Black Subversions: The Making of Black Identity in African American Autobiography

Lovemore Mabugu

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Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies

University of Essex

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Abstract

This thesis is a critical exploration of black identity evolution in the US through African American autobiography. It examines and tracks particular periods of the treacherous journeys black people have taken in America. I argue that oppositional consciousness has consistently been at the centre of black identity in the US and has helped consolidate their defiance, resilience and subversion of oppressive structures. This inherently oppositional stance has enabled African Americans to evolve from being positioned as property to having representations in the highest offices in the US, including the presidency. This thesis also explores how gender politics problematises the consolidation of black identity with patriarchy mimicking racist structures of oppression and inequality. In this regard, every chapter uses double lenses (male and female) to explore distinctive gender experiences and how these shape particular black identities. The overarching argument is that black autobiography produces an alternative version of black identity evolution – a version which demonstrates their overcoming of double consciousness.

African American autobiography is the primary mode of text used to especially investigate subversions black people engage with to reclaim their humanity, and illustrate how particular writers represent their journeys from being enmeshed in double consciousness to their desired black identities. I examine seminal autobiographies by Angelo Herndon, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and Maya Angelou.

Themes covered here include the impact of literacy, manhood, womanhood, incarceration, sexism, and racism. Subsequent chapters investigate how these themes impact on particular generations through representations by autobiographical writers at different historical junctures in black literature. Furthermore, this thesis critically explores theories and concepts which help interrogate black subversive praxis engaged by the different writers in their subjective and representational positions and these include - critical race theory (including its tenant of counter-story narrative), family systems theory, critical consciousness theory, black feminism, black womanhood, intersectionality, and double consciousness.

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Introduction

This thesis critically interrogates how Black autobiography responds to changing literary and historical circumstances, given that we understand African Americans to be historically enmeshed in double consciousness. Throughout the thesis I employ W.E.B. Du Bois' formulation of double consciousness:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[1]

I draw from this formulation the multiple ways African Americans have been historically impacted and how they have enacted strategies to resist and dismantle double consciousness as it manifests from a range of interlocking oppressive structures which include race, culture, class, and gender.

In this introductory chapter, I move chronologically through each author's corpus of work to give critical insights into their literary contributions and explore what was happening in social movements and black literature in each moment. This would

[1] W.E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Millenium Publications, 2014), 5. Subsequent page referencing in text.

contextualise how each writer responded to their distinctive and collective oppressions and provide an evolving representation of black subversions from 1900 to the period just after the Civil Rights Movement. The autobiographies being investigated are: *Let Me Live* (1937) - Angelo Herndon; *Dust Tracks On A Road* (1942) – Zora Neale Hurston; *Black Boy* (1945) – Richard Wright; *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) – Malcolm X; *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) – Maya Angelou; and *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974) – Angela Y. Davis.

The Autobiographers:

Angelo Herndon (1913-1977) - Corpus of work

Angelo Herndon was born on May 6, 1913, to poor parents who struggled dreadfully on a miner's salary. Despite or because of his poverty-stricken upbringing, Herndon became a significant communist political practitioner and grassroots freedom fighter for black and working-class liberation in the Twentieth century US. Although he did not do much writing, his autobiography *Let Me Live* (1937) is a seminal Harlem Renaissance template of black radical writing which chronicles his attempts to resist the devastating impact of capitalism on the working class and the concomitant racism reserved for black people in the US and the wider world. Ross Marlon characterises *Let Me Live* as the "progenitor of modern Back radical writing."[2] Herndon's body of work includes speeches and articles, letters and correspondence to newspapers, legal documents, and court records, as well as pamphlets and Communist Party (CPUSA) publications. Key themes in his body of work include racial injustice, labour rights, communist ideology, and legal struggles. With these critical themes, Herndon recalled

[2] Ross Marlon, "Introduction," *Let Me Live* by Angelo Herndon (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2007), vii-vxii.

Frederick Douglass, and anticipated black radicals like Richard Wright, Malcolm X, and Angela Davis who went on to interrogate US history regarding labour, Christianity, politics, law, and incarceration, among other profound concerns.

His father's death plunged Herndon's family deeper into abject poverty which forced him and his elder brother (at thirteen and fifteen years old, respectively) to be miners. He endured the capitalist exploitation of workers, especially with his Lock 18 experience which recalled the slave codes and deplorable living conditions. Furthermore, the Great Depression which hit the US from 1929 right through the 1930s, meant that, like most black people, he had to navigate poverty, racism, and social injustice. Robin D. G. Kelly intertwines and encapsulates Herndon, 1930s fascism, and the Great Depression: "[Herndon's] story upends typical Great Depression images of despondent men and women in breadlines and soup kitchens, waiting for Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal to save the day. Instead, the story of thousands of Angelo Herndons is a story of Black antifascism."[3] Responding to these experiences, Denis Childs asserts that consequently, "Herndon's writings and political activism also focused on the uniquely terrorised predicament of Black people under various systems of legalised terror and neo-slavery."[4] Illustrating this through one of his experiences on a Lexington mine, Herndon posited that black miners were consistently marginalised and oppressed: "They couldn't be section foremen, or electricians or head bank boss … Besides that, the Negro miners got the

[3] Robin D. G. Kelly, "The Great Depression," in *Four Hundred Souls*; *A Community History of African America 1619-2019*, ed. Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain (Great Britain: Penguin Random House, 2021), 292. Subsequent page referencing in text.
[4] Dennis Child, "An Insinuating Voice" *Callaloo*, vol. 40 No. 4 (Fall, 2017), 31. Subsequent page referencing in text.

worst places to work. We worked in low coal, only 3 or 4 feet high. We had to wear knee pads, and work stretched flat on our bellies most of the time."[5]

Before joining the Communist Party USA, Herndon had struggled to reconcile his split identity in being black and American in a society that refused to recognise him as a valued citizen – leading him, like most black people in the US, to grapple with Du Bois' formulation of double consciousness. It was only when he got involved with the Unemployment Council (a labour organisation) and various organs within the CPUSA that he gained political literacy which would help in resistance strategies and dismantling the historic double consciousness felt by most African Americans. His first Communists meeting was on May 22, 1930, and he joined that very night as he was "impressed with the Communists for fighting for all workers and advocating openly for "Negro rights …" (Kelly, 293). Soon after, he got involved in grassroot mobilising as "he immediately threw himself into work, organizing coal miners, the unemployed, and sharecroppers, and spending many a night in an Alabama jail cell" (Kelly, 294). His continued political education through Marxist thought promoted his critical consciousness which he then utilised to reassess how oppression manifested and inform subsequent resistance strategies.

One of these strategies was through anti-Christian thought which anticipated Richard Wright and Malcolm X. Herndon vociferously disavowed Christianity, dismissing it as white ideology designed to maintain the racist status quo with its promise of an abstract and unknowable heaven which promised to reward black people for being meek and obedient. While Herndon (and Wright) initially chose communism, Malcolm X ended up with orthodox Islam with both

[5] Angelo Herndon, "You cannot kill the Working Class" (1937). http://www.historyisaweapon.org/defco1/herndoncannotkill.html

organisations enacting the possibilities of post-racial societies through inter-racial brotherhood. This would then be a catalyst to the erasure of whiteness as a symbol to aspire to – everyone, regardless of race, would have the potential to realise the "American Dream." However, this "dream" is problematised in *Let Me Live* through the introduction of a gender lens in which Herndon portrays Christianity as feminine and dismisses it as a "potential location of false consciousness … [that must be replaced by] Communism, which is masculine" (Mostern, 125). Mostern further argues, "In addition to the text's rejection of prayer as a solution to poverty, then, black female reliance on feminine Christianity is portrayed as the direct cause of internalization of biblically commanded racial self-hatred" (125). This is illustrated when he falls critically ill at six years old, and his mother relentlessly prays to no avail for his good health—he is only healed when a neighbour provides money for medication. Furthermore, when he asks his mother what "nigger" means after he is racially abused by a group of boys in his neighbourhood, she immediately quotes the Song of Songs on how God asked the sun to burn people because they were vain sinners. According to Mostern, "The racialized male internalizes his self-hatred, aided once again by his mother" (125). However, patriarchal representations like these were met with resistance during the Harlem Renaissance period – female writers like Zora Neale Hurston had begun to critically explore black woman identity (I examine this later in this introduction and in the thesis).

Among Herndon's major literary contributions was his employment of "the unendurable situation of imprisoned living death as a prism through which to unveil the structurally unfree nature of Black life outside of official zones of incarceration (Childs, 40). This is portrayed in *Let Me Leave*, which Mostern celebrates: "after the slave narrative but prior to *The Autobiography of Malcom X* it is the central prison text in black literature" (124). Before

Herndon's arrest on June 30, 1932, he had become a real threat especially when "he led a march of over one thousand Black and white workers to [Atlanta] city hall that forced the city to add $6,000 to local relief aid" (Kelly, 295). According to Kelly, six days after this march, the police searched his room without a warrant and arrested him, ostensibly for the "the small cache of leaflets, pamphlets, Communists newspapers, and books by George Padmore and Bishop William Montgomery Brown" (295). The State of Georgia's response to this "crime" was the "reanimation of an ostensibly dead slave code …. [a 1930s development which] underline[d] the degree to which Blackness represent[ed] the condition of possibility for the resuscitation of putatively obsolete modes of legal and extra-legal violence" (Child, 39). Subsequently, Herndon's imprisonment and the ensuing legal battels with the State of Georgia saw the CP membership surge as he was seen as a political prisoner and a symbol of resistance. This meant that his persecution went beyond the individual, it "brought the class struggle into the courtroom."[6] Furthermore, Mostern posits that *Let Me Live*, as the title implies, written "to raise funds and support for the Communist-led social movement backing Hendon's defence, [also] provides a space for defining the intersection of race, class, and gender ideology in the southern US with the CP's commitment to organizing workers without regard to race" (123). What complicated Herndon's case was that both he and the Scottsboro boys (accused of raping two white girls) were both being represented by the Communist-led International Labour Defense (ILD) defence; a development which created an intersection of race, class and gender, especially that "in the southern imagination – and arguably the national imagination generally – communism meant interracialism and interracialism meant unacceptable sexual liaisons" (Mostern, 123).

[6] Frederick T. Griffiths, "Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and the Case of Angelo Herndon" *African American Review* Vol. 35 No. 4 (Winter, 2001), 623. Subsequent page referencing in text.

Herndon was then tried under an 1861 anti-slave-insurrection statute, "and sentenced by the 'mercy' of an all-white jury to 18-to-20 years on a chain gang" (Griffiths, 622). The "chain gang," predominantly practised in Georgia, was a practice of chaining men together to perform physically challenging work as a form of punishment. This was the precursor to Angela Davis' communist-framed exploration of what she has promoted as "the prison industrial complex". There are parallels between the "chain gang" and what Davis posits about the "prison industrial complex" in that they are both "accompanied by an ideological campaign to persuade us once again … that race is a marker of criminality. The figure of the criminal is a young black man. Young Black men engender fear."[7] Herndon and the Scottsboro boys illustrate the 1930s white ideology of the black male which Davis speaks about in her statement – black males are criminals who should be feared – the former for treasonous acts, and the latter, for sexually abusing "innocent young white girls." This then implies that black people, and especially black males, have a marker which leaves them in a situation of "imprisoned living death" whether in or outside the official zones of incarceration.

Notwithstanding his seminal prison narrative text, *Let Me Live,* Herndon demonstrated black radicalism through his activist-praxis as he immersed himself in grassroots organisation, participation in awareness and resistance marches, speeches, and writing letters. His work in inter-racial community organising anticipated the historic 1960s civil rights movement. Childs credits the CPUSA for offering "Herndon and others subjected to [capitalist] atrocities a viable political mechanism through which to channel personal rage into collective, grassroots organizing" (45). Herndon encapsulates the impact of the CPUSA on his evolving black male

[7] Angela Y. Davis, *The meaning of Freedom* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2012), 38. Subsequent page referencing in text.

identity with his explicit rejection of religion and embracing a post-racial vision which privileged the unity of the working class:

> The change of my viewpoint was almost fabulous, emerging from the urge to escape the cruelties of life in religious abstractions into a healthy, vigorous, and realistic recognition that life on earth, which was so full of struggle and tears for the poor, could be changed by the intelligent and organised will of workers (Mostern, 127).

Zora Neal Hurston (1891 – 1960) – Corpus of work

Alice Walker, arguably the most influential artist responsible for Zora Neale Hurston's intellectual resurrection described her as an:

> outstanding novelist, journalist, folklorist, and critic, [who] was, between 1920 and 1950, the most prolific black woman writer in America. The intellectual and spiritual foremother of a generation of black women writers, Hurston believed in the beauty of black expressions and traditions and in the psychological wholeness of black life.[8]

In this thirty-year career, Hurston published four novels, two books of folklore, an autobiography, short stories, articles, and plays. Walker's characterisation of Hurston as "the most prolific black woman writer" in America (at that point in black literature) is echoed by Mary Helen Washington whose scholarship along with that of Hurston's biographer (Robert Hemingway) is recognised for its significant role in resurrecting Hurston's corpus of work, as well as deepening our understanding of what Hurston was up against during her career and life. Both Walker and Washington characterise Hurston as unique—with the former asserting that she was ahead of her time, and the latter averring she was "eccentric". Washington explicates Hurston's eccentricity: "Hurston, one must conclude that she was nothing if not controversial, highly outspoken, arrogant, independent, and eccentric. She was also a black woman

[8] Alice Walker, ed., *I love Myself When I Am Laughing*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979), 1. Subsequent referencing is cited in text.

determined, in the period of 1920 and 1950, to have a career as a writer, which in itself was eccentric" (*I Love Myself*, 8).[9]

Historically, going with this personality and this determination as described above, Hurston was always going to rely on her extraordinary tenacity, which recalled her foremothers in Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs, and Mary Prince, among many others. She did most of her writing during the Harlem Renaissance, the cultural and intellectual movement which flourished in the 1920s and 1930s. This period marked the cultural awakening of African Americans in the North and according to Cheryl A. Wall, "Harlem, located in New York City, the national cultural capital, became the cultural capital of African Americans."[10] This was a pivotal moment in American history which saw black cultural, social, and artistic movements thrive. For some writers, as Wall asserts, this period was also known as "New Negro Renaissance," which underscored "their sense of redefined racial identity, one that heralded the spiritual emancipation of black Americans. Yet women writers on the whole seemed less certain that the Old Negro, embodied in the stereo types of Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemina, had died" (32-33). Wall's averment here encapsulates the circumstances in which Hurston and other black women artists operated during the Harlem Renaissance period. Nevertheless, it is during this period that Hurston produced her seminal work – *Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937).* Janie, the protagonist in this feminist narrative is searching for her identity, and like Hurston, she must overcome adversity which includes the tyranny of patriarchy and being trapped in double consciousness as she navigates towards finding her voice, autonomy, and self-identity.

Hurston's audacious writing gave illuminating insights into American social and cultural history, exposing the damage caused by racism, intra-racial conflict, patriarchal tyranny, rigid religiosity, classism, and family feuds. Hurston's inspiration was her mother, Lucy Hurston. Although she died when Hurston was only nine, Lucy, (as represented in *Dust Tracks on a Road*) left an indelible mark on her daughter who

[9] Mary Helen Washington makes this comment in her introduction chapter in Alice Walker's collection - *I love Myself When I Am Laughing.*

[10] Cheryl A. Wall, "Women of Harlem Renaissance," in *African American's Women Literature*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 32. Subsequent page referencing in the text.

inherited her indefatigable spirit of determination. Although life was not easy after her mother died, with having to work in several homes as a domestic worker, Hurston went on to study at various academic institutions: Morgan Academy, Howard university (where she was awarded an associated degree in 1920) and later studies at Barnard College as an anthropologist under the tutelage of the anthropologist Franz Boas whom she later worked with at Columbia University.[11] Despite poverty, her intelligence and tenacity saw her through a turbulent academic journey from which she rose to be one of the best African American writers. As an artist who delved into a diverse range of art, Hurston anticipated many black women artists including Maya Angelou. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Angelou pointed to how Hurston had been inspirational to her artistic craft, "Zora Neale Hurston means a great deal to me as a writer"[12]

Huston's major contribution to the Harlem Renaissance was through her literary work and her ethnographical research. *Mules and Men*, published in 1935, was a result of ethnographic field work which collected African American folklore in the South. Washington celebrates Hurston for her endeavour in formal folklore research which tapped the "rich storehouse of authentic tales, songs, and folkways of black people– *unresearched by any scholar until Hurston* … It was out of this material that Hurston would fashion her career as a folklorist and novelist" (my emphasis) (*I Love Myself*, 14). Throughout her writing, the determination to represent authentic black culture as well as preserve black expression is prevalent; this is evident in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Tell My Horse* (1938)*, Moses*, *Man of the Mountain* (1939), and *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). However, it was this deep desire to showcase the beauty of black culture, and her determination to preserve black expressions through her art that brought trouble for her. Ramifications of her determination to be a unique writer included being seen as a pariah, sinking into penury, and ending with a tragic death almost obscurity. Unlike the mostly male Harlem Renaissance writers who advocated for radical protest literature which incorporated the challenges black people were facing, Hurston chose to stay away from such themes. She opted for black folk aesthetics that documented everyday positive

[11] Tom Wilhelmus, "Without Color: Zora Neale Hurston," in *The Hudson Review*, 1996, Vol. 48. No. 4 (Winter, 1996), 674-675

[12] Jefferey M. Elliot, ed., *Conversations with Maya Angelou*, (London: Virago Press, 1989), 147.

experiences of black Americans—their love, joy, and humour as they triumphed over racism and other negative experiences.

I examine Henry Loius Gates Jr's statement in his article "Preface to Blackness" to explicate, among other reasons, why Hurston was targeted by the "black intelligentsia" which was fronted by Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, male artists who set the model and tone for the Harlem Renaissance and the 1940s respectively. Gates asserts, "The confusion of realms, of art with propaganda, plagued the Harlem Renaissance … [and] this meant that each piece of creative writing became a political statement. Each particular manifestation served as a polemic."[13] This characterisation echoes W. E. B. Dubois' 1921 explicit equivocation of the relationship between art and propaganda for black Americans:

> Negro art is today plowing a difficult row. We want everything that is said about us to tell the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one. We fear that the evil in us will be called racial, while in others it is viewed as individual. We fear that our shortcomings are not merely human.[14]

This assertion by Du Bois was embraced by powerful artists and militant movements such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the 1930s and 1940s. This call became intergenerational as artists and movements inherited it well into the 1960s and 1970s. No wonder Hurston's deliberate choice to resist this political stance brought a deluge of criticism on her personality and craft. In his 1936 review of *Mules and Men*, poet, educator, and critic Sterling Brown set the tone by accusing Hurston of ignoring the racial and economic terrorism of black people in the South, a land which was "shadowed by squalor, poverty, disease, violence, enforced ignorance, and exploitation" (*I Love Myself*, 16). However, as Washington proposes, Hurston's riposte to these accusations of her portraying false realities about black American was that "She saw black lives as psychologically integral—not mutilated half-lives, stunted by the effects of racism and poverty. She simply could not

[13] Henry Louis Gates Jr, "Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext," in *African American Literary Theory: A reader*, Winston Napier, ed. (New York University Press: New York & London), 154. Subsequent referencing cited in text.
[14] W.E.B. Dubois, "Negro Art," *Crisis*, 22 (June 1921), 55-56.

depict blacks as defeated, humiliated, degraded, or victimized because she did not experience black people or herself that way" (*I love Myself*, 17).

Subsequent interrogation of Hurston's work by male critics betrayed a collective masculine lens in what Washington calls "intellectual lynching" of a black woman artist (16). The criticism became more personal as her life and her politics became the target, with very little to do with her literary work. She was accused of selling her race to please her white benefactors and readers. Her relationship with Mrs. R. Osgood Mason, a white patron, came under severe scrutiny. According to Washington, Hurston had a contract with Mason for folklore collections which would be the latter's exclusive property. Letters between them depict how Hurston was financially dependent on Mason. This meant Mason oversaw Hurston's art and determined the path her career would follow. Nathan Huggins, another critic, eviscerated Hurston for her relationship with Mason, accusing her of playing a childlike role in her dependence on Mason. Wallace Thurman likens Hurston to "a Negro opportunist cutting the fool for white folks in order to get tuition paid and her stories sold." (*I love Myself*, 11). This is echoed by Richard Wright in his review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God;* he accused Hurston of perpetuating the minstrel tradition "that makes the white folks laugh."[15] However, male authors like Hughes and Wright were never scrutinised like Hurston for their relationships with white people. According to Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell in their introduction to *Zora Neale Hurston: Collected Plays*, Hughes was also a recipient of Mason's "kindness" and financial help. However, he did not face a barrage of criticism like his female colleague, a development which speaks to a politics of gender and recognises the "complex way in which black masculinity has been, and is, socially and culturally produced" (Hazel V. Carby, "Introduction to Race Men," *African American Theory*, 660).

It is clear that Hurston's politics and art did not resonate with the prevailing black mood and the political status quo of her time. She was characterised as a pariah for not being a "race woman" and had to face fierce personal and artistic opposition and criticism. However, she robustly resisted these attempts to contaminate her version of

[15] Jean Lee Cole, and Charles Mitchell, ed. *Zora Neale Hurston: Collected Plays* (Rutgers: The State University, 208), xxxi. Subsequent page referencing is cited in text.

art with political impositions. Responding to criticism from Wright et al., she resolutely defended her right to the freedom of writing and choosing the material she wanted to produce. In her seminal essay, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934), she argued that "we each have our own standards of art … and so unfit to pass judgement upon the art concepts of others."[16] As for her politics, she resisted the tyranny of the majority – she refused to support the 1954 Supreme Court desegregation decision because this implied that black teachers, black students and black schools were inferior and needed to integrate with the "superior" white people and education. Here she anticipated Malcolm X, who was an avid philosopher of black nationalism and believed in Hurston's claim "Whatever the Negro does on his own volition he embellishes …" (*I love Myself*, 19). She went on to dismiss the black middle class whose vociferous voice against her was the loudest: "The self-despisement lies in a middle class who scorns to do or be anything Negro … He wears drab clothing, sits through a boresome church service, pretends to have no interest in community, hold beauty contests, and otherwise apes all mediocrities of the white brother" (*African American Literary Theory, 38*).

However, according to Washington, Hurston continued sinking deeper into pariah status when in 1952 she wrote an anti-Communist article in an American Magazine which betrayed a developing ideological leaning towards conservatism and right-wing politics (22). This came after some controversy with her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* which even Alice Walker, her most sympathetic supporter, dismissed as "oddly false-sounding."[17] As this was supposed to be an authentic representation of her life and experiences, the autobiography was a masterpiece of artistic subterfuge full of contradictions. There is a sense of an artist profoundly enmeshed in double consciousness – an artist being sensitive to other people's reactions to her representations of self, those in her life, and the socio-political status quo. One of the most difficult areas to explain in *Dust Tracks* is Hurston's dismissal of slavery as an anachronism which no longer concerned her, since all slaveholders were long since dead, and she was too busy getting on with the future to care. She declared, "I have

[16] Cheryl A. Wall (ed.), Zora Neale Hurston: *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 79.
[17] Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South," *Ms* (May, 1974):67.

no intention of wasting my time beating old graves with a club … while I have a handkerchief over my eyes crying over the landing of the first slaves in 1619, I might miss something swell that is going on in 1942."[18] Perhaps, this was the precursor to another puzzling development when she went on to write *Seraph on the Suwanee* - a novel which explored the lives of a poor white couple in Florida with all the other characters also white. This bizarre exploration into the psychology of poor whites marked an abandonment of the black cultural tradition which had anchored most of her art and heralded her demise as it appeared her expressive creativity had waned. In 1950, after some of her writings had been rejected by publishers, she penned a protest essay – "What White Publishers Won't Publish." She criticised white publishers for ignoring stories which depict black people differently; opting to make money through stereotypes of black characters in abject poverty and brutal oppression: "I have been amazed by the Anglo-Saxon's lack of curiosity about the internal lives and emotions of the Negroes ... It is assumed that all non-Anglo Saxons are uncomplicated stereotypes" (*African American Literary Theory*, (54-55). Perhaps this article demonstrates her realisation of how wrong she had been a few years back when she had dismissed the recurring impact of slavery and how her blackness was not a factor in her navigation of life in America.

Her politics notwithstanding, Hurston was a formidable artist who had remarkable fidelity to her culture. Her literary legacy is significant in that she decided to go "directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself" (*African American Theory*, 43). What set her apart from her contemporaries was that she refused to portray back people as humiliated victims, warped by racial oppression. Her experience of black people stemmed from having sat on "her front porch in Eatonville, Florida, watching the parade of human activity and being a natural watcher and recorder of human behaviour and language" (*Zora Neale Hurson: Collected Plays*, xx). From this defining experience, Hurston was determined not betray her history and her people; her work was designed to give the ordinary black folk a voice as much as empowering black women in their journeys to self-identity. Her characterisation of black women was about dismantling double consciousness and resisting the intersecting oppressive

[18] Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks On A Road* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995),230. Subsequent page referencing in text.

structures – race, class, and gender. She personified the struggles black women went through and are still going through. As an artist, she represented what it was like for black women artists in her time – the gender and economic oppression, and the tyranny of patriarchy, among other debilitating strictures peculiar to black women. Furthermore, through her corpus of work, she affirmed black women's right to inventive imaginations. Washington's celebration of Hurston encapsulates her literary legacy: "She believed wholeheartedly in the beauty of black expressions and traditions and in the psychological wholeness of black life. With little to guide her, except her fidelity to her own experience, she documented the survival of love, joy, honour, and affirmation as well as tragedy, in black life" (*I love Myself*, 23).

Richard Wright (1908 – 1960) – Corpus of work

The cultural historian, sociologist, and critical race theorist Paul Gilroy asserts that "Richard Wright was the first black writer to be put forward as a major figure in world literature. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1939 and, following the publication of *Native Son* in 1940 and *Black Boy* five years later, he was certainly the most famous black author in the world."[19] This is testimony to how Wright was remarkably recognised as a prodigious writer who had managed to destabilise the received perception of African American writers in the literary scholarship, and black and white reading communities. Wright's depiction of racial subordination and its devastating impact on both black and white races demanded critical attention as it shifted literary expressions of politics, religion, and culture. He announced himself through his fearless projection of the damage racist cultural and intra-cultural conflicts brought to his immediate surroundings of the South, wider American society, and later, Europe and the world. The entrance of Wright into the literary and reading world marked yet

[19] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*: *Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1999), 146. Subsequent page referencing in text.

another stage of the black identity evolution this thesis is exploring. Emerging at the tail-end of the Harlem Renaissance, Wright encapsulated an extraordinary departure from black writers' endeavours of proving their humanity. He epitomised a different black sensibility in his writing compared to his antecedents – most of whose writings he decried:

> Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. For most part the artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks. White America never offered these Negro writers any serious criticism. The mere fact that a Negro could write was astonishing.[20]

It then appears that Wright's corpus of writing was in response to this charge – his representation of American life disassociated him from dressing "in knee-pants of servility" or going "a-begging to white America". His writing made American and wider audiences sit up and give unprecedented critical criticism of a black writer, starting with the reception of his groundbreaking novel *Native Son*, which explored black double consciousness and the struggles of urban life amid systemic racism and poverty.

[20] Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in *African American Literary Theory*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 45. Subsequent page referencing in text.

Wright's assertions on white America not giving "serious criticism" of his antecedents' writing, and the "mere fact that a Negro could write was astonishing," recalls Du Bois' foundational framing of black identity in America – double consciousness. Du Bois surmised double consciousness as that African American psychological challenge in which they "always look at themselves through the eyes of the racist white America and "measuring [themselves] by the means of a nation that looked back at them in contempt."[21] This contempt Dubois asserts, echoes Wright's characterising black writers as "French poodles who can do clever tricks" in the eyes of white America. Aware of how enmeshed black writers and African Americans were in double consciousness, Wright set out to depict the rawness of the status quo to instigate honest and courageous conversations which would help shift black and national narratives about race relations in America. This lens of double consciousness, which for Wright was a "double vision", provided a framework for his corpus of writing as he strove to find ways to theorise black psychological escape as a premise to black liberation. Jean Paul Sartre examines Wright's oeuvre and asserts that:

> … each of Wright's works contains what Baudelaire would have called "a double simultaneous postulation"; each word refers to two contexts; two forces are applied simultaneously to each phrase and determine the incomparable tension of his tale. Had he spoken to the whites alone, he might have turned out to be more prolix, more didactic and more abusive; to the negroes alone, still more elliptical, more of a confederate, and more elegiac. In the first case, his work might have come close to satire; in the second, to prophetic lamentations. Jeremiah spoke only to the Jews. But

[21] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Millenium Publications, 2014), 5. Subsequent page referencing in text.

> Wright, a writer for a split public, has been able both to maintain and go beyond this split. He has made it the pretext for a work of art (Gilroy, 146).

Wright did not hold back when he assertively spoke to that “split audience” Sartre talks about. His corpus of literary work consistently castigated white America for being part of the problem and for helping produce the Bigger Thomases of his times. Wright also viciously indicted black Americans for lacking the will to initiate robust actions due to their habituation to the status quo. In his two major publications (*Native Son and Black Boy*) as in most of his works, Wright juxtaposed white and black America to give instructive insights into the interplay of these supposedly disparate worlds. The representations of Bigger Thomas, and Richard Wright (the protagonist of *Black Boy)*, were designed to illuminate the interweaving “twoness” of black consciousness always at play and on display throughout their interactions with Jim Crow South systemic racism, and the intra-racial conflicts impinging on their evolving blackness. According to Hakutani Yoshinobu, the violence that characterised the two protagonists’ lives was a result of “a racist system [that] produce[d] the way of life that was forced on black people" (Alzoubi, 179). Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son,* was unconsciously drawn to the existential dimension of his unconscionable acts of murder.

The theme of violence inherent in most of Wright’s writings speaks “to building a materialist theory of the psychological birth and object choices of the black subject” (Gilroy, 175). Black subjects are caught up in two social spaces of violence – the domestic settings which constitutes part of their cultural identity, and the outside world where the white man rules supreme, defining black Americanness, and the limits of their blackness. Gilroy connects this to Wright’s depiction of black violence:

> The key point is that Wright connected the violence found in the private, domestic sphere to the ritual, public brutality that was a means of political administration in the South. This public terror did more to create conditions in which private violence could thrive. It was shadowed by the domestic authoritarianism and violence which it also required if the racially coercive social order was to function smoothly (Gilroy, 175).

Later in this thesis I explore Ralph Ellison's reading of *Black Boy*, in which he gives an insight into the impact of the historic racial terror on the black family—what he calls "a homeopathic dose of violence generated by black and white relationships" (Gilroy, 174). Wright illuminates on the violence black children suffer in intimate spaces - where family members physically assault them – a development which is echoed by Hurston, Malcolm X, and Angelou. On different occasions in *Black Boy,* Richard is beaten by his mother, grandmother, and aunty. In one incident he is involved in a life and death fight with his aunty – and such was his fear that for a while, he slept with a knife under his pillow. Wright characterises these intimate relatives as violent mothers – he depicts his mother and aunty as monsters who wanted to commit filicide—representations which strengthened charges of misogyny against him (I explore this later in the thesis). Furthermore, James Baldwin, another prolific African American writer, explores black violence and uses Wright's work to explore the site of violence in black literature: "In most novels written by Negroes … there is a great space where sex ought to be; and what usually fills this space is violence."[22]

[22] James Baldwin, "Alas Poor Richard," in *Nobody Knows My Name* (London: Corgi, 1969), 51.

Ellison and Baldwin's examinations speak to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), a trauma-informed approach into the different levels of mental and emotional distress experienced by some demographic groups. A London (UK)-based ACEs research project "shows that the traumatic experiences and events impact on future health and wellbeing, how children learn and how people relate to the world around them."[23] I propose using ACEs as a lens into Wright's examination of violence and racism experienced by black Americans. *Native Son, Black Boy*, and most of his literary writings critically interrogate black lived experiences which were replete with violence and discrimination. This ACEs lens gives insights into how trauma lies heavier for black communities, "particularly when trauma is a repeated and common occurrence. Discrimination, harassment, microaggressions all add to the load that [black] people carry in life" (Deeper Thinking, 17). Wright's portrait of the psychology of black children encapsulated how they had to grapple with double consciousness in their navigation of life as black people.

Earlier on, I pointed to Sartre's assertion on Wright's "double simultaneous postulation" in his address to the split audience in which he simultaneously addressed white and black Americans. I now want to sketch a brief portrait of Wright's black cultural identity. Violence in black intimate spaces illuminates the intra-racial oppressions which are amplified by cultural institutions like family and church. Wrights' depictions of black institutions in what some critics call "misanthropic narratives" were replete with despairing violence, elements of misogyny, and broken black families leading to charges of self-hatred or hatred of other blacks. Wright did not hesitate to attack the

[23] Education and Training Foundation UK, "Deeper Thinking and Stronger Action: A personal and Organisational Commitment to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion," (20/09/22), 17. https://www.et-foundation.co.uk

so-called sacred elements of black culture, including the church. He anticipated Malcolm X's excoriation of black habituation to the status quo through Christianity. Both Wright and Malcolm X were especially incensed by black people's protracted fear or inability to act on or react to oppressions in their daily exertions of life. In "The Man Who Lived Underground", Wright has one of the characters question the singing in the church which symbolised the black congregation's "search for a happiness they could not find [as making] them feel that they had committed some dreadful offence which they could not remember or understand … why was this sense of guilt so seemingly innate, so easy to come by, to think, to feel so verily physical?"[24] In most of his narratives, Wright represented the black church (and the black middle class) as problematic to black identity evolution, again anticipating Malcolm X. Harvard Sitkoff confirms this view when he surmises that black churches and black community leaders' reaction to the fight for justice was "to stay on the sidelines of the civil rights struggle [and] to advocate upright behavior and individual economic advancement within the existing order and to preach paternalism and 'civility."[25] This non-reaction or ambivalence at best from the church and middle class sees Alzoubi characterising Wright as a representative of the minority who advocated for action, and as a writer who symbolised a chasm which was developing between black writers and the communities they represented:

> Wright utilizes [a] call-and-response pattern [that] elucidates the changing relationship between the individual storyteller and the community, which contextualizes the transforming nature of the movement regarding the individual and community

[24] Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground," in *Eight Men* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1969).
[25] Harvard Sitkoff, *Toward Freedom Land: The Long Struggle for Racial Equality in America* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 56.

> investigation and action. Even though the black community was not addressing the call, individuals felt the requirement for transformation and mobility (Journal of African American Studies, 185).

Wright's literary corpus significantly engaged with critical interrogations of black culture and its cultural expressions to lift the veil which he felt obscured interracial oppressions; he advocated that black Americans face up to these oppressions if any action and progress was to be realised. Gilroy provides an insightful critique of Wright's stance on black culture:

> Wright was making the still heretical argument that the effects of racism on black people were not generated by the leviathan machine of white supremacy alone. He was suggesting that blacks should bear some measure of responsibility for the evil and destructive things that we do to one another, that racism should not provide an alibi for the anti-social aspects of our communal life (Gilroy, 159).

Situating self-criticism as one of his core values, Wright became a foundational writer as he consistently dissected the oppressions inherent in black institutions. To Wright, black culture and its expressive institutions formed one side of the double bind on black people's consciousness, with the other being the navigation of the ever present oppressive white world. This lived experience of what he called a "double vision" informed the corpus of his writings, especially before he left for Europe; and it was the reason he left – to escape this double consciousness/double bind/double vision. *Native Son* and *Black Boy* vividly reflected the psychological conflict African Americans grappled with in their lived experiences as they attempted to navigate their sense of self while under unmitigated pressure to conform to cultural, and racist expectations.

Wright's strong belief in active resistance drove him to join political and social movements—a development which formed an integral part of his journey to becoming a prolific writer who significantly contributed in shaping the discourse surrounding race, class, and social justice. He joined the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) in 1933 and was a very active member – including overseeing youth activities designed to keep black youths from trouble with the police and other racist institutions at a time when the economic depression compounded and wrecked the lives of many Americans, not least those black families already in the margins. A beneficiary of the informal educational structures of the CPUSA himself, Wright was subsequently involved in the communist writing club for young writers. Furthermore, Gilroy speaks about Wright as an indirect inspiration to young writers as his "[political and social] demands and fearless projection of anger released new creative possibilities and changed the terms in which the racial politics of literary expressions were articulated" (Gilroy, 147). The economically crippling effects of the Great Depression in the US must have contributed to Wright and other black people joining the CPUSA, which appeared to provide an attractive political alternative to white capitalist-driven politics. This communist movement's agenda for social and economic equality resonated with Wright and other black Americans who were personally and collectively experiencing the debilitating effects of capitalism and systemic racism. Although he later fell out with and left the CPUSA, *Native Son* and some of his subsequent works were informed by his leftist political leanings, anti-capitalism, and anti-imperialism, which later evolved into his active participation of Pan-Africanism, anticipating Malcolm X and Maya Angelou.

In his attempts to escape the oppressive double consciousness/double bind of being a black man in America, Wright emigrated to France in 1947, never coming back to settle in the country of his birth – such was his determination to turn his back on his old life. His emigration to France actualised his life-long "endeavour to break up a black-white vicious circle that [had] enclosed him since a young age" (Alzoubi,181). His subsequent writings epitomised a writer seemingly free of his US chains, free to have a world view unencumbered by his cultural and racial oppressions. One example of his global view was how he became active in Pan-Africanism—he saw parallels in black Americans' struggles for freedom and justice in the US and Africans' bitter fight against colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. He was actively involved in the writing of *Presence Africaine*, a journal which "attempted to bring together the thinking of Africans with that of American, Caribbean, and European blacks at least so that their similarities and differences might be systemically explored" (Gilroy, 151). Another example of his active participation in global politics was his participation at the1955 Bandung Conference in which twenty-nine Asian and African nations came together to demonstrate the power of racial solidarity and a common identity of anti-imperialism. Wright celebrated the diversity of those who attended by commenting on their unity which came despite their oppressions under Western rule:

> .. their ideological defences dropped … They began to sense their combined strength; they began to taste blood … They could now feel that their white enemy was far, far away …Day after day dun-coloured Trotskyites consorted with dark Moslems, yellow Indo-Chinese hobnobbed with brown Indonesians, black Africans mingled with swarthy Arabs … dusky nationalist palled around with yellow communists ..But they all had the same background colonial experience of subjection, of coloured consciousness, and

> they found that ideology was not needed to define their relations … Racial realities have a strange logic of their own. [26]

His speech here demonstrates his spirited belief in different races coalescing around their imagination of the common enemy (those of western sensibility), and collectively challenging for justice and equality which would lead to post-race societies.

However, his corpus of writing after he left America received scathing criticism resulting in poor sales. Wright was criticised for losing his black American sensibility displayed in his earlier work. Some critics argued that his oeuvre while in the US was exceptional and gave him unchallenged racial authority. For example, Edward Weeks, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, described the impact of *Native Son*: "It has us all by the ears. It is certainly a performance of great talent—powerful, disturbing, unquestionably authentic."[27] This perception changed for some in their critical reviews of his work starting with *The Outsider* (started in the US and finished in France). The feeling was that Wright had lost that distinctive voice that differentiated and defined him. Professor Jerry W. Ward Jr., a Richard Wright scholar describes this distinctive voice which Wright brought to world literature through his writing craft as "Angry, bold, critical, hard boiled, hurtful, uncompromising, violent—I think of adjectives that might be used or were used by reviewers to characterize what distinguished Wright's voice in fiction and nonfiction from voices employed by many of his contemporaries."[28]

[26] Richard Wright, *The Colour Curtain* (London: Dobson, 1956), 150.
[27] Gilroy reports that this comment was on the book sleeve of the first edition of *Native Son* (Black Atlantic, 243).
[28] John Zheng and Jerry W. Ward Jr. "The Many Influences of Richard Wright: An Interview with Jerry W. Ward, Jr." *African American Review*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Spring 2017), 22.

Malcom X (1925 – 1965) - Corpus of work

Malcom X, born as Malcolm Little in 1925, rose to become one of the most influential iconoclastic black Americans in US history. He epitomised the revolutionary tradition of black people as he followed in the footsteps of iconic antecedents who included Nat Turner, Denmark Vessey, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Willam E. B. Du Bois, among many more. Malcolm X evolved to become a proponent of black empowerment who strongly affirmed blackness to the world and was an avid anti-white supremacy advocate. Because of his abrasive and militaristic style of leadership, he was bound to attract both criticism and adulation from both sides of the American racial divide. Robert E. Terrel encapsulates his legacy: "Mention Malcolm X, and you are bound to get a reaction. Many admire him, but even now, more than four decades after his death, few people lack an opinion about him. A polarizing figure, in death as in life, Malcolm X continues to haunt American national consciousness …"[29] Malcolm X's corpus of work, which includes an autobiography, speeches, press releases, television and radio interviews, public letters, and college and university lectures, demonstrates a radical activist-intellectual who intensively interrogated American socio-political history, white supremacy, as well as the directions of African American struggles for freedom. His prodigious influence in the 1960s and his subsequent legacy in 1970s black politics and beyond is evidenced by what Terrill asserts to be "a formidable torrent of scholarly work … critical analyses of [his] oratory and Autobiography, explorations of his influence on, and representation in, art, music, and politics ..." (Terrill, 1).

[29] Robert T. Terrill, "Introduction," *Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1. Subsequent page referencing in Text.

Having been raised by parents who were avid black liberation activists (Reverend Earl Little and Louise Little), Malcolm X was aware of grassroot activism as he grew up; in particular, he claimed that Earl regularly took him to meetings when he was very young. His parents were members of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.), which "was raising the banner of black-race purity and exhorting the Negro masses to return to their ancestral African homeland." [30] According to Malcolm X, Earl was a "dedicated organizer" for this black nationalist organisation, and this led to numerous clashes with white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. In his autobiography, he asserts that his parent's house was attacked and his father "was finally himself to die by the white man's hands" (*Autobiography*, 80). He also adds that Louise was subsequently targeted, declared insane and unfit to look after her children—a significant development which shaped his identity evolution. For most of his life, he was bitter about how white systemic racism destroyed his family through murdering his father, institutionalising his mother and declaring him and his siblings state wards. His evolution through different physical and psychological stages as represented in his autobiography is centred on the state's hand in the demise of his family.

Traditionally, religion has always been intertwined with politics in the struggle for black freedom; however, Malcolm X revolutionised this black tradition through his incorporation of a version of Islam. Having been converted to this version of Islam when in prison, upon his release he rose through the ranks to become the spokesman

[30] Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), 79. Subsequent page referencing in text.

of the Nation of Islam (NOI) which was led by Elijah Muhammad, who became his spiritual father. From this position, Malcolm X was able to follow in his father's footsteps and interweave religion and politics. He lived and witnessed the impact of racism on black lives—an experience he significantly crafted into his oratory and rhetoric eloquence. Some of the historic moments which may have influenced his evolving politics include: *Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka, Kansas (1952); the Lynching of Emmett Till (1955); the arrest of Rosa Parks and the subsequent Montgomery bus boycott (1955); and the 1960s civil rights campaign in which he was one of the central figures. Through his leadership as Elijah Muhamad's de facto deputy and NOI's spokesperson, Malcolm X managed to increase the visibility of NOI as an alternative vehicle to black emancipation in the US. This organisation was premised on racial pride, self-determination, economic freedom and did not allow any non-black membership. Malcolm X became integral to the growth of NOI as his intense critique of American society resonated with a significant proportion of the black demography in the US and beyond.

Although he was not permitted to be too political, Malcolm X still managed to adeptly and charismatically infuse an interplay of religion and politics into his role of being the face and voice of NOI. This was demonstrated in the numerous public speeches, interviews, and lectures. However, conflict was inevitable as he entered the national consciousness through some of his hard-hitting criticism of systemic racism and economic exploitation faced by black Americans. His 13 July 1959 speech on national television, "The Hate that Hate produced," announced NOI's radically polarising ideology to the American public and was received with much shock and rebuke across the racial divide. This was followed by his 1963 Detroit speech, "Message to the

Grassroots," in which he vociferously argued for black unity through a more robust and militaristic stance. This significantly contrasted with what the Civil Rights Movement stood for, as its leadership, which included Martin Luther King, advocated for a non-violent approach, and promoted integration. This speech was followed by another call on April 3, 1964, to rally black people to vote and begin their journey towards nationalism - "The Ballot or the Bullet". Celeste Michelle Condit and John Louis Lucaites assert that this line was subsequently presented on numerous occasions and provoked much reaction: "It was one of his most militant statements, and for this reason it drew a great deal of attention from the White mass media and the White political establishment, which interpreted it as an appeal for a violent overthrow of the U.S. government."[31] From this speech Malcolm was constructed as a pariah by some across the US racial divide. The civil rights leadership took this speech as divisive and undermining of their approach, while for most whites, Malcolm X emerged as treasonous and therefore dangerous, recalling Angelo Herndon in the early 1930s.

James Smethurst explores Malcom X's significant influence on the Black Arts movement during the 1960s and 1970s. This movement was mainly comprised of politically engaged black artists and arts institutions. Smethurst asserts that "Malcolm X served as inspirational, icon, model, polemicist, theorist, and adviser to the movement, especially in its formative years in the early and middle 1960s" (*Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X, 78*). Malcolm X had a personal presence in Black Arts Movement centres in New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago and Oakland. This robust connection to grassroots "influenced radical black arts activists such as Amiri

[31] Celeste Michelle and John Louis Lucaites, "Malcom X and the Limits of the Rhetoric of Revolutionary Dissent" *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 23, No. 3 (March 1993), 292. Subsequent page referencing in text.

Baraka, Gwendolyn Brookes, Etheridge Knight, Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, and Askia Toure and promoted the rise of cultural nationalism as a powerful, organized tendency within the Black Power movement" (Smethurst, 71). Amiri Baraka, in particular, avidly believed in Malcolm X's nationalist ideology, especially that it suggested a vision of liberated black zones: "Black people are a race, a culture, a Nation. The legacy of Malcolm X is that we know we can move from where we are … if we are a separate Nation, we must make our separateness where we are. There are Black cities all over this white nation. Nations withing nations."[32]

The 1960s struggle for civil rights was one of the most contentious intra-racial moments in African American struggles for freedom. There emerged a polarising issue between nationalism and integration, with Malcolm X supporting the former and Martin Luther King Jnr. advocating for the latter. In the thesis I interrogate Malcolm X's corpus as his revolutionary conceptual space which he opened to dismantle double consciousness enmeshing black people in and outside America. His radical instincts revolved around re-characterising the black image to erase the white construction of black people. He consistently used the historical framework as he "spoke at length on the importance of Africa Americans learning their history if they were to successfully overcome the mental and social assault on their psyche from being viewed as inferior and second-class citizens."[33] Another way Malcolm X sought to dismantle double consciousness was his re-characterising white people as devil incarnations. He saw this strategy helping to remove the historic feeling of looking at oneself through the eyes of the oppressor. Characterising the white man as devil would then erase him as

[32] Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Home* (New York: Morrow, 1966), 248.
[33] Trevin Jones, "The Ideological and Spiritual Transformation of Malcolm X," *Journal of African American Studies,* 425. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111 18 July 2020.

a symbol of excellence—a move that would constitute a rejection of the debilitating white gaze on black identity. Furthermore, Malcolm X went on to make it explicitly clear where he stood regarding the Civil Rights Movement's non-violence approach to black freedom. In what appeared to be a rejoinder to Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech during the civil rights "March on Washington," Malcolm X delivered "A Declaration of Independence" speech on December 4, 1963. In this speech, he argued that black people should arm and defend themselves:

> Concerning non-violence: it is criminal to teach a man not to defend himself when he is the constant victim of brutal attacks. It is legal and lawful to own a shotgun or a rifle. … We should be peaceful, law abiding—but the time has come for the America Negro to fight back in self-defense whenever and wherever he is being unjustly and unlawfully attacked.[34]

It was inevitable that Malcolm X's evolving politics would lead to his parting ways with NOI. As he gained more power, he became more militaristic, and this caused friction within the NOI. On March 8, 1964, he announced that he was leaving the NOI. Parting with the NOI freed him from the strictures imposed by Elijah Muhammad. On 13 April 1964, he announced the formation of his own church, Moslem Mosque, Inc. before later joining Orthodox Islam after going on a Hajj to Mecca. To mark his complete departure from NOI, he also formed an overtly political wing on 9 June 1964, the Organisation of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) which was marked by his declaration that black people should be prepared to achieve freedom and equality "by any means necessary" which paralleled Garvey's long-term plans for black nationalism. This

[34] George Breitman, ed. "A Declaration of Independence," in *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 22. Subsequent page referencing in text.

declaration underscored his growing militaristic posture. His consistent call to arms invoked "the persona of a self-confident Black identity that demanded all of the rights ever claimed by humanity" (*Journal of Black Studies*, 302). This was his strategy to dismantle the historic double consciousness which manifested from the intersecting oppressive structures impinging on black Americans.

On 13 April 1965, Malcolm X travelled to Mecca for the Hajj and his subsequent conversion to Orthodox Islam which was epitomised by a change of name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. This journey marked a significant shift from some of the NOI ideologies which, for some people, still define who he was and what he represented. Prior to his pilgrimage, he had epitomised black masculinity and exhibited sexist thinking by explicitly representing black women as problematic to black men attaining manhood. Michele Wallace examines black patriarchy and characterises Malcom X as "the supreme black patriarch … the great black father was finally in our midst. But in 1965 black men murdered Malcolm, and with him died the chance for a black patriarchy."[35] This explicates Malcolm X's conviction that black liberty could be achieved through the affirmation of black manhood which allows black men to be men. I suggest that he saw this as a way of confronting the historical double consciousness which has continued to leave a significant number of black men feeling inadequate and therefore unable to match the accomplishments of their white counterparts. His legacy continues to help dismantle double consciousness as observed by Farah Jasmine Griffin: "The image of Malcolm X refuses to die and remains a space where contemporary urban black men can create their own sense of identity in contrast to

[35] Kenneth Mostern, "The political identity "woman" as emergent from the space of Black Power," in *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 164. Subsequent page referencing in text.

the construction of them by the dominant society."[36] However, with his evolving psychology after witnessing a more tolerant world in Mecca, he appeared to be moving away from his male-privileging posture to more inclusive politics. Furthermore, he became more tolerant of racial diversity after his pilgrimage to Mecca. Jimmy Butts asserts Malcolm X claimed that he was beginning to "judge people based on their actions" and not the colour of their skin as Mecca had revolutionised the concept of brotherhood by exposing him to "a diversity of Muslims from different races treating each other equally ... there were blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned African who were all participating in the same ritual."[37] Another significant shift emerged as he softened his polarising stance towards the Civil Rights Movement's leaders and their politics, "The goal has always been the same, with the approaches to it as different as mine and Dr Martin Luther King's non-violent marching, that dramatizes the brutality and the evil of the white man against defenceless blacks" (Malcolm X, 496).

