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Vulnerability, Trauma, and Testimony in American Women’s Literature: A Long History

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ABSTRACT

VULNERABILITY, TRAUMA, AND TESTIMONY IN AMERICAN WOMEN’S LITERATURE: A LONG HISTORY

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Northern Illinois University, 2020
Melissa Adams-Campbell, Director

This study examines the effects of vulnerability and trauma in American women’s literature across the intersections of genre, race, and time. In this dissertation I have applied a feminist long history approach to examine women’s literature from the seventeenth through twenty-first centuries together inspired by Mary Beard’s theory that compartmentalizing women’s history ignores long-range patterns and contributions. I have assembled the beginnings of a canon of women’s trauma literature that allows women writers to form a multi-century discourse community wherein trauma and recovery may occur. This analysis applies twentieth-century medical research about trauma and recovery, particularly that of Judith Herman, to argue that women create generic spaces and discourse communities that empower them to testify to and recover from sexual trauma through a survey of significant genres of American literature—captivity narratives, slave narratives, seduction novels, sentimental novels, neo-slave narratives, and short story cycles—from the seventeenth through twenty-first centuries. My study is a starting point for further scholarly conversations about women’s vulnerability, trauma, and recovery.
A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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Melissa Adams-Campbell
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DEDICATION

For all of us. Me too.
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INTRODUCTION

In the Spring 2016 issue of *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* Laura Stevens recalls being propositioned by a man in a vehicle when she was a pre-teen. Although the man eventually drove away without touching her, she reflects that being marked as a woman by others, regardless of one’s own gender identity—means recognizing the vulnerability that follows from a kind of hyper-visibility. What woman is not aware of the knife’s edge she walks when she ventures into spaces where she will be seen? What woman does not hold as intrinsic to her sense of self the awareness of being watched and sexually assessed, with a whisper of violence behind every look? (8)

Stevens poses important questions, and the answer I offer is this: no woman. No woman is unaware of her vulnerability in spaces of visibility. No woman is unaware of the gaze that assesses her body, her “sexiness,” her “desirability” and ultimately, her violability. No woman is unaware of the dangerous space she occupies when she occupies any space at all. Such vulnerability is not restricted to public spaces, either; a woman’s vulnerability does not dissipate when she crosses her home’s threshold, hence door locks (double checked each night) and home security systems, to say nothing of women who experience domestic violence.

Stevens’ experience is not uncommon; rather, many women can claim similar experiences, and recently, they have. The #metoo movement, founded by Tarana Burke in 2006, gained mainstream attention in 2016 as a social media phenomenon that asked any woman who had experienced harassment, assault, or rape to post the words “Me too” to highlight the
pervasiveness of violence against women.\textsuperscript{1} The number of posts that read “me too” illuminates an alarming but unsurprising trend. Society commodifies women’s bodies, reducing them to thinghood: “The very hyper-visibility of women’s bodies (and only certain bodies) obstructs the fulfillment of that need [to be seen], for the male gaze of sexual assessment dismisses most data as beneath notice if those data do not speak to sexual desire” (Stevens 9). Women’s bodies are always already vulnerable, for a woman’s disinterest in her desirability is generally irrelevant to those who desire her. This vulnerability, a product of patriarchy, renders women captive in America, though that captivity takes different forms over time.

This dissertation surveys women’s sexual trauma and recovery in significant genres of American literature, including captivity narratives, slave narratives, seduction novels, sentimental novels, neo-slave narratives, and short story cycles, from the seventeenth through twenty-first centuries. I apply twentieth-century medical research about trauma and recovery to argue women create generic spaces and discourse communities that empower them to testify to and recover from sexual trauma. Regardless of genre, the common thread through these stories of female vulnerability is captivity, broadly conceived. While captivity is not exclusively about sexual threat, the possibility for sexual violence increases when a woman becomes captive. While the Indian captivity narrative is most closely associated with captivity in the popular consciousness, it is far from the only form of captivity women endure. In fact, Christopher Castiglia suggests that captivity narratives retained their popularity with American readers—particularly women readers—through time because they symbolized other forms of captivity, such as “confinement within the home, enforced economic dependence, rape, [and] compulsory heterosexuality” (4). Most women will not be taken as war captives, but all women experience

\textsuperscript{1} For more about the movement visit their website at https://metoomvmt.org/.
the constraints of a patriarchal society, particularly early American women whose life trajectory was prescribed from birth. Castiglia explains, “Captivity narratives remained popular even after Anglo-America had won its wars for possession of the continent and its resources because they offered sensational stories of explicit or implied sex and violence” (2). As Castiglia’s observation illustrates, the American occupation with stories of sex and violence is not a new phenomenon but a traceable one throughout the nation’s history. Women in American literature represent bodies under constant threat not just of sex and violence, but of sexual violence. While sexual violence against men certainly exists, Stevens’s experience is one of many that illustrates the vulnerability inherent in occupying a woman’s body.

Sexual vulnerability presents in multiple ways throughout the literature in this study. Early American reading audiences viewed women in traditional Indian captivity narratives as bodies under constant threat of sexual violation. That enslaved women experienced sexual violence is a well-established fact, and slavery is captivity taken to its most extreme form. While being a prisoner of war or an enslaved person constitutes an obvious form of captivity, more subtle forms of the phenomenon exist, including compulsory domesticity. Patriarchy ensured compulsory domesticity for American women because, as Gerda Lerner explains, “[t]he sexuality of women, consisting of their sexual and their reproductive capacities and services, was commodified even prior to the creation of Western civilization” (212). In order to procure some semblance of economic security, women passed from the protection of their father to the protection of a husband. Under patriarchy, women became their husbands’ property. A woman’s body became her husband’s property, her bodily autonomy subsumed under his rule. Compulsory domesticity made women vulnerable to their husband’s sexual desires, making marriage a form of long-term captivity. That is not to say women did not love their husbands or
only viewed them as abusers; such an overarching statement is surely a mistake. However, women had limited agency under the compulsory domesticity system, and their lack of legal right to refuse consent to sexual relations made them vulnerable for the duration of their marriages.²

To date, no scholar of American literature has critically examined the effects of vulnerability and trauma across genre, race, and time, yet connecting texts through these three axes—genre, race, and time—yields interesting new research questions about American women’s literature. How do American women authors represent female vulnerability, especially threats of sexual violence? How does genre impact the presentation of female vulnerability across captivity narratives, seduction novels, sentimental novels, slave narratives, and neo-slave narratives? At their core, do these genres deal with trauma in the same ways, or different ways? If each genre deals with trauma differently, then what are those differences? How does American women’s literature represent the role of testimony, either oral or written, in the trauma recovery process? Finally, what are the effects of female community on trauma recovery?

While one could argue that (white) feminism proper begins in 1848 with the Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention, later than some authors in my study are writing, feminist theory informs my analysis. Feminist studies of early American literature are not a new phenomenon. In 2009, Mary Carruth expressed the concern that feminist studies of early American literature are slower to catch on than similar studies of nineteenth-and-twentieth-century literatures. Marion Rust argues, along with Ivy Schweitzer, that cultural obsession with the founding fathers delayed

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² America did not begin to pass marital rape laws until the late twentieth century; and marital rape on federal lands did not become a crime until 1986. For a detailed review of legal dates and feminist responses to marital rape laws see Rebecca Ryan, “The Sex Right: A Legal History of the Marital Rape Exemption.” For a legal history of marital rape and its posttraumatic effects see Jennifer Bennice and Patricia Resick, “Marital Rape: History, Research, and Practice.”
feminist scholarship on early America. Schweitzer also points out that many colonial and early national women’s texts, including letters, diaries, and oral narratives, were not published. Tamara Harvey argues equal rights discourse often precludes early American women’s writings from feminist critiques because early American feminism is not about achieving rights, but critiquing limits on women. Karen Weyler’s scholarship spans the turn of the eighteenth-and-nineteenth centuries, which affords her a different perspective on why early American feminist studies are complicated. She argues the evolving nature of the publishing industry at the turn of the eighteenth century presents challenges to studying colonial and early national women writers, which may account for the delay in feminist critiques of literature from the period. Information and publication records for mid-to-late nineteenth-century women writers are easily accessible, Weyler notes, but limited records exist that contain similar information on earlier American women writers since presses were usually small, rather than large and industrialized. Lisa Logan moves away from the inquiry about early Americanists’ need to “catch up” on feminist analysis to offer a new debate for feminists to adopt. Logan critiques the turn toward gender and away from women, not because gender is unimportant, but because women’s experiences within patriarchy are relevant. She argues that “feminism cannot be ‘liberated’ from women. Women are the first subject of feminism, and, as long as we continue to live in patriarchy and study texts written in it, the different lived experiences of women who matriculate in patriarchy in their bodies matter” (643; Logan’s emphasis). My analysis operates from an agreement with Logan’s statement—women (particularly in early America and its historical representations) cannot escape their embodied experiences.

Women and their bodies have symbolized cultural anxieties across centuries and genres, primarily as a metaphor or cultural symbol. Problematically, these representations of women’s
vulnerability often ignore the real traumatic and post-traumatic experiences and effects of living in a vulnerable body. Anxieties about women’s bodies evolve throughout American history but do remain present. Scot Guenter, who argues that combining the American flag with other symbols works to “enhance or disseminate adherence to a cause, as a means to procuring or protecting power within a society” (1), explains that symbols of nationalism and femininity have often been linked. According to Guenter, an Indian Queen initially represented the land of America, but the image shifted to a teenage Indian Princess with the rise of the thirteen colonies and the American Revolution; the Goddess of Liberty briefly represented early national America, but soon gave way to Lady Columbia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century women came to symbolize cultural purity through the angel in the house trope and, before the Civil War, slaveholders cited the sanctity and vulnerability of white womanhood to justify their atrocities, conveniently forgetting their victimization of enslaved women. Female bodies are vulnerable to sickness, kidnapping, and other risks, but the most decidedly female of these is vulnerability to sexual violation. Despite shifting cultural attitudes of the term, as early as 1425 rape was defined as “the act or crime, committed by a man, of forcing a woman to have sexual intercourse with him against her will, esp. by means of threats or violence” per the OED; clearly, the concept (and language) of sexual violation can be considered consistent within the temporal scope of this project, from the seventeenth through twenty-first centuries.

3 A commonly circulated print from 1774 entitled “The Able Doctor, or America Swallowing the Bitter Draught” depicts Lady Britannia looking away in disappointment as several men pin Lady Columbia to the ground. Columbia’s clothing is torn, exposing her breasts. One man holds her wrists behind her back, another holds her ankles as he looks up her skirt, and yet another wraps one hand around her neck and uses the other to force a tea kettle spout down her throat. According to The British Museum website, where the image can be viewed, the print is traditionally read as symbolic of early American political vulnerability.
A multi-century analysis of women’s vulnerability in American literature allows long-range patterns to emerge that analyses restricted to a specific era cannot provide. Wai-Chee Dimock argues not only that “[s]ome historical phenomena need large-scale analysis” (5) but specifically that “[t]his is also the case with long-lasting genres, such as epic and novel, with thousands of years behind them, and demanding analytic frames of comparable magnitude” (5-6). To begin to understand the relationship between women and vulnerability in American literature requires a long approach because, as Dimock explains,

Dates such as 1776 are misleading for just reason, for the temporal duration for American literature surely did not begin at just that point, that upper limit. Nor did it begin at 1620, when the Plymouth Colony was settled. These putative beginnings, monumentalized and held up like so many bulwarks against the long histories of other continents and the long history of America as a Native American habitat, cannot in fact fulfill their insulating function. The continuum of historical life does not grant the privilege of autonomy to any spatial locale; it does not grant the privilege of autonomy to any temporal segment. (4)

Furthermore, Mary Beard says “the caution which eliminates the quest for truth about women in long and universal history may in fact limit the ideas of such scholars about long and universal history or any of its features, as they fasten their minds on males in history. While exaggerating the force of men in the making of history, they miss the force of women which entered into the making of history and gave it important directions.” In this dissertation, long history gives voice to American women across temporal divides to contextualize sexual vulnerability as part of America’s origins and to illustrate women’s common experiences with sexual trauma and recovery. Judith Herman notes: “Like traumatized people, we have been cut off from the knowledge of our past. Like traumatized people, we need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future. Therefore, an understanding of psychological trauma begins with rediscovering history” (2). If readers of American literature are to take up the project of healing the trauma that accompanies vulnerability, they must rediscover its long history of
women’s sexual vulnerability, abuse, and rape. Furthermore, readers of American literature must recognize intersectional voices in the ongoing trauma conversation. Women’s differing experiences of trauma are woven into the roots of American women’s literature; that trauma must be rediscovered, testified about, and witnessed. Of course, I do not presume to heal the whole of American women’s literary trauma in one project, nor do I claim that my study can say everything that must be said about female vulnerability and trauma. Feminist long history provides a survey—a starting point, if you will—for further and more in-depth research on women’s vulnerability in American literature.

Early feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Judith Sargent Murray argued that all humans, including women, were capable of rational thought and that this mental capacity was more important than sexed embodiment. Nevertheless, women had to survive in an environment that disregarded their capacity for rational thought; additionally, they largely could not hold jobs or own property; as a result, women were often compelled to commodify their bodies for the sake of the economic security marriage could provide. Female bodies were legally commodified in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but in the twentieth century Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex brought critical attention to that sexual difference. Beauvoir believes that to exist in the world is to be embodied, and male bodies and female bodies experience the world differently. Patriarchal society encourages girls to be passive, and boys to be rambunctious. For Beauvoir, then, the female body becomes the object of the gaze early—in girlhood.\(^4\)

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\(^4\) Later, Judith Butler argues gender is a socially constructed performance, inherited by repetition, and Anne Fausto-Sterling rejects a gender binary all together, as it forces intersexed bodies into a false system of identification (Lennon). Even if one accepts Butler’s notion of performativity, a gender performance does not eradicate a body’s vulnerability.
French feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray largely conceive of the body as discursive, which is not without use, but focus on the body’s discursive elements risks ignoring the lived experience of embodiment. Indeed, ignoring the body is problematic because, as Iris Marion Young explains, “the woman lives her body as object as well as subject. . . . An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject’s intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention” (153-54; Young’s emphasis). In other words, Young argues a woman’s personhood—her consciousness—is often secondary to her corporeality, which is always under threat by outside forces. If women become objects in girlhood, as Beauvoir suggests, then women’s ever-present awareness of their vulnerability creates a double consciousness they are taught to navigate from an early age. Susan Bordo expresses rage that Sharon Lamb argues in The Secret Lives of Girls that girls as young as nine can wear thick eyeshadow and short skirts without risks; Bordo wants “to remind Sharon Lamb that 22 to 29 percent of all rapes against girls occur when they are eleven and younger” (Bordo xxx). Every child faces vulnerable experiences, but children in female-sexed bodies face unique dangers, as Bordo’s statistics illustrate.\(^5\) Bordo argues that often “even when women are silent (or verbalizing exactly the opposite), their bodies are seen as ‘speaking’ a language of provocation” (6). Victim-blaming is a common manifestation of this language of provocation. American

\(^5\) I do not mean to infer that male children are not at risk of sexual violence, merely that avoiding such violence is not part of the life narrative culture teaches them.
culture puts women on trial\textsuperscript{6} when they are sexually violated: what was she wearing? Why was she drinking? Why did she agree to go on a date? She isn’t a virgin, so she “wanted it.”

Bordo’s “language of provocation” persuasively highlights the mind/body dichotomy as a patriarchal tool to regulate female bodies. In this dichotomy, the woman generally represents the body while the man represents the mind. Bordo criticizes this policing and structure, arguing that “if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, the body is the negative term, and if woman is the body, then women are that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence, or aggression, failure of will, even death” (5; Bordo’s emphasis). In other words, Bordo opposes the idea that men are cerebral and women are corporeal, therefore women are responsible for men’s embodied behavior. As Bordo explains, “These depictions of women as continually and actively luring men to arousal (and, often, evil) work to disclaim male ownership of the body and its desires. The arousal of those desires is the result of female manipulation and therefore is the woman’s fault” (6). The mind/body dichotomy conveniently allows men to denounce their corporeal desires as emotions and actions for which women are culpable, shifting the burden of prevention and safety onto the female body—“don’t get raped” versus “don’t rape.” Problematically, this projection works; “[w]omen and girls frequently internalize this ideology, holding themselves to blame for unwanted advances and sexual assaults” (Bordo 8).

Gender may be socially constructed, but that does not negate the fact that female bodies are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. According to the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), nine out of every ten rape victims are female. Bordo acknowledges that sex,

\textsuperscript{6} I speak metaphorically here, although it is generally well known that the legal system treats rape victims as criminals—unlike victims of other types of crime.
gender, and racial differences are social constructs, but argues that bodily experience cannot be ignored because “each of these dualities [male/female, black/white] has had profound consequences for the construction of the experience of those who live them” (234). Believing gender is a social construct does not stop someone from being violated. In a culture where a woman who refuses sexual activity is viewed as prudish or playing hard to get, an individual who inhabits a body perceived as female is always already at risk. A woman’s subjectivity is important, but she can never wholly abandon the vulnerability that comes with inhabiting a female body in a patriarchal culture.

An intersectional approach is vital to any survey of women’s trauma. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in 1989, explaining that analysis favoring one form of identity over another (gender OR race) erases the complex realities of lived experiences, particularly for Black women. Female bodies are constantly at risk, but not all female bodies are at equal risk for violation; African American and Native American women experience higher rates of sexual violence than white women, and Native American women are twice as likely to experience sexual assault compared to women from any other race (RAINN). Hortense Spillers traces these race-based increases in violence back to the New World, arguing that enslaved peoples’ “New World, diasporic plight marked a theft of the body—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire” (386; emphasis Spillers’). The body becomes a tool dispossessed of a consciousness, a flesh prison disconnected from its ostensible owner.7 Women of color face distinct obstacles that white women do not have to deal with when victimized by a member of their own race. When a woman of color identifies

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7 While enslaved bodies complicate the ownership question from a legal standpoint, I take the position that each individual owns his or her own body.
an abuser or attacker of her same race, she is often seen as a race-traitor. The internal conflict forces survivors to choose between themselves and their communities, which signals a large problem because, as Andrea Smith argues regarding Native women, “[w]e cannot limit our conception of sexual violence to individual acts of rape—rather it encompasses a wide range of strategies designed not only to destroy peoples, but to destroy their sense of being a people” (2). What better way to create intra-community turmoil than forcing a portion of the population to live with not only the fear of being victimized, but the possibility of seeing their attackers go free because reporting them may result in victims being ostracized from valuable support systems?

The simplest definition of trauma is an event that falls outside of the life experiences a person expects to have; for example, marriage and childrearing are not generally considered traumatic, but war and sexual violence are. According to Cathy Caruth, “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). Trauma’s recursive nature requires it to be understood as history. Caruth explains that “[t]he historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (17). But trauma, Caruth argues, “is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival” (58).

Much available scholarship on sexual violence in American literature centers on drama, film, Native American literature, or young adult literature. Laura Tanner explores the reader’s role—and complicity—in sexual violence plots in twentieth-century fiction, while Sharon Block offers an extensive historical analysis of early American legal reports of rape and sexual coercion. In addition to slave narratives, Sabine Sielke uses seduction, realist, naturalist,
sentimental, and modernist novels to trace an American feminist rhetoric of rape and evaluates issues surrounding rape as a trope for other concerns. According to Sielke, early nineteenth-century narratives employ rape to project social anxieties onto the female body; later nineteenth-century narratives develop and advance the racist trope of the black male rapist and the white female victim; modernist rape narratives focus on rape’s ideological subtexts; and postmodern literature re-politicizes and literalizes rape. Bourke studies the history of sexual violence as a psychological injury through the evolution of nineteenth- and twentieth-century medical and legal discourse on rape. She finds that the concept of psychological trauma “was not applied to women who experienced rape or sexual assault. Bodily pain was acknowledged, but not psychological anguish. In other words, in rape narratives we have an example of a ‘bad event’ that was [initially] excluded from trauma narratives” (26). She concludes that women’s psychological injuries from sexual violence are excluded from trauma discourse because traumatic events were defined vis-à-vis white male experiences.

Attackers have different motivations—and possibly think they stand to gain more—by violating women of color. For example, Smith argues rape was and is used as a tool to perpetuate the genocide of Native peoples and increase the enslaved labor force via the violation of African American women. She asserts, “Because Indian bodies are ‘dirty,’ they are considered sexually violable and ‘rapable,’ and the rape of bodies that are considered inherently impure or dirty simply does not count” (10). In addition to Native women, African and African American women are viewed as rapable. According to Bordo, “[c]orresponding to notions that all black men are potential rapists by nature are stereotypes of black women as amoral Jezebels who can never truly be raped, because rape implies the invasion of a personal space of modesty and reserve that the black woman has not been imagined as having” (9). Bordo goes on to explain
that the black woman’s body carries multiple negative associations. Most notably, “[b]y virtue of her sex, [the black woman] represents the temptations of the flesh and the source of man’s moral downfall. By virtue of her race, she is instinctual animal, undeserving of privacy and undemanding of respect” (10-11). The black woman is seen as temptation embodied, and because she is dehumanized she is rapable. The Native woman’s rape may not count because she is ‘dirty,’ but the black woman’s rape does not count because her body is viewed as mere commodity. Even today, “the legacy of slavery has added an additional element to effacements of black women’s humanity. For in slavery her body is not only treated as an animal body but is property, to be ‘taken’ and used at will. Such a body is denied even the dignity accorded a wild animal; its status approaches that of mere matter, thing-hood” (11; Bordo’s emphasis).

Despite many atrocities and setbacks, trauma survivors share one common goal: recovery. Unfortunately, many survivors experience frustration when they realize recovery is a recursive process, and healing will not always occur on a convenient timetable. Herman asserts traumas must be remembered and told for both individuals and social groups to heal (1). Regarding witnessing trauma, in fact, Herman argues, “The fundamental stages of recovery are establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community” (3). In this project I will evaluate if and how well characters in my chosen texts navigate Herman’s framework of rediscovering history, establishing safety, telling their trauma, and connecting with community. Evaluating the literary texts I have chosen through Herman’s psychiatric trauma and recovery model allows a canon of women’s trauma literature to emerge that allows women writers to form a multi-century discourse community. Within this community, women create generic spaces that empower them to testify to and recover from sexual trauma through a survey of significant genres of American literature—
Testimony, a vital component of trauma recovery, can be oral, legal, or written. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub believe, “survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one’s story” (78). Telling and knowing work together; a survivor must testify if she is to accept her trauma and integrate it into her life’s narrative. Time complicates the recovery process, for the longer a survivor’s story “remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in [her] conception of it, so much so that [she] doubts the reality of the actual events” (Laub 79). Self-doubt hinders recovery, yet the longer a survivor waits to speak, it seems, the more she doubts herself. American—that is to say, patriarchal—society doubts victims who hesitate to come forward immediately, even though a historical gap “does not invalidate in any way the power and the value of the individual testimonies, but it underscores the fact that these testimonies were not transmittable, and integratable, at the time” (Laub 84). Furthermore, “the ultimate historical transmission of the testimonies beyond and through the historical gap, indeed emphasizes the human will to live and the human will to know even in the most radical circumstances designed for its obliteration and destruction” (84). Time invalidates neither traumatic experiences nor testimony regarding such experiences.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I define testimony as the transmission of a traumatic event via detailed narrative rather than the legal proclamation of events in a court of law. The primary reason I do not define testimony in legal terms is that legal testimony as it is understood today was not available to many of the women in my study. For example, Mary Rowlandson writes in the colonial era, before the United States itself had a judicial system separate from the
church. Leonora Sansay’s Clara flees colonial and marital violence, leaving her with limited recourse for legal action. Harriet Jacobs was a fugitive slave; as property, she had no legal protections or rights to testify in court. Even as this study moves toward contemporary literature, testimony is not generally available to trauma victims. The two Toni Morrison novels in this study are set during slavery and Reconstruction, and Gloria Naylor’s characters, as African American women throughout the twentieth century, have no reason to trust the judicial system and no financial means to pursue justice. For the women in this dissertation, then, testimony cannot be legal.

Witnessing, like testimony, exists in multiple forms and is vital to trauma recovery. In fact, “the emergence of the [victim’s] narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the ‘knowing’ of the event is given birth to” (Laub 57). Laub indicates trauma victims cannot truly know—that is, process—their experiences without a witness. Witnesses can take many forms, such as juries, judges, friends, family, and therapists. The general conception is that a witness sees; however, trauma witnesses may see, hear, or read. The trauma witness need not see the victim’s trauma as it occurs; rather, the witness “sees” the trauma through the victim’s testimony and validates the survivor’s experience through active listening. Trauma recovery, then, is dyadic at minimum, requiring a survivor and a witness. In American women’s literature, the witness takes many forms. An early American woman like Mary Rowlandson had readers in her immediate community to bear witness to her experience, though her narrative’s end calls the completion of her recovery into question. Eighteenth-century white women writers had an implied audience of their peers to whom their writings bore witness. Even though the texts in this dissertation’s second chapter are fiction (or at least fictionalized) they illustrate the novel’s function as a safe space for women’s
testimony. Literate white women had the privilege of telling their own stories; however, enslaved women’s stories were often mediated through amanuenses, usually white abolitionists as in the case of Harriet Jacobs and Lydia Maria Child. Hannah Crafts’ literacy and the eventual discovery of her manuscript offer a rare opportunity wherein an enslaved woman testifies without mediation to an audience, albeit centuries after her death. Jacobs had abolitionist support and Crafts escaped, but Fugitive Slave Laws complicated their safety. Testimony did not become safe for Black women until the twentieth century and, even then, that safety was precarious.

Genre, too, bears witness. Laub speaks of a Holocaust survivor who misrepresents the number of chimneys blown up at Auschwitz during a Jewish uprising. While historians—in an attitude similar to the one society and the legal system has toward rape victims—attempted to discredit her entire narrative simply because she misremembered a number, Laub insists she was not testifying to a historical event, but “to the breakage of a framework” (60). Genre, with its boundaries and expectations, works to create frameworks for testimony. Genre provides the template from which reader-listeners bear witness to the traumas of women’s vulnerability, to the experiences wrought from that vulnerability. Genre teaches readers how to bear witness. Therefore, the genres that have evolved throughout the timeline of American women’s literature have given women the ability to testify and to have witnesses to whom they bear their narratives. Laub explains that “[b]earing witness to trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other—in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody: to somebody they have been waiting for a long time” (70). It is not enough simply for women to write their traumas; someone must read their traumas. For American women, as a collective, to heal from the trauma
of vulnerability, there must be women to testify—writers—and people to witnesses—readers. Genre allows writers a framework from within to speak to a specific set of readers, to choose their audiences in at least a limited way.

Captivity strips a person of her most fundamental form of agency: freedom. A commonly cited traumatic event is war, which is a prevalent theme in early American literature—for instance, Native Americans often take captives during periods of war in colonial America. While these captives sometimes return to their Anglo-American home, they struggle to fully assimilate after the captivity experience. Problematically, captivity narratives focus so narrowly on white women’s vulnerability that they often diminish or entirely ignore the vulnerability of and violence against women of color. Castiglia argues that “[c]aptivity narratives flourish in moments of racial ‘crisis’ in America: the colonial confrontation with Native Americans, the Civil War, the civil rights movement” (14); yet, his study focuses exclusively on white women. While my project opens with real and fictionalized accounts of the traditional captivity narrative in which a white woman is held captive in a Native American community, I extend the concept of captivity beyond this traditional approach to include stories of other types of captivity, such as slavery and compulsory domesticity, and to include African-American women’s voices.

Yes, all women are vulnerable to sexual violation; however, not all women have the same resources for recovery, and healing cannot begin when society denies violation—even

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8 Of course, freedom has varying meanings in a project that explores both white and black women’s literature. My functional definition of freedom is a woman’s bodily autonomy to move freely in her chosen society. I specify chosen society to accommodate women like Mary Jemison, who chose to remain a member of the Seneca tribe rather than return to white society. I realize early compulsory domesticity complicates notions of freedom that provide white women with complete agency. All enslaved women are precluded from freedom at least until they are manumitted.
personhood. Joanna Bourke’s criteria for an act to qualify as sexual abuse can work toward undoing the “thing- hood” Bordo says women of color experience, and offer a genesis for recovery: first, the act must be sexual (in whatever way the victim defines “sexual”) and second, it must be non-consensual. Bourke’s criteria shift focus from victimizer to victimized, offering survivors the agency to define their own experiences. Despite sexual violence’s extremely traumatic nature, discourse on such trauma in early American literature is rare. Of course, one factor that contributes to this absence is that conceptions of sexual violence vary throughout time. Merril D. Smith explains that in early America rape was often considered a crime against a man’s property rather than a crime against the victimized woman since white women “belonged” first to their fathers, then to their husbands, and enslaved women were owned outright as property. That seventeenth-and-eighteenth-century Americans framed rape as a national issue— women were thought of as metaphors for America’s strength—rather than a gendered, personal act of violence may contribute to the scarcity of literary references to rape. According to Block, who historicizes rape’s early American contexts, the legal definition of rape in early America “did not provide details about how to distinguish between a man’s seductive pressure and a woman’s inability to refuse” (16-17). In other words, the legal line between consent and coercion was not concrete, so rape prosecutions were complicated. Societal attitudes and customs barred justice in many cases, as women “accepted a wide range of forceful sexual relations without charging a man with rape. . . . This was especially true when the man was already in a position of mastery over a woman. In such situations, women seemed to accept a wide range of verbal and physical persuasion before categorizing the man’s actions as attempted rape” (Block 23). Social class and race relations prevented many women from reporting rape, in many cases because they lived with coercion daily. For example, enslaved women could, and sometimes did, report rapes,
albeit fruitlessly: “No rape conviction against a white man, let alone a victim’s owner, for raping an enslaved woman has been found between at least 1700 and the Civil War” (Block 65) largely because enslaved women lacked the agency associated with personhood—in other words, to rape an enslaved woman was to violate her master’s property, not to violate a human being.