Malcom X was always a black nationalist at heart - he made numerous journeys to Africa where he met with many African leaders and intellectuals in his bid to affirm his convictions in Pan-Africanism. He was assassinated on 21 February 1965 before he could develop his political strategy of transforming the African American civil rights struggle into a human rights issue which would mandate the United Nations to investigate. Fortunately, before his untimely death, he had managed, with the help of Alex Haley, to articulate his evolving political philosophy in his seminal autobiography which is firmly situated within the black radical tradition. Perhaps, historians Randy Robert and Johny Smith encapsulate his drive at radical black nationalism: "At his

[36] Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin'?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 135.
[37] Jimmy Butts, "The Suppression and Liberation of Malcolm's Agency: Malcolm X and His Religio-Racial Understanding of White People," Journal of Black Studies Vol. 55 (2024): 227. Subsequent page referencing in the text.

core, Malcolm X was a Black Nationalist, a soldier at war searching for allies in the black liberation movement."[38] Furthermore, he had a global perspective to the interconnectedness of oppressive structures and travelled across the world to inculcate his ideas. Keving Gaines eulogies Malcom X's legacy as the precursor to Barack Obama and celebrates his global impact:

> Obama is a product of the history of black freedom movement in the United Staes. That history belongs to the world, due to no small part to Malcolm X's travels to Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, and the importance of Islamic faith to his rejection of the Nation of Islam's antiwhite doctrine … The African American struggle for equality for some, like Shankar, was embodied by Malcom, inspired people all over the world, throughout Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe (*Autobiography and Black Identity Politics*, 158).

Maya Angelou (4 April 1928 – 28 May 2014) – Corpus of work

In her article, "Contemporary African American women writers," Dana A. Williams designates Maya Angelou as the "progenitor of contemporary black life writing."[39] This is a fitting designation for an internationally renowned bestselling writer who published seven autobiographies and eight books of poetry. Her corpus of writing also encompasses a book of essays, several plays, a screenplay, children's books, and two cookbooks. Angelou went on to receive recognition for her prodigious writing craft

[38] Randy Roberts and Johny Smith, *Blood Brothers: the fatal friendship between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X* (Basic Boks, 2016), 430.
[39] Dana A. Williams, "Contemporary African American women writers," in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell, and Danille K. Taylor, (Cambridge: University Cambridge Press, 2009), 73.

through awards and honours which included three Grammy Awards for her spoken-word albums (1993,1995, and 2002). She was inducted into the Arkansas Women's Hall of Fame in 1993, and in 2013, a year before her death, she received the Literature Award from the National Book Foundation and the Miller Prize for Lifetime Achievement from the Norman Miller Centre. Besides writing, she was an exemplar of creative diversity, modelling a lifetime of resilience, tenacity, and resistance—and as Claudia Tate put it, she was a "poet, director, composer, lyricist, dancer, singer, journalist, teacher and lecturer"[40] Recognising her accomplishments in creative expression, and her remarkable service to human rights, Angelou was a recipient of more than fifty university honorary awards – an extraordinary feat considering the historical racial turbulence in the US literary landscape.

Angelou's work broadly focused on American identities and history; critically exploring themes such as racism, slavery, oppression, self-identification, freedom, equality, religion, and survival, among others. Like her antecedents, she used personal narratives to articulate what it meant to be black in America, employing the 'I' to represent both the individual and the community or black women. In most of her writing Angelou privileged African American survival, compassion, and love—demonstrating their capacity to triumph over adversity. Williams asserts, "Throughout her [writing], she recognizes the customs and traditions of the community and the culture as forces that allow people to live through their difficulties" (73). She managed to probe "the interior self with a distinctive use of humour and self-mockery, her linguistic sensibility, as well as her ability to balance the quest for human individuality with the general

[40] Jeffery M. Elliot, ed. *Conversations with Maya Angelou*, (London: Virago Press Limited, 1989), 152. Subsequent page referencing in text.

condition of black Americans distinguish her as a master of the genre."[41] This analysis resonates with most of her works, and especially with the two autobiographies this thesis critically interrogates - *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1969), chronicling her first sixteen years of her life, and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013) – exploring the relationship she had with Vivian Baxter, her redeemed biological mother. In the thesis, I examine her search for self-definition as she navigates life as a black woman in America through Du Bois' formulation of double consciousness in which African Americans grapple with conflicting identities in their search for self-identity amidst racism, economic oppression, and persecution in America.

As a form of creative art, poetry for Angelou was a vehicle to express black experiences – their emotions, feelings, and search for individual and collective identities. African American poetry is a literary body of work in which "African American writers have participated in a productive, frequently intense debate with American literature."[42] In order to develop her craft, she joined the Harlem Writers Guild, an organisation set up in 1950 by African Americans who felt excluded from the mainstream literary culture. This organisation sought to give black writers a platform to nurture their writing talent and publish compelling literature about black experiences. Subsequently, Angelou became passionate about writing and thus joined illustrious writers and poets such as Langston Hughes, Lorraine Lansberry, Audre Lorde, and James Baldwin. About Baldwin, she claimed he stealthily challenged her to write an autobiography—she said he declared: "Miss Angelou, … I'm rather glad you decided not to write an autobiography because to write an autobiography as literature is the

[41] Siphokazi Koyana, "The Heart of the Matter: Motherhood and Marriage in the Autobiographies of Maya Angelou," *The Black Scholar* vol. 32 no. 2 (summer, 2002): 35

[42] K. Preethi, and N. Gayathri, "Thematic and Stylistic Analysis of Maya Angelou Poems: A Review of Literature," *Studies of Media and Communication*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (June 2023): 247.

most difficult thing to do" (*Conversations*, 152). She responded by taking up the challenge even though she had vowed not to write her autobiography. Baldwin was one of the central artists who echoed Du Bois in promoting the preservation and communication of black traditions across music, poetry, and theatre; feats Angelou embraced as she went on to be such a prodigious and multi-talented artist of a diverse range. This promotion of black traditions across the arts by Du Bois, Baldwin, and Angelou marked intergenerational "great political and social significance [which continues to] challenge the popular belief that blacks have contributed nothing to the development of American culture."[43]

Angelou particularly mentioned Zora Neale Hurston, a luminary of the Harlem Renaissance era, as having had a pivotal influence on her writing career: "Zora Neale Hurston means a great deal to me as a writer" (*Conversations,* 147). She followed women writers such as Hurston in their interrogation of the social, cultural, and political status quo to give African Americans and especially, black women, voices – extolling their indefatigable character which has seen them pull through adversity. This historic triumph over multiple oppressions by black women is celebrated through poems such as "Still I Rise" (1978) and "Phenomenal Woman" (1995). From a woman-centric analysis, Preethi and Gayathri assert that in the former poem, Angelou "positions the black female as the spokesperson for the community," and about the latter, they conclude, "The poet asserted that black women can thrive because of their optimistic attitudes, self-confidence, and innate patriotism" (250). Angelou's poems promoted black women as community spokespersons who can teach and foster the value of

[43] Sandra Adell, "Reading Across the Color Line," in *Double Consciousness/ Double Bind: Theoretical Issues in Twentieth-Century Black Literature,* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 23

humanity, love, and social justice. In this position of black women's leadership, Angelou delved into the psychology of the Other to help challenge the racist and patriarchal discourse pervading American reading public and literary studies. The quest for "self-defining identity" became an organising centre, working towards dismantling Otherness and double consciousness.

Sandra Adelle, in her chapter "The Auto-Text," explores the writings of Otherness as "the great obsession of the late twentieth century literary studies." (*Double Consciousness/Double Bind,* 56). She affirms that:

> In any event, as Blacks, Women, Gays, and everyone else who is likely to fall under the rubric Other were admitted into the "Court of Western Literature" mainly through the different area studies that have become institutionalised over the past two decades. Otherness became the new center from which they would demand a fair hearing. What they demanded was a *space* within the institution from which they would articulate their diversity" (Adell, 57).

With her poetry and autobiography, Angelou thus entered the literary field in the 1960s. Joanne Braxton and James Olney have argued that "the popularity of autobiographical writing in American literary studies in general can be attributed to the political upheavals of the 1960s" (Adelle, 57). Grappling with Otherness, Angelou demanded "space within the institution" to give voice to racially and economically marginalised groups, especially black women. She remarkably broke new ground with her multilayered autobiography series when she went on to expose intra-racial rape, incest, and violence through themes of identity, family, community, and resilience. Unlike Alice Walker who uses fiction in *The Color Purple* to explore rape and incest in

black families and communities, Angelou is the central character as the victim of these heinous crimes committed in intimate spaces by family members and lovers. I examine the character Maya Angelou, in *Caged Bird* and *Mom & Me & Mom* to explore how she endured personal and collective trauma while creating her identity. Some of these traumas gave birth to periods of double consciousness as Angelou grappled with the complexities of black womanhood amid rigid cultural and racial expectations. In *Caged Bird*, as in her subsequent works, she took readers through her process of self-discovery as she dismantled the debilitating double consciousness which threatened to give her a false identity. Running through her seven autobiographies are themes which gave voice to the marginalised and these included: resilience and triumph over adversity; social justice and civil rights; empowerment and liberation; family and community; spirituality and faith; love and relationship; as well as exploring the imbrications of maternity on black womanhood.

Through this diversity of themes, Angelou demonstrated incisive insights into humanity and used her experiences to rise to be recognised as one of the significant American figures who continue to inspire commitments to justice, equality, and empowerment. Carol E. Neubauer (1975) celebrates Angelou in “Southern Women Writers: The New Generation” – she asserts that Angelou is regarded “as a spokesperson for … all people who are committed in raising the moral standards of living in the United States” (*Studies in Media and Communication*, 248). In this role as a “spokeswoman,” Angelou strove to promote the image of the black woman, and in an interview (1993) with Claudia Tate she declared:

> Image making is very important for every human being. It is especially important for black American women in that we are, by being black, a minority in the United States, and by being female, the less powerful of the gender. So, we have two areas we must address. If we look out of our eyes in at the immediate world around us, we see whites and males in dominant roles. We need to see our mothers, aunts, our sisters, and grandmothers. We need to see Frances Harper, Sojourner Truth, Fannie Lou Hamer, women of our heritage. We need to see these women preserved. We need them all … All these women are important as role models. (*Conversations,* 147).

With the image of black women in mind, Angelou gave her female characters empowering leadership roles in families and communities, reminiscent of those historic female figures mentioned in the above quotation – for example, both her grandmothers were the centre of their communities, black women who usurped control of traditional male roles so effectively that even white men recognised their leadership. Vivian Baxter, her redeemed mother, played a significant feminist role-model influence to help Angelou navigate her youth, marriage, motherhood, and careers.

Echoing the influence of great women who came before her on her life and career, Angelou as one of the initiators of contemporary life writing anticipated the life writing of two black women luminaries: Michelle Obama, the US First Lady between 2009 - 2017 (*Becoming,* 2018), and Viola Davis, a remarkable actress and producer (*Finding Me*, 2022). Reading *Becoming* and *Finding Me*, one can recognise parallels with Angelou's accounts of how she battled with her identity as she navigated life in segregated communities which did not value black women, before she found herself and became the epitome of black excellence. Obama spoke of Angelou's extraordinary influence on her and other black women, especially her celebration of black women

beauty which exuded a deep sense of racial pride: “Maya celebrated black women beauty like no one ever dared to before … Angelou spoke to the essence of black women ... And how desperately black girls needed that message. As a young woman, I needed that message.”[44]

Angelou was also an avid activist who was integral to many social and political movements of her time. Her participation in activism meant that she combined theory and praxis, echoing another black woman giant in Angella Davis, whose writing and activism I also examine in this thesis. Angelou participated in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and worked closely with such prominent figures like Malcolm X whom she had met in Ghana, and later worked with in a Pan-African endeavour – the Organisation of Afro-American Unity. She also worked with Dr. Martin Luther King during the civil rights struggle. She was nominated to be the northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) which was a pivotal organisation in the black struggle for civil rights. Asked by Jackie Kay in a 1987 interview about her involvement as a civil rights campaigner, and working with Dr. Martin Luther King, Angelou described this momentous period:

> The period was absolutely intoxicating. The streets were filled with people who were on their toes, figuratively, with alertness. There was a promise in the air, like delicious aroma of a wonderful soup being cooked in the kitchen on a cold day when you are hungry. It really appeared as if we were going to overcome racism, sexism, violence, hate (*Conversations*, 196)

[44] Michelle Obama, “Remarks by the First Lady at Memorial Service for Dr. Maya Angelou” whitehouse.archives.gov – Office of the First Lady, National Archives (.gov) 07 June, 2014

Angelou, however claimed this pivotal moment towards the annihilation of the chaotic and unequal world she extensively interrogated in her writing was "derailed understandably by those, to quote Miss Margret Walker: 'who tower over us omnisciently and laugh'" (*Conversations*, 196). Angelou's summation here echoes Du Bois' formulation of double consciousness in which he talks about this laughing world which looks at black people in "amused contempt and pity."[45] Nevertheless, Angelou was not discouraged, and she did not let this setback derail her political aspirations for a better world as she continued with her mission as a "revolutionary reformer."[46]

Angelou was an avid black women's rights advocate and activist, in writing, public speaking, and other engagements—significantly contributing a black woman's voice in the national conversations and consciousness on marginalised demographic groups. Asked about Amiri Baraka's representational stance on black women during the Black Panther Movement, she took a feminist stance. Baraka had written that black women's role in the black liberation movement was to be feminine and submissive. As spokesperson, Angelou invoked slavery in the black women's response:

> 'No babe, we don't take it like that', and we don't, we haven't. We were sold together on the African continent, lay spoon fashion in the filthy hatchets of slave ships together, got up before sunrise, got up after sunset together, worked those cane fields and cotton fields and the mines and all together. Please, we are equal (*Conversations,* 1999).

[45] W. E. B. Du Bois*, The Souls of Black Folks*, (Millenium Publication, United Kingdom, 2014), 5.
[46] In an interview with Jackie Kay, she clarified what she meant in referring to herself as "radical;" she said she equated the word with being a "revolutionary reformer" (*Conversations*, 197).

Although she ferociously sought the survival of African Americans and giving voice to black women, she had universal aspirations in her writing, as well as social and political activism which spoke to and extolled the humanity of all people regardless of race:

> I'm talking all people—that's what I know, but I'm always talking about the human condition. So, if it's possible for me, Maya Angelou, me, myself to feel thirst, then I know how it's possible for you to feel thirst. And if my tongue dries up with thirst, then I know how your tongue must feel when there is no liquid … I accept that we human beings are more alike than unlike and it is that *similarity* that I talk about all the time. Yes, not just surviving … but thriving with passion and compassion, and humor and style, and excitement and glory, and generosity and kindness (*Conversations,* viii).

Considering this universal approach to her activism, Angelou continues to be recognised for her inspirational role in her advocacy for equality and social justice. Acknowledging her significant contribution to race relations in America, the highest office of the US government awarded her accolades which included the National Medal of Arts in 2000, and in 2011 President Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Perhaps, Maya Angelou's significance and contribution to American culture is encapsulated in her invitation to read her poem: "On the Pulse of Morning" at the 1993 Bill Clinton inauguration. This was an unprecedented gesture as in the entire history of American Presidential inaugurations, she became the first African American and woman to be invited to read a poem at such an illustrious and grand occasion on the American calendar.

Angela Davis: (26 January 1944 –) Corpus of Work

Angela Davis symbolises the historic evolution of black liberation movements as her lived experiences and intellectual rigour connect and delineate some pivotal moments in American history. She continues to typify the duality of intellectual-activist praxis through her scholarship and being at the centre of grassroot organising. At an event at which she was being honoured as one of the pioneers in integrative race, gender and class studies, Bernice McNair Barnett introduced her as: "… a Black American woman leader in civil rights struggles, activist-intellectual, knowledge constructor, professor, philosopher, and global citizen scholar."[47] In this intersection of roles, Davis has produced a prodigious body of work which gives radical insights into racial and patriarchal structures of oppression. She has written essays, an autobiography, and several books; she has also given speeches and lectures at universities and other public spaces. This corpus of work has been consistently and profoundly radical in her endeavour to tenaciously resist and subvert all forms of oppression - taking unpopular positions against black political and social movements, and successive American governments, including Obama's two presidential tenures. For Davis, the fundamental question is what is freedom? Robin D. G. Kelly posits, "Angela Davis's entire life, work and activism has been dedicated to examining this fundamental question and to abolishing all forms of subjugation that have denied oppressed people freedom."[48]

[47] Bernice McNair Barnett, "Angela Davies and Women, Race, & Class: A Pioneer in Integrative RGC Studies," *Race, Gender, & Class Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 3. 2003, p.10 https://www.jstor.org/stable/41675085

[48] Angela Y. Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom And other Difficult Dialogues*, (City Light Books: San Francisco, 2012), 7.

In this endeavour to work for the freedom of the oppressed, Davis's intergenerational involvement in grassroot organisation and black liberation movements started very early through her mother and grandmother who were avid activists. They used to take her with them to meetings and protests - introducing her to an activist life which continues to define her black identity. She grew up during the McCarthy era in which the contradictory Smith-McCarran acts were active. She was aware that some people had to flee the FBI, which pursued them under these two laws. In a 2013 interview with Tony Platt, she declared, "One of the most important lessons I learned as a child was never to talk to the FBI."[49] Davis goes on to elaborate the impact of these laws: "According to the McCarran Act (or Subversive Activities Control Act of 1950), a communist [was] defined as someone who want[ed] to violently overthrow the government. The Smith Act required communists to register. So, if you registered under the Smith Act, then immediately you will be charged under the McCarran Act (Platt, 40). Growing up in such an environment and with family members who were activists, it is not surprising that during university she transitioned to active roles in grassroot organising and protest, culminating in her joining the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1967, and the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) in 1968 to anchor her Marxist politics and praxis. Marxist thought provided her with a framework for understanding and critiquing capitalism and its concomitant oppressions. Her middle-class background and scholarships allowed her to enrol at various universities, including University of Frankfurt, and to travel in Europe. This gave her global experiences of resistance and subsequently increased her appetite for social justice. Radical intellectuals like Herbert Marcuse and Theodore Adorno

[49] Tony Platt, "Interview with Angela Davis," *Social Justice*, vol. 40, No. 1, (2013),40. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24361660

sharpened her intellectual lens and influenced her activism to resist all forms of oppression. Her membership of the CPUSA attracted much attention especially as she was teaching at university, a development which was vehemently opposed by some whites who feared their children would be radicalised. She had to go to court to be reinstated after being fired from her university position as a philosophy lecturer for being involved in "criminal activities." She became a symbol of resistance for taking on the university board and winning. This victory appeared to have emboldened Davis as she subsequently (in the 1960s and 1970s) became actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panther Party.

As a proponent of intersectionality, Davis has written and given lectures on race, class, Marxism, feminism, prison abolition, and social justice. Her seminal work includes: *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (1971); *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974); *Women, Race & Class* (1981); *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003); *The meaning of Freedom: And Other Difficult Dialogues* (2012); and *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundation of a Movement* (2015). Davis anticipated Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectional scholarship with her *Women, Race & Class*, in which she highlights the intersectionality of oppressive structures on black women and working-class women. She has continued to insist on the interconnectedness of interlocking structures of oppression and how holistic approaches are the panacea to these systemic inequalities. According to Barnett, "In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the challenges, critiques, theorizing, research and teaching by Angela Davis and other racial ethnic women pioneers generated a new field of recognizing scholarly inquiry often referred to as "*integrative* race, gender, and class studies" (Barnett, 16). This pioneering field of scholarship has provided analysis

of how multiple and simultaneous interlocking structures of power impinge on the liberation and freedom of marginalised groups.

Davis has consistently stood up to resist patriarchal oppression in the organisations and movements she has been integral to. She has defied the sexist calls which deny women their places in the struggle, and echoing Zora Neal Hurston, Maya Angelou, and Alice Walker, she has ignored calls for black women not to “talk back” or expose cultural oppressions by black men as well as their violence in intimate spaces – I interrogate this in the thesis using the lens of womanism which celebrates black communities and advocates for an inclusive approach to liberate all oppressed groups. She raised her voice to expose the sexism at the centres of the CPUSA, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Panther Party. In the thesis I also examine the way Davis represents black women’s interlocking oppression through Du Bois’ formulation of double consciousness. I interrogate how black women grapple with the recurring tensions of navigating imposed multiple identities which compete with their self-perception. In her writing and lived experiences, Davis symbolises this complex navigation and resistance as she continues to strive for the liberation of black women and other marginalised groups.

Another critical area in which Davis has explored and contributed much scholarship is the disproportionate incarceration of black people. Her own imprisonment on trumped up charges gave her insights into prison experience and triggered her critical inquiry. After being put on the FBI most wanted list, she was hunted like an animal, arrested and then imprisoned on false charges for aiding and abetting criminals. This experience and her involvement with the Soledad Brothers called her attention to

criminology and prisons. Davis confirms this in an interview with Platt, “Through my involvement with Soledad Brothers and George Jackson I began to think about prison repression in a much broader context … that the prison institution constitutes a mode of racist repression” (Platt, 42). She has subsequently written and spoken much on prisons including a book – *Are Prisons Obsolete?* She interrogates what she and other scholars have termed ‘the prison industrial complex system” which is fed by black prisoners who continue to disproportionately fill up prisons and work as inmates. As an abolitionist, Davis has called for the abolition of prisons as they have failed, and advocates for restorative justice as an alternative. In 1997, together with Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Rose Braz, and other activists, Davis co-founded an organisation called Critical Resistance.

As a response to the US government’s 1994 Crime Bill, Davies and her colleagues organised a massive anti-prison conference in 1998 under the rubric “Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex.” They characterised the bill as promoting state violence through carceral solutions to capitalist challenges. This conference attracted more than 3500 advocates, activists, artists and scholars. In her article “Crime Bill,” Davies explains the aim of this conference: “The ultimate goal of this gathering was to propose new vocabularies and a new discourse that would help to shift the ‘law and order rhetoric’ to one that acknowledge the role played by the multifaceted criminalisation of Black Brown, and poor communities in consolidating the punitive turn”.[50] From this conference the movement grew with a key philosophy calling for the abolishment of prisons to stop the capitalist collusion between the US

[50] Angela Y. Davis, “The Crime Bill,” in *Four Hundred Souls: A Community of African America 1619 -2019,* ed. Ibram X. Kendi, and Keisha N. Blan, (UK: Penguin Random House, 2021), 369. Subsequent page references in text.

government and industry in transforming prisons into business entities to make profit out of prisoners. Critical Resistance continues to advocate for alternative solutions which incorporate community health, education, and restorative practices to reduce crime and the need for violent and oppressive policing and carceral systems. Davis's scholarship on Critical Resistance continues to educate on how the prison industrial complex is systemic; it does not address the root causes of crime in the USA and beyond. She explores the global nature of mass incarceration using the intersectionality of poverty, lack of education and healthcare as root causes of crime which need to be addressed.

Like other historic radical revolutionaries, for example, Maya Angelou, Richard Wright, and Malcolm X, Davis has followed the black tradition of travelling in and outside the US. Travelling has helped expand her knowledge of how oppression operates as she connects and shares ideas with other global revolutionaries. This has given her global views on oppression and engendered activism which is rooted in international solidarity for those impacted by western domination. Following her earlier interactions with Algerian students during her university years and connecting capitalist imperialism and colonialism to the historic capitalist oppressions of black people in the US, Davis later travelled to Egypt in the early 1970s. This journey demonstrated a Pan-Africanism thrust in her activism which must have been stirred during her involvement with the Civil Rights Movement and Black Panther Party—both movements were deeply connected to Pan-Africanists' ideals. According to Sara Salem, this visit, "marked the formation of new transnational connections of solidarity between Davis and numerous Egyptian feminists ... it was a moment of a new form of solidarity [which] was forged on the basis of analysis and activism against the material

realities of capitalist expansion and emerging of imperialism."[51] Salem also focuses on how Davis's visit revealed the shared experiences between Egyptian women and African American women based on how mainstream western feminism have represented them:

> By pointing to this form of oppression, Davis is already preventing us from imagining that there is some type of automatic solidarity among women on the basis of womanhood. By calling attention to these misconceptions and stereotypes harbored by many white Western feminists, both toward women of color in the West and women in the third world, Davis shows that there are hierarchies within "universal sisterhood" and suggest why transnational feminism based on shared womanhood is a myth (Salem, 245).

This historic exclusion and misrepresentation by western feminism, and the recurring experience of capitalist domination suggests the possibility of a strengthened solidarity between African American women and African women, as well as other marginalised groups who continue to experience the interlocking oppressions of race, gender, and class. In her corpus of work, international speaking tours and numerous visits to African and Caribbean countries, Davis seeks to foster continued dialogues and solidarity among people of African lineage. Furthermore, from Davis's inclusive womanist perspective, and in "the tradition of black women activists of previous century, Davis has raised her voice on issues ranging from education, injustice, prison

[51] Sara Salem," On Transnational Solidarity: The Case of Angela Davis in Egypt," *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* vol. 43, no. 2 (2018), 245

reform, welfare, and women's liberation, to disarmament and world peace."[52] Renowned scholar-activist June Jordan encapsulates Davis's historical intellectual-activism praxis: "Behold the heart and mind of Angela Davis; open, relentless, and on time! She is as radiant, she is as true, as that invincible sunrise she means to advance with all the faith and all the grace of her entirely devoted life" (Barnett, 21).

Chapter Outline:

Chapter One gives critical insights into black childhood experiences through representations by Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Malcolm X, and Maya Angelou. I examine these aforementioned writers' formative years through the impact their parents and communities have on their black identities as they grow up. This chapter is divided into two parts to explore the impact of fathers and mothers separately through autobiographical ontologies: patriography, and matriography—the insertion of the father and mother's memoirs respectively in one's autobiography. Parental lives have direct impact on their children's lives; what these parents do and don't do has profound influence in the shaping of their children's black identities. The father's impact is separated from the mother's impact in order for me to critically investigate the significant gendered impact on both the parents and the children. I investigate how racial and gender politics significantly limit both parents and their children, and how the latter subvert these limits, which include double consciousness, to access their potential as they grow up.

[52] Marilyn Sanders Mobley, "African American Essayists," in *The Cambridge Companion To African American Women's Literature* ed. Angelyn Mitchell, and Danille K. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 239. Subsequent page referencing in text.

Critical Race Theory frames my investigation of patriography as I explore how capitalism impinges on black fathers in particular, and black men in general, in the US during the formative years of the autobiographical writers I am exploring. I also draw on Paul C. Rosenblatt's work on Family Systems Theory and literature as a social science. This allows me to critically examine how racism comes home to black families through black men's interaction with the capitalist environment. My focus is on black men as the culturally defined providers for their families at these particular historical junctures portrayed by the respective writers. I also employ Critical Race Theory's tenet of what Richard Delgado terms "counter-narratives". Recalling slave narratives, the autobiographical writers in this thesis frame their counter-narratives with an oppositional consciousness which rejects the status quo and works to subvert it. This subversion engenders the disruption of the status quo which in turn realises the prodigious potential in these black autobiographical writers. They demonstrate extraordinary resilience, tenacity and boldness in confronting cultural, racial, and gender adversity.

The second part of this chapter looks at matriography to critically examine black mothers' influence in shaping black identities of their sons and daughters. Living in the dark shadows of both racism and patriarchy, black mothers face a daunting experience of raising their children. These difficult experiences impact on both their relationships with their children and the shaping of their black identities. The inherent political and cultural challenges on black mothers necessitate that they seek help to raise their children through shared motherhood and mothering. I incorporate Patricia Hill-Collins' black feminist motherwork conceptualisation of *othermothers* and *community mothers.* These concepts speak to communal and collaborative approaches to black motherhood and mothering which is

necessitated by the lived historical experience of black mothers and children since slavery. This trope of shared motherhood and mothering is especially represented by Wright, Malcolm X, and Angelou; all of whom owe their subversive black identity shaping to black women's communities of their times.

Chapter Two examines how Angelo Herndon and Angela Davis develop critical consciousness and how they both embrace an ideology not considered to have originated from the US – Communism. Reflections from these writers reveal the extent to which some black political activists have historically put their lives into jeopardy in their aspirations to overcome their double consciousness, challenge the status quo, and gain freedom for black people. My interest in these two writers lies in their representation of "double jeopardy" – being black and communist in historically contested terrains of US racial politics. For Davis, it becomes distinctively "triple jeopardy" – being black, communist and a woman. I track their childhood experiences to identify their evolution into political activists who subvert not only powerful white politicians, but also rebel against the traditional black political actors of their times. They challenge and work to subvert the former for their debilitating oppression of black people, and the latter for lethargy–they accuse black leaders of being reluctant to engage in active resistance, not just vocal protests which have failed to yield much for black people.

I read *Let Me Live* as a neo-slave autobiography in which Herndon exposes the depth of barbarism at the centre of white culture's so called "Christian civilisation" which parallels the brutality of the slave era complete with lynchings. Herndon chronicles his escape from the treacherous capitalist mines which claimed his father and how he navigates his way into politics. I also interrogate *Let Me Live* as a prison narrative which depicts real prison life

juxtaposed with the metaphorical image of the US as a gigantic prison for black people. Framing my investigation of Herndon's black identity transitions is critical consciousness theory, which Mathew A. Diemer et al. define as "the capacity of oppressed or marginalized people to critically analyse their social and political conditions, endorsement of societal equality, and action to change perceived inequalities."[53] It is the development of this critical consciousness that propels him into a political life that sees him become, like Davis, an enemy of the state and a prisoner of conscience. I also use Critical Race Theory framework in my investigation of how the state reacts to Herndon and Davis as political saboteurs, and how the law is manipulated and weaponised against black people in the US.

There are parallels between what happens to Herndon and Davis; however, the latter as a female activist has a distinctive treatment reserved for black women by both black and white cultures. Her experiences take on profound gender aspects as she negotiates the intersectionality of race, class, and gender as a womanist proponent. I explore intra-racial tensions within some black organisations revolving around women like Davis who challenge for leadership roles. Davies, like Herndon and Malcolm X, subverts the traditional role of prisons as state institutions which are designed to "rehabilitate" black people through punitive and cruel measures. She turns the prison narrative into a transformative discourse in which she articulates how prisons can be locations from which critical and political consciousness can be harnessed.

[53] Matthew A. Diemer et al., "Change to Development and Validation of the Critical Consciousness Scale," Youth and Society v. 49, no. 4 https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X14538289

Chapter Three critically interrogates Christianity and its historical roles in black lives. In the first part of this chapter I investigate Hurston and Wright's representations of how Christianity negatively impacts their lives as they grow up. I examine these writers as proponents of *free thought* – joining those who have historically demonstrated religious scepticism. Christopher Cameron investigates the history of black free thinkers who resist the existence of a God. He goes as far back as the slave era to acknowledge that even during slavery, there were many who did not believe in the presence of God in their lives. This is corroborated by Charles Colcock who asserts in his 1842 book (*The Religious Instruction of the Negroes*), "many enslaved people upheld common arguments against God's existence."[54] That there is a history of black people who have embraced *freethought* ideology dismantles the belief by some white people that they had the preserve to think outside traditional religious perspectives of life. Hurston and Wright, like Langston Hughes and Nella Larsen, centralise this ideology of *freethought* which questions the existence of a God for black people amidst all the suffering they go through. Caught-up and trapped in families and communities whose black identities are inextricably intertwined with the Christian religion, they represent childhood experiences which demonstrate remarkable tenacity in subverting both black cultural belief in the omnipotent and omniscient God, and white culture's centrality of Christian Civilisation. This chapter continues with the simultaneous investigation of specific themes based on gender perspectives. Wright's representation betrays a patriarchal gaze on black women and how his mother and grandmother in particular, contribute to the damage he claims Christianity does to his evolving black male identity. Hurston, on the other hand, provides a black female experience as she is raised in a patriarchal home, church, and community. She critiques the

[54] Christopher Cameron, *Black Free Thinkers: A History of Africa American Secularism*, (Evanston: Northwest University press, 2019), ix

tyranny of patriarchy and the Christian religion – both institutions, for a while, coalesce to limit her curiosity and impinge on her questioning temperament as she battles to navigate her way out.

In the second part of this chapter, I examine Malcolm X who continues with the theme of black rejection of Christianity, albeit opting for a different religion. Unlike Hurston and Wright, Malcolm X embraces religion (in the form of Islam) as part of his black identity evolution. I investigate how Islam anchors his intertwined religious and political journeys as he navigates the many roles which demand his attention. His vociferous rejection of Christianity's efficacy resonates with many black people as he models a different pathway for black identity. I use *habituation*, a psychological phenomenon as a lens into the intervention techniques Malcolm X models for African Americans to dismantle double consciousness and reclaim their blackness. He articulates how Christianity as an oppressor's religion is not designed to help black people – it has mostly served to historically *habituate* black people to oppression. I also interrogate Malcolm X's political pedagogy as deeply steeped in patriarchy and how it harms black women – a theme which I carry on with in Chapter 5 as I investigate the tenuous relationship between black women and patriarchy (black and white). He interweaves religion and politics in his endeavour to continue with his father's aspiration of making black people race conscious. For Malcolm X race consciousness is a critical intervention weapon to wean black people from their deep slumber of habituating to white supremacy. I also examine his criticism of black civil rights leaders and how their tactics perpetuate double consciousness and oppression. Unlike Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders who implore non-violence campaigns and integration, Malcolm X is a staunch nationalist who advocates for

separatism and even the use of violence where necessary to match white people's historical violent strategies.

Chapter Four critically examines the inter-generational relationship black women have with patriarchy (black and white). I investigate how particular black women negotiate their black identity modelled to subvert gender and racial oppression. The first part of this chapter examines the concept of *misogynoir* which interrogates historical sexism and hate of black women. Moya Bailey, one of its two proponents articulates the scope of this concept: "For me, naming misogynoir was about noting an anti-Black misogyny and a problematic intra-racial gender dynamic that had wider implications in popular culture. Misogynoir can come from Black men, white men and women, and even other Back women."[55] Bailey is corroborated by Trudy, her co-proponent, who explicates the interconnectedness of hatred, violence, and oppression on black women: "Making these connections between relationships, entertainment, and institutional violence helped me not only understand my own experience but how Black women in particular experience inequalities and abuse." I use *misogynoir* as an interrogative lens into patriarchy's oppressive structures and how they interlock in men's historical endeavour to exert power and control over women in general and black women in particular.

I track misogyny from the eighteenth-century US white male colonial settler who imagined white women as not only inferior to white men, but also temptresses who are inherently sinful: "White male religious teachers taught that woman was an inherently sinful creature of the flesh whose wickedness could only be purged by the intercession of a more powerful being. Appointing themselves as the personal agents of God, they became the judges and overseers

[55] Moya Bailey, and Trudy, "On misogynoir: citation, erasure, and plagiarism," in Feminist Media Studies 18, no. 4 (2018): 762-768, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395. Subsequent page references in text.

of woman's virtue."[56] I also track how this representation of white women is then transferred to female slaves upon their arrival in the US. I investigate the parallels between white patriarchy and black patriarchy's gaze on black women. I then especially examine the intergenerational strategies black women have used to subvert patriarchy in their endeavour to construct black female identities which epitomise independence, agency, and power. This chapter examines inter-generational black female representations which include: Mary Prince, Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neal Hurston, Louise Little (Malcolm X's mother), Maya Angelou and Angela Davis.

The second part of this chapter interrogates *colourism* as a divisive concept which especially wounds and enmeshes black women in double consciousness. Alice Walker, who coins the term *colourism* defines it as: "internalised preference for European physical features by African Americans such as light skin and straight hair, which divides the Black community."[57] I argue that colourism is an extension of misogynoir which, as discussed before, is at the centre of patriarchy. I track colourism from its slave roots and its subsequent pernicious inter-generational journey at the heart of black identity evolution. Colourism, like racism stereotypes, stigmatises and devalues especially black women, categorising them according to their skin-tone and other physical attributes which should have a closer proximity to female whiteness as a standard of beauty or else one is condemned. The sexism at the centre of colourism engenders what E.M. Hill terms as "gender-colourism" which as Maya Angelou demonstrates, can emotionally, psychologically and physically damaging for dark skinned black girls and women. Colourism is therefore premised on a form of double consciousness in which some black people are always measuring their self-worth based on their proximity to whiteness.

[56] bell hooks, "Sexism and Black Female Slave Experience," in *Ain't I A Woman* (London: Pluto Press, 1982), 29. Subsequent page references in text.
[57] Keisha L. Harris, "Biracial American Colorism: Passing for White," American Behavioural Science 62, no. 14 (Dec.2018): 2073. Subsequent page references in text.

However, I also critically investigate how some black women refuse to be colonised as they strategise and explore ways to effectively subvert inter-racial and intra-racial gender oppression which is central to the patriarchal spectrum of power. I especially track three generations of the Baxter women in Grandmother Baxter, Vivian (Maya's mother) and Maya as formidable women who model extraordinary resilience, tenacity and power to destabilise the corrosive effect of patriarchy and its divisive concomitant colourism. Maya learns from her grandmother and mother, two black women whose activist praxis and agency drives them to do whatever is necessary to resist and dismantle patriarchy, racism, and sexism.

Conventions and Terminology:

Please note that I use the present tense in my interrogation of my primary sources and the past tense for historical events and some secondary resources. I also use black people and African Americans interchangeably in this thesis.

In Chapter Two I use the name Richard in order to distinguish between the protagonist, his father (Nathan Wright) as well as the author (Richard Nathaniel Wright). I also use Maya for the protagonists and Angelou for the author throughout this thesis.

Chapter One: Genesis of Black Identity: An Intersection of Patriography, Matriography, and Childhood Experiences

In Richard *Wright's Blues*, Ralph Ellison examines the journey African Americans have taken since emancipation from slavery through a critical interrogation of Richard Wright's childhood autobiography: *Black Boy.* Ellison asserts:

> For certainly, in the historical sense, Wright is no exception. Born on a Mississippi plantation, he was subjected to all those blasting pressures which, in a scant eighty years, have sent the Negro people hurtling, without clearly defined trajectory, from slavery to emancipation, from log cabin to city tenement, from the white folk's fields and kitchens to factory assembly lines; and which, between the two wars, have shattered the wholeness of its folk consciousness into a thousand writhing pieces.[58]

Ellison's representation here recalls the general tenor of African American lives in the US at the various times protagonists of autobiographies I examine in this chapter lived. With grandparents or wider family members having experienced slavery or its immediate ramifications, autobiographies in this chapter inevitably have a dialogical engagement with their historical past, positioning the slave narrative as the primary text of black lives. Black family disruption historically began in Africa when black parents and children were systematically kidnapped, separated and shipped across the Atlantic as slaves. This black destabilisation narrative by the larger dominant white culture has continued as social, economic, and political dynamics intertwine to coalesce on Africa American families,

[58] Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Summer 1999): 265. Subsequent page references in text.

consistently disrupting them through forced migrations, legal and extra-legal terrorism, incarcerations, and their own attempts at escaping.

My interrogation of Patriography and Matriography (the insertion of one's father and mother's memoirs respectively in one's autobiography) is influenced by Family Systems Theory, Critical Race Theory, and the above historical context elaborated by Ellison. I interrogate African American parents' narratives through their children's interpretations of their black identities. I draw on the work of Paul C. Rosenblatt who uses Family Systems Theory as a framework to analyse literature as a social science; a strategy which helps to critically examine how racism comes home to black families, and the devastating impact it has on family members. African American families, as microcosms of the larger American society, are given more nuanced examinations through the lens of Family Systems Theory. This theory also illustrates the interconnectedness of family members, "what affects one family member will affect others and one family member's action or reaction will affect others."[59] In line with this definition of Family Systems Theory, I will exclusively concentrate on interrogating how racial politics impinged on these particular parents and how their reactions affected their children (autobiography authors). Rosenblatt underscores the interaction of systems, alerting us to how the family might impact on what is going on around it as well as being impacted by what goes on around it. However, racism has so much overwhelming power "that most of the observable impact in the relationship between the racist larger society and African Americans is the impact of racism on the family and not the

[59] Paul C. Rosenblatt, *The Impact Of Racism on African American Families: Literature as Social Science* (USA: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 8. Subsequent page referencing in text.

reverse" (Rosenblatt, 9). This illuminates how these parents' relationship with inherited historical survival mechanisms impacts on the formative identities of their children.

I have divided this chapter along gender lines through autobiographical ontologies: patriography and matriography. These ontologies provide lenses to critically examine the gendered impact of racism on fatherhood and motherhood; the cumulative struggles and interactions in the family; and the resultant effect on the black identity evolution of particular sons or daughters in the family (autobiography authors in this thesis). I examine how parental removal or incapacitation through death, divorce or illness alters family connection, support and functioning, and how all this impacts the black identity evolution of these protagonists. Rosenblatt comments on this: "How the family changes after the separation hinges on the roles the person who left was filling in the family, the poor health of one family member, the gender constellation of who was left, … the ideas in the family and community about what respectable people do, and of course the limits racism puts on African American families in the community" (27). Parental narratives comprehensively illustrate how racism comes home to disrupt black family lives, and shape the protagonists' formative black identity evolution—demonstrating that what racism does to these parents has a direct impact on who these particular sons and daughters grow up to be.

Family Systems Theory explores how family experience is integral to the making of black identities—however, who is family? In this examination of black families, I look at the nuclear family as well as the extended family members like grandparents, uncles and aunts who in black culture form a close family unit through emotional connections and interdependence. In black cultures generally, members of the extended family step in to take essential roles such as surrogate mothers and surrogate fathers when a nuclear parent is absent for one

reason or another. This is elaborated by Rosenblatt: "And for African Americans in a world where racism disrupts family life, many people, adults as well as children, may find themselves moving from one family to another" (10).

I interrogate these black family relations using the Critical Race Theory lens to illuminate contextual racial positions in the US and how race relations continue to shape identities. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic explain Critical Race Theory as an interdisciplinary movement which considers many of the issues that conventional civil rights take up. However, "unlike traditional civil rights, which stress incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundation of liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism and neutral principles of constitutional law."[60] My exploration takes one theme from the basic tenets of this broad theoretic movement: "The social construction thesis which holds that races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient" (*Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 7). This theme underscores how Critical Race Theory alerts us to the intertwined nature of racism to the structure of legal systems making it unequivocal, and imperative that we must "look beyond the popular belief that getting rid of racism means simply getting rid of ignorance, or encouraging everyone to get along."[61]

I explore how these narratives recognise the creativity, power, wit, and humanity of the voices speaking about ways to transform US structures through re-imagining black identity trajectories. All protagonists in this thesis endeavour to create new powerful black identity

[60] Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press: 2012), Page 3. Subsequent page references in text.
[61] Angela Harris in the foreword to Richard Delgado*'s Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press: 2012), xviii.

narratives which counter and transcend the predictability of their parents' lives as set by the dominant white culture. They insert their parents' narratives to produce what Richard Delgado calls "counter-narrative":

> The attraction of stories for these groups, [those whose consciousness is other than that of the dominant culture] should come as no surprise. For stories create their own bonds, represent cohesion, shared understandings, and meanings. The cohesiveness that stories bring is part of the strength of the outgroup. An outgroup creates its own stories, which circulate within the group as a kind of counter-reality.[62]

I frame these counter-narratives as predicated on the protagonists' opposition to their inherited and lived experiences of double consciousness – postulated by Du Bois as: "… this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in contempt and pity …" (*Black Souls*, 5).

Endeavours to resist this imposed double consciousness engender patterns of judgements, rejections, and black identity transitions. I trace the evolution of these black identity trajectories at their formative stage during childhood and early teenage years through the inserted representation of their parental experiences and struggles against the structures of oppression. Ralph Ellison calls attention to how parental experiences contribute to the shaping of black American children through "estrangements, fights and flights, deaths and disappointments, charged with physical and spiritual hungers and pain" (265). I suggest that both protagonists under examination here go through this cycle to evolve into iconoclasts who partially or completely reject their parents' templates. This investigation reveals how protagonists' childhood experiences of trauma educate them on how to deal with adversity;

[62] Richard Delgado, "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative" *Michigan Law Review* V.87 Issue 8, 1989: 2412. Subsequent page references in the text.

and while they acknowledge historical pains, they veer towards changing the world for black people. These protagonists' narratives (echoing their antecedents in slave narratives) also seek to tell a contrasting version of American life to the one given by the dominant culture through re-telling to engender the re-imagining of black identities.

Patriography

I use patriography as a point of entry into the intersection of African American autobiography and the search for identity. Patriography is defined as the writing of fathers' stories by their sons or daughters. The 'absence-present' narrative of fathers is a recurring trope in much African American writing, and autobiography, in particular. Although the fathers' stories are not written in great length, I see them as framing most of the protagonists' search for identity. The father's legacy requires interrogation and expression if the child is to process and re-imagine a different black identity. Family Systems theory explores how fathers do not have to be physically present to have an influence in their children's lives. Moreover, the legacies which the children inherit do not necessarily have to be good for them to process a progressive black identity. This speaks to most of the protagonists I am exploring as they are exposed to the corrosive effect of witnessing the demise of their fathers (and mothers) in one form or another as a direct result of racism. In telling the father's story, the individual is also telling part of their story, an essential component of their reality which helps shape their "adversity to triumph" black identity.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the part of Critical Race Theory I am using to interrogate Patriography is Richard Delgado's strategy of using story-telling as "counter-narratives" which

marginalised people may use to "name their reality" and oppose dominant ideologies.[63] I incorporate this part of theory as a lens into my dialogical interrogation of African American fathers' representations in their children's autobiographies. These father representations are essential narrative strategies which provide foils to the counter-stories that illuminate the identity transitions of the protagonists. Traditionally, in African American autobiography, the father's story frames the protagonist's search and progress to a revised black identity; a process which while acknowledging the foundations laid by previous generations, seeks to radically transform these inherited legacies into more resolute, robust and resilient black identities. However, Richard Wright and Maya Angelou, over their respective times, destabilise the autobiographical trope of representing inherited legacies as positive anchors. They are unequivocal in their disavowal of their fathers as positive models from which they can build their own black identities. As I demonstrate later in this chapter, these protagonists critically interrogate their inherited black identities through inserted *memoirs* of their fathers to indict them for lack of agency and using impotent strategies in their struggles against white hegemony.

There is a form of double consciousness in this disavowal which exposes family tensions and conflicts as central to black identity transition; a development which simultaneously demonstrates how the black family becomes a microcosm of African Americans' relationship with the racist structures in America. Historically in African American culture, a man's identity is tied to his providing for his family; a trope which runs through the narratives confirming the firm belief in the father's primary role as being the provider and protector of the family (at

[63] Erin Ponton Fiero, "A knot to Bind Our Experiences Together: Story telling in Barack Obama's Dreams from my Father and Critical Race Theory" in *Race and Identity In Barack Obama's Dreams From My Father: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. Charlene T. Evans and Michael A. Zeitler (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press: 2012), 15. Subsequent page references in text.

the time of writing). However, this role is always in jeopardy because the conditions favour white men, making it difficult for black men to measure up. This results in perpetual tension in most black families as the provider's double consciousness of always looking at himself through the eyes of the white man becomes contagious. Nikki Giovanni, in her discussion with James Baldwin in *A Dialogue*, underscores the conditions of blackness in America and how black men are socialised. She comments on how black men measure their manhood by their ability to be breadwinners. She asserts:

> Maybelle understands there is no job. But what she needs is a man to come by and say, Hey baby, you look good. And black men refuse to function like that because they say, I want to bring the crib when I come. You're never going to get the crib. [64]

As my investigation attempts to show, Giovani's assessment is reflected in the African American fathers (as well as mothers who take up this role in the absence of the father) who are overwhelmingly undermined by the racism of the dominant culture. In response to Giovani`s assertions, James Baldwin encapsulates a correlation to the impact of racism on black men. He asserts a particular burden of black manhood which is underpinned by cultural expectations:

> The standards of the civilization into which you are born are first outside you, and by the time you get to be a man they're inside you; it's a fact. If you're treated a certain way, you become a certain kind of person. If certain things are described to you as being real [,] they're real for you whether they are real or not. And in this civilization a man who cannot support his wife and child is not a man. The black man has always been treated as a slave and of course he reacts that way, one way or another. And you can blame him on a human level if you like, but

[64] James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, *A dialogue* (New York: Lippincott, 1973), 8.

> I think it's more interesting to try to understand it, the bag the cat is in. To understand that although I may love you, especially if I love you, in this world I can't come with nothing. It isn't rational. I know it doesn't make any sense, but a man is built like that (52-53).

This expectation of men being breadwinners as asserted by both Giovani and Baldwin, perhaps is pivotal to the intergenerational racial conflicts witnessed in America and wider societies. Historically, white men can 'bring the crib' to their women and families while black men struggle (as symbolised by Wright and Angelou's fathers). This struggle is the foundation of their troubling double consciousness – being black and American does not seem to reconcile. As Du Bois asserts, a black man has "—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. … He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cured and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (*Black Souls*, 5).

Richard Wright and Patriography

Positioning Nathan Wright in the above commentary by Baldwin calls attention to how the burden of black manhood condemns him to what George E. Kent provocatively calls "a zero" man.[65] Kent's evaluation of Nathan chimes with Wright's subjective portrait of his father– constructing him as a spectacular failure: as a man, as a father, and as a husband. However, this characterisation disingenuously ignores "the bag the cat is in."