Of course, language and legal challenges were not the only issues surrounding sexual violence; societal gender expectations were a factor. Block explains it was considered public indecency for women to speak about the details of a rape; consequently, women were removed from rape rhetoric and their stories became about men. Block argues that early rape narratives cast men as both perpetrators (of rape) and victims (of property damage), and the early rape narrative is represented as a space in which masculinities compete. Appropriately, then, in the early national period, rape narratives became allegories for the American/British conflict. As Katharina Erhard explains, “images of rape and (the founding of) nation are conflated, since both deal with the idea of exclusivity and staking one’s territory” (511). Early American fiction often situated a British soldier as a rapist and an American soldier as a rescuer. Thus, through the early national era, women rarely—if ever—appeared in rape fictions; when they did, it usually turned out that either the rape was fabricated or the raped woman died. Problematically, this construct removes the narrative’s central character, the victimized woman, from her own story, thereby erasing her potential for healing and agency.

Because I aim to survey a broad swath of American women's literature, I have chosen to organize the chapters in this dissertation chronologically, beginning with the seventeenth century Indian captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson and ending with Gloria Naylor’s short story cycle The Women of Brewster Place. Chapter 1 assesses how female vulnerability is represented in the captivity narrative, arguably the first American literary genre. Technically, any story with a
captor and a captive can be categorized as a captivity narrative; captors are typically Native American while captives are typically settlers. Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola believes “the Indian captivity narrative is arguably the first American literary form dominated by women’s experiences as captives, storytellers, writers, and readers” (xi). In A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1682), one of the first and certainly the most canonical captivity narrative, a Puritan woman and minister’s wife recounts her eleven weeks as a captive during King Philip’s War. Rowlandson’s narrative was well-circulated, endorsed, and framed by an introduction widely credited to spiritual leader Increase Mather. The text was immensely popular: it went through four editions the year it appeared (Derounian-Stodola 3). Rowlandson never claims she was sexually assaulted during her captivity and there is no evidence to suggest otherwise. That her narrative makes this explicitly clear to her Puritan reading audience not only indicates the communal coopting of her story, as her purity must be maintained if she is to serve as a symbol for her Puritan community’s spiritual and political triumph, but also that rape was a common European war tactic. While Rowlandson’s narrative appeared in the seventeenth century, captivity narratives maintained steady popularity well into the nineteenth century. The Indian captivity narrative can be traced through “three distinct phases: authentic religious accounts in the seventeenth century, propagandist and stylistically embellished texts in the eighteenth century, and outright works of fiction in the late eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries” (Derounian-Stodola xii). The texts in Chapter 1 trace these phases. A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson is the prototype of the seventeenth-century captivity narrative. Rowlandson’s narrative is generally

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9 Only a second edition is extant—early Americans read the first edition so voraciously that it disintegrated.
accepted as framed by a man but written by a woman; despite Increase Mather’s influence and
the text’s religiosity, moments of traumatic remembering occur throughout Rowlandson’s
narrative. Chapter 1 juxtaposes Mary Rowlandson with Ann Eliza Bleecker’s *The History of
Maria Kittle* (1797) to explore how women writers fictionalize the captivity narrative. Chapter 1
argues the captivity narrative as a genre illustrates a method of trauma recovery that is not
always completely successful in nonfiction, such as Mary Rowlandson’s seventeenth-century
Puritan narrative; however, captivity narratives gain effectiveness as healing apparatuses as
women writers fictionalize these stories to open a space that imagines alternative possibilities.
Tracing women’s vulnerability, trauma, and trauma processing in two early American texts—
Mary Rowlandson’s *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*
(1682) and Ann Eliza Bleecker’s *The History of Maria Kittle* (1797)—Chapter 1 compares the
tensions between individual and communal healing through the lens of trauma and recovery.
Mary Rowlandson, the redeemed captive, presents her trauma matter-of-factly, whereas early
national author Ann Eliza Bleecker fictionalizes the captivity narrative formula to illustrate the
healing potential of a transnational community of women following a violent battle for
nationhood. Chapter 1 concludes that Indian captivity narratives, whether factual or fictive, are
vehicles for testimony to and recovery from the trauma of physical captivity for early American
women. Giffen’s reminder that *The History of Maria Kittle* “concludes not with Maria’s
returning home but with Mr. Kittle joining her in this specifically feminized site” (61)
underscores the necessity of a safe community for traumatized women. In the end, it is the
community of other women to which Maria Kittle belongs that allows her to recover as Mary
Rowlandson cannot, illustrating that women’s voices and support are vital to women’s recovery
from trauma.
While Chapter 1 explores traditional accounts of Indian captivity, Chapter 2 turns to the epistolary novel, particularly the novel of sentiment, to explore the vulnerabilities young women face surrounding companionate relationships. Through an investigation of Leonora Sansay’s *Secret History* (1808) and Susanna Haswell Rowson’s *Trials of the Human Heart* (1795) and *Reuben and Rachel* (1798) I argue the sentimental genre reflects cultural anxieties of its time period, and the sentimental novel in particular allows early Anglo-American women a proto-therapeutic space to testify to and begin to heal from their vulnerabilities and traumatic experiences under patriarchal control. Chapter 2 positions the sentimental novel of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century as a uniquely constructed safe space that allows women to explore the physical, sexual, and social vulnerabilities of early national life and relationships. Women in each of the chapter’s respective texts process their traumas to varying degrees, but the racial implications of trauma, testimony, and witnessing stand out. Rowson’s white heroine Meriel survives attempted incestuous rape and is ultimately rewarded with a happy ending: marriage to her first love, Kingly, and reunion with long-lost parents who bequeath her a large fortune. Alternatively, Sansay’s creole heroine Clara does not suffer attempted rape; rather, she endures domestic violence and marital rape. Nevertheless, the novel offers her the possibility of a happy ending as she sails for America, even if readers do not get to see that ending. Meriel escapes her abusers. Clara escapes her abusers. Rowson’s nonwhite heroines Bruna, Alzira, and Mina—who are raped, coerced, and seduced—die, leaving their stories to be mediated through several levels of white narrators. The sentimental novel is proto-therapeutic for Anglo-American heroines, but heroines of color are not afforded the chance for trauma recovery.

Chapter 3 argues that in nineteenth-century American women’s writing, tales of captivity merge with features of the sentimental novel to create compelling women’s slave narratives. In
Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Crafts’ novel *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, and Jacobs’ slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) allow trauma victims to explore the trauma recovery process; each of the three texts manipulates generic conventions to produce hybrid narratives that reveal, investigate, and understand the impact of sexual vulnerability and trauma on enslaved women. This chapter has argued that in nineteenth-century American women’s writing captivity and sentiment merge with gothic elements to create compelling women’s slave narratives of trauma and recovery. The texts realistically illustrate the complex nature of sexual trauma as each woman achieves different levels of healing, from the bare minimum of Cassy to the suicidal women of Crafts’ novel to the happy ending Jacobs’ Linda Brent enjoys. Both Crafts and Jacobs give their narratives the sentimental ending Stowe’s novel teaches white women readers to expect. Crafts did not know anyone would ever read her novel, but both Stowe and Jacobs wrote within the framework of the abolitionist movement, appealing directly to a white female readership.

Chapter 4 argues that gothic elements provide a framework for contemporary African American women writers to explore trauma and recovery through the neo-slave narrative and the short story cycle. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* exposes the trauma enslaved women endured but does not end with recovery for the characters, whereas in *A Mercy* Morrison allows an enslaved woman to achieve recovery. Conversely, Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* employs the polyvocal short story cycle to illustrate the cyclical nature of trauma and the communal recovery process. The neo-slave narrative and the short story cycle allow contemporary African American women writers to explore trauma and recovery outside of a slave-system setting. White women such as Mary Rowlandson assert their lack of victimhood, painstakingly assuring their community of their sexual purity. Later white women write sexual vulnerability, but the
Republican-era notion that death is preferable to rape is ever-present. Enslaved women hint at sexual abuse, but their political purposes prevent full disclosure. Contemporary women writers such as Morrison and Naylor are free to experiment with generic forms and nonlinear narratives to offer voice to generations of trauma, both past and present.

Many scholars identify sexual violence in literature as trope, metaphor, or plot device, which is not wholly inaccurate—one need look no further than George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series to see rape as a plot device—but what rarely gets scholarly attention are the ways female trauma survivors navigate recovery from both vulnerability and assault, defining vulnerability to sexual assault as a trauma in and of itself. Herman argues that trauma recovery occurs within the context of relationships, and I would further specify that women recover from trauma through relationships with other women. For example, Bryce Traister has recently suggested that Mary Rowlandson’s trauma recovery is not as complete as we might think, as she exhibits post-traumatic symptoms toward her narrative’s end. Conversely, Sansay’s Clara can resolve her narrative through a supportive female community. This multi-century, multi-genre study of female vulnerability that addresses historical context, race, and genre illustrates the intersectional nature of traumatic experiences and their aftermath written about, by, and for women themselves.
CHAPTER 1

REPRESENTING WOMEN’S VULNERABILITY IN THE EARLY AMERICAN CAPTIVITY NARRATIVE: MARY ROWLANDSON’S FACT AND ANN ELIZA BLEECKER’S FICTION

In the fourth remove of her canonical captivity narrative, *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682), Mary Rowlandson witnesses the violation of a pregnant fellow-captive’s body. The woman in question often asks to go home as she approaches her due date, until her Indian captors seem exasperated with her request. They “gathered a great company together about her, and stript her naked, and set her in the midst of them: and when they had sung and danced about her (in their hellish manner) as long as they pleased: they knockt [sic] her on the head, and the [older] child in her arms with her: when they had done that, they made a fire and put them both into it” (20). On the surface, a large group of strangers who captured the woman gather around her, remove her clothing, chant in a language she likely does not recognize, then murder her, her toddler, and her unborn child, and burn her remains. Such an ordeal would be terrifying to experience, and traumatic to witness. Rowlandson empathizes with the woman whose death she witnesses, as she herself could just as easily be in the other woman’s vulnerable position. The reality is, of course, more complicated than what I have described here. Rowlandson and others fail to observe how these scenes of Native violence are historically situated in settler colonial confrontations and war, and omit the violence settler men inflict on Native women. Descriptions of Native violence against white colonial women has often been a justification for “retaliatory” racialized violence, a pattern that continues in life and
literature well after the American Civil Rights era. I use the scene to illustrate a truth that endures throughout literature and society: women’s bodies are always already vulnerable; physical captivity heightens not only that vulnerability, but a captive woman’s awareness of it as well. Significantly, the pregnant woman’s body remains exposed for the duration of a ceremony, and this exposure increases her perceived vulnerability to both physical torture and a decidedly gendered form of violence—sexual violation. Furthermore, the scene highlights two vulnerable bodies: both the pregnant woman and her unborn child—a body contained within a body. If Rowlandson’s captors had been so inclined, they could have sexually abused or assaulted the exposed pregnant woman (or any of the other captives). Because Rowlandson identifies with the other woman as a fellow Christian captive, she likely internalizes the possibility that they will share similar fates. Captivity, then, is both a physical and mental state, and trauma results from the convergence of that physical and mental captivity.

Rowlandson’s violent description of a pregnant woman’s death may appear sensational to twenty-first-century readers, but violence and colonial-Indian relations remain inextricable from the American experience. In fact, Richard Slotkin’s seminal work, *Regeneration through Violence*, argues violence is the foundation upon which the story of America was built: “The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience” (5). Colonial renewal came at great expense to Native American populations; thus, the foundational stories of America endorse violence as a means of success, whether implicitly or explicitly. Women most often appear in these foundational stories via the Indian captivity narrative, often called the first uniquely American literary genre. The women of
early American literature, then, face a distinctly gendered conflation of issues as they inhabit bodies under constant threat not just of sex and violence, but of sexual violence.

The captivity narrative as a genre, whether oral or written, fiction or nonfiction, functions as trauma processing, a proto-therapeutic instrument for captives and the societies that so voraciously consume their narratives. Often authored by women, captivity narratives illustrate a method of trauma recovery that is not always completely successful in nonfiction, such as Mary Rowlandson’s seventeenth-century Puritan narrative; however, captivity narratives gain effectiveness as healing apparatuses as women writers fictionalize these stories to open a space that imagines alternative possibilities. Tracing women’s vulnerability, trauma, and trauma processing in two early American texts—Mary Rowlandson’s *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682) and Ann Eliza Bleecker’s *The History of Maria Kittle* (1797)—I investigate the impact of women’s vulnerability by comparing the tensions between individual and communal healing through the lens of trauma and recovery. Mary Rowlandson, the redeemed captive, presents her trauma matter-of-factly, whereas early national author Ann Eliza Bleecker fictionalizes the captivity narrative formula to illustrate the healing potential of a transnational community of women following a violent battle for nationhood.

**Trauma, Recovery, and Literary History**

The simplest definition of trauma is an event that negatively impacts a person because it falls outside of the life experiences he or she expects to have; for example, marriage and childrearing are not generally considered traumatic, but war and sexual violence are. According to foundational trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of
sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). Furthermore, psychiatrist Judith Herman explains that “traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death” (33). The typical response to such catastrophic events is denial: Herman explains “the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness [because certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud” (1). Nevertheless, the horrors of trauma beg to be told.

Most trauma survivors share one common goal: recovery. Unfortunately, many survivors experience frustration when they realize recovery is a recursive process, and healing will not always occur on a convenient timetable. Herman explains, “The fundamental stages of recovery are establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community” (3). Again, the recursive, cyclical nature of trauma recovery forces survivors to move in and out of these stages in a non-linear fashion.

Scholars must rediscover women’s literary history from a trauma-informed perspective, a point Herman’s extended trauma study supports. Herman believes trauma must be told and that recovery only becomes possible after victims remember and admit their experiences: “Like traumatized people, we have been cut off from the knowledge of our past. Like traumatized people, we need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future. Therefore, an understanding of psychological trauma begins with rediscovering history” (2). Traumas must be remembered not only on an individual basis, but on a large-scale one as well. If, as Herman and other trauma scholars such as Caruth suggest, trauma recovery begins with rediscovering
history, then a truly trauma-informed survey of American women’s literature must begin with the one of the earliest genres of American women’s literature—the Indian captivity narrative.

Testimony is a vital component of trauma recovery. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub believe, “survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one’s story” (78). Similarly, Herman argues traumatic experiences must be developed into a coherent narrative, complete with emotions. She makes it plain that “[a] narrative that does not include the traumatic imagery and bodily sensations is barren and incomplete. The ultimate goal, however, is to put the story, including its imagery, into words” (177). Testimony requires more than a survivor speaking her trauma. The survivor must acknowledge the emotions she felt during her traumatic experience(s) before she can process and integrate them into the larger narrative of her life.

Captivity

Practice

Early Americans were no strangers to violence, witnessing inter-tribal conflicts and participating in European/Indigenous wars. Native peoples from the Northeast, Midwest, and Plains all took captives for various reasons, but major motives include exchange (for ransom or goods) and adoption. Of course, captives were generally prisoners of wars that the colonists themselves provoked in their racially-based battle for ideological and geographical supremacy. According to Karen Weyler, “Indians took captives for a variety of reasons, most often as a tactic of warfare and in retaliation for broken treaties and encroachment on their lands” (25).
Additionally, captives were often held for ransom or used as slaves. June Namias also notes that captivity, usually with the end result of adoption or ransom, served as a war tactic (16). Furthermore, she identifies four primary reasons captives were taken during war: for mourning rituals; to replenish the population; to get ransom payment; or to inflict a form of psychological warfare (17). “Either sex was considered a desirable substitute for a lost relative,” according to Namias, but overall “[t]he sex and age of the victim were [still] important in determining the survival of the captive” as women were not required to run the gauntlet and children acculturated more easily than adults (16-17). During Metacom's War, the war in which Mary Rowlandson was taken captive, Michelle Burnham notes, “[c]aptives served as tools of economic negotiation and as figures of political and religious significance as they circulated between the New England tribes and the New England colonists” (location 280).

Captivity proved exceedingly common in colonial America, but our ability to determine exact numbers of captives is limited. Still, despite inconsistent record-keeping in the era, scholars estimate that various Native American tribes took at least tens of thousands of colonials captive. During the nearly ninety-year period between 1675 and 1763 alone, “approximately 1,641 New Englanders were taken hostage [and] hundreds of women and children were captured” by Plains Indians (Deronian-Stodola Women’s Indian Captivity Narratives xv).3

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1 According to Namias, “‘Mourning war’ was a complicated set of rituals for assuring that the family of deceased warriors were compensated for their loss both physically and psychologically. It was also a cultural system of bestowing power to avenge loss. Through their political power the women of the family, as leading older women in the clan, could call upon kin to make war on those who had killed a son, brother, or husband. After battle, the ceremonies of bringing the captives into the village and running the gauntlet enabled the family to express anger and loss as well as victory and dominance. The ritual mourning could then be transformed into new life with the adoption of a captive” (17).

2 This conflict is also commonly known as King Philip’s War. For the sake of continuity, I will refer to the conflict as Metacom’s War.

3 For an extensive estimate of the population of various New England colonies during the Indian Wars, see Franklin Bowditch Dexter’s “Estimates of Population in the American Colonies” (1887).
Evolution of a Genre

Early Americans’ frequent experiences with captivity spawned a new, and some scholars argue distinctly American, genre: the captivity narrative. The captivity narrative is “an indigenous New World genre based on interactions between Euro-Americans and their Indian captors” (Weyler 25). According to Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, captives themselves had various motivations for telling their stories, including political or spiritual reasons, because family or community suggested it, for financial gain, and to raise funds to ransom other captives (“Captivity Narrative” 246). However, the reading public was so eager to consume captivity narratives that, Weyler explains, many were printed even if the survivor had little-to-no literary skill, employing amanuenses and editors in as-told-to stories (27). Derounian-Stodola suggests that even though captivity is traumatic, captives face challenges communicating that trauma as the genre evolves and its conventions solidify, particularly when editors are involved: “Released captives who wrote their own narratives, but especially editors who ‘embellished’ a captivity account for publication (Cotton Mather, for example), quickly realized the genre’s inherent potential for religious, propagandist, sensational, or literary exploitation” (“Puritan Orthodoxy” 92). Such editorial practices problematize many captivity narratives, as both seventeenth-and-eighteenth-century readers and modern scholars question narrative authenticity. Editors shaping these narratives may have shared the captives’ motives, but they may have had their own motives for sharing these stories. The line between a captive’s “authentic” experience and feelings and an editor’s shaping of the narrative for a larger ideological purpose can be difficult, if not impossible, to parse. Nevertheless, as Herman advocates testimony as a healing method for
social groups, it stands to reason that fictive captivity narratives\(^4\) allow early Americans to process the traumas inherent in living in a perpetual war zone surrounded by strangers.\(^5\)

Over the course of the eighteenth century, the captivity narrative evolves to reflect American societal concerns. Roy Harvey Pearce argues the captivity narrative is polygeneric, a “popular form which shapes and reshapes itself according to varying immediate cultural ‘needs’” (1)’ conversely, Richard VanderBeets labels it monogeneric, a hero’s quest of separation, transformation, and return (“Ritual” 548). Alden Vaughn and Edward Clark posit that the captivity narrative becomes its own genre in the late seventeenth century, before which it was usually published in larger works (2). Generically, Vaughn and Clark claim the captivity narrative is a mix of spiritual autobiography (4) sermon (6), jeremiad (7) and secular adventure story; “At root, captivity narratives were lay sermons (or, when recited secondhand by an Increase or Cotton Mather, clerical sermons), in the guise of adventure stories” (7). David Minter describes the captivity narrative as deeply devout—closest in genre to Puritan conversion narratives (340-41)—albeit propaganda against the French and Indians, tools to support “government protection of frontier settlements” that read as pulp thrillers (335). Conversely, Burnham argues that captivity narratives are not so much generic amalgamations as liminal writings that defy easy categorization: “captivity narratives—like the captives who wrote them—occupy a space suspended between coherent generic forms. That space is not only one aligned with the genre of the novel but one created by the practice of colonialism” (location 764). As

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\(^4\) Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola explains in *Women’s Indian Captivity Narratives* that captivity narratives exist on a continuum between factive, or more true-to-reality (such as Mary Rowlandson), and fictive, which she designates as largely, well, fictionalized (such as Maria Kittle’s narrative) (xii).

\(^5\) I call Native Americans strangers here in the general sense of unknown persons, not to invoke the Puritan religious connotations of the term. For more on the religious definition of the term, see Joseph A. Conforti, *Saints and Strangers*. 
Burnham notes, trauma survivors—such as redeemed captives—often occupy a liminal space, suspended between the trauma itself and the healing and integration of that trauma into the life narrative.

If captivity narratives themselves are generically liminal, then a text need not be marketed or labeled as a captivity narrative to function as such, though they generally fit a more rigid definition in Rowlandson’s time. According to Pearce, captivity narratives began as Puritan (mostly) religious documents concerned with mobility, adoption, torture, temptation, returns home, and evidence or proclamation of Providential wisdom (2) that were often propagandist and stylized by editors (such as Cotton Mather) rather than the captive him or herself; usually, the outside editor sought to provoke hatred for Indigenous peoples and the French (6). While imprisonment was a sixteenth-and-seventeenth-century metaphor for human existence, Minter argues the language of captivity “made any particularly dramatic experience of captivity a sign of judgement and any dramatic deliverance a sign of grace” (338-39). Even as he continues to build his argument, Mary Rowlandson’s narrative fits his definitions. For example, Minter carefully notes that individualism was less important to a delivered captive (or at least to the narrative they published) than reinforcing collective identity. He notes that “what we observe in the early narratives is the work not simply of an individual but of a radically socialized individual, an individual who feels a deep need to conform experience to socially sanctioned patterns and no longer feels any deep resistance to such restriction” (Minter 347). To process their experiences, then, captives needed to situate them within the framework of their natal

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6 Definitionally, Vaughn and Clark explain that the lack of written captivities by Native Americans means the early captivity narrative was defined as “an account, usually autobiographical, of forced participation in Indian life” (2); and that such narratives offered “unpolished but intense religious statements in the Puritan period” (3).
culture; Minter’s argument aligns with Herman’s insistence that reconstructing a trauma story requires the survivor to situate her trauma within the context of her pre-traumatic life, despite the inevitable pain of that process, in order to reintegrate into her community (176), a concept at work in Mather’s preface, but absent from Rowlandson’s own writing.

Captivity narratives continued to evolve throughout the eighteenth century. They took a less religious and more sensationalist turn in the mid-eighteenth century, offering graphic depictions of French and Native violence against the English; these narratives were difficult to verify, seemingly a mix of fact and fiction (Pearce 8-9). As the colonies moved toward revolution captivity narratives evolved, Vaughn and Clark explain, “into ornate and often fictionalized accounts that catered to more secular and less serious tastes” (3). By the end of the American Revolution, Daniel Williams and Christina Riley Brown note, the captivity genre’s reach expands even further:

In addition to the popular tales of Americans held captive by Native Americans, readers could also immerse themselves in the textual experiences of American prisoners of war, Americans enslaved by North Africans [after being captured at sea], Africans enslaved by Americans, Americans imprisoned by other Americans, American mariners forced to sail on British warships, Americans taken by pirates, and Americans shipwrecked on desolate, hostile shores. (1)

Clearly, captivity (and its narratives) assumed many forms, and Americans were eager to consume them all. Weyler further identifies societal desire for tales of captivity as she notes that “In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tales of Indian captivity appeared in virtually every genre of popular writing, including ballads, poems, plays, short stories, sentimental and historical fiction, dime novels, and children’s literature” (31). Captivity narratives were not an isolated genre unto themselves; rather, they permeated every aspect of literary society. Small wonder, then, that Williams and Brown read captivity narratives “as part of a dynamic enactment
of national and personal selfhood” (6), arguing that while post-Revolutionary captivity texts did promote nationalism and racial prejudice, they also “served to support the formation of a national identity” (7). Early national Americans occupied a liminal space similar to that of the captive, as the American Revolution ruptured colonial identity. Following trauma, Herman notes, the “sense of self has been shattered. That sense can be rebuilt only as it was built initially, in connection with others” (61). Even the increasingly fictionalized captivity narrative, then, is useful for postcolonial, post-Revolutionary Americans.

Pearce argues that fifty years later, by 1800, “the captivity narrative had all but completed its decline and fall” (13) although it “continued to be a popular journalistic, terrorist vehicle through the first three quarters of the nineteenth century” (16). While Minter views captivity narratives as social education tools and agrees with Pearce that an individual voice grounds such narratives, he diverges from Pearce in his belief that “[w]hat we observe in the later narratives is experience that remains socially useful, as propaganda and as entertainment, and yet becomes centerless as [the] expressing self is lost” (347). Furthermore, Vaughn and Clark explain, “By [the] mid-nineteenth century the captivity narrative had become fully integrated into American literature” as captivity tales were so common (28), and “[b]y the late nineteenth century the genre had lost most of its historical and autobiographical integrity” (3). Early nineteenth-century captivity narratives offered some ethnographic detail, but mostly catered to readers eager for sensation rather than truth (Vaughn and Clark 25-26), which they got in the form of novels such as The History of Maria Kittle (1797).
Purpose, Popularity, Readership

Throughout its nearly two centuries of development, and transformation from a spiritual to sensational focus, the captivity narrative, a bit of a generic chameleon, had literary, cultural, and personal uses that adapted to the needs of its readership. As Weyler explains, “Religion, cultural values, racial attitudes, politics, and settlement patterns all influenced the content and style of captivity narratives at different times, enough so that the purposes of the captivity narrative varied widely through its history” (“Captivity Narratives” 25-26). Furthermore, Minter insists that “the early captivity narratives embody one of the primary tensions in Puritan life—tension between the urge toward unification and interdependence and the urge toward separation and independence” (345). While Weyler offers an overview of the captivity narrative’s function and Minter identifies more Puritan-specific purposes, Pearce views the captivity narrative as a religious confessional or visceral thriller, stressing their historical value; conversely, VanderBeets stresses their literary value. Vaughn and Clark take a position closer to VanderBeets as they argue the captivity narrative offered contextually relevant “literary and psychological satisfaction” in a world without fiction, drama, or much poetry (3). In other words, captivity narratives had to serve all of readers’ literary needs. Vaughn and Clark further articulate that the Puritan captivity narrative’s purpose “was its introspective concentration on God’s role in the life of the individual and the collective community” (4) via its combination of “individual catharsis and public admonition” (5). In addition to the historical, religious, and entertainment functions scholars have previously identified, I suggest the captivity narrative also serves a personal purpose. A trauma survivor must tell her story, and “[i]n the telling, the trauma

7 The Bible was, of course, the other major literary work of the time.
story becomes a testimony” (Herman 181). So, the captivity narrative itself—whether written by the survivor or recorded via an amanuensis—is both individual and cultural testimony that attempts to heal a person and a community.

Captivity narratives were high-demand reading material in early America. Burnham posits captivity narratives were so popular because they “offered readers a transgressive account of legitimized escape from dominant social and moral norms” (location 869). In other words, Puritans could not disrupt their existing social order, but as Vaughn and Clark also argue, captivity accounts offered them a morally sanctioned adventure story. However, over time the law of supply and demand complicated the captivity narrative’s nonfictive authenticity. Williams and Brown explain that “[a]s demand outstripped supply, and as the literary marketplace rapidly expanded and extended, printers turned increasingly to fiction and fictive techniques to produce enough commodity to meet the needs of their market” (14). Readers wanted captivity narratives; printers wanted to sell what readers were eager to buy. Furthermore, “as print culture increasingly became commercially competitive, printers developed extravagant strategies for fictionalization for embellishing narratives of liberty with spectacle and sensation” (Williams and Brown 14). Since printers did not always have authentic captivity narratives, they devised fictionalized captivity accounts. Vaughn and Clark delineate editorial interference in the genre, noting that early editors of captivity narratives offered substantive structuring, but late eighteenth-century narratives had heavier rhetorical editorial influence; sometimes editors made prose more dramatic and sometimes they attempted to emulate the English sentimental novel (25). In fact, Burnham claims both the anonymous “The Panther Captivity” and The History of Maria Kittle “are virtually indistinguishable from sentimental novels” (location 1051). While we cannot ignore the financial implications of captivity narratives’ success, neither can we ignore
the elements of trauma recovery such narratives enable. Escapist adventures—even fictionalized accounts—offered readers a medium through which to process the trauma of living through wars, and publication offered witnesses for those narratives.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence for captivity narratives as trauma recovery documents is that they were particularly popular reading material for women. Christopher Castiglia suggests captivity narratives retained their popularity with American women readers because they symbolized other forms of captivity, such as “confinement within the home, enforced economic dependence, rape, [and] compulsory heterosexuality” (4). Most women would not be taken as war captives, but nearly all women experienced the constraints of a patriarchal society in which their life trajectory was prescribed from birth. Puritan women were certainly expected to be homemakers, but American women have been continuously prescribed this role; even twenty-first century women struggle with career/life balance. Furthermore, Derounian-Stodola explains the captivity narrative, regardless of the form it takes, “is all about power and powerlessness,” a dynamic with which American women were (and are) intimately familiar (Women’s xii). The genre’s fluidity allows it to serve as testimony to both the communal trauma of war and the individual trauma of physical captivity.

Women-authored captivity narratives enjoyed such popularity at least partially due to the public’s fascination with the female captive’s vulnerability and their obsession with policing her sexuality. Vaughn and Clark explain that Puritan women who survived captivity were generally seen as resilient or resourceful, but by the second half of the eighteenth century, “[a]lthough the actual experience of captive women often justified a more assertive image, the usual picture in the public mind was of a frail woman submissively kneeling before her Indian captor, waiting for
a death stroke from a raised tomahawk” (25). Despite the resilience and resourcefulness of real women in captivity, society believed they were weak and unable to assert any agency at all, an attitude that has not completely vanished even today. Public belief that women were frail, the idea of women representing the nation’s vulnerability, and common European war tactics (i.e. sexual violence) meant that even though “no ethnological evidence indicates that northeastern Indians ever raped women prisoners, as Plains Indians sometimes did, female captives [in New England] sometimes felt a need to defend their sexual conduct” (Vaughn and Clark 14). In fact, Rebecca Faery argues that Rowlandson’s narrative is an “attempt to rewrite herself back into the Puritan community by addressing the chief question leveled at a woman who survived captivity: whether her intimate contact with Indians had shaken her Christian faith or ‘tainted’ her sexually, either by rape or by seduction” (51). Puritan society had little concern for Rowlandson’s traumatic experience; sexual shame was not withheld simply because a woman was subject to—or experienced—sexual violence. Burnham links these gender-based attitudes to white nationalism, arguing that “[n]arratives of female captivity fulfilled this nationalist function particularly effectively, largely because so many of the women taken captive were mothers whose bodies quite literally reproduced the nation and therefore had to be preserved” (location 1120). Burnham refers to the early national era, but American nationalism has its pre-cursor in colonial desire to reproduce European identity. Of course, captive women could conceive children with Native American men; however, miscegenation threatened the reproduction of a

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8 This image was popularized by the story and portrait of Jane McCrea. The portrait can be viewed at https://www.umbc.edu/che/tahlessons/pdf/historylabs/Should_the_Colo_student:RS17.pdf
9 The white woman in danger is one of the most common tropes in United States captivity literature.
10 For example, Martha McCaughey argues in “Victim Vaginas” that “In pairing vaginas with sexual victimhood, V-Day encourages participants and the public to see women as always already vulnerable to attack and to link this vulnerability to having a female body” (924). V-Day, the anti-sexual violence movement founded by Eve Ensler in association with The Vagina Monologues, raises funds to disperse among various victim/survivor services.
specifically European-based nation. Colonial desire to reproduce a Eurocentric population outranked concern for an individual woman’s trauma and suffering.

The abundance of Eurocentric captivity literature does not mean that only Europeans were taken captive. Vaughn and Clark explain that Indigenous peoples were not spared their own experiences as captives; indeed, Spaniards were the first to take captives in the New World, but most Native cultures are oral so there are few—if any—firsthand accounts of Indigenous captives. Furthermore, Namias clarifies that “[a]ll of the major European players in the conquest of the Americas captured American natives in war, for profit, for novelty, and for sexual misuse” (18); Indigenous individuals experienced captivity fully and brutally, with Native women bearing the brunt of the abuse: “Ironically,” Namias notes, “despite nineteenth-century fears of Indians sulling the honor of white women captives, it appears that Indian women were more often brutalized by white capture” (19). Of course, the lack of written accounts of Native women’s captivities problematizes any study of American women and leaves a significant gap in the study of American women’s vulnerability, rendering the knowledge scholars can attain incomplete at best.11

Despite Native women being in more danger than white women, white women’s sexual vulnerability perpetuated European anxieties regarding racial superiority.12 As Maureen Woodard notes, “Rowlandson’s text reflects the anxieties of an entire community. Her use of racialized language or distinctions also demonstrates one of the ways that these narratives sought to control or interpret the threats to social order implied by the protagonists’ experiences” (115).

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11 Contemporary historical fiction attempts to address this gap. See, for example, The Moor’s Account by Laila Lalami and Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir by Deborah Miranda.
12 White women’s vulnerability is used as a tool to perpetuate racial injustice throughout America’s history and literature.
The colonies engaged Native Americans in a violent battle not only for physical resources such as land, but also for moral and ethnic superiority; Rowlandson not only lived through these colonial-versus-Indigenous conflicts but became an enduring symbol of ethnic superiority after her redemption from captivity. Castiglia explains, “Captivity narratives remained popular even after Anglo-America had won its wars for possession of the continent and its resources because they offered sensational stories of explicit or implied sex and violence” (2). Castiglia’s observation suggests the American occupation with stories of sex and violence is not a new phenomenon, but a traceable one throughout the nation’s history. Because “the white Christian woman was a representative of the colonial culture,” Faery explains, “she quite literally embodied its vulnerability” (40). The white woman in danger reoccurs as a common trope in Native American captivity narratives, and sexual agency comprises the core of the image. The white woman may suffer sexual violation at the hands of her Native American captors, yes, but she may also transculturate, marry, and reproduce with a Native spouse. Either way, the white woman’s sexuality embodies the colonial experiment.

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13 The white woman’s violability represents the possibility of colonial failure. If the European woman suffers sexual trauma, the colonial endeavor is tainted; the tension in captivity narratives generally arises from the possibility of such trauma, the woman’s vulnerable body. Faery argues, “[t]he conflict between colonial and Native cultures contracted, during the time of [Rowlandson’s] captivity into the space she herself occupied; her body, both actual and textual, was a border zone” (41). Rowlandson’s captivity narrative exploits the tension of possible sexual exploitation. Faery believes “[t]he challenge to the Puritan community was to respond to what they saw as the sexualized threat to the project of colonization embodied in the captive woman’s situation, but at the same time to turn the captive’s story into a parable of Puritan godliness” (41). Furthermore, Faery suggests the male frame surrounding Rowlandson’s narrative—Increase Mather’s preface and Joseph Rowlandson’s final sermon—prevent “the possibility of its being read in ways that would open the Puritan colonial endeavor, and its accompanying politics of gender and race, to critique” (42). Mather’s preface perpetuates the colonial rhetoric that implies Native Americans are predisposed to sexual violence, but implies “it is Rowlandson’s faith, not her captors’ willingness to treat her respectfully, that prevents her rape” (Faery 46).

14 Anxieties surrounding miscegenation become more pronounced in antebellum America, primarily centered on relations between white women and black men, but colonial and Revolutionary literature establish a tone for Euro-American fears surrounding race relations that persists in the twenty-first century.
Early American fiction borrows from the non-fiction captivity narrative, including its inherent racial biases. Slotkin argues that Puritan literature situated Native peoples as “visible emblems of the dark motions of the human soul, trapped in original sin” (66). The phenomenon persists throughout early American literature, as Woodard notes: “the racial or ethnic identities of the dark tormentors vary, [but] their intended symbolic role as representatives of the forces of evil or danger remains identical” (117). Furthermore, racial boundaries are permeable, as both English and Native people experience a kind of reciprocal transculturation. Nevertheless, authors frequently use the female captivity theme in American settings, and the captive woman often mediates between her natal culture and that of her captors (Woodard 124-144). Redeemed captive women become important vehicles for communication between cultures, particularly those where language barriers exist. Additionally, authors frame the other as a threat both to reflect authentic colonial concerns and “explor[e] the anxieties of a developing and differentiated society” (144). The language of racial difference helps white authors construct distinct identities defined by what someone is not, and to do so in what they consider a safe space. To construct colonial, but not English, Christian identity, authors need heathens; Native Americans fill this void in Puritan literature. After the Revolution, discourses of religious and racial differences allow authors to construct a sense of (white) national identity (Woodard 144). All this is to say, the racial or ethnic other becomes a scapegoat to reflect European men’s behavior; Native men may not violate captive women, but rape remains a common war tactic for colonizers even today.

The Indian captivity narrative materializes the threat of sexual violence into concrete examples for readers to follow. One ritual that heightened captive vulnerability and fear of sexual violence was the gauntlet ritual, in which a captive was forced to run naked through a line of captors; Burnham notes such a ritual evoked captives’ fears of rape (location 1155). While
Burnham explains that gauntlet rituals could be part of adoption ceremonies or transculturation, which Gordon Sayre confirms, captives did not know this, and the lack of understanding legitimized their fears of sexual violence. Additionally, Burnham notes, captive bodies circulated as goods—not people—and functioned as cultural texts of a sort. She explains, “[t]he body of the captive, exchanged as an unusual sort of commodity between two social and military antagonists, consequently told a history in which often contradictory economic, cultural, and religious signs were articulated” (location 280). Burnham suggests that captives were not exchanged; captive bodies were exchanged. Interiority and personhood were non-factors in exchange and ransom negotiations.

Communal lack of concern for the captive’s personhood further exacerbates her trauma; however, captivity narrative authorship offers her agency. The captivity narrative restored personhood to the traumatized captive, allowing her to remember, articulate, analyze, and process her experiences; the narrative is quite literally in the survivor’s hands. Herman insists trauma must be remembered and told; a survivor performs these steps toward healing by writing a narrative that speaks to her specific captivity experience. The act of writing a captivity narrative gives her the space to describe and analyze her trauma. Perhaps most importantly, captivity narratives give survivors voice, allow them to confirm their trauma. A written account lets a redeemed captive admit: Yes, this happened. It was real. And I survived. Furthermore, especially once the generic expectations of the captivity narrative are more firmly established, the comfort and security of a formula for storytelling alleviates some of the uncertainty a survivor may experience when narrating her trauma.
Mary Rowlandson: History and Life

In 1637, Mary White, the woman whose captivity narrative would launch a phenomenon, was born in England to middle-class Puritan parents; her family emigrated to the colonies when she was approximately two years old. The White family owned land in the colonies, which made Mary an attractive potential match for Lancaster, Massachusetts, minister Joseph Rowlandson. Eventually, the White family wealth and the Rowlandson family social status merged when Mary White and Joseph Rowlandson wed. The couple enjoyed high social standing and Mary bore several children, leading the life she likely expected until war arrived at the couple’s doorstep in the final quarter of the seventeenth century.

Metacom’s War broke out in 1675 when Wampanoag, Narragansett, and Nipmuck nations united against the English colonies to oppose the latter’s expansion into Native territories and the former’s forced conversion to Christianity. In February of 1676, Mary White Rowlandson was captured during an attack on Lancaster; she remained in captivity until May of that year. Her three-month captivity may seem short compared to that of others; however, as the minister’s wife she was the “most important political prisoner [of Metacom’s War], the one that the authorities tried hardest to ransom, and the first actually to be released” (Derounian-Stodola Women’s 3). After her redemption and with the encouragement of her spiritual advisors, Mary Rowlandson wrote a narrative detailing her experiences as a captive. In 1677 the Rowlandson family moved to Connecticut, but Joseph died in November of the following year. Rowlandson married Samuel Talcott two years later, in 1679. They remained married until Talcott’s death in 1691, and Mary White Rowlandson Talcott died around 1710 without taking a third husband or writing a second narrative.
Rowlandson’s narrative enjoyed a lengthy transatlantic publication history. Initially, Increase Mather published his own version of Rowlandson’s narrative in various passages of his 1676 work *A Brief History of the War with the Indians in New England*, while portions of the narrative also appeared in William Hubbard’s 1677 *The Present State of New England* (241). The first three editions of Rowlandson’s work were titled *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* and were published in Boston (first edition) and Cambridge, Massachusetts (second and third edition) in 1682. The narrative’s title appealed to a Puritan audience, reducing Rowlandson’s own trauma, agency, and recovery to God’s divine plan—she was simply a Christian who faced a trial, and came out stronger on the other side. Derounian-Stodola identifies a common organizational sequence for the narrative, which was often accompanied by the final sermon of Joseph Rowlandson: preface to the narrative; narrative; preface to the sermon; sermon (5). Scholars suggest Increase Mather authored the narrative’s preface, in addition to funding its publication and possibly offering a heavy editorial hand. The fourth edition, published in London in 1682, was styled *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (Derounian-Stodola 250). Rowlandson’s initial success across the ocean materialized from readers’ eagerness to consume the danger, adventure, and suspense the captivity narrative provided. Derounian-Stodola explains that “the market for [Rowlandson’s] work did overfill as current captivities began to take its place” (257). Stories of women’s vulnerability were—and still are—high-demand commodities.

Many scholars have discussed Rowlandson’s canonical text and most agree that the male-authored frame and Biblical passages help guide Puritan readers to the proper interpretation of her experience. Minter argues, “Rowlandson’s narrative speaks directly to the two great dangers that haunted the Puritans: pride and complacency born of excessive confidence of election [and]
anxiety and despair born of failure of confidence of election” (339). For Minter, the narrative’s didactic implications are clear: “Mary Rowlandson’s narrative comes to us as experience apprehended (and to be read) in terms provided by a highly developed intellectual context which defined experience as representative and instructive on several levels at once” (344).

Rowlandson herself projects Puritan values, for “at least as she comes to us in her narrative, [she] is a nearly perfect internalization of a social code which possessed, despite its distinct social bias, a capacity for giving heroic... meaning to individual adventure” (347). Margaret Davis provides further support for Rowlandson’s Puritan socialization when she suggests Rowlandson refuses aid from a Native who offers to help her escape because she wants to function inside the Puritan social order, a hierarchy of God, man, woman (52):

Because the Puritan teaching that the goodwife accepts all males as authority figures is so deeply grounded in her psyche that her subjection becomes almost automatic, Mary White Rowlandson submits herself without argument to Indian males as distorted images of authority in her imposed society. Part of her submission may be explained by awareness of the dire consequences of rebellion, such as that of the pregnant woman murdered for her complaints and continuous pleas for release. (54)

So, Rowlandson’s willingness to obey her male captors is twofold: her culture requires her to submit to a male authority figure and she intends to stay alive. She may be prey to her own social codes and that may allow her to accept authority from Native men, but she is not devoid of embodied knowledge; as Davis argues, Rowlandson possesses eyewitness knowledge of her physical fate should she attempt her own escape.

Rowlandson’s narrative offers her Puritan community a story through which they can heal and reassure themselves of their election, as she becomes a metaphor for the entire Puritan project. Nevertheless, Mitchell Breitweiser argues Rowlandson’s narrative elevates her individual grief and healing. He claims Rowlandson’s “was an afflicted time, in which the
public’s war was a faint noise at the horizon” (5). In other words, Rowlandson experiences her own trauma but the community’s trauma is a secondary fact of her existence. Burnham takes issue with Breitweiser’s argument that Rowlandson’s text is about repressed mourning for her dead daughter—not because she believes Rowlandson does not grieve, but because Breitweiser’s interpretation “eclipses the fact of her fundamental adaptation—however partial—to Indian tribal life” (64). Grief exists in Rowlandson’s narrative, but not to the exclusion of transculturation. Furthermore, Burnham argues that psychological interpretations of Rowlandson’s text, such as that presented by Breitweiser, dismiss its author as a product of Puritan culture. While it is certainly true that we cannot ignore Mary Rowlandson the Puritan, neither should we ignore her individual, embodied existence; Mary Rowlandson the Puritan is also Mary Rowlandson the individual woman who survived a traumatic experience, however well she may have adapted or transculturated.

Like Burnham, many scholars reiterate Rowlandson’s position within the Puritan social order, but recently others have joined Davis to acknowledge Rowlandson as an embodied individual, and particularly an individual occupying a woman’s body. Rowlandson insists she was not sexually violated during her captivity, which Teresa Toulouse argues “points to her own need to be reintegrated into the community as the same body (mentally and physically) that was wrenched from it—that went out into the wilderness but remained the same” (655-56). Rowlandson may want to be reintegrated into Puritan society but if she is to be a proper female martyr, Toulouse argues, her “body must be revealed as weak, pitiful, and utterly degraded, enduring only through grace” (660). If this is the case, according to Tolouse, Rowlandson cannot be a proper Puritan martyr because she is not utterly degraded (i.e. sexually violated)—she makes that clear. Lisa Logan argues “captivity operates as a metaphor to reveal the position(s)
she [Rowlandson] inhabits as a woman author and a gendered and political subject” (256). She also believes Rowlandson’s position is liminal, but in a different way than Burnham sees it: she is not silenced, but she is not the true authority on her own experience. Rather, “Puritan typology attempts to appropriate her textual and corporeal body as a symbolic ‘home’ from which to control the meaning of her experience” (274). In either scholar’s interpretation, Rowlandson’s agency is limited.15

While Breitweiser and Burnham grapple with an either/or interpretation of Rowlandson’s experience, Faery attempts to reconcile Rowlandson’s individual and communal identities. She argues the narrative is likely Rowlandson’s “attempt to rewrite herself back into the Puritan community by addressing the chief question leveled at a woman who survived captivity: whether her intimate contact with Indians had shaken her Christian faith or ‘tainted’ her sexually, either by rape or by seduction” (51). The six-year delay between Rowlandson’s redemption and her narrative’s publication make this question even more essential than it might be otherwise; if she is still pure and Christian, why wait so long to tell her story? The answer is simple. Male authors told versions of her story, but she did not have recourse, as a woman, to author her own narrative without the significant social (and likely financial) support of powerful men such as the Mathers.16

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15 Some say Rowlandson has agency because she can set her own redemption price, but she has to decide her own monetary value. She is an exchangeable commodity; however, her captors allow her to determine her worth to an extent, asking “what [she] thought [her husband] would give” to redeem her (38). The question is ultimately one of how Joseph Rowlandson measures his wife’s worth, but Mary’s opinion does matter to her captors.

16 Puritans maintained a religious worldview and dealt with atrocities (which were abundant for the colonists) through a relationship with God mediated by ministers, among whom the most influential were Increase and Cotton Mather. Cotton in particular used his authority to illustrate proper spiritual responses to trauma, urging “Puritans to sublimate mourning and redirect it into specific social processes so as to construct an appropriate memory for the living” (Kennedy 220). In other words, Puritan mourning was not about a trauma victim’s recovery, but how that victim’s experience could ultimately serve their spiritual community. Spiritual service may have been Mather’s goal, but not every Puritan trauma survivor cooperated. Kathleen Kennedy argues, “Puritan captives used their narratives...
Rowlandson’s Search for Healing

A captive’s primary goal is survival. Obviously, captivity is traumatic regardless of sexual violation; the very possibility of such abuse keeps female captives—particularly Puritan white women—hypervigilant. As Ann Stanford points out, “First of all, the captive must survive. Survival means adaptation to the ways of the captors physically and psychologically” (29). In other words, transculturation—intentional or otherwise—is both a survival and a coping mechanism. Rowlandson’s survival instinct leads her to refuse an offer to run away with a Native couple, as she “was not willing to run away, but desired to wait God’s time, that [she] might go home quietly, and without fear” (46). Rowlandson makes it explicitly clear that no Native person sexually violates her: “I have been in the midst of those roaring Lions, and Salvage Bears, that feared neither God, nor Man, nor the Devil, by night and day, alone and in company, sleeping all sorts together; and yet not one of them ever offered the least abuse of unchastity to me, in word or action” (46). While it may seem odd to call attention to a lack of violation, clearly Puritan society finds the state of her chastity important or she would not mention it. Furthermore, her insistence that she was not violated illustrates European societal expectations about war: she would not need to insist explicitly that she was not violated unless rape was a common, expected component of European warfare. Derounian-Stodola explains that “Northeastern Indian tribes did not rape captive women, so we can take at face value Rowlandson’s claim that she was not

to express the grief, rage, and alienation caused by [traumatic] experiences [such as frontier war violence], and those expressions were not always in keeping with the spiritual mourning required by Puritan ministers” (220). Such mourning should not be misconstrued as a peaceful alternative to captive rage, however; as revenge was encouraged as a proper response to Native-on-colonist conflict under the guise of purifying violence (Kennedy 227). Religious leaders attempted to use Puritan women’s pain, particularly the pain of violated motherhood, as a tool to further men’s spiritual authority. As Kennedy explains, “the traumatized bodies of women captives served as texts on which Puritan authors tracked the spiritual decline and renewal of New England” (225). While it is true ministers practiced such behavior, it limited but did not negate women’s power to tell their own stories.
sexually abused” (343 n. 79). While Derounian-Stodola’s claim is useful for scholars, Puritan women living during the height of settler colonial conflicts did not know rape was not a component of Northeastern Native warfare; Puritan women had only limited stories, sermons, anti-Native rhetoric, and the context of their own lives from which to draw conclusions about the captivity experience.

Although Rowlandson does not experience sexual trauma, her captivity narrative functions well as a general trauma recovery document. Stanford believes that “[b]y its very nature the captivity narrative has a formal literary structure, moving from the capture through the ordeal of captivity—with its incidents of the captive’s becoming reconciled to circumstances—to the final return to the society from which the captive came. The narrative ends with reflections on the nature of the experience and its larger meanings. Rowlandson’s narrative makes full use of the opportunities of the form” (29). The stages Stanford describes are not dissimilar to Herman’s trauma recovery stages. Rowlandson, for example, establishes safety via her redemption from captivity. She tells her trauma via her narrative, and that narrative’s structural apparatus connects her experience and her writing to the larger Puritan community. According to Herman, the first two stages of trauma recovery are rediscovering history and establishing safety; the preface to Rowlandson’s narrative covers both stages. The preface, widely believed to be authored by Increase Mather, opens with a description of the circumstances preceding the Narragansett attack on Lancaster, and insists, “This narrative was [p]enned by this Gentlewoman herself, to be to her a Memorandum of God’s dealing with her, that she might never forget, but remember the same, and the several circumstances thereof, all the [days] of her life” (Derounian-Stodola 9). Mather’s statement at once allows the colony to rediscover history via an authoritative source (a redeemed captive) and justifies a woman’s entrance into the print
sphere. The narrative’s existence establishes Rowlandson’s basic safety, but Mather assures readers God has guaranteed her safety against sexual predators, “curbing the lusts of the most filthy, holding the hands of the violent, delivering the prey from the mighty” Native captors (11). Mather’s metaphorical reference to Rowlandson as prey highlights her captive body’s vulnerability, but his assurance that God protected her further establishes her safety.

Rowlandson is hyperaware of the sexually vulnerable position in which captivity places her body, and the sexual power her captors have the potential to embody. Indeed, she illustrates a heightened awareness of English-versus-enemy (non-Anglo) bodies during her captivity, both her own and those of others. At one point she requests to sleep indoors, in a vacant English house, which is partially cultural and identity awareness of her Englishness but also prompted by awareness of her vulnerability. Inside a house, some physical barriers exist between Rowlandson and her captors, whereas under the stars her body is exposed to whatever purposes her captors may choose. On the other hand, isolation within a secluded house removes potential witnesses, perhaps increasing her vulnerability to violation. Captivity is a liminal position—every remove in Rowlandson’s narrative has the possibility to turn violent.

Rowlandson exposes the vulnerability she feels in her English female body throughout the text; in fact, the twelfth remove parallels a common rape narrative. First, a man threatens to penetrate Rowlandson with a sword if she does not go to another wigwam: “Then was I fain to stoop to this rude fellow, and go out into the Night, I knew not whither” (28). She is forced to

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17 In *Buried in Shades of Night: Contested Voices, Indian Captivity, and the Legacy of King Philip’s War* Billy Stratton takes issue with the claim that Mary Rowlandson constitutes an authoritative source. While I have no intention of furthering the “did she/didn’t she” debate, the tensions evident between Rowlandson’s communal responsibility to her fellow Puritans and the evidence of her attempts to process individual/personal grief and trauma suggest to me that, even if Mather played a significant editorial role, the core of the narrative was indeed authored by Rowlandson herself.
choose between shelter and violence. Her vulnerability is further exacerbated when her master, Quinapin, becomes intoxicated. She explains, “He called for me; I trembled to hear him, yet I was fain to go to him; and he drunk to me, shewing no incivility” (43). She confesses fearfulness because Quinapin’s intoxication makes him unpredictable—much as anyone’s intoxication makes them unpredictable—thereby increasing her perceived vulnerability. Her surprise that Quinapin offers her no injury confirms her anxiety. The master does not harm Rowlandson; in fact, no textual or historical evidence exists to indicate he meant to harm her at all, but that does not negate the fear she may have felt in such a tenuous situation. Rowlandson’s narrative indicates she may have Quinapin’s partner to thank for her perceived safety: “At last his Squaw ran out, and he after her, round the Wigwam, with his money jingling at his knees: but she escaped him; but having an old Squaw, he ran to her: and so through the Lord’s mercy, we were no more troubled with him that night” (43). Rowlandson attributes her safety to God but dismisses the Native women’s agency in the episode. While, as far as Rowlandson indicates, her master may or may not have assaulted her, her fear was legitimate: she did not know if he would hurt her, and her captive position makes her hypervigilant. Herman notes that traumatized people lack “a normal ‘baseline’ level of alert but relaxed attention. Instead, they have an elevated baseline of arousal: their bodies are always on the alert for danger” (36). The grief and trauma Rowlandson suffers teach her body to prepare for constant attack or assault.

Rowlandson experiences post-traumatic stress symptoms after her redemption, including conflict and sleeplessness. Toward the narrative’s end she reflects:

I can remember the time, when I used to sleep quietly without workings in my thoughts, whole nights together: but now it is otherwise with me. When all are fast about me, and no eye open, but His who ever waketh, my thoughts are upon things past, upon the awful dispensations of the Lord towards us: upon His
wonderful power and might in carrying us through so many difficulties, in returning us in safety, and suffering none to hurt us. (50)

Rowlandson’s sleep disturbance is highlighted as symptomatic because she confesses it begins after her captivity; she used to have restful, undisturbed sleep. While she claims her thoughts are now occupied with God, which we have no reason to doubt, her sleeplessness did not exist before her captivity. According to Herman, those “with post-traumatic stress disorder take longer to fall asleep, are more sensitive to noise, and awaken more frequently during the night than ordinary people” (36). Because Rowlandson enjoys undisturbed sleep before her captivity and does not experience sleep issues until after her redemption, the logical conclusion is that her sleeplessness is due to post-traumatic stress disorder.

Finally, in addition to the clear post-traumatic stress symptom of sleeplessness, Rowlandson experiences survivor’s guilt. She is “full of joy” to be back among Christians, but “not without sorrow to think how many were looking and longing, and [her] own Children amongst the rest, to enjoy the deliverance that [she] had now received; and [she] did not know whether ever [she] should see them again” (47). Furthermore, while she is happy to be free of captivity herself, she feels bad for others who are still captive. Her narrative expresses the emotional conflict that is characteristic of post-traumatic survivor’s guilt, which Herman explains is “especially severe when the survivor has been a witness to the suffering or death of other people” (54). Her own safety has been established, but her awareness that others, including her own children, still reside in captivity creates “a severe burden of conscience” (Herman 54).

In writing—rather than speaking—her captivity story, Rowlandson offers herself a unique medium through which to speak her trauma without immediate judgement. To cope with guilt, “the survivor needs the help of others who are willing to recognize that a traumatic event has
occurred, to suspend their preconceived judgements, and simply to bear witness to her tale” (Herman 68). Even if judgement occurs after her story is published, she enjoys a brief moment, immediately following the act of writing, of knowing her tale will have witnesses. Before the narrative is circulated, she is free to imagine any cathartic response she chooses—free to step outside her trauma and bear witness in her own regard, to tell herself exactly what she needs to hear.