Nathan Wright's decision to leave his family for another woman precipitates physical, psychological, and emotional devastation for his wife and children. This situation alerts us to Rosenblatt's exploration of Family Systems Theory's assertion: "One family member's action

[65] George E Kent, Richard Wright: Blackness and the adventure of western culture, in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. Macksey, R. and F.E. Moorer (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 38.

or reaction will affect others" (8). However, even before he abandons his family, Nathan Wright and his son (Richard Wright) are already estranged: "He was the law giver in our family and I never laughed in his presence … He was always a stranger to me, always somehow alien and remote."[66] Already at this tender age, Richard appears to be conscious, and sensitive to oppression, and in his imagination, his father is an oppressor who needs to be resisted. The source of this resistance and "hatred" of his father could be oedipal as he tries to emotionally distance himself from him. Nevertheless, this incident represents a significant rupture in their relationship; a relation which paints a portrait of palpable and escalating tension, threatening conflict, and leading to parental alienation. At about five years old, Richard is already scheming against his father and his authority: "I resented his shouting and it irked me that I could never make him feel my resentment. How could I hit him back?" (*Black Boy*, 9). He gets his opportunity when his father tells him to 'Kill that damn thing' which was disturbing his sleep. Fully aware that his father's instructions were not to be taken literally, and despite his young brother's protestations, he consciously and callously kills the 'damn thing' (cat). This act demonstrates Richard's tenacious drive to get back at his father, encapsulating the growing distance between them; a distance which shapes his formative and subsequent black male identity: "My deep hate of him urged me toward a literal acceptance of his word" (9). He is already showing his capacity to resist oppression as he imagines his father as a 'law giver' who is oppressive. His actions here anticipate his resistance of another 'domestic oppressor': his grandmother (who becomes his surrogate mother as his mother is incapacitated by illness). His tenacity and resolve to act, as demonstrated here against his father, evolves to become an integral part of his black identity. He excoriates his mother and grandmother later

[66] Richard Wright, Black Boy, (London: The Random House Group Limited: 2007 [1946]), 8. Subsequent page references in text.

on for lack of agency to act against his father and his 'strange' woman: "What irked me was the ceaseless talk and no action. If someone had suggested that my father be killed, I would perhaps become interested; if someone had suggested that his name never be mentioned. I would no doubt have agreed" (*Black Boy*, 26). This agitation to act, as later events reveal, shapes "his development of an individualistic consciousness in the face of familial and societal opposition."[67]

From the moment his father leaves home, Richard's life dramatically changes and is characterised by hunger and taking on roles which belie his age. He asserts that before his father left, a slice or two of bread would satisfy his hunger. However, this new hunger is different: "This new hunger baffled me, scared me, made me angry … I became less active and for the first time in my life I had to pause and think what was happening to me" (*Black Boy*, 13). This awareness of change troubles him until his mother confirms the source of his insatiable hunger by asking him who was responsible for providing food in the family. From then on his alienation with his father is profound: "As the days slid past the image of my father became associated with my pangs of hunger, and whenever I felt hunger I thought of him with a deep biological bitterness" (14). This image of his father becomes entrenched and plays an essential part in his estimation of black men he comes in contact with in his childhood and youth, as well as patterning his aspiration for a different black male identity. He later disowns his mother's brother as no role model, perhaps because he was just another poor black man. He prefers his paternal uncle who demonstrates black manhood by running a business and being able to feed his family. However, this rich uncle is allegedly murdered by white men for transcending the economic boundaries set for black people and daring to be ambitious. This

[67]Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr, "Richard Wright Writing and Identity," *Callaloo* No. 7 (October 1979): 90. Subsequent page references in text.

murder anticipates racism, legal and extra-legal terrorism which Richard Wright grapples with as he transitions to his eventual black identity.

Richard and his young brother demonstrate Angela Davis' assertion that black children, especially in the South, have to grow up before their time, if they are to survive.[68] With their father's abandonment comes the need for them to take up demanding roles earlier than usual. He confirms this through the words of his mother:

> [She told us] that we now had no father, that our lives would be different from those other children, that we must learn as soon as possible to take care of ourselves, to dress ourselves, to prepare food our own food; that we must take it upon ourselves the responsibility of the flat while she worked. Half frightened, we would promise solemnly (*Black Boy*,
>
> 14).

His father's departure also forces him into facing difficult choices, mainly at the behest of his overwhelmed mother. These instances include: his role as a witness in a court-case to force his father to pay for his children's upkeep; accompanying his mother to face the humiliation of asking for money from his father in front of his mistress or keep living in an the orphanage. However, I see these and other experiences after his father has left shaping who he becomes as he learns to rise above adversity. Unlike his father, he quickly learns he has to take responsibility of his life and have agency so that he can be who he wants to be (This will be discussed further in the next segment of this chapter which explores the impact his mother had on his evolving identity).

[68] Angela Davies, *Angela Davies /An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 104. Subsequent page references in text.

Nathan Wright encapsulates the triple burden of racism, poverty, and class on black men, echoing Baldwin's image of "the bag the cat is in" (93). Nathan's representation reflects his son's "dual awareness of the nature of his parent's failure: it is personal; it is social. It has to do with the personalities of his parents; it has to do with the situation of black people in the South during the time."[69] However, Wright's reflective image of his father privileges the view that he fails because of a deficient personality; this is what contributes more to his spectacular failure as a husband, father, and a (black) man: a man who abandons a wife with no income; a father who fails to feed his own children; a man who regresses to poverty and descends to the lowest class in society. *Black Boy* centres this image of Nathan Wright's failures to magnify the son's (Richard Wright) response and evolution to a different black identity which encapsulates resistance, resilience and resolve.

As the adult Wright reflects through *Black Boy*, the physical and emotional distance created between him and his father is a development which allows him to evolve to a different black identity trajectory through physical migrations, and interiority. He represents his father's physical migrations, that is, from the rural South to the city, from deserting his family to living with 'that strange woman,' and from the city back to the rural South as not matched by his interiority. This mismatch between physical migrations and inward changes, as Wright's representation of his father suggests, condemns him to spectacular failure and regression. Wright's narrative strategy of juxtaposing his father's story with his own migrations (physical, and interior) serves to illuminate a counter-story to black (male) regression. This unequivocally demonstrates how individual agency can have significant influence in shaping black identities. However, Wright seems to have conveniently eschewed the 'time-and-place

[69] Donald B. Gibson, "Richard Wright's Black Boy and The Trauma of Autobiographical Rebirth" *Callaloo,* No.28 Richard Wright: A Special Issue (Summer 1986), 494. Subsequent page references in text.

context' in his comparison, which I suggest, should always be considered when we interrogate personal histories.

To crystallise the dichotomy of their black identities, Wright presents his meeting with his father twenty-five years after they last met:

> A quarter of a century was to elapse between the time when I saw my father sitting with the strange woman and the time when I was to see him again, standing alone upon the red clay of a Mississippi plantation, a sharecropper, clad in ragged overalls, holding a muddy hoe in gnarled, veined hands – a quarter of a century which my mind and consciousness had become so greatly and violently altered that when I tried to talk to him I realised that, though ties of blood make us kin, though I could see a shadow of my face in his face, though there is an echo of my voice in his voice, we were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on different planes of reality (*Black Boy*, 32).

His father, a victim of white racist culture like him, is completely emaciated: physically, spiritually and psychologically. What is profoundly tragic here is that what should at least unite father and son, their black identity, will never coalesce as they have become "forever strangers". For the son, that his mind and consciousness have been "so greatly and violently altered" is the reason he has managed to process a black identity which is so alien to that of his father. Nathan Wright's dilapidated shack he now calls home is a palpable symbol of his failure, which is only mitigated as son puts it, by the agency of racism that cheated him of "his ethical birth-right, his chance to learn and practice loyalty, and that the primal victimizer was himself a hapless victim of systematic economic peonage" (32). Perhaps, invoking elements of Critical Race Theory as an analytic framework, the adult Richard Wright appears to acknowledge how historical forces of the dominant racist culture forced his father to flee from

the city and back to the poor soils he thought he had escaped. However, while Wright acknowledges his father's agency in migrating to the city and the part racism plays to forestall his progress, he also seems to excoriate him for his lack of loyalty and other qualities which would have helped him evolve to a black identity like his. He portrays his father as a villain, someone who has lacked agency and is an architect of his own failure; he fails in the same location his son has found success: "… a black peasant who had gone to the city seeking life, but who had failed in the city; … that same city which had lifted me in its burning arms and borne me toward alien and undreamed-of shores of knowing (33).

By confronting his father's legacy, Wright is celebrating not only his triumph over him, but also his overall triumph over adversity. His black identity transitions defy Ellison's characterisation of where he starts: "For certainly, in the historical sense, Wright is no exception" (265). He certainly evolves to be in that select group of exceptional people who rise from adverse childhood experiences to confront oppression and whose resolve helps transform black identities. For Wright, I however suggest that what he becomes is partly a direct result of some of the circumstances which play out because of his father's decisions, actions, and inactions. The emotional distance created by these schisms with his father are integral to his idiosyncratic progress to a black identity premised on individualism; a development which propels him to transcend the limits of race. As a result, father and son end up in radically different geographical, social, and psychological spaces; inhabiting contrasting black identities whose significant differences are measured by corresponding knowledge which a failed peasant, and an articulate survivor may pass on to future generations.

Maya Angelou and Patriography:

Maya Angelou (1969) parallels Wright (1945) in incorporating her father's story in her reflection of how dominant racial prejudices impact on her family, and herself. She provides a daughter's perspective of a father whose legacy she condemns. Like her black male autographical counterparts, she must radically intervene to change her life, for her father's legacy threatens to pull her towards the predictable paths of poverty, menial jobs and subjugation. Like Wright, her father's decisions profoundly impact her identity transitions. Introducing how she comes to be in the South, she makes it explicit that it was her father's decision: "When I was three and Bailey was four … our parents decided to put an end to their calamitous marriage, and *Father shipped* us home to his mother" (my emphasis)[70] Unresolvable schisms between her parents directly lead to her father's decision for her and her brother to relocate to the South; a development which I suggest recognises how family members' lives are impacted by (in)actions and decisions made by other family members. However, for her, what seems as a backward journey to the South paradoxically precipitates her progressive black identity transitions she develop through various stages which include: double consciousness which manifests as self-loathing, helpless indignation, subtle resistance, and active protest.

After initially celebrating her father (Bailey Johnson) as 'blindingly handsome', Maya[71], at seven years old, has all her illusions about him shattered; so shattered that she recoils at the possibility of the Stamps community recognising him as her father: "Then the possibility of being compared to him occurred to me, and I didn't want anyone to see him. Maybe he wasn't

[70] Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (London: Verago Press, 2007), 7. Subsequent page references in text.
[71] Marguerite is the name Maya Angelou is called as she grows up.

my real father. Bailey was his son, true enough, but I was an orphan that they picked up to provide Bailey with company" (*Caged Bird*, 60). This is after his unannounced appearance in Stamps with his shiny car, which Maya suggests must have been wiped clean just outside the village in preparation for his 'grand entrance'. She goes on to expose her father as vain and pretentious through her sarcastic comment: "Everybody could tell from the way he talked and from the car and clothes that he was rich and maybe he had a castle out in California" (60). Her early awareness of her father and her disconnection from him is instructive; she does not see or want any resemblance to this man she regards as a stranger. Here Angelou echoes Wright in setting the tenor of her alienation from her father. Both writers present their fathers as strangers, as well as monstrously and grotesquely huge, perhaps to indicate the gulf between their respective black identities. For Wright, his father "was quite fat and his bloated stomach always lapped over his belt" (*Black Boy*, 8), and for Angelou: "His bigness shocked me. His shoulders were so wide I thought he'd have trouble getting in the door. He was taller than anyone I had seen" (59).

Unlike Wright who initially stops at his father's physical monstrosity, Angelou has Maya push her 'school principal English' accented father further away, and towards those white people she does not understand and are completely alien to her: "He sounded more like a white man than a Negro. Maybe he was the only brown-skinned white man in the world. It would be just my luck that the only one would turn out to be my father" (63). From this statement, it appears she cannot relate to a father who comes back to the South with internalised oppression manifesting through notions of self-hate which does nothing but damage progressive black identity evolution. Bailey Johnson exemplifies what Malcolm X called "self-degradation," which implies lack of self-respect as one aspires to model oneself in the image

of his oppressor (white men). His mannerism and values speak of a man who "had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that black people are inferior."[72] Angelou's portrait of her father exposes such black men (as him) for their regressive black identity which seeks to 'rescue' themselves from alleged inferiority through aping white men and valorising white values. She further exposes the tragedy at the centre of her father's story, the impressionable Stamps audience which flood her grandmother's store to partake in this backward journey of self-loathing. She exposes her father as deceptive, masquerading as a successful businessman (she later learns he was a hotel doorman) while in reality his life is a poor attempt at whiteness. Perhaps, representing the more racially conscious black community, Maya stands apart from the Stamps community to position her father within that group of "African Americans who try to do better by white standards, and [show how] they are often objects of disgust, contempt, dislike, and ridicule for other African Americans" (Rosenblatt, 126). Her portrait of her father suggests she is aggrieved, ashamed and enraged.

Paradoxically, Angelou's sense of parental rejection which manifests through her being shipped home to the South, inadvertently helps shape her black identity. The South provides the framing for her counter-story and it is here that she first witnesses white supremacy politics and its pernicious impact on African American families. The South becomes the location from which her black identity evolves as she weans off her damaging self-loathing and journeys from helpless rage at white racism to become an assertive black woman, a mother who is not only proud of her blackness but one who embraces her black heritage as well. One of the incidents which marks the genesis of her evolving black identity is the image

[72] Malcolm X and Alex Hayley, *The Autography of Malcolm X*, (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 138.

she paints of herself squashed in the backseat (which had been turned into the luggage section) with the family patriarchy (father and son) comfortably sitting in front as they travel back to the North the first time. It is instructive that she is sensitive to her positioning and how she is excluded from the conversations between her father and brother. She notes that although her father irregularly checks on her, he "never waited to hear my answer … before he'd resume his conversation with Bailey" (62). Her positioning as the Other here alerts us to the centrality of patriarchy and racism in black women's lives which leads to Pierre A. Walker's observation that one of the central themes in *Caged Bird* is, "how undeservedly its protagonist was relegated to second-class citizenship in her early years."[73] Like Wright, she exposes her father's lack of true self-consciousness at the centre of his physical and interior migrations; and uses his portrait to reinforce the rigid dichotomy between their black identities while mapping her own transitions to a black woman identity which subverts all forms of oppression.

In the end, Angelou and Wright use their familial proximity to critically interrogate how their fathers' stories threaten to undermine their black identity transitions. As G. Thomas Couser posits on Barack Obama, the implication in interrogating the father's history is that it holds some answers to his children's perpetual questions.[74] This lens therefore engenders Wright, and Angelou to provide nuanced iconoclastic counter-narratives designed to name a new reality which helps them to radically progress towards black identities that are remarkably different to those they may have inherited from their fathers. I suggest that these

[73] Pierre A. Walker, "Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form in Maya Angelou's *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*" College Literature, V. 22, No. 3, Race and Politics: The Experience of African-American Literature (October 1995): 93.
[74] G. Thomas Couser, (2012) Filiation in Barack Obama's *Dream from My Father* Life Writing, 9:3, 266, DOI: 1080/14484528.2012.689945

patriographical narratives inserted within the larger autobiographical narratives of sons or daughters become subversive interventions which enact, inspire and validate the delivery of new black identities that are significantly different to their fathers' egregious models. Patriography becomes a usable past, an inspirational past to replace the father's lethargy with determined action, resolve, and resistance to white supremacist politics. There is a recurring sense of independence integral to their black identity transitions which appears to gain strength from realising that the father's story, and template of life, cannot serve as a model for the son or daughter. Nevertheless, this 'failed template', becomes a useful guide towards separating what is useful and what is not, in the on-going endeavour to provide strategies, and theories for progressive black identities.

Matriography: Shared Black Motherhood and Mothering

In this section of Chapter Two, I am interrogating Matriography as black mothers' memoirs which are inserted in autobiographies of their sons or daughters. I explore the influence of parenting by these black mothers in shaping black identities of sons, and daughters through the analytic framework of shared motherhood and mothering. Overall, my interrogation of this particular motherhood discourse is premised on black mothers' lived experiences as highly influential, especially in the dark shadow of the racist dominant white culture – what these mothers do or not do, has direct impact in the shaping of their children's black identities. I also explore the impact of other mothering institutions on these protagonists' black identity formations through Patricia Hill Collins' black feminist *Motherwork* conceptualisation of *othermothering* and *community othermothering*. These two concepts

describe "a non-biological [black] women-child relationship."[75] This communal and collaborative approach to motherhood and mothering is necessitated by the lived historical experience of black children dating back to slavery, which has continued especially within black working-class communities. Black children have been historically raised by a community of mothers incorporating biological mothers, blood relatives, and surrogate mothers. This trope of shared motherhood and mothering is in line with how Richard Wright, Malcolm X, and Maya Angelou represent their formative years. For these particular representations, I examine the influence of biological mothers, and blood relatives - namely grandmothers, aunties and sisters, and community mothers. I investigate black motherhood as a broad institution to try and understand why black children in general, and the aforementioned protagonists in particular, historically needed more than one mother to raise them.

A pattern emerges for the biological mothers I am exploring - they follow what Martha Pitts constructs as "the conventional nineteenth-century Marriage plot: unreliable husbands, widowhood, and inevitable self-reliance" (147). They also all marry below their social status: Ella Wright (Richard Wright's Mother), a former class teacher marries an illiterate sharecropper; Louise Little (Malcolm X's mother, who I examine in Chapter Four) is said to have been more educated than her husband - a situation which contributed to the frequent turbulence in their marriage; and Vivian Baxter (Angelou's mother) – a nurse who marries a doorman. This pattern of black women marrying below their status will be interrogated in Chapter Four as I explore black women's historical turbulent relationship with patriarchy. For now, I want to trace the gender dimensions which colour the circumstances these mothers

[75] Martha Pitts,"Nineteenth-Century Motherwork: Ideology, Experience and Agency in Autobiographical Narratives by Black Women" in *Patricia Hill Collins: Reconceiving Motherhood,* ed. Kaila Adia Story (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2014), 143. Subsequent page references in text.

face after their marriages end; and how these circumstances profoundly impact their children's black identity. Notwithstanding their education and potential, some of these mothers can only find work in white people's kitchens; indicating limited opportunities black women had in the racist communities they lived. These mothers continue with a tradition since slavery which sees black women experience a different tenor of blackness as their identity is imbricated by intersecting identities which include their maternity role—giving an insight into what it means to be black and female in America. For Wright's mother (Ellah Wright) as with most black mothers, her maternity further complicates her life. Unlike her husband, whose position in this patriarchal society allows him to desert his family with no scruples or compunction, Ellah must bear the brunt of motherhood; she becomes an illustration of how black women subversions of patriarchy and racist capitalism continues to require extraordinary tenacity.

Since autobiography is modelled on strategic selection of incidents which are designed to tell a particular narrative, I interrogate how these mothers are represented by their sons and daughters to support the shaping of a particular black identity for the author. The tenor of mother-representations by Angelou is markedly different from the way she uninhibitedly, vociferously and unilaterally rejects her father as a template for her evolving black identity (as illustrated in the first part of this chapter). In contrast, Richard Wright and Malcolm X betray a masculinist approach – while they may sympathise with the challenges their mothers face, they remain locked within the reductive patriarchal imagination of black women. Historically, patriarchy thrives on controlling images of black womanhood which position black females in the margins and assigning them fixed roles. Parvin Ghasemi explores the mythologising and stereotyping of black maternity, culturally and historically: "Such myths

delineate black mothers as matriarchal figures, superbly strong and protective, and at the same time, selfless, all embracing, demanding nothing or little, and totally self-sacrificing creatures whose identities are inseparable from their nurturing services."[76] I use this lens to explore the representation of black mothers' incapacitation, and implications which portray their supposed 'weaknesses' as problematic to their children's progressive black identities. Both Wright and Malcolm X struggle with black women's authority, constructing relationships which are characterised with extraordinary tension, anger and even violence. It appears these troubled relationships with black motherhood and mothering, as well as confrontations with the dominant culture's racism contribute to the shaping of these male protagonists' black identities. Angelou on the other hand, evolves from being an angry girl child who is self-loathing, feels rejected by her biological mother, and is at times, frustrated with her paternal grandmother Henderson's mothering. Nonetheless, her lived experiences rescue her from the debilitating double consciousness which threatened her identity at some point, helping her appreciate and celebrate that community of resourceful mothers who are integral to the shaping of her black female identity.

Richard Wright: Shared Black Motherhood and Mothering

My exploration of the lived experiences of all the authors in this thesis reveals how the "South exacted a heavy penalty from its black children in ignorance, marginality, inertia, an idle or paltry future."[77] Conscious of this debilitating Southern environment and the subsequent

[76] Parvin Ghasemi Negotiating Black Motherhood In Toni Morrison's Novels 237
[77] Herbert Leibowitz, "Richard Wright's "Black Boy": Styles of Deprivation," *Southwest Review* 70, no.1 (Winter 1985): 89. Subsequent page references in text.

devastation it inflicts on black children, Wright reflects on his youth and shaping of his black male identity in *Black Boy*: "What is it that made me conscious of possibilities? From where in his southern darkness had I caught a sense of freedom?" I suggest the entry point to this exploration should be his acrimonious relationship with black motherhood and mothering. His representation of his biological parents and *othermothers* in his life betrays remarkable parental alienation. However, as Donald B. Gibson asserts:

> The greatness of the narration of the autobiography lies in Wright's awareness of the nature of the failure: it is personal; it is social. It has to do with the personalities of his parents; it has to do with the situation of black people in the south during the time. *Black Boy* is at once an exploration and defence of Wright's separateness from the black community and a strong protest against the plight of all the black boys and girls, men and women subjected in his words, to 'the ethics of living Jim Crow'.[78]

Wright's representation of these personalities of his biological mother and *othermothers* is framed by the relationship black motherhood has with a racist dominant culture. Wright introduces his mother (Ella Wright) as a mother who beats her child nearly to death. This initial representation throws a shadow on her positive qualities as a mother, casting their relationship in ambivalence throughout his growing up. At four years old, Richard is severely beaten by his mother for setting their home on fire, leaving him so fevered and hysterical that he needs a doctor to examine him. Gibson examines this incident and concludes:

> Whether in actual fact his life was in danger or whether his reaction was a hysterical reaction to the extraordinary harsh beating he received at the hands of his mother, the fact is that he

[78] Donald B. Gibson, "Richard Wright's Black Boy and The Trauma of Autobiographical Rebirth," *Callaloo* no.28 (Summer, 1986): 494. Subsequent page references in text.

> felt as though his mother, whom the child expected to protect, nourish, and sustain, came close to expressing the most extreme form of rejection - infanticide (492-493).

It is this unmotherly personality that dominates his representation of his mother. With the father jettisoned from the narrative and vociferously rejected as a model of black male identity because of his personality, Ella Wright becomes a mother who subsequently fails (or is unable) to protect, nourish and support her son(s). She utterly fails to the extent that she has to put her sons into an orphanage – a place where institutional *othermothering* also fails Richard. It is here that the seeds of mistrust of adult authority are planted with a feeling that his mother has rejected him and placed him in harm's way; just as much as his maternal grandmother and her adult children subsequently do (this will be explored later in this chapter.)

Hunger for food gnaws at Richard for most of his life with his mother, demonstrating her failure to provide the basic responsibility of a parent to her child – nourishment. She does try her best to be a supportive parent, "but her guardianship became sporadic, then stolidly harsh, and finally prostrate." (Leibowitz, 79). I suggest however, that from this parental failure, Richard begins to consolidate his sense of interiority and individualism, characteristics which become emblematic to his black identity. From this hunger for food, he develops a recurring metaphorical hunger for knowledge which may help him explain the status quo both at family level, and his positions in the black community and wider society as he grows up. When his mother sometimes takes him to her work-place (white people's kitchens) he begins to question why white people have so much food when black families, especially his family, have so little to eat. This recalls my earlier investigation into Family Systems Theory's explorations into how (in)actions by parents may have an effect on other family members.

Maternal failure to provide enough food triggers Richard's critical consciousness in asking questions about the racial status quo; a development which gradually pushes him towards protest. This gradual formation of a protest persona in Richard depicts Ella Wright as a mother who repeatedly allows people who seem to be of no significance to him; forcing him to assume authority of his life. Usurping authority from the adults is integral to his development of a critical consciousness – a development which sets him onto a collision course with authority throughout his youth.

In the absence of her husband, Ella Wright struggles with the role-overload of mothering, protecting, and providing for her two sons. However, she does provide Richard with some life lessons and tools which help shape his black identity. She teaches him to stand up to tyranny and fight for his right to be in spaces he might be denied. At a very early stage of his life, she makes him face black boys who terrorise him in the streets and rob him of money. Her poverty notwithstanding, when he comes back crying that he has been robbed, she gives him more money and forces him out there so that he can learn to be strong, tenacious and defend himself: "I'm going to teach you this night to stand up and fight for yourself … Take this money, this note, and this stick. Go to the store and buy those groceries. If those boys bother you, *then fight*" (my emphasis) (*Black Boy*, 15). At that time Richard must have seen her as a cruel mother who deliberately risks her son's life by locking him outside, leaving him vulnerable to the hostile dark streets teeming with menacing gangs. However, due to his mother's insistence that he face his tormentors, "That night [he] won the right to the streets of Memphis." (*Black Boy,* 16). From this experience he learns that he has to fight for his rights, a situation which has to be replicated throughout his life. This is especially acute in his formative years as the effects of his family's continued displacement are that "each new

school meant a new area of life to be conquered …[as] the first trial was never in books but the value you placed upon your willingness to fight" (*Back Boy*, 88-89). We see his willingness to fight for his rights (verbally or physically or both) thereon in his life – at the various schools he attends, in the streets where racial fights take place, and even in the homes he lives. All this lived experience further reinforces his evolving black male identity, imbuing him with resilience, determination and resolve to critically question the status quo and resist oppression. Leibowitz gives Ella credit for trying her best in extremely challenging circumstances: "And despite her being a part-time parent, she managed to instil in her son some self-esteem and tenacity of will" (81).

However, Ella Wright simultaneously demonstrates the paradoxical nature of black motherhood. While she significantly encourages her son to be brave, resilient, and have agency by defending himself against other black boys, she is horrified to hear that Richard throws stones and fights white boys to and from school. Critically aware of the ramifications of these child-conflicts across the colour lines, Ella exhorts her son never to fight white boys because he "might be killed by them" (*Black Boy*, 81). This confuses Richard; he is encouraged to fight back at black boys but is not allowed to fight white boys who are out to cause as much damage as possible, given the opportunity. However, he has no intention of listening to his mother because his standing, and identity in the black boys' gang he is affiliated to would be severely compromised: "Her word did not sink in, for they conflicted with the code of the street. I promised my mother that I would not fight, but I knew that if I kept my word I would lose my standing in the gang, and the gang's life was my life" (81). Ella Wright, like Maya Angelou's Grandmother Henderson, model what Patricia Hill Collins posits as "socialization

for survival" which has historically been a central feature of black mothering.[79] Here, Ella, as does Grandmother Henderson (I explore this later in this chapter), attempts to socialise her son in the best way she can to try and ensure his survival.

Another aspect Wright is thankful to his mother for is her teaching and encouraging him to read and write, a precursor to his ability "to revere the fanciful and imaginative." His ability to read, write, and delve into fantasy (imagination) offers him coping strategies which then help him escape the challenges of poverty, and the tyranny of his maternal grandmother's theocracy. This repertoire of coping strategies also helps shape his black identity which he premises on confronting and transcending his environment(s). From a very early age, the moment his mother is "dumbfounded" that he could count from one to a hundred he says, "After that she taught me to read, told me stories. On Sundays I would read the newspapers with my mother guiding me and spelling out words" (*Black Boy*, 21). From this reading he becomes more curious and begins to question his world; a development which recalls Hurston and the curiosity which got her into deep trouble with adults who were reluctant to satisfy her quest for knowledge. He asserts: "I soon made myself a nuisance by asking far too many questions of everybody. Every happening in the neighbourhood, no matter how trivial, became my business. It was in this manner that I first stumbled upon the relations between whites and blacks, and what I learned frightened me" (*Black Boy*, 21).

Ella (his mother's namesake) a teacher who lodges in his maternal grandmother's home demonstrates the efficacy of shared mothering by complimenting the work which his biological mother had started. With his mother now incapacitated, Ella invokes the historic

[79] Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 183-189.

black tradition of mothering which Patricia Hill Collins conceptualises as *community othermothering* by reading to him. Ella's *othermothering* here opens a whole new vista of possibilities for young Wright, notwithstanding the violent resistance they both encounter from his maternal grandmother who views reading anything other than a bible as an act of abomination. Ella makes a political decision of reading to Richard fully knowing the wrath she will face, and the possibility of being removed from her lodgings: "Your grandmother wouldn't like it if I talked to you about novels" (*Black Boy*, 36). That she still goes on to read to him (albeit, whispering) recalls the black mother's historical subversive instincts in doing what is best for her children. In this case Ella privileges the value of this reading for him, a development which engenders a future steeped in writing and intellectual engagements:

> The tale made the world around me be, throb, live. As she spoke, reality changed, the look of things altered, and the world became peopled with magical presences. My sense of life deepened and the feel of things was different, somehow. Enchanted and enthralled, I stopped her constantly to ask for details. *My imagination blazed*. *The sensations the story aroused in me were never to leave me* (my emphasis) (*Black Boy*, 37).

This is the beginning of his "gateway to a forbidden and enchanting land" (*Black Boy*, 38). This refers to a space he creates for his reading, writing, and re-imagining. This is where his individuation takes hold and enables him to transcend his environments – home, school, and wider society. A space created to develop his identity as a writer who centres black communities' introspection as a starting point in investigating black relations with the dominant white culture. He rises through incredible adversity and opposition to be the writer he became. His grandmother symbolises family resistance to his introduction to reading from the onset as she shouts at Ella for daring to read to her grandson: "You stop that, you evil gal, I want none of that Devil stuff in my house" (*Black Boy*, 37) When Richard protests that he

likes the reading, “she bared her teeth and slapped [him] across [his] mouth with the back of her hand” (*Black Boy*, 37). This marks the beginning of the violent relationship he has with his *othermothers* in Grandmother Wilson’s household. However, he demonstrates his evolving resilience, tenacity and resolve by authoring a story which is published in the local paper – *The Voodoo of Hell’s Acre*. His whole family responds with apoplectic outrage; his classmates view him with suspicion and disengage from him. To compound his ostracisation, his headmaster tries and fails to take away his identity by imposing his words and philosophy into his valedictory speech: “ ..listen, take this speech and say it … I’ve seen many a boy and girl graduate from this school, and none of them was too proud to recite a speech I wrote for them” (*Black Boy*, 176). Richard remains obstinate and characterises the Headmaster as a “bought man” who in turn tries to “buy” him by promising him a teaching position: “He was tempting me, baiting me; this was the technique that snared black young minds into supporting the southern way of life (177). Outside school he has white people like Mrs Bibbs (his employer) representing the dominant culture’s contempt. When she asks what Richard’s ambition was, he told her that he would like to be a writer. She is astounded and declares: “You’ll never be a writer, who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?” (*Black Boy,* 147). This is a representation of how Southern life scars black children with double consciousness – this white woman’s arrogance, disregard and dismissal is designed to hurt Richard and curb his ambitions.

When his mother is incapacitated with illness and is bedridden, Richard steps up and does all a young boy could do to help ameliorate this precarious situation. However, when a stroke debilitates her further, and the burden to sustain the family becomes insurmountable for a little boy, community mothering intervenes: “The neighbours nursed my mother day and

night, fed us and washed our clothes" (*Black Boy*, 84). However, *othermothering* intervention while much needed at times like these, it is always going to be temporary. The historical solution in these crisis times is always the benevolence of relatives (and sometimes non-relatives) to step in to give mothering care to affected children; a situation which leaves his financially struggling maternal grandmother, Granny Wilson with no choice. What follows in the years he lives with the Wilson family goes a long way towards shaping who Richard evolves to be. He steps into a domestic environment which is not only oppressive and violent but continues to starve him of food and intellectual nourishment. Leibowitz paints a portrait which encapsulates Granny Wilson and her theocracy:

> … but Granny's house was the worst possible place for a nervous dream boy. She dominated the household with unchallenged authority, the matriarch as Medusa. A fanatic Seventh Day Adventist whose cosmology was ruled by a jealous, punitive God, devils ready to work their evil, and an imminent apocalypse which would sweep sinners to hell, she judged her wayward grandson's deeds with absolute righteousness (82).

Richard remarkably reacts to this autocratic domestic regime with multiple resistance strategies which help him prepare for the uncompromising wider society's expectations and demands from a black boy. Perhaps this portrait of Granny Wilson and her theocracy can give some insight into the perplexing choice for a husband by her daughter (Ella Wright). Escaping this hardened theocracy maybe a plausible reason why a trained teacher gives up teaching to marry an uneducated sharecropper whose poor soils never promised much.

Taking over from his incapacitated biological mother, Grandmother Wilson becomes the primary *othermother* for Richard and his young brother. While the concept of *othermothers*

has mostly been beneficial to 'abandoned' children in black culture, for Richard it means a lot of pain and struggling. He is exposed to a continuum of violence forcing him once again to invoke parental alienation which leads to an atmosphere full of tension, confrontation and recrimination. This continuation of harsh punitive treatment from "sources of expected tenderness and sanctuary … left Wright socially uncertain, distrustful and insecure" (Skerrett, 86). Gibson explicates this thinking that it is in this household that his historic individuation is consolidated: "If your father lets you down, the logic goes, and if your mother can't take care of you thereafter, [with even the *othermothers* failing], then you have to take care of yourself – to figure out how you can survive independent of others" (495). Ralph Ellison corroborates Gibson in his analysis of the tension between Wright and black motherhood by invoking historical class and gender dimensions:

> And the significance of the crisis is increased by virtue of the historical fact that the lower-class Negro family is matriarchal; the child turns not to the father to compensate if he feels mother-rejection, but to the grandmother, or to an aunt – and Wright rejected both of these. Such rejection leaves the child open to psychological insecurity, distrust, and all those hostile environmental forces which family functions to protect it.[80]

Ellison goes on to further unravel the historical and contextual domestic background between Wright and the paradoxical black motherhood which incidentally replicates the tyrannical violence of the dominant culture on black communities. He explains:

> One of the southern Negro family's methods of protecting the child is severe beating – a homeopathic dose of violence generated by black and white relationships. Such beatings as Wright's were administered for the child's own good; a good which the child resisted, thus

[80] Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," *The Antioch Review* 50, no.1/2 (Winter-Spring 1992):269.

> giving family relations an undercurrent of fear and hostility ..., because here the severe beating is administered by [mothers], leaving the child with no parental sanctuary. He must ever embrace violence along with maternal tenderness, or else reject … the mother (269).

Having been raised by a single mother whose role-overload means he has to take care of himself and his brother most of the time, Richard is not bereft of tools to survive the incredible hostility he faces in his grandmother's household:

> There were more violent quarrels in our deeply religious home than in the home of a gangster, a burglar, or a prostitute, …. Granny bore the standard for God, but she was always fighting. I, too, fought; but I fought because I felt I had to keep from being crushed, to fend off continuous attack (135).

Ironically, in this Wilson home – a supposedly Christian domestic setting, the tension, confrontation and recrimination constantly escalate into life and death violence. The continuum of violence follows him to and from school as his *othermother* – Auntie Addie continues with the Wilsons' tradition of violent disciplining of children. However, Richard's resistance to tyranny by then has evolved to include a resolve to defend himself physically if need be – he vows that no one is going to beat him anymore for any supposed wrongs. His philosophy here suggests a black identity which privileges individual agency and action as opposed to becoming a prisoner to victimhood. To demonstrate this new resolve, he is involved in bitter physical confrontations, firstly with Aunt Addie, and then her brother, Uncle Tom. Richard invokes his aunt's othermotherhood, however, he makes it unequivocally clear to her that she is not going to beat him again: "This woman who stood before me was my aunt, my mother's sister, Granny's daughter; in her veins my blood flowed; … I did not want

to be violent with her, and yet I did not want to be beaten for a wrong I had not committed." (103). His resolve here leads to conflict with his *othermother* to escalate into a violent tailspin.

> She was stronger than I and I felt my strength ebbing; she was still fighting for my knife and *I saw a look on her face that made me feel she was going to use it on me if she got possession of it.* I bit her hand and we rolled, kicking, scratching, hitting, fighting as though we were strangers, deadly enemies, fighting for our lives (my emphasis) (*Black Boy*, 106).

Again, Wright alludes to a mother who is so unstable that her intention is maternal filicide. He further strengthens this suggestion after another violent incident with Aunt Addie: "For a month after that I took a kitchen knife to bed with me each night, hiding it under my pillow so that when Aunt Addie came I could protect myself" (134). Richard feels profoundly unsafe in a location which should offer him safety and comfort: "My position in the household was a delicate one: I was a minor, an uninvited dependant, a blood relative who professed no salvation and whose soul stood in mortal peril" (*Black Boy*, 101). Wright's overall representations of his biological mother and his *othermothers* (Grandmother Wilson, Aunt Addie, and the orphanage) underscore his tenuous relationship with black motherhood. This collective institution (black motherhood) lets him down; he perpetually feels unsafe, oppressed, and is left under-nourished physically, emotionally, and intellectually. He represents these specific mothers in his life to have absolutely failed him—colouring the first seventeen years of his life with negativity, alienation and feelings of hopelessness. This dark shadow of black motherhood's negative impact on his childhood is encapsulated by his declaration soon after his valedictory speech—he is repulsed by the idea of attending a graduation party he is invited to by a classmate: "… a few of my classmates managed to shake my hand as I pushed toward the door, seeking the street. Somebody invited me to a party

and I did not accept. I did not want to see any of them again. I walked home, saying to myself: The hell with it! With almost seventeen years of baffled living behind me, I faced the world in 1925" (*Black Boy*, 179-180). No wonder, soon after this ninth-grade graduation, he packs the little possessions he has and heads North; a location which promises him everything the South has failed to provide.

Maya Angelou: Shared Black Motherhood and Mothering

Unlike Richard Wright who paints a gloomy picture of black motherhood, as does Malcolm X (see Chapters Three, and Four respectively), Maya Angelou writes from a black-feminist perspective which underscores the intersection of race, gender, family, and black women's oppression, while simultaneously celebrating black motherhood which is premised on subversion. This enables a robust standpoint which engenders re-imagination of black motherhood as a subversive location from which black womanhood transgresses prescribed patriarchal boundaries to dismantle double consciousness and controlling images which are so damaging to black women. As I have explored earlier in this chapter, Wright and Malcolm X represent black motherhood as problematic to their black male identity process and describe black women within a spectrum of weak, unreliable, incomprehensible, and irrational matriarchs, among other negative descriptors. This representation amplifies the historic tension at the centre of the tenuous relationship between patriarchy and black womanhood. In contrast, Angelou largely depicts black motherhood as having a positive influence on black women through an empowering standpoint leading to independence, political consciousness, possibility, and agency, among other positive values. Angelou's

experience, told through Maya as the central character in *I Know Why The Cage Bird Sing,* and *Mom & Me & Mom* tracks three generations of mothers whose black motherhood praxis defines what Martha Pitts sees a the three tenets of *motherwork*: survival, power, and identity (143).

My entry point into Angelou's *motherwork* is her representation of her biological mother, Vivian Baxter. Vivian's depiction encapsulates a subversion of cultural, racial, and gender stereotypes of black motherhood and black womanhood. Her decision to choose herself over her children challenges patriarchal controlling images of biological motherhood as black women's primary role. She abdicates on her maternal responsibility of nurturing, protecting, feeding, teaching and caring for her young children, thereby inviting the historical black tradition of *othermothering* into her children's lives. According to Olga Barrios, the framework of *othermothers* "brings to [the] front the African American philosophy of an extended family where women become *othermothers*, thus transcending the western concept of a nuclear family."[81] It is her experience from this *othermothering* care that sees Angelou craft a collective black motherhood designed to empower, notwithstanding the inherent struggles. Vivian personifies some fictional heroines who are represented in some black women narratives. Central to these representations is a unique black womanhood predicated on radical strategies designed to subvert cultural and racial ideologies. However, fictional heroines like Zora Neale Hurston's Janie (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*), and Toni Morrison's Sula (*Sula*) are not mothers. Having them as mothers would have problematised their radicalism, a recurring theme of black mothers since slavery. This recalls Harriet Jacobs as an

[81] Olga Barrios, "African American Women in the performing arts," in *The Cambridge Companion To African American Women's Literature,* ed. Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor (Cambridge: University of Cambridge University Press, 2009), 194. Subsequent page references in text.

epitome of nineteenth-century black motherhood. Although she later escapes, her maternal instincts make her endure seven years in a cramped attic, just to be near her children and see them through a small opening in the ceiling. Her predicament is that to escape without her children is not an escape at all—she cannot separate her individual self from her motherhood. Unlike Jacobs, Janie and Sula with no maternity imbrications to navigate, evolve into radical black women subjectivities. Janie emerges from patriarchal oppression (personified by her husbands) to become a black woman with individual autonomy, ability to speak, and being able to choose a lover who fulfils her personal dreams (however, she has to kill him when he becomes rabid after being bitten by a stray dog). Sula embodies Morrison's crafting of a black female persona designed to transgress the matrix of oppression which coalesces on black women through patriarchy, race, and gender. Sula's characterisation challenges the controlling image of black women as nurturing, sacrificial burden bearers. She refuses to marry and be fettered by both a husband and children. She has the freedom to flaunt her sexuality and sleeps with whoever she wants including white men. She is even dominant when having sex, directing men to what fulfils her most. Responding to Morrison's representation of Sula, Linden Peach asserts, "In creating characters who defy received assumptions about how a black woman should behave, Morrison confronts and challenges a larger history in African American and white fiction …"[82] In this characterisation, Morrison takes a feminist stand to construct a black woman model which works towards dismantling double consciousness and other intersecting historical oppressive structures.

[82] Linden Peach, *Toni Morrison* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 2000), 53.

Vivian's radicalism therefore starts in subverting her mothering role, subletting it to *othermothers*. I use Martha Pitts' lens in explicating Angelou's *othermothering* framework, and the role mothers like Vivian play:

> Although motherwork *i*s focused on the concepts of mothering, it reaches beyond women who are biologically mothers, as embodied in the term "othermothers." As a tool for resistance and social justice motherwork and othermothering provides a mechanism for the survival of black women and the survival of their communities because it is an active effort to confront oppression with the goal of advancing the concerns of black women, children, and men (157).

Maya initially grows up traumatised and bitter that her biological mother abandons her and her brother: "I couldn't believe that our mother would laugh and eat oranges in the sunshine without her children" (*Caged Bird*, 56). However, by this radical act of abdicating her mothering role, Vivian allows her children, Maya in particular, to benefit from shared black motherhood. Maya becomes a product of a community of mothers who have her best interests at the centre of their lives. Vivian's abdication saves both herself and her children; she realises that her presence as a mother at this particular time would suffocate all three of them. One can say she chooses herself; however, she chooses her children to have a better mother in Grandmother Henderson. She does not opt to have her children with her mother (Grandmother Baxter), perhaps because she is too conscious that she is her mother's daughter–the Baxter matriarch has her hands full overseeing St. Louis Prohibition era's underworld activities (I explore this in Chapter Four).

At three years old, Maya and her four year old brother (Bailey), travel alone to the South to live with their paternal grandmother, Grandmother Henderson (whom they affectionately call Momma).Their unaccompanied journey to Stamps, encapsulates what Peach posits as "the received assumptions" about black women—Maya reports that "Negro passengers, who always travelled with loaded lunch boxes, felt sorry for 'the poor little motherless darlings' and plied us with cold fried chicken and potato salad."[83] The "received assumption" here is that Maya and Bailey are in this position because of their mother; she alone is the sole reason her children are at the mercy of strangers. This assumption, perpetuated by patriarchy and racism's imagination of black women endures as Vivian is not the only women who is put into this difficult position of "abandoning" her children. This is articulated by Maya when she asserts, "Years later I discovered that the United States had been crossed thousands of times by frightened Black children traveling alone to their newly affluent parents in Northern cities, or back to *grandmother*s in Southern towns when the urban North reneged on its economic promises" (my emphasis) (7-8). I emphasise grandmother here to highlight that the burden of care has been historically assigned to black women regardless of race in the US, be it in black or white people's homes.

Maya and Bailey call their grandmother Momma; perhaps demonstrating that she is more than a grandmother - she is a more intimate mother-version, standing in for the absent biological mother. Under the nurturing and tutelage of Momma, Maya evolves from double consciousness (which manifests through her self-hate as she hankers for whiteness) to developing shoots of political consciousness by the time she returns to be with her biological mother (see Chapter Four for her relationship with a redeemed Vivian). Momma's

[83] Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings,* (London: Virago Press, 2007), 7. Subsequent page references in text.

personality, and motherhood is imbued in rigid theocracy which provides both Maya and Bailey a morale centre. Momma's *othermothering* is centred on Christianity, from which her personality and morality are anchored. She parallels Wright's grandmother in using religion as a guiding lens in both her view of life, and her influence on those who depend on her. However, Momma, unlike Wright's grandmother is a black woman who has the economic power to reinforce her beliefs and views on black life. She is an unmarried (previously married three times), independent and God-fearing black woman who is represented as a leader of Stamps' black community. Her leadership is endorsed by the economic power provided by her store and her ability to lend to both black and white people. Unlike Wright, who virtually starves during his stay in his grandmother's house (a situation which contaminates their relationship), Maya and Bailey are mothered well, with plenty of food, and comfortable shelter. Maya and Bailey benefit from an enterprising grandmother who besides running a successful store also sews their clothes; a situation Wright would envy as his "clothing remained little better than rags" during the period he lived with Grandmother Wilson (*Black Boy*, 175). Wright characterises his mother, and grandmother's religious fanaticism as not productive as it leaves him destitute. Maya on the other hand, represents Momma as a responsible and resourceful *othermother* who provides effective motherly care and love to her and her brother throughout their formative years; a development which goes a long way towards filling the gap left by their lack of biological parenting. The fact that they even call her Momma demonstrates the reciprocal affection running through their relationship.

However, Momma's domestic theocracy has hiccups which at times escalates to violence—black motherhood has historically been characterised as violent at times. Wright, Malcolm X, and Angelou, all insert episodes in which their mothers, or grandmothers have been violent

to them. I explore Wright's violent relationship with his mother and *othermothers* at length in Chapter Three. Malcolm X admits that although his father was violent to his wife and children, he rarely lay a finger on him. He attributes his father's favouritism to his light skin, which is quite paradoxical in the light that his father was a fanatic black activist who abhorred any hint of whiteness. Manning Marable, in *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, asserts: "Earl was prone to physical violence with his wife and most of his children. Yet Malcolm, who idolized his father, would routinely escape punishment. Somehow the small boy sensed that his light color served as a kind of shield."[84] Conversely, Malcolm X, again because of his light skin-tone, alleges that he constantly received all his beating from his mother. Marable posits that, "As an adult, Malcolm recalled the violent incidents, admitting that his parents quarrelled frequently; however, nearly all his whipping as a boy came from his mother" (30). Being the lightest of all her children, perhaps Malcolm becomes a constant representation of how his mother was sired. Louise Little (Malcolm X's mother) is a product of rape. Louise's mother was raped by a white man in Grenada and fell pregnant. Eric S. McDuffie posits that this rape engendered a "violent history and legacy of slavery and colonialism [which] left an indelible mark on [Louise] Little's body and consciousness"[85] (further explored further in Chapter Four). Louise is raised by her mother's family in a community in Grenada which was steeped in what McDuffie describes as "a dynamic culture of opposition, [which] laid the foundations for her community feminism and her life as an organic activist-intellectual in the Garvey movement" (152). However, Malcolm does not give this context provided by McDuffie in his seminal autobiography; again, we see a black male writer characterising his mother as

[84] Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (London; Penguin Books Ltd., 2011), 30. Subsequent page references in text.
[85] Erik S. McDuffie, "The Diasporic Journeys of Louise Little: Grassroots Garveyism, the Midwest, and Community Feminism," *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2016) 152. Subsequent page referencing in text

irrational in her violence towards her son. Wendy Ashely posits this overarching negative stereotype of black women in America as historical:

> In the aftermath of slavery and the resulting social, economic, and political effects, Black women have become the victims of negative stereotyping in mainstream American culture. Such stereotypes include the myth of the angry Black woman that characterizes these women as aggressive, ill-tempered, illogical, overbearing, hostile, and ignorant without provocation.[86]

Returning to Angelou – while she does implicate black motherhood's involvement in violence, she does not condemn them to patriarchal imagination of black motherhood as described by Wendy Ashley, and as represented by Wright, and Malcolm X. She is careful not to be complicit with patriarchal stereotyping of black women which Martha Pitts posits as "part of a generalized ideology of domination" (153). With Momma's fixed religious ideology which at times influences her sporadic violence towards Maya and Bailey, she characterises this as part of the discipline black motherhood historically instils in black children. Angelou's lens (through Maya) on black mothers' violence when disciplining children corroborates Gibson as I have explored earlier in this chapter. Gibson does not single out black motherhood as steeped in violence; he asserts the severe beatings of black children as a historical method which black families use to ensure their protection and survival, regardless of the gender of the parent or the child. An example is when Maya misuses, according to Momma, the phrase "by the way." Momma commands that Maya and Bailey kneel down with her to pray for forgiveness, which indicates to Maya how serious her "abominations" is: "I was crying loudly

[86] Wendy Ashley, The angry black woman: the impact of pejorative stereotypes on psychotherapy with black women," *Social Work Health* 29, no. 1 (2014), 27. https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2011.6194479

now. Momma's voice had risen to a shouting pitch, and I knew that whatever wrong I had committed was extremely serious. She had even left the Store unattended to take up my case with God. When she finished we were all crying" (*Caged Bird*, 111). Momma later explains to Maya and Bailey that the former's violation lay in causally using "by the way" which should only be used when refereeing to Jesus or God as they are the only "Way, the Truth and the Light" (111). This example highlights Angelou's attempts to contextualise Momma's violence on Maya. This is not just wanton violence; Momma's violence lies in her conviction that her grand-daughter has committed a punishable sin, and to teach her, she has to exert corporal punishment which will help her remember not to sin again. In Momma, Maya's childhood memory depicts "her power and strength" and believed her unequivocal intention was "to teach Bailey and me to use the paths in life that she and her generation and all the Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe" (*Cage Bird*, 51). However, it is Momma's fixed belief in her ways which lays the foundation of their paradoxical relationship with her granddaughter (Maya). Generational distance dictates that Maya take the usable past and build on it to subvert the status quo (I will explore this later). For now, I want to continue with the representation of black mothers' violence.