In releasing her story to the larger Puritan community, Rowlandson relinquishes control of her trauma’s narrative; she can no longer construct imagined catharsis but must rely on her compatriots to respond supportively. Rowlandson arguably has a supportive community in her fellow Puritans, but she does not have a supportive community comprised specifically of women. Stanford is correct: “Mary Rowlandson, the redeemed captive, can never look at the world in the old way again” (35). Her trauma will always be part of her life narrative, a marker to delineate “before” versus “after.” According to Bryce Traister:

Mary Rowlandson’s ‘restoration’ is imperfect; her sleeplessness registers the incompleteness of her redemption, testifying simultaneously to her desire to thank God for her rescue from captivity, and to her ongoing spiritual search for the assurance that God’s wondrous power has indeed provided for her restoration to English community, if not for her spiritual redemption. The need to resume her place within her community thus remains unfulfilled, as the ‘restored’ woman’s nocturnal watch renders her extraordinary at precisely the moment when it is the ordinariness of life she craves. She remains self-consciously singular when absorption into community is the goal. (324)

For Traister, then, Rowlandson has not reconnected with her community in a meaningful way. I would add that while she technically participates in Puritan culture, her sleepless nights illustrate her post-traumatic stress; she wants to be reintegrated with her community, but the framing and appropriation of her narrative for distinctly religious purposes prevents her from complete healing.
Herman argues trauma needs a witness; a witness implies disclosure on the survivor’s part. Denise M. Sloan and Blair E. Wisco define disclosure as “the communication of personally relevant information, thoughts and feelings,” either verbally or in writing (qtd. in Zoellner 192-93). Simply disclosing the trauma is insufficient for recovery, they argue. Superficial disclosures offer less benefit than detailed ones, and context matters: “disclosures to individuals with whom we have an ongoing relationship can increase psychological well-being and can strengthen our relationship with that person,” they explain (194). Additionally, “choosing the appropriate time to disclose and the appropriate people to disclose to (e.g., close friends) is important in whether or not the disclosure will lead to successful recovery from a traumatic event” (194). Mary Rowlandson provides a detailed, written disclosure of her trauma; however, she has limited control over important aspects of the disclosure. Because she publishes her narrative, she effectively discloses to her entire Puritan community regardless of their appropriateness to witness her story. Additionally, the disclosure is one-sided, as her text replaces her body and forecloses authentic exchange with another person. Furthermore, because the church appropriates her narrative for their own rhetorical, religious purposes, she does not have full control of her disclosure’s details. As Sloan and Wisco argue, a trauma “disclosure should contain a detailed account of the trauma event, including the emotions and thoughts the person experienced during the event” (205). Rowlandson offers a detailed account of her captivity, and the thoughts and emotions she expresses are probably authentic; problematically, though, her narrative is mediated through a male frame to her entire community. Because the narrative’s editor has particular religious goals, Rowlandson has limits on the emotions and thoughts she can express—they must be consistent with Puritan doctrine.
Her own incomplete recovery within the context of her narrative notwithstanding, Mary Rowlandson’s narrative sparks a long tradition of women writers authoring captivity narratives. *The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* certainly functions in one capacity as a religious document, if not authored then certainly edited to teach a Puritan spiritual lesson. Simultaneously, though, the narrative is a foundational precursor to the autobiographical tradition as it reveals the complex pain, grief, and trauma an individual woman experiences as a colonial prisoner of war. Rowlandson tells her story, but because that story is appropriated to serve the larger community her healing is incomplete, leaving her to suffer intrusive thoughts, guilt, and sleepless nights while her contemporaries ostensibly enjoy peaceful rest. Nevertheless, Rowlandson’s text offers a complex glimpse of the realities attendant upon both communal and individual trauma—neither of which neatly disappear at the end of a narrative.

*The History of Maria Kittle* and Fictive Trauma Recovery

By the time Ann Eliza Bleecker’s *The History of Maria Kittle* (1797) appeared in the late eighteenth century, American readers had digested the captivity plot for nearly a century. The generic conventions of the captivity plot were as well-established for early national readers as romantic comedy plots are for twenty-first century movie-goers; authors did not need to spend much time on painstakingly detailed accounts of individual captivity, giving authors like Ann Eliza Bleecker the freedom to explore women’s vulnerability and captivity-related trauma in new ways. *The History of Maria Kittle*, set during the French and Indian Wars, and composed during the American Revolution, was initially published “in five installments in *The New York Magazine* from September 1790 through January 1791, feeding a reading public hungry for tales of adventure and violence in the wilderness” and published as a stand-alone novel in 1797.
(Giffen 59). Bleecker’s *Kittle* occupies a liminal space between the Indian captivity narrative and the sentimental novel, defying distinct categorization into either genre.

Ann Eliza Schuyler was born in October of 1752 in New York. She married John Bleecker when she was seventeen, in 1769; if she wrote before her marriage, none of those texts are extant. After their marriage, the Bleeckers lived in Poughkeepsie, NY, for a short time before moving to their picturesque home in Tomhanick, NY. Bleecker fled her home on foot with her two children in the summer of 1777 when British troops approached her village. Her children survived the initial flight, but her infant daughter, Abella, died on the journey home. According to Kittle’s daughter and biographer, Margaretta Faugeré, her mother never recovered from Abella’s death: “The remembrance of every circumstance that led to it . . . never failed to awaken all her sorrows” (vii). Compounding her grief, Bleecker’s mother and sister both died not long after she lost Abella. In 1779 and 1780 Bleecker wrote a manuscript she called the *Albany Gazette*, initially meant to be circulated among her friends. The *Gazette* was considerably popular in the area; unfortunately, as Faugeré notes, the “lively and ingenious performance was much admired, and being handed about from one company to another, is entirely lost” (xvi). In general, Bleecker’s works were never truly meant for large public audiences. Bleecker survived the war, but her health declined in the devastation of its aftermath; she passed away in November of 1783. Her work was not widely available until ten years later, when Faugeré published *The Posthumous Works of Ann Eliza Bleecker, in Prose and Verse* (1793).

*The Posthumous Works* contains Bleecker’s fictionalized captivity narrative *The History of Maria Kittle* (1797) and her extant poetry. She was incredibly prolific, but much of her work is lost. Faugeré explains:
She was frequently very lively, and would then give way to the flights of her fertile fancy, and write songs, satires, and burlesque: but, as drawing a cord too tight will make it break, thus she would no sooner cease to be merry, than the heaviest dejection would succeed, and then all the pieces which were not as melancholy as herself, she destroyed. (xv)

While Allison Giffen notes that Bleecker was heavily influenced by the language of feeling, and argues she destroyed her more lighthearted works because she styled herself a melancholic author, Faugeres portrays her as suffering what doctors today would likely cede is some form of bipolar disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder. Giffen herself notes that Abella’s death “colored everything she [Bleecker] wrote afterward” (56). In fact, her daughter, mother, and sister died in succession, thus “[e]very generation in her supportive circle of women was devastated” (57).

Although scholars prefer discussing Bleecker’s poetry, those who do study Kittle generally agree that Bleecker employs the language of sympathy to two specific ends: to highlight the plight of white women during wartime and to villainize the Native American population. Julie Ellison labels Kittle a captivity narrative that “conveys Bleecker’s sense of the alien terror unleashed upon white women in 1777” (451). While there is little evidence northeastern Indian tribes used rape as a weapon of war, the possibility of sexual violence would certainly inspire terror for any woman; couple that anxiety with the sensationalized racism against Native Americans, and a recipe for women’s terror certainly exists. Ellison also argues that Bleecker uses the captivity narrative as a political tool whose generic popularity “arises also from the need to express the cultural superiority, physical exposure, and political entanglements of white women” (451). In other words, Bleecker highlights white women’s vulnerability and liminal societal position. Meanwhile, Giffen believes Bleecker’s novel fits the generic conventions of the captivity narrative “plot [that] objectifies women as sexual objects of
exchange and seeks to justify Native American genocide” (59). E.W. Pitcher agrees, noting “the finer sensibilities of Mrs. Kittle and all the whites are contrasted explicitly and frequently with the unfeelingness of the Indians” (36). All of these critics indicate Bleecker’s heavy use of the white woman in danger trope. While the trope can be manipulated, the vulnerability women feel in times of war and chaos is authentic and valid.

True (factual) captivity narratives often show Native American humanity, whether intentionally or not. However, “Because Bleecker does not write as a former captive but as a virtual, vicarious, or potential victim only, she treats Native Americans as a mobile strike force, as embodied panic, and as an antidomestic energy that frightens families out of their homes, then makes them fall ill” (Ellison 451-52). In other words, Bleecker writes Native Americans as mystic agents of evil. Despite the racism inherent in Bleecker’s text, Cathy Rex explains Maria Kittle was a real person, and while Bleecker was never a captive, Rex argues, she “endured many of the same distinctly gendered degradations and violences as Kittle did; and by uniting her own historical moment and life experiences with Kittle’s, Bleecker sought to expose those gendered injustices through writing” (958-59). Furthermore, Rex concludes, Kittle is Bleecker’s attempt to flip the script, imagining women as political agents and men as agents of ineptitude and destruction (rather than protection) in moments of national crisis.

Like Rowlandson’s non-fiction narrative, Bleecker’s novelized captivity narrative presents women’s bodies as particularly vulnerable. After a member of the raiding party tomahawks Comelia Kittle, he “deform[s] her lovely body with deep gashes; and, tearing her unborn babe away, dash[e]s it to pieces against the stone wall” (20). Meanwhile, another Indian

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18 For further information on Bleecker’s knowledge of the flesh-and-blood Maria Kittle see chapters three and four of Sharon Harris, Executing Race: Early American Women’s Narratives of Race, Society, and the Law.
tears Maria’s infant from her arms. Bleecker illustrates Maria's emotional turmoil through her mixed feelings about life and death. When someone raises a hatchet above Maria’s head, she thinks she will die; she lives, but is unsure whether that makes her happy or sad (36). Her captor almost murdered her, and he revealed her potential fate, claiming “we never suffer our prisoners to be re-taken” (36). Maria knows she is vulnerable. She occupies a female body in the midst of an imperial power struggle, and even in Rowlandson’s time Europeans accepted and expected sexual violence as a common war tactic. Her current captors have not offered her sexual violence, but if she were retaken or stolen by another group her fate would be altered in ways she cannot predict.

Maria’s body plays an integral role in how she experiences captivity, as her captors refuse to exchange her body (i.e. release her from captivity) unless they can do so on their terms. Her bodily vulnerability is highlighted when she must change clothes in the bushes; nudity, however brief, leaves her vulnerable to exposure and possible physical or sexual attack. Additionally, she changes out of her English dress and into Native attire. Her body’s exposure and the exchange of clothes mark both physical and cultural vulnerabilities for Maria.19 Changing clothes outdoors violates her English sense of propriety, while her new attire quite literally strips her of the adornments that mark not only her Englishness, but her position among the English.20 A century before Bleecker’s narrative, Mary Rowlandson experiences the same

19 Interestingly, Native women also offer Maria physical violence. An elderly Native woman attempts to beat Maria with a pine knot, but an Indian man uses physical violence to restrain her: “he twisted the pine-knot away from her hand and whirled it away to some distance, then seizing her arm roughly and tripping up her heels, he laid her prostrate, leaving her to howl and yell at leisure” (44).

20 For more on the significance of Englishness to early Americans see Leonard Tennenhouse, The Importance of Feeling English.
fear for safety that Kittle experiences here, the same uncertainty about threats to her bodily autonomy.

**Safety and Trauma Processing**

Maria experiences Herman’s first step in trauma recovery, establishing safety, when she finds herself in the Governor’s mansion after her party arrives in Montreal. unsure how or when she arrived there. Technically, her safety is established. She gives way to her trauma and grief; yet, she cannot endure the sympathy of another English woman who aims to comfort her: “your pity is severer than savage cruelty—I could stand the shock of fortune with some degree of firmness, but your soft sympathy opens afresh the wounds of my soul!” (47). The governor dismisses the Kittles “with a small guard, who was directed to provide them with decent lodgings” (48). Finally, Maria arrives at an Englishwoman’s home, where she can truly feel herself safe: under a roof with other white women. She is fed, nursed, and given new clothing at this house, which helps her trust the women taking care of her.

The community of women surrounding Maria help her establish safety and trust, which moves her and, consequently, them, closer to the next recovery stage: reconstructing the trauma story. While the other women provide Maria with necessities (food, medical care, and clothing), they also build the frame for her to share her experience as they reconstruct their captivity stories to varying degrees. In this community of safety, the women encourage Maria to tell her story. Maria’s story then allows Mrs. Bratt to recite a portion of her own tale. Mrs. Bratt’s son is shot in front of her, but she insists “language would fail” to describe her emotions regarding his death (54). Her story continues, following a stereotypical format that echoes Maria’s own experience: she collapses on her dead child’s body, tearing out her hair and praying, while her remaining son
escapes on horseback; then, she curses the “whole race” as attackers scalp her son (55).
Significantly, Mrs. Bratt does not tell her entire story as it is “nearly similar to Mrs. Kittle’s” (55). She chooses to tell the story of the initial attack on her home, which suggests the violent manner by which she loses her children registers as her most traumatic event. The realization that they are among a safe community empowers each woman to tell her trauma story. Next, the women encourage Mrs. Willis to reconstruct her trauma story. She tells of the raid and burning of her home, the death of her infant, and hiding from the “olive-coloured natives” (59) in a hollow tree. After her infant daughter, Charlotte, dies Mrs. Willis faints, which leaves both her and her thirteen-year-old daughter vulnerable to further attack and assault. Luckily, her neighbors find her. When she recovers her strength, she decides to “traverse the wilds of Canada in pursuit of [her husband]” (62). The journey leaves her exhausted. Her grief doubles when she learns her husband died of dysentery after his capture. She tells her friends, “Here my expectations terminated in despair. I had no money to return with, and indeed but for my Sophia no inclination—the whole world seemed dark and cheerless to me as the fabled region of Cimmeria, and I was nigh perishing for very want, when Mrs. Bratt, hearing of my distress, sought my acquaintance” (63). Mrs. Willis is exposed and penniless, but her savior is not a man; it is another woman—Mrs. Bratt. The circle of women support Mrs. Willis after she tells her story, hugging her and acknowledging “the painful task she had complied with to oblige their curiosity” (63). Reconstructing the attack and its consequences is painful, but Mrs. Willis must do it if she is to recover. The women gain strength and courage from their common traumatic experiences, primarily those of violated motherhood and bodily vulnerability.

In telling their traumas, the women make themselves vulnerable to each other. Such vulnerability holds power, as it represents each traumatized woman’s willingness to trust again
(and trust strangers at that). As a group of women who have survived similar traumas, they are in a safe enough space to share at their own paces; explicit details are not required because they recognize the similarities inherent in their individual experiences. When Mr. Kittle returns, Maria tells her story again. Even though it is sorrowful, “she felt a great satisfaction in pouring her complaints into a bosom whose feelings were in unison with hers” (67).

Kittle’s post-traumatic community relaxes the religious tensions common between the (usually) Protestant English and the (usually) Catholic French. Mrs. Bratt even thanks the French women for their communal care of her: “I was a stranger, sick and naked, and you took me in” (56). She rejects the anti-French biases of her upbringing now that she has met kind French women. Thus, Bleecker writes a female community that transcends nationality. Such transcendence does not release the community from biases, however. “Though this circle of women may be able to overcome nationalistic biases,” Giffen explains, “it achieves this communal identity specifically by way of racism and classism” (61). Only the French and English elite—and certainly no Native women of any social status—have access to Kittle’s post-traumatic recovery community.

Conclusion

Rowlandson and Bleecker’s Indian captivity narratives, whether factive or fictive, are vehicles for testimony to and recovery from the trauma of physical captivity for early American women. For the moment, Giffen’s reminder that The History of Maria Kittle “concludes not with Maria’s returning home but with Mr. Kittle joining her in this specifically feminized site” (61) underscores the necessity of a safe community of and for traumatized women. In the end, it is the community of other women to which Maria Kittle belongs that allows her to recover as Mary
Rowlandson cannot, suggesting that women’s voices and support are vital to women’s recovery from trauma.

Between the colonial and early national era, Indian captivity narratives evolve from factive to fictive. Following Rowlandson’s narrative, Burnham notes, captivity narratives “begin to look more and more like sentimental novels precisely as a result of their struggle to contain such transgressive elements [i.e. cultural crossings] and the mobility that produced them” (location 892). As the captivity narrative melts into the sentimental novel, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish the two genres, particularly since so many sentimental novels contain obvious captivity stories. Furthermore, both American captivity narratives and English sentimental novels frequently crossed the Atlantic and, Burnham claims, “The exchanges and transgressions between these two kinds of texts are fundamental to the development and function of sentimental discourse during” the eighteenth century (location 931). In other words, both captivity narratives and sentimental novels actively worked to construct sentiment; sentimental tears, Burnham argues, were useful masks to cover female transgressions or expressions of agency.

This chapter has argued that the Indian captivity narrative, whether factive or fictive, acts as testimony to help women heal from the trauma that accompanies physical and sexual vulnerability. Chapter 2 will investigate representations of trauma and recovery in sentimental and domestic novels, exploring not only how the genres treat vulnerable women, but also how racial identity shapes that vulnerability and the trauma survivors’ responses to it. Additionally, Chapter 2 will investigate the captivity narrative’s role within the genres, and ultimately assess each genre’s ability to function as a site for trauma recovery.
Pilgrimages to visit Charlotte Temple’s grave were common well into the nineteenth century. Such journeys were so common, in fact, that Julia Stern claims obsession with Temple’s gravesite bordered on fetishism (328). One detail makes this nineteenth-century fetish particularly unique: Charlotte Temple never existed; she is a protagonist in a novel. Specifically, she is the heroine of one of the earliest and best-selling sentimental novels,¹ Susanna Haswell Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple*, published in England in 1791 then again in America in 1794.² Obsession with her gravesite,³ located in Trinity Churchyard in New York,⁴ illustrates both her importance in the American literary canon and the sentimental novel’s importance to American literature as a whole, and particularly to women’s literature. While it may seem odd to twenty-first century readers for a fictional character to inspire such a reaction, Charlotte’s influence offered real early American women license to vent their emotions. In fact, Eve Cherniavsky argues Charlotte Temple’s “generic femininity” represents the sentimental novel’s white women

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¹ Klaus Hansen praises critics Cathy Davidson and Nina Baym for locating the sentimental novel as an important element of American literature rather than a simple continuation of the Richardsonian novel (39).
² Debates about *Charlotte Temple* generally focus on tensions between critics who argue the character’s embrace of her own sexuality and emotions precipitate her downfall (see Evans, Fichtelberg’s “Early American Prose Fiction,” and Woodard) and those who claim she has no true agency (see Stern, Cherniavsky, and Ryals).
³ Spencer Keralis identifies how Charlotte Temple’s gravestone represents a site for readers to project their own anxieties and grief onto Charlotte and Montraville’s story (41) while Lisa Gordis discusses the gravesite’s influence on twenty-first century readers.
⁴ Trinity Churchyard is an impressive final resting place for the fictional Charlotte, who will eventually be “buried” alongside the likes of notable early American figures such as Alexander Hamilton, his wife Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton, and her sister Angelica Schuyler Church.
readers who mourn at the fictional Charlotte’s gravesite “because she invests them with a collective identity” the law denies them (28-29).

Sentimental literature opens a space for readers to feel the intensity of their emotions; the suffering eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century women readers did was for themselves as often as it was for fictitious fallen women such as Charlotte Temple. In fact, Donna Bontatibus argues that “sentimental novels acted out in private for the reader what the culture would not discuss in public or on the stage” (6) while Cathy Davidson explains sentimental novels reflected common social concerns. Charlotte and other sentimental heroines represent the vulnerability women readers faced as they navigated the American patriarchy to which they were captive.

Through the titular Charlotte, Rowson outlines the rise and fall of a sentimental heroine; at the core of this trajectory are events that illustrate the sexual vulnerability of eighteenth-century women. Fifteen-year-old Charlotte finds herself attracted to an older man, Lieutenant Montraville. Such attraction poses no danger in and of itself; however, the moment Charlotte’s instructor, Mademoiselle LaRue, convinces Charlotte to act on her impulsive romantic feelings the young girl falls into a dangerous trap. Montraville kidnaps Charlotte despite her protests, for the physical strength of a teenage girl pales next to that of a British military officer, and he forces her to sail from England to America. Charlotte becomes Montraville’s captive. Eventually, he coerces her into intercourse; in other words, he rapes her. She becomes pregnant, gives birth to a baby girl, and, ultimately, dies alone in America.

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5 For example, Elizabeth Barnes argues sentimental literature blurs the line between fiction and reality to ensure readers feel connected to the story, while Cathy Davidson explains Charlotte Temple would have felt real to her eighteenth-century readers.
Charlotte’s tale is a common one for the late eighteenth century, and one that illustrates the vulnerabilities young women faced both in early national America and across the Atlantic. As Cathy Davidson explains, early sentimental novels portrayed “the dangers of unsuitable relationships and . . . graphically described the heavy portion of blame and suffering that would necessarily fall on the shoulders of the sexually transgressing woman” (189). Charlotte Temple follows this pattern, because in addition to being taken captive and coerced into betraying her desire to preserve her virginity, Charlotte suffers, physically and emotionally, at the hands of Montraville, LaRue, and others. Her death from pregnancy complications proves neither implausible nor unfamiliar to eighteenth-century readers: Davidson notes that early American women were expected to marry and engage in sexual intercourse with their husbands, and these women knew “[i]ntercourse begot children, and having to bear a child was a mixed blessing” because of high infant and mother mortality rates (192). Charlotte was seduced instead of married, but married and unmarried women alike identified with her plight. In fact, Charlotte continues to influence readers; Lisa Gordis describes an exchange with one of her students who claimed Rowson’s novel gave her the confidence to walk away from a man who reminded her of Montraville, as well as a trip her students organized to visit Charlotte’s gravesite. Clearly, twenty-first century readers see their own vulnerability reflected in Charlotte’s story and mourning the fictional Charlotte’s death continues to offer present-day women the emotional release their nineteenth-century counterparts enjoyed.

In Chapter 1, I argue that the captivity narrative as a genre, whether oral or written, fiction or nonfiction, functions as trauma processing, a proto-therapeutic instrument for captives.

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6 Perhaps the most famous example of such a story is Hannah Webster Foster’s The Coquette, based on the life of Elizabeth Whitman.
and the societies that so voraciously consume their narratives. Chapter 1 discusses both the traditionally structured captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson and the more novelized, fictional version of the captivity narrative through Ann Eliza Bleecker’s *The History of Maria Kittle*. Bleecker’s novelization reflects the generic popularity of epistolarity in the early national era. The novel-in-letters, or epistolary novel, was a common structure for early novels for several reasons, perhaps most notably due to its plausibility as nonfiction—epistolary novels are virtually always “founded on fact,” or so their authors and editors claim. While Chapter 1 explored traditional accounts of Indian captivity, this chapter turns to the epistolary novel, particularly the novel of sentiment, to explore the vulnerabilities young women face in heterosexual relationships.

This chapter explores the question of how testimony, articulated in epistolary fiction through the letter writer’s relating of their trauma for intimately connected fictional readers (and implied novel readers), constructs a safe place for women who live within the patriarchal confines of compulsory heterosexuality. Building upon the work of previous scholars of the early American sentimental novel such as Julia Sterne, who positions early national fiction as a response to the American Revolution’s violence, and Elizabeth Barnes, who argues sentimental literature responds to the anxieties of patriarchal authority, I agree that the sentimental genre reflects and responds to the cultural anxieties of its time period; furthermore, through an investigation of Leonora Sansay’s *Secret History* (1808) and Susanna Haswell Rowson’s *Trials of the Human Heart* (1795) and *Reuben and Rachel* (1798) I argue the sentimental novel in particular provides early Anglo-American women a proto-therapeutic space to testify to and begin to heal from their vulnerabilities and traumatic experiences under patriarchal control via
epistolary form, implied female readership, and sentimental plot devices that engage readers’ sympathy.

American Sentimentalism

The sentimental novel is a powerful vehicle for women’s trauma recovery. Joanne Dobson defines the desire to bond with others as the central theme of sentimental literature, and violation as the central tension. Donna R. Bontatibus defines the sentimental novel as “a genre that appeals to the sympathy of readers, particularly during conventional seduction, death, or marriage scenes” (6) while Marion Rust defines sentimentalism as discursive, requiring an audience, and democratic, or targeted to an aspiring middle class (38-39). Lauren Berlant’s discussions of sentiment define the concept of a “women’s culture,” which “is distinguished by a view that the people marked by femininity already have something in common and are in need of a conversation that feels intimate, revelatory, and a relief” (viii-ix). Berlant does not see such a conversation as particularly liberating or feminist, but it certainly can be. Women need to use vulnerability as power—power to express their common experiences in order to heal from the trauma inherent in occupying bodies coded as female. One way to begin such healing is via what Berlant calls intimate genres, or “genres that offer a framework for living in the world as a woman” (x). Berlant views intimate genres such as the novel of sentiment as genres of complaint where little feminist change work truly occurs; significantly, though, the novel of sentiment flourished in early national America precisely because, I argue, it was a vehicle for women to do the individual and cultural work of healing. To work toward healing and recovery within the patriarchal culture that holds women captive and traumatizes them in the first place is
a powerful act of resistance and the sentimental novels that do such work are powerful cultural productions because of their proto-therapeutic function.

Scholars seem to agree that “sentimentalism, with its twin emphases on subjective affect and social sanction, exists at the crux between institution and individual and works to reconcile a seemingly isolated and usually female subject to a systemic structure that can alternatively support or destroy her” (Rust 31). In other words, the goal of American sentiment was to teach its reading audience the proper way to feel about and react to various social situations as an individual without political agency. Furthermore, Elizabeth Barnes argues “[s]entimental literature—including political, philosophical, and fictional texts—is to a certain extent a response to the cultural anxieties present in the question of patriarchal authority” (143). Sentiment offers a behavioral blueprint for women navigating life in post-revolutionary, and therefore inherently post-traumatic, America; for revolutionary equality rhetoric, despite women’s best efforts, failed to include them. Stern posits sentimental literature offered a space in the new nation for those who were never intended for inclusion in the Revolution’s equality rhetoric in the first place; specifically, Stern argues, sentimental novels illustrate the social consequences of the Revolution for women, lower class people, and non-whites (2). The new nation’s official documents omitted women, but sentimental literature provided a fictionalized space for women to testify to their lived experiences.

**Implied Readership**

Women’s culture allowed early national women a safe space of sorts, but not every woman had access to that space. Political equality was not the sentimental novel’s only concern; another function of sentiment was to educate the young, unmarried women who were the genre’s
implied readers. Davidson sketches an outline of the implied reader of early American sentimental novels. First and foremost, the implied reader was a woman; furthermore, she was generally young, white, unmarried, and a worker, either in her own home (knitting for her family) or as a teacher or domestic worker outside her home. According to Davidson, the post-Revolutionary population boom meant two-thirds “of the white population of America was under the age of twenty-four” in the early nineteenth century (188). Younger audiences tended to be more literate because they had more educational opportunity than their parents and other previous generations; logically, authors wrote to an audience who could read their work, further indicating the implied reader was young. Slavery limited the literacy skills of the United States’ black population, and black women were generally relegated to subplots in sentimental fiction, with protagonist/heroine roles reserved for white women (Davidson 188). The implied reader saw herself reflected in the sentimental heroine, particularly the heroine’s quest for a suitable marriage partner. In fact, Michelle Burnham argues that sympathy “requires a crossing of the boundary between reader and text” (location 952). Such boundary crossing afforded early national women, writing from after the American Revolution through the nineteenth century, an emotionally-fulfilling support group of sorts, where they could tell their stories—testify—and have witnesses in the form of their reading audience. Precisely because sympathy requires boundary crossing, the sentimental novel, so often presented in the epistolary format Joe Bray identifies as particularly invested in letter writers’ interiority, is an excellent vehicle for exploring the vulnerabilities and traumas of early American women.

Many eighteenth-century sentimental novels were epistolary, written as a series of letters presented as either one-sided correspondence from a heroine or an exchange of letters between two or more parties. While twenty-first century readers assume letters are a private exchange
between individuals, most likely in electronic form, that is not necessarily true of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As Eve Tavor Bannet explains, “[t]he expectation in the eighteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic was still that letters would be read aloud [which] acted as a vocalization of the absent writer’s speech act within the conversation stimulated among those who heard it” (27). Letter-writing and reading was a group activity; while a letter may be addressed to an individual, both writer and reader knew it would likely be disseminated to a wider, albeit intimate, audience. Furthermore, reading aloud was not restricted to letters. Davidson identifies reading in general as a communal activity: “Women often met together to engage jointly in such tasks as sewing or quilting; while the others worked, one member of the group would read aloud—typically from a sentimental novel” (190). Of course, reading was not always a group activity; both letters and novels could be read privately. Just as writing a sentimental epistolary novel can function as scriptotherapy, giving the author a voice to testify and witnesses in the form of a reading audience, reading such novels—in a group or individually—is bibliotherapeutic.

Due to their communal nature, sentimental novels can present trauma and stages of trauma and trauma processing, where women writers create characters who experience the traumas to which their contemporaries are vulnerable. Many sentimental heroines move recursively through the stages of trauma recovery identified by Judith Herman: establishing safety, remembering and mourning, and reconnection with everyday life (177).

Trauma and Recovery in Sansay’s *Secret History*

One text well situated to explore American women’s vulnerabilities is Leonora Sansay’s epistolary novel *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo*, published in 1808 by Bradsford
and Inskeep. Sansay’s novel sets the marriage of Clara and St. Louis, thought to be based on Sansay and her own husband, against the revolutionary colonial backdrop of the Haitian Revolution (Drexler 32). Sansay’s novel represents an important cultural reminder that the United States’ fate was inextricably bound with the success or failure of the Haitian Revolution. When General Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared Haiti’s independence from France on January 1, 1804, the U.S. was able to complete the Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the country’s geographic reach and enabled the expansion of slavery and Indian removal (Drexler 10-14). Michael J. Drexler identifies three factors that led to rebellion: opposition to “imperial mercantilism,” revolutionary equality rhetoric, and a slave uprising in 1791—notably, the only successful slave rebellion in history (19). The Haitian Revolution had psychosocial implications for the U.S. as well. After Toussaint Louverture led the largest and most successful slave revolt in the Atlantic world, slaveholders in the United States feared uprising from their own slaves. Consequently, “all of the southern states placed restrictions on the Atlantic slave trade during the 1790s. Most laws were specifically designed to prevent the importation of slaves from the West Indies” (Drexler 21).