Angelou subverts the stereotype of black mothers by acknowledging that they have their faults like everyone else. Whereas Wright and Malcolm X push black motherhood to the margins as they recount the shaping of their black male identity evolution, Angelou brings it to the centre, with all its concomitant blemishes. She represents black motherhood as a critical institution with complete human beings who are diverse and complex. To this end, Angelou provides a pivotal image of split black motherhood which raises her. Mary Jane Lupton posits that Angelou represents black motherhood as an institution riddled with

contrasts, hence the need for shared motherhood. Following Vivian's subversion of patriarchal controlling imagination of black motherhood, Angelou depicts black motherhood with "indications of split motherhood—the absent natural mother, the gentle Mrs. Flowers, the forceful Annie Henderson—whose divisions [Maya] must articulate.[87] Continuing with this split motherhood image, I view Angelou's depiction of Grandmother Baxter as epitomising black motherhood tradition of an *outraged mother*. When she is rapped by her mother's live-in boyfriend (Freeman), Angelou suggests that Grandmother Baxter sees to it that he is punished with his life. Having left it to the courts to do their job, which they fail to do (Freeman is sentenced to one year and is out on bail in one day), Grandmother Baxter is outraged. Maya suggests that she (Grandmother Baxter) organises that Mr. Freeman pays with his life. When a policeman comes to tell her that Freeman has been found dead, Grandmother Baxter nonchalantly comments, "Tom, thanks for telling me. Poor man. Well, maybe it's better this way. He was a mad dog. Would you like a glass of lemonade? Or some beer?" (*Caged Bird*, 93). The tone of this conversation and what she then says to Maya and Bailey further suggests her hand in Freeman's demise: "Ritie and Junior. You didn't hear a thing. I never want to hear this situation nor that evil man's name mentioned in my house again. I mean that" (*Caged Bird*, 93). After this exhortation, Maya says her grandmother then "went back into the kitchen to make apple strudel for *my celebration*" (my emphasis) (*Caged Bird*, 93). Maya understands that her Grandmother's celebratory mood, and her warning to them implies she has played a significant role in the demise of Freeman.

[87] Marry Jane Lupton, "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical Continuity," *Black American Literature Forum*, 24, no. 2 (Summer, 1990), 266. Subsequent page references in text.

What follows is that Maya blames herself for causing Freeman's death, and decides to withdraw from this world of "evil" in which even Bailey, her trusted brother, could not help. She condemns herself as being culpable to causing violence and death:

> In these moments I decided that although Bailey loved me he couldn't help. I had sold myself to the Devil and there could be no escape. The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people other than Bailey. Instinctively, or somehow, I knew that because I loved him so much I'd not hurt him, but if I talked to anyone else that person might die. Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die like the black fat slugs that only pretended. I had to stop talking (*Gaged Bird*, 93).

Maya's representation of Grandmother Baxter implicates black motherhood in unsavoury deeds. Here, as does Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and Alice Walker in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), and *The Colour Purple* (1982), Angelou exposes the sexual and familial violence in black families, again defying the political call of her time which advocated for only positive depictions of blackness (especially of black masculinity as leaders of black liberation so as to insulate them from critical gaze). However, Grandmother Baxter is redeemed; and further redeemed if one looks at *Caged Bird* as a neo-slave narrative. Maya's rape then symbolises the historical oppression of black women by both black and white men, with rape being one of the most cruel, egregious abuse, and disempowering crimes perpetrated against black women (I explore this in Chapter Five). Grandmother Baxter's outrage calls to attention the radical responses needed to discourage historic black women's sexual exploitation, especially if patriarchal institutions like courts perpetuate this by letting men like Freeman off so easily. The message these courts (as extensions of white patriarchy) send is that black women's violation is inconsequential, recalling the unrestrained access white men had with black women during slavery. I propose a dialogue between Malcom X's mother and Angelou's maternal grandmother as outraged daughter, and outraged *othermother*, respectively: Louise Little's political life is a reaction to her mother's rape, and her subsequent race consciousness is nurtured by her

maternal black family, and a black community steeped in dynamic politics of opposition. Juxtaposing Louise Little's black woman activism with Grandmother Baxter's outraged mother persona adds to the historic representations which continue to enlighten readers on how black women have increasingly taken responsibility, and agency to restore their dignity. This is further emphasised by how Vivian and Angelou continue with this intergenerational black women activist praxis as represented in the later part of *Caged Bird*, and *Mom & Me & Mom*.

Maya's conscious decision not to interact with the "evil world" (except with Bailey) is a coping mechanism, and weapon to resist evil, that sees her again exposing familial violence perpetrated on her. Now living with Grandmother Baxter, she echoes Wright in that she is a child mired in an increasingly hostile environment with uncompromising adults. After her doctor announces that she is healed, the Baxter family reverts to their violent type as they begin to beat Maya, for not talking to anyone: "When I refused to be the child they knew and accepted me to be, I was called impudent and my mute sullenness. For a while I was punished for being uppity and I wouldn't speak; *and then came the thrashing, given by any relative who felt offended*" (my emphasis) (*Caged Bird*, 94). Close reading this statement by Maya puts an emphasis on "any relative" beating her while she is living with Grandmother Baxter. While this indicts the Baxter family as violent, it also subverts the patriarchal gendered characterisation of black women as the only ones who are prone to irrational violence as depicted by Wright and Malcolm X. Familial violence on children is represented as endemic by Hurston, Wright, Malcolm X and Angelou; nonetheless, it has to be emphasised it is not just a preserve of black motherhood. However, what happens to Maya here anticipates an incident she describes in *Mom & Me & Mom* in which her mother (Vivian) violently attacks her when she is about fifteen years old. In this incident, Vivian wakes up to a Maya who is swollen all over from her severe beating.

Vivian's vicious attack on her daughter is comparable to Wright's description of how his mother beats him to what he terms as a "near death experience." Vivian admits to her egregious violence, "I had the key ring in my hand with at least twenty keys on it and I hit you without thinking" (*Mom & Me & Mom*, 56). The damage on Maya induced a sense of shock for everyone: Bailey's reaction included packing a bag with the intention of leaving such a violent household, while Maya's stepfather, and Papa Ford's (houseman, cook and servant) reactions encapsulate the gravity of Vivian's physical damage of her daughter: "Each looked at [Maya], and the shock on their faces was undeniable" (*Mom & Me & Mom*, 55). Notwithstanding her violence, after asking for forgiveness, and swearing never to be violent to her children again, Vivian is then depicted as a remorseful mother who deserves redemption. Unlike Ella Wright, whose son appears to not have forgiven her for that beating, Angelou gives Vivian space to explain her actions, a development which then leads to her redemption. Subsequent to this incident Maya and her mother grow closer, with the latter's black feminist characterisation increasingly having much influence in shaping the former's black female identity evolution (I extensively explore this in Chapter Five).

Returning to the time Maya is living with the Baxters after being rapped by her mother's live-in boyfriend, she is not sure whether Momma sent for them or that the "St. Louis family just got fed up with [her] grim presence" (*Caged Bird*, 95). Once again, Maya and Bailey are sent to Stamps to live with Momma. This latest move underscores how inextricable shared motherhood is to the nurturing and caring for black children. Historically, from slavery onwards, shared motherhood has made it possible that black children survive, notwithstanding the inherent challenges which have to be navigated. Clearly, Maya is traumatised by her rape, and the beating she receives from the Baxter adults exacerbates her

trauma. Split-motherhood comes into play, the outraged *othermother* (Grandmother Baxter) has revenged her grand-daughter's rape, now it's the turn of the religious Grandmother to see to the healing and survival. Momma, and Stamps provide the space for recovery, therapy, and healing: "The barrenness of Stamps was exactly what I wanted, without will or consciousness. After St. Louis, with its noise and activities, its trucks and blues, and loud family gatherings, I welcomed the obscure lanes and lonely bungalows set back deep in the dirt yards" (*Caged Bird,* 96).

However, her complete healing takes longer than Momma anticipates, making her seek help from her black community. She reaches out to the black tradition of *community mothering*. This conscious decision by Momma recalls Wright's situation when his mother falls ill, and is incapacitated. Community mothers step in to ensure the immediate survival of Wright and his brother. In Maya's case, Momma engages Mrs Bertha Flowers, who, according to Maya is "the aristocrat of Black Stamps … [and our] side's answer to the richest white woman in town" (*Caged Bird*, 101). Mrs Flowers, like Wright's Ella, can be seen as an *intellectual othermother* who plants intellectual seeds, and unlocks vistas of imagination in the otherwise compromised children. Maya's description of Mrs Flowers marks a significant departure from her hankering for white features; she begins to see blackness in positive light. She describes Mrs Flowers as an aristocrat, and her skin as "a rich black" (*Caged Bird*, 101). Marking an irreversible evolution in negotiating her black female identity, Maya celebrates Mrs Flowers: "She was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be" (102). After being initially mystified why Momma and Mrs Flowers called each other "sisters," Maya later acknowledges: "they were as alike as sisters, separated only by their formal education" (103). This confirms Mrs Flowers

as her *othermother* who intervenes, as dictated by black tradition, to save her. The collaboration of a blood relative and a black *community mother* comes through for Maya as she asserts, "I heard the soft-voiced Mrs. Flowers and the textured voice of my grandmother merging and melting" (103). Mrs. Flowers' presence in Maya's life remarkably brings race consciousness and engenders her individual transformation as she begins to celebrate blackness, "It would be safe to say she made me proud to be a Negro, just by being herself" (103).

Mrs. Flowers' impact on Maya is so significant that she unconsciously engages her in conversations, making her the first person she talks to other than Bailey after a long time. Maya is congratulated for reading a lot; however, she is made aware of the power of the spoken word, "Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning" (106). Mrs Flowers as the intellectual mother, further educates Maya through "lessons in living": "She said that I must be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and even more intelligent than college professors. She encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generation" (108). This speech speaks to her Momma, and therein lies the collaboration of black motherhood in biological mother, *othermothers*, *pedagogical mothers*, and *community mothers*. This collective black motherhood, without subordinating any part of it, helps in raising black children, making sure they survive, and thrive, in the best way circumstances permit.

Mrs. Flowers' designation as the *intellectual/pedagogical othermother* or *community othermother* sees Maya start to dismantle double consciousness and become race conscious

in her interaction with the outside world. She begins to see the world in a different light which questions black people's position/positioning within her immediate vicinity of Stamps. Like Wright's questioning of why white people had plenty of food while his family and other black people struggle when he goes into white people's house with her mother, Maya goes through similar interrogations of the status quo. Firstly, she appreciates how Mrs Flowers acknowledges her individual identity: "I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson's grandchild or Bailey's sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson" (*Caged Bird*, 108).

Incidents which follow her introduction to Mrs. Flowers indicate Maya's evolving black consciousness. I will start with an incident with her experience working for a white lady Mrs Cullen which I explore more fully in Chapter Four. Here I want to highlight her evolving black identity when she takes exception to being re-named by Mrs Cullinan. Firstly, Maya dismisses white patriarchy when she does not recognise Mr Cullinan as anyone of significance in her life: "Her husband remains, in my memory, undefined. I lumped him with all the other white men that I have ever seen and tried not to see" (*Caged Bird*, 115). This powerful statement entrenches her deep into racial, and gender politics at a very young age. With Mrs. Cullinan, her gripe is how white people historically deny black people their humanity, and identity by misnaming them intentionally. Having appreciated the respect of being recognised as an individual by Mrs. Flowers, and how this recognition affirms her black identity, Maya takes great exception to Mrs. Cullinan re-naming her "Mary". Her first sign of protest is writing a poem: "That evening I decided to write a poem on being white, fat, old and without children. It was going to be a tragic ballad. I would have to watch her carefully to capture the essence of her loneliness and pain" (*Caged Bird*, 117). Her passive resistance in writing this private

poem does not work as Mrs. Cullinan insists on miscalling her. Maya moves to active resistance when Mrs Cullinan has her usual white ladies visiting:

> I had again been told to serve the old biddies on the porch, I dropped the empty serving tray. When I heard Mrs. Cullinan scream, 'Mary!' I picked up the casserole and two of the green glass cups in readiness. As she rounded the kitchen door I let them fall on the tiled floor.

When her visitors intimate that Mary (Maya) has broken her valued dishes, Mrs. Cullinan explodes: "Her name is Margaret, goddamn it, her name's Margaret" (120). With her active protest accomplished, Maya departs and never returns.

Momma enables Maya's race conscious evolution by firstly providing family unity, a home which becomes a healing site and source of activism. Maya's active resistance to Mrs Cullinan's racism is not an aberration, but a result of navigating the racial codes which children in the South go through. I pick a few incidents which track Maya's progressive race consciousness, and fledging activism in response to what happens to herself, her grandmother, and her community. Maya's first response to racism is being upset, angry and humiliated—this is when the "used-to-be -sheriff" suggests that all black men should hide because of the imminent Klan ride through Stamps. This humiliates and upsets Maya because the ex-sheriff's "confidence that my uncle and every Black man who heard of the Klan's coming ride would scurry under their houses to hide in chicken droppings was too humiliating to hear" (*Caged Bird*, 20). Another incident which involves family is when Momma is humiliated by a group of what Maya calls "powhitetrash". A group of white girls make fun of Momma by aping her posture. Momma does not react to this racist taunting; a reaction which makes Maya even more angry. Pierre A. Walker posits that in the aforementioned incidences,

Maya displays, "rage, indignation, humiliation, [and] helplessness."[88] The ten-year old Maya is confounded by her Momma's non-reaction to these "dirty, mean and impudent" white girls and "why Momma have to call them Miz?" (*Caged Bird*, 35). At this stage Maya is still going through the process of figuring out the racial power dynamics. What Momma chooses to do in this context is survival, given "the record of lynching, rape, and other forms of violence endured by African American in the Jim Crow South."[89] She is conscious of the consequences of any indication that her response would suggest anything but black subordination—in these circumstances, race triumphs over age and class. Young Maya is confounded and furious at both the white girls and Momma; she cannot believe her grandmother's non-reaction. She is yet to realise the historic complexity of blackness and its intertwined process of survival and subversion. However, the adult Angelou, looking back now understands the contest of wills and how Momma, and she subsequently won. According to Walker, the emphasis of dirt on the white girls' bodies and clothes, Momma's directive for Maya to go and wash her face, and Mayas' independent decision to rake the trampled front yard after the white girls have left signify that:

> Maya and Momma demonstrate that, unlike the white trash girls, they are neither dirty not impudent. This is where their victory lies. Part of it consists of Momma's resisting the white girls' attempts to goad her into descending to their level of impudence. But another part of the victory lies in maintaining personal dignity through the symbolic importance of cleanliness and politeness (95-96).

[88] Pierre a. Walker, Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form in Maya Angelou's I know Why the Caged Bird Sings" *College Literature* 22, no.3 (Oct, 1995): 95. Subsequent page references in text.
[89] Stephen A. Berry, "Resistance Begins at Home: The Black Family and Lessons in Survival and Subversion in Jim Crow Mississippi," *Black Women, Gender + Families* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2009):65. Subsequent page references in text.

Yes, this represents subtle resistance strategies which in the end mean nothing if they are not escalated to active resistance; however, for Momma, in the historical context of her period she "establishes [her] family's respectability in the face of racism and subtly throw[s] the attempt to degrade them back on their oppressor" (Walker, 96).

Maya's growing understanding of race issues continues with the dentist incident. She is taken to a white dentist to have her tooth removed. Firstly, she notices that they don't use the front entrance but knock at the rear of the dentist's building, and secondly, the white receptionist who answers Momma's knock on the door is openly surprised to see them. Thirdly, Momma addresses herself with her first name, "Annie." This submissive gesture shocks and humiliates Maya leading her to conclude: "It seemed terribly unfair to have a toothache and a headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness" (*Caged Bird*, 202). According to Berrey,

> In these encounters and others with whites, race trumped the familial hierarchy, and children saw their parents reduced to a subordinate, almost childlike position. One would suspect that these displays of power relations could undermine parental authority and potentially threaten the black family. At the very least, such encounters could represent potent lessons in the meaning of blackness (73).

For Maya this encounter does not undermine Momma's authority, it actually reinforces her own awareness of race, and the meaning of blackness. The receptionist's response and Momma's use of her first name is just the precursor to the overt racism which the white dentist displays to her and Momma. Upon being asked to return a favour by attending to Maya, the dentist declares: "Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (*Caged Bird*, 203). This is despite the fact that Momma had lent him some money

when he was desperate; a situation which clearly shows how desperate he was then, and also further demonstrates Momma's significant financial stability. For the first time, we see Momma's resistance to white unfairness, and oppression: "I wouldn't press on you like this for myself but I can't take No. *Not for my grandbaby*. When you come to borrow my money you didn't have to beg. You asked me, and I lent it. Now, it wasn't my policy. I ain't no moneylender, but you stood to lose this building and I tried to help you out" (my emphasis) (203). For her grandchild, Momma is prepared to go all the way and she is said to have even raised her voice. Later on, she tells her son (Uncle Willie) that she exerted more money as interest from the racist dentist. Momma here demonstrates remarkable confrontation of racism as she demands and gets some form of reparations for the harm done to her and her grandchild by the dentist's racist act:

> He tole that little snippity nurse of his'n to give me ten dollars and make me sign a "paid in full" receipt. She gave it to me and I signed the paper. Even though by rights he was paid up before, I figger, he gonna be that kind of nasty, he gonna have to pay for it (*Caged Bird*, 207).

Whereas Maya says she prefers her fantasy version of how Momma reacts to the dentist's racist act, she nevertheless recognises her (Momma's) subversive act of resistance. Maya's fantasy of Momma demonstrates that at this stage she is not only race conscious but aware of the need of active resistance. Yes, at her age she is unable to do much, but the fantasy helps her configure strategies which black people can use to resist racism. At the centre of this fantasy of resistance is a black woman with "her eyes blazing like live coals and her arms had doubled themselves in length," who demands and gets respect from a white man. This fantastical black woman is assertive in her transgression of racist, and gender ideologies, demonstrating that the seeds of women activism have germinated in Maya. She is learning

that racism needs to be aggressively confronted if things are to change; a shaping which is made possible by shared black motherhood. Angelou represents black motherhood as a critical institution in black communities which serves lessons in survival through avoiding physical harm as much as possible, as well as psychological damage through a rejection of ideas of black inferiority, and promotion of subversion.

By the time she is twelve and graduates from her eighth-grade primary education, Maya's race consciousness, and Bailey's age as a black boy in the South become problematic. Once again, the sagacity of black motherhood comes to the fore as Momma decides that it is time she hands over mothering duties to Vivian, the biological mother. Angelou reflects through her characterisation of Maya on how, by the age of twelve, she had begun to understand the racial displays of power. Maya's critical interrogation of the school system through what happens on graduation day gives an extraordinary insight into the wider socio-politics involved. Firstly, one of the two white men who come as the "special guests" dislodges the school principal from his seat at the centre of the stage, perhaps symbolising how white people always push black people to the margins. Maya notes that while the white speaker appears to praise the sportsmanship of the present and former students of her school (Lafayett County Training School), what he is actually saying is that "white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (*the girls weren't even in on it*) would try to be Jesse Owenses and Joe Louises" (my emphasis) (*Caged Bird*, 193). What Donleavy, the white speaker betrays in his speech is that white people see black people as "maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen" and any black person with higher aspirations was "farcical and presumptuous" (*Caged Bird*, 194).

To Maya and most of the black children in Stamps and the wider South, double consciousness takes hold - the school is an unambiguous marker of racial difference between white and black children. Berry illustrates how the school acts as the site of racial distinction:

> In Jim Crow Mississippi, the differences in schooling for black and white children were dramatic. Generally, white students had physically superior facilities, newer textbooks, and a longer school year than black students. Initially, however, black students noticed a much more visible distinction between the schools—they walked while the white students rode buses (70).

Perhaps conscious of similar disparities Berry asserts above, and as evidence of the impact of her twelve years of black motherhood nurturing and tutelage, Maya is increasingly exasperated, upset, and angry as the white speaker drums on. This is yet another incident which triggers Maya's double consciousness and in response, she invokes the heroic slave radicals who contributed to the subversion of slavery: "Then I wished that Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner had killed whitefolks in their beds … and Christopher Columbus had drowned in the *Santa Maria*" (*Caged Bird*, 194). Again, we see Maya willing to go beyond the rhetoric and institute aggression and even violence if necessary in black people's crusade against racist oppression. Her ability to imagine alternative scenarios demonstrates her evolving black female identity which is not satisfied with sitting back and let the status quo prevail. While she is incredibly upset with the white speaker and his colleague, she is also exasperated with black adults for not actively reacting (to replicate Prosser and Turner's subversions) to their emotional abuse and oppression by these white speakers in particular, and white people historically:

> It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense. *We should all be dead*. I thought I should like to see us all dead, one on top of the other (my emphasis) (*Caged bird*, 194).

Sensing the tension and restlessness of her grandchildren as epitomised by Maya's explicit double consciousness in the critical reflection above, Momma wisely decides that for their safety and survival, she needs to hand them back to their biological mother. However, what happens to Bailey precipitates the escalation of these plans to relocate them from Stamps. Upon being a victim of overt racism, Bailey comes back to ask Momma and Uncle Willie why white people hate black people so much. Unable to give a "safe" answer to this pertinent question, and aware of the historic dangers lurking in the deep South, Momma hurriedly makes plans to make the journey and hand over the mothering role—and so continues the legacy of shared motherhood of black children.

For Maya in particular, the nurturing and lessons she receives from Grandmother Henderson and Mrs Flowers imbue her with transformative critical foundations which help shape her black womanhood. With Mrs Flowers, Maya, like Wright, is introduced to a new world of reading. Reading becomes a critical tool which gradually engenders her imagination, race and gender consciousness, and intellectual resilience. She confirms this just before leaving Stamps as she asserts: "I wouldn't miss Mrs Flowers. For she had given me her secret word which called forth a djinn who was to serve me all my life: books" (*Caged Bird*, 214). In this assertion Maya joins Hurston, Herndon, Wright, and Malcolm X who all explicitly proclaim reading as being central to their evolution to critical consciousness, and inevitable confrontation with the socio-political status quo of their times. In Chapter 5 I explore Maya's relationship with

her redeemed biological mother (Vivian). I track Maya's evolving black woman activism praxis and explore the critical influence her biological mother brings, and how this relationship builds on her experience of shared black motherhood in Stamps.

Chapter Two: Black Identity and Communism - Histories, Contexts, and Resistance Strategies

In this chapter, I interrogate the relationship some US black communities had with communism in their black identity transitions which included integral battles with double consciousness. I investigate a range of critical questions: Why did some black communities embrace the Communist Party as opposed to the traditional parties whose ideologies were recognised and encouraged as patriotic especially between the 1920s to the 1950s? Why did these predominantly black communities see communism as providing viable strategies to subverting capitalism and its concomitant racism, oppression and tyranny? Why was the pull towards communism so strong that these black communities consciously carried the "double burden" of being black and communist, inevitably inviting the vicious wrath of the dominant culture(s)? In attempting to find answers to these questions, I have chosen to explore the relationship between black communities and communists through the lenses of Angelo Herndon (*Let Me Live* -1937) and Angela Davis (*Angela Davis: An Autobiography* - 1974). These two black political activists, like some of their black forefathers, employed the power of literacy through autobiography to document personal and communal experiences as witness-testimonies to historical events, contexts and resistance strategies black communities grappled with to resist the suffocating tyranny of white America.

My investigation of this relationship between some black communities, the Communist Party and its affiliates has been broadly influenced by Critical Race Theory's interrogation of how the law in America shapes race relations. I subscribe to proponents like Dereck Bell whose

views suggest "race as expressing material interests of elite groups."[90] This interpretation speaks to the pernicious racism black Americans have historically been subjected to—views which are echoed by both Davis and Herndon as their writing expose the weaponisation of the American law against black communities. In both their writings and political activism, Davis and Herndon focused on how the law has been historically manipulated to legitimise various "legalised" terrorism against black individuals and communities to perpetuate white supremacy. They critically reflect on the past and examine how the law was manipulated during the slaveocracy by slave-owning ruling class of elite white men whose systemic skewing of the US Constitution and laws was designed to favour their white supremacist ideology and capitalism agenda. Over the centuries, this manipulation of the law to masks black oppression through racist structures continues unabated as explored in all the eight autobiographies I examine in this thesis.

My explorations of Herndon and Davis in particular have also been influenced by another tenet of Critical Race Theory: counterstory tradition (recalling slave narratives) as political intervention. In this perspective, I see Davis and Herndon as "critical writers [who] use counterstories to challenge, displace, or mock pernicious narratives or beliefs" circulated by the dominant culture about black people (Delgado and Stefancic, 50). Considering this framing, I suggest that *Let Me Live* (1937) and *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974) became inescapably political writing. Their writing espoused their resistance of double consciousness (a historic burden for black Americans), and encapsulated wider political ramifications which

[90] Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, (New York University Press, New York, 2017): 140, Subsequent page referencing in text.

shaped not only their own black identity transitions, but also impacted many black lives in the communities they lived.

Communism: Angelo Herndon - *Let Me Live*

> I WAS NOT THE SAME CHILD after I had left my sickbed. I now looked out upon my little world with new and troubled eyes. My illness had drawn me closer to my family. Absurdly young as I was, I already began to feel a share of general responsibility toward warding off the hunger and suffering which were driving my poor parents to despair. I fully understood now what it meant to be poor. My childish mind became greatly distressed. "Why are people poor?" I asked myself. But I could find no answer. Yet the squalor and wretchedness of my surroundings, in contrast with the lovely world of whites outside, filled me with broodings far too morbid and grave for a mite of six. Baffled from explanation, I found naïve consolation on the rapturous dream my mother used to weave for me about the Second Coming whenever poverty obliged us to go to bed hungry.[91]

This quotation remarkably encapsulates the historically contested terrain of US racial politics as the context in which Angelo Herndon's black male identity evolves and responds. A close reading here identifies Herndon as a six year old already endowed with a penetrative consciousness which not only questions the status quo, but resolves to take personal responsibility to act and at least save his family from hunger. He later demonstrates that these were not just ramblings of a six-year-old child; at 9 years he is already at work to help support his family, and at thirteen years (together with his brother) he follows their late father's fatal journey down the pernicious mines (where he succumbed to miner's pneumonia). It is initially through his family experience with capitalism that he begins to question racial politics. This

[91] Angelo Herndon, *Let Me Live* (New York: Random House, 1937), 9. Subsequent page referencing in text.

initial anxiety with his "little world" develops into critical consciousness which is engendered by his experiential education into the wider world. Critical consciousness impacts on his black identity evolution as he transitions to a radical communist who strives for the emancipation of black people, and the working class. I investigate Herndon's identity transitions and his resistance to oppression from when he was 13 years old through the prism of Critical Consciousness Theory. In this interrogation I incorporate Mathew A. Diemer et al. in their formulation of Critical Consciousness Theory as "a developmental approach to addressing marginalisation and oppression."[92] Additionally, I interrogate *Let Me Live* as representative of the double consciousness which is part of the collective struggles black people have historically faced. I also examine this autobiography as a neo-slave narrative, as well as a prison narrative. Lastly, I examine some of the strategies Herndon and his communist colleagues use to resist white supremacy and its concomitant oppressive structures.

Black Identity Evolution: Critical Consciousness

Paulo Freire defines critical consciousness as "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality."[93] I suggest this definition of critical consciousness as integral to Herndon's black identity transitions as he seeks answers to those questions that "baffled" him as a six year old and strove to end "the squalor and wretchedness" surrounding his family, black people, and the working-class. Herndon's identity transitions anticipate subsequent black radicals I discuss in this thesis and they include: Angela Davis, Zora Neal Hurston, Richard Wright, Malcolm X, and

[92] M.A. Diemer, et al., "Critical Consciousness: A Developmental Approach To Addressing Marginalisation and Oppression," *Child Development Perspectives*, v. 10, no. 4 (2016): 216. Subsequent page references in text.
[93] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 35.

Maya Angeleou. My focus on these black writers is grounded on Paulo Freire's thought from which M.A. Diemar et al., in their contemporary formulations of critical consciousness Theory, posit three core areas: *critical reflection; critical motivation (or, efficacy); and critical action*. *Critical reflection* is defined by Diemar et al. as the initial stage which refers to "the process of learning to question social arrangements and structures that marginalize groups of people – learning to see … how history works, how received ways of thinking and feeling perpetuate existing structures of inequality" (216). Herndon demonstrates *critical reflection* from the moment he gets his first job and throughout his time before he joins the Communist Party. Although the "dreadful thought of conditions at home stiffened his spine" and forced him to carry on working despite the terrible working conditions, critical reflections take hold of him and he protests in a rage (41). In this incident, he seamlessly moves into the second stage of critical consciousness; that is *critical motivation*, which refers to the perceived capacity and commitment to address perceived injustices. He tells us that his "fighting spirit was aroused" and ran up to the foreman and shouted in his face, "You have no right to do that! I have four thousand pounds of coal in those cars and you are only giving me credit for seventeen hundred. This is a gyp and I don't mind telling it to you" (42). Although an essential component of his development, this proves to be impotent rage as he is pointed to the universal exploitation of black people in particular, and the working class in general: "If you don't like it, get the hell out of here and see if you are treated better elsewhere" (42). He realises the tragic truth to his and other black workers' fate as he laments, "The world looked dark for me … there seemed no end to the company's inventiveness and cunning [in its exploitation of workers]" (42-43). He is painfully conscious of the subhuman standard of living the black workers have to endure through segregation, poor diet and the ever increasing debt they accrue.

Although he is frustrated by his impotence at this point in his identity transitions to do much to change the status quo, Herndon continues to challenge both white "authority" and black people. He accuses the latter for never turning their frustrations into active resistance; a development which would mark the *critical action* stage as postulated by Deimar et al. In an incident in which a fellow black traveller in the train is assaulted by a conductor, he excoriates his black colleagues for allowing one white man to bully them and only get excited with words after he had left: "Smart guys! Why didn't you help this man when the conductor beat him? I think we're all yellow, otherwise we would never have allowed this to happen. When that white conductor beat this fellow he was beating us, too, but we never said a word. Shame on us all!" (66). Once again, he is painfully aware of his impotent rage as a fifteen year old whose physical frailty is a "misfortune" for now. However, he demonstrates *critical reflection* as well as *critical motivation* in providing a possible solution to this particular race issue through shaming the physically mature black men, suggesting their lack of critical consciousness as part of their blackness and urging them to intervene when one of their own is under attack. What Herndon may not have been aware of at his age was the form of double consciousness at play here; these black men are conscious of what they would want to do to that white conductor. However, these men are also conscious of the precarity of who they are in the eyes of white people wo are the custodians of American law since slavery. The confidence of the conductor to assault a man in front of his fellow black men demonstrates the debilitating power of double consciousness as a tool of white supremacy.

To further mark his development of the third component of critical consciousness (*critical action*) which "refers to engagements in individual or collective efforts to change perceived injustice," Herndon describes the events of another train incident when he was sixteen years

old. He becomes frustrated by being repeatedly asked to push back by some white boys who keep piling into their section. This forced the retractable iron bars which separated the races to further trap Herndon who began to feel "like a monkey in the zoo" (70). I suggest this feeling is a metaphor for the way black people feel, particularly in the Jim Crow South. I also interpret this image of him as "a monkey in the zoo" as anticipating his dehumanising incarceration which subsequently shapes his black identity evolution, especially from the moment he joins the Communist Party. Reacting to the white boys on the train, he boldly declares that having paid his money, he was not moving an inch. When the other black passengers began "meekly moving back," Herndon "felt so ashamed of them" and could not restrain himself when the Reverend, characterising double consciousness as internalised oppression, asked him to move because "White people run things like they want to, and it's not up to us to tell them what to do" (71). He admits that revulsion takes hold as he turns on the Reverend and uncharacteristically rebukes him, "Dear Reverend, will you please go and take ten steps to hell!" (71). This incident confirms his rupture with his Christian up-bringing and brings into sharp focus the problematic relationship religion has with the contested terrain of racial politics (a complexity I will interrogate in Chapter Four). Herndon shows his determination to resist oppressive instructions when the conductor commands him to move back. He rises from his seat and unequivocally challenges this representative of 'white authority and civilisation':

> You white people are so civilised that you seem to think that you can afford to behave worse than savages towards us defenceless Negroes. I know you hate us, but it strikes me awfully funny that you are ready to accept money from a black hand as well as from a white. Now understand me clearly, I've paid my fare to ride this car and I won't give up my seat to any white man until hell freezes over! (71).

To this demonstration of uncharacteristic open challenge to Jim-Crowism by a black person, the conductor reacts by dismissively characterising Herndon as "crazy" and urges the white boys to leave him alone. Labelling of Herndon as "crazy" fits the Southern white imagination of black people who display "irrational" and apparently "aberrational" behaviour by questioning white authority – a black person must surely be "crazy" to challenge absolute white authority, especially in a public place like that. As they cannot overcome their double consciousness, these "good" black people are meek, docile and entirely predictable; happy to quietly occupy their places in the margins. Unlike these "good" blacks, Herndon's "craziness" replicates, "Nat turner, Denmark Vasey, and Gabriel Prosser [who] attempted to destroy this double consciousness …" [94]

This train incident marks an end to Herndon's individual resistance to oppression as soon after, he begins to muse over ideas his father had given him about his role as deliverer of black peoples' emancipation from oppression. This appears to be the right time for him to get into the political arena through the Communist Party—his critical consciousness has evolved to embrace collective strategies to guide his resistance to oppression. Perhaps, it is the 1918 Turner incident of which propels him to stand up to the white boys and conductor in the train, and his subsequent entry into communism because, to his knowledge, it was the "most gruesome, the most disgusting lynching story" which epitomised the extra-legal terrorism perpetrated by some sectors of white communities (67). Hayes and Mary Turner were black sharecroppers in Georgia who stood up for their rights by demanding an equal share of the profits as agreed.

[94] Larry Neal, "And Shine Swam on: An afterword," in *African American Literary Theory*, ed. Winston Napier, (New Yor: New York University Press, 2000), 71.

However, the white landlord typically refused and instead set up a lynch mob to teach Hayes a lesson for insolence. The lynch mob was led by the County Sheriff, exposing the collusion of the police with the vigilante white mob. On 18 May 1918 Hayes was "arrested" and was hung up a tree for two days. The following day, his wife threatened to report this group and have them arrested. They did not take kindly to her threats and her eight months pregnancy notwithstanding, "they strung her to a tree and broke her neck" before pouring gasoline over her, and "as she burned, the mob howled with glee" (68). As if this was not enough, one of this vigilante mob ripped her belly open and when the baby fell to the ground, it was repeatedly stamped upon. Demonstrating Paulo Freire's assertion on how oppressing others dehumanises the oppressor; upon seeing their colleague repeatedly stamp on the infant, "the mob, driven with wild bestiality, began to howl like wolves and in their criminal sadism fired hundreds of bullets into her lifeless body" (67). As elaborated by the Equal Justice Initiative, this was not an isolated incident, lynchings were endemic in the US, even after slavery:

> During the period between the Civil War and World War II, thousands of African Americans were lynched in the United States. Lynchings were violent and public acts of torture that traumatized Black people throughout the country and were largely tolerated by state and federal officials. These lynchings were terrorism. "Terror lynchings" peaked between 1880 and 1940 and claimed the lives of African American men, women, and children who were forced to endure the fear, humiliation, and barbarity of this widespread phenomenon unaided.[95]

The Turner lynchings prove to be a turning point for Herndon as it marks an end to his Christian up-bringing and his adherence to his parents' teachings to guide his blackness.

[95] Equal Justice Initiative, 2Intorduction" *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror* (2017) https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org

Hitherto the Turner incident, Herndon experiences legal and extra-legal terrorism which comes through various agencies like the capitalist companies and vigilante members of the white communities. However, after this incident he resolves to change the trajectory of his black identity evolution, firmly consolidating his entry into the *critical motivation* stage of his critical consciousness:

> I saw how wrong and impossible [were] my parents' ways. I was no longer among those who could honestly turn the right cheek when the left was smitten. Rather, my own moral code now was to return two blows for every blow I got, to take two eyes for one taken from me, to defend my rights as an upstanding man, to defend the elementary dignity of the human being in me against all aggressors (69).

This disruptive, militant and revolutionary resolve anticipates his reaction in the train incident I have mentioned earlier on, and his work as a communist in his near future. His action also predates civil rights radicalism epitomised by Malcolm X – a development I will explore later in this chapter. I see this incident as consolidating his critical questioning of his parents' politics as "hard-boiled" Republicans. He posits that his parents believed black people should look to the Republic Party for racial justice as it was them, led by Lincoln, who freed slaves. He is troubled why these "inheritors of Lincoln's tradition" as the central government, were reacting with "stony silence" and displaying incomprehensible reluctance to enforce the law which guarantees black people's equal rights and protection. He critically interrogates the status quo in the South where Jim Crow laws were depriving black people of the barest constitutional rights. He realises that this struggle needed a collective push to be resolved. He then decides to encourage his relatives and all those he meets to unite "against all aggressors and all aggression" and free themselves from white terrorism (70). This psychologically sets

him up to embrace communism as a vehicle to achieve his ambitions and play the role of deliverer his father had predicted for him. Herndon is not clear on why his father took this messianic position on him. The mystery is further compounded by Herndon's decision to include this position in his autobiography if we take his anti-Christian stance as his black identity evolves.

Herndon's evolving black identity benefits from his association with communist ideology as it provides a platform for him to sharpen and consolidate his *critical action* – a stage of critical consciousness, which as alluded to before, engenders individual or collective efforts to disrupt the status quo in so as to influence changes to injustices. He confirms this when he is chosen as a delegate to the Unemployment Council in Birmingham: "My mental and nervous energy had at last found an organised outlet, I was not, as hitherto, merely sowing with the wind, but harnessed in systematic and well-disciplined activity" (92). At a meeting of the Union Council he witnesses the possibility of black and white working class people uniting to wage a revolution which would free them from capitalist terrorism and exploitation:

> The change of my viewpoint was almost fabulous, emerging from the urge to escape the cruelties of life of religious abstractions into a healthy, vigorous and realistic recognition that life on earth, which was full of struggle and tears for the poor, could be changed by the intelligent and organised will of the workers (78).

This discovery, for Herndon, elucidates some of the complexities of US racial politics—not all white people are enemies of black people and that it is mostly the benefiting capitalists who are the distinctive oppressors. With this development, Herndon begins to re-imagine America and what disruptive possibilities of a revolution would mean for people like him. This spectre of a revolution has been suggested as one of the main reasons which attracted black people

to communism; a development Robin D.G. Keeley suggests was part of Herndon's attraction to Communists Party: "Conditions were so bad that the many people believed that the only way they could ever get better was to start a new war … I very naively was under the impression that the Unemployment Council was calling all Negro and white workers to a new war."[96]

Neo-slave narrative

What characterises *Let Me Live* as a neo-slave narrative is the evocation of slave-era barbarism pervading it. Through his autobiography, Herndon exposes white America's "Christian civilisation" as state criminality which is masked in legal and extra-legal lynching. He asserts that this strategy has historically led to mass incarceration of supposedly "emancipated" black people. Having experienced unspeakable cruelty at the hands of the capitalist mining companies during his time at Lock 18, Herndon, like many of his black compatriots, desperately searches for a way to free himself from this debilitating oppression. He describes the horrific and subhuman conditions black workers face in the mines and other work places, especially with the existential threat posed by Lock 18 which echoes slavery conditions. Lock 18 was a camp where he worked for a company constructing a bridge across the Alabama River. This camp encapsulated modern slavery as "the workers were not getting any pay and that it was impossible to leave the camp voluntarily" (52). With a whole army of guards patrolling the valley where the camp is situated, any attempt to escape would prove fatal for a lot of those who try. He gives an example of what happened to some who tried to

[96] Robin D.G. Kelley, "Negroes Ain' Black – But Red! Black Communists and the Culture of Opposition," in *Hammer and Hoe (North Carolina: University of North Caroline Press)*, 100. Subsequent page references in text.

escape by crossing the wooden bridge to get to the other side of the river; they were callously gunned down and "their bodies fell into the river and they were never seen again" (52).

The horrors of his experience at Lock 18 must have been reawakened by the Turner lynching as Dennis Child suggests that this later incident may have been one of the major reasons that triggered Herndon to join the Communist Party. Child points to the timing of his decision as "indicating the degree to which the Party offered Herndon and others subjected to such atrocities a viable political mechanisation through which to channel personal rage into collective, grassroots organizing."[97] That nothing happened to perpetrators of these heinous crimes evokes the slave era in which black lives were mostly at the very mercy of slave masters and white people. Herndon points to how extra-legal organisations like the Ku Klux Klan and the American Legion "behaved as if they were the legally constituted authorities of the city, [as] the police gave them that outrageous recognition" (106). Childs directs us to Ida B. Wells who had earlier argued extensively on the lynching of black people – "that the right to dehumanize, kill, and torture Black people is often invoked on the slightest provocation; or, rather, that the only catalyst often required for the exercise of the right to kill Black people in apartheid America is the Blackness of the subject to be murdered" (44).

To demonstrate what activist like Ida B. Wells had exposed, Herndon gives graphic details of an incident which happened in Birmingham on 3 August 1931 and marks it as "one of the most tragic events for the American Negroes" (148). After three white girls were mysteriously shot in Shade Valley it was inevitable that the perpetrators of this heinous crime would be profiled as black and as Herndon puts it, "the lily-white myth of Nordic virtue had somehow

[97] Dennis Child, "An Insinuating Voice: Anglo Herndon and the Invisible Genesis of the Radical Prison Slave's Neo-Slave Narrative" *Callaloo*, v. 40, no. 4, (Fall 2017): 30-56

to be sustained" (148). For a month, a bloody reign of terror engulfed Birmingham as revenge to this particular accusation of black men's desecration of 'white women virtue'. Herndon describes horrific scenes in Birmingham as "blood and more blood was demanded by the white butchers. No one in the South ever saw so much Negro blood flow" (160). He goes on to evoke the slave era lynching as he describes these "white Protestants" (who see themselves as Jesus' friends) descend on the black side of Birmingham and how they "tarred and feathered Negroes and roasted them alive over the scorching flames" (160). Once again we are reminded of Freire's assertion on how oppression dehumanises the oppressor as Herndon laments "every moan and groan of the crucified Negro martyrs aroused in them neither human compassion nor shame" (160). Reminiscent of the callousness exhibited during the Turner incident, Herndon limns the inhumanity and the sexual degeneracy at the heart of the 1930s "Christian" American South:

> The lynchers went wild in a convulsion of bestiality [as] they clamoured for the emasculation of their victims …the mob leaders, with flashing knives, flung themselves upon the tortured Negroes and blood-curdling howls ripped out their bleeding genitals. These they carried off as sourvenirs to display boastfully before their wives and children and friends … (160).

Compounding these "criminal exhibitions" of white superiority, as Herndon puts it, was the hardening of the young and innocent hearts of white children who will inevitably take the mantle to continue with this vile tradition – making sure of its perpetuation as it is handed down the white generations as evidenced by its continuous presence since slavery. Here Herndon demonstrates this recurring nature of white supremacy as he echoes Solomon Northup in *Twelve Years A Slave*. During his enslavement, Northup asserts the training of white boys into hardened white supremacists as they observe daily how their fathers treated

black people. He gives an example of his master's son and muses that whatever noble qualities Young Epps may have possessed, "no process of reasoning could lead him to comprehend [the humanity of slaves]"[98]. Young Epps is brought up looking at the slave as no different to "his father`s mules – to be whipped and kicked and scourged through life - to address the white man with hat in hand, eyes bent servilely on the earth, in his mind, [this was the natural and proper destiny of the slave]" (202).

Conversely, this Birmingham lynching incident speaks to Ralph Ellison's assertion on the ways black people may confront their destiny in the South. Whichever way they choose, he surmises that they inevitably must confront the dominant culture's oppressive systems. Ellison suggests lynching as one of the most horrific oppressive tools:

> The primary technique in its enforcement is to impress the Negro child with the omniscience and omnipotence of whites to the point that whites appear as ahuman as Jehova, and as relentless as a Mississippi flood. Socially it is effected through an elaborate scheme of taboos supported by a ruthless physical violence, which strikes not only the offender, but the entire black community. To wander from the paths of behaviour laid down for the group is to become the agent of communal disaster.[99]

Such is the context of black life in the 1930s American South. The expedient imagination of "black criminals" assumed to have shot the three white girls, constructs them as "agents" of this Birmingham communal disaster for the black people. Nevertheless, for Herndon, these contrived acts of racial hatred impact on him differently as he is radicalised and makes him more determined to fight oppression: "This hatred I know is going to be a torch to me for all

[98] Solomon Northump, Twelve Years A Slave (), 201. Subsequent page referencing in text.
[99] Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright's Blues. The Antioch Revie, v.57, no. 3 (Summer, 1999): 268.

the days of my life, never to relinquish my effort until all lynchers are brought to justice and until the system that breeds such horrors is destroyed (160).

Prison Narrative

The Turner lynching incident, while highlighting what Childs calls, "private racial sadism," implicates the state as complicit in orchestrating systemic lynching of black people. The presence and leadership of the County Sheriff points to the imbrications of state criminality into "necropolitical right to kill, dehumanize, and desecrate *the nigger*" (Childs, 45). *Let Me Live* limns how white supremacist tentacles have spread from the private domain of vigilante groups like the Ku Klux Klan into the state machinery to produce the fatal combination of extra-legal and legal lynching (the latter being a term Herndon and other black radicals used in the 1930s). This deplorable situation, according to Assata Shakur, leads to "a generalised structure of social imprisonment for Black people in the United States."[100] I propose using Critical Race Theory lenses to examine black people's social imprisonment in the US: this promotes my interrogation of the relationship between race, racism and power to elucidate state criminality through its use of law as a weapon to oppress, and promote white supremacist ideology - a development which engenders black people's double consciousness.

Herndon interrogates quite a few Jim Crow laws which were directly enacted to protect white supremacy and designed to thwart any resistance to oppression by those outside the dominant culture's definition of whiteness. These laws confirm the US as a location of social imprisonment for black people; these laws include: vagrancy, seditious literature, zoning, insurrection, among many others. Commenting from prison, Shakur indicts the US for socially-

[100] Assata Shakur, Assata: An Autobiography, (New York: Zed Books,1987), 60

imprisoning laws operating outside the official incarceration zones aimed at black people: "The only difference between here [the prison] and the streets is that one is maximum security and the other is minimum security. The police patrol our communities just like guards patrol here. I don't have the faintest idea how it feels to be free." What Shakur describes here echoes Herndon's depiction of the surveillance strategies which help to police black people in particular, and other perceived enemies, like the working class and the communists in general. One of the most used laws for policing black people and keeping them within restricted areas was the early 1930s Vagrancy Laws – used as pretext to incarcerate black people accusing them of loitering, prostitution or drunkenness. This law recalls the slave pass laws designed to police slaves by prohibiting their freedom to movement outside the plantation without the express permission of their master (or any white person acting on the master's behalf). Herndon interrogates this particular law when he is arrested at a mining company where he had gone to recruit workers to join the National Miners' Union. He is charged under the Vagrancy law and locked up in solitary confinement. It is while he is here that he critically explores the status quo in the South. He witnesses the "barbarous way" black prisoners were being treated; being beaten and maltreated – foreshadowing the pernicious treatment he later receives in various incarceration locations:

> Helpless myself, I began to brood on this insane business of living. For the first time I clearly saw the white man's boastful civilisation was a fraud. The few battened on the many and when the underdog dared to question his evil lot he was beaten down without mercy. If there were violence at all in the world, it certainly was not being employed by the workers. Quite the contrary, it was the ruling class that was doing it in a conscienceless and bestial way (99).

He is subsequently found guilty of vagrancy (even though he was still employed), sentenced to twelve months on the chain gang with hard labour and ordered to pay five hundred dollars fine; however, both sentences and the fine are thrown out on appeal. This experience and the subsequent blacklisting by his company (which meant he would never work in Birmingham again) leaves him with no illusions about the unconscionable character of capitalism; a development which he says, attracted him to the Communist Party. His and other black people's horrific experiences of the other geographies of incarceration, like Lock 18 (as a de facto prison slave-camp), threats of and actual acts of lynching point to a life of *living death* which mirrors what they also go through in prison – all reminiscent of black lives in the slave era. This *living death* echoes Du Bois' "twoness" of black identity; a development which brings black people's historic grappling with double consciousness into sharp focus. In this instance there is a constant tension between the will to thrive and the way the dominant culture enacts a range of laws designed to strangle black life.

Extending the neo-slave narrative I have discussed in the previous segment into this prison narrative, I use Herndon's lenses in his suggestion that the attempt by the Georgian State to resuscitate a legal anachronism, confirms the intertwining nature of legal, extra-legal, social imprisonment, and neo-enslavement pervading black lives in the 1930s South. Childs interrogates Herndon's construction of an inextricable link between blackness and social incarceration since the Civil War and concludes: "In short, the spectral return of the slave insurrection law in the 1930s signalled the undead nature of the system of legal terror that first brought the law into being in the 1830s" (39). This is corroborated by Frederick Douglass in his 1850 lecture on "The Nature of Slavery" to expose the legal and social relation of master and slave: "The law gives the master absolute power over the slave. He may work him, flog

him, hire him, and, in certain contingencies, *kill* him. With perfect impunity. The slave is a human being, divested of all rights – reduced to the level of a brute – chattel in the eye of the law …"[101] What Douglass says here confirms the "undead nature" of this system of legal terror. Childs observes that this supposedly legal system is a recurring form of the "slave codes" which still dictate the poor quality of life for black people which they endure in the margins. This development echoes Shakur's blurring of the lines which separate life in prisons and life as "free" black people.

Interrogating *Let Me Live* as a prison narrative brings Herndon's identity intersection of blackness and communism into sharp focus. His evolution into this political "double identity" invites the wrath of white supremacy through the state laws determined to make an example of what happens to black people as well as communists when they threaten the social order. His lengthy and multiple political and racialised incarcerations demonstrate the historic threat of legal lynching facing black people inside and outside the formal incarceration zones. However, it is when Herndon poses what was perceived as a real threat to the social order through his intersecting identity of being a black-communist that the State of Georgia resurrects a sixty-two-years old law, the infamous 1861 Insurrection law which the State Legislature of Georgia had passed to crush all slave rebellions. He is portrayed as an anarchist and charged with "attempting to overthrow a lawfully constituted authority of the State of Georgia" (222). He is also charged of "trying to stir trouble that will bring about an industrial revolution so he and his Communist friends can set up a godless dictatorship … based on the style of the Bolsheviki dictatorship in Soviet Union" (227). The prosecutor, Assistant Solicitor

[101] Jeannine Marie Delombard, "Slave Narratives and U.S. Legal History," in *The Oxford Handbook of The African American Slave Narrative*. Ed. John Ernest (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 67. Subsequent page references in text.

General, Colonel and Reverend John H. Hudson represents the intertwining nature of US law, the army and the Methodist Church – any one of these institutions designed to make sure "enemies of the state" like Herndon are always found guilty. Hudson whips up white supremacists emotions in one of his addresses to the Jury and appeals to them: "… but I ask you gentlemen of the jury, must the State of Georgia sit idly by while he, Angelo Herndon, is organising his army to march into the state to murder, kill and assassinate all white people, take away their property and set up a nigger kingdom?" (230). With emotional addresses like these throughout his trial, Herndon's fate is sealed, and so will it be for all perceived enemies as the State of Georgia intends to use this law to deal with any future "insurrections".

Childs traces this weaponising of the law since the slave era and how it connects with the 1930s American South, right through to 21st Century America:

> Herndon's political imprisonment occurred at a moment when the disruptive punitive methodologies of chattel slavery had completed a relative and always unfinished migration from the realm of plantation/customary law – as enacted by slave masters, overseers, patrollers, and private (White) citizens mobs – to the domain of penal/juridical law – as embodied by wardens, guards, sheriffs, judges, district attorney, governors and other publicly declared officers of the white supremacist state (46).

This migration of slave codes into Herndon's world epitomises the system's deliberate strategies to feed its industrial prison complex with black bodies through racialised crimes, for example, vagrancy, gambling, petty larceny, breach of contract, loitering and public drunkenness. Herndon confirms this during his time at Atlanta's Fulton Towers: "Normally only four prisoners occupied a cell. But during the summertime when the warden did a

thriving business, what with innocent people being sentenced from one to five years for vagrancy statute and drunkenness, six to eight people crowded like sardines into a single cell" (205). Herndon and other radical black leaders, like Tom Mooney, were however, characterised as political prisoners in the eyes of those outside the dominant culture; elevating their incarcerations to symbolise black resistance to oppression. However, Herndon, like Angela Davis privileges being identified with all the other prisoners as demonstrated by his inclusion of Scottsboro 9's incarceration as a perpetuation of white supremacist black incarceration ideology. This discriminating ideology is further exposed with the tragic revelation of three black youths (Richard Morris, Mose White, and Richard Simms, whose ages ranged from 15-19 years) are sentenced to death for being present when an off-duty policeman was killed; a development which epitomises the seamless migration of slave codes across the centuries. As Childs posits, the killing of these three young black boys by the state underscores the "emblematic overall system of legalised terror endured by the masses of Black people in prisons, plantations, the chain gang, and the police-occupied domains of the "free-world" – a murderous social structure in which the neo-slave experience of staying "alive" often amounted to an unendurable approximation of biological death" (47).

Resistance Strategies:

As pointed out before, one of the suggested reasons black people strategically joined the Communist Party was their anticipation of a revolutionary war which would emancipate them from a neo-slave status quo. Kelley points to this Southern black imagination of 'Northern Yankees' coming down South to help free them again. He quotes Hosea Hudson (a Communist Party veteran) commenting on the arrival of the communist in the South:

> [T]he Negro began to look. Something's gonna happen now … And when the organizers of the Party came in there representing what the Negro have been reading about in the paper … this is what brought the Negroes into the organization … They thought the North was coming back and they was going to have another war" (100). This is confirmed by Herndon: "Conditions were so bad that many people believed that the only way they could ever get better was to start a new war … (178).

Although "war" did come, it was not as Herndon and his black colleagues had initially envisaged. It came in the form of state criminality: legal and extra-legal terrorism against black people, communists, and all perceived enemies. As Herndon and other black radicals experience, the state did not hesitate to use force and law to criminalise any dissent; a development which recalls slave experience. However, Herndon, black radical leaders, and black and white communists collaborate to model resistance strategies to oppression, injustice and life in the margins. In resisting oppression, Herndon and other black leaders of communist persuasion follow the historic black radical tradition which can be traced as far back as slavery through the radicalism of Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass and Solomon Northup, among many others. In order to compliment and reinforce this black radical tradition, like some black leaders of the 1930s, Herndon decides to join the Communist Party. The presence and involvement with the Communist Party served "precisely this function [of] emboldening individual members who might otherwise had retreated from confrontation" (Kelley, 101). Thus we see Herndon declaring his dedication to communism as a means to actualise his determined resolve to work towards dismantling double consciousness through emancipating victims of capitalism and white supremacy:

> Never before was I so full of determination, so fired up by the fighting spirit. No, my discovery of Communism did not bring religion, or a mystic faith; it gave me a purpose in living, in doing,

> in aspiring. Rational and scientific in its base, ethical in its motives, it is the only philosophy of living worthy of thinking civilised man (89).

With this declaration, the stage was set for bruising encounters with the state systems which were designed to thwart by any means necessary, any notions of equality for black people, and the working class (black and white). Herndon's experience with communism and its turbulent relationship with capitalism (designed to buoy white supremacy), gives him opportunities for experiential education about political and activism praxis. The neo-slave context of his experiential learning of the ways capitalism dominates world plays out as he transitions into symbolising the historical black people and working class' resistance to oppression. Formally joining the Communist Party at 17, he characterises the envisaged struggle for freedom as a war, "… for I was mobilised like a soldier in war, and the battle was on continuously" (103)**.** He demonstrates his evolution into a "soldier" for equal rights and freedom from oppression when he challenges his boss for calling him a *nigger*. Herndon trembles with rage and when his boss picks up a knife to threaten him, he rushes into the kitchen and grabs the biggest butcher knife he could see. At this point his black identity has evolved to that stage where he could take (individual) *action* at perceived racial injustices, anticipating Malcolm X's philosophy, some thirty-five years later: "My common sense told me that violence can only be countered with a display of violence, that if I did not fight my boss with his own weapons I would remain in his eyes a "nigger" ever after. My own pride and the honor of my race demanded that I stand up and resist him" (105). Faced with such determination to resist oppression, and fearing for his life, the white boss is forced to put his knife down, pay Herndon his wages and let him go.

Herndon's action here echoes a dramatic shift from "soft" oppression resistance approaches by the Communists Party and its affiliated black organisations. At its first convention in St Louis, The League of Struggle for Negro Rights, which was also attended by The Scottsboro Defence Conference delegates, marked a shift to a more militant approach. Herndon posits that the League's militancy which had been unheard of before this convention, was "clear-cut and courageous ... It also adopted a bill for Negro rights and for the suppression of lynching" (128). This move was supported by the Communist Party in Birmingham which "did everything in its power to publicize the decisions of the St. Louis Convention. Its principal aim was to involve as many Negroes as possible in a struggle for their constitutional rights" (129). However, he points out the slow progress which ensued due to intra-racial tensions and conflicts epitomised by "downright chicanery and selfish class-interest of our Negro demagogues and two faced leaders" (129) (I will be returning to intra-racial, and intraparty tensions and conflicts, when I explore Angela Davis' relationship with communism later in this chapter). Nonetheless as Childs argues, the adoption of this theoretical concept of black self-determination "ended up creating a critical opening for the Party's practical organizing activities and theoretical analyses to be directed by rather than to, Black people" (43). Childs goes on to posit that the black radical Marxism of Herndon, William Patterson, Louise Thompson Patterson, Claudia Jones, Harry Haywood, B.D. Amis, among many others, produces what he called an "epistemic break" from Marxist orthodoxy to chart a black left political agenda which "made the concept of Black 'self-determination' a matter of life and death praxis more than a politically expedient theory" (44).

The above shift sees black revolutionary voices ringing out during the political persecution of the Scottsboro boys (1931) and Herndon (1932). Herndon himself takes the initiative to

mobilise resources and moral support to aid the defence of the Scottsboro boys – nine black boys, ranging from thirteen to nineteen, who were being accused of raping two white girls. Responding to the lynch atmosphere being orchestrated, which would, according to Herndon, not only frame innocent boys, but also use their case as a veil to disrupt the labour organisation's work in the South, he again takes responsibility to act against oppression. As indignation runs high on both racial and ideological sides, Herndon demonstrates his black identity's evolution to leadership as he declares: "The all-important thing now was to harness this emotion into a powerful protest. I decided that it was my job to make the first move in defense of the poor frightened Scottsboro boys" (119). The campaign for the Scottsboro boys became a political symbol as the Communist Party's leadership from the North, not only called for the solidarity of black and white workers' support for these boys, but "pledged the whole hearted support … for the self-determination of Negroes in the Black Belt of the South" (123).

Mass mobilisation becomes an effective resistance strategy as the "contagion of protests" spreads through black communities, political, religious and social organisations. Herndon is a beneficiary of mass solidarity and support when he is prosecuted and imprisoned for attempting to overthrow a legally constituted government of the State of Georgia (using the slave-era Insurrection law as I have explored earlier). These are significant moments of mass protests and solidarity which successfully save his life from imminent death on the chain gang (where he had been sentenced to serve eighteen to twenty years). One of these significant moments was the raising of fifteen thousand dollars bail money in twenty three days – an unprecedented feat for anyone, let alone a black political prisoner. A prison officer declares, "Hell no! They will never raise $15,000 in twenty-three days to get a nigger out of jail" (292). This prison officer's incredulity speaks to how this astronomical bail was a strategic carceral

ploy using the law to mask the state's real intentions of keeping Herndon isolated. However, what transpires demonstrates the rising influence of communism as the total amount is raised (with the help of well-wishers) and bail is posted. Another example of mass support comes as a result of his demonstration of political praxis which has been inculcated in him during trade unionism. He becomes an expert in ways to harness "the power of an enlightened public opinion" (217). Demonstrating the traditional efficacy of literacy in black subversions of oppression, Herndon begins to write letters to powerful people, and articles to newspapers. This strategy culminates in an address through a letter published by a black newspaper, *The Liberator* in October, 1932 in which he highlights the carceral status quo and emphasises that his persecution was "not directed at him as a person, but the whole working class" (218). He attacks the system's application of unjust laws to oppress black people, and the working class, and also declares its imminent collapse, despite its "legal phraseology and corruption." The response to his address was a "perfect avalanche of letters and telegrams from every part of the country," signifying how, at this stage, he symbolises the struggle against oppression. He has become the face of the struggle, and this recognition is demonstrated by a mass protest of thousands of people congregating where he is imprisoned. This mass protest successfully and immediately puts a stop to all the physical brutality he has endured in jail at the hands of the prison officers. Now they could not touch him as the outside world "was now watching alertly what was happening to [him]" (210).

Another example of the efficacy of mass collaborated protests is demonstrated with the successful collection of two million signatures as a petition to Eugene Talmadge, the Governor of Georgia and self-styled "Hitler of America," demanding Herndon's freedom. This mass protest demonstrates "such sincere devotion and sacrifice on a mass scale [that] had rarely

been equalled before" as it spreads through the US, going international with signed petitions being received from "London, Johannesburg, the West Indies, Mexico and France" (317). To augment their ambitious drive for signatures, the International Labor Defence (which sponsors his defence) employs the visual metaphor (anticipating Maya Angelou's caged bird symbolism) of "an exact replica of the cages of torture in which prisoners on the Georgia chain gang [are] forced to live" (318). This is paraded in every town with dramatic effect as it demands and gets the attention of "workers, farmers, business men, professionals and young children …. to see with their own eyes the fruits of "Christian civilisation"" (318). This exposure of the carceral system at the core of white supremacy is a demonstration of resisting oppression by pushing for the abolition of unjust laws. In this neo-slave abolitionist strategy, Herndon and his ILD team strongly believe that they are not only saving him, but saving millions of workers from the same fate; the State of Georgia, in particular, makes it unequivocally clear by their determination that it aims at using this law, if Herndon is convicted, to supress any perceived insurrections in the immediate future.

This strategy is a continuation of the "abolitionist work" Herndon had started earlier on in Birmingham; a development which anticipates Angela Davis, a prominent black woman communist who also later worked as an abolitionist in the 1990s. Herndon had earlier worked towards the abolition of racial laws which were targeting black people, like vagrancy, loitering, gambling and petty larceny, among many others. Speaking tours organised when he is out on bail (for the 'Insurrection conviction') epitomise his life-long ambition to conscientise people "of the ways in which racist policing and anti-Black jurisprudence constitute[d] a structure of state-criminality" (Childs, 48). With communism central to his resistance of oppression, the youthful Herndon dedicates his life to black radicalism imbued with extraordinary resilience,

tenacity and resolve. The resilience tenor of his struggle for freedom is demonstrated when he resists the advice to run away, and returns to jail upon the denial of his latest appeal (on his Insurrection conviction) by the US Supreme Court. He reveals his imagination of America, and the South in particular, as a battlefield from which "good soldiers must not run away. If they run away, they break the morale of their fellow soldiers" (331). Although facing imminent death on the chain gang if he returns to jail, he refuses to run away and declares: "Death itself is not the greatest tragedy that can possibly happen to a man, rather, the greatest tragedy is to live placidly and safely and to keep silent in the face of injustice and oppression" (332). This statement demonstrates Herndon's resistance of the *living death* I explored earlier – he advocates that one must choose either of this "twoness." If one chooses to live, then one must fight for justice. He castigates those who lead placid lives whose central tenet is fear.

Communism: *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*

My exploration of Angelo Herndon's bruising experiences with the white supremacist structures in the Cold War era suggests communism as having provided "the basic framework of media-constructed [white] fear" of the Other.[102] Kenneth Mostern goes on to suggests that if only for a while, "blackness was not the foreground narrative of white fear" during the 1930s; communism increasingly became the imminent threat. However, Angela Davis' equally volatile experiences in the 1960s points to blackness as "clearly the foreground narrative, though the suspicion that communists orchestrate everything from behind never entirely disappears" (Mostern, 174). In this segment of my critical analysis of communism's relation

[102] Kenneth Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 174. Subsequent page references in text.

to the struggle for black rights, I examine how Angela Davis (at particular historical moments) provides nuanced female witness insights into black women negotiations of the treacherous intersection of race, class, and gender. Her particular female insights speak to a Womanist approach as she ascribes to a communal strategy to resisting oppression, regardless of race, class, or gender. In her determination to dismantle these oppressive structures, her autobiographical account suggests, like Herndon's: "blackness [as] the name of a politics, while Marxism is maintained as a theoretical framework, and the [Communist Party] is a support network …" (Mostern, 183). I critically analyse her identity evolution through her intersectionality and her Womanist approach to African American prisoner-identification narrative as a transformative discourse. I also interrogate the Communist Party (CP) to reveal the intra-party/intra-racial tensions and conflicts—the main issue here being the re-inscribing of the very oppressive structures they were fighting against.

Identity evolution – Negotiating the Intersectionality of Race, Class, and Gender

It is when she joins the Communist Party (CPUSA) and becomes actively involved with several black political movements that Davies collides with the intersecting oppressive structures of race, class and gender. These oppressive structures engender the problematic double consciousness (and triple consciousness at times) on Davis. She becomes, as the intersectionality theory suggests, the quintessential subject which is "a site where structures of domination and subordination but also agency converge."[103] As she did when she was young back in Birmingham, she employs the power of words and action to respond to and

[103] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Beyond Race and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Feminist Perspectives on the Self*, 14 http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-self/

resist these interlocking structures of power, domination and oppression inside and outside the colour line. Her political autobiography, as she prefers to call it, explores "the collective history of a movement to analyse and dismantle those intersectional forms of domination" (Guenther, 54). It is through collective effort that she sees a pathway to overcoming oppressive forces:

> When I decided to write the book after all, it was because I had come to envision it as a political autobiography that emphasized the people, the events and the forces in my life that propelled me to my present commitment. Such a book might serve a very important and practical purpose (Davis, xvi)

Davis proves that while a black woman is the site where interlocking structures of domination and subornation can be found, she is capable of remarkable agency to resist, re-imagine and change her world. She continues this black women's tradition of using their intersectional selves – their suffering and alienation to "not only discern which values and practices in their heritage deserve allegiance but also identify shortcomings in the groups they belong."[104] Davis utilises her friend Margaret as an example which encapsulates white people's imagination of black women. When Davis was arrested, Margaret comes to represent her. However, Margaret faces a determined white force representing a system unwilling to believe that a black woman could rise to be a lawyer. She has a hard time convincing both the marshals at the Federal Building and the jailers who dismiss her claims because she does not look like a lawyer: "… she seemed too young to have passed the bar in New York. And besides, she was a Black and, to complete the unpopular combination, she was a woman" (37). This

[104] Cynthia Millet, *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities* (New York, Routledge, 1995)

incident illustrates the double/triple consciousness which black people encounter in their everyday lives and even when they are trying to execute their professions duties.

While the issue of their blackness is always an overt territorial contest with the dominant culture, it is the re-inscribing of hierarchical structures within the CPUSA and other black organisations which equally causes black women much disquiet. Davis recounts an incident which becomes "a constant problem" throughout her political life when she steps up to take a leading role at organising a rally. This is when the male member supposed to be in charge does not seem up to it, leaving Davis with no choice but to take up the responsibility. This causes so much consternation with mostly the male members of Karenga's US-Organisation.[105] Davis is accused of doing "a man's job" – "women should not play leadership roles, they insisted. A woman [is] supposed to inspire her man and educate his children" (Davies, 161). However, she soon finds out that the Karengas are not an aberration as sexism penetrates through the wider political spectrum of black movements:

> I became acquainted very early with the widespread presence of an unfortunate syndrome among some Black male activists—namely to confuse their political activity with an assertion of their maleness. They saw—and some continue to see-Black manhood as something separate from Black womanhood. These men view women as a threat to their attainment of manhood —especially those Black women who take initiative and work to become leaders in their own right. The constant harangue by US men was that I needed to redirect my energies and use them to give my man strength and inspiration so that he might more effectively contribute his talents to the struggle for Black liberation (161).

[105] Ron Karenga was an African American male leader of US-Organisation which was popular in San Diego where Angela Davis says she encountered misogyny. It is when she was organising an inter-organisation rally when she faced resistance from the male members of this Black organisation.

This representation of black men will be my focus in Chapter Four when I interrogate patriarchy (black and white), and the bifurcation of African American Autobiography along gender lines. For now I suggest this is a valid representation of some black male writer-activists as it recalls the 1930s black intelligentsia fronted by Richard Wright and Langstone Hughes who dismissed Zora Neal Hurston's writing as irrelevant to black revolutionary causes (I explore this in Chapter Four); Malcolm X who was unequivocal in his assertions that black women "castrated" black men; and George Jackson who did not value black women's roles and contributions to the black struggles against multiple forms of oppression. However, as I will expand on in Chapter Four, some black radicals, like Herndon echo Davis in calling for solidarity of all the oppressed as the only way to free themselves. In *Let Me Live*, on several occasions, he calls attention to the several black and white women who show courage, determination and resilience to resist oppression. He celebrates a number of black women who sacrifice the little money they have to contribute towards his bail fund. He also recognises how white women help his cause. One of these women is a white female doctor whose tenacity saves his life in prison where the jailers were determined to see him die a slow death. He also celebrates a sixteen-year-old white girl who writes a poem in which she is unequivocal about her shame on the inhumanity of some sections of her race.

Prisoner-identification as Transformative Discourse

Notwithstanding some intra-party and intra-racial tensions and conflicts which may have afflicted organisations resisting white supremacy, Davis epitomises black women tradition imbued in ferocious tenacity to dismantle all forms of oppressive power structures. She evolves into the quintessential womanist Walker envisaged; one whose behaviour is "outrageous, courageous or willful" (Walker, xii). She continues to work with various black

movement groups which include the Black Panther Party for self-Defence, as well as the Che Lumumba Club, the black collective of the Communist Party. It is her involvement with the latter that signals trouble for her when she begins her teaching career at UCLA in 1969; gaining the notoriety for being a communist who has managed to infiltrate the system: "… the immediate excuse for her notoriety was never her relationship to the Black Panthers or SNCC, but rather her being hired to teach philosophy in the California system while being a member of the Communist Party" (Mostern, 183). At the behest of the then Governor Ronald Regan who uses his political muscle to convince the university board to act, Davis is fired from her teaching position. She is however reinstated as she resists this development through the courts. Nevertheless, this incident proves to be a precursor to her gaining even more notoriety and carrying the burden of spectacularity for a long time. As a communist during this cold war era, she is also constructed as an enemy of the state, and by extension, of the dominant culture. She represents the political as well as cultural threat of infiltration and contamination, entrenching her double consciousness.

What precipitates her notoriety and eventual arrest is her role as communist political organiser and activist. Davis joins the Soledad Brothers Defence Committee to spearhead a campaign to defend the Soledad brothers (George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo, and John Clutchette)—three prisoners indicted for killing a prison guard in retaliation for the shooting of black prisoners (Guenther, 53). Her involvement is further complicated when Jonathan Jackson (brother to George Jackson) attacks a courtroom in Marin County, California, leaving four people dead, including a judge held as hostage. The guns used here are registered in Davis' name and she becomes an accomplice, according to California laws. A warrant of arrest is issued with Davis being charged with aggravated kidnapping and first-degree murder in the

death of the judge – meaning she would face the death penalty if found guilty. Davis goes on the run for two months and becomes "the third woman ever to appear on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitive List" (Guenther, 54). She is arrested two months later, imprisoned for almost two years without being bailed or tried. After an International campaign for her release (which parallels Herndon's), she is eventually acquitted of all charges. However, her arrest and trial exposes the racial politics and ideological framework inherent within the white people's construction of Davis' identity:

> Our survey demonstrated that the majority of people in Marin County, who were both white and wealthy, believed me guilty of kidnapping, murder and conspiracy. But more telling, they believed that I was guilty of something worse – of being a Communist, of being a Black woman. Many of them felt outraged that I had been allowed to teach the children of decent white Californians. If they could vote on the matter, they would banish me forever from the universities in California (Davis, 321).

It is her time when she is in the Women's House of Detention that she becomes a proponent of how prisoner-identification can be a transformative discourse in resisting and defeating the intersecting structures of oppression. As a fugitive she experiences "the feeling of being hunted, tracked and eventually being cornered and captured" (Simpson, 328). This experience and her prisoner-identification, strips Davis of her complex identity and reduces her to just "a black woman with an Afro and gun, [an image] which provides the all-important visual phantasm around which the right could construct an enemy" (Mostern, 183). The period she spends in prison, away from her daily schedule of political organising and activism allows her opportunities and space to reflect and deepen her understanding of what it means to be a black woman in the US. She generates a transformative discourse which puts prisoner-identification and black women prisoners at its centre. Firstly, she works towards being

identified with all the other prisoners as she shouts the names of the other prisoners in response to "Free Angela" chants from the crowds outside. This speaks to her discourse of transforming prisons from being places which are just physically and psychologically inhibitive, to being locations from which black solidarity can be forged. She sees the involvement of more people in the prisoner defence campaigns through fighting for bail, and parole as progressive black and communist politics. She believes that through this experience, those involved would evolve politically: "Once they had been exposed to the realities of the prison and judicial systems, they were forced to give serious consideration to the political repression we spoke about" (Mostern, 178).

To further demonstrate her transformative discourse, Davis places her fellow women prisoners at the centre as well as expose the paradoxical nature of prisons – it is on one hand, a location of power and control (punishment and discipline); while it is also imagined as a "jungle full of wild animals" whose inhumanity is unparalleled. Davis works to transform both images of imprisonment for herself and her fellow women prisoners. The first thing she notices is the predominant ethnicity of the female prisoners – "All the women I could see were either Black or Puerto Rican. There were no white prisoners in the group" (19). The absence of white prisoners speaks to Robin G. D. Kelly's assertion on Davis' scholarship on black incarcerations: "Her powerful critiques of Foucault and other theorists/historians of the birth of the prison reveal the centrality of race in the process of creating a carceral state in the west. The critical question for Davis centers on how black people have been criminalized and how this ideology has determined black people's denial of basic citizenship rights."[106] It is this historical denial of basic citizenship rights which engenders the double consciousness

[106] Angela Y. Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom* (San Francisco: City Lights Bookstore, 2012): 11.

that afflicts the majority of black people, and what Davis and other radical proponents strive to dismantle.

Overcoming her own initial inhibitions about prisons which included identifying these women as Other, Davis, as a Womanist, works to uplift and empower other women. She works tirelessly to forge ties with the other female prisoners (she calls them sisters) creating what Simpson calls – a womanist space that "appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility …. and women's strength" (331). Already having their own rituals which demonstrate their solidarity (the goodnight ritual), Davis manages to utilise this to create opportunities for these "sisters" to empower themselves. Once again, literacy becomes a cornerstone to freedom as Davis relentlessly encourages her fellow prisoners to read widely. She works hard to push the prison administration to have more books available. She also teaches her fellow prisoners philosophy, black history and sociology. From this endeavour, Davis "is able to transform this guarded space of confinement into a space where identities are transformed and where there are new possibilities for language and knowledge" (Simpson, 330). Here she echoes Herndon who records his own success "in organising and conducting classes in Negro history, trade unionism, Fascism and war" (Herndon, 329). Davis also manages to continue with her activism in prison, using her communist lens to articulate how racism "is a weapon used by the wealthy to increase the profits they bring in—by paying Black people less for their work. We talked about the way racism confuses white workers, who often forget that they are being exploited by a boss and instead vent their frustration on the people of color" (Davis, 61-62).

I see her inclusive Womanist approach urging her to continue to advocate for the release of male political prisoners who include George Jackson, despite his misogynistic dismissal of

back women's roles and participation in the black struggles. Here she validates Sherley Anne Williams' descriptive statement on black women writers who encapsulate Womanist perspectives of black men: "It urges them not so much as to come down and fight, but to come down and talk." [107] Davis, in reaching out to Jackson and continuing to work for the solidarity of both black women and black men epitomises Alice Walker's womanist figure as I have alluded to before. In this regard, she provides and urges her "sisters" to read Jackson's letters and *Soledad Brother*, giving them opportunities to relate to black movements through studying Jackson's political evolution. According to Davis, her work and influence on Jackson, makes him revise his earlier criticism of black women whom he saw "as often acting as a deterrent to the involvement of Black men in the struggle" (62). She reports that he keenly apologises for his misjudgement and wishes that this be communicated to the "sisters".

In encouraging her black women prison colleagues to embrace Jackson, she is appreciating Walker's metaphorical definition of Womanism in which she asserts: "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (Walker, 1983: xii). In this colour distinction, Walker extols Womanism with the royal colour which sets it apart from feminism. Womanism, as Janet Montelaro argues, leaves "bourgeois feminism literally pale in comparison to the wide-ranging, nonexclusive womanist concerns represented by the rich an and undiluted color purple."[108] When Jackson is shot and dies in prison, Davis is naturally distraught as she has come to see him as "a symbol of the will of all of us behind bars, and of that strength which oppressed people always seem to be able to pull together" (317). Although she experiences deep personal pain, she vows to turn it "into a proper and properly placed rage" (319).

[107] Sherley A. William, "Some Implications of Womanist Theory," *Callaloo* no. 27(Spring 1986): 303
[108] Janet, Montelaro, *Producing a Womanist Text: The Maternal as Signifier in Alice Walker's The Color Purple* (Victoria: University of Victoria, 1996), 14.

Jackson's death emboldens her to continue to fight against the oppressor: "It would give me the courage and energy I needed for a sustained war against the malevolent racism that had killed him. He was gone, but I was here. His dreams were mine now" (319).

Through her prison narrative, Davis manages to alert the wider audience to this transformative nature of prison-identity which she advocates for all the oppressed. She echoes Herndon and Shakur who characterise the US as a giant prison which displays no difference between designated zones of incarceration and those "free" locations in the wider society. Acknowledging this status quo, Davis thus advocates that black people embrace prisoner-identification as a starting point from which they will work towards freeing all prisoners. Mostern echoes this philosophy when he proposes that: "The best political strategy … is the one that identifies blacks, and specifically black women, as real and metaphorical prisoners, as a way into the objective analysis of societal oppression which places black women at the bottom of an oppressive totality" (179). Davis proposes that the different movements' work to dismantle the double/triple consciousness resulting from the interlocking structures of oppression (race, class, and gender) continues to be undermined by their own marginalisation of black women. Echoing Herndon, she argues for solidarity as "the liberation of any group depends on the liberation of all [and] this is only possible when the perspectives of those who are directly impacted by multiple forms of oppression are located at the center of both theoretical and political movement-building" (Guentha, 54).

Chapter Three: Black Identity and Religion

Zora Neale Hurston (*Dust Tracks On A Road*), Richard Wright (*Black Boy*), and Malcolm X (*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*) are writers whose autobiographies interrogate the impact of religion on black identity evolution. Examining their lived experiences mainly through these autobiographies, and exploring some of their fiction and other writings, a recurring theme which suggests a rejection of Christianity (in particular) emerges. From these writings, it is clear that Christianity, or rather versions of black Christianity, were fundamental within black communities they were raised in. My investigation is therefore centred on why these writers found their inherited religion of Christianity unpalatable when so many of their own embraced it. What was it about black Christianity they found so damaging to their individual black identity in particular, and African Americans and black people in general? I explore how this rejection of Christianity plays out into family, and intra-racial tensions and conflicts. Religion is represented as not only perpetuating black oppression by white people, but also replicating historical oppressive structures that white people use to oppress black people. To understand how Christianity impacted on black lives, I explore Hurston and Wright as proponents of *freethought* (rejection of Christian theism) whose writings offer extraordinary insights into black Christian rituals which include revivalism, baptism, and conversion. Examining these Christian rituals sheds light on religious alterity and how it constructs the "outsider," an identity so damaging and feared in black communities. Negotiating the double consciousness brought about by religious fear becomes central to these writers' black identity transitions - producing lives replete with chronologies of radical change.

In the second part of this chapter I investigate why Malcolm X embraced Islam, eschewing Christianity, the religion he was brought up in. What is it about Islam that was fundamentally

different to Christianity that he found helpful to his transitions to a black identity he imagined? I also examine how he sought to underpin his pedagogy on the (re)modelling of black identity on Islam–a development which inevitably intertwines religion and politics. I go on to explore his chronology of changes in conversation with Zora Neale Hurston, especially on how they differed on race consciousness and race pride as cornerstones of black identity evolution which dismantles the historic combination of religious and political double consciousness. While Hurston refused to be reined in by any racial classification, Malcolm X believed self-segregation, underpinned by race pride, was the way forward for black people. This fundamental difference in how Hurston and Malcolm X imagined their black identities underscores the gender aspects of their lived experiences as impacted by religion and politics. This chapter introduces gender issues to highlight patriarchal dominance in the versions of religion depicted by Hurston and Malcolm X; however, a more nuanced examination will be done in Chapter Four.

Rejection of Christianity:

For two people who were reported to have fundamental political differences on black identity evolution, Wright and Hurston appear to have significant convergence in their experience and representation of Southern black Christianity. Rachel Pietka explores this rift between Hurston, and Wright and Ralph Ellison - with these male writers forming part of the "Black Intelligentsia" faulting Hurston for her caricatures of blackness and criticising "her for not writing in a more social, political, or artistic vein"[109] (I examine this reading of Hurston's work in Chapter Four). However, both Hurston and Wright (in their autobiographies) articulate

[109] Rachel Pietka, "There is No Me Like My Statue: "Life and Text in Zora Neale Hurston's Dust Tracks on a Road," *Pacific Coast Philology* v.49, no.1 (2014): 108.

explicit hesitancy in believing in the Christian God from an early age, and show significant disdain for Christian rituals. They subsequently evolve towards black identities which strive to de-centre Christianity. This rejection of "seek[ing] an alliance with omnipotence" (*Dust Tracks*, 225) leads to their conscious choice of foraging through secular pathways in search of their black identities; a search which I suggest is anchored on African American *freethought* ideology. Christopher Cameron explores African American *freethought* as an "ideology which began during the era of slavery when enslaved people such as William Wells Brown rejected prevalent theodicies and came to believe that with the immense suffering Blacks experienced in bondage, there was likely no just God looking out for their interests."[110]

Cameron speaks of black secularism as "present in both slave narratives and diaries of those visiting the antebellum South," and connects it to the era of the New Negro Renaissance in which writers like Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen and Hurston began to explore their own religious scepticism and paths toward *freethought* in great depth (237). In his introduction to his seminal book, *Black Free Thinkers: A History of African American Secularism,* Cameron articulates this long history of black *freethought*, and challenges the historical perception that free thinking was the preserve of whites. He quotes Charles Colcock, a slaveholder and Presbyterian minister from Georgia, whose 1842 book, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes* notes "the widespread presence of religious skepticism among slaves," and goes on to posit that "many enslaved people upheld common arguments against God's existence."[111] This development directly challenges the contention that *freethought* and its concomitant non-religious movements, "including atheism, agnosticism, and other non-traditional

[110] Christopher Cameron, "Zora Neale Hurston, Freethought, and African American Religion," *Journal of Africana Religions* v. 4, no. 2 (1998): 237.
[111] Christopher Cameron, *Black Free Thinkers: A History of African American Secularism*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019), ix.

religious views such as deism, was a preserve of educated or cultivated minds belonging to philosophers – that is, white people" (Cameron, ix). Although Frederick Douglass represents himself as a Christian believer, he articulates religious scepticism on its support of slavery. It is from his scepticism that I propose his anticipation of Hurston and Wright's black *freethought.* These three black thinkers attest "that atheism, agnosticism, and secular humanism have been much more prevalent in African American culture than scholars have traditionally recognised" (Cameron, *Journal of Africana Religions*, 241). Douglass' free thought dispensation anticipates the identities Hurston and Wright transition through in resisting historical assumptions which depict black people as naturally religious and whose "fervent African temperament makes them peculiarly susceptible to religious sentiment" (Cameron, Black Free Thinker, X). I explore Douglass' freethought philosophy in the next segment of this chapter in tandem with Malcolm X's disavowal of Christianity as pathways to (re)model black identities.

I propose Wright belongs to this historical *freethought* tradition as his writing in general, and *Black Boy* in particular, mirrors Hurston's *Dust Tracks* in unequivocally displaying religious scepticism through personal witness accounts of how Christianity destabilises back identity transitions. Hurston, however does not deny the impact religion plays in her life as she implores readers who want to understand her black identity transitions to go back to her birth within the Baptist Church, a period which provides 'time and place' context to her black identity: "time and place have their say, so you will have to know something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life."[112] Jenny Hyest proposes that with this intimation, Hurston is emphasising her

[112] Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks On A Road* (New York: First Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition, 2006), 1.

proximity to the Baptist Church to underscore "the profundity of its influence on her."[113] Hyest goes on to assert that, although not a Christian, Hurston's "themes of her writing and research suggest she retained a decidedly Christian sensibility" (26). This "Christian sensibility" which is explicitly evident in *Dust Tracks*, is paralleled in her other writings, which include *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1933), with the protagonist suggesting a portrait of her father, *Mules and Men* (1935), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939). These religious themes which underpin her writing underscore her relationship with the Baptist Church—a close relationship which starts through her parents, with her father, John Hurston being a reverend, and mother a Sunday school superintendent. I then suggest that, like Wright, she inherits Christianity, a religion she grapples with from an early age; and resisting the double consciousness brought by Christianity becomes integral to the black female identities she transitions through.

Before I get into why Hurston and Wright reject their inherited Christian identities, I would like to briefly explore some of the virtues of black Christianity and its functional power in black culture and black communities. Hurston celebrates black churches as historical sites of resistance to white hegemony - promoting black celebrations of their own identity away from the oppressive white gaze. Hyest posits, "Hurston recognises that churches and their ceremonies provided a space where black voices could be heard, emotions could gain expression, and art could be created" (30). Black churches, for Hurston, through their religious expressions, demonstrate black culture's distinctiveness–its ability to create and re-interpret. These are the unique characteristics which are passed down through generations, with her and other black writers beneficiaries of this distinctiveness as part of their black

[113] Jenny Hyest, ""Born with God in the House": Feminist Vision and Religious Revision in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston," *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* v. 35, no. 1 (2018): 25.

identity transitions. In a letter to Lewis Gannet, she articulates this positive Christian contribution to black cultures and black identities:

> We are ceremonial – lovers of color and magnificence. While white people strive to achieve restraint, we strive to pile beauty on beauty, magnificence on glory. Our preachers are talented men even though many of them are barely literate. The masses do not read literature, do not visit theatres nor museums of fine arts. The preacher must satisfy their beauty-hunger himself. He must be a poet and an actor and pos[s]ess a body and voice … [T]he truth is, the greatest poets among us are in our pulpits and the greatest poetry has come out of them (Hyest, 30).

Hurston further acknowledges the church as a repository of spiritual needs through its religious rituals and expressions, and herself as a product of this powerful spiritual-aesthetic institution. For most black people, as Hyest posits, especially the "rural black folk … the church was the library, theatre, and museum. It was a place to appreciate art and to embrace and exercise their creative capacities" (30). This demonstrates how much church has influence in shaping black identity transitions. Hurston's proximity to church bears a significant impact on who she evolves to be; she bears a seemingly paradoxical personality – an identity premised on rejecting Christianity, while her identity as a writer could not eschew the aesthetics of the black Baptist Church she inherits and internalises during her formative years. Hyest explores the effect of her experience in church: "She honed her ear for language and her eye for performance every Sunday in her father's church, where she revelled in the "action, more or less dramatic" of sermons, prayers, and conversion testimonies (30). In *Dust Tracks*, Hurston confirms how the Baptist Church shaped her artistic sensibility:

> As I told you before, I had pitched head-foremost into the Baptist Church when I was born. I had heard the singing, the preaching and the prayers. They were part of me. To me, what the

> Negroes did in Macedonia Baptist Church was finer than anything that any trained composer had done to the folk songs (171-172).

Here she celebrates black peoples' varied talents; however, my focus here is in her claim to these positive black attributes as her birthright; a position emphasised by this statement – "*They were part of me.*" She is acknowledging the integral impact of her Christian heritage (black church's art and aesthetics) in shaping and defining her identity as a black writer.

However, as Hyest suggests, "[Huston] insisted, too, on testifying to the ways the church had injured her" (31). In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she chronicles how her curiosity at a very early age engenders her interrogation of Christianity, questioning its central tenets; for example, she is perplexed why, "If Christ, God's son, hated to die, and God hated for Him to die and have everybody grieving ever since, why did He have to do it? Why did people die anyway? (216). Like her contemporaries, Wright and Langston Hughes, Christian rituals which produce baptised and converted Christians bring more curiosity and doubt to her about God's omnipotence and omniscience. These "re-born" people are as troubled with poverty and oppression just as those who have not gone through these rituals. This leaves young Hurston mystified at the value of religion when those who claim to "have religion" don't look any different from all the sinners:

> They should have looked and acted differently from others after experiences like that. But these people looked and acted like everybody else—or so it seemed to me. They ploughed, chopped wood, went possum-hunting, washed clothes, … cooked collard greens like anybody else. No more ornaments and nothing. It mystified me. (*Dust Tracks*, 216).

She then tries to seek some explanations from adults but like Wright, she encounters resistance, violent resistance at times. Her inquisitive nature often gets her into trouble; an

example is when she asks why people die, and why some people are called out for being sinners when they should have been already saved by Christ's dying:

> It seemed to me somebody had been fooled and I stated so to my father and two of his colleagues. When they were through with me, I knew better than to say that loud again, but their shocked and angry tirades did nothing for my bewilderment. My head was full of misty fumes of doubt" (*Dust Tracks*, 217).

This is damaging to a young inquisitive mind; genuine and identity-shaping questions which would help her understand are violently put down – reinforcing endemic symptoms within a particular religious institution that is punitive to critical inquiry. Hurston reports that for a while as she grows up, she is forced to curb her inquisitive mind as it may cause friction with family, or lose her friends who would not want to play with a person who does not believe in their God. When asked if she believed in God, Hurston says, "I always said yes because I knew that that was the thing I was supposed to say. It was a guilty secret with me for a long time ..." (217). She goes on to state that for a while, to keep peace at home and in her black community she "forgets" to think. This demonstrates how for Hurston, religious oppression manifests through a form of double consciousness – she must navigate the tension between her perception of religion and the imposed religious expectations by her family and community. However, when she gets to Barnard College where she studies History and Philosophy, demonstrating the power of literacy, she resumes her critical examination of black Christian identity. To Hurston as she comes to reflect on the Missionary Baptist Church's version of Christianity, "the insurmountable challenge … was not one of believing in things unseen, but rather to hold such beliefs without question." Hyest encapsulates her struggle with black Christianity: "It was stifling for her to exist within spaces that treated inquiry with

hostility" (33). Her experience of Christianity is that everything is 'known and settled'; it is an institution that resists critical inquiry. This rigid refusal to allow curious minds to engage in "poking and prying with purpose … a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein," constructs Hurston, and people like her, as outsiders and enemies of Christianity (*Dust Tracks*, 143).

Richard Wright echoes Hurston's double consciousness which manifests as childhood fear of being constructed as an outsider. Despite his ambivalence towards God, as some point as he grows up, he has to pretend to conform to Christianity so that he can keep his friends. This need to belong forces both Hurston and Wright to be who they are not; they have to hide their inner selves, and wear masks which make them pretend to centre their black identities with Christianity. Commenting about his involvement with the Sunday school at his mother's Methodist Church, Wright underscores what it all means for him:

> I liked it and I did not like it; I longed to be among them, yet when with them I looked at them as if I were a million miles away. I had been kept out of their world too long ever to be able to become a real part of it. Nevertheless, I was so starved for association with people that I allowed myself to be seduced by it all, and for a few months I lived the life of an optimist. A revival began at the church and my classmates at school urged me to attend. More because I liked them than from any interest in religion, I consented.[114]

In their rejection of Christianity, both Hurston and Wright critically explore "the [historic] instrumentality of fear in enabling Christianity's spread and dominance." (Hyest 33). They both examine the role of fear in Christian rituals with Hurston looking at conversions and Wright exploring his own baptism at a revival meeting with his mother, as well as his

[114]Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (London: Vintage Random House Group Limited, 2007), 151.

encounter with his grandmother at a church meeting when she (mis)understands his talk about seeing an angel. These witness representations by Hurston and Wright encapsulate Christianity and its varied religious expressions as undermining black identity evolution through the tyrannical double consciousness imposed on young minds. Hurston describes her own experience of conversion ceremonies led by her father which have parallels to Wright's baptism experience. She explores the fear at the centre of these ceremonies with hell "described in dramatic fury" and "the pressure on the unconverted … stepped up by music and high drama" (*Dust Tracks*, 218). She depicts a scenario echoing the chants, groans and moans which accompany Wright's process to his baptism as a "tense harmonic chant seeps over the audience" with the congregation "right in there at the right moment bearing Papa up and heightening the effect of the fearsome picture a hundred-fold" (*Dust Tracks*, 219). The humorous way she depicts these conversions at revival meetings amplifies her lack of conviction regarding Christianity's efficacy to black identities. She echoes Wright in dramatising the familiarity of the whole process to "getting religion" through the traditional "visions" amplifying how the whole process is underpinned by palpable fear. First the candidates "suddenly become conscious that they had to die", then they are "conscious of their sins" and so they pray and pray to have "their souls converted." These seekers of salvation describe how they "hung over Hell by one strand of hair" as the congregation "shudder[s] and groan[s] at the picture in a fervent manner" (*Dust Tracks*, 220). They (seekers of salvation) continue to narrate how they then found "themselves walking over a foot-log so narrow that they had to put one foot right in front of the other while the howling hell-hounds pursued them relentlessly. Lord! They saw no way of rescue" (*Dust Track*, 220). However, it is when they invoke Jesus by calling his name that salvation is realised:

> But they called the name of Jesus and suddenly they looked on the other side and saw *a little white man* and he called them there. So they called the name of Jesus and suddenly they were on the other side. He poured the oil of salvation into their souls and, hallelujah!" (*Dust Tracks*, 220) (my emphasis).[115]

For young Wright, his friends and his mother's relentless exhortations lead to his baptism, forcing him into a Christian ritual he does not want to participate in. On the last day of one of the revival meetings, he and some of the boys are isolated as "sinners" for not belonging to any church and "professing no religion." They are led into a room where the preacher would come and discuss the state of their souls. Wright reveals his anxiety: "Surrounded by people I knew and liked, with my mother's eyes looking pleadingly into mine, it was hard to refuse" (*Black Boy*, 152). The language which Wright goes on to use as he describes the whole process for him and the other young men (to be confirmed as candidates for baptism) demonstrates how alienated he is to Christian rituals of this kind. He talks about being "filled more with disgust than sin" by all the familiar techniques the preacher dramatically pulls out (*Black Boy*, 152). One such technique ("ruse") the preacher employs as a persuasive tool is involving the mothers of these boys – he calls upon these mothers "as symbols of Mother Mary at the tomb" to come and pray for their sons. However, Wright sees through it all: "The mothers knelt. My mother grabbed my hands and I felt hot tears scalding my fingers. I tried to stifle my disgust." The repeated use of the powerful and emotional word "disgust" in his description of the whole experience demonstrates the significant trauma he endures. The "scalding" of his fingers by his mother's tears further amplifies the psychological and emotional damage he suffers - creating an image of indelible scars which he would take with

[115] In the next segment of this chapter, I will use Malcolm X's lens to interrogate this depiction of Jesus as a white male in Christianity, and how this destabilises blackness in its reliance on a white saviour.

him long after this ceremony. Wright feels trapped and believes whatever is being done here is not really for him and his fellow "sinners". The whole experience is for the benefit of the "tribe" which feels threatened by these outsiders who have not declared their allegiance:

> The business of saving souls had no ethics; every human relationship was shamelessly exploited. In essence, the tribe was asking us whether we shared its feelings; if we refused to join the church, it was the equivalent to saying no, to placing ourselves in the position of moral monsters. One mother led her beaten and frightened son to the preacher amid shouts of amen and hallelujah (*Black Boy*, 154).

What this ceremony does to Wright is create significant resentment of Christianity which deepens further with the subsequent fractious relationship with the Wilson family led by her grandmother, with poverty exacerbating the rising tensions which lead to bitter family conflicts.

This alienating inscription of non-Christians as outsiders, "moral monsters" who are impure and threatening leads mothers to do everything in their power to exhort their sons "to cross over" and be with the Christian community at all costs. This is not necessarily for their sons' redemption, but because of their fear of the palpable shame they have to go through if these sons remain a "threat" to the Christian community. Wright provides an example of this when he describes a mother who leads her "beaten and frightened" son to the preacher, with the "tribe" cheering and celebrating her actions. Here and elsewhere in *Black Boy*, Wright consciously uses the naming metaphor "tribe" "to explain the constitution of the religious deviant or non-Christian as an outsider" (Jonson, 174). Johnson examines this metaphor as an "analytical trope" and suggests that its use arguably marks Wright's sharpest and most pronounced representation of religious conflict in *Black Boy* (Johnson, 174). Conflict is never

more acute than when it pits mothers and sons against each other; as in Wright's representation of Christian mothers whose concerns are not the psychological and emotional traumas their sons go through. He implicates his own mother as one of the loyal members of this particular Christian "tribe," revealing a pattern of no ethical boundaries in "this business of saving souls". Wright's perception of this ritual is confirmed by his mother's actions, who in sensing her son's hesitation, implores him not to humiliate her in public and destabilise her position within the "tribe". To her it is no longer about saving her son, it is her fear of being associated with him outside the rigid boundaries inscribed by her church; she has to make him cross over, regardless of any harm this may cause to him:

> It was no longer a question of my believing in God; It was no longer a matter of whether I steal or lie or murder; it was a simple, urgent matter of public pride. If I refused, it meant that I did not love my mother, and no man in that tight little black community had ever been crazy enough to let himself be placed in such a position (*Black Boy*, 155).

After this ordeal, Wright feels nothing "except sullen anger and a crushing sense of shame," but his mother is not concerned about that because to her, "the main thing is to be a member of the church" (*Black Boy*, 155). His traumatic experience is not over as he is still to be baptised. The day of his baptism arrives and he again describes the excruciating psychological and emotional trauma he goes through:

> Finally my turn came and I felt foolish, tense; I wanted to yell for him to stop; I wanted to tell him that this was so much nonsense … The dripping branch was shaken above my head and drops of water wet my face and my scalp, some of it rolling down my neck and wetting my back, like insects crawling. I wanted to squirm, but I held still. Then it was over. I relaxed. The preacher was now shaking the branch over another boy's head. I sighed. I had been baptised (*Black Boy,* 155).

Close reading this lamentation reveals the significant trauma he goes through – he wants so much to protest, to escape, to be himself, but he is imprisoned; the whole process leaves him feeling "like insects crawling" on his back. Afterwards, he relaxes and sighs; however, this whole ordeal is passed on to other young men to demonstrate how endemic this damage is to young black boys. Furthermore, that those isolated as "sinners" and needing to be saved are all male brings a gendered dimension to the reception of Christianity in black communities. Is it a coincidence that there are no female "sinners" on this occasion? Or perhaps the fact that, mothers are then called upon to help cajole their sons into submission telling on how black females are represented as more receptive to religion? I am not suggesting in any way that black females have an innate receptivity to religion; however, this representation of just male sinners perhaps speaks to the way black women are socialised to "be good" from an early age in a way boys are not. I will be further exploring these gendered dimensions in Chapter Four which examines black females' relationships with patriarchal institutions.