Scholarly knowledge of Leonora Sansay’s biography is incomplete, but if the semiautobiographical Secret History offers any indication, she did not fit any culturally-sanctioned model of American womanhood. Her father’s name was William Hassell, and Leonora may not have been her given name (Vietto 330-36). She conducted a twenty-year correspondence with Aaron Burr, third vice president of the United States, beginning in

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7 In late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century America a conventionally good wife exhibited the virtues of Republican womanhood identified by Jan Lewis and Linda Kerber; specifically, a Republican woman was a wife who educated her sons and policed her husband’s commitment to the civic sphere and democratic ideals.
approximately 1796, and married French merchant Louis Sansay sometime in 1800. Like our knowledge of Sansay’s life, our knowledge of her body of literary work is limited. In addition to *Secret History*, she penned a true-to-genre sentimental novel titled *Laura* (1809). The novel *Zelica, The Creole* (1820) is often attributed to Sansay as well. As her writing career (or her published writing career, at least) began after her marriage, her status as both the wife of a plantation-owning merchant and a correspondent of a prominent political figure afforded her a certain level of privilege. Despite her privilege, she was a woman and a wife in a patriarchal society so, she did not experience total enfranchisement.

Sansay resided in New York until 1802, when her husband insisted the couple return to Saint Domingue to reclaim his plantation; this geographic relocation situated Leonora Sansay in the heart of the conflict that would become the basis for *Secret History*. In the novel, Sansay portrays domestic violence through secondhand narration as the character Mary writes letters that describe her sister Clara’s life and personality. Mary’s letters contain occasional suspicions or hints that Clara’s husband, St. Louis, is abusive, but Clara’s own narrative voice does not appear to confirm these suspicions of domestic abuse until the twenty-eighth of thirty-two letters. On a basic level, Sansay positions Mary as a limited narrator who does not have complete access to the violence Clara experiences. Alternatively, Clara herself spends much of the novel as an object. However, through writing, Clara eventually navigates Herman’s three stages of trauma recovery.

Drexler compiled an edition of *Secret History* and *Laura* accompanied by several contextual materials in 2007, and scholarship on Sansay has grown steadily since his publication. Common threads of critical inquiry surrounding *Secret History* focus on race, gender, and genre, although Sansay’s novel defies scholarly efforts at generic classification. In fact, Elizabeth
Maddock Dillon criticizes Davidson for excluding *Secret History* from *Revolution and the Word* (1987; revised 2004), her seminal study of the early American novel, because it does not fit her nationalist critical method (“The Secret History” 78). Meanwhile, Abby Goode argues *Secret History* is a gothic novel “because it reveal[s] a messier, more entangled world—one based on affiliation and interrelatedness rather than racial hierarchy and difference” (450). Furthermore, Gretchen Woertendyke claims Sansay’s preface situates *Secret History* “within the British literary genealogy of the secret history, a genre primarily encountered in England during the long eighteenth century” (255). According to Woertendyke, “secret histories suspend tension between a partially concealed past and an uncertain future, one made more fragile as a result of narrative disclosure” (257). Sansay’s novel certainly fits such a description, but Woertendyke ultimately argues “neither secret history nor novel—but rather, a new world novel *after* secret history—the power of *Secret History* lies as much in its unique manipulation of literary form as in its spectacle of ‘horror’” (257).

*Secret History* defies easy generic classification precisely because of the horrors it represents. If the text must occupy a specific generic space, though, perhaps it best fits Dillon’s subgenre of marital gothic, which criticizes the dangers of heterosexual marriage as a structuring paradigm for society. Dillon explains, “The fiction of the marital gothic presupposes the structuring efficacy and even necessity of heterosexual marital desire while nonetheless indicating its lack of affective purchase upon the characters of the fiction” (136). In other words, heterosexual marriage is necessary for the functioning of the patriarchal social order as instituted

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8 Nationalist methodologies dominated the critical conversation surrounding early America for years, but scholars such as Malini Schueller and Edward Watts employ postcolonial critiques to argue early America was part of a transatlantic network rather than an isolated conflict between European colonists and indigenous peoples in *Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and Early American Studies*. 
in Europe and its colonies (current and former) but the sexist violence and exploitation of patriarchy means that mutual admiration and affection in heterosexual marriage are not necessary to that social order’s functioning and, further, domination of the wife by the husband is required. Dillon’s description certainly fits the marriage between Clara and St. Louis, for Clara is encouraged to marry him for social and economic security rather than because she feels any great affinity for him. Dillon explains that marital gothic produces wives as corpses. In some instances, she explains, “marital desire is not so much misdirected, but revealed as itself a murderous structuration of the subject” (Gender 140). St. Louis is a bad man, but it is Clara’s marriage to him, rather than his explicit lack of morality, that places her in danger. His physical, psychological, and sexual abuse are directed to Clara precisely because she is his wife—other women in the novel do not suffer the same abuses at his hands. Clara does not become a literal corpse (though her husband’s abusive tendencies make her death a possible eventuality), but she effectively becomes a metaphorical corpse to St. Louis and their shared social circle through her escape.

If Clara becomes a metaphorical corpse when she flees her marriage, she is reborn through a community of supportive women. Herman explains that recovery from trauma must occur “within the context of relationships” rather than in isolation (133). Clara’s relationship with her friend Mrs. V empowers her to plan her escape and know she will be supported. Mrs. V resides in a remote location where she is convinced no one from Clara’s immediate social circle will look for her. Once Clara and Mrs. V establish a relationship, Clara can begin to recover from the experiences of her abusive marriage. She moves through the first stage of recovery—establishing safety—when she flees her husband’s home and runs to Mrs. V. Significantly, Clara flees her plantation-owner husband’s home in the middle of the night during a slave revolt. The
severity of her trauma becomes clear in this action because, as Dillon notes, “More pressing for Clara than the soon-to-be-realized threat of the massacre of all the white residents of Le Cap by black revolutionary forces is thus the threat of being murdered at the hands of her white husband” (“The Secret History” 80). The young white woman is so terrified of her brutal husband that she readily inserts herself into a situation that promises her nothing but violence and death to escape him. Although risky, her flight through a war-ravaged town illustrates her attempt to establish safety for herself, though on the surface her actions appear nearly suicidal. In addition to the risks inherent in fleeing her abusive husband, she faces the possibility of death by exposure to natural elements or as a casualty of the revolt. Nevertheless, she makes it clear that she fears nothing as much as she fears St. Louis himself. Clara’s actions indicate that, for her, to escape her husband is to establish safety, regardless of anything that may befall her after she leaves him.

Once Clara establishes her own safety, she moves into the second stage of recovery, remembrance and mourning, wherein “the survivor tells the story of the trauma. She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (Herman 174). In short, Clara cannot truly heal until she not only acknowledges the violence she has suffered but tells the story of that violence. To progress in her healing, Clara must give a testimony of her experience. Adams-Campbell believes Sansay’s choice of epistolary format “transforms Clara from an object of male desire and sisterly curiosity to a writer with the power to communicate her own story,” a woman who “writes her way out” of victimhood (132). When Clara writes her first letter, she becomes an author with the ability to control how—and how much of—her story is told and how her experience is regulated. Herman explains that one of “[t]he first principle[s] of recovery is
the empowerment of the survivor. She must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery” (133). This is not to say Clara is completely responsible for healing from events and experiences she cannot control; rather, she must tell her own story to gain emotional autonomy. Herman deliberately declares that a survivor must be an author. As a first-person narrator, Clara has complete power over every aspect of her story. Even though remembering the events proves painful, she controls how she reveals her story to Mary. In fact, the epistolary form allows Clara to revise the content of her letters to suit her needs before she sends them to Mary. Thus, the epistolary form allows Clara the authorship and control so vital to her healing process.

Organizationally, the end of the novel seems rather late for Sansay to reveal what Clara has survived. However, according to Herman, “Reconstructing of the trauma story begins with a review of the patient’s life before the trauma and the circumstances that led up to the event [to provide] a context within which the particular meaning of the trauma can be understood” (176). Thus, Clara’s letter appears so late in the novel because Sansay must first establish a framework that allows both character and reader to process the traumatic events. The next logical step, Herman explains, “is to reconstruct the event as a recitation of fact” (177). Clara writes her story and sends it for her sister to read; as a result, her “narrative includes not only the [events themselves] but also [her] response to [them]” (Herman 177). Indeed, Clara’s letters reveal several of the horrors to which St. Louis subjects her. She explains, “Often returning at a late hour from the gaming table, he has treated me with the most brutal violence,—this you never knew; nor many things which passed in the loneliness of my chamber, where, wholly in his power, I could only oppose to his brutality my tears and my sighs” (137). Here, Clara explicitly labels St. Louis an abuser and likely, given that the brutal violence occurs in her bedchamber, a rapist.
Eventually, Clara provides more detailed descriptions of St. Louis’s abusive behavior. One night, his threat to scald Clara with acid “deprive[s] [her] of the power of utterance” (138). She declares, “to kill me would have been a trifling evil, but to live disfigured, perhaps blind, was an insufferable idea and roused me to madness” (138). St. Louis threatens to disfigure her—to leave permanent, visible scars on her body—to signify his claim upon her. Here, Clara not only recounts the event but reveals her emotional reaction to her husband’s brutality.

Additionally, after St. Louis threatens her with such a vicious injury, she discloses other types of abuse to Mary. She says, “I was roused by his caresses, or rather by his brutal approaches, for he always finds my person provoking, and often, whilst pouring on my head abuse which would seem dictated by the most violent hatred, he has sought in my arms gratification which should be solicited with affection, and granted to love alone” (139). Again, Clara recounts not only the literal experience of her abuse but also the feelings it provokes.

Of course, the cultural customs of Clara’s time period complicate her life and her experiences. She explains, “I was united to St. Louis by bonds which I had been taught to consider sacred, and, though my heart shuddered at the life-long tie, yet I always recoiled with horror from the idea of breaking it (138). As a nineteenth-century woman, Clara knows it is unacceptable to end her marriage; importantly, however, the phrase “I had been taught” confirms her knowledge that propriety is socially constructed, and that she does not merit the abuse St. Louis inflicts on her. Finally, her letter to Mary rejoices that the marriage “tie however is broken; those bonds are dissolved! And there is no fate so dreadful to which I would not submit, rather than have them renewed” (138). Clara’s statement seems extreme, but she confirms her conviction further when she explains, “My wearied soul sunk beneath the torments I endured and death would have been preferable to such a state of existence” (138). Clara’s marriage proves so
abusive, restrictive, and horrible that she would rather die than continue to live within its confines; her feelings certainly support Dillon’s claim that “Sansay’s Secret History . . . centers primarily on effecting escape from the violent authority of husbands or slipping the knot of marital attachment” (“The Secret History” 80).

Clara’s claim that she prefers to die rather than continue married represents a significant step in her recovery. Herman explains that “[h]elplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma [while] [e]mpowerment and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery” (197). Clara has been helpless, most notably because she is a woman, which legally makes her the property of her husband. Nancy Cott explains that nineteenth-century wives were legally unable to refuse their husband’s sexual demands; marital rape was not criminalized until the 1980s (211). St. Louis’s abuses force her into a type of isolation, even when she is not physically held captive (though he does hold her physically captive). Once she leaves St. Louis, however, she gains empowerment. The letters she writes to Mary tangibly represent her empowerment and symbolize her reconnection to her supportive sister. Mary does not know the traumas Clara has suffered in her marriage, nor does she know where Clara goes when she leaves St. Louis. Clara possesses the knowledge of her own experiences, and her letter provides this knowledge to Mary; thus, Clara reconnects with Mary on her own terms.

Clara’s letters act as testimony to her trauma. She is not, of course, consciously following Herman’s recovery model (that is not possible for her), but the model is broadly applicable to her situation. Once Clara tells her story, she must “[face] the tasks of rebuilding her life in the present and pursuing her aspirations for the future” (195). In other words, once she tells her story

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9 Nancy Cott explains coverture meant “a wife could not use legal avenues such as suits or contracts, own assets, or execute legal documents without her husband’s collaboration” (11).
and processes its implications and realities, she may transition into the third stage of recovery: reconnection with ordinary life, which she begins when she contacts Mary. Here, it is important to note that the stages of recovery are not fixed, but fluid. Yes, Clara is ready to reconnect with life. However, trauma is recursive by nature. The stages may—and often do—infiltrate one another. One clear example of the stages being integrated occurs when Clara entreats Mary, “I am convinced of your affection for me, but do not let that affection hurry you into imprudences which may perhaps betray me. Do not think of returning to St. Jago; and, may I add, do not think of leaving Jamaica till I can join you. We will return to the continent together, and I hope together we will be happy” (147). Clara’s urgency is reminiscent of stage one—she has already established safety on a basic level, but while she remains in the Caribbean St. Louis poses a legitimate threat to her safety. Rather than succumb entirely to fear, however, Clara controls the situation through what she forbids Mary to do. Additionally, her plan to return to the continent shows an attempt to reconnect with ordinary life, which she defines as the life she had before her marriage to St. Louis.

Trauma recovery is an ongoing process. After a certain amount of healing occurs, Clara must rebuild her life. Herman explains, “The recreation of an ideal self involves the active exercise of imagination and fantasy” (202). Clara’s whiteness allows her to construct a fantasy of the life that surrounds her when she arrives on the new island, even though she has escaped her husband by following a path frequented by runaway slaves. In the village where Clara hides, the inhabitants “sip their chocolate, smoke a segar, [sic] and thrum the guitar undisturbed by care” (152). Dismissive of the war and slavery that surround her and occupy the lives of the island’s inhabitants, Clara represents the villagers as people who live a relaxed and stress-free life. She writes, “Often, when reviewing the events of my past life, I wish that their calm destiny had been
mine; but alas! how different has been my fate” (152). While her dismissal of the actual circumstances that surround her seems callous, her traumatized state may allow readers to grant her a modicum of forgiveness. Her lament contains a hint of mourning for the life she will never have, but its importance lies in what it reveals: she understands what she cannot have—she accepts reality and knows she must move on and recreate her life.

The last words Clara writes portray her attempt to reconnect with ordinary life. She informs Mary, “I write this letter to prepare you for my arrival. When Anselmo goes next, I go with him; and, when I embrace my sister, I shall be happy” (152). Clara intends to sail to Jamaica to reunite with Mary. The sisters’ face-to-face reunion signifies Clara’s obvious attempt to reconnect with everyday life. Significantly, Clara chooses to reunite with her family, but also with her parent country. In the novel’s final letter, Mary informs a male friend, “Clara and myself will leave . . . for Philadelphia, in the course of the ensuing week. There I hope we shall meet you; and if I can only infuse into your bosom those sentiments for my sister which glow so warmly in my own, she will find in you a friend and a protector, and we may still be happy” (154). Mary solicits affection and protection for her sister. Her friend represents America itself. In addition, he is a witness to Clara’s trauma through her testimony, which Mary provides for him. Clara’s return to America literally places an ocean between her and her abuser. Obviously, St. Louis can sail to America, but Clara has protection in her home country; thus, America beckons her as a place of safety. Clara’s family, friends, and country provide affection, protection, and the ability to pursue happiness.

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10 I am not attempting to justify Clara’s obliviousness here, merely to acknowledge that captivity and trauma heighten one’s survival instincts and make many circumstances seem far more idyllic than they actually are.
Leonora Sansay is not the only fascinating early American woman writer to survive and thrive despite a tumultuous life; Susanna Haswell Rowson, prolific author and actress on the early American stage, lived a life that allows readers a model through which to understand many of her novels. Rowson was a transatlantic woman; while many women of her generation were born in the colonies or the new America, Susanna Haswell, the daughter of a British Naval officer, moved to the colonies from England around the age of four. However, war disrupted the course of her life. The onset of the American Revolution forced the Haswell family from their home based on suspicion of loyalty to the crown. In 1778, after a three-year house arrest, Susanna (then sixteen) and her family were traded for American prisoners of war and sent back to England. Once the war ended in 1783, twenty-one-year-old Susanna became financially responsible for her family, including William Rowson, whom she wed in 1786. By 1793, when she was around thirty-one, Susanna and William sailed to America to join a theatre company, and Rowson remained in the States until her death in 1824 (Parker 314-321). Rowson’s firsthand knowledge that the complexity of America’s history and origins reach well beyond the land known as “America” allows her to depict early national women’s lives with authenticity and nuance.
Trials (and Traumas) of the Human Heart

Rowson’s sentimental epistolary novel *Trials of the Human Heart*, originally published in 1795,11 follows protagonist Meriel Howard through a series of trials via correspondence with Celia, her friend from the convent where she was educated.12 These trials include attempted rape, failed relationships, destitution, near-prostitution, an abusive husband, a shipwreck, and mistaken and concealed identities. These misfortunes are largely beyond Meriel’s control, but place her in vulnerable financial, physical, and sexual situations. The death of her patroness early in the novel forces the young protagonist to leave the convent. She meets her true love early in the plot, but a misunderstanding keeps them apart. Eventually, Meriel’s father attempts to assault her; he then gambles away her fortune. Later, her mother falls ill. Meriel exhausts the inheritance from her patroness to care for her family and is prepared to enter into the employ of a madam, resorting to the prostitution she so violently abhors so her family will not suffer. She eventually comes under the protection of Mrs. Rooksby, who encourages her to marry her son, to which Meriel consents to appease her ailing benefactress. The marriage seems to go well at first, but ultimately Rooksby rekindles and maintains a relationship with his mistress (whom the benevolent Meriel supports financially), and Meriel’s own daughter succumbs to an illness. In keeping with the sentimental genre, the novel’s final letter reveals Meriel’s true, concealed identity as the daughter of wealthy

11 Melissa Homestead explains that Rowson stood outside the theatre where she was an actress to collect subscriptions for the work, which she proposed her intention to publish on April 2, 1794 (619).
12 Rowson’s initial success came with *Charlotte: A Tale of Truth* (1791), retitled *Charlotte Temple* in 1797, originally published in England; *Trials of the Human Heart* was the first novel she published in America. *Trials* was not as popular as *Charlotte*. Rowson’s patron Anne Willing Bingham offered financial support for *Trials* to be published via subscriptions available in cities such as Philadelphia and Baltimore. Three publishers in Philadelphia split the financial risks of printing initial copies amongst themselves: Carey, Dobson, and the Rice brothers. Despite the support from her patron and the initial publishers, *Trials* was never reprinted (Adams-Campbell 6-7).
parents who provide her a fortune sufficient to marry Kingly, her true love from the novel’s early letters. In *Trials of the Human Heart* Rowson complicates the dynamics of captivity and freedom, proving that prisons are not always defined by physical spaces.

*Trials* has not received abundant critical attention; scholars have discussed the novel as a response to slander, women’s lack of control, and authorship. Joseph Fichtelberg examines the novel through the lens of Rowson’s public feud with William Cobbett. After Cobbett accused Rowson’s literature of pornographic tendencies, Fichtelberg argues, “[d]epicting a sentimental heroine’s struggle to preserve her reputation allowed Rowson to play out the cultural clash that Cobbett’s attack so richly represented as a contest between rigid authority and libidinous desire” (435). Fichtelberg’s exploration of the parallel between the metaphorical storm of slander within Rowson’s novel (and her novels in general) predates Anne Baker’s discussion of the role of literal storms common in Rowson’s literary canon. Baker argues storms “represent the powerful forces, both external and internal, that threatened to wreck women’s lives” (208). Specifically, she argues the storm in *Trials* represents Meriel’s “illicit emotions” (i.e. desire for the married Kingly) (208). Both the metaphorical and literal readings of the storm are compelling; Fichtelberg’s argument indicates that authorship, readership, and sentimental plots are inextricably bound. I contend that if *Trials* is a response to criticism leveled against Rowson’s sentimental writing, then it can be viewed as her defense of sentiment’s implied female readership. The novel acknowledges many common traumas women face, which validates Rowson’s implied readership. Meanwhile, Baker’s connection between the shipwreck-inducing storm and Meriel’s desire for a married man highlights the parallels between physical and mental captivity. The storm makes Meriel physically captive to the forces of nature—she has no control over her life, death, or location in this scene. Conversely, she has no psychological control over
her feelings for Kingly, despite her ability to regulate her emotions out of respect for his wife. Once Kingly is widowed and subsequently wed to Meriel, the novel ends; it fulfills the sentimental goal of the heroine’s happy marriage and consequently ends Meriel’s captivity as an unmarried woman preyed upon and traumatized by a patriarchal system.\(^{13}\)

Desirée Henderson offers a compelling argument that scholarship focuses on early American women as readers to the exclusion of rich analyses of women as writers, aiming to help dismantle the maternal narrator/seduction victim binary she sees in Rowson scholarship. She argues Rowson employs the window as a metaphor for female authorship but not always to the woman writer’s advantage, for “in Rowson’s imagination, the window invariably renders the female author vulnerable to penetration by unwanted, unknown, or invisible forces that wrest away her control of the text. Accordingly, window scenes in Rowson’s fiction represent the print public sphere as a hostile and debilitating space for women” (153; emphasis added). Henderson identifies the window metaphor as violation. However, a window is precisely what allows Meriel to escape what she believes is her father’s incestuous attack. After she retires for the evening her father enters her room, whereupon “he immediately shut the door and turned the key” (69) rendering her captive. She asserts, “To describe my horror is impossible or to give you the most distant idea of the scene that ensued, but never to the latest hour I have to breathe will it be erased from my memory. My repeated screams were of no avail” (69). Meriel is clearly terrified of his intentions to violate her body but does find her voice: “I seized the opportunity to fling open the window and declare, if he did not instantly quit my chamber, I would throw myself out” (69). He leaves her alone for the moment, but upon his return she strips “the sheets

\(^{13}\) This is not to say marriage frees Meriel from all forms of captivity, as readers do not see beyond her “happily ever after” to know what her marriage to Kingly looks like.
off the bed [and] slip[s] by them [out the window] into the garden” (70). Thus, in my view, rather than render the female author vulnerable, the window in *Trials* empowers Rowson’s heroine to escape captivity and the unwanted penetration to which Henderson refers. Existing scholarship briefly addresses Meriel’s sexual vulnerability; I extend this discussion by examining her posttraumatic stress and healing process.

**Trials are Traumas**

Before Rowson grants Meriel’s happy ending, her protagonist endures multiple sexual traumas. Sentimental literature may have relied on readerly boundary crossing, but sentimental plots themselves illustrated the boundaries patriarchal authority permitted men to cross for the purposes of violating women. For example, men often crossed the boundaries of women’s bodies without fear of punishment or retaliation, and one of the most disturbing bodily boundary violations to appear in early American literature is incest. According to Elizabeth Barnes, “[i]ncest represents the mysterious, vexing, sometimes ungovernable but always undeniable power of kinship ties and their widespread ramifications for individuals and society at large” (1). Early national women were subject to the power of kinship, even if they were under the control of abusive or tyrannical relatives. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that one of the most harrowing sexual traumas Meriel endures is attempted incest at the hands of the man she (and readers, at this point in the novel) believes is her father. Barnes goes on to note that “the literary study of incest sharpens our awareness of trauma as a social and cultural, as well as a personal, experience” (2).

Furthermore, while it may seem somewhat anachronistic to discuss Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in an analysis of eighteenth-century novels, the disorder existed long before it
had a name. Gender inequity played out in the development of the medical definition, diagnosis, and treatment of PTSD. Herman explains:

> only after 1980, when the efforts of combat veterans had legitimated the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder, did it become clear that the psychological syndrome seen in survivors of rape, domestic battery, and incest was essentially the same as the syndrome seen in survivors of war. The implications of this insight are as horrifying in the present as they were a century ago: the subordinate condition of women is maintained and enforced by the hidden violence of men. There is war between the sexes. Rape victims, battered women, and sexually abused children are its casualties. Hysteria is the combat neurosis of the sex war. (32)

In short, PTSD had to be legitimated by male sufferers before it was recognized, and women’s symptoms were often still dismissed. Such recognition did not come until the late twentieth century. Meriel Howard and her novel of testimony offered eighteenth-century readers who survived similar traumas a safe space to feel seen and heard before therapy as we conceptualize it today existed.

When Meriel flees her home, her parents assume she has eloped to marry her neighbor; only her nurse, Deborah, believes the girl is innocent. Deborah describes Meriel’s tenuous state of being: she is senseless, unable to speak coherently, and “her eyes too plainly indicated that her mind was disturbed” (64). When Meriel wakes up partially clothed she panics, yelling, “I am betrayed, I am lost. He is here, I know he is here, and I will not stay another moment” (64). Meriel’s anxiety about her state of dress and subsequent insistence that she be clothed coupled with her exclamations against a mystery man of whom she is clearly terrified gives readers recourse to assume she has suffered a sexual assault. She insists she cannot disclose her abuser’s name, as she has “made a vow, a solemn, sacred vow, never to wound the peace of [her] dear, adored mother” (65). When Meriel recovers her senses, she thinks her trauma was a dream (66). Meriel eventually identifies Mr. Howard as her attacker. Anne Dalke explains characters’
discovery of potential incest “usually results in madness or suicide,” (188) which Meriel’s reaction to Howard’s rape attempt supports. Fichtelberg’s analysis reaches beyond the protagonist’s mental state, as he argues Howard’s attempt to rape Meriel “suggests more than Meriel’s fragility; it represents the final collapse of an authority already abdicated by her natural parents, who consented to give up the infant to her aunt in order to conceal Mrs. Harcourt’s marriage to a commoner” (444). In other words, Meriel’s parents relinquish their right to her when they abandon her, and Howard relinquishes his patriarchal “rights” to Meriel when he attempts assault, leaving her effectively fatherless. Despite the fact that the attempted rape was not completed and the revelation that Mr. Howard is not her biological father, Meriel suffers post-traumatic symptoms of an incest survivor, including sleep disturbances, nightmares, and general anxiety, for the remainder of the novel.

Meriel escapes Howard’s incestuous attempt on her chastity but continues to suffer bodily violation in various forms. For example, she is physically restrained when she refuses the solicitations of her boss’s husband. After she refuses him, she attempts to exit the room, but Monsieur Lacour throws “himself between [her] and the door and, seizing [her] hand, impudently swore [her] threat [to expose his mistress’s existence to his wife] proceeded only from jealousy” (137). Lacour’s violation of her bodily autonomy leads to a flood of tears on Meriel’s part. Furthermore, his wife Madame Lacour walks into the middle of the assault, misinterprets what she sees, and goes into premature labor. Thus, the actions of one man violate the bodily autonomy and safety of two women and an unborn child.

In addition to attempted rape and bodily assault, Meriel experiences coercion; for Meriel, captivity has little to do with physical space. She does not want to get married. She laments, “Can I not be suffered to pass quietly through the remainder of my life without forming any
other connection than friendship? Why must I be obliged to undertake duties I am so very unable to perform?” (187). When Mrs. Rooksby insists that women are born to experience hardships, Meriel admits: “my share has already been almost beyond my weak power to support, for, from the day in which I left the convent till the present, I have not experienced one so happy that I could wish it to return” (187). In other words, a cloister away from men is Meriel’s safe space. A convent is a physical space to which Meriel is bound, yes, but she always feels safe there.

“Captivity” among other women in the convent is safe, versus “freedom” outside the convent, where the introduction of men into her life violates her safety at every turn. Mrs. Rooksby means well on the surface; yet, she still coerces Meriel into a relationship the latter does not want by telling her she can best serve God as a wife and mother (188). Marital coercion carries implications of sexual vulnerability. As a wife, Meriel will be expected to engage in sexual activity with her husband which both limits her power to refuse sexual advances and introduces the possibility of pregnancy, the dangers of which Davidson has noted. Meriel echoes the anxieties of Rowson’s implied readership. The pressure not only to marry but also to be a conventionally good wife, which also meant being a mother, was immense. Women readers had the freedom to choose their partners, but not necessarily the freedom to abstain from marriage altogether.

Meriel exemplifies women’s vulnerability through her knowledge of public censure. She reflects, “Through the whole course of my life, I have been particularly unfortunate in having my most innocent actions misconstrued and, . . . I have never wanted enemies who are ever ready to catch at the errors to which frail mortality is liable and magnify them into crimes” (231). She is keenly aware that she, the victim, will be tried in the court of public opinion. Her declaration feels like an ancestral predecessor to the idea that women must speak out immediately against
their abusers or forever have their credibility questioned. From the time she leaves the convent, Meriel is a captive, first to her parents, then to her benefactress, and ultimately to her first husband.

The traumas Meriel survives linger, making her mind captive to PTSD even though her physical body is technically free; she copes with this captivity through the epistolary form, wherein her letters are a source of comfort and healing. As trauma theorists such as Herman and Dori Laub note, trauma needs a witness. Furthermore, Herman argues, the witness must be a sympathetic listener as traumas are best worked through within the context of a safe, caring relationship. The epistolary form allows Meriel to identify safe and caring listeners to whom she may reconstruct her traumas. Herman insists that “[r]emembering and telling the truth about terrible events are essential tasks for both the healing of individual victims, perpetrators, and families and for the restoration of the social order” (“Crime” 129). Rowson’s decision to write Trials in epistolary form allows her implied readership to benefit from Meriel’s healing practice of telling common women’s traumas to sympathetic listeners.

_Reuben and Rachel: Indigenous Seductions_

In addition to the domestic marriage plot, the seduction plot was a popular subgenre of the sentimental novel. The generic conventions of seduction dictated that a rake, libertine, or man of otherwise ill character convince a (generally) young, unmarried woman to surrender her virginity; the woman often died bearing her seducer’s illegitimate child at the end of such novels.14 A common critical model reads seduction plots as allegoric representations of the new

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14 Two of the most well-known (and well-read) examples of the seduction novel are Hannah Webster Foster’s _The Coquette_ (1797) and Rowson’s own _Charlotte: A Tale of Truth_ (1791), retitled _Charlotte Temple_ in 1797.
nation’s vulnerability. Scholars who follow this line of thinking argue that early Americans see the new nation as weak and violable, like the female body. Bontatibus claims seduction narratives represent “a complex signifying practice determined and reproduced by limited educational opportunities, colonial laws and customs, circumscribed roles for the middle-class woman, and the existence of a rape culture” (5). In other words, patriarchal society produces and upholds the structures that enable seduction. Nevertheless, Bontatibus notes, “seduction narratives offered some readers . . . an escape from a mundane existence and the constricted realms of women” (8). Seduction was a tool of patriarchy, but women writers processed and commented on the practice through seduction narratives, most often in novel form.

Seduction novels offered women readers access to a hitherto inaccessible form of sexual agency, but not unmitigated freedom. Bontatibus delineates the function of seduction novels well:

The seduction novel of the early nation voices and represents fears of rape, seduction, and sexual harassment not because these are fantasies on the part of the author or reader. Rather, seduction narratives explore the lives of characters who have suffered from these atrocities while providing readers with an imaginative space in which to suffer along with the heroine. (11)

Early American seduction plots center around concern for violence against women. Two elements of the passage above merit close attention. First, Bontatibus dispels the myth that women fantasize about or desire violent experiences. Second, she identifies seduction narratives as spaces that give readers leave to suffer along with the heroine. While I do not dispute the validity of the seduction novel as a method for sentimental release, I posit women readers’ empathy for fictitious fallen women’s suffering offers catharsis for their own real-life traumas. Seduction research supports this assertion, as seduction “novels serve as loci for the exploration
of victimization and self-affirmation. Revealing the forces that act upon women provides an education that cannot be taught at the local schoolhouse or academy” (Bontatibus 18). Seduction, like other sentimental subgenres, educates its implied readership. In addition to education, I posit, seduction fiction allows its readership to process their own traumas through their role as sympathetic witnesses who identify with the fiction’s heroines.

Early American fiction rarely offers a fallen woman redemption beyond deathbed reconciliation, but even that is limited to white heroines of average-to-above-average social standing; consequently, the therapeutic potential of seduction novels was not accessible to all women. While many people criticize what they see as an overabundance of feeling in early American women’s novels, Stern positions early American fiction’s common subgenres, including the seduction narrative, as tools to cope with the power to which so few had access; these social others Stern identifies occupy varying levels of powerlessness (2). In fact, it is tempting to read Reuben and Rachel (1798) as Rowson’s attempt to revive these social noncitizens, such as Indigenous women, to offer them a role in history. Indeed, her text revives both real and fictional people through their writing in order to tell a complicated story, though largely it is a story of assimilation. Rowson revives social others, such as women and Indigenous peoples, not to give them individual voices per se, but to use them as tools to teach the performance of white womanhood to her implied readers through the seduction and death of non-white women in Reuben and Rachel.

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Reuben and Rachel was one of Rowson’s later novels, published in Boston in 1798 and later reprinted in London in 1799 (Bartolomeo 35). Neglected for many years in favor of the best-selling Charlotte Temple, Reuben and Rachel traces ten generations of Christopher Columbus’s descendants, beginning with Columbus and his wife Beatina and ending with the novel’s eponymous twins Reuben and Rachel. Throughout the novel Rowson introduces each generation of the Columbus family and chronicles their experiences as they move throughout the Atlantic world. Each generation faces its own trials, which include captivity, religious persecution, financial disinheritaice, and deceptive spouses, but the novel resolves neatly with Reuben and Rachel inheriting American land, marrying their respective loves, and living out their lives in America.

Scholars identify myriad goals for Rowson’s Reuben and Rachel. Jennifer Desiderio believes “Rowson is ultimately interested in conveying the importance of cultural cohesion and the remarkable promise it holds for the young republic at the end of the eighteenth century” (78), while Jenny Heil focuses on Rowson’s role as an educator, claiming that “[u]sing [Reuben and Rachel] as a supplement to her pedagogical practices, Rowson arranged chronology and geography—what she called the ‘two eyes of history’—to incorporate Anglo cultural practices into America's Columbian beginnings” (624). According to Heil, Rowson is interested in a cultural cohesion that ensures the new nation retains a decidedly Anglo-American origin story. Carrol Smith-Rosenberg takes Heil’s argument one step further, arguing that “Reuben and Rachel constitutes a matriarchal origin myth in which America is repeatedly represented as female and America's women as ennobling and entitling” (496-97; emphasis added). Fusing the scholars’ ideas, then, positions Reuben and Rachel as an American genesis narrative centered on
white women of English origin. While the novel certainly has its share of Indigenous characters and does attempt to critique colonial violence, the plot centers on assimilation.

Tracing the seduction narratives throughout *Reuben and Rachel* reveals a nuanced relationship between assimilationism and colonial critique. Rowson’s novel offers voice to some women, and while she attempts visible representation of non-white women, she ultimately falls short of providing those women any recognizable agency. Bruna, for example, is sacrificed on the altar of sexual assault so Rowson can illustrate virtue’s importance to her young readers. Columbus describes twelve-year-old Bruna as “wild and untutored” and calls her an “Indian heroine” (68). After Bruna’s rape, she refuses to return home: “No! Never! Bruna is the daughter of the chaste Lilah, and was instructed by the wise precepts of her father, to prize her honour above her life. Their mansion was the dwelling of innocence, piety, and virtue; and never will their wretched daughter carry pollution tither” (70). It seems as though Bruna’s wildness must be conquered, but once it is, she cannot survive; she responds to sexual violence by committing suicide. She clearly sees herself as damaged beyond repair, a common trope in the rhetoric of white womanhood. Rowson’s representation of Bruna reveals common early American attitudes about female vulnerability and virtue. First, there is always the possibility for violation; next, and most telling, is Bruna’s own reaction to her assault. Based on what her father has taught her, she refuses to return to her family home because she is now damaged goods, so to speak. She resolves to “[draw] a dagger she had concealed in her bosom, [and plunge] it in her heart” (70). Three pages constitute Bruna’s entire story, from first contact to death. In this short space,

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16 I realize the novel opens with Christopher Columbus’s family, but argue the origin narrative is English as Rowson’s audience is a white female readership.
Rowson encapsulates the prevailing attitudes concerning feminine virtue; significantly, though, she does not use a white woman to do it.\textsuperscript{17}

Bruna, as an Indigenous woman who exists before the early national era, is not necessarily required to follow the precepts of Republican Womanhood, but her death by suicide shows the gendered ideology of Rowson’s patriarchal America. Linda Kerber argues that the ideal Republican woman was a mother, whose “life was dedicated to the service of civic virtue; she educated her sons for it; she condemned and corrected her husband’s lapses from it” (202). Jan Lewis explains that “[m]arriage was the very pattern from which the cloth of republican society was to be cut” (689). For Lewis, marriage was a microcosm of the republic. Indeed, Lewis reveals, “The topic of marriage was not reserved to women or their magazines, for it was an issue of public, indeed political, import” (692). According to Kerber and Lewis, then, women held important roles in republican society: mother and wife. Kerber does acknowledge, though, “the ideology of Republican Motherhood had limitations; it provided a context in which skeptics could easily maintain that women should be content to perform this limited political role permanently and ought not to wish fuller participation” (205). Early national women had a role, yes, but they hardly had options. The ideals that become known as Republican Womanhood were firmly in place when Rowson published Bruna’s narrative in the 1790s. Projecting societal anxieties onto a Native woman from a previous historical period offers a limited critique of colonial violence; primarily, though, it allows Rowson to teach her implied readers who to avoid

\textsuperscript{17} Of course, Native women’s virtue held no value or meaning to colonizers. According to the Coalition to Stop Violence against Native Women, Indigenous communities still feel the effects of Spanish and Euro-American colonization, with four out of five Native women affected by violence and over 500 Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) across 71 US cities as of 2019. For an extensive study of violence against Native women, see Andrea Smith, \textit{Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide}. 
without forcing them to imagine themselves in such a horrible situation. So, Rowson’s text partially illustrates Stern’s claim that non-citizens are the nation’s foundation; Rowson uses Bruna’s assault and subsequent suicide as parables to teach Republican women to protect their chastity at all costs, implying that they are never safe, but always already vulnerable to sexual attack.

Bruna arguably suffers the worst fate, but she is by no means the only woman whose situation serves Rowson’s pedagogical purposes. Orrabella—Columbus’s daughter-in-law—has a young sister named Alzira who falls prey to seduction. Alzira admits her affection for Garcias, and her hope to marry him, “[b]ut Garcias had not an idea of an honourable union; he meant to conquer her father’s kingdom; and had it in contemplation to degrade the fair Alzira to the station of a slave, for the amusement of his looser hours . . . he was frequently privately admitted [to her apartment] after her parents were retired to rest” (84). Eventually, Alzira is “borne to the tent of her betrayer [and] the scene that follow[s] is too horrid for repetition!” (84). Rowson does not describe Alzira’s fate for a few reasons; first, it is arguably improper for a woman to discuss rape and sexual abuse; second, not describing the scene gives readers license to use their imaginations and visualize the possible abuses Alzira suffers. Alzira’s story conflates reality and allegory in a common early national trope: in Republican literature, the female body

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18 This is a common Shakespearean trope, exemplified by Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice.*
19 Projecting anxieties onto Native characters is also one example of the “regeneration through violence” of the American frontier. Richard Slotkin argues American literature was born from colonial conflict; its long history is steeped in the violence of colonization.
20 Rowson carefully chooses how detailed her descriptions need to be. For example, upon the marriage of Ferdinando and Orrabella, she remarks: “Avarice had discovered this new world was an inexhaustible mine of wealth; and, not content to share its blessings in common with the natives, came with rapine, war and devastation in her train: And as she tore open the bowels of the earth to gratify her insatiate thirst for gold, her steps were marked with blood” (63). In one sentence, Rowson cautions against greed and encourages her readers to share, as avarice leads to violent destruction. To suggest greed “tore open the bowels of the earth” is to personify destruction; yet, the description is also vague.
commonly represents the land; yet, Garcias plans a takeover of both the land and Alzira’s body. Through Alzira’s story, then, Rowson teaches her readers society’s perception of their value to America; they must remain inviolate for the nation itself to stay pure because violation injures not only the individual, but everything she represents. Alzira behaves unacceptably for a woman, and Rowson uses her story to convey the importance of caution: women must protect their bodies, or they endanger the nation.

In addition to using Bruna and Alzira as women to present cautionary tales, Rowson also introduces Mina, a nine-year-old whose seduction story she follows to completion. Mina has a “complexion clear olive, a profusion of jetty hair waved in glossy ringlets over her neck,” and “full black eyes” (42). Mina’s olive complexion and dark eyes mark her as racially ambiguous. Importantly, Rowson describes Mina in contrast to Columbia, explaining that Mina “was by nature a coquette, fond of admiration, and pleased with those who gave it” (118). To carry the dichotomy of the two unlikely friends21 to its full conclusion, then, situates Columbia as the virtuous America and Mina as its opposite—racially ambiguous, mysterious, and unable to maintain strict Republican morality. Mina’s fate later in the novel illustrates this claim. After Mina’s virtue is tempted by Howard, her concern over what Rawlins would think if he knew she was meeting Howard illustrates that she knows her behavior is wrong; however, she is too weak to be constant, for “Mina possessed that unfortunate flexibility of disposition, that unfits its possessor for opposition of any kind” (122). Rowson makes clear that Mina needs a woman with stronger morality and virtue to police her behavior. She explains, “Had the lady Columbia been present, she would no doubt, notwithstanding her promise to the contrary, confided to her the

21 The term “friends” is problematic here; while the two girls loved each other, Mina was technically Columbia’s servant.
intrusion of the stranger, and her promise to see him again in the morning” (122). Columbia, no doubt, would admonish Mina’s behavior, possibly saving her from ruin. Instead, Mina falls prey to Howard’s deceitfulness, “and in the end [he] triumphed in the spoils of her innocence” (123). Mina’s secrecy destroys the family. The relationship between Mina and Columbia provides a friendship model for Rowson’s readers. Readers are meant to identify Columbia’s behavior as that of true and proper friendship, and at the same time realize that Mina’s secrecy sets her up for destruction.

Not only does Rowson use Indigenous and racially ambiguous women to illustrate the potentially dire consequences of seduction, but she mediates Indigenous stories through Columbus and Beatina, further reducing Bruna and Alzira’s agency. Columbus and Beatina’s letters (and, consequently, Bruna and Alzira’s stories) are locked away for years, only revealed when young Columbia reads the family papers. Bruna and Alzira have their experiences mediated and transcribed through a male voice and circulated as letters. These stories maintain a liminal, complicated status, both written and unwritten, told and untold. The women do not write their own experiences, meaning readers miss the interiority generally associated with eighteenth-century fictions, which adds another layer of complication to the narratives of these Indigenous women. Whereas composing a letter signifies some amount of agency, these women are regulated to subaltern status. Rowson presents her readers with horrifying scenes, but she mediates them through a colonial male gaze, both to lend those scenes a legitimizing male authority and prevent forcing a female narrator to utter/author clearly improper passages.

Throughout *Reuben and Rachel*, Columbia embodies the sentimental implied reader: well-educated, white, and financially secure. Burnham’s argument that sympathy requires a boundary crossing plays out with Columbia, who acts as a proto-therapeutic repository for
others’ trauma through reading the letters that reveal traumatic events. The letters detail generations of traumas. Significantly, although the trauma sufferers are written about, they do not tell their own stories; this complicates the stories’ status as testimony. Only Bruna speaks for herself, and her words are still mediated through a letter; Columbia, the reader, only has what is written, much like Columbia the nation has one “official” historical record. In positioning Columbia as the reader of the letters, Rowson makes the implied reader an embodied one in a move that may increase sympathy between women across racial boundaries and move toward a healing version of American woman’s culture, though not a truly inclusive one.

Conclusion

This chapter has positioned the sentimental novel as part of a canon of literary trauma recovery. Such novels, I have argued, functioned as testimony to the abuses of patriarchy and as vehicles of recovery from trauma—as proto-therapeutic spaces—for their authors and implied audience(s). Sentimental novels position marriage in the context of eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century concerns and anxieties about rights, revolutionary ideals, social order and authority, and national identity. Genre and form, particularly sentimental epistolarity, allow proto-feminist authors to critique patriarchal abuses of power and failed revolutionary ideals about equality for all. The texts in this chapter also highlight the racial disparities of trauma recovery between white and nonwhite characters.

The sentimental novel of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century is a safe space that allows women to explore the physical, sexual, and social vulnerabilities of early national life and relationships. Women in each of the chapter’s texts process their traumas to varying degrees but comparing the three texts highlights the racial disparities of trauma recovery between white
and nonwhite characters. Rowson’s white heroine Meriel is ultimately rewarded with a happy ending: marriage to her first love, Kingly, and long-lost parents who settle a fortune upon her. Alternatively, Sansay’s heroine Clara endures domestic violence and marital rape. Nevertheless, the novel offers her the possibility of a happy ending as she sails for America, even if readers do not get to see that ending. Clara escapes her abusers; Meriel escapes her abusers. Unlike their white counterparts, Bruna, Alzira, and Mina—who are raped, coerced, and seduced—die. Their stories are mediated through several levels of white narrators. Ultimately, Sansay and Rowson use seduction and sentiment to offer therapeutic healing to their implied readership: early national white women.

Finally, understanding sentimental novels through a modern psychiatric lens offers new insights into early American literature’s cultural significance. Reading sentimental novels in the context of Herman’s twentieth-century psychiatric research reveals that sentimental novels were more than female complaints; they testified to the abuses of patriarchy and were powerful vehicles for trauma recovery—proto-therapeutic spaces—for their authors and implied audience(s). The trauma theory framework positions sentimental novels as safe spaces women constructed for themselves to process and recover from the physical, sexual, and social vulnerabilities and traumas of early national women’s life and relationships.

Berlant suggests women’s culture is ineffectual as a change agent and views the sentimental genre as a novel of complaint that accomplishes little. Conversely, I illustrate how the sentimental novel allows its implied readers—young white women—to identify with and heal from common traumas inherent in patriarchal society. Women writers and women readers did the important cultural work of resisting patriarchal norms through communal reading and recovery.
Ultimately, and perhaps more powerful than any other purpose it served, the sentimental novel showed American women, both writers and readers, that their voices and experiences mattered enough to appear in print. Sadly, neither Sansay nor Rowson offer happy endings to women of color. Chapter 3 searches for these happy endings through an analysis of antebellum women’s writing, wherein both white women writers and women writers of color adapt generic conventions to testify to the traumas of slavery and create the agency that is denied to most early national nonwhite heroines.
CHAPTER 3

NOVEL NARRATIVES:
NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN WRITE SLAVERY’S SEXUAL TRAUMAS

In Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Cassy, the plantation owner’s mistress, embodies the mixed-race enslaved woman’s dilemma. Cassy exclaims, “It’s no use resisting! Did I want to live with him? Wasn’t I a woman delicately bred; and he—God in Heaven! what was he, and is he? And yet, I’ve lived with him, these five years, and cursed every moment of my life, —night and day!” (327). Cassy has been cast aside in favor of a new mistress, Emmeline—a young slave of fifteen—but she clearly does not hate the girl; rather, Cassy pities Emmeline: “We live in filth, and grow loathsome, till we loathe ourselves! And we long to die, and we don’t dare to kill ourselves! —No hope! no hope! no hope! —this girl now, —just as old as I was!” (327). Cassy expresses disquiet not only because the new mistress is so young, but also because she is about to repeat Cassy’s (and other enslaved women’s) lived experience as sexual property that Simon Legree (or any male slave owner) may command. During the antebellum period, characters like Stowe’s Cassy and Emmeline enabled enslaved women to begin telling their own trauma stories.

Previous chapters of this dissertation outlined white women’s use of literature, particularly the captivity narrative and the sentimental novel, as a proto-therapeutic space to support their implied readership’s trauma recovery; in other words, white women wrote to help other white women heal. In this chapter, sentiment becomes a tool through which women writers
support a radical political movement—abolition. Focusing on the sociocultural effects of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Chapter 3 surveys the emergence and evolution of enslaved women’s literary trauma through the nineteenth century, beginning with a third-person account of enslaved women’s sexual trauma and culminating with a first-person archive of enslaved women’s trauma from a fugitive slave woman’s perspective. As in previous chapters, I will assess trauma recovery based on stages identified by psychiatrist Judith Herman: establishing safety, telling the trauma story, and restoring the survivor/community relationship.

Following the historical shift from white women speaking for enslaved women to enslaved women speaking for themselves, this chapter opens with Cassy’s story from Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) to argue that Cassy provides insight into real-life enslaved women’s traumatic experiences as captive sexual objects in the antebellum South. Next, I address Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), a case study in the power of testimony to heal trauma for an individual. Finally, I argue Hannah Crafts’ *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* (written in the early 1850s, discovered and published circa 2002) represents an archive of enslaved women’s testimony free of abolitionist influence—the enslaved woman’s experience exclusively through the enslaved woman’s voice. As these three texts illustrate, the antebellum period is a powerful transition period that allows enslaved women some voice, even if that voice is limited, and paves the way for women of color to testify to their own traumas.

**Fugitive Slave Act of 1850**

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 specified not only that escaped enslaved people could be recaptured, but also that American citizens were required to aid in such recapture; furthermore, any person who harbored a fugitive slave could face fines and jail time. On the other hand,
anyone could return an enslaved person to bondage in exchange for monetary compensation and, according to Carla Bosco, “the only proof needed in fugitive slave cases was positive identification of the slave” (242). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains, “The Fugitive Slave Act effectively sought to cancel the states north of the Mason-Dixon Line as a sanctuary against human bondage; it meant that privileged fugitive slaves, such as Harriet Jacobs, were forced to allow friends to purchase their freedom from their former masters” (xciii). Summarily, under the Fugitive Slave Act enslaved persons were not permitted to give testimony or defend themselves, and even freedom was its own form of captivity because a fugitive slave was in constant fight-or-flight mode since being discovered almost guaranteed a return to slavery.

Vulnerable Bodies

The Fugitive Slave Act increased the enslaved individual’s vulnerability, but it proved particularly dangerous for an enslaved woman, whose intersectional identity as slave and woman often led her to flee slavery to escape sexual abuse. Hortense Spillers explains that “[u]nder [ethnicity’s] hegemony, the human body becomes a defenseless target for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract phase, a resource for metaphor” (386). Miscegenation led to different enslaved bodies representing different economic and cultural value. According to Edward Baptist, letters exchanged between slave traders reveal that in the antebellum South, “mulatto,” or mixed-race, women were physical and sexual commodities whose value increased with their light skin, as whiteness increased their rape-ability. Furthermore, Thelma Jennings finds enslaved women were frequently subjected to breeding—forced sex specifically for the purpose of conceiving children—because masters found it cheaper to produce their own enslaved
labor force rather than purchase them. 1 Slavery followed the condition of the mother, so any child born to an enslaved woman also became enslaved. Renee Harrison terms an enslaved woman’s sexual vulnerability “vaginal incarceration,” which objectifies the woman as a captive vagina—a tool for pleasure, control, and reproduction independent of a whole body. She further situates the enslaved woman as a symbol that allows male slave owners to control an entire workforce through sexual coercion and rape; both the threat and the act of rape can keep husbands, fathers, and sons submissive, as well as keeping enslaved women submissive, because an enslaved woman’s refusal often resulted in a master’s threat to sell her away from her family. 2

Enslaved women had no legal protections against their abusers. According to Harrison, some buyers at slave auctions went so far as to knead a slave woman’s stomach to determine her childbearing capacity. Both Joanna Bourke and Saidiya Hartman detail the enslaved woman’s lack of agency to fight such humiliation and abuse. Bourke explains that an enslaved woman could not formally bring rape charges to a court; only a slave’s master could take her case to court, where her trauma proved irrelevant in the legal context since the court viewed her assault as damage to a white man’s property. Hartman explains that because enslaved women were property, they had no legal recourse against the men who raped them; hypocritically, though, enslaved persons were considered legally liable for crimes they executed in self-defense. In other words, white men were not held legally liable for the rape of enslaved women, but enslaved

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1 Jennings also explains that strong enslaved males and females were often forcibly united to produce strong children; many plantations had “stock men,” strong enslaved males to impregnate enslaved women. Likewise, “weak” enslaved men were sometimes castrated, and rarely permitted sexual access to women. An enslaved woman’s value and treatment depended on her ability to produce strong, healthy children. Refusal on the enslaved woman’s part frequently resulted in beating or selling, and some enslaved women resorted to chewing cotton roots in hopes of avoiding pregnancy.

2 “Husbands” is admittedly a loaded term in discussions of slavery, as enslaved people were not legally permitted to marry. For a more detailed look at companionate relationships and enslaved marriage, see Tess Chakkalakal’s Novel Bondage: Slavery, Marriage, and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century America and Frances Smith Foster’s Till Death Do Us Part.
women (and men) were held legally liable—and often punished—for seeking justice against their attackers.

To appreciate enslaved women’s traumas fully, twenty-first-century scholars must understand slavery as a form of captivity. Captivity presents unique experiences which cause captives to exhibit various traumatic and post-traumatic symptoms. Judith Herman illuminates several aspects of captive symptomology. First, she explains that “[c]aptivity, which brings the victim into prolonged contact with the perpetrator, creates a special type of relationship, one of coercive control” (Herman 74). Dynamics between captives and captors resemble the master/slave relationships present in many slave narratives. For example, Linda Brent’s relationship with Dr. Flint in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* exemplifies the power that coercion allows slave masters, particularly toward female slaves. Herman further explains, “In situations of captivity, the perpetrator becomes the most powerful person in the life of the victim, and the psychology of the victim is shaped by the actions and beliefs of the perpetrator” (75). Anything perpetrators, such as slave masters, do powerfully influences their victims, a fact illustrated within many slave texts through the apparent fear enslaved people have of their masters. Slavery places one human being under absolute control of another; to ensure their own survival, enslaved people often suffer verbal, physical, and sexual abuses such as threats, shame, beatings, malnutrition, and rape. Eventually, enslaved peoples’ self-esteem and self-worth diminish with the abuses they suffer. Another of Herman’s revelations about perpetrators perfectly highlights larger-scale captivities like slavery. Since a captor “does not perceive that anything is wrong with him, he does not seek help—unless he is in trouble with the law. His most consistent feature, in both the testimony of victims and the observations of psychologists, is his apparent normality. Ordinary concepts of psychopathology fail to define or comprehend him”
Herman’s basic concepts describe many slaveholders, particularly Dr. Flint. Many southerners owned enslaved people in antebellum America, thus the slaveholder seemed normal because he did not threaten, but embodied and sustained, the status quo. In nearly every way, the antebellum slave owner embodies normality and believes owning other human beings is his right, rather than a crime against humanity.

Enslaved women of African descent experienced a different captivity than white women captured by Native Americans. The white woman in danger (of rape and/or murder) anchored white women’s captivity narratives. Conversely, African and African American women are viewed as rapable. According to Susan Bordo, “[c]orresponding to notions that all black men are potential rapists by nature are stereotypes of black women as amoral Jezebels who can never truly be raped, because rape implies the invasion of a personal space of modesty and reserve that the black woman has not been imagined as having” (9; Bordo’s emphasis). For instance, despite Cassy’s claim that she was a woman “delicately bred,” her race precludes her from such a possibility in nineteenth-century public consciousness. Bordo also explains that the black woman’s body carries multiple negative associations. Most notably, she argues, “[b]y virtue of her sex, [the black woman] represents the temptations of the flesh and the source of man’s moral downfall. By virtue of her race, she is instinctual animal, undeserving of privacy and undemanding of respect” (Bordo 10-11). From this perverse stance, the black woman is seen as temptation embodied; because she is dehumanized, she is rapable. Even today, “the legacy of slavery has added an additional element to effacements of black women’s humanity. For in slavery her body is not only treated as an animal body but is property, to be ‘taken’ and used at will. Such a body is denied even the dignity accorded a wild animal; its status approaches that of
mere matter, thing- hood” (11; Bordo’s emphasis). The black woman’s rape does not “count” because her body is viewed as mere commodity. Jenny Sharpe details the complicated dynamics of enslaved women’s lack of choices:

For [enslaved] women to resist, they would have to refuse their sexual slavery, which begs the question of what such a refusal might look like. Because of the structures of slavery that sanctioned their sexual appropriation by white men, slave women had extremely limited options. They could be raped, paid a small sum for their outward 'cooperation,' or enter into more formal long-term arrangements, but there was no position from which they could refuse. Within this dynamic of nonconsent, we are confronted with the contradictory practice of slave women subjecting themselves to sexual exploitation in order to remove themselves (if only provisionally) from the threat of rape or the control of their owners. (xvii-xviii)

While I agree that such subjection seems paradoxical, I contend it is also a powerful survival technique. Any rape is violent; giving a rapist the illusion of consent may allow the victim to stay alive. Enslaved women were property, imbued with no legal rights to resist sexual advances. Even in the twenty-first century, women risk their lives when they physically resist a rapist. Every scenario Sharpe describes above is a form of rape; enslaved women found ways to make their inevitable sexual exploitation survivable.

Enslaved women’s intersectional identities positioned them as one of the most vulnerable populations in antebellum America. Their race rendered them property with no legal rights; their race coupled with their sex left them vulnerable to a type of abuse unique to women as their bodies were used to reproduce the labor force. Only an enslaved woman’s master could bring legal charges against her abuser, but often her master was her abuser, as the writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Hannah Crafts, and Harriet Jacobs illustrate.
The only book to outsell *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the nineteenth century was the Bible. Tracy Davis notes that Stowe’s novel sold an impressive ten thousand copies in its first two weeks, and Leslie Fiedler reveals it sold approximately 300,000 copies in its first year of publication. By 1853, Davis says, one million copies had been sold; finally, Joy Jordan-Lake notes Stowe’s was the first American novel to sell over one million copies. Such a popular novel evoked plentiful criticism even in its own time. In 1853, Louisa McCord penned a scathing review of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, referring to abolitionists as a “satanic school of arguers.” McCord and other contemporary critics felt Stowe’s portrayal of slavery was exaggerated, which led Stowe to publish *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a sourcebook of incidents from the novel accompanied by their real-life inspirations. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published in 1852, when what Barbara Welter has identified as the Cult of True Womanhood, a nineteenth-century ideal that valued women who embodied purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity was the dominant ideology of femininity. Nina Baym rightly views Stowe’s work as outside of the true woman framework, arguing: “Stowe calls on women who are placed so that they can see the [slavery] system’s evils, to bear witness to an opposing truth. [This demands] of women something quite different from the allegedly traditional passive femininity and domesticity” (*Woman’s Fiction* 232). James Baldwin calls *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* a “catalog of violence,” criticizes Stowe for erasing the blackness of George and Eliza, whom he identifies as the novel’s most important black characters, and disagrees with Stowe’s support of African colonization.