Regarding this endemic damage to black males, I suggest Wright constructs black Christianity as a big part of the adversity he triumphs over. As I have articulated in Chapter Two, he characterises black mothers as agents of a black Christianity which is damaging to the black male identity. Quiana J. Whitted reflects this in his exploration of Wright's fiction:

> His narrative choices in works such as *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), *Native Son* (1945), *The Outsider* (1935), and the unfinished novel, *Tar-baby's Dawn* emphasise the declining efficacy of black Christian theism in modern times of crisis. Wright also stresses the betrayal of elders, *particularly mothers*, whose exhortations to believe act as hindrances to his young

> protagonists' full understanding of [black] manhood, human dignity, and race pride." (My emphasis).[116]

Family schisms, especially with female members who have adult authority, is a recurring theme in his fiction; a development which reflects his troubled relationship with his own mother, Aunt Addie, and Grandmother Wilson, with Christianity at the centre in *Black Boy*. The version of black Christianity represented here by this black motherhood forces him to reject Christianity. What he goes through with his mother during the baptism, his frequent physical fights with Aunty Addie (representing violence as a central characteristic of the wider Christian faith I will explore later in this chapter), and his grandmother's rigid theocracy pushes him to resist or be "crushed."

Wright represents his maternal grandmother as exerting significant damage to his black male identity evolution in his unpublished essay: "Memories of My Grandmother":

> My grandmother lived her religion day by day and hour by hour; *religion* was her *reality*, the sole meaning in her life. The inconsistencies of her behavior were the subject of much agonizing thought and feeling on my part during at least one-half of my life; indeed, it was my grandmother's interpretations of religion – or perhaps I should say that it was my religious grandmother's interpretations of life – that actually made me decide to run off from home at the age of fifteen (Whitted, 15).

Echoing Hurston's representation of troubles with her father and adults as representatives of a religion which violently resists critical inquiry, Wright explores his own relationship with his grandmother. This turbulent relationship results in his flight from religion, her home, and the

[116] Qiana J. Whitted, ""Using My Grandmother's life as a Model": Richard Wright and the Gendered Politics of Religious Representation," The Southern Literary Journal v.36, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 14.

South in search of his black male identity which is under threat. His grandmother's religiosity is so intense that even her own daughters frequently have problems with her. Ella (Wright's mother) escapes into a different and seemingly 'milder' version of Christianity she finds in the Methodist Church; leaving her son at the mercy of a toxic and volatile battle with Auntie Addie and Grandmother Wilson (*Black Boy*, 135). The Wilsons, as represented by his grandmother, Auntie Addie and Uncle Tom replicate the historical axis of a violent theocracy found at the centre of American and wider Western Christianity to which Wright has to defend and protect himself:

> There were more violent quarrels in our deeply religious home than in the home of a gangster, a burglar, or a prostitute, a fact which I used to hint gently to granny and which did my case no good. Granny bore the standard for God, but she was always fighting. The peace that passes understanding never dwelt with us. I, too, fought; but I fought because I felt I had to keep from being crushed, to fend of the continuous attack.

Wright is physically, psychologically and emotionally traumatised from the relentless "attacks" by his family members. However, he uses this abusive experience to transition into a black male who learns to resist and triumph over adversity. At fifteen he attempts to leave home as his grandmother refuses to let him work on Saturdays because of her devotion to her church doctrines. For members of the Seventh Day Adventists Church (SDA), Saturday is a holy day in which they are not allowed to work. For Wright, this is a day which could make a fundamental difference to his life as working would be a beginning to his independence; he could look after himself better by buying himself clothes like the other boys in his class. He is so ashamed of his clothing and grows so bitter that he confronts his grandmother who then tells him: "You left church and you are on your own. You are with the world. You're dead to me, dead to Christ" (143). He is bold enough to tell her, "That old church of yours is messing

up my life" (143). Trembling violently with emotion he tells her that he is leaving and with that he packs a bag, only to be stopped by his mother. He later defies his grandmother and finds work, marking a significant break from adult authority framed by rigid Christian dogma.

His grandmother's reaction to his accusations that her church is "messing up" his life is: "God is punishing you, and you're too proud to ask Him for help" (143). That his grandmother sees his privations as God's punishment for his desertion of the church suggests Wright's representation of the fear at the centre of Christianity (which I have explored earlier on). Here she is representing her Christian God as a punishing omnipotent and omniscient superior – underscoring the fear at the centre of Christianity – fear of punishment – fear of an eternal hell as a final destination of all those who defy their God. However, a corollary of this reasoning by his grandmother is that if he is a punishing God, then he is a rewarding God. If the Christian God can reward, why is it then, as observed by Hurston, that those like Grandmother Wilson who imagine themselves as loyal Christians, continue to wallow in poverty with no discernible difference to those they label as non-religious and sinners?

At fifteen, Wright has assessed his situation and works out a way to improve his life; a decision which however clashes with the regime of theocracy governing the Wilson domestic settings. Once again, he sees religion, as represented by the female members of his household, attempting to thwart the evolution of his black male identity. This domestic setting anticipates the adversity of racism which he has to overcome later on in his life – a tone which is set by his white racist female boss who declares that he will never be a writer after he tells her about his aspirations: "You'll never be a writer, who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?" (*Black Boy*, 147). I suggest her reaction to Wright's aspirations represent the fear of the wider white supremacists who feel threatened by black people who

are keen to go beyond the boundaries they have set for them. Wright's heightened literacy aspirations amount to what Robert J. Butler calls "a kind of subversive act."[117] Recalling the slave South, his white female boss is bewildered that this black boy can imagine himself attaining human qualities of literacy in a social system designed to eradicate such fantastic and dangerous thoughts in black people. Similarly, later on in this chapter I interrogate an incident in which Malcolm X's male white teacher is astounded that a black boy has ambitions to be a lawyer. This teacher then advises him he should set his sights at carpentry as that is a realistic ambition for a black boy.

Coming back to Grandmother Wilson's explanation of why her grandson is being "punished" by God, I use Hurston's lens to further interrogate her thinking and how destabilising this is to Wright's black identity transitions. Hurston posits that religious people create gods to explain away their weaknesses, insecurities and failures. Why Grandmother Wilson defers her responsibility to feed and clothe her grandson to God's doing speaks to Hurston's characterisation of religious people:

> It seems to me to be true that heavens are placed in the sky because it is the unreachable. The unreachable and therefore the unknowable always seem divine – hence, religion. People need religion because the greatest masses fear life and its consequences. Its responsibilities weigh heavy. Feeling a weakness in the face of great forces, men seek an alliance with omnipotence to bolster up their feeling of weakness, even though the omnipotence they rely upon is a creature of their own minds. It gives them a feeling of security. Strong, self-determined men are notorious for their lack of reverence … (*Dust Tracks,* 225).

[117] Robert J. Butler, "Seeking Salvation in a Naturalistic Universe: Richard Wright's Use of his Sothern Religious Background In Black Boy (American Hunger," in Richard Wright: New Readings in the 21st Century p62

Grandmother Wilson epitomises black motherhood; overwhelmed by responsibilities she invokes religion and uses it as coping mechanism. With a husband who cannot contribute anything because his war pension has been withheld as part of the wider American racist politics, she is now burdened with a bed-ridden daughter who is accompanied by a "sinner" in the form of a son who now threatens everything she stands for as an obedient and loyal Christian. I utilise Hurston's lens to explain black mothers with similar portraits to Grandmother Wilson: "feeling a weakness in the face of great forces," she turns to her god to bolster her "feeling of weakness," to give her a "feeling of security" and help explain away the predicaments, impediments and complexities of her life here on earth (*Dust Tracks*, 225)

Rejecting the Christian identity modelled by those close relatives who "seek an alliance with the omnipotence," Hurston and Wright represent their black identity transitions as predicated on "strong, self-determined men [who] are notorious for their lack of reverence" (*Dust Tracks*, 225).[118] Hurston, like Wright, subverts a historic black tradition of relying on prayer and refuses to pray; she dismantles double consciousness by choosing to be strong and face life without having to install fear and unseen gods as anchors to her black identity evolution:

> So I do not pray. I accept the means at my disposal for working out my destiny. It seems to me I have been given a mind and will-power for that very purpose. I do not expect God to single me out and grant me advantages over my fellow men … Prayer seems to me a cry of weakness. I accept the challenge of responsibility (*Dust track*, 226).

Hurston and Wright's lived experiences, as recorded in their autobiographies, and gleaned from their fiction and other writings, are "attentive to the dynamics of religious bigotry

[118] The use of "men" here appears to represent the collective of the human race.

through compelling assessment[s] of American Christian identity among poor black Southerners."[119] They imagine black Christianity as cynically tribal in its motivation to ensnare and keep black people in enforced conformity through a theology of fear. Johnson posits that "Wright strategically narrates Christian conversion in order to demonstrate how its meaning and practices induce a traumatic experience of being an outsider" (174). This is demonstrated by his mother (Ella Wright) and Grandmother Wilson who are petrified of living outside the borders of Christianity. Their relentless pursuit to incorporate him encapsulates the tribal ideology at the centre of Christianity: "[T]he desire to incorporate 'others' into the group as an absolutely necessary condition of accepting the other as a legitimate being. In this schema, one simply cannot exist legitimately unless one converts to Christian identity" (Johnson, 174). This is why Wright is "dead" to his grandmother and her God, because he has resisted incorporation; however, I suggest the rejection is mutual because for both Hurston and Wright to transition to their imagined black identities and assert their individuality, they have to challenge black Christian tyranny. They both chronicle their resistance, rejection and escape to give voice to victims of religious terrorism and critically challenge the "predominant historiographical trends [that] have regarded African American religion as exceptional, as uniquely communal, and accepting" (Johnson, 185).

Malcolm X and Islam: (re)modelling black identities

Echoing Hurston and Wright, Malcolm X consciously rejects Christianity (his family's religion as he grew up) in order to re-imagine his black identity. He parallels Angelo Herndon (as I have explored in Chapter 2), who also must internally and publicly reject Christianity for him to

[119] Sylvester Johnson, "Tribalism and Religious Identity in the Work of Richard Wright," *Literature and Theology* v. 20, no. 2 (June 2006): 185.

progress to his imagined blackness. However, unlike his predecessors, Malcolm X embraces religion in the form of Islam to underpin his black identity evolution. It is his conversion to Islam which precipitates what he calls "a chronology of changes" throughout his truncated adulthood (he was assassinated on 21 February 1965, just three months shy of his fortieth birthday).[120] While Hurston and Wright, as I suggested in the first part of this chapter, frame their rejection of Christianity with *freethought*, I propose exploring Malcolm X's evolving blackness through the influence of a version of Islam (Nation of Islam), as articulated in his autobiography, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. In this section I investigate how his Islamic conversion(s) underpin not only his personal changes, but also his role as a pedagogue to influence wider black identity shaping. I interrogate this autobiography to investigate his aspiration "to achieve pedagogical authority regardless of his specific social situation."[121] I suggest that it is this aspiration for "pedagogical authority" that sees him conflate his religious *identities* with his political identity.[122] Finding his "salvation" in Islam, Malcolm X embarks on a crusade to use his Islamic experience(s) as pedagogical tools to (re)model Africa Americans' black identity evolution. I examine his attempts to (re)model black identity through two main analytical prisms – disavowal of Christianity in favour of Islam, and black race consciousness (the separation of black people as a distinct 'nation' from white America). In both cases, I use a psychological phenomenon – *habituation* as a lens into his intervention techniques for African Americans to dismantle double consciousness and reclaim their blackness.

[120] Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 454. Subsequent page references in text.
[121] Kenneth Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 162. Subsequent page references in text.
[122] I have chosen to use *identities* as Malcolm X goes through three religious identities – Christianity – Nation of Islam (a version of Islam) – Orthodox Islam.

In using *habituation* as a lens into Malcolm's religious and political identities, I have been significantly influenced by how Alex Magaisa, lecturer in law at the University of Kent, uses this theoretical prism to interrogate the relationship between the Zimbabwean autocratic regime and its long-suffering citizens in his article: "The Problem of Habituation to Authoritarianism."[123] He explains *habituation* as "our way of learning. It is how we manage to focus on things that we think matter and ignoring supposedly non-essential things." He gives an example of how, upon moving into a new neighbourhood where a railway line passes through, you would be initially troubled by the train noise. After a while, you will hardly notice it and carry on with life, concentrating on what you prioritise as essential. Expanding on this, Magaisa then asserts that, "It is this reduction in response to the sound that psychologists refer to as habituation. You become habituated." This explanation is corroborated by Philip Zimbardo et al. who assert a "decrease in response to any repeatedly presented event is habituation" and that "it is a basic response found in most species …"[124] In this chapter, using *habituation* may help explain how Malcolm X (as presented through his autobiography) visualises the relationship between African Americans and white people in America. I see this phenomenon also explaining Malcolm X's radicalism as a response to the domination of Christianity in undermining black religious, and political identities. Outraged by the lack of significant black outrage at their generational marginalisation, I propose that Malcolm X sets out to introduce a template aimed at changing the course of black identity evolution through black people's rejection of Christianity as the oppressor's religion, in favour of Islam. He also introduces militant rhetoric to underpin his call for racial consciousness as a framework to

[123] Alex Magaisa, "The Problem of Habituating to Authoritarianism," The Big Saturday Read, https://bigsr.africa/2021 (accessed 20 July 2021).
[124] Philip Zimbardo et al., *Psychology – A European Text*, (United Kingdom: Pearson Higher Education, 1995), 126.

black politics. Malcolm X recognises that most African Americans were so habituated to white America's authoritarianism that they had come to accept the status quo. To support this assertion, one can examine his autobiographical imagination of Christians and their conviction of life after death and heaven fantasies; the image of black life in the American urban ghettos; and the general tenor of black life in America. This collective image of black habituation to white racism, with its concomitant anxieties and tensions, illustrates a generational pattern which, in my view, sees Malcolm X rising to challenge, upon realising the necessity of radical interventions to black identity evolution. I investigate his attitudes towards black middle-class leadership as agents of black identity destabilisation through their embracing and promotion of Christianity, and integration politics.

Disavowing Christianity

Well before his prison conversion to the Nation of Islam, Malcolm had already rejected Christianity. Trevin Jones proposes that this rejection is perhaps a result of what happened to his parents: "Although the [autobiography] does not state this explicitly, one can infer the possibility that the sudden death of his father and his mother's breakdown thereafter contributed to Malcolm's distrust of religion."[125] Although a practising Christian, and a Baptist minister, for that matter, Malcolm's father (Reverend Earl Little) is reportedly murdered by the Ku Klux Klan for his Garveyist political views which promoted the return to Africa for black Americans, black solidarity, and black racial pride. His mother, epitomising black motherhood pride and resilience, however, succumbs to the heavy toll of having seven mouths to feed. She is eventually placed in a mental institution; this is a development Malcolm X grapples with

[125] Trevin Jones, "The Ideological and Spiritual Transformation of Malcolm X," *The Journal of African American Studies* (2020), http://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-020-09487-2.html: 418. Subsequent page referencing in text.

for a long time, and perhaps even has a significant influence in shaping his relationship with white people—he blamed whites for murdering his father and destroying his family by institutionalising his mother. This is explicated by Jones who asserts: "These two unfathomable losses are the first in a series of incidents that served as turning points in his life. At such a young age, Malcolm X experienced what most adults dread, yet also understand as imminent. He suffered the literal death of his father at the age of six and the (figurative) passing of his mother at the age of twelve" (419). As we see later in his life, Malcolm had internalised his father's teachings on Garvey's philosophy – which stressed black solidarity, racial pride, and black independence from their reliance on white people.

I propose that Malcolm X's representation of Shorty's mother and her faith in God epitomises his conviction that Christianity does nothing to help black people. She repeatedly implores Shorty, "Son, read the Book of Revelations and Pray to God" (244). In response, Shorty (the friend he is accused with for robbery), "actually [gets] down on his knees, praying like some *Negro Baptist deacon*" (my emphasis) (244). However, prayers from both mother and son prove to be futile as Shorty, like Malcolm, is sentenced to ten years in prison–leaving "Shorty's mother … sobbing with her head bowing up and down to her Jesus …" (244). This representation of Shorty's mother pitifully clinging to her Christian beliefs calls attention to the recurring theme of black motherhood and its relationship with Christianity in African American literature as highlighted by Herndon (in Chapter Three) and Wright (in the first part of this chapter). The image of Shorty's mother keeping her faith in spite of the clear evidence that her God has not responded to her prayers and wishes, encapsulates the habituation at the centre of black Christianity which Malcolm X goes on to use as a pedagogical tool to mark a different path for black identity evolution. In prison he intensifies his rejection of Christianity

as he confesses: “I would pace for hours like a caged leopard, viciously cursing aloud to myself. And my favourite targets were the Bible and God … Eventually, the men in the cell-block had a name for me: Satan. Because of my anti-religious attitude” (246). This temperament of Christian disavowal as the oppressor’s religion, and the initial tutelage from Bimbi - *the “*prison intellectual” who reintroduces him to literacy, sets the scene for his conversion to Islam; a religion he is introduced to by his brothers, Philbert and Reginald.

Malcolm X’s conversion narrative and transformation thus symbolises the possibility of black identity evolving to freedom and happiness here on earth, and not waiting for the life after death fantasy promised by Christianity. What follows his conversion is a new belief system which anchors his drive towards helping break through the generational pattern of how “a large majority of African Americans [believed] that a higher being would eventually relieve them from their pain and suffering on earth” (Jones, 418). For Malcolm and other prison inmates, and the black communities (ghettos and urban spaces) in Detroit and other parts of the USA, the Nation of Islam’s message of black solidarity resonated because it “affirmed their humanity, in time of extreme social and racial oppression” (Jones, 421). Jones goes further to assert that:

> The NOI reached many Black males in prison because the organisation addressed issues of racism and poverty in Black communities, the breakdown of the Black family, rising rates of prisoners of color, and a lack of spiritual guidance. These issues were pertinent to both incarcerated and free Blacks, thus making Muhammad’s message of liberation viable to hopeful converts and intriguing to those somewhat sceptical (421).

Using this new belief system and his life experience as empirical evidence, he sets out to repudiate Christianity as a panacea to unlocking black progress, starting right there in prison.

He looks at the historical context of the relationship between Christianity and black people and concludes that the two are incompatible. It becomes his on-going pedagogical strategy to use historical evidence to help (re)model black identity transitions through Islam. Larry Neal celebrates Malcolm's use of history as pivotal to his breakthrough to generations of black people. He feels the way Malcom understood and expressed the history of America was fundamentally different from his contemporaries: "Finally, the success of one leader over another depends upon which one best understands and expresses the emotional realties of a given historical epoch. Hence, we feel a Malcom in a way that a Roy Wilkins, a King, a Whitney Young can never be felt. Because a Malcolm, finally, interprets the emotional history of his people better than the others."[126] One of his pedagogical strategies is going back to slavery; a piece of history he knows never fails to ignite black emotions. The following is the image of slavery which Malcolm X presents to his different audiences to "start opening their eyes about the devil white man" and dismantle the historical double consciousness enmeshing black people (311):

> I know you don't realize the enormity, the horrors, of the so called *Christian* white man's crime …Not even in the *Bible* is there such a crime! God in His wrath struck down with fire the perpetrators of lesser crimes! *One hundred million* of us black people! Your grandparents! Mine! *Murdered* by this white man. To get fifteen million of us here to make us his slaves, on the way he murdered one hundred million! I wish it was possible for me to show you the sea bottom in those days – the black bodies, the blood, the bones broken by boots and clubs! The pregnant black women who were thrown overboard if they got sick! Thrown overboard to the sharks that had learned that following these slave ships was the way to grow fat! (311)

[126] Larry Neal, "And Shine Swam On," in *African American Literary Theory* ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 70. Subsequent text referencing in text.

From close reading this assertion on slavery, I propose Malcolm X's three main discourses which underpin his theological intervention: the first one is black people's on-going *habituation* to horrific Christian historical crimes. This then results in Malcolm X representing black people as spiritually sick and brainwashed – because of the centuries they have accepted Christians' cruelties, and their continued endurance of marginalised positions. This status quo calls for radical interventions to which Malcolm employs his religious identity to try and solve political problems. The second discourse is the Christian God's lack of action to punish white people's criminal acts on black people. This lack of action from an authority who allegedly has acted before on lesser crimes, positions black bodies outside the Christian domain – making black people incompatible with Christianity. These two aforementioned discourses should then lead to the third discourse – sensitisation and "opening of [black people's] eyes about the *devil* white man" (311). Malcolm X's re-telling of the historical inhumanity of the white man, and re-naming him as a *devil*, opens up a new psychological process needed as an intervention to black habituating to the intertwined white religious (Christian) and political hegemony. Through this radical action Malcolm X re-configures the religious and political relationship between white and black people as this shifts the historical inscription of criminality from black bodies onto white bodies. This would then allow black people to revert to sensitisation, as opposed to habituating to white oppression; this enables black people to critically re-examine their historical relationship with Christianity and white people, and in so doing, open up vistas of re-imagined black identities and freedom (I explore this through the race consciousness lens later on in this chapter).

Malcolm X's framework of religious and political pedagogy is based on what he calls a "double edged sword" (an inheritance from Elijah Muhammad, the leader of NOI), "which cut[s]back

and forth to free the black man's mind from the white man" (310). He goes on to assert that this double-edged sword "cuts into you. It causes you great pain, but if you can take the truth, it will cure you and save you from what would otherwise be certain death" (311). He strives to trigger critical reflections on historical events so that black people can use the truth to judge both the whites and themselves. Repeatedly, in prison, and throughout his ascendance to NOI Minister, and spokesman, Malcolm X dramatises the connection between Christianity and slavery for recruitment, proselytisation, and (re)modelling black identity evolution:

> The dramatization of slavery never failed intensely to arouse Negroes hearing the horrors spelled out for the first time. It's unbelievable how many black men and women have let the white man fool them into an almost romantic idea of what slave days were like. And once I had them fired up with slavery, I would shift the scene to themselves" (312).

Here, Malcolm X radically inverts the role of Christianity; it no longer serves as agency for white power and control, but becomes an agent to black identity (re)modelling. He sees black people's emotional reactions which are stirred through his critical interrogation of Christianity, working to intervene and instigate black critical reflections. He urges a historical sweep to these critical reflections and connects them to contemporary black people's experiences:

> I want you, when you leave this room, to start to *see* all this whenever you see this devil white man. Oh, yes, he's a devil! I just want you to watch him, in his places where he does not want you around; watch his reveling in his preciousness and his exclusiveness, and his vanity, while he continues to subjugate you and me … Think of how it was on *your* slave foreparents' bloody, sweaty backs that he *built* this empire that's today the richest of all nations – where his evil and his greed cause him to be hated around the world! (312).

The success of Malcolm X's inverting of Christianity as part of the recruitment and proselytisation strategy is seen in the swelling numbers which rise from a roomful of people initially, to conferences in large halls across different cities as NOI influence exponentially grows. According to Malcolm X: "America had never seen such fantastic all-black meetings! To hear Elijah Muhammad, up to ten thousand and more black people poured from public and private transportation to overflow the big halls we rented, such as the St Nicholas Arena in New York City, Chicago's Coliseum, and Washington, DC.'s Uline Arena" (351).[127]

At this stage, I propose going back to what I explored earlier as Malcolm X's first two discourses in which he represents the Christian God as looking out for white people, and how Christianity has been a historic agent of black habituation to white supremacy with all its concomitant elements. Through his NOI theological lens, Malcolm X views Christianity as rooted in teleological narratives which serve to perpetuate white hegemony—black Christians are instructed to accept their suffering here on earth, and wait for their rewards in heaven after their death: "The white man has taught us to shout and sing and pray until we *die*, to wait until *death*, for some dreamy heaven-in-hereafter, when we're *dead*, while this white man has milk and honey in the streets paved with golden dollars right here on this earth!" (320). Malcolm X regularly preaches of black solidarity as a panacea to black poverty but first he strives to open the eyes of the "brainwashed" black people to their reality. He encapsulates his pedagogical strategy as: "I had learned early one important thing, and that was to always teach in terms that the people could understand" (321). Just like how he asks his fellow prisoners (during his time in prison) to reflect on how the white man had adversely impacted

[127] Elijah Muhammad was the leader of the NOI and Malcolm X's spiritual father. Despite their fall out later, Malcolm X unequivocally asserted that Muhammad, and NOI saved him from a life of hustling, crime, and spending most of his time in prison. A development which then engendered Malcolm X's reimaging of black identity.

on their individual and collective black lives, he asks his congregation to go out and do simple research by looking and comparing themselves to how the white man is living:

> You go out of here, you take a good look around where you live. Look at not only how you live, but look at how anybody you know lives … And when you get through looking at where you live, then take a walk down across Central Park, and start to look at what this white God has brought to the white man. I mean, take yourself a look down there at how the white man is living! (320).

Malcolm X's insertion of the slave narrative, and instructions to his congregations to engage in simple actionable research become significant pedagogical strategies which help him get reactions of black people's consciousness to their religious and political reality. To underscore his progress in sensitising black people and help remodel their black identity transitions, Malcolm X quotes the "plainspoken conviction" of one of the black students who often attends NOI's Temple 15 in Atlanta:

> This Christian religion is incompatible with the Negro's aspirations for dignity and equality in America … It has hindered where it might have helped; it has been evasive when it was morally bound to be forthright; it has separated believers on the basis of color, although it has declared its mission to be a universal brotherhood under Jesus Christ. Christian Love is the white man's love for himself and for his race. For the man who is not white, Islam is the hope for justice and equality in the world we must build tomorrow (336).

As representative of the future (like most of the students Malcolm X meets and engages in intellectual discussions at universities and other educational spaces), this black student demonstrates a remarkable grip on reality, and epitomises Malcolm X's headway in inculcating generational black consciousness. The above quotation not only epitomises the

explicit differences between Christianity and Islam, but also insightfully highlights the inevitable conflation of religious and political identities for African Americans. This student demonstrates his awareness and understanding of Christianity as sustaining the status quo of white supremacy, while Islam, for black people, endeavours to emancipate them from oppression in its aspiration for justice and equality. This student's reading encapsulates the message that underpins Malcolm X's conflated religious and political drive to "resurrect" the majority of the "black race in America [who are] mentally dead" (324).

Race Consciousness: A Theology of Liberation

For Zora Neale Hurston, about thirty years before Malcolm's intervention, slavery and race consciousness are not applicable foundations to model black identity. In her autobiography (*Dust Tracks*) she asserts that it is futile for black people to bring slavery into their present circumstances:

> I turn my back upon the past. I see no reason to keep my eyes fixed on the dark years of slavery and the Reconstruction … there seems to me to be nothing but futility in gazing backwards over my shoulder and buking the grave of some white man who has been dead too long to talk about. Neither do I see any use in button-holing his grandson about it. The old man probably did cut some capers back there, and I'll bet you anything my old folks didn't like it. But the old man is dead. My old folks are dead. Let them wrestle all over Hell about it if they want to. That is their business. The present is upon me and that white man's grandchildren as well. I have business with the grandson as of today. I want to get on with the business at hand (254).

Hurston's thinking here (perhaps grounded in her professional training as an anthropologist) disavows Malcolm X's positioning of slavery as central to historical race relations in the US,

and the world. She represents the past as burdensome, damaging, and something that should be obliterated in favour of starting new race relations which have nothing to do with history. Through her anthropological lens, history has nothing to do with the present black and white interactions from which, she surmises, a better life and future for both races can be negotiated. I suggest that she anticipates the black middle class which clash with the NOI and Malcolm X throughout the early 1960s as she advocates "for starting something brand new in co-operation with the present incumbent" (*Dust Tracks*, 254). To Hurston, and the black middle class of the 1960s and 1970s, race consciousness is more divisive and would jeopardise back black identity progress:

> Why waste time keeping conscious of your physical aspects? What the world is crying and dying for at this moment is less race consciousness … So Race Pride and Race Consciousness seems to me not only fallacious, but a thing to be abhorred. It is the root of misunderstanding and hence misery and injustice (*Dust Tracks*, 250).

However, for Malcolm X, slavery is the indispensable entry point to both religious and political identities, and his pedagogy to re-imagined black identities. He underscores the primacy of this historical context by his recurring identification of whites as slavemasters. He concludes that for the majority of black people who occupy precarious positions in the margins, religion and politics are inextricably intertwined; making him inevitably anchor his pedagogy for reimagined blackness on what Jones encapsulates as "a theology of liberation" (421). His thinking here perhaps echoes one luminary who appears to be a hero to him for his leadership against the imperial British, Mahatma Ghandi: "Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is."[128] Through this theology of intertwined religious and

[128] Mahatma Ghandi, *The story of my experiment with truth* (New York: Beacon, 1993), x.

political pedagogy, Malcolm strives to liberate black people and save them from white "conspiracy down through the generations to keep the truth from black men" (278). For him, this conspiracy has led to black pacifism and the misrecognition of black people for 400 years - a development which inevitably engenders the rethinking of race, and (re)positioning "the white man is the devil" to the centre of the race problem in the US in particular, and the rest of the world in general (279). Mostern analyses this conception of the white race as "devils," and what it opens for black identity evolution:

> What is taking hold, at this historical moment, and via a phrase more shocking than substantial, is the thinking through of the concept "white" by a class of people who previously felt constrained from such thinking through. The mere process of thinking whiteness as negative to blackness is central to the ability to conceive critically of white supremacy as such" (155).

Thus, for Malcolm X, the image of the "white devil" at the centre of slavery and Christianity inevitably conflates religion with politics. I suggest this construction of the "white devil," dating back to slavery, as the first intersection of politics (in the form of Capitalism) and religion (Christianity) for Malcolm X's black identity pedagogy. This strategy opens up new pathways in the production of blackness; pathways anchored on race consciousness and race pride. For Malcolm X personally, as I have suggested earlier, the inevitable conflation of his religious and political subjectivities is precipitated by his conversion to NOI's version of Islam which heralds a new belief system. In his autobiography, these perspectives through the Islamic prism, crystallise the culpability of Christianity in making black people sick - mentally, spiritually, economically, and politically (424-425). This is mainly because, as the sociologist Magnus O. Bassey suggests, "Malcolm recognises that Christianity misdirected black rage

away from white racism and toward another world of heaven and sentimental romance."[129] Christianity, for Malcolm X, becomes unequivocally a white man's political strategy which has historically maintained his hegemony:

> Christianity is a white man's religion. The Holy Bible in the white man's hands and his interpretations of it have been the greatest single *ideological weapon* for enslaving millions of non-white human beings. Every country the white man has conquered with his guns, he has always paved the way, and salved his conscience, by carrying the Bible and interpreting it to call the people 'heathens' and 'pagans'; then sends his guns, then his missionaries (my emphasis) (343).

I propose that Malcolm's characterisation of "The Holy Bible" as Christianity's "greatest single ideological weapon" is the second site of religion and political intersection for his pedagogy. Christianity, for white people, is no longer just a religion, but also a political strategy to maintain their grip on political and economic power, at the expense of black people in the US. I explore this intersection through the French philosopher Michael Foucault's description of power. I once again turn to Magaisa who posits that Foucault describes two kinds of power: "coercive power, which is based on command and control, and normalised power, which derives from various subtle tactics" (BSR). The historic use of coercive power by white people is so overt and there for all to see through police brutality, and disproportionate numbers of incarcerations for non-white people in the US. Coercive power is also demonstrated through the historic vigilante groups whose drive for white supremacy appears to be state sanctioned terrorism on black people in particular. Historically, white terrorism on black bodies makes it

[129] Magnus O. Bassey, "Malcolm X: Islam and African American self-consciousness" *Dialogue & Alliance*: v. 13, issue 1 (1999): 50.

difficult for black people to embrace Hurston's thinking on slavery and race consciousness. For Malcolm X, whose father is allegedly murdered for racial and political reasons, it becomes unconscionable to eschew race in religion and politics of the US, and the world.

In this part of the chapter, I am interested in using the Foucauldian perspective in my exploration of normalised power (which I suggest as more insidious in that it feeds on habituation). In her article "Normativity and Normalization," Diana Taylor asserts that by 1978, Foucault was describing Normalisation as "the process of establishing the norm."[130] Using this definition, I suggest that historically, Christianity has been a socio-political strategy for normalised power to sustain white hegemony. Christianity, as I have explored earlier, "misdirects" (Bassey) and distracts black people from comprehensively dealing with white racism and brutality, producing pliant and habituated black identities; a recurring practice which then perpetuates black oppression. *Habituation*, as Magaisa asserts, "… is a necessary accessory in the realization and confirmation of normalized power and it is a powerful tool for authoritarian regimes. When society habituates to bad governance, it adjusts and not only tolerates poor and corrupt practices but might even support them" (Big Saturday Read). This is corroborated by Taylor who asserts normalisation (and normation) as functioning to "make normal" (52). She goes on to look at normalisation as one of the techniques which "on one hand … intervene[s] within both individual bodies and populations in order to bring them into conformity with particular social norms. On the other hand, such [a technique] perpetuates the power relations that the norm founds and legitimizes by reproducing norms within the socio-political landscape to the point that they come to be seen not as produced at all but simply as natural and necessary" (52). Thus *habituation*, leads to normalisation, where in this

[130] Diana Taylor, "Normativity and Normalization," *Foucault Studies*, no. 7(September 2009): 51. Subsequent page referencing in text.

case, it has become the generational "norm" for white people to have power and enjoy life on earth, while for black people, their turn may or may not come after their deaths. This thinking calls attention to Malcolm X's use of the "double edged sword" as a pedagogical strategy to racial consciousness; he indicts black people for habituating to their oppression through Christianity, a religion which does not recognise them, and hankering for integration (I will be interrogating this later in this chapter). At the centre of this religious/political habituation is the black middle class, which historically has (mis)led black people in their quest for freedom and justice.

I see the consolidation of NOI in the early 1960s, and the rise of the Black Arts Movement and Black Power from the mid-1960s, as echoes of the 1930s which saw rising numbers of black people joining the Communist Party as a sign of increasing disgruntlement at the black middle-class leadership (I have explored this in Chapter 4). According to Malcolm X, black middle-class leadership in religion and politics has failed black people:

> It is a miracle that a nation of black people has so fervently continued to believe in a turn-the-other-cheek and heaven-for-you-after-you-die philosophy! It is a *miracle* that the American black people have remained a peaceful people, while catching all the centuries of hell that they have caught, here in the white man's heaven! The miracle is that the white man's puppet Negro 'leaders', his preachers and educated Negroes laden with degrees, and others who have been allowed to hold the black masses quiet until now (349).

This image of the black middle class characterises them as enablers of (white) normalised power which has held back black solidarity and advancement. In this assertion, Malcolm X unequivocally calls for racial separation through his distinct categorising of black people as a "nation". This "nation of black people," which has been "quiet until now," should now turn

away from Christian ideology and its enablers (black and white). For Malcolm, recalling his father's politics which followed Garveyist philosophy – now is the time for black solidarity. During his time in NOI, Malcolm is discouraged from being too explicitly political, a development which causes much disquiet with him as he becomes the face and spokesman of the organisation. Nonetheless, he finds ways to conflate his religious pedagogy with politics through his racial consciousness rhetoric which explicitly defines Christianity as white, while visualising NOI's version of Islam as the black man's panacea to his political situation. Thus, through his pedagogy he sets out to help (re)model black identity evolution through the NOI framework; introducing a new belief system which affirms black humanity; validating black people's capability of separating from white people and sustaining a distinct nation.

NOI's religious (and political) ideology was rooted in race consciousness, limiting their membership to black people, and for a long time did not permit white people to attend their prayer meetings, even as guests (however, as documented in the autobiography, this later changed with the white press allowed in). The political move of barring white people was a race-conscious move towards black solidarity and separation from white American influence and power. In his autobiography, Malcolm X articulates the nuances of Muhammad's (NOI's) position on separation and segregation: "*segregation* is when your life and liberty are controlled, regulated, *by someone else*. To *segregat*e means to control. Segregation is that which is forced upon inferiors by superiors. But *separation* is what is done voluntarily, by two equals – for the good of both!" (348) Malcolm further asserts NOI's disavowal of any notions of integration, "the only way the black people caught up in this [American] society can be saved is not to *integrate* into this corrupt society but to *separate* from it to a land of *our own*, where we can reform ourselves, lift up our moral standards, and try to be godly" (348). While

it may have been not possible for a complete geographical separation, as suggested by "to a land of *our own*", black people could devolve and be able to control their local communities through running their own schools, establishing more black owned businesses which would employ more black people and keep the resources within their own communities.

For Malcolm X, Muhammad's message on race consciousness is pivotal to black identity evolution: "The Honourable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that as long as our people here in America are dependent upon the white man, we will always be begging for jobs, food, clothing and housing. And he will always control our lives, regulate our lives, and have the power to segregate us" (348-9). This resonates with what happens to his family upon his father's alleged murder. The white controlled welfare system "intervenes," and like it does to so many black families, it causes more damage than help. Malcolm's mother is taken into a mental institution and all her children become wards of the state (recalling what slave mothers went through) – meaning, once again, white people have complete control of black people. He posits that even in their illusory "kindness," white people are always out to benefit more out of exploiting black people. This is a lesson he learns (during his prison days) from his brother Reginald when he (Malcolm) tries to defend Hymie, the Jew who had been "good" to him for facilitating that he also makes some money. To this, Reginald asks Malcolm a rhetorical question, "What is it if I let you make five hundred dollars to let me make ten thousand?" (253). This question piques Malcolm to critically reflect on his, and black people's relationship with whites; prompting his pedagogy, thereafter, to repeatedly urge black agency towards autonomy. He gives an example of how Jews have allegedly managed to carve out lucrative economic spaces for themselves through exploiting black communities:

> In every black ghetto, Jews own the major businesses. Every night the owners of those businesses go home with that black community's money, which helps the ghetto to stay poor …I will bet I have told five hundred such challenges that Jews as a group would never watch some other minority systemically siphoning out their community's resources without doing something about it. I have told them that if I tell the simple truth, it does not mean that I am anti-Semitic; it means merely that I am anti-exploitation (391).

I suggest this is a call to (political) action for black people to unite and break their *habituation* to exploitative arrangements with anyone. Here, Malcolm X is articulating the overarching NOI nationalist message that until there is black solidarity underpinned by race consciousness, black people will find it difficult to emancipate themselves from racism, political oppression and economic marginalisation.

Increasingly, during his NOI days, Malcolm X becomes, like his father, "a religious black man who challenge[s], and confront[s] white political power and privilege;" thereby consolidating the conflation of his religious and political subjectivities.[131] As spokesman and face of NOI, he finds himself having to grapple with not only black and white adversaries, but with his own internal struggle; he finds himself "desiring to be part of the political action, yet restrained under the headship of Elijah Muhammad (Jones, 427). James Smethurst however posits that an aspect "that is sometimes underestimated is the frame and platform that the Nation of Islam provided him, however much he would come to feel constrained by the limits that it and its leader, Elijah Muhammad placed on him."[132] Nonetheless, NOI's underpinning ideology of nationalism propels the organisation and Malcolm X into the national political

[131] Ryan Williams LaMothe, Malcolm X's Conversions: The Interplay of Political and Religious Subjectivities, Pastoral Psychol (30 September 2009): 523. Subsequent page referencing in text.
[132] James Smethurst, "Malcolm X and The Black Art Movement," in *The Cambridge Companion to Malcom X*, ed. Robert E. Terrill, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 78. Subsequent age referencing in text.

arena and consciousness as “enemy of the state” (I later explore black nationalism and Pan-Africanism through Malcolm X when he leaves NOI). For Malcolm X, his political belief system which has been unlocked by his religious subjectivity comes to the fore and evolves at pace once he leaves the NOI. He parts ways with the NOI mainly due to his discovery that Elijah Muhammad has fathered children outside his marriage (raising questions about his views on the marriage institution, and women – an exploration I will critically interrogate in Chapter Four). Malcolm X unequivocally asserts that his religious subjectivity had been shaped by how he imagined Elijah Muhammad to be – after God, he believed in Elijah Muhammad: “I believed in him as a divine leader. I believed he had no human weaknesses or faults, and therefore, he could make no mistakes and that he could do no wrong” (482). For Malcolm X, this betrayal is devastating, and his religious subjectivity as premised by NOI is destabilised; however, his fidelity to Islam remains intact as demonstrated by his formation of Muslim Mosque Inc., and his journey to Mecca on the Hajj after leaving NOI.

The Civil Rights Question

One of the major American political issues which threatened black solidarity as well as national cohesion was the African American battle for civil rights in the early 1960s. There emerged protracted inter and intra racial conflicts due to different ideologies, thoughts, and strategies. Malcolm X, as he articulates in his autobiography, was one of the prominent black figures whose thinking and position on this issue became central to how this minefield was negotiated. Inevitably, this question of black civil rights roped in people from all walks of life as it affected every facet of black and white lives. Religious figures would play major roles with Martin Luther King and Malcolm X operating from different sides of black positions; significantly differing on integration and civil rights. Malcolm X’s black subjectivities (religious

and political) clashed with the Civil Rights Movement's black middle-class leadership which was mostly Christian, and whose politics suggested a leaning towards integration. In his autobiography Malcolm X articulates tensions between himself and this black middle class dating back to his NOI days, in which both sides continue to accuse each other of destabilising black identity. Malcolm X positions the general populace of US black middle class at the centre of betraying black people with their obsequious postures towards white people, while the black middle class imagines Malcolm X as a demagogue whose philosophy on race relations does not represent black people's aspirations towards racial harmony.

Furthermore, in his autobiography, Malcolm X articulates nationalist criticism of the wider aspects of integration—he criticises the historical Great March on Washington organised by the civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King. While this march for the integrationists is a success and heralds a breakthrough in race relations between blacks and whites, for Malcolm X it is an illustration of how black Americans were being systemically "fed a dose of another form of the weakening, lulling and deluding effects of so-called 'integration'" (385). While he acknowledges the Great March's success in mobilising black people as "nothing since Joe Louis had so coalesced the masses of negroes," he also demonstrates his disgust by calling it a "Farce on Washington" (385). According to Malcolm X, this great idea was a result of "national bitterness … [p]redominantly [organised by] young Negroes, defiant of whatever might be the consequences, sick and tired of the black man's neck under the white man's heel" (385). However, he is not happy with how some the civil rights leaders (whom he does not name) hijacked this noble cause and also allowed the "integration" of the "white head of a big philanthropic agency" (386). This was only the start as besides the money, more famous white public figures were added to the 'supervision' of the march to help the 'big six' civil

rights Negro leaders (386). The original grassroot youth organisers, according to Malcolm X, were completely side-lined as the black middle and upper class who had earlier been against the march embraced it, since it now had the blessing of white organisations. With the white money, support and participation, "there wasn't a single logistics aspect uncontrolled" (387). The following conclusion from Malcolm X encapsulates his disgust:

> Yes, I was there. I observed that *circus*. Who ever heard of angry revolutionists all harmonizing 'We shall Overcome … Suum Day …' while tripping and swaying along arm-in-arm with the very people they were supposed to be angrily revolting against? Who ever heard of angry revolutionists swinging their bare feet together with their oppressor in lilypad park pools, with gospels and guitars and 'I Have a Dream' speeches? *And the black masses in America were – and still are – having a nightmare* (my emphasis) (387-388).

Notwithstanding, his deep mistrust of the civil rights movement's leadership and strategies, Malcolm X's political critique here clearly demonstrates how for him, Martin Luther King Jr., and other prominent religious figures, politics and religion were historically and inextricably intertwined.

Malcolm X as an Orthodox Muslim

After leaving the NOI, Malcom X's religious subjectivity influences his political positioning. He initially formed The Muslim Mosque, Inc. a religious organisation designed to reinforce the complimentary nature of his imagined black man's (two) subjectivities premised on religion and politics:

> This will give us a religious base, and the spiritual force to rid our people of the vices that destroy the moral fiber of our community … It will be a working base for an action program

> designed to eliminate the political oppression, the economic exploitation, and the social degradation suffered daily by twenty-two million Afro-Americans (*Autobiography*, 428).

Through the Muslim Mosque Inc., Malcolm hopes to demonstrate another progressive change to his black religious and political subjectivities as this organisation, unlike the NOI, "would embrace all faiths of black men, and it would carry into practice what the Nation of Islam had only preached" (427). For Malcolm and those who were willing to join him, the NOI was "too inactive" and "too slow" (427). Nonetheless, this organisation, like the NOI, would only allow black membership – "but if [white people's] conscience dictated, they could financially help [this] constructive approach to America's race problems" (428). However, this development problematises his imagined black identity, which prior to the Muslim Mosque Inc. has been premised on complete separation and independence from white people. In his autobiography he consistently criticises black organisations for being "black bodies with white heads" by accepting money and sponsorship from white people and white led organisations (345). He indicts these black organisations for having a "white boss – a president, or board chairman, or some other title, pulling the real strings" (346). How, then, his acceptance of money from these white people and organisations would be different is not made clear in his autobiography. However, if seen from the prism of his evolving black identity after his pilgrimage to Mecca, this could have been another sign of his ever-evolving black religious and political identities.

A profound change to Malcolm X's black identity emerges during and after his pilgrimage to Mecca on a Hajj in April 1964, and again, I suggest that his religious subjectivity is pivotal to this. What he sees and experiences during this journey (sponsored by his sister Ella as he did not have money) influences him to convert to Orthodox Islam. He claims that his blackness is

invisible in Mecca; he is embraced as a human being: "People seeing you as a Muslim [and not as a black man] saw you as a human being and they had a different look, different talk, everything … there really wasn't any colour problem here. The effect was as though I had just stepped out of prison" (433). Here Malcolm X parallels Herndon and Shakur in imagining the US as a giant prison which has imprisoned black people and enmeshed them in double consciousness; they cannot experience the real freedom he experiences in Mecca. Stepping outside this prison (the US), his experiences are astounding as he is not only embraced but honoured by "white" Muslims who have nothing to gain for their services to a black man.[133] Initially, Malcolm X instinctively defaults to his US black identity mind set as he posits:

> Nothing in either of my two careers as a black man in America had served to give me any idealistic tendencies. My instincts automatically examined the reasons, the motives, of anyone who did anything they didn't have to do for me. Always in my life, if it was a white person, I could see a selfish motive (446).

Malcolm X's US black man's disposition towards white people is destabilised by his Mecca experience in general, and how Dr Azzam treats him in particular. Dr Azzam (whom he considered would be recognised as white in America), gives up his opulent hotel apartment for him for no apparent gain. The impact of this action on Malcolm X's imagination of whiteness is "radical alteration", as prior to meeting Dr Azzam, and Orthodox Muslims, the white man "meant specific attitudes and actions toward the black man, and toward all other non-white men" (447).

[133] "White" because, according to Malcolm X their physical presentation would have had them classified as white people in the US (444).

However, I suggest that Malcolm X rather romanticises his acceptance. His acceptance is mainly due to group consciousness which is based on religious tribalism (reminiscent of Hurston and Wright's experiences, as I have explored in the first section of this chapter). He is embraced in Mecca because of his religion, which appears to subsume his racial identity at this point. Furthermore, I argue that even his religious position is only bolstered by his proximity to influential Muslims like Dr Mahmoud Shawarbi, whose letter is necessary for his visa, and how Dr Azzam facilitates his release after he is detained by customs and his passport and luggage returned. My argument here is further influenced by the elder Dr Azzam (father to the Dr Azzam who helps him with his customs and accommodation issues) who acknowledges the presence of racism in the Muslim world, albeit, as he claims, due to western influence: "He also pointed out how color, the complexities of color, and the problems of color which exist in the Muslim world, exist only where, and to the extent that, the area of the Muslim world has been influenced by the West" (449).

On the last Day of April 1964 Malcom flies back from from Mecca with a new name, El-Hajj Malik El -Shabbaz. This new name marks his conversion to Orthodox Islam and hopes that for his Muslim Mosque Inc. this "has established an authentic religious affiliation with the 750 million Muslim of the orthodox Islamic world" (478). On the other hand, his politics also evolve together with his religion as he benefits from his extensive travelling across Asia and Africa which comes after Mecca. This travelling allows him to meet world leaders and intellectuals, whose engagement engenders his imagination to soar. Some of the African leaders he met included: Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Gamal Abel Nasser of Egypt, and Ahmed Ben Beall of Algeria. In the Autobiography he talks of meeting African intellectuals like Professor Essien-Udom of Ibadan University, the author of *Black Nationalism*. Nonetheless,

he bemoans how the American black leader's "critical problem is lack of imagination. His thinking, his strategies, if any, are always limited, at least basically, to only that he is either advised, or approved by the white man" (461). Malcolm X advocates for solidarity with the black world outside America and starts conceptualising African American race issues with an international lens, something he says the American power structure fears. This "global black thinking" (467) would then connect the African American political and social issues to how black people are being treated globally by white people. To Malcolm X, the African American plight when thought of transnationally, eclipses the civil rights struggle to become a United Nations issue of human rights. Malcolm X posits Angola and South Africa as precedents of how the African American has an alternative to the narrow and unimaginative civil rights struggle authored by whites and supported by the black middle class: "... the American black man needed to recognise that he had a strong case to take the United States before the United Nations on a formal accusation of 'denial of human rights' ..." (478). I propose that this Malcolm X's framing of civil rights as human rights could be an example of the "new interpretation" which he had been looking for in his critique of the civil rights struggle earlier on in 1963, when he made the following statement:

> The entire civil rights struggle needs a new interpretation, a broader interpretation. We need to look at this civil rights thing from another angle – from inside as well as outside. To those of us whose whole philosophy is black nationalism, the only way you can get involved in the civil rights struggle is to give it a new interpretation. The old interpretation excluded us. It kept us out (Peller, 758).