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3 Stowe’s contemporaries criticized her portrayal of Southern life as inaccurate. Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese offers an overview of the planter-class antebellum white woman’s duties in *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. 
(582). Baldwin’s view was hardly unusual; Elizabeth Ammons explains that even among Stowe’s own contemporaries, few endorsed colonization, the debate surrounding which was perhaps the most stringent disagreement between Stowe and readers who supported her abolitionist aims. Despite criticisms against it, though, the novel’s impact in public and scholarly discourse is undeniable. 4 Jane Tompkins argues that Stowe and other nineteenth-century writers use sentimental rhetoric to facilitate action from their target audiences. 5 Aside from Tom himself, certainly the character who occupies the most critical space is little Eva, whose death constitutes one of the novel’s most powerful sentimental scenes.

In contrast to the popularity of Tom and Eva, perhaps the most neglected character from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is Cassy, the mulatta woman who cares for Tom on Simon Legree’s plantation. 6 Leslie Fiedler delineates Cassy’s character trajectory from a child “scarcely aware that she is a Negro, through her lush bondage to a chivalrous white New Orleans lover, in which she is scarcely aware she is a slave, to the point where she is pawed publicly in the slave market

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4 Scholarship on the novel has addressed themes of gender, race, slavery, and sentiment, among other things. For biographical information on Stowe and an overview of her novel’s controversial content, see Thomas Gossett’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture*. For more on Stowe’s transatlantic career and influence, see Denise Kohn’s edited collection *Transatlantic Stowe: Harriet Beecher Stowe and European Culture* and Sarah Meer’s *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s*. Issues of race, gender, and Stowe’s Calvinist upbringing can be reviewed in Eric Sundquist’s *New Essays on Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, while the extension of these themes throughout Stowe’s work beyond Uncle Tom can be found in *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe*, edited by Cindy Weinstein. For those interested in how to approach Uncle Tom in the classroom, see *Approaches to Teaching Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, edited by Elizabeth Ammons and Susan Belasco.

5 While earlier authors like Susanna Rowson wrote for an implied readership of young, unmarried white women, Stowe was more direct. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was specifically a call to action for white women; Harriet Jacobs mimics this rhetorical move in her slave narrative nearly a decade later.

6 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has enjoyed a lengthy stage career beginning as early as the 1850s. Perhaps the most popularly known stage adaptation is that noted by Jane Tompkins, “Small House of Uncle Thomas” in *The King and I*. For more on stage and film adaptations of Stowe’s novel, see Harry Birdoff’s *The World’s Greatest Hit: Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1941); John Frick’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin on the American Stage and Screen* (2012) and “The Representation of Violence and the Violence of Representation: Uncle Tom’s Cabin on the Antebellum American Stage” (2010); works by Ioana Szeman Emily Sahaikian in Tracy’s Davis’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin: The Transnational History of America’s Most Mutable Book* (2018); Hazel Water’s "Putting on Uncle Tom on the Victorian Stage" (2001); and Stephen Johnson’s "Uncle Tom and the Minstrels: Seeing Black and White on Stage in Canada West Prior to the American Civil War" (1999).
and degraded to the level of becoming Legree’s unwilling mistress” (58). Existing scholarship treats Cassy as a tragic mulatta—which she is—but does not explore her individual role in the text. In fact, Eve Allegra Raimon argues that “Cassy’s own oral history follows the ‘tragic mulatta’ narrative faithfully, but too often, following circular logic, critics have failed generally to focus on it precisely because of the incendiary function she serves in Stowe’s work” (99).7 Reading Cassy strictly as a tragic mulatta—and therefore as a trope—ignores the reality she represents in Stowe’s text. Cassy, and mixed-race slaves in general, embody living, breathing evidence of miscegenation. As Lea Pitschmann notes, “black sexual appeal is a source of concern, especially for white men. Beauty must be comprehended through the lens of rape, as ‘mulatto’ women who elicit desires are products of rape somewhere along their ancestral line” (25). Enslaved women were a legal paradox; technically property, they could not consent to sexual relations. Technically property, neither could they refuse sexual relations. Through Cassy, Stowe provides insight into real-life enslaved women’s traumatic experiences as captive sexual objects in the antebellum South.

Several nineteenth-century authors employ the tragic mulatta trope, which Raimon defines as “the story of an educated light-skinned heroine whose white benefactor and paramour (sometimes also the young woman’s father) dies, leaving her to the auction block and/or the sexual designs of a malevolent creditor. The protagonist, sheltered from the outside world, is driven to desperation by her predicament and perhaps to an early death” (7). Cassy does not die, but otherwise her story fits Raimon’s outline. Cassy’s father is white, but her mother is enslaved; as a result, Cassy has light skin but must follow her mother’s enslaved status. She explains to

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7 For information on miscegenation during the Revolutionary era, see Emily Clark’s The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World.
Tom that she was “brought up in luxury [and] learned music, French and embroidery” (331) until her father’s death, when she was sold to cover his debts. Cassy’s fate depends on her intersectional identity. The tragic mulatta plot’s success relies on both race and gender; a white woman cannot occupy the same space with the same meaning in such a plot. As Raimon explains, “it is imperative to the narrative aims of [American antislavery] literature for the ‘tragic mulatto’ to be a ‘tragic mulatta.’ The very tragedy of the figure’s fate depends upon [a character’s] female gender. The sexual vulnerability of a light-skinned enslaved woman is essential to propel the plot forward and to generate the reader’s sympathy and outrage” (5; Raimon’s emphasis). Furthermore, Cassy’s education marks her as a cultured sexual companion; this gives her more value as a commodity than an enslaved woman treated as a “breeder” and field hand. Her education, accomplishments, and values align with those of white women readers. Additionally, nineteenth-century readers could partially identify with Cassy’s sexual vulnerability. In the nineteenth century, the United States did not have laws protecting wives from marital rape; this meant husbands could rape their wives with impunity because they were not legally committing any crime. Similarities in sexual vulnerability allowed white women to identify with Cassy on an emotionally powerful level. Thus, Cassy contributes to Stowe’s abolitionist cause. Men possessed the buying and selling power in the slaveholding South;
therefore, to sell an enslaved man, while his strength as a field laborer was desirable, may not
generate the financial resources necessary to cover Cassy’s father’s debts.8

Mulatta women such as Cassy embody complex racial power structures, and a large market existed for them. Slaveholders wanted females; according to Edward Baptist, mulatta women were physical and sexual commodities whose value increased based on their perceived whiteness. Baptist argues white men rape mixed-race women for three reasons, the most significant of which is to re-exert their power as white men by re-violating a visual representative of their powerful status. The mulatta reminds the white slave master of his complete sexual power over enslaved women. Mulatta women bring high prices because they are viewed as valuable sex objects that represent white male power. Cassy reveals her experience as a commodity to Tom: “Then, they made me dress up, every day; and gentlemen used to come in and stand and smoke their cigars, and look at me, and ask questions, and debate my price” (335). Cassy represents a very real issue in antebellum America, where enslaved women are displayed, harassed, and fondled.

Slavery is a form of captivity; logically, then, when Cassy is sold to her master, she becomes his captive, subject to his physical and psychological tortures. As Herman explains, “[i]t is not necessary to use violence often to keep the victim in a constant state of fear. The threat of death or serious harm is much more frequent than the actual resort to violence. Threats

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8 Because the end of the transatlantic slave trade meant new enslaved peoples were not imported, American slaveowners enacted systemic rape as a means to reproduce slave labor; as a child's enslaved status follows the condition of the mother, any children an enslaved woman bore (regardless of who fathered those children) were the legal property of the woman's owner. In short, white men could (and did) reproduce their own labor force. Prices for enslaved women increased steadily throughout the nineteenth century, as archival bills of sale illustrate. Several such bills archived through Duke University’s American Slavery Documents Collection record the increasing cost for female slaves: In 1805, Harriet (age 20) and her daughter Elizabeth (6) were sold for $280. In 1818, Esther (20) sold for $500, while Jenny (age unspecified) was purchased for $618 in 1850. By 1860, an enslaved woman called Susan, along with “her future issue,” was sold for $1,500.
against others are often as effective as direct threats against the victim” (Herman 77). Herman dispels the myth that violence always involves excessive physical force; threats allow slave masters coercive control over Cassy. One master threatens to sell her children if she refuses to fulfill his sexual desires (Stowe 333). The master verbally harasses Cassy. She admits, “He told me that he always meant to have me, from the first time he saw me; and that he had drawn Henry on, and got him in debt, on purpose to make him willing to sell me. That he got him in love with another woman; and that I might know, after all that, that he should not give up for a few airs and tears, and things of that sort” (333). Basically, the master tells Cassy she cannot refuse his advances because he exerts so much effort to get her. Although the man admits his elaborate, deceptive scheme, Cassy has no legal protection from him because she is his property to use as he pleases. Cassy is a captive, and her master controls her.

Consequently, as a captor, Cassy’s master controls her body and her actions through coercive techniques. Herman explains, “The methods of establishing control over another person are based upon the systematic, repetitive infliction of psychological trauma. They are organized techniques of disempowerment and disconnection. Methods of psychological control are designed to instill terror and helplessness” (77). Cassy’s first master threatens her with fears for her children in order to control her actions. She admits, “I gave up, for my hands were tied. He had my children;—whenever I resisted his will anywhere, he would talk about selling them, and he made me as submissive as he desired . . . I was afraid to refuse anything” (Stowe 333). Cassy endures rape from her master to protect her children, and her coerced submission allows him to frame their sexual relations as consensual.

Cassy believes the only way to protect her children is to violate her religious teachings and sexually submit to her master. As an enslaved woman, she has no legal protections; her only
hope to keep her son and daughter is to suffer her master’s sexual abuse. Her sexual slavery solidifies the slave master’s unwavering control. Herman explains, “The psychological control of the victim is not completed until she has been forced to violate her own moral principles and to betray her basic human attachments. Psychologically, this is the most destructive of all coercive techniques, for the victim who has succumbed loathes herself” (Herman 82). Cassy’s master possesses every aspect of her being and forces her to violate her beliefs. Cassy embodies the tragic mulatta’s plight. She hates herself, but she cannot change her circumstances; her master controls her. Cassy’s father dies before he emancipates her; her lover and the father of her children sells her; and her master purchases her to indulge his sexual depravity. Cassy’s children are her only remaining human attachment, and she clings to them. As she tells Tom, “you can do anything with a woman, when you’ve got her children. He made me submit: he made me be peaceable” (Stowe 333). Her language confirms the relationship’s non-consensual nature; he made her succumb to his demands.

Cassy’s experiences traumatize her. Herman points out that “a single traumatic event can occur almost anywhere [but] prolonged, repeated trauma, by contrast, occurs only in circumstances of captivity . . . when the victim is a prisoner, unable to flee, and under the control of the perpetrator” (74). As an enslaved mulatta woman, Cassy is a sexual captive. To heal from her trauma she must tell her story, which she attempts to do as she cares for Tom. Herman insists that the trauma survivor must tell her story “completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (175). Cassy must not omit any detail of her experience. Her scene with

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9 As in Chapter 2, I realize some readers may find the idea of applying twentieth-century medical ideas to nineteenth-century texts problematic; however, I make the comparison to articulate the long-range effects of trauma using symptomology that certainly appears in earlier women’s writing despite their lack of a language for it.
Tom represents an important step in her recovery, and she begins her story intentionally. Cassy offers a relatively detailed account of her experiences, but she “hurrie[s] on through her story, with a wild, passionate utterance; sometimes seeming to address it to Tom, and sometimes speaking as in a soliloquy” (Stowe 335). Cassy’s narrative is frantic and fragmented; she vacillates between past and present, conscious and unconscious. Sometimes she realizes Tom listens to her, but sometimes she experiences flashbacks instead. Her behavior indicates that she does not synthesize her traumatic experiences with her comparatively happy childhood. However, her frazzled state at the end of her tale indicates that she does not offer the detailed account necessary to process her violent experiences as one part of her life. She acknowledges them, of course, but does not possess the mental acuity to speak the narrative intentionally, from beginning to end.

Although she creates an imperfect narrative, by sharing her traumatic experiences with Tom, Cassy begins her recovery process. Herman explains that trauma “[r]ecovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (133). Cassy and Tom have tried to protect each other during their mutual time with Legree, so she has established trust with Tom. She chooses Tom as a safe witness for her story; she remembers her traumas and names them consistent with nineteenth-century readers’ expectations. However, although Tom listens to Cassy, he cannot offer her a strong, consistent relationship because they are both enslaved, and therefore subject to Legree’s whims.

Tom helps Cassy begin her healing journey, but he cannot provide the tools for complete recovery; Cassy cannot recover until she establishes safety. Cassy is not safe while she is Legree’s property. She takes an important step toward her recovery when she flees the Legree plantation because only when she escapes captivity can she heal completely. She eventually
reunites with her daughter, Eliza, and seems to be in ideal circumstances to heal. Eliza can provide Cassy with the loving relationship necessary to her recovery. In fact, Stowe’s narrator confirms that “in two or three days, such a change had passed over Cassy, that our readers would scarcely know her . . . Indeed, her love seemed to flow more naturally to the little Eliza than to her own daughter; for she was the exact image and body of the child whom she had lost. The little one was a flowery bond between mother and daughter, through whom grew up acquaintance and affection” (392). Cassy and Eliza develop a relationship through their mutual love for a child. Cassy has a loving family structure in which to heal; problematically, though, she prefers the little Eliza to her adult counterpart. Little Eliza provides Cassy access to her pre-traumatic self; because the child looks so much like her mother, Cassy sees her as a daughter rather than a granddaughter, which propels the illusion that Cassy suffers no trauma. In order to heal, Cassy must accept her daughter’s adulthood and integrate every part of her own life into one cohesive story.

Stowe does not allow Cassy to develop an integrated narrative; instead, she Christianizes her: “Cassy yielded at once, and with her whole soul, to every good influence, and became a devout and tender Christian” (392). Of course, as a Christian, Cassy will easily reintegrate into the microcosmic nineteenth-century society that her family represents. Problematically, though, Stowe silences Cassy—once she renews her Christianity, she loses her narrative voice. So, Cassy cannot fully heal. Instead, she lives in a world where her daughter is still a child, which allows her to compartmentalize her experiences rather than confront them.

Throughout the course of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* Cassy tells her trauma and develops relationships, but she cannot incorporate the episodes of her life into a complete narrative. Cassy’s story seems to end happily, but she loses her agency. Sadly, she represents the plight of
real-life enslaved women. In fact, Carolyn Berman speculates, “it is . . . possible that Stowe based her story of the slave Cassy’s flight on the legend of [Harriet] Jacobs’s own escape from slavery. The similarities between the stories of Stowe’s fictional Cassy and Jacobs’s pseudonymous heroine Linda Brent are, in any event, striking” (330). While Berman offers limited circumstantial evidence to support her claim, she notes that Stowe and Jacobs did correspond while Stowe drafted Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Thus, Berman identifies an important connection. Even if Stowe does not base Cassy’s character on Jacobs, she knows Jacobs’ story, which means she understands that Cassy’s experiences represent common occurrences for enslaved mulatta women.

Despite the limited critical attention Cassy receives, she plays a significant role in Stowe’s novel. True, Stowe does not give Cassy the same amount of time she devotes to characters such as Tom and Eva, but she still includes Cassy’s story; in fact, Raimon asserts that “Cassy’s is the only voice the reader is permitted to hear, and her recitation of her own story—which extends through an entire chapter—is of profound importance in connection with her role as the novel’s primary political agitator” (111). Regardless of whether or not Cassy is a political agitator, she signifies all mulatta women’s racialized sexual vulnerability.

Stowe carefully crafts each character in her novel to serve a specific purpose, even as those characters operate within the confines of sentimental fiction. Cassy voices authentic problems rampant in antebellum slave life, as countless women’s slave narratives published after Uncle Tom’s Cabin attest. Cassy’s story carries value precisely because her experiences represent more than a fictional archetype. She embodies the reality of sexual abuse under the slave system—a reality that too many enslaved women endure. America as a nation cannot heal
from slavery’s traumas unless each enslaved individual’s trauma is told, understood, and integrated into the narrative of the nation’s history.

Captivity, Trauma, and Recovery in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents*

Harriet Jacobs was born in 1813 in North Carolina to Delilah and Elijah, two enslaved people from different families (Riemer 152). She labored in her master’s house at age six after her mother’s death, but her mistress ensured she was literate. Then, Jacobs was enslaved by the Norcum household at around age ten. By age twenty-two, she had given birth to two children fathered by a local white lawyer. After a seven-year captivity in her grandmother’s cramped attic, she eventually escaped, traveling through several Northern states before landing in the abolitionist hub of Rochester for a while. She was manumitted by Cornelia Grinnell Willis in 1852 for three hundred dollars. After Jacobs’s narrative was published, she did relief work during the Civil War and Reconstruction era, ran a school, and opened a boarding house. She died in March of 1897 and is buried in Cambridge, Massachusetts.10

Jacobs completed her manuscript of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in 1858 and sailed to London in search of a publisher, but to no avail. Eventually, Lydia Maria Child agreed to introduce and edit the manuscript so it could be published by Thayer and Eldridge of Boston. Unfortunately, the firm went bankrupt and Jacobs had to find a private publisher. The American edition of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* appeared in 1861; in 1862 a London edition titled *The Deeper Wrong; Or, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* appeared. Critical interest in Jacobs and her narrative resurfaced in the late 1980s after Jean Fagan Yellin authenticated Jacobs' identity and the events her narrative describes, and today *Incidents* is frequently anthologized and taught.

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10 For extensive biographical information on Jacobs, see Jean Fagan Yellin’s *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*. 
Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) tells the story of the pseudonymous Linda Brent, who was not taken from her home but driven away from it for her own protection. Before her flight, Brent endures abuse from her master then hides in her grandmother’s house for seven years. Brent suffers captivity on multiple levels: her very being is captive to the institution and perpetuators of slavery; her body is captive to her master’s sexual innuendo and threats; and her mind is captive to her fears and anxieties about her sexual vulnerability and subsequently that of her children.

One useful way to think about Jacobs’s text is through the *testimonio*, which John Beverly defines as “a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience” (31). Slavery certainly constitutes a significant life experience. Jacobs offers a first-person account of her time as an enslaved person and captive to her master’s sexual threats, which span a large portion of her life.

Jacobs establishes her safety early; the first edition’s title page reveals the narrative was published in Boston and edited by a well-known author. Jacobs promises, “I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts” (1) and claims she does not want personal sympathy but desires “to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse” (1). She admits to withholding details from the narrative’s first page, citing cross purposes of herself and editor Lydia Maria Child. Child and other abolitionists primarily see Jacobs’ narrative as a piece of abolitionist rhetoric; alternatively, Jacobs reconstructs her captivity, escape, and recovery through her written
narrative. For Child, the narrative serves political purposes, while for Jacobs it is both a political and a personal document, an attempt to heal her trauma.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* chronicles the master Dr. Flint’s sexual pursuit of the enslaved Linda Brent and her resistance to his advances, coercion, and threats. Jacobs reveals age fifteen is “a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl” because, no matter the crude images or threats her master inflicts upon her, “there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men” (27). By law, masters may expose, rape, and kill enslave people. The enslaved girl learns becoming an adult—particularly a woman—often poses great dangers. Jacobs explains:

> Even the little child, who is accustomed to wait on her mistress and her children, will learn, before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves . . . Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master’s footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child.

(28)

Jacobs reveals the enslaved girl’s fate. She will likely not reach her teenage years without knowledge and fear of her master’s sexual power over his female slaves. Obviously, no systems exist to protect enslaved people from physical violence; unfortunately, none exist to protect them from sexual assault and rape either. Enslaved girls learn early that sexual violence will be part of their lives. Traditionally, slave masters exert coercive control over enslaved females, which places them in Herman’s “perpetrator” category.

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11 For the purposes of this chapter, references to the man Dr. James Norcum will refer to Norcum, but I will refer to him as Dr. Flint in discussions of his textual counterpart within Jacobs’s text. Similarly, I will refer to Harriet Jacobs when I discuss her as an author, but to Linda Brent when I reference the character within her text.

12 Harriet Jacobs

13 Joan Jacobs Brumberg notes that in the nineteenth century in the United States, fifteen was the average age of menarche. A nineteenth-century text is unlikely to reference menstruation directly, but we can infer the connection between its onset and increased sexual vulnerability for enslaved females, who were able to reproduce the labor force once they began menstruation.
Unlike Stowe’s Cassy, who speaks to Tom, Jacobs employs a detached tone to speak directly to her readers. She explains slavery’s sexual dangers, then confesses her firsthand experience: “I cannot tell how much I suffered in the presence of these wrongs, nor how I am still pained by the retrospect. My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him” (28). Dr. Flint’s methods attempt coercive control over Linda. When she will not submit to his advances, he extols his power to gain consent but finds himself unsuccessful. Notably, he does not directly threaten physical force; rather, he insists he will compel her. His word choice implies he can force her to fulfill his wishes. Block explains that “theoretically, a master could use physical force to commit rape, but most did not have to depend exclusively on fists or whips. Instead, they could rely on the strength of their mastery” (72). Linda has minimal recourse against her master’s threats and actions, which frightens her.

Dr. Flint’s threats silence Linda when she is young. She considers telling her grandmother about Flint’s advances, but he “swore he would kill [her], if [she] was not as silent as the grave” (28). Thus, Flint controls Linda’s body and her mind; her fear solidifies her captivity, as even among other people she feels isolated. As Herman notes, perpetrators isolate captives to control them, a method Flint finds effective for a time as Jacobs’ narrative notes: “I was very young, and felt shamefaced about telling her [Jacobs’ grandmother] such impure things, especially as I knew her to be very strict on such subjects” (29). As the captive and the victim, Jacobs believes her situation results from her own thoughts and behavior; if she did not feel shame, then telling her grandmother about the abuse would likely be easier. Her silence reveals Flint’s power, as she admits, “both pride and fear kept me silent” (Jacobs 29).
Brent cannot truly break her silence until she establishes safety, which remains out of reach after Flint’s initial advances. Dr. Flint persecutes Linda further as she gets older: “He boasted much of the forbearance he had exercised towards me, and reminded me that there was a limit to his patience” (Jacobs 32). Flint reverses the roles of victim and perpetrator, shifting blame to Linda. He insists he is good to her simply because he has yet to rape her but suggests he will force her if she does not submit to his demands soon. After his threat, he commands Linda to perform errands that place her alone with him; as a result, Linda reveals that “the state of things grew worse daily. In desperation I told him that I must and would apply to my grandmother for protection. He threatened me with death, and worse than death, if I made any complaint to her” (32). Dr. Flint’s threats of murder and rape keep Linda silent, thus isolating her from most of her family. She keeps busy during the day to avoid Dr. Flint, and sleeps with her great aunt at night, “where [she] felt safe” (32). Sleeping alone makes her vulnerable to Dr. Flint’s rape threats but bunking with another woman relaxes her enough to sleep. Unfortunately, her comfort is temporary. After she moves to a room adjoined to Mrs. Flint’s, she suffers further abuse: “Sometimes I woke up, and found her bending over me. At other times she whispered in my ear, as though it was her husband who was speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer” (34). Mrs. Flint’s actions compound the fear Linda already feels for her safety. She admits her fear of death; significantly, she prefers the thought of death to the thought of rape. She admits, “Terrible as this experience was, I had fears that it would give place to one more terrible” (34). Linda’s preference to preserve her chastity even at the cost of her life parallels her with the sentimental heroine, which Mary Vermillion discusses at length. She explains, “For over a hundred years preceding Jacobs’ writing of her autobiography, sentimental novelists portrayed both raped and seduced heroines as believing, like Shakespeare’s Lucrece, that their sexual
activities sever their integral selves from their bodies” (Vermillion 246). Vermillion argues the sentimental novel inspires how Jacobs portrays obscure lines between seduction and rape, which leads her to abandon her own body to combat sexualized perceptions of black women.

Vermillion notes, “She portrays the sexual threat that Flint poses as a predominantly psychological/spiritual one and thus lessens her reader’s tendency to associate her body with illicit sexuality” (246). Linda may not reference her body explicitly but fears of physical/sexual threats lead her to seek safety by sleeping with her aunt.

Throughout the years, Dr. Flint silences Linda’s voice; eventually, he destroys her dreams of purity and love. She prides herself on her chastity, but sadly reveals an enslaved woman “is not allowed to have any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous” (Jacobs 31). Dr. Flint habitually reminds Linda that virtue eludes the enslaved woman but contradicts himself through coercive acts. He tells Linda, “I would cherish you, I would make a lady of you. Now go, and think of all I have promised you” (35). Although he continually threatens her virtue with promises of a higher social status, Linda knows her master’s empty promises function as rhetoric to induce her submission.

Jacobs tells her story through Linda Brent but frequently interjects her present-day thoughts into the narrative. Her interruptions perform two healing functions. First, they highlight her role as a writer to remind her audience she is removed from her master, or that she has established safety:

No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery. The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will . . . resistance is hopeless. (Jacobs 51)
The pen symbolizes her escape, granting her the narrative authority to discuss slavery’s evils even while she declares that slavery defies representation. Jacobs has the agency; she tells her own story, rather than the master telling his version of her story. She cannot try him in a court of law; however, she details the evidence of his guilt in the court of public opinion. Second, because she establishes her own safety, she achieves the second fundamental stage of trauma recovery: reconstructing the trauma story. Clearly, she reconstructs the story throughout the entire narrative; however, the breaks within the story that discuss the overall condition of slavery, particularly for women, reinforce that she not only recreates her own story but speaks for others who have not established safety.

During her narrative Jacobs asserts, “As for the colored race, it needs an abler pen than mine to describe the extremity of their sufferings, the depth of their degradation” (52). Jacobs believes the trauma of slavery needs to be told, but as a victim of that system she feels inferior, believing her writing is not only insufficient to heal enslaved peoples’ sexual traumas, but insufficient to fully and accurately expose them at all. Jacobs’ perceived inferiority signals that she may not have fully recovered from her own trauma and that part of her remains captive, even though her physical body is free. Conversely, her stated apology could be the rhetorical and cultural work of Jacobs or of Child as the narrative’s editor. White women writers often apologized for their lack of writing skill in their published works; *Incidents* was published as an abolitionist text, so identifying with the common trope white women writers used was a powerful move to help Jacobs’s white reading audience identify with her.

Healing requires a sympathetic listener, and Jacobs’s apology for her skill level is not the only rhetorical strategy she employs to identify with her readers. The early American white woman in danger trope and, later, the sentimental heroine seduction plot inform Jacobs’s
narrative, particularly regarding the complicated emotions that accompany sexual threat. Although Jacobs resists her master’s advances, she feels guilty. Logically, she knows all enslaved girls share her plight; nevertheless, her master’s incessant harassment influences her psyche. She claims resistance is futile, yet she resists her master consistently. Xiomara Santamarina discusses representations of black womanhood in the slave narrative, and explains some complexities of representing resistance: “While resisting women may appear heroic to modern readers . . . a woman who resisted, verbally or physically, could also potentially compromise her womanhood and jeopardize her readers’ sympathy” (237). Resistance poses a literary threat. Nineteenth-century true women are submissive to men; resistance—even resisting rape—is complicated. Of course, true women are chaste as well, a virtue sometimes at odds with submissiveness. As an enslaved person, Jacobs cannot be a true woman, although she tries. When she writes, she breaks her narrative to address the reader: “And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame” (53). Through confessing shame, Jacobs aligns her response to sexual threat with those published by white women.

Jacobs, through Linda Brent, confesses sorrow and shame, two classic symptoms trauma survivors suffer. Through reconstructing her trauma story, she relives the emotions involved; during her captivity the focus on survival—both her own and her family’s—prevents her from fully experiencing her emotions. The sad period Jacobs references reveals both her resistance and her descent into total captivity. Chapter ten, “A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl’s Life,” marks many pivots in the narrative. Here, Linda asserts her agency in the only way she believes she can: she sleeps with a white man who is not her master. She claims her actions are completely her own, and largely they are. However, scholars and readers must situate her actions within the
larger context of her situation; her master’s advances force her to act against her will. She prefers to remain chaste but sees no way to do so. Thus, she violates her own moral beliefs to escape her captor. Her actions fully ensconce her into her captivity situation. She explains, “It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion” (55). Of course she prefers to give herself freely, but her language reveals that she merely chooses the lesser of two evils. She speaks fondly of Mr. Sands, but cannot erase Dr. Flint’s underlying influence on her decisions; she gives her virginity to Sands, and does not preserve it, because her mind remains captive to her master’s resolve.