However, Malcolm X's push for the reframing of civil rights to human rights does not get as much support from black Americans. He even concedes that he knew it would be difficult as the "… American white man has so thoroughly brainwashed the black man to see himself as

only a domestic 'civil rights' problem" (480). The other reason for this lack of appetite for engaging the United Nations is that "the black man has gone down so many fruitless paths. His leaders, very largely, had failed him. The religion of Christianity had failed him. The black man was scarred, he was cautious, he was apprehensive" (482). Nonetheless, Malcolm X is not giving up as Islam may be the panacea to the black man's problems: "In my thirty-nine years on this earth, the Holy City of Mecca had been the first time I had ever stood before the Creator of All and felt like a complete human being (482). This demonstrates his unequivocal belief that Islam, in good time, is the black people's "theology of liberation." To him, Islam is the only religion which can provide a counter-narrative to the dominant white perspective which then becomes a catalyst to unify black people and dismantle the problematic double consciousness which has engendered their habituation to oppression. However, at this stage in 1965, as indicated in his autobiography, Malcolm X has come to embrace all Americans in his endeavour to find a lasting solution to the problematic race issues:

> True Islam taught me that it takes *all* of the religious, political, economic, psychological, and racial ingredients, or characteristics, to make the Human Family and the Human Society complete. Since I learnt the *truth* in Mecca, my dearest friends have come to include *all* kinds – some Christians, Jews, Bhuddhists, Hindus, agnostics, and even atheists! I have friends who are called capitalists, Socialists, and Communists! Some of my friends are moderates, conservatives, extremists – some are even Uncle Toms! My friends today are black, brown, red, yellow, and *white* (493).

I suggest that this development has been precipitated by his religious evolution; once again demonstrating how his politics are driven by his religious subjectivity. He has now come to acknowledge there are some good people who are not black. He however continues to advocate for "his" human rights framework in the races working together: "… both races, as

human beings, [have] the obligation, the responsibility, of helping to correct America's human problem … The well-meaning white people … [have]to combat actively and directly, the racism in other white people." He goes on further to say, "And the black people [have] to build in themselves much greater awareness that along with civil rights there [has] to be the bearing of equal responsibilities" (494). However, his NOI image continues to destabilise the new Malcolm X, with the white press not helping with their relentless crusade of imagining him as the "angriest Negro in America" and "a teacher, a fomenter of violence" (483). He acknowledges his anger but has come to realise "that anger can blind human vision" (493). Genuine attempts to tame his emotions, as represented by his reaching out to different racial and ideological communities, mark a fundamental development which defines Malcom X's black identity evolution and how his pedagogy has evolved.

To augment his religious endeavours to (re)model black identity, Malcolm founds a Black Nationalist political organisation – the Organisation of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) which is predicated on the "black global thinking" I discussed earlier to foster Pan-Africanism. He defines this international black union as: "…physically we Afro-Americans might remain in America, fighting for our Constitutional rights, but that philosophically and culturally, we Afro-Americans badly needed to 'return' to Africa – and to develop a working unity in the framework of Pan-Africanism" (465-6). He personifies this Pan-African philosophy when he celebrates his new name to mark his honorary membership of the Nigerian Muslim Student Union: 'Omowale' – which, in Yoruba language means – "the son who has come home" (466). He declares his euphoria and sincerity to be so honoured: "I meant it when I told them I had never received a more treasured honor" (466).

Back in America, notwithstanding his acceptance of the need to work with positive-minded white people, he still maintains black nationalists' ideology of separation, and like his religious wing (Muslim Mosque Inc.), no white people are allowed to join OAAU. He urges that the "sincere" white people who wish to see the restoration of black Americans' human dignity work separately because black victims of racism are not the problem; their sincerity is rather needed "on the battle lines of where America's racism really is – and that is in their own home communities … America's racism is among their own fellow whites" (495). He firmly believes that white people working with black people in the same organisations would not bring the best out of the black man, because even "… the best white members will slow down the Negro's discovery of what they need to do, and particularly of what they can do – for themselves, working by themselves, among their own kind, in their own communities" (495). This demonstrates his deep devotion to localism as the structural framework to black politics which favours progressive black identity evolution predicated on black agency, and disengaging blackness from normalising white power and culture. Malcolm further stresses that while these "sincere whites teach non-violence to white people," his organisation "will meanwhile be working among our own kind, in our own black communities – *showing* and *teaching* black men in ways that only other black men can – that the black man has got to help himself" (my emphasis) (496). He then goes on to assert: "Working separately, the sincere white people and sincere black people actually will be working together (496).

In the end, as Malcolm predicts his own violent demise, he has come to recognise the value in the diversity of approaches to back people's journeys to reclaim their humanity, and this includes his nemesis Dr Martin Luther King's approach:

> The goal has always been the same with the approaches to it different as mine and Dr Martin Luther King's non-violence marching, that dramatizes the brutality and the evil of the white man against defenceless blacks. And in the racial climate of this country today, it is anybody's guess which of the 'extremes' in approach to the black man's problems might personally meet a fatal catastrophe first – 'non-violent' Dr King, or so-called 'violent' me (496).

Acknowledging this multiplicity of black pathways to freedom, and the complexity of the struggle reflects Malcolm X's lived experiences which have been replete with what he calls "unexpected drastic changes" (409). He has put himself at the centre of his black identity pedagogy to model his philosophy and demonstrate what he expects from his race. He further asserts that his death is imminent because in his endeavour to do his best in this fight for "the freedom of his 22 million black brothers and sisters," he has made enemies, especially given how his voice has "disturbed the white man's smugness, and his arrogance, and his complacency …" (496). Like most of his brothers he dies violently, and like his father he dies "because of what he believed in" (497). He gives a rundown of the "concoction" which points to his imminent violent death:

> To come down to it, if I take the kind of things in which I believe, then add to that kind of temperament that I have, plus the one hundred percent dedication I have to whatever I believe in – these are ingredients which make it just about impossible for me to die of old age (497).

Right up to his death, Malcom X frames his overarching aspiration to (re)model black identity with consistent fidelity to Islam as the "theology of liberation," notwithstanding the different versions he must personify. His life, as represented in his autobiography, encapsulates what Gandhi asserts about how religion and politics are inextricably intertwined: "Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is!" (Ghandi, x).

Chapter Four: Black Female Identity and Patriarchy: Misogynoir, and Colourism

In this chapter I investigate black and white patriarchal cultures and their historical relationship with black female identity. I posit that at the centre of this inter-generational and tyrannical relationship is pernicious sexism in the form of *misogynoir* – a term coined by two African American women through a blending of concepts that combines "misogyny" with the French word for black "noir" in their scholarship on specific hatred directed at black women. In an article in which they interview themselves in 2018, Moya Bailey talks about how she conceptualised *misognynoir*:

> As a queer Black woman, I was struggling to find a way to talk about the racial violence I was seeing in popular culture throughout history … For me, naming misogynoir was about noting an anti-Black misogyny and a problematic intraracial gender dynamic that had wider implications in popular culture. Misogynoir can come from Black men, white men and women, and even other Back women.[134]

In the same interview, Trudy (prefers using the first name with no surname) declares her interest in womanism and that from 2012 she started twitting about how *misogynoir* "impacts Black women's lives in interpersonal, social, and institutional ways." She further clarifies how *misogynoir* helps her discuss the interconnectedness of violence on black women:

[134] Moya Bailey, and Trudy, "On misogynoir: citation, erasure, and plagiarism" in *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 762-768, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395. Subsequent page references in text.

> It became important to me to connect how misogynoir in interpersonal relationships is impacted by misogynoir in mainstream media, which impacts misogynoir and State violence, for example. Making these connections between relationships, entertainment, and institutional violence helped me not only understand my own experience but how Black women in particular experience inequalities and abuse."

I use *misogynoir* as an interrogative lens of how patriarchy has historically enacted double consciousness through interlocking oppressive structures (politically, culturally and socially) as tools of power and control over black women. While misogyny is the hate directed at women in general, I use *misogynoir* in this chapter as distinctive hatred which singles out black women to discriminate them for their race, gender, class, skin colour, hair styles and body shape, among a host of other imagined descriptors. My initial focus is on how this specific hate of black women originated in the US and how it continues to evolve as represented in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; *Dust Tracks on a Road*; *Angela Davis: An Autobiography; I Know Why The Caged Bird* Sings, *Mom & Me & Mom*, and The *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. My entry point to my examination of *misogynoir* is the slavery era – the epitome of American white patriarchal capitalism, and how it formed this foundation of inter-generational sexism which continues to manifest through the weaponising of patriarchal cultures to contain, ostracise, silence and oppress women in general, and black women in particular.

I also examine the aforementioned sources' representation of colourism as a particular form of black patriarchal sexism which paradoxically appears to mimic the historic wider racism black people have fought against. Colourism is intra-racial racism by black people which discriminates those who are dark skinned (especially black females) in favour of those who are light skinned. Colourism also forms the framework

of my examination of the geography of patriarchal power—where is it located and how does it operate? I view the combined black and white patriarchal gaze, manifesting through *misogynoir* and colourism, as producing a cultural stranglehold which intractably positions black women at the centre of gender, intra-gender, racial, and intra-racial intersections of hate. However, embedded in my exploration is black women's historical subversions manifesting through inter-generational resistance as demonstrated by the way they "talk back"[135]. Black women subversions combine political activism against racism with combatting sexism in the endeavour to (re)shape black womanhood.

Black Patriarchy and Misogynoir

While most African women may have had their moments of being celebrated, especially during marriage ceremonies and just after giving birth, their lives in eighteenth and nineteenth century Africa were shaped by oppressive structures of black patriarchy. Oral-tradition and documented history passed down generations attest to how this tradition has been intergenerational. Black women are celebrated during marriage, and after childbirth, especially if the child is male. However, in typical patriarchal tradition, these celebrations, which are usually confined to these instances, betray patriarchal selfishness; women are not being lauded as equal contributors to family and community progress, but for what they serve for patriarchy. Reni Akujobi explores African motherhood and asserts, "Motherhood is not always as smooth as it seems in that it is also self-denying … although the reality of motherhood is experienced by women, the institution is ably controlled by men, because the

[135] Bell hooks – when women talk back "It is that act of speech … that is no mere gesture of empty words, [it] is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice – my notes p4

experience is being interpreted by men and the structure they control."[136] In marriage they are celebrated for their subordinate role of domesticity which is designed to serve the "master's" domestic and sexual needs. As mothers, African women are traditionally, only celebrated for their roles as "breeders" and care givers tending to the proliferating patriarchal linage. Amanda Berry, a nineteenth-century black missionary reports in one of her visits to African communities the condition of African women:

> The poor women of Africa, like those of India, have a hard time. As a rule, they have all the hard work to do. They have to cut and carry all the wood, carry all the water on their heads, and plant all the rice. The men and boys cut and burn the bush, with the help of women; but sowing the rice and planting the cassava, the women have to do.
>
> You will often see a great, big man walking ahead with nothing in his hand but a cutlass (as they often carry that or a spear), and a woman, his wife, coming on behind with a great big child on her back, and a load on her head.
>
> No matter how tired she is, her lord would not think of bringing her a jar of water, to cook his supper with, or of beating the rice, no, she must do that (hooks, 17)

Subsequently, this African cultural paternalism and *misogynoir* which positions black women as inferior and subservient is exploited by slaveocracy to its benefit. This may also explain the masculinisation of female slaves as they were made to carryout heavy field-duties on top of those duties which were reserved for only females. Joycelyn Moody explicates the masculinisation of slave women: "As physical laborers and

[136] Remi Akujobi, "Motherhood in African Literature and Culture," *Comparative Literature and Culture* Volume 13 Issue 1 (March 2011) Article 2 http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss2/2

mothers, … the enslaved black female body was simultaneously masculized and feminized by the dominant culture; in short her body was disparaged as grotesque"[137]

Brenda E. Stevenson explores the immediate impact of slavery on African women upon arrival in the 17th century US. In Virginia, for example, in 1643 the Virginia General Assembly passed a law which meant that any black female of sixteen years or older was "tithable" – "meaning taxes which had to be paid to the Church of England would be assessed on these women. Neither white nor Indigenous women had that distinction. In that way, Virginia's earliest leaders legally equated African women with men, erasing these women's pubic claim to feminine equality with other women."[138] This legal designation added costs which were passed onto these African women by their masters setting them as far apart from the other women as possible. They suffered economically as they struggled to pay what they were said to owe in taxes; they suffered physically as they had to work extra-hard to make ends meet, and they suffered emotionally as they became less desirable to black men because of the added cost of taxes. Stevenson asserts that this initial 17th century African women experience set the image of black womanhood which has endured the test of time in the US:

> It was a womanhood synonymous with market productivity, not motherhood; with physical prowess instead of feminine vulnerability; and with promiscuity rather than modesty or heightened moral sensibility. Such a distortion of Black women's physical,

[137] Joycelyn Moody, "African American women and the United Staes slave narrative" in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 122. Subsequent page referencing in text.
[138] Brenda, Stevenson, "Black Women's Labour," in *A Community History of African America 1619 – 2019: Four Hundred Souls,* ed. Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain (Dublin, Penguin Random House, 2021), 18-19. Subsequent page references in text.

emotional, cultural, gendered, and spiritual selves led to broad public's imagining of Black women as work horses, whores, and emasculating matriarchs" (19).

In *Incidents*, Jacobs confirms Stevenson's black women's slave portrait in the above passage through her assertion, "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own" (*Incidents*, 207). To further corroborate Jacobs' lament, Ijeoma Olou explores the shift on the blame of miscegenation from white men to the black women. In Virginia, a law was established to protect whiteness from contamination: "By 1640 when another white man was brought before Virginia Law for impregnating a Black woman, it was the Black woman who was whipped, while the white man was sentenced to church service."[139] The degree of punishment on the black woman betrays extraordinarily racial and gender bias designed to punish her with physical pain; while the white male is rehabilitated in church. These historical gendered differences have had devastating consequences on black women and the wider black race as Stevenson asserts: "This "othering" of Black women in colonial American society was foundational in the assault on Black femininity, masculinity, the Black family, and the sociocultural roles of Black adults" (19). Biological factors of motherhood and heterosexuality have had a fundamental impact on black women and how their lives are shaped. I have explored the former, and I now want to touch on the latter in its tragic impact on black women and how patriarchy continues to distinguish black women to rape as a particular way of threat and punishment well after slavery.

[139] Ijeoma Oluo, "Whipped for Lying with a Black Woman," in *A Community History of African America 1619 – 2019: Four Hundred Souls,* ed. Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain (Dublin, Penguin Random House, 2021) 13. Subsequent page references in text.

Angelou explores this recurring form of *misogynoir* through Maya's rape incident. Maya is rapped by her mother's live-in boyfriend, who is aptly named 'Freeman' – free to do what he likes with black females, apparently. Finding Vivian (Maya's mother) elusive, emasculating and not always available for him, Freeman decides, like white slave-masters, that any black female body will do, and rapes her daughter (Maya). The rape of any female, more so a child of eight years is egregiously vile and traumatising in its physical, emotional and psychological damage on the victim. However, in this case I want to examine Freeman's court case to reveal the hate at the centre of US law which insidiously operates as an essential component of the geography of patriarchal power to sanction the terrorism of black females: sexually, emotionally, physically or otherwise. While it is his role to defend his client, Freeman's lawyer's sniggering tone and posture leads to young Maya to question the whole procedure: "He snickered as if I had raped Mr. Freeman" (*Caged Bird*, 90). The lawyer's interrogation of Maya depicts her in the image of the black female slave who white patriarchy imagined as a temptress, jezebel and possessing wanton sexual drive: "Marguerite answer the question. Did the accused touch you before the occasion on which *you claim* he raped you?" (my emphasis) (*Caged Bird*, 9). That Maya is an eight-year-old girl who has been medically examined and confirmed as raped is not enough, she has to be paraded "in that strange and unfriendly place" and left to conclude "… all those people in the court would stone me as they stoned the harlot in the Bible (*Cage Bird*, 90-91).

Freeman is sentenced to "one year and one day, but he never got a chance to do his time. His lawyer (or someone) got him released that very afternoon." (*Caged Bird*, 91-

92). In the context of Freeman's heinous deed, his light sentence illustrates how the law, since slavery, places little value on black females. If Freeman had committed a similar offence to a white girl, he would surely have been lynched and never lived to remodel his life. Nonetheless, he is "lynched" anyway, as he is found dead and thrown behind a slaughterhouse. The "lynching" was probably done by Maya's uncles, whose power lay in their bi-racial heritage (I will be exploring this further in the segment on colourism). Maya's rape and court case illustrate how black female sexual molestations have been traditionally minimised, and how US law, being an essential cog within the geography of patriarchy has institutionalised sexism, especially against black women since slavery. This practice is especially endemic within male scholarships (black and white) which betray discriminatory male gazes towards black womanhood. In the thesis introduction, I have evidenced how the Black Intelligentsia, fronted by Richrd Wright and Langstone Hughes ridiculed and dismissed Zora Neale Hurston's corpus of work in the late 1930s. Later, in this chapter, I explore how Malcolm X erases his mother's extraordinary contribution to grassroots movement in Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association during the 1920s.

The end of slavery did nothing to really bring much joy for the black woman who found herself still yoked to subservient roles and positioned at the centre of multiple oppressive structures – gender, race, and class. This is evidenced by Wright and Malcolm X who in previous chapters have described how their mothers toiled in the white man's houses as maids. The recurring nature of this is illustrated by what Hurston and Maya go through in their workspaces in the homes of white people as I have highlighted earlier. However, it is the unceasing oppression back in their homes and communities (spaces which should give black women support and protection) that

further burdened their already traumatised existence. The characterisation of black patriarchy across my primary sources in this thesis (both male and female authored) illustrates a profoundly disquieting image of a culture mimicking the *misogynoir* central to white patriarchy. Black women are subjected to vile strategies which are aimed at marginalising, silencing and oppressing them. Quite often these strategies escalate to violent and sexual terrorism which recall the slave era. Malcolm X's mother is a victim of domestic violence perpetrated by her husband who in this case, is simultaneously fighting racist practises oppressing black people.

I read Malcolm X's representation of his father, Reverend Earl Little as echoing the black slave drivers in their violence against black women and anticipating the *misogynoir* which subsequently framed black patriarchy-led organisations which include: the Nation of Islam, Civil Rights movements, and Black Power movements of the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. It was apparently lost on Reverend Little, as to most black male leadership in religious, political, and civil rights organisations, how oppressive they were to their mothers, wives, daughters and all the black females in their lives. These black male leaders appear to have had an inter-generational characteristic of privileging and channelling their efforts towards fighting racial inequality at the complete exclusion of gender inequality. Sheila Radford-Hill, in her chapter, "Womanizing Malcolm X," reflects on the way black feminist and womanist have "sculpted the dominant theoretical narrative on Malcolm X. For example, in the 1980s and 90s, black feminists wrote a series of essays generally praising his political insight and excoriating his misogyny" (*African American Women's Literatur*e, 63). Malcolm makes it clear that his father was violent to his wife and children. However, Malcolm's representation of his father's violence on his mother is problematic in that it

suggests Louise Little was asking for it as she was condescending, and emasculating her husband, which is, apparently an unforgivable back woman apostasy:

> They seemed to be nearly always at odds. Sometimes my father would beat her. It might have had something to do with the fact that my mother had a pretty good education. Where she got it I don't know. *But an educated woman, I suppose can't resist the temptation to correct an uneducated man.* Every now and then, when she put those smooth words on him, he would grab her.[140] (my emphasis).

This is consistent with his representation of his sister, Ella, who as a strong black woman "emasculates" all the men in her life. Although grateful to his sister for her guidance and support, he is left astounded by her 'unrestrained disrespect of patriarchy' as she does not play her subservient role as a black woman:

> Only two weeks before I arrived, she had split with her second husband – the soldier, Frank, whom I had met there the previous summer; but she was taking it right in stride. I could see, though I didn't say, how any average man would find it almost impossible to live for very long with a woman whose every instinct was to run everything and everybody she had anything to do with (Leaky, 57)

Malcolm's conservative views on patriarchy always come to the fore whenever he talks of black women, displaying unmitigated bias and sympathy towards black males. Jeffrey B. Leaky surmises that "Throughout the Autobiography, Malcolm offers commentary on the roles of black women. Certainly, through his childhood as Malcolm

[140] Jeffery B. Leak, "Malcolm X and black masculinity in process," in *The Cambridge Companion To Malcolm* X ed. Robert E. Terrill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 54. Subsequent page references in text.

Little and his later incarnation, women are primarily depicted in relation to serving the needs of men" (Leaky, 57).

In Elijah Muhammad (the leader of the Nation of Islam, the church which models who Malcolm X becomes), he has an unapologetic patriarch and surrogate father who has no respect for women. Muhammad has children with women from his church, young enough to be his daughters. That Malcolm attempts to do some damage control to save Muhammad says much about his equally unedifying views of black women; he only leaves the church when it is clear Muhammad wants him completely out. Before their fallout, Muhammad discourages Malcolm from marrying and this adds to his (Malcolm's) ideology on women:

> I'd had too much experience that women *were only tricky, deceitful, untrustworthy flesh.* I had seen too many men ruined, or at least tied down, or in some other way messed up by women. Women talk too much … And for anyone in any kind of leadership position, such as I was, the worst thing in the world that he could have was the wrong woman. Even Samson, the world's strongest man, was destroyed by a woman who slept in his arms …" (my emphasis) (*Autobiography*, 326-327).

Malcolm does not see (black) women as complete human beings as he catagorises them as just *flesh*. This negative imagination and interpretation of black women and their roles in black men's lives is steeped in *misogynoir* and echoes the slave-master's imagination of female slaves as evil, jezebels and temptresses whose function was to lead men to sin and destruction. Echoing their white patriarchal counterparts, black men have historically appointed "themselves as the personal agents of God, they [have become] the judges and overseers of [black] woman's virtue" (hooks, 29).

Malcolm and Muhamad are not aberrations but symbolise black patriarchy throughout African Americans' long struggle against racism. They have parallels throughout my primary sources for this thesis, and black literature in general. For example, Hurston reports that her father was apoplectic with rage when she was born; he was not happy at all to have another daughter: "*I did hear he threatened to cut his throat when he got the news*. It seems that one daughter was all that he figured he could stand … one girl was enough. Plenty more sons, but no more girl babies to wear out shoes and bring nothing" (my emphasis) (*Dust tracks*, 19). A close reading of this account by Hurston on her father's reaction to the news of her birth is quite disturbing. For her father, having another daughter is so abhorrent, despicable and unfathomable that he sees it far much better to take his own life. He feels, as a (black) man, he has failed so absolutely to fulfil his duty of bringing more males into the patriarchal world; such is the hate directed at black females from birth.

This inter-generational pathological disdain of black women is instructive to the socialisation of black males. Representations suggest that from this socialisation, black men, like their white counterparts are historically reluctant to imagine black women in any other roles besides those which are subordinate to them - be it in politics, religion or any social setting which requires leadership. Exploring two seminal autobiographies: Frederic Douglass' *Narratives*, and Malcom X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, reveals a disturbing pattern of minimising, or occluding black women's primacy in black males' progress and successes. Douglass' narration of his slave life and escape does not give enough credit to both his mother (Harriet Bailey) and wife (Anna) except a cursory glance at them. Both women, according to Jeffery B. Leak are taken for granted and their role is minimised. Leak is especially concerned that

even as an adult and writing back in fairly comfortable settings, Douglass “finds little comfort in the effort his mother made, after a day of labor, to return to the plantation to make sure he was safe and that his basic needs were met” (60). Douglass replicates his attitude towards her mother’s role in his life when he fails to adequately acknowledge his wife’s (his intended then) role during and after his escape from slavery. Alerting us to the vagaries of colourism on black women (which I discuss later in this chapter) Leak notes both Douglass’ mother and wife’s dark hue skin-tone: “This woman [Douglass’ wife], also of a “darker complexion,” was clearly a major player in Douglass’s escape, but her role was never explored in any of the three autobiographies” (60). I argue that Leak’s effort to highlight both women’s skin-tone strongly implies colourism was at play here with Douglass viewing both Harriet and Anna as less valuable because of their dark skin - especially with the development that he later marries a white woman after the death of his Anna.

Douglass’ legacy (explored in the above paragraph) is continued by Malcolm X in his representation of his mother (Louise Little) and his half-sister, Ella. His relationship with both women illustrates his “struggle with paternalism and sexism with all the women in his life” (Leaky, 55). I posit that Douglass and Malcolm’s characteristics of paternalism and sexism speaks to how black masculinity generally echoes white masculinity in its patriarchal gaze on black women. Again, Leaky alerts us to colourism as he uses Malcolm X’s language to describe Louise Little as “a light skinned woman” and Ella as “strong big, black Georgian-born woman”. With Ella, while she is strong, reliable and resourceful, her strength and her dark skin-tone simultaneously make her undesirable and even dangerous. I have discussed in Chapter Two about how she is represented as a type of black women who emasculates black men, and therefore are

dangerous. Here, as a precursor to my colourism section, I use Leak's assertion: "Malcolm views [Ela's strength] along with her dark complexion, as signs of some kind of disorder, one from which he benefits of course, but nonetheless not to be replicated, say, in the lives of his daughters … In Malcolm's view, she is not the woman to marry, but the woman to go to when you need help." I argue that at the centre of Malcolm's patriarchal gaze is *misogynoir*—to Malcolm, both his mother and sister are inherently defective.

With his mother, Malcolm claims he does not even know where she got her education; a dismissive description which marks her education as some kind of blemish which she should be stigmatised for. He then goes on to completely occlude her history of grassroots-activism during the Marcus Garvey Movement which he goes into at great length when talking about his father. Louise was very active in the Garvey movement and her ability to read and write was valuable. However, for Malcolm X, his mother's activism was insignificant compared to his father whom he represents as a martyr as I have explored earlier in Chapter Four. According to Hilton Als, "Louis Little only serves two purposes for Malcolm: to give birth to him and to symbolise the stain of white bold on the Negro race. Malcolm objectifies her, rendering her as nothing more than an extension of white supremacy and colonialism" (Leak, 56). This reading, then perhaps explains why Malcolm is uncomfortable and reluctant to represent her mother as a heroine of the liberation struggle on par with his father. Like Douglass his predecessor, Malcolm's patriarchal disposition does not allow him to credit his mother;

he instead elects a representation which echoes Charlotte Bronte's characterisation of Bertha Mason as a mad woman in the attic.[141]

In the next two paragraphs I want to sketch a representation of Louise Little which resists minimising and erasure. Little was far from how Malcolm X represents her. Furthermore, Malcolm X's representation of his mother is echoed by some mostly male scholars whose reading postures towards imagining Little as vulnerable, unstable, and a woman who buckled under the weight of single parenthood. Erik S. McDuffie, "recovers the life and work of [Louise] Little from historical obscurity."[142] In this remarkably insightful exploration which incidentally interrogates the extent of *misogynoir* at the centre of male scholarship, McDuffie asserts that Malcolm X, Alex Hayley, and most scholars have, "unfortunately, portrayed Little one-dimensionally as a wretched figure. The Autobiography frames Little as passive and apolitical …" (148). McDuffie goes on to posit that even Manning Marable's biography of Malcolm X minimises Little's active role in cultivating Malcolm's political consciousness. While Marable acknowledges Louise's political involvement, he limits her role to a secretary of a local UNIA branch.[143] However, he covers her husband, Reverend Earl Little, more broadly—giving him more space to articulate his contribution to the struggle. It then appears that at the very least, Malcolm X, Alex Hayley, and Manning Marable were complicit in making deliberate decisions to minimise the crucial part Louise Little played, not only in Malcolm's coming to political consciousness, but her role as one of

[141] In Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason, is a fictional character depicted as an insane Creole woman married to Rochester, a rich Englishman. Bertha represents British fears of both foreigners and women and is kept in the attic away from everyone else.
[142] Erik S. McDuffie, "The Diasporic Journeys of Louise Little: Grassroots Garveyism, the Midwest, and Community Feminism," *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2016) 148. Subsequent page referencing in text.
[143] Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (London, Penguin Group, 2011), 23. Subsequent page references in text.

the foundational black women political pathfinders of her time. This is an example of selective black patriarchal gaze in black academia which McDuffie says, “affirms literary scholar Carole Boyce Davies’s observation about the ways black women have been erased from scholarly analysis of the black radical tradition” *(146).* In his autobiography, Malcolm X represents his father, Earl Little as a great patriarch who was fearless, resourceful and a politically conscious Garveyite. Earl Little’s dedication to political activism and emancipation of the black diaspora in the US is portrayed to have been so successful that he was seen as a threat by white supremacists who are then alleged to have murdered him. Malcolm goes on to claim his father’s political activism and legacy as the genesis of his own political consciousness, citing the times his father took him to meeting as one of the examples. However, he is incredibly silent about his mother’s remarkable political activism.

During the 1920s, Louise Little was a formidable woman whose activism was grounded firstly on her choice not to only identify with blackness, but to choose to be black, marry a black man and raise black children – it was an extraordinary political statement. She was reportedly light-skinned enough, with such long black hair that she could have passed as a white woman. She could have chosen to whiten herself and lived a fairly comfortable life. However, she chose to be a black woman who would go on to use her experience from her upbringing to be part of community activism. Louise was born in Grenada, a British colony and former slave society deeply stratified by race, gender, and class. She was a product of rape and McDuffie posits that her father “Edward Norton, was a loafer from Scotland, who had a penchant for sexually assaulting Africa-descended women. Norton raped Little’s mother, Edith Langdon, when she was 11 years old, producing her only child, Louise” (152). Conscious of her

personal history and the legacy of racialized sexual violence on black women, Louise grew into a fierce political activist. She joined Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and became a committed grassroots leader who McDuffie posits as "a major figure in the twentieth-century black nationalism, Pan-Africanism and the African Diaspora" (147). Born and raised in a family and community steeped in a dynamic culture of opposition, it is then difficult to comprehend how her children could have been impervious to her politics. Malcolm's father as a reverend minister was often away from home, so Louise's political and social influence cannot be underestimated. McDuffie emphasises Louise's impact on Malcolm and the rest of her children when he asserts, "… growing up in a family fiercely proud of its African ancestry ensured [Louise] Little identified with black people and their struggle to be free. She would cultivate this sensibility in her children" (152). Sheila Radford-Hill corroborates this when she asserts that "Louise Little was a woman whose life had a profound impact on her son [Malxolm X]. … [She] was a proud and resourceful woman" who, "according to Philbert, Malcolm's older brother, Yvone Woodward, his young sister, and Ilyasah Shabazz, the third of his six daughters, Louise Little provided education, race consciousness, and spiritual direction for her children"[144] Radford-Hill, unlike her male counterparts, also acknowledges and celebrates Louise Little's activism as on par with her husband: "Like her husband, Earl Little, she espoused the beliefs of Marcus Garvey, who in 1914 founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association based on race pride., Pan-Africanism, and black economic independence" (66). It is therefore not surprising then that she becomes a victim of state sanctioned structural violence because her political ideology was deemed to be subversive. She

[144] Sheila Radford-Hill, "Womanizing Malcolm," in *Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X*, ed. Robert E. Terrill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 66. Subsequent page references in text.

was then targeted and put into a mental institution; a development which automatically made her children state wards who were then distributed into various foster homes. Her treatment here is typical—any black woman who acts to subvert patriarchal tyranny in any way is deemed mad and should be confined to the "attic". Furthermore, recalling the cruelty of slavery on black mothers, Little's punishment involves her separation from her young children.

Douglass and Malcom's legacies demonstrate that from "1845 to 1965, one of the primary challenges of black masculinity involved acknowledging and affirming the presence of black women, not simply as helpmates for black men, but as primary conduits for African American emancipation" (Leaky, 60). George Jackson, as I have explored in Chapter Two mimics Douglass and Malcolm X in displaying black patriarchal *misogynoir* and only revisits his stereotypical imaginations due to his association and intimate relationship with Angela Davis. As demonstrated by Davis and Elaine Brown (Black Panther Party leader), most black men in black liberation movements did not readily accept their leadership as they preferred that women confine themselves to subservient roles, leaving the leadership roles to black men. In her chapter, "Autobiography and African American women's literature," Joanne Braxton gives an insight into the treatment of women in the Back Panther Party: "[Elaine] Brown details her beating and sexual abuse by Huey P. Newton, her lover and supposed comrade , and the violent "discipline" forced upon sister Panthers by men who resented the presence of women in leadership roles" (*African American Women's Literature*, 141) This recalls some of the nineteenth century representations of white patriarchy which upon abandoning its portrayal of white women as temptresses, began to extoll them as the "nobler half of humanity" whose duty was to

elevate men's sentiments and inspire their higher impulses" (hooks, 31). While black patriarchy has historically dispensed with the characterisation of black women as the "nobler half of humanity" they have kept fidelity to the part which sees black women's role as that of supporting and inspiring black men to "their higher impulses". A typical illustration was Elaine Brown, the first woman to seem to have "successfully" challenged black manhood by going on to lead the Black Panther Party from 1974 to 1977. Her rise to leadership and the subsequent tenor of black male resistance encapsulated patriarchal ideology about black women's positioning in the struggle across the diverse range of political and civil rights movements.

However, some black women, as illustrated by Davis and Brown resisted the patriarchal posture to diminish their agency and leadership qualities. Braxton quotes Brown as she bravely announced her quest of reclaiming "her womanhood and her place" through unequivocally proclaiming:

> There would be no further imposition on me by men, including black men, including Black Panther men. I would support every assertion of human rights by women – from the right to abortion to the right of equality with men as laborers and leaders. I would declare that the agenda of the Black Panther Party and our revolution to free black people from oppression specifically included black women (141).

Nonetheless, it was when she directly challenged patriarchy that she entered dangerous grounds; she asserted:

> I would denounce loudly the philosophies of the Karengas, who raised the name of Africa to justify the suppression of black women. I would lambaste the civil-rights men

> who had dismissed the importance of women like Fannie Lou Hammer and Ella Baker and Daisey Bates and even Kathleen Cleaver*. I would not tolerate* any raised fits in my face or any Black Power handshakes, or even the phrase "Black Power," for all it now symbolized to me the denial of the black woman in favour of the freedom of "black man." *I would reclaim my womanhood and my place* (My emphasis) (141).

What followed this great speech of resistance demonstrated the misogynoir which has historically framed black struggles and patriarchy. In events which recall Harriet Jacobs, as with other slave females, in the multiple strategies of disguise and concealment, Brown had to flee in the dark of the night with her little daughter as black men pursued them (Braxton, 143). This disturbing development underscored the fact that black women continued to feel terrorised by those they shared the same identity with, those who should have been their protectors. These were her brothers in the struggle; brothers who claimed to be sharing the same quest for freedom.

In her autobiography, Angela Davis demonstrates the extent and depth of black men's antipathy to black women by articulating her own gender experiences with black men in organisations fighting racism and other injustices. She reveals how she faces significant resistance when she is also pilloried for daring to take leadership of organising a joint rally which included her Student National Council, the Communist Party, Black Panther Party and Ron Karenga's US-Organisation, among others. She is accused, as Brown was of attempting to usurp male authority. Her action causes so much consternation with mostly male members of the Karengas – they ridicule her for doing "a man's job" because "women should not play leadership roles, they insisted. woman [is] supposed to inspire her man and educate his children" (*Davies*, 161).

Black women portraits of slaveocracy, and representations by Hurston, Angelou, and Davis, critically encapsulate what Bailey and Trudy have framed as *misogynoir*. Historically, there are no safe spaces for black women; be at work, church, community or homes, they are hated for being female and black. This is why Trudy and Moya, following their black women pathfinders, have positioned *misogynoir* at centre their theorising and scholarship. Bailey sees the surfacing of new terms like *misogynoir* as helping to "broaden the current toolbox in order to resist gender oppression."[145] Continuing to interrogate and challenge the interlocking nature of *misogynoir* may help explain black women experiences as well as help in finding lasting strategies and solutions. Trudy explains the efficacy in her theorising *misogynoir*:

> It has helped me explain my own personal experiences and use them as a template for pushing back on street harassment, anti-Black ableism, economic violence and exploitation as well as State violence. If intersectionality explains how Black women experience race, gender and class differently from Whites/men, then misogynoir explains why it occurs. If womanism provides the space for vulnerability and strength for Black women, misogynoir explains how that vulnerability is exploited and how strength is weaponised to deny Black women's humanity (*On misogynoir; citation, erasure, and plagiarism).*

[145] Moya Bailey, "New Terms of Resistance: A Response to Zenzele Isoke," *A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 15, no.4 (March, 2014): 341, https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2014.884451

Colourism

Colourism is an intra-racial colour system prevalent in black societies which privileges those of lighter skin while discriminating those with a darker hue as less valuable. Colourism is a term coined by Alice Walker, a prolific African American female writer who has interrogated the lived experiences of black people through mostly her fictional narratives. Walker defined colourism as an "internalised preference for European physical features by African Americans such as light skin and straight hair, which divides the Black community."[146] Walker's definition here, as I later examine, epitomises young Maya Angelou's representation of the psychological and emotional damage African American women are exposed to from a very early stage of their lives. Deborah Gabriel expands on Walker's definition when she critically examines colourism as "a pernicious, internalised form of racism which involves prejudice, stereotyping and perceptions of beauty among members of the same racial group, whereby light skin is more highly valued than dark skin."[147]

I frame my exploration within this definition to interrogate representations of the colour binary within African American communities. I also examine how black women especially, are represented as having been historically wounded by colourism as part of the damaging patriarchal gaze which prompts Du Bois' double consciousness formulation that leaves them always measuring themselves through the eyes of the oppressive patriarchal institution(s). I posit that colourism is an extension of the *misogynoir* I have explored earlier, further illustrating how patriarchy (black and white) determinedly continues to institute a cultural system designed as a significant

[146] Keisha L. Harris, "Biracial American Colorism: Passing for White," *American Behavioural Scientist* 62, no. 14 (Dec. 20180): 2073. Subsequent page references in text.
[147] Deborah Gabriel, *Layers of Blackness: Colourism in the African Diaspora* (London: Imani Media Ltd, 207), 11. Subsequent page references in text.

repressive instrument which manipulates, marginalises and oppresses black women. I premise that within this cultural framework, both the dominant white culture and African American culture are weaponised to perpetually position women generally, and black women particularly, at the margins of any meaningful roles in family, social and political sites. I especially examine how Angelou represents colourism as an extra-burden on her and other black women who are already at the centre of the intersection of oppressive patriarchal structures which include race, gender, and sexism. I explore the representation of how some black women imbue themselves into colourism to erase their blackness or escape the oppressive cultural structures of patriarchy. I also explore how some women characters in the narratives I'm exploring utilise "benefits" from colourism to subvert patriarchy to reposition and assert black womanhood.

Black Patriarchy and Colourism

Hurston and Angelou represent the typicality of black patriarchy as mimicking white patriarchy to impose its construction of black female bodies and determine who is beautiful and who is ugly. They explore these representations as giving rise to what "gender colourism." Using data from the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA), Mark E. Hill develops and tests a theory of gendered colourism among Africa Americans. He asserts, "As predicted, results indicate that skin tone influences the attractiveness ratings assigned to black women in a compelling, monotonic manner. The association is significantly weaker for men. The gender-by-skin-tone interaction is consistent with the hypothesis that African Americans perceive fair skin tone as a particularly feminine characteristic." [148] This makes gender colourism a historic

[148] Mark E. Hill, "Skin Color and the Perception of Attractiveness among African Americans: Does Gender Make a Difference?" *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 65, no.1 (Mar, 2002): 77. Subsequent page references in text.

phenomenon which has become one of the most intractable and interlocking systems of black women oppression by black patriarchy. This is mainly because of the power and privilege black men have in black culture. In this case, male power and privilege manifests as “gender colourism” in which black patriarchy colonises black women bodies by significantly rewarding those who are light-skinned while simultaneously devaluing, punishing and dehumanising those with a darker hue.

I explore why black patriarchy favours light skinned women through Fanon’s lens of the disproportionate power, position and privilege white men have, and how this development engenders double consciousness in black men. Fanon argues that black men covet the power white men possess but the denial of social, economic and political opportunities have left them frustrated and angry. One way of mitigating this situation for the black man is his desire to escape his blackness through becoming “white”. One way of becoming “white” is to date or marry a white woman: “Unable to change his skin color, the African American male may conceptualise one method to assimilate or liberate his oppression [is] by forming an intimate and once taboo relationship” (Mathews and Jonson, 254). This recalls the period Malcolm X and his friend, Shorty go through in their processing of black identities as reported in *Malcom X: An Autobiography.* They are subsequently jailed ostensibly for burglary but, they are criminalised for defiling ‘pure white females’ and are disproportionately sentenced to ten years in prison. Here Malcolm X and Shorty are the quintessential black men who are failed by system whose social, economic and political conditions historically privilege white men. These taboo relationships with white women, only for a moment, allow Malcolm X and Shorty to “escape” their blackness and “whiten” themselves. Their psychological conflict here encapsulates what Fanon critically explores about

some black men who choose to have relationships with white women in order to ameliorate their social conditions:

> Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra stripping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly *white*. I wish to be acknowledged not as a black but as *white* … who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. Her love takes me onto the noble road to total realization …. I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilisation and dignity and make them mine (*Black Skin*, 45)

According to Mathews and Johnson, what Fanon articulates above illustrates what racism and the denial of opportunities have done to the African American men's collective psyche:

> … as a result of this internal chaos, the African-American male has projected his feelings onto the African-American female. He attributes his self-worth to the physicality of his partner, and if she cannot be white, she can at least be light. Therefore, the role of the African-American male in regards to colorism is the blatant preference for light complexioned women (254)

This preference for light skin becomes a damaging double bind for black women as evidenced by the solidarity of the patriarchal gaze (black and white):

> While it is recognized that African-American males encounter psychological conflictions in their role in general society, they nevertheless benefit from a male privilege that allows them esteem and authority over how African-American women

> view themselves. Again, American society places high importance on women's physical appearance and it is an unfortunate fact that what is visually acceptable for women is controlled by the opinions of men (Mathews and Johnson, 255)

This double-barrelled culturally powered onslaught on black women is central to what I view as a weaponised culture (which could be termed as *culturefare*). The solidarity of white and black patriarchy converges on black women in the endeavour to colonise their bodies and determine who they become. Zora Neale Hurston talks about a woman whose husband leaves her for a light skinned woman: "He was in business, and a member of the House, but long years ago he had divorced Botts's mother for a woman with lighter skin."[149] Unable to change his wife's skin colour, this man decides the shame of having a dark-skinned wife is too much. Black culture, echoing the white slave-master, sees black women as expendable; this permits Botts' father to replace his wife with a more "desirable" light skinned one who gives him the social prestige he craves. Never mind the damage he is causing to his former wife and the children – his manhood is sacrosanct. This man sets a precedent for his son who also rejects his mother for the same reasons – dark skin-tone. Despite being left to fend for her children by herself, Botts' mother successfully labours to send her son through law school in London to become a barrister. However, her son "had come [back], not full of gratitude for the sacrifices she had made, but scornful of her black skin and all that she stood for. People said that he had paid her … to stay away from his house (161). What happens here is a microcosm of the wider black cultural privilege accorded to black men in a patriarchal culture which sees black women as dispensable - a husband

[149] Zora Neal Hurston, *Dust Tracks On the Road*, (New York; First Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 206), 161. Subsequent page references in text.

replaces his wife, and a son rejects his mother – both men completely disregard the emotional and psychological damage they cause to her.

At this point I initiate a dialogue between Hurston's characterisation of black women treatment as illustrated by the above anecdote and Maya Angelou's representation of herself as a little girl child. This dialogue traces black women trauma from childhood to adulthood in patriarchal cultures at the centre of their lives**.** The mother Hurston talks about is not rejected just because of her gender here, but also because of the skin-tone which has become incompatible with the success her husband and son have recently achieved, significantly repositioning their status in society. Her dark skin represents all that is deemed negative about female blackness and brings shame to both men whose success has now brought closer proximity to whiteness and deserves, in their imagination, black women who embellish their newly acquired status. These women must have features which resemble the "standard of beauty" – white women. This is echoed by Maya who at a very young age is already subconsciously aware of the treatment she will receive the rest of her life within the overarching patriarchal framework (black and white) – a culture which does not value black women like her who have dark skin and her kind of hair, notwithstanding her bi-racial heritage. Her fantasy, which opens her autobiography (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings)*, is representative of her double consciousness and signals the struggle ahead:

> Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light blue eyes were going to hyptonize them, after all the things they said about 'my daddy must have been a Chinaman' (I thought

> made of china, like a cup) because my eyes were so small and squinty. Then they would understand why I never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil (*Caged Bird, 4-5)*

Furthermore, it is significantly telling that in this fantasy, the church minister's wife has a "yellow face" reinforcing the idea that black men who have status set the standard of female beauty by their preference of light-skinned women. This preference is echoed by Hurston when she explores how, within black communities,

> [T]he blackest Negroes, [are] made the butt of all jokes, particularly women … They were evil. They slept with their fists balled up and ready to fight and squabble even while they were asleep. They even had evil dreams. White, yellow and brown girls dreamed about roses and perfume and kisses. Black [skinned] gals dreamed about guns, razors, ice-picks, hatchets and hot lye … (*Dust Tracks*, 184).

The above anecdote is typical of some of the stereotypes which reinforce and normalise damaging cultural perceptions whose influence help shape black femininity within black communities and wider society. This relentless onslaught on black women is present in families and is reinforced in schools. Hurston echoes young Maya's traumatic experience which leads her to escape through fantasy; she questions the representation of blackness in schools and society:

> If it was so honourable and glorious to be black, why was it that the yellow-skinned people among us had so much prestige? Even a young child in the first grade could see that this was so from what happened in the classroom and on school programs. The light-skinned children were always the angels, fairies and queens of school plays. The lighter the girl, the more money and prestige she was apt to marry (*Dust Tracks*, 185).

With this perception of society's preference for light skin in the girl child, black women face traumatic experiences from the moment they are conscious of how they may fall short of the expected physical beauty standards largely set by the patriarchal communities around them. Maya, for example, must employ fantasy to escape the trauma of her blackness which she interprets as not representative of the image acceptable to her community. Her blackness as represented by how her skin colour, hair and other physical features combine to compromise her self-esteem, leading her to reject who she is. Mathew and Johnson reiterate this impact of negative self-esteem on African American women which affects Maya: "African-American women's self-esteem begins to deteriorate as soon as she understands the racial guidelines of American culture" (258). I therefore explore Maya as representative of how the dominant white culture and her own black culture converge to colonise her body and compromise her self-worthiness. Her double consciousness impinges on her psychology and forces her to examine herself using the eyes of the patriarchal society. I use the lenses of two sociological theories of self: Charles Horton Cooley's *Looking glass theory*, and Erving Goffman's concept of *Stigma* to explore how this convergence of white and black cultures affects Maya and other black women. Cooley's theory of how we view ourselves through the reflection we see from society posits that "in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our

appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it." (Mathews and Johnstone, 257). For black women like Maya, they face judgement from an unforgiving American patriarchal culture (black and white) and it is their awareness of this biased critical eye that impacts on their self-esteem and who they transition to be. This impact becomes explicit through Cooley's explication of his theory:

> [T]he imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of *his* judgement of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. The comparison with the looking glass hardly suggests the second element, the imagined judgement, which is quite essential. The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind. This is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our feeling (my emphasis to underscore patriarchal influence).[150]

Using the stigma lens on Maya, one can sense her low self-esteem as resulting from negative messages she receives from those around her and particular social sites which include school and church. These patriarchal spaces submerge her in negative judgements on dark-skinned women which she internalises at an early age - triggering her escape into fantasy as a coping or resistance strategy. I see this escape into fantasy as a form of a mask which mimics Fanon's suggestion of how some people of African descent attempt to break away from their blackness by wearing 'white masks'.

[150] Charles Horton Cooley, "The self as sentimental reflection," in *inside social life readings in sociological psychology and microsociology,* S.E. Cahill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007):28.

I see Maya's mask as two-fold; she rejects herself in real life, and then rejects herself again in her fantastical world by re-imagining herself as white, with those around her remaining black. This double rejection emphasises the depth of her trauma. When she is working for Mrs Cullinan, back in Stamps, Maya continues to show how colourism is deeply embedded in her psyche. She talks about Mr Cullinan having two daughters with a coloured lady she knows so well. She says of these two girls, "They were very light-skinned and certainly didn't look like their mother … Those girls, … were beautiful. They didn't have to straighten their hair. Even when they were caught in the rain, their braids still hung down straight like tamed snakes …" (*Caged Bird*, 116). In this development of her black woman identity, she typifies the manifestation of double consciousness by measuring herself against these "light-skinned" girls who have "straightened hair." She echoes those black women whose endeavour is to escape their blackness at all costs; they attempt to transform their bodies to resemble white female bodies through imitating hairstyles and bleaching their skin to meet the acceptable beauty standard set by the American patriarchal society.

The negative impact of colourism on Maya continues as she grows older. She is eight years old when she sees her mother for the first time after Bailey (her elder brother) and her have been sent to live with her paternal grandmother in the South:

> To describe mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power … My mother's beauty literally assailed me. Her red lips …split to show even white teeth and *her fresh-butter color looked see-through clean* … I was struck dumb, I knew immediately why she had sent me away. She was too beautiful to have children (my emphasis) (*Caged Bird*, 64-65).

This is corroborated in *Mom & Me & Mom*, where Maya encapsulates how low a dark-skinned woman's self-esteem can fall. She recounts a version of her first encounter with her mother (originally told in *Caged Bird*) at the station when they are brought to live with her. She describes how she sees herself in this fledging mother-daughter relationship:

> [Mother] looked around and [then] saw me. I wanted to sink into the ground. *I wasn't pretty or even cute.* That woman who looked like a movie star deserved a better-looking daughter than me. I knew it and was sure she would know it as soon as she saw me (my emphasis).[151]

Angelou's representation of herself gives an insight into the effects of stigma on dark-skinned women. Akeia A. F. Benard's exploration of the body as a form of physical text loaded with meaning explicates Maya's interaction with her society*:* "Since the body is a physical text in society, laden with meaning and positioned within particular systems of meaning, it is always in view and on view."[152] In light of this assertion, I posit that the skin becomes an iconographic text which is open to interpretations of one's worthiness*.* The society's critical eye, with its concomitant historical colourism bias, "reads," interprets, and stigmatises dark-skinned black women. Black women are automatically categorised according to their skin-tone and their social interaction is predetermined because, according to Goffman, "physical appearance serves as information about an individual which helps to define the situation, enabling others to

[151] Maya Angelou, *Mom and Me and Mom* (Great Britain: Virago Press, 2013), 12. Subsequent page references in text.
[152] Akeia A. F. Benard, "Colonizing Black Female Bodies Within Patriarchal Capitalism: Feminist and Human Rights Perspectives" *Sexualization, Media & Society* (Oct-December 2016): 2. Subsequent page references in text.

know … what they expect of [them]" (Mathews and Johnson, 259). Seeing her mother and being "literally assailed" by her beauty makes Maya self-conscious about her perceived ugliness which her society's collective consciousness has reflected to her; that is why she has accepted that she "wasn't pretty or cute". She has internalised the stigma associated with dark-skinned black women making her feel unworthy to be the daughter of such a beautiful woman whose standing in society is so high. She feels that her society holds women like her mother, with her light skin and beautiful soft hair (not kinky and hard) in such high esteem that a daughter like her (Maya) does not fit the profile of familial relations. While she is proud to have a mother so beautiful, it appears that beauty triggers a heightened feeling of shame; she becomes acutely conscious of the stigma attached to black girls like her. Goffman concept of stigma explicates this particular stigma illustrated here by Maya. This concept reveals how some people experience *discredited stigma* – a development which comes from having a blemish or mark that separates one from others. Maya's low self-esteem, which is a result of her "sub-standard" physicality (inter alia, dark skin, and kinky hair) becomes a stigma (mark or blemish) that leaves her completely alienated from her mother.

As if her experience with her mother in the above incident is not traumatic enough, Maya's low self-esteem and stigma is again tested when she meets her stepmother. Already fragile because of her feelings of abandonment by her mother earlier on in her young life and her subsequent "excuse" as to why she did it, Maya is re-traumatised when she meets her stepmother for the first time. This meeting again confirms how the world perceives black women like her; she is rejected by her stepmother the moment they meet – she completely shuts Maya out and wraps herself in silence.

Meeting her stepmother at the station (note the very public space of her rejection), Maya describes what ensues:

> I saw her first and when I did, I wanted to shrink and I wished I had not come. She was small like my mother but half her age …She saw me and looked twice … Her face registered utter disbelief. I walked over to her so she had to admit that her eyes were not playing tricks. I was indeed Bailey Johnson's daughter and by association, despite my size and plainness, I was hers as well … I could hear the locks slam shut in her mind. She would never accept me as anyone close to her … She did not initiate any conversation during the ride. She answered each question I asked with a single yes or no (*Mom & Me & Mom*, 39-40).

This incident encapsulates Cooley's looking glass theory and Goffman's concept of stigma. On seeing Maya, her stepmother categorises her as unworthy of her attention because she does not fit the expected cultural model of a black woman, she is dark skinned, has kinky hair and is too plain to warrant her attention. She reacts to Maya with open disapproval and opposition, confirming her *discredited stigma* category which is articulated by Goffman. Goffman takes his cue from the Greek original meaning of stigma as a symbol of dishonour or disgrace which is usually marked by a bodily sign, which in Maya's case (and other black women) is her dark skin and kinky hair, among other bodily signs. This is why Maya is met with abrupt disapproval and rejection by her step-mother; something which is an enduring lived experience which black women like her grapple with all their lives. B.G. Link and J.C. Phelan summarise the conceptualisation of this stigma as lived by dark-skinned black women:

> In our conceptualization, stigma exists when the following interrelated components converge. In the first component, people distinguish and label human differences. In the second, *dominant cultural beliefs link labelled persons to undesirable characteristics---to negative stereotypes*. In the third, labelled persons are placed in distinct categories so as to accomplish some degree of separation of "us" from "them." In the fourth, labelled persons experience status loss and discrimination that lead to unequal outcomes. Finally, stigmatisation is entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political that allows the identification of differences, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination (my emphasis).[153]

The summary above, encapsulates Maya's lived experience, and represents what most dark skinned African-American women and wider black women endure in their lives. This attitude displayed by Maya's stepmother speaks to the intra-racial and intra-gender conflict which is a result of the controlling processes of American patriarchal culture. This is another typical example of weaponised culture—in this case, the cultural "controlling processes are a form of symbolic violence, present when the power of patriarchal capitalism/colonialism has become thoroughly hegemonic and internalized by the very groups it oppresses" (*Colonizing Black Bodies*, 4-5). Symbolic violence, as articulated by Akeia A. F. Benard, "is a form of domination that is exercised on social actors with their own involvement and complicity" (*Colonizing Black Bodies*, 2). Maya's step-mother, her familial duty notwithstanding, commits symbolic violence on Maya by her "involvement and complicity" in discriminating, disapproving and ultimately rejecting her like the majority of black people have been culturally influenced to do. However, I posit that these experiences depicting Maya's

[153] B.G. Link and J.C. Phelan, "Conceptulizing stigma," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27, (2001): 367.

low self-worth and how she is treated by her very "own people" go a long way to illustrate her journey as an agent of change. Later in this chapter, I explore how Maya learns from her mother and maternal grandmother's lived experiences of black women activist praxis to evolve to a black woman identity premised on resilience, resolve and re-imagination.

At this point I comeback to Maya's description of her first meeting with her mother. I propose linking cultural beliefs which are pivotal in the construction of stigma (as identified by Link and Phelan) to Maya's descriptions of her encounter with her mother. She asserts that her mother "was too beautiful to have children" (*Caged Bird*, 65). This statement further demonstrates the cultural bias which light skinned women enjoy for meeting American's culturally imposed standards of beauty. Maya is willing (or she has been culturally indoctrinated enough) to relieve her mother of the guilt of abandoning her children because she is too beautiful to be a mother. Maya's mother, Vivian Baxter, models what Goffman posits as *discreditable stigma* – defined as having a mark or blemish which is less noticeable, or which could be tolerated. In African American communities, black women like Vivian, who meet the American standards of beauty are in a better position as they are tolerated, even accommodated, and largely escape the treatment their darker complexioned counterparts must go through, that is: "disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination" (Phelan and Link, 367).

As I have explored earlier, both Hurston and Angelou confirm black men's historical predilection of light skinned women as their girlfriends or wives. In *Mom & Me & Mom* Angelou reports that both her father and brother marry women who look like Vivian –

a woman she repeatedly represents as meeting America's standards of beauty. It appears "gender colourism" has become intergenerational as evidenced by some research and scholarship. Allen, Telles, and Hunter claim that: "The prevalence of male emphasis on light skin is a driving force behind a barrage of beauty products designed to lighten skin and to straighten the hair of black women with characteristically African traits."[154] This is corroborated by Hill in his investigation whether the link between skin-tone and physical attractiveness depends on perceiver's gender: "It is widely assumed that men are the principal agents of color biases regarding attractiveness in black community" (81). Mathews and Johnson add their voice to this proposition that black men are believed to be the major drivers of gendered colourism: "The current research corroborates that most women believe that African American males are a major contributor to the perpetuation of colourism" (270). Allen, et al. implicate black men as the driving force behind the "barrage of beauty products designed to lighten skin" which black women consume (137).

Utilising Colourism "Benefits" to Resist and Dismantle Patriarchy

Although Vivian faces discrimination as a black woman, she and her mother (Grandmother Baxter) epitomise the "benefits" that come with light skin-tone and escape most of what dark skinned black women go through in and outside the colour line. Maya likens her mother to the "Virgin Mary" (recalling the historical white imagination of white womanhood) and describes her as "a pretty woman, light skinned with straight hair … She was educated, from a well-known family …" (*Caged Bird, 74*).

[154] Allen, Walter, Edward Telles, and Margarett Hunter, "Skin Color, Income and Education: A Comparison of Africa Americans and Mexican Americans" *National Journal of Sociology* 12, no. 1 (2000): 136. Subsequent page references in text.

With this representation, Vivian encapsulates the quintessential model of black women's beauty which is acceptable to both white and black patriarchal cultures. However, both Vivian and her mother remain vigilant in protecting their black womanhood against patriarchy; they use the "advantages" society accords to black women like them to reinforce their determined challenge of black and white patriarchy. These two women become part of a community of women activists (which include Grandmother Henderson and Mrs. Flowers I explore in Chapter One) who guide and support Maya through their black women activist praxis.

Grandmother Baxter is represented as a formidable matriarch who uses her mixed heritage to challenge and thwart white and black patriarchal oppression. She exudes so much power in the St. Louis community that she even has the police doing her favours. Notwithstanding her mixed-heritage identity, she displays unusual female influence to penetrate white patriarchy through one of its insulating pillars – the police. The policing system in America, a central site within the geography of patriarchal power, is designed to keep black people, especially under surveillance while insulating the power and control of white patriarchy. Historically, American police forces enable white supremacy through its structural violence on black men in particular—a development which in turn affects black women who are left to deal with and often, defend themselves against frustrated, angry and traumatised black men. The policing of black people traces back to the Slave Codes, which were then succeeded by the Jim Crow laws; both systems have disturbing parallels with present policing of black people, especially black men. Michael A. Robinson, exploring systems of policing disparities in African American community posits: "Historically, the relationship

between Blacks and police has been tempestuous at best."[155] He goes on to assert: "I hold that police and policing are a reflection of society and are an attempt to control what is perceived as a threat to the majority, and that is currently people of color in general, and Black men in particular" (559). In this study he reviews newspaper articles and electronic media on police killings of unarmed men printed between January 1, 2015, and December 31, 2015. From this review his findings conclude that, "Unarmed Black men were killed at a rate of close to 5 times that of white men" (561). A further breakdown of these statistics is profoundly unsettling, and in Robinson's words:

> A very sobering finding is worth noting. Maryland and Virginia are the two states that originated the Slave Codes (Wadmen & Allison, 2004) and they have the highest percentage of Blacks killed by police of all former enslaved African-holding states at 83% and 75%, respectively, followed by Florida at 43 %, which had the harshest Black Codes (Richardson, 1969), and then Texas at 38% (562).

The above historical evidence puts Grandmother Baxter's formidable power into context—she pierces through the very centre of white supremacy through her control of white policemen, who, according to Maya, report to her and often "help" her with what she needs done. This relationship she has with the police puts Grandmother Baxter at the centre of prohibition, gambling and other St. Louis under-belly activities. Maya recounts Grandmother Baxter's colossal reach which she experiences during her school days:

[155] Michael A. Robinson, "Black Bodies on the Ground: Policing Disparities in the African Community—An Analysis of Newsprint From January 1, 2015, Through December 31, 2015," *Journal of Black Studies* 48, no. 6 (April 2016): 557.

> We met the numbers runners, gamblers, lottery takers and whiskey salesmen not only in the loud streets but in our living room as well. They were often there when we returned from school, sitting with their hats in their hands, as we had done upon our arrival in the big city. They waited silently for Grandmother Baxter … she had pull with the police department, so the men in their flashy suits and fleshy scars sat with churchlike decorum and waited to ask her favours *(Caged Bird, 67).*

The above quotation unequivocally demonstrates Grandmother Baxter's subversion of patriarchy; she commands both respect and fear from powerful and dangerous black and white men. She becomes a pathfinder for her children, grand-children and wider black society, especially black women. She provides an alternative representation of an indefatigable black woman who subverts the historic narrative of male privilege and supremacy. Her daughter Vivian, becomes her heir-apparent who makes sure of the inter-generational black feminist interrogation of patriarchy. She models her black womanhood on the way her mother interacted with patriarchy; she is just as subversive and confronts patriarchy head on. These women model Maya's dream activism as they put into practice what she wished Grandmother Henderson would have done when she and her were abused by the racist white dentist in Stamps. However, a disquieting reading emerges here: unlike the light-skinned women (Vivian and her mother), dark-skinned Grandmother Henderson fails to assertively challenge racist patriarchy, leaving Maya to again invoke fantasy as a coping mechanism (explored in Chapter One).

Vivian is a model of black womanhood rooted in the decolonisation of the patriarchal construction of the black female body. I also see her representation as premised on decolonising black women's minds as pivotal to their getting rid of internalised self-

hate. Unlike Hurston in *Dust Tracks*, who refuses to acknowledge and use the benefits of colourism, Vivian embraces her bi-racial heritage and uses it to resist patriarchy by modelling her femininity to promote assertive, confident and daring black womanhood. Hurston resists the binary nature of colourism and declares, "I am a mixed-blood, it is true, but I differ from the party line in that I neither consider it an honor nor a shame" (*Dust tracks*, 191). Vivian, on the other end uses her "benefits" of colourism to educate her daughter and wider black women on the power of black womanhood. Maya confirms the power Vivian exerts over men (an inherited legacy from her own mother - Grandmother Baxter): "Mother's beauty made her powerful, and her power made her unflinchingly honest" (*Caged Bird, 220*). This is not a one-time observation as Maya repeats her observation when, years later, she asserts: "If Mother was a beautiful woman who *exacted the tribute of obeisance from all men*, she was also a mother, and 'a damn good one'" (my emphasis) (*Caged Bird*, 276). Although a trained nurse, she does not use her profession as a means of livelihood; she has a string of men who appear to "help" her run her household and other expenses. She, however does not depend solely on these men as she, like her mother, is at the centre of her community's under-belly activities. She also runs gambling parlours from which she gains such powerful influence that she can decide who lives or dies (I explore this below).

While she is willing to consciously use her body, which meets the patriarchal standards of beauty to its full extent, Vivian is also willing, in her endeavour to confront patriarchy (black and white), to demonstrate that she is schooled in the art of violence if needs be. There are several incidents in which Maya describes her mother as militaristic, a representation which dispels the stereotype of beautiful women as meek or even weak and always needing male support for protection. Maya introduces the other side of her

mother with a declaration: “With all her jollity, Vivian Baxter had no mercy” (*Caged Bird*, 221). To demonstrate how merciless Vivian is, Maya describes an incident in which her mother shoots her male business partner, who incidentally, is possibly her lover:

> Mother had a business partner (who may have been a little more than that) with whom she ran a restaurant cum gambling casino. The partner was not shouldering his portion of responsibility, according to Mother, and when she confronted him he became haughty and domineering, and he unforgivably called her a bitch. Now, everyone knew … no one cursed around her, and certainly no one cursed her. Maybe for the sake of business arrangements she restrained a spontaneous reaction. She told her partner, ‘I’m going to be one bitch, and I’ve already been that one.’ In a foolhardy gesture the man relieved himself of still another ‘bitch’ – and Mother shot him (*Caged Bird*, 221).

This is not a one-off incident in which Vivian is prepared to use a gun or to be physical in her entanglements with patriarchy (a representation which echoes Malcolm X’s activist praxis). In this incident, as in all her life, she defends black women integrity and refuses to allow men, in whichever capacity, lover, business partner or both, to insult her. To further demonstrate her power and how she is connected, she is jailed for only one day, bailed the next day and that was the end of it. In another incident in which Maya is assaulted by her lover “Two Fingers” Mark and left for dead, Vivian intervenes to send a message to black men and to make sure this particular black man is punished and may never be violent to women again. Through her street connections, Vivian tracks down “Two Fingers” Mark and gives Maya a gun to shoot him. Maya does not have the courage to shoot him and orders him to go away. However, Vivian assures her, “You never have to worry about him again. I put the

news in the street. He knows if he ever walks the streets in San Francisco, his ass is mine, and I won't hesitate" (*Caged Bird*, 89). Violence notwithstanding, what Vivian models is black woman assertiveness which does not subordinate to patriarchy at whatever cost. Vivian's representation is a decolonising model for those black women who have internalised patriarchal ideology of male privilege and superiority. Seeing these vanquished black men and how far Vivian is prepared to go, educates Maya and other black women on alternative templates of black femininity and possibilities (Angelou's corpus of work explored in the thesis introduction attests to this development).

In *Mom & Me & Mom*, Maya further illustrates how Vivian never lets men think she is expendable without a cost. Unlike Betts' mother in *Dust Tracks*, who could not act against her husband and son's rejection as I have explored earlier, for Vivian no man gets away lightly with disrespecting her. Angelou recounts one incident in which her mother's lover shows how badly men can behave even to those that meet their standards of beauty. In this incident in which her lover lies to her about his separation to his wife, Vivian displays how black women should (re)possess agency and decisively act whenever they feel they are being violated. Upon discovering that this lover was sleeping at his wife's place, she drives there to confront him. At gun point, she makes him get into her car and drive to her house. At her home she has him begging for his life and tells him that he should thank Maya's presence: "Open the bedroom door and get on your knees because if it wasn't for my baby, I'd blow you a brand-new one this morning" (147). The point of this performance by Vivian is that: while she can carry out her threats of shooting this cheating lover (as demonstrated before), she wants her daughter to witness black womanhood's agency, assertiveness

and resolve. This is corroborated by what she then says to Maya following this incident: “Baby, you know I didn’t do anything to that man. He’s the one who did something to me. You see, baby, you have to protect yourself. If you don’t protect yourself, you look like a fool asking somebody else to protect you” (147). Maya muses on her mother’s advice and then concludes, “She was right. A woman needs to support herself before she asks anyone else to support her” (147). Despite her knowledge that she meets patriarchal beauty standards and so can have most men she wants, Vivian aims to teach men that you don’t treat women as expendable objects. Her performance here also teaches her daughter and other black women never to let men be comfortable and normalise taking women for granted; she inculcates self-reliance and taking responsibility as some of the pivotal black womanhood characteristics.

At this point I want to return to my earlier assertion that Vivian’s representation is premised on decolonising black women of their double consciousness and self-hate Although she takes advantage of what she gets out of colourism, she appears to stay away from any intra-gender conflict based on skin-tone politics. Judging by the way she interacts with her daughter, Vivian appears acutely aware of the damaging effects of colourism’s symbolic violence on black women like her daughter whose defining features are their dark skin and black natural hair. She is conscious that her daughter is not immune to a weaponised culture; she then sets out to decolonise her psyche of internalised skin stratification politics at the centre of American culture. Cooley’s looking glass theory puts into perspective Vivian’s acute awareness of the potential damage awaiting her daughter and must intervene. She knows that if a woman becomes a victim of double consciousness and believes that others think of her as unattractive, she is likely to accept this as a fact—a development that will damage her

for life. To counter this cultural symbolic violence her daughter is most likely to experience, Vivian consistently showers Maya with positive reinforcements of her beauty (despite her dark hue) and potential to achieve greatness. She must have sensed her daughter's sense of inferiority engendered by the cultural South's symbolic violence. At the station during their first reunion, Maya displays her sense of inferiority when she declares that she "wanted to sink into the ground" because she "wasn't pretty or cute." Vivian, on the other hand, is full of redemptive joy as she cries out the moment she sees her, "Maya, Marguerite, my baby. Oh baby, you're beautiful and so tall. You look like your daddy and me. I'm so glad to see you" (*Mom & Me & Mom*, 12). Vivian goes on to demonstrate her love by kissing Maya who then declares: "I had not received one kiss in all the years in Arkansas [when she lived with Grandmother Henderson]" (12).

Later when Maya sets her mind to become a conductorette on a streetcar, Vivian encourages and supports her aspiration, regardless that all the women employed at that time are white. Vivian helps Maya strategise by giving her money to buy some food so that her presence at the company offices is uninterrupted until they stop ignoring her and give her an interview. Maya endures racism as the company secretaries refuse to even give her an application form because she is black. At the offices she meets some of her former school mates (already employed there) who racially abuse her. Their abuse is within the colourism framework of Goffman's *discreditable stigma* as she is abused not only for being black but for her particular physical features which do not meet American culture's standards of beauty. In *Mom & Me & Mom* Maya describes this experience:

> That was among the most hateful, awful, awkward experiences I can remember. I knew some of the girls from George Washington School, and I had helped some of them with their homework. They graduated and got jobs in the office where I was sitting. They would pass me laughing, making faces and pooching out their lips, laughing at my features and hair. They whispered terrible words, racial pejoratives (48).

By third day Maya wants to give up but she says, “I couldn’t face Vivian Baxter. I couldn’t tell her I wasn’t as strong as she thought I was” (28). Demonstrating learned resilience and tenacity she endures two weeks before she finally gets the job. When she is given “a punishing split shift” her mother volunteers to take her to and from work to meet her 4 A.M. start. When she leaves the job to go back to school, Vivian sits her down and asks her what she has learnt about her experience. Maya says she has learnt about how she is not afraid of work. But Vivian corrects her and posits: “No, you learned that you have power---power and determination. I love you and I am proud of you. With those two things, you can go anywhere and everywhere” (50). Her first working experience inculcates Maya with “power and determination,” helping decolonise her psyche from initial internalisation of aspects of patriarchal ideology which work to marginalise and oppress black females.

When Maya is twenty-two and living alone with her five-year old son, Vivian continues to be present in her life but encourages her self-reliance. She also continues with her positive reinforcement of love, support and encouragement:

> “Baby, I’ve been thinking and now I am sure. You are the greatest woman I have ever met. You are very kind and very intelligent and those elements are not always found

> together. Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, and my mother–-yes, you belong in that category. Here, give me a kiss" (*Mom & Me & Mom, 78*).

Vivian's ever supportive inspiration has its mark on Maya's self-awareness and confidence. Maya evolves from that child who was painfully conscious of how society perceived her as ugly and unworthy of anyone's attention to a young adult who begins to reimagine herself and believe in the positivity and possibilities as reflected by her mother: "Now I thought of what she has said. I thought, suppose she is right? She's very intelligent and often said she didn't fear anyone enough to lie. Suppose I really am going to become somebody. Imagine. Imagine I might really become somebody. Someday" (79). And surely Maya becomes someone as she dismantles her double consciousness and continues to soar throughout her life – becoming, among many other accolades: a film writer, a film director, an author of several books and a university professor, invited to several universities as visiting professor. As visiting professor, she echoes, if not surpasses, Malcolm X's influence on academia through speeches at various universities.

Vivian also extends her modelling of powerful black femininity praxis by confronting white patriarchy's racism aimed at keeping black women oppressed. As someone who is viewed as less threatening by whites, if we use Goffman's theory of *discreditable stigma*, Vivian is still stigmatised for her race and so inevitably has to confront racism as a product of white patriarchy. Like she has encouraged and supported her daughter earlier on to not let racism stop her from getting the job she wanted, Vivian refuses to be blocked from working on a ship as ship fitter because of her gender and race. Despite strong resistance from the racist management, (which is again displaying the geography of patriarchal power) Vivian becomes a pathfinder for women to work on

ships. In *Mom & Me & Mom* Vivian declares that no racism would stop her, or any other woman for that matter: “I will put my foot in their door up to my hip until every woman can get in that union, and can get aboard a ship and go to sea” (136). Her success with this declaration is confirmed by Maya when she looks back at her mother’s achievements: “You’ve been a hard worker—white, black, Asian, and Latino women ship out of the San Francisco port because of you” (192).

Maya also recounts another incidence in which Vivian inculcates black woman activist praxis at a hotel they had booked to stay overnight. Maya says that “even at this newly integrated hotel people were literally amazed to see two black women walking in,” and when they approached the front desk, “The clerk stared at us as if were wild things from the forest” (*Mom & Me & Mom*, 138-139). Vivian is unfazed, assertive and commanding, demonstrating as she does throughout her life, that she is a woman of action, a tenacious woman who does not outsource responsibilities because the cost of doing so would be inordinately high. Her action here as always, powerfully illustrates how individual black women must have agency to confront oppression and help dismantle patriarchal power wherever it is located. Reacting to this incident and Maya’s surprise at seeing a “.38 revolver” on top of her clothes in her bag she has just opened, Vivian gives her daughter (and black women) a masterclass on her uncompromising confrontation of patriarchy:

> If they were not ready for integration, I was ready to show it to them. Baby, you try to be ready for every situation you run into. Don’t do anything that you think is wrong. Just do what you think is right, and then be ready to back it up even with your life. Make sure that everything you say is two-time talk. That means say it in the closet and be prepared to say it on the city hall steps, and give anybody twenty minutes to draw a

> crowd. Don't do it to make news. Do it to make it known that your name is your bond, and you are always ready to back up your name. Not every negative situation can be solved with a threat of violence. Trust your brain to suggest a solution, then have the courage to follow through (*Mom & Me & Mom*, 139).

Vivian demonstrates that she is always prepared to fight for women's rights using whichever way works. Because she is always "ready for every situation," her activism shines a light into the struggles black women face with patriarchal and racial violence. Vivian and Maya's representations reveal that any black woman's body is always "in view and on view" and as such, "invites a gaze of difference. A gaze of differentiation … the most historically constant being a gendered gaze"[156]

What I have explored throughout this chapter has revealed inter-generational, inter-racial, intra-racial, and intra-gender racial politics integral in gender interrogation and the resultant damage on black women especially. To this effect, Benard echoes Bailey and Trudy in his assertion that "… gender must always be discussed as racialized and race as gendered since these two are inextricable social constructs. The body is also an area where systems enact human rights violations in the form of not only physical violence but structural and symbolic violence" (2). This is why black women's activist praxis inevitably and consistently grapples with the interconnectedness of different structural elements within the geography of patriarchal power in American, and the wider world.

[156] K. A. Story, "Racing sex—Sexing race: The Invention of Black feminine body" in *Imagining the Black female body*, ed. C.E. Henderson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 24.

Conclusion

Regarding race and gender inequalities, the United States of America has been a country at war with itself since its inception. From the arrival of black Africans in America, democracy as a central tenant of this powerful nation has always been in jeopardy as racial tensions have repeatedly spilled over into conflict, violence and unnecessary loss of life. At the centre of this perpetual "civil war" has been the evolving nature of black identity and its concomitant subversions, grappling with white supremacists whose determined grip on American political, economic, and social structures continues to tighten. The reported historical nature of the first ancestors of black people's arrival continues to problematise race relations in America. Nikole Hannah-Jones succinctly articulates the foundational nature of the arrival of about twenty Angolans (of the Ndongo people) who are believed to be the first black African people to set foot on American soil in James Town, Virginia on August 20, 1619:[157]

> The Adams and Eves of Black America did not arrive here in search of freedom or a better life. They had been captured and stolen, forced onto a ship, shackled, writhing in filth as they suffered and starved. Some 40 percent of the Angolans who boarded that ghastly vessel did not make it across the Middle Passage. They embarked not as people but as property, sold to white colonialists who just were beginning to birth democracy for themselves, commencing a four-hundred-year struggle between the two opposing ideas foundational to America.[158]

[157] Ibraham X. Kendi, "Introduction," in *Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619-2019,* ed. Ibram x. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain (Great Britain: Penguin Random House UK, 2021), xiv.
[158] Nikole Hannah-Jones, "Arrival 1619-1624," in *Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619-2019,* ed. Ibram x. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain (Great Britain: Penguin Random House UK, 2021), 3-7.

This initial arrival set the tone for the countless subsequent journeys that violently took Africans across the Atlantic to America and other western spheres. It is from this historical context that African Americans have been persistently enmeshed in double consciousness through cycles of discrimination, stigmatisation, and violent oppression. I have drawn from W. E. Dubois' formulation of double consciousness to track some parts of this "four-hundred-year struggle" and investigate the treacherous journey black people in America took from around 1900 to the years just after the Civil Rights campaigns—a watershed period whose major success was the 1965 Voting Rights Act which gave black people the right to vote. This act surely did not mean the end of racism, sexism, and other inequalities; it however did not only give voting rights to black people, it marked their humanity as individuals who had agency to contribute to the collective destiny of Americans. While the struggles for freedom for black Americans are far from over, this thesis has proven that they owe whatever progress they have had to their forebears' inter-generational and incremental resistance strategies. I have called these inter-generational resistance strategies "Black Subversions" which have historically marked black people's oppositional and fierce resistance to: white supremacist ideology, tyrannical cultures, double consciousness, white-centred political, economic and social structures, sexism, and intra-racial conflicts, among others, on this wide spectrum of contestations and conflicts endemic in multicultural societies.

African American autobiography, recalling slave narratives, engenders black people to share their subjective stories from their own perspectives. These personal experiences become representational as many parallels emerge with other black narratives, allowing generations of black people to own their history, free from white

distortions, propaganda, and obfuscations. There is power in black people owning a history told by their own people, a history that continues to inspire them to greatness through resistance against oppressive structures endemic in their communities. From this premise, I critically examined black autobiographical writing by incorporating a unique autobiographical double lens for each chapter through experiences from both genders so as to distinctively interrogate their subjective and representational gender-subversive strategies towards oppression, injustice and denial of freedom. However, black autobiography investigated in this thesis revealed that while race unites black women and black men, patriarchal structures have been profoundly divisive. The damage on black women is encapsulated in Tori Moi's assertion, "Even when they say the same things, [black] women are not speaking from the same position as [black] men, and consequently, are not arguing the same thing at all."[159]

Chapter One examined black families to assess parental influences on how their sons and daughters negotiated their formative years, given that they were all enmeshed in double consciousness. This chapter examined paternal and maternal influences on sons and daughters separately through *matriography* and *patriography* (the insertion of the mother and father's memoirs respectively in one's autobiography). Except for Davis whose family was black middle class, the rest of the protagonists ended up being raised by single mothers for diverse reasons which however implicate the racist status quo of their times and the gender aspects of oppression. What came out of this investigation was that parental socio-economic situations took a toll on their physical and mental health; developments which subsequently impacted their children's well-

[159] Tori Moi, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Style: Recent Feminist Criticism in the United States," *Cultural Critique (*Spring 1988), 15.

being. Depictions from all the autobiographies in this thesis strongly suggested that the double consciousness which was rooted in poverty, racism, and lack of opportunities, significantly destabilised black families. The common factor in the particular families investigated in this thesis is the significant burdens black mothers carried and how their children were affected by this. Political, economic and cultural challenges necessitated that black mothers help each other raise their children through *shared motherhood*—a trope I examined through Patricia Hill Collins' black feminist conceptualisation of *other mothers* and *community mothers*. These concepts continue to speak to communal and collaborative approaches to black motherhood and mothering which is necessitated by the lived historical experiences of black mothers and their children since slavery. However, this chapter demonstrated that it was from these challenging experiences in mostly poor and impoverished families and neighbourhoods that brought about black subversions in black children; imbuing their identities with resistance, tenacity and remarkable resolve.

Chapter Two explored how Herndon and Davis developed their activism praxis to directly challenge racism, injustice and capitalism. They represented black gendered experiences as well as demonstrated the multiplicity of strategies historically employed to dismantle white tyranny. Through critical consciousness, Herndon and Davis deliberately chose to join the Communist Party, which they saw as the most likely vehicle to achieving justice for black people and establishing egalitarian societies. I read *Let Me Live a*s a neo-slave narrative in the Jim Crow era due to the racist brutality and lynchings experienced by black people who were supposed to be free. Herndon also continued with the prison narrative which slave narratives explored earlier—the conclusion being that America continues to be a giant prison for most black people.

The only difference is the location of the prison - with some incarcerated through what Davis terms “the prison industrial complex,” which continues to disproportionally incarcerate black people, especially black men. This chapter further revealed the other geographies of incarcerations as the lines which separate traditional prisons from the rest of society are blurred for black people. Those black people who are not in traditional prisons and serving disproportionate sentences are however in metaphorical prisons where freedom is an illusion.

I used Critical Race Theory to interrogate some US laws to expose how they are traditionally designed to police, criminalise, and limit black people’s chances to thrive. What Herndon and Davis experienced and what they reported about other black people’s experiences confirmed the historical structural inequalities at the centre of US governments and institutions. However, Davis, Herndon and Malcolm X reconstructed prisons as spaces from which critical consciousness, race consciousness, and black subversions can be launched and shared. Davis proposed prisoner-identification as a transformative discourse for black people which imagines America as a prison—this raises political awareness and engenders black transformations through subversive strategies which are then replicated through inter-generational solidarity as black identity continues to evolve. Davis, as a black woman activist, also revealed the history of black women in black organisations which sought for freedom. She interrogated the patriarchal organisations she was involved in throughout university and as a member of the Communist Party and concluded that they were just as sexist as the white America they were fighting against. However, through her womanist (as opposed to feminist) tenacity and resolve she managed to

convince some of the black male leaders like George Jackson to change their patriarchal mind-sets and embrace black women's contributions to the struggle.

Chapter Three critically interrogated religion, especially the efficacy of Christianity to black people's perennial struggles in the US since the arrival of the first Africans in 1619 aboard the *White Lion*. I examined Hurston and Wright as proponents of *freethought* - an ideology which rejected God and Christianity as central to human lives; especially in light of the abhorrent lives African Americans have endured over the centuries in a deeply racist country. Both writers provided childhood experiences caught up in a religion which damaged them through its agents (inter alia, parents, guardians and those in church leadership). Christianity was represented as obstructive, discouraging curiosity, limiting imagination, and promoting double consciousness in African Americans. Nevertheless, Wright (through his patriarchal gaze) chronicles how he subverted the familial Christian women who surrounded him and threatened his black male identity evolution. On the other hand, Hurston provided a portrait of the damaging black female experiences in patriarchal families, church and Christian communities. She articulated her subversive acts to save herself from the tyranny of culture, and how she became a pariah, especially to the black male intelligentsia (which included Wright and Langston Hughes) for not writing about race issues. In the second part of this chapter I examined Malcolm X who also rejected Christianity mostly on political grounds as a religion which favoured white people. He instead embraced Islam through the Nation of Islam before he converted to Orthodox Islam. Malcolm X was represented as a pedagogue who thrived to teach religion and politics through race consciousness (rooted in lived-experience) to save black people from their habituation to white tyrannical hegemony. Like Herndon and Davis, Malcolm

X's subversions included the criticism of black middle-class leadership as part of the problems which perpetuated black oppression. He openly accused Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders of using impotent strategies which favoured their privileged positions and proximity to whiteness at the expense of advancing the majority of black people. To Malcolm X, politics and religion were inextricably intertwined as the gun and Christianity have been for centuries.

Chapter Four interrogated black and white patriarchy and how black women, recognising their intersectional positions which are rooted in oppression, have traditionally enacted various subversive strategies. I examined black women experiences in US communities through the prism of Moya Bailey and Trudy's *misogynoir* - a concept which highlights the intersectionality of black women, and explicates the interconnectedness of specific hatred, violence and oppression on them. However, riding on the shoulders of their black foremothers, this thesis demonstrated that black women have historically carved spaces from which they continue to (re)construct identities that support their independence, agency and power. The second part of this chapter critically explored colourism as a divisive double consciousness agent of racism and sexism which continues to cause intra-racial and intra-gender tensions and conflicts within the black communities. However, a critical exploration of three generations of the Baxter women in Angelou, her mother Vivian and her Grandmother Baxter demonstrated formidable black women who modelled remarkable gender and political activist-praxis to resist, destabilise and help dismantle patriarchy, racism and sexism.

Continuing Legacy of Black Subversions

The historic and recurring nature of contestations based on race and gender relations in the US and the world over validate continued study; and this thesis attempts such an interrogation. It is essential that we continue to look at historical narratives to understand what went wrong and what we can change. The past is certainly not dead when we continue to experience similar challenges which suggest that historical problems and gaps are widening instead of narrowing. To evaluate the progress and limitations of the making of black identity this thesis has investigated, I have chosen to examine the representations of some aspects of Barack Obama's history, extraordinary election and presidency as the first non-white President of the USA. I also briefly examine the rise of Black Lives Matter Movement, Nikole Hannah-Jones' 1619 Project and the resurgence of Critical Race Theory as contemporary black subversions which are rooted in dismantling oppressive structures. The unprecedented inauguration of an African American US President epitomised the success of diverse and historical black subversions. African Americans have surely come a long way—from being regarded as property to the recognition of not only their humanity, but a collective identity possessing intellectual capability of leadership as demonstrated through the various critical spaces they increasingly occupy in American institutions including the presidency for eight years and the appointment of Erick Himpton Holder Jr. as the first African American Attorney General from 2009 to 2015. This progress continues today with Vice President Kamala Harris becoming the first black woman in the US to fill that esteemed post. What her appointment does, as Obama's election and Holder's appointment did, if nothing else, is widen the possibilities and awaken the imaginations for black children; a development which

opens up vistas which white-centred structures have historically attempted to deny generations of black children as experienced and articulated in the slave narratives I examined in this thesis as well as in autobiographies by Angelo Herndon, Zora Neal Hurston, Richard Wright, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and Maya Angelou. What Obama, Holder and Harris have accomplished is undeniably due to the extraordinary contributions of these aforementioned forebears among the many millions more before them who paved the way through their blood, sweat and lives. Obama, especially, could have rightly declared: "I am my ancestors' wildest dreams," claiming for himself the saying which circulated in black communities for decades according to Keisha N. Blain (*Four Hundred Souls*, 389).

Obama's memoir, *Dreams from My Father* interrogates his search for a black identity which is negotiated from his paternal historical inheritance. It is this search that takes him into internal and physical journeys which become critical to his black identity shaping, as well as the launch-pad for his political career and successful presidential campaign. His inevitable collision with double consciousness and subsequent navigation of this inherent American socio-political minefield is pivotal to the shaping of his critical consciousness. It is from this critical consciousness that he embarks on these journeys into himself, his past and to Africa. What comes out of these critical journeys is the Faulknerian theme's premise - the past and the present are inextricably intertwined; the past is alive and will always have a say in the present and future. His journey into self-discovery takes him to Kenya where he is exhorted to learn from his father's stories. Recalling *shared motherhood* as a traditional cornerstone of bringing black children to critical consciousness as they grow up, Obama encounters the influence of *other mothers* in Kenya and learns a lot about his father and family history–

a development which plays a crucial role in his continuous black identity shaping. Aunt Zeituni echoes his grandmother's earlier interventions and prompts Obama into self-reflections based on the re-telling and reframing of his father's image (and by extension, his paternal history and his own image): "I tell you this so that you will know the pressure your father was under in this place. So you don't judge him too harshly. And you must learn from his life." [160]

And he does learn from these *shared motherhood* interventions. He demonstrates this sharpening of his critical eye as he reflects on what his sister Auma and Kenyan *other mothers* have revealed to him: "I felt as if my world had been turned on its head. All my life, I had carried a single image of my father, one that I had sometimes rebelled against and never questioned" (221). Here, Obama replicates the "aha moment" which I explored with Herndon, Davis and Malcolm X; moments when everything crystalised and their pathways to new black identities emerged. For Obama, interrogating the dominant narrative about his father sharpens his worldview. It becomes clear that tracing his father's footsteps back to Africa, (echoing other historical figures like: W.E.B. Dubois, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, Oprah Winfrey, and Michelle Obama, among many others) helps Obama navigate his black identity inheritance, embrace the concomitant historical challenges, and acknowledge the tyranny of single stories. What he experiences in Africa and the multiple stories he is told become pivotal his creation of a concrete sense of identity which then anchors his political ambitions.

[160] Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1994), 337. Subsequent page references in text.

The election of Obama, like the proclamation of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, was a symbolic victory for not only black people, but for democracy as a political weapon which had the potential to unite America's disparate population and usher in a post-racial era, albeit for brief moments. However, as time would tell, the age-old racial tensions and conflicts continued unabated, making the Obama tenure a missed opportunity for significant improvements in race relations and alleviating structural inequalities. Obama as a black President came under increasing pressure from the expectations of African Americans and other minorities to do more than his white predecessors had done. He did introduce some legislations which would help the traditionally marginalised members of the American communities. For example, the 2010 Affordable Care Act (also known as Obamacare) from which he faced immense resistance from the Republicans. The aim of this act was to provide affordable health insurance coverage to all American, benefitting millions who previously could not afford. He also appointed two black Attorney Generals in Holder and Loretta Lynch (the first black woman Attorney General) to oversee the overhaul of the criminal justice system which continues to disproportionally incarcerate black people as articulated by Herndon, Davis and Malcolm X. One does wonder whether Obama's appointment of black people (albeit highly qualified) as US Attorney Generals was a race-conscious decision in anticipation of the problems he would face to convince a white Attorney General to reform an anachronistic system that continues to inordinately criminalise black people and deepen their double consciousness. Peniel E. Joseph reports that Holder's "efforts to reform the criminal justice system at the federal level were extensive, thoughtful and unprecedented."[161] Joseph puts into context the racist and

[161] Peniel E. Joseph, "The Movement For Black Lives," in *The Presidency of Barack Obama*, ed. Julien e. Zelizer (Princetown: The Princetown University Press, 2018), 134. Subsequent page references in text.

disproportionate nature of the justice system Holder had inherited: “Black men received sentences which were 20 percent longer for the same crimes as white defendants” (134).This is corroborated by Rogers M. Smith and Desmond King who assert that by 2005 (three years before Obama and Holder took office), “black men were incarcerated at a rate of 4, 682 per 100,000, compared with 709 per 100,000 for white men; and black women were incarcerated at a rate of 347 per 100,000, compared to 88 per 100,000 for white women.”[162] These outrageous statistics underscore the historical nature of African Americans’ treatment and recalls what Malcolm X and his friend Shorty experienced when they were sentenced to ten years for a crime which reportedly attracted two years. Malcolm X asserted that their real crime was that they had fraternised and slept with white women who they were then accused to have influenced into crime. Angela Davis also echoed the inordinate numbers of ethnic minorities compared to white women in the prison she was sent to for a crime she had not even committed. Holder instigated several changes to include “new guidelines which provided U.S. Attorneys more discretion in applying federal charges to criminal defendants … and revised “zero tolerance” school policies that send too many young black children on a “school-to-prison pipeline” (Josehp,133-134).

Obama for a while was not on the frontline on numerous racially motivated violent incidents and let his Attorney General take the lead in these matters which intertwined legal issues. However, he was forced to confront the reality of America’s escalating racial tensions after a series of racially motivated shootings and police brutality. As the

[162] Rogers M. Smith and Desmond King, “Barack Obama’s Election and America’s Racial Orders,” in *Obama At The Cross Roads: Politics, Markets, and the Battle for America’s Future,* ed. Lawrence R. Jacobs and Desmond King (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 156. Subsequent page references in text.

President, he had up to this moment carefully chosen his words so as not to antagonise certain sections of communities and inflame situations which were already threatening to escalate to full scale violent clashes, and jeopardise his political visions, especially the sterling work of revamping the criminal justice system. Under pressure from the Black Lives Matter Movement, Obama's relationship to previous black movements and forebears came out as he assertively called out racism in a manner that recalls Malcolm X. Obama linked the various racial disparities in the justice system to "a legacy of hundreds of years of slavery [that] did not happen by accident" (Joseph, 139). This was after he had again criticised the continued use of Confederate flags as symbols of slavery whose legacies continued to shape America's reality (Joseph, 139).

Nonetheless, with all the work and rhetoric Obama put out, it increasingly became evident that the centuries-old structural inequalities were so deeply entrenched in the cultural, political and economic fabric of America that two terms of black presidency were woefully inadequate to make any significant and meaningful changes. For the better part of his campaign, and during his presidency, Obama was constrained on race matters as he needed to epitomise that post-race image which had put him into office. He had to dip into multiple identities to connect to different races and cultures – for example his white heritage from his mother, his African and immigration heritage from his father, his membership of the bi-racial demographic group, his religious identity, and his black manhood, among others. This convergence of identities was what was so attractive about him during the campaign and earlier parts of his presidency; however, this identity multiplicity was also his undoing. While for a while he managed to unite the majority of the electorate, it became impossible to keep this diverse group of supporters satisfied and happy. Various groups were always ready

to pounce at any given time to any slips or perceived weakness he displayed. There were even outrageous calls that he be impeached as he was not American enough, being a son of an African with a Muslim name. This recalls how slave children had to follow the identity of their slave mothers as this was economically beneficial to slave masters; however, for political expediency, Obama's master identity was being imagined to be black African (because his father was Kenyan) with tenuous links to the US despite his being born in the US by a white American mother. The most confused group must have been African Americans. Obama identified as an African American and the majority of black people were driven by race consciousness, race pride and race expectations towards him. African Americans were put in difficult positions during Obama's tenure – they were unhappy with his reluctance to explicitly condemn racism when most opportunities arose, but were too racially invested in him to condemn one of their own. While Obama may have failed to deliver to the satisfaction of his black supporters, his presidency, however, erased the images of impossibilities for both black and white Americans. For black people it raised hopes of what is possible, to white supremacists, their worst fear was realised as the myth of black inferiority was dismantled. Obama's presidential election and re-election, and the vast array of African Americans who continue to hold high positions across government institutions as well as in the private sector, have demonstrated the intellectual capability of black people.

America continues to be a deeply divided country at war with itself, with Obama's tenure proving, in retrospect, to have been a missed opportunity for the races to begin to find each other. The recurring rancour, recrimination, and rivalry at the centre of American race-relations continue to deeply destabilise the American socio-political

and economic landscape making it difficult to predict a post-racial convergence at some point soon. The election of Trump, with his unapologetic white supremacist rhetoric, erased the few positive contributions the Obama administration had achieved, and entrenched the historic sense of racist oppression. The contrast between the constrained Obama and the garrulous Trump on race relations puts into perspective the widening gap between reality and the ambition to a post-race America. Trump romped to victory with a slogan pregnant with racist and white supremacist ideology in the context that his predecessor was black: "Making America Great Again means never taking another step backwards."[163] This implied that the eight years under a black president were regrettable and demonstrated a weakness which should never be repeated because it undermined all the work put in by the white presidents. However, black people then and now appear as emboldened as ever as they continue to push for an egalitarian society. The Black Lives Matter movement (BLM), which was ironically founded during a black president's tenure, epitomised black assertiveness and paralleled the Civil Rights Movement in fearlessness, grassroots organisation and leadership. Alicia Garza, one of the founders of BLM (the others were Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi) put into context what defined her organisation's impact and the tenor of white backlash to black people's subversions: "Change does not occur without backlash—at least any change worth having—and that backlash is an indicator that the change is so powerful that the opposing forces resist that change with everything they have (*Four Hundred Souls,* 382). The death of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014, slain by white police officer Darren Wilson, precipitated a chain of events which led to BLM becoming, in Garza's words:

[163] Donald Trump, *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2015), 138.

> A Black Renaissance that declared that all black lives are worth fighting for … It was this Black Renaissance that propelled activists to refuse to allow traditional Black church leaders to speak on their behalf, to tell them to go home in the dead of the night and be content to allowing the system to run its course as Michael Brown lay dying in the streets … It is this Black Renaissance that refuses to make coffee and the copies while men do the real work. It is this Black Renaissance that questions the stated role of policing in this country … (*Four Hundred Souls,* 383)

This declaration recalls traditional black resistance strategies, some of which are covered in this thesis: Herndon's castigating of a reverend who wanted to persuade him not to resist a white train conductor's racist orders; the rejection by Malcolm X and others of the Civil Rights Movement's mostly Christian middle class leadership, including Martin Luther King; and Angela Davis' resistance to being confined to peripheral roles in the Communist Party and black organisations fighting for freedom and justice. This declaration by the BLM movement emphasised the resurgence of black subversions in the light of an unyielding white force determined to uphold the status quo of institutional racism and structural inequalities. According to Garza, 2014 had more protests than any other time in the history of civil rights protests in the US. BLM's race consciousness and race pride awareness reached many corners of the world as it was recognised in sporting activities which have a wider audience like football. Garza underscored what BLM aimed to achieve in the US and beyond: "Making Black lives matter meant fighting back against the oppression of Black people, which also meant investing in loving Blackness in all its forms" (*Four Hundred Souls*, 384). This aim inevitably set BLM on a collision course with a system headed by a

president who was determined to “Make America Great Again” by putting black people, who for a while were excited about Obama, in their rightful places.

There have been concerted efforts recently to combat black subversions that include the Hannah-Jones’ 1619 Project which is accused of being revisionist for interrogating American History from a black perspective; the banning of Critical Race Theory from the school curricula by the Trump administration; and the enacting of the Divisive Concepts Legislation which is designed to limit the teaching of race in public schools. Ken Paulson claims these Divisive Concepts have “emerged in multiple states beginning in 2021, largely fuelled by conservative legislature seeking to limit topics that can be explored in public school classrooms. The laws have been driven in large by opposition to critical race theory, an academic theory that says racism in America has largely been perpetuated by the nation’s institutions.”[164] In the same article, Paulson goes further to assert that in the political arena, “critical race theory was recast as an effort to make white America uncomfortable with America’s history of racial justice and slavery.” This has led black academics to redouble their efforts for race conscious publications to enter the literary landscape with a design to rip the veil off American history which white conservatism seeks to protect. Hannah-Jones, Tami Charles and Kwame Alexander are some of the black writers and artists who have recently published picture books about black history designed to give children ownership of American history. A typical example is how very little is known about the *White Lion* which brought the first African people to America and so symbolises the slave legacy as foundational to American power, might and wealth; a development

[164] Ken Paulson, “Divisive Concepts,” in *The First Amendment Encyclopedia*, Middle Tennessee State University http://www.mtsu.edu/first-ammendment/article/2178/divisive-concepts (accessed Feb 17, 2023).

which is not in the educational curricula at any stage. Conversely, every child is taught about the *Mayflower*, the first ship to bring white Pilgrims to the new world, a development which is celebrated every year and has ensured its indelible place within the American narrative. While Black History Month is celebrated every year as a result of black subversions, Hannah-Jones has pertinently asked, "How do you celebrate Black history in a time when books about Black history are being banned and curriculums about this nation's racist past are being challenged?"[165] Her 1619 Project, which designed an educational curriculum focussing on slavery as part of the foundation of America and written to take a critical view of the received American history, has caused much contestation, with accusations that it is revisionist. This has prompted its banning from several states, just as what is happening to Critical Race Theory. These developments recall Wright, Davies, and Malcolm X, who all provided searing indictments of the educational systems of their times which, as controlled by whites, deprived them of their black history and were never designed for black consciousness and progress; reminiscent of how slaves were violently prohibited to have anything to do with literacy. However, through determination, these black people did not only triumph, they put it in writing to raise awareness and for their victory to continue to inspire future generations.

This thesis has exposed how historical and structural inequalities persist in America today with African Americans continuing to be disadvantaged and enmeshed in double consciousness. Nonetheless, as demonstrated in the representational African American autobiographies interrogated in this thesis, the distinguishing characteristic

[165] Nikole Hannah-Jones Reviews Two Books About Black History: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/16/books/review/tami-charles-bryan-collier-we-are-here-kwnae-alexander-dare-coulter-an-american-story.html (accessed 17/03/2023)

of black people has been their triumph over adversity. Their many victories over adversity have been largely to their subversive character, their ingrained characteristic of resistance to oppression which has been passed down generation after generation to carry them through incredibly atrocious journeys and periods in human history. Perhaps the words from the founder of the contemporary civil rights movement, Black Lives Matter, would encapsulate the journey ahead for black subversions: “Black Renaissance has dutifully carried on the tradition of resistance that our ancestors gifted us, and it [will continue] to push for the change that they did not complete” (Alicia Garza, *Four Hundred Souls*, 383).

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