Through Jacobs’s plea for forgiveness from her readers, she reinforces Dr. Flint’s power to captivate her: “You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice” (55). The narrative break signals Jacobs’ attempt to maintain a connection with her audience, which suggests the final fundamental step of trauma recovery. Her recovery-centered intrusion parallels the events she dictates, wherein young Linda mourns her lost attachment to her grandmother. She confesses, “I longed to open my heart to her. I thought if she could know the real state of the case, and all I had been bearing for years, she would perhaps judge me less harshly” (57). Linda violates her personal morals when she takes a lover before marriage; furthermore, her situation compromises her closest filial relationship, without which she cannot hope to gain freedom.

Later, Linda’s trauma is exacerbated when she goes into labor with her first child, not because of birth pains, but because Dr. Flint appears in her room when complications arise. She remembers, “I was very weak and nervous; and as soon as he entered the room, I began to scream” (60). Here, Linda’s screaming signifies multitudes. On the literal level, her screams
come from her painful labor and delivery. Symbolically, the sight of her oppressor ignites fear, particularly as labor places her in a vulnerable, exposed position. In addition to pain and fear, she experiences a brief sense of woe for her child. She does not know the child’s sex when Dr. Flint enters the room; the narrative insists every slave girl suffers sexual exploitation and degradation, and Flint’s appearance highlights both the child’s and the mother’s vulnerability.

Linda’s first child is male, but soon she delivers a second child, a female, which exacerbates her anxieties about sexual vulnerability as she now worries about her child’s safety. She confesses, “When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. 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” (77; Jacobs’ emphasis). Linda knows her daughter’s fate because she has lived it. The probability her daughter will suffer rape, or at least coercion, is extremely high. During her son’s birth, she can feel slight comfort once Dr. Flint exits the room; sadly, when she delivers a daughter, she knows the girl cannot be protected from slavery’s sexual tortures.

After Linda escapes Dr. Flint’s grasp, she continues to suffer sexual anxieties. Not even the prospect of freedom soothes her post-traumatic stress as she admits, “Neither could I feel quite at ease with the captain and his men. I was an entire stranger to that class of people, and I had heard that sailors were rough, and sometimes cruel. We were so completely in their power, that if they were bad men, our situation would be dreadful” (157). Her language reveals fear of both the unknown and the known. She worries sailors may be violent and comprehends the magnitude of her danger if her worry is valid. Years of constant vigilance prompt Linda to acknowledge the dangers of being nearly alone with several men at sea.
Happily, Linda’s arrival in Philadelphia offers her the possibility of physical freedom as her new environment prompts her to tell her trauma: “[Mr. Durham] was approaching a subject on which I was extremely sensitive. He would ask about my husband next, I thought, and if I answered him truly, what would he think of me? I told him I had two children, one in New York and the other at the south. He asked some further questions, and I frankly told him some of the most important events of my life. It was painful for me to do it; but I would not deceive him” (160). Linda’s location on free soil establishes her safety and allows her to reconstruct her trauma story for Mr. Durham. She admits the story is painful to recount, but their discussion begins the final step in her recovery as she, the survivor, connects with a community member who exists outside of her traumatic narrative. She maintains that “It has been painful to me, in many ways, to recall the dreary years I passed in bondage. I would gladly forget them if I could” (201). However, she cannot simply forget her story no matter how painful it is, for to do so will jeopardize her recovery.

Jacobs published *Incidents* in 1861; America was at the onset of Civil War and the Fugitive Slave Act was still in place. Individually, she connects with the abolitionist community to testify to her trauma; additionally, her work becomes a tool for the abolitionist movement, as she was the first escaped slave woman to offer an honest portrayal of enslaved women’s sexual vulnerabilities under the “peculiar institution.” Jacobs’ narrative tells a traumatic story, yes, but her work moves beyond individual significance. *Incidents* positioned African American women as literate people with values similar to those of nineteenth-century white women readers. In authoring her narrative while she was legally a fugitive, Jacobs risked the safety she worked so hard to establish and humanized enslaved women.
The Bondwoman’s Narrative is a relatively recent addition to the literary canon, despite being the first novel likely written by a fugitive slave woman.14 Dorothy Porter Wesley purchased the handwritten manuscript for eighty-five dollars in 1948. Roughly six years after Wesley’s passing, the manuscript was auctioned through Swann Galleries on February 15, 2001; Henry Louis Gates, was the only bidder. Gates explains that he was interested in the manuscript because Wesley—a famous twentieth-century black librarian—had studied it and believed the author was black and that “handwritten manuscripts by blacks in the nineteenth century are exceedingly rare” (xlv). After having the manuscript of The Bondwoman’s Narrative authenticated, Gates embarked on a journey to discover Hannah Crafts’ racial identity. He managed to uncover the name of her owner, John Hill Wheeler, through census data. In 2013, Gregg Hecimovich ultimately identified Hannah Crafts as Hannah Bond, born in 1826 on a North Carolina plantation (xiii). She was given to her master’s daughter in 1850, became maidservant to another of his daughters in 1853, and was used to settle a debt between two of the Wheeler brothers in 1856. Hannah subsequently escaped, in 1857, leaving the Wheeler plantation disguised as a man. Her light skin and male disguise could offer her the unprecedented freedom and (at least the illusion of) safety that came with moving through the antebellum South as a white man. After her escape, Hannah settled in a free black community in New Jersey, married, became a teacher, and finished her novel around 1858 (though she never published it).

Such a truncated biographical sketch hardly does justice to Crafts’ testimony “of sexual servitude

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14 In his preface to The Bondwoman’s Narrative, Gregg Hecimovich reveals the text is not the first novel published by an African-American woman (that honor goes to Harriet Wilson’s 1859 novel Our Nig, or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black), but it is likely the first novel written by such an author. Also of note is that while Wilson was free, Hannah Crafts was an escaped slave.
and escape” (Gates xvii) or the magnitude of her importance to the African American women’s literary canon, but scholarly knowledge of her is limited.

Hannah Crafts was not the only enslaved woman to escape the Wheeler plantation, or even the first. In fact, Wheeler “was the petitioner in the infamous Case of Passmore Williamson,” which “turned on Wheeler’s attempt to regain his fugitive slave, Jane Johnson” (lxxvii-lxxix). Wheeler clearly used the full force of the law in his attempt to recapture Jane Johnson in 1855, only two years before Hannah herself would escape. Gates dates Crafts’ escape between late March and early May of 1857, a time when she “was living in the gravest danger of being discovered by Wheeler and returned to her enslavement under the Fugitive Slave Act” (xciii).

Like the early Indian captivity narratives, many slave narratives and other works of antebellum African American literature were influenced by white writers or editors. “To find an unedited manuscript, written in an ex-slave’s own hand,” Gates declares, “would give scholars an unprecedented opportunity to analyze the degree of literacy that at least one slave possessed before the sophisticated editorial hand of a printer or an abolitionist amanuensis performed the midwifery of copyediting” (xlv). Of course, the manuscript had to be authenticated before scholars could attempt any such analyses. Harvard College librarian Leslie A. Morris told Gates that his newly-acquired manuscript was likely from the 1850s or 1860s; paper conservator Craigen Bowen of Harvard University agreed with Morris’s assessment of the mid-nineteenth century as the manuscript’s date of origin. After Wyatt Houston Day, original authenticator of Crafts’ manuscript for the Swann Galleries auction, dated the text pre-Civil War, likely between 1850 and 1855, Gates approached Kenneth Rendell to identify and date the ink Crafts used. Confident the manuscript was an antebellum original, Gates pursued biographical research to

The most significant scholarly work on *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* remains Gates’s edited collection *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. Scholars in the collection explore Crafts’ identity, her knowledge of the literary marketplace, her literacy skills and canonical influence, and her text’s place in the African American Gothic tradition. Several scholars explore Crafts’ use of Gothic elements. Russ Castronovo argues, “Ghost-writing offers material testimony of the family separations, corporeal abjection, and trauma that detached individuals from one another and their bodies under slavery’s social death” (209). In other words, the Gothic is a framework within which authors can testify to—and attempt to heal from—trauma. He continues, arguing “[w]hat her [Crafts's] aesthetic privileges, then, are domestic experiences and relationships that nineteenth-century black people, living in a nation in which family separation and community disintegration was both legal and profitable, do not have the privilege to enjoy” (Castronovo 211). Priscilla Wald agrees that Crafts’s novel employs gothic conventions but claims it “is not a haunted text” (214). She argues Crafts “cannot afford the luxury of a ghost story” (227) as slavery is about the crimes real human beings perpetuate against each other.15 Wald insists that Rose, the enslaved woman Sir Clifford, Lindendale plantation’s master, hangs, “haunts not as a ghost but as a memory of the all-too-natural and all-too-human crimes that an owner of slaves may at any time legally perpetrate on another human being” (227). In other words, Crafts’ novel contains elements of the African American and Female Gothic, but she employs various generic conventions to convey the

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15 Stowe, a white author, memorably situated Cassy’s escape within the context of a ghost story.
horrors perpetrated against real human beings. The amalgam of genres represents reality far better than one standalone genre.

Like Gates, John Stauffer agrees that the publication of Crafts’ novel “would have increased the likelihood of her recapture [and] as a black woman, publishing would also mean having her manuscript edited by whites and a loss of ownership over her craft” (55). Crafts may have feared recapture or loss of her narrative voice. Alternatively, she may have had no access to publication. Stauffer explains that “for authors of slave narratives, the publishing market was controlled by white abolitionists. And there is no record of Crafts corresponding or interacting with black or white abolitionists, who could have helped her gain the necessary contacts to publish her novel” (54-55). Market demand for slave narratives declined in the 1850s, Stauffer notes. Furthermore, “Crafts’s decision to write a first-person autobiographical novel would have made publication all the more difficult in the political climate of the 1850s” when abolitionists were concerned with true accounts above all else (55).

Instead of a slave narrative, The Bondwoman’s Narrative is Hannah Crafts’ artistic testimony of her servitude and subsequent escape from slavery. Crafts sets up her novel as a tale of gothic horror through the legend of the Linden tree at Lindendale, the plantation where she lives. Rose, the elderly woman who had been nurse for the master’s son, had a small dog, which he one day ordered her to drown. Upon her refusal, the master tortures her:

An iron hoop being fastened around the body of Rose she was drawn to the tree, and with great labor elevated and secured to one of the largest limbs. And then with a refinement of cruelty the innocent and helpless little animal, with a broad iron belt around its delicate body was suspended within her sight, but beyond her reach. And thus suspended between heaven and earth in a posture the [sic] most unimaginably painful both hung through the long days and the longer nights. Not a particle of food, not a drop of water was allowed to either, but the master walking each morning would fix his cold cruel eyes with appalling indifference on her agonised countenance, and calmly inquire whether or not she was ready to
be the minister of his vengeance on the dog. For three consecutive days she retained strength to answer that she was not. Then her rigid features assumed a collapsed and corpse-like hue and appearance, her eyes seemed starting from their sockets, and her protruding tongue refused to articulate sound. Yet even in this state she would faintly wave her hand towards the dog and seemed in commiseration of his sufferings to forget her own. (23-24)

Rose and the dog lived hanging from the linden tree for five days; after the dog died and Sir Clifford threatened to cut Rose down, she insisted: “I will hang here till I die as a curse on this house, and I will come here after I am dead to prove its bane” (25). Rose’s story illustrates the depths of human depravity; Crafts does not gloss over the disturbing details, showing exactly how depraved the slave master can be. Such a disturbing scene so early in the novel, while not one of sexual vulnerability, foreshadows the delicate balance between powerlessness and agency that enslaved women maintain throughout the text.

Crafts purposefully does not write a slave narrative. Jenny Sharpe explains that “the political objective of the slave testimony was to demonstrate the subjectivity of a human being whose humanity had been negated and to produce its narrator as a reliable eyewitness to the horrors of slavery” (xxiv). While Crafts is clearly a credible witness, her text is not an instrument of abolition per se. Crafts does not write for white audiences, but for herself and other enslaved women. I contend that she anthologizes common experiences among enslaved women, giving these women voice throughout her novel, using her literacy to assemble an archive that bears witness to enslaved women’s traumas.

Furthermore, Crafts writes a book-length manuscript—a novel narrative. While we think of the “as told to” story as something more like the captivity or slave narratives dictated to white editors, Crafts offers a new take on the idea: she is both a real protagonist and a real witness of slavery’s horrors, and she archives other enslaved women’s traumas through the stories passed
down or told to her. The testimonio’s “authority derives from the fact that we are meant to presume that its narrator is someone who has lived in his or her person, or indirectly through the experiences of friends, family, neighbors, or significant others, the events and experiences that he or she narrates” (Beverly 3). As an enslaved woman herself, and one who does not write under the guide of abolitionist editors, Crafts has the credibility to tell these stories.  

Furthermore, what gives Crafts’ novel, and all testimonio, significant power is that “what is at stake in testimonio is not so much truth from or about the other as the truth of the other” (Beverly 7). Testimonio privileges marginalized voices, making it a powerful tool for trauma survivors.  

Legal slavery may have ended in the nineteenth century, but twenty-first century readers should care about testimonies of enslaved women’s sexual traumas. As Saidiya Hartman illustrates, understanding the past is key to understanding contemporary black subjectivities. However, primary source material untouched by abolitionist hands is incredibly rare. Jenny Sharpe claims enslaved women’s experiences are missing from the archives, but not because their stories did not exist or should not matter. As Sharpe explains, “In failing to consider what is forgotten, erased, or illegible in the slave narrative, we are often forced to rely on the evidence abolitionists considered noteworthy” (123). Archives are not apolitical constructions; they reflect what their assemblers want to preserve, perhaps at the cost of other important information. Fiction becomes an important medium in light of limited archival materials. According to Sharpe, “By staging how a lost or forgotten past continues to exert its influence, active yet unseen, fiction makes the ghosts of slavery speak” (xii). Crafts constructs her own archive of testimonio through her insistence on a fictionalized account of many women’s stories,

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16 I do not mean to suggest abolitionists did unimportant work here, but to acknowledge that Crafts is doing a different kind of work.
representing common vulnerabilities enslaved women face through Mrs. Vincent, Lizzy, and herself (the fictionalized Hannah).

Mrs. Vincent, Hannah’s new mistress, suffers both mental and physical captivity via a slave trader named Trappe, an associate of her late father. Notably, Hannah foreshadows Trappe’s dangerous knowledge when she describes the similarity between Mrs. Vincent’s physical appearance and her own. Mrs. Vincent is “a small brown woman, with a profusion of wavy curly hair, large bright eyes, and delicate features with the exception of her lips which were too large, full, and red” (Crafts 27). Trappe reveals that Mrs. Vincent was born to an enslaved woman but passes well enough to have been switched with a white baby at birth and reared as a white man’s only daughter. Mrs. Vincent is completely beholden to Trappe’s power as he knows the secret of her birth. Initially, he plans to keep her racial identity a secret until a reveal would be most beneficial for him. He explains her father died in debt and his creditors expect payment, which he may render when it benefits his own purposes. He says, “While I know that such property, and valuable property too, really exists, who shall prevent my making such use of the knowledge as the occasion demands” (Crafts 39). The property he refers to is Mrs. Vincent herself; Trappe’s knowledge places her in a state of suspended vulnerability. Trappe holds Mrs. Vincent in mental captivity with his knowledge; she is completely beholden to him. As enslaved status passes through the mother, the discovery and proof that her mother was enslaved renders her extremely vulnerable; in antebellum America, such knowledge degrades her from heiress to property.

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17 The baby-switching trope is a common plot device. See, for example, Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson.*
Mrs. Vincent has always been vulnerable as the object of Trappe’s gaze. “Even when a child the shadow of his presence occasioned within me a thrill of dread and fear,” she admits; “As I grew older he professed a fondness for me, he even sought my hand in marriage, and my refusal made him an enemy” (Crafts 46). She has been the object of his gaze her entire life, from childhood. Once she rejects Trappe’s marriage proposal, he becomes vengeful, but ultimately declares to her: “I may yet possess you on my own terms” (Crafts 40-41). The word possess has layers of significance. Trappe knows Mrs. Vincent was born enslaved, so she can be owned as physical property. Had she married him, he would likely possess her financial assets under coverture laws. Furthermore, as her husband, Trappe would not only have unmitigated sexual access to her body, but the right to sell her to others. Trappe’s desire to possess her overrules her autonomy, as her mind and body are captive to his knowledge and manipulations.

Trappe weaponizes his knowledge and Mrs. Vincent suffers psychological trauma and post-traumatic stress symptoms as a result. After the interview with Trappe, which Hannah overhears, Mrs. Vincent briefly contemplates suicide (which foreshadows her completed suicide later in the novel). She confides to Hannah that after Trappe revealed her heritage she fainted, both a nod to the sentimental literature of the day and an indication of the information’s traumatic effects. She suffers memory lapses, admitting she does not remember much about what happened immediately following Trappe’s revelation: “My thoughts were in Chaos. I was half mad, half-wild” (49). Later, throughout her escape attempt with Hannah, Mrs. Vincent exhibits the post-traumatic symptom of hypervigilance and “though her reason consented to all [Hannah] said, her terrors were unconquerable” (68). Additionally, Hannah reveals that Mrs. Vincent suffers hallucinations: “After a time my mistress became decidedly insane . . . She fancied herself pursued by an invisible being, who sought to devour her flesh and crush her bones [and
fell] to the ground in a paroxysm of wildest fear. She would remain insensible for a long time” (69). When Mrs. Vincent realizes Trappe is her would-be savior later in the novel, the very sight of him triggers a post-traumatic reaction as “[t]he past comes rushing over her with its tide of memories moved and swayed by his presence” (100). While Mrs. Vincent’s behaviors recall the white sentimental heroine in distress, they also illustrate the traumatic effects the very possibility of returning to Trappe’s captivity have on her psyche.

Hannah and Mrs. Vincent eventually leave jail but remain captive. Once they arrive at their new master’s home, Hannah explains, “It was evident that we had only been transferred from one prison to another” (97). Of course, the women have traded one captivity for another at every change of the novel’s setting. Trappe intentionally seeks to hurt vulnerable women. He admits, “You are not the first fair dame whose descent I have traced back—far back to a sable son of Africa, and whose destiny has been in my hands as clearly and decidedly as you must perceive that yours is now” (101). Trappe admits, “It is not my intention to expose you in the public market for slaves, but rather to dispose of you in a private manner, as I am now your legal owner” (103). After Trappe explains that he has identified a private buyer, Mrs. Vincent dies by suicide; this action bespeaks her white upbringing, since the idea that death is preferable to rape is a common sentiment in literature regarding white American women. Hannah reflects that through suicide, her mistress “had escaped wo[e] and oppression, and insult, and degradation” (104).

In contrast to Mrs. Vincent’s socialization as a white woman, Crafts establishes Mrs. Vincent’s waiting maid, Lizzy, as an authority on the female slave experience. Hannah describes Lizzy as educated, traveled, and “a Quadroon, almost white, with delicate hands and feet, and a person that any lady in the land might have been proud of” (33). Lizzy’s physical description as a
quadroon makes her highly desirable as a concubine on the slave market, a fact Crafts does not ignore: “Lizzy, notwithstanding her good family, education, and great beauty, had been several times under the hammer of the auctioneer, had passed through many hands, and experienced all the vicissitudes attendant on the life of a slave” (34; emphasis added). As a light-skinned enslaved woman who has “passed through many hands,” Lizzy doubtless has intimate knowledge and experience of sexually vulnerable enslavement. Furthermore, Crafts reveals that Lizzy has “suffered the extremes of a master’s fondness, a mistress’s jealousy and their daughter’s hate” (34). As Jacobs illustrates in Incidents, the “extremes of a master’s fondness” for an attractive, light-skinned house slave is often sexual exploitation.

Lizzy’s testimony confirms the cyclical nature of sexual exploitation and trauma that slavery upholds through her story of Lindendale’s master, Mr. Cosgrove. While his wife was away, Mr. Cosgrove “took a great fancy to beautiful female slaves . . . and no Turk in his haram ever luxuriated in deeper sensual enjoyments than did the master of Lindendale” (177). Upon her return, Mrs. Cosgrove insists her husband’s victims be sold. Yet the women, who know the fate they cannot escape when a slave trader comes to buy them, “wept bitterly and implored their master to kill rather than sell them” (182). Upon his refusal, a young, beautiful enslaved woman who has recently borne his child “snatched a sharp knife . . . and stabbing the infant [at her breast] threw it with one toss into the arms of its father. Before he had time to recover from his astonishment she had run the knife into her own body, and fell at his feet bathing them in her blood” (182-83). Two light-skinned enslaved women have now committed suicide rather than endure further sexual exploitation.

18 The infant rescued from slavery by murder motif resurfaces in American literature well into the twentieth century, with the most famous example being Toni Morrison’s Beloved.
Finally, Hannah’s own sexual vulnerability illustrates that masters are not the only predators the slave system produces. Another enslaved woman frames Hannah for spreading rumors about her mistress, Mrs. Wheeler, who resolves to punish her. She commands, “You will depart from the house, and go into the fields to work. Those brutalized creatures in the cabins are fit companions for one so vile. You can herd with them. Bill, who comes here sometimes has seen and admires you. In fact, he asked you of Mr. Wheeler for his wife, and his wife you shall be” (210). Mrs. Wheeler reveals aspects of slavery’s power structure here; as Bill can request Hannah for his wife, enslaved women clearly occupy the lowest rung of that structure. As a house slave, Hannah has slightly more power than an enslaved field laborer, but Mrs. Wheeler’s whims reveal how easily that can be disrupted. If Hannah becomes a field laborer and Bill’s wife, she will occupy the lowest possible position on the plantation.

Significantly, the loss of what little power she retains is not what resolves Hannah to escape; rape and reproduction are. She admits, “Condemned to receive one of them for my husband my soul actually revolted with horror unspeakable. I had ever regarded marriage as a holy ordinance, and felt that its responsibilities could only be suitably discharged when voluntarily assumed” (211). Hannah has borne her lot patiently throughout the novel, “[b]ut when she sought to force me into a compulsory union with a man whom I could only hate and despise it seemed that rebellion would be a virtue, that duty to myself and my God actually required it and that whatever accidents or misfortunes might attend my flight nothing could be worse than what threatened my stay” (212). The threat to which she refers is, of course, rape. She decrees nothing could be worse than the most intimate form of sexual violation, and

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19 This could be a connection to Crafts’ own experience while enslaved by Wheeler and offer clues about what ultimately led her to flee his plantation.
avoiding that violation is worth the risks inherent in becoming a fugitive slave. Hannah is not wholly against the concept of marriage, though. She refuses marriage not because of inability to love, she says, “but because it was [her] unalterable resolution never to entail slavery on any human being” (213). Because slavery is inherited through the mother, any child Hannah bears will be born into bondage. She flees from rape, for all intents and purposes. She does not want to get pregnant, but marriage will remove the illusion that she could consent to or refuse sexual relations; she would undoubtedly find herself pregnant against her will. Furthermore, the exhaustion that accompanies field slavery leaves her unable to fight off his advances; when the overseer commands Bill take Hannah to his cabin “Bill’s eyes sparkled with delight, and [Hannah] was too weak and weary, too dispirited and overcome to offer resistance” (214). Such circumstances almost guarantee she will become pregnant and face the decision to attempt abortion, see her child experience slavery, or take the course of one of Cosgrove’s victims—and in this dissertation’s next chapter, Morrison’s character, Sethe—and murder her child as an act of mercy.

Unlike Stowe’s Cassy, who is Christianized and forced to compartmentalize her trauma as her character subsumed under a sentimental “happy ending,” Crafts confronts vulnerability and trauma at every turn; yet, her novel ends in the proper sentimental style reminiscent of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Hannah marries, reunites with her biological mother, and later becomes neighbors with Mrs. Henry’s escaped slave Charlotte and her husband in the North. Jacobs offers a slave narrative written by the protagonist, herself. Within the confines of the traditional slave narrative, Jacobs manages to escape her captivity and recover from her trauma. After she is safe and free, she reconstructs her trauma story precisely to share it with the public, thus restoring her connection to the larger abolitionist community. Through writing a contemporary slave narrative,
Jacobs establishes a communal relationship that promotes healing, using the veneer of sentimental fiction to reconstruct her trauma story as individual *testimonio*. Like Jacobs, Hannah Crafts constructs a narrative centered around the theme of sexual vulnerability; Crafts, though, expands the individual *testimonio* into an anthology of *testimonios*, using several slave women’s experiences to illustrate the problem’s wide reach. Testimony is a vital component of trauma recovery, and *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* allows Hannah Crafts to give voice to her contemporaries and herself. Her insistence on creating a novel gives her ownership over her material that she likely would not have were she writing (or publishing) a slave narrative. Thus, Crafts anthologizes the testimonies of several enslaved women, through an enslaved woman’s voice. The generic agency of the novel ensures the power of testimony rests with the author; Hannah testifies on her own terms, controlling the pace of her recovery. She comes through the traumas of slavery to author her narrative and claim the story for herself and her fellow enslaved (and formerly enslaved) women.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that in nineteenth-century American women’s writing, captivity and sentiment merge with gothic elements to create compelling women’s slave narratives of trauma and recovery. Stowe, Jacobs, and Crafts realistically illustrate the complex nature of sexual trauma as each woman achieves different levels of healing; realistically, some of the women do not heal. Cassy establishes safety, whereas several victims in Crafts’s novel die by suicide. Jacobs’ Linda Brent establishes safety in the North, testifies to her trauma, and achieves the common sentimental ending of marriage and family. Both Crafts and Jacobs give their narratives the sentimental ending Stowe’s novel teaches white women readers to expect. Crafts
did not know anyone would ever read her novel, but both Stowe and Jacobs wrote within the framework of the abolitionist movement, appealing directly to a white female readership. So far, this dissertation has explored how both white and black women writers write to a white readership, whether willingly or because racial power dynamics prevent or complicate their ability to write for a nonwhite audience. Chapter 4 will analyze two of Toni Morrison’s neo-slave narratives to discover how narrators represent and recover (or not) from trauma differently when black women writers write with a black female audience in mind.
CHAPTER 4

“TEN MINUTES FOR SEVEN LETTERS”: GENRES OF TRAUMA IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S WRITING

Margaret Garner, whose escape and subsequent infanticide made headlines on both sides of the slavery debate in 1856, exists in historical records and cultural renditions; she left behind no recorded narrative of her experiences as an enslaved woman. In an extended study of Garner’s cultural influence, Delores M. Walters employs a curious and thought-provoking word choice, explaining that Garner and her husband were “tried as runaway fugitives who had stolen themselves” (4; emphasis added). Slavery was a captivity so complete it rendered individual human beings both people and things. Garner was tried for destruction of property—not infanticide.¹ Her actions and their aftermath illustrate the enslaved woman’s complex relationship with agency. Garner maintained that she meant to kill all her children rather than have them captured and returned to slavery. Garner had no legal agency because she was considered property, and Walters points to records that Garner’s pregnancies may have resulted from repeated rapes (5). Slavery, and its attendant rape and sexual abuse, traumatized Margaret Garner so thoroughly that she was terrified her daughter(s) would share the same fate—one she clearly deemed worse than death—so she exercised the little agency she had to stop the abuse cycle from repeating itself.

¹ For more on Margaret Garner’s trial see Mark Reinhardt, Who Speaks for Margaret Garner? For an examination of Garner’s actions through the lens of southern antebellum culture see Steven Weisenburger, Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South. For a thorough historical study of Garner inspired by black feminist thought see Nikki Taylor’s Driven toward Madness: The Fugitive Slave Margaret Garner and Tragedy on the Ohio.
Chapter 4 brings this vulnerability survey closer to our current moment, exploring the ways African American women write both historical and contemporary traumas. I argue that gothic elements provide a framework for contemporary African American women writers to explore trauma and recovery through the neo-slave narrative and the short story cycle. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* exposes the trauma enslaved women endured but does not end with recovery for the characters, whereas in *A Mercy* Morrison allows an enslaved woman to achieve recovery; Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* employs the short story cycle to illustrate the cyclical nature of trauma and the communal recovery process.²

Genres of Trauma

Cathy Caruth explains, “Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). E. Ann Kaplan builds on Caruth’s definition of trauma, defining a variety of possibilities for how victims respond to trauma. Response may be delayed, but it may also be relatively instantaneous. Kaplan categorizes traumatic events as overwhelming, but she extends Caruth’s definition to include “suffering terror” as a trauma. Her extension is useful provided we acknowledge that feeling overwhelmed and experiencing terror mean different things based on a traumatized person’s embodied, intersectional experiences; no two people respond to trauma in the exact same way. Few people would deny sexual violence and rape constitute traumatic experiences; however, victims’ responses to traumatic events play a significant role in processing and healing. Slavery

² A note on terminology: the literary work *Beloved* is italicized throughout this chapter while the character Beloved is not.
presents a uniquely complex trauma wherein a sexually abused woman has no legal rights. Additionally, mothers know their daughters will likely suffer sexual exploitation and violence as well, thus slave rape represents a multi-generational trauma. Caruth argues that “through the notion of trauma . . . we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not” (11; Caruth’s emphasis). In other words, survivors must integrate their traumatic experiences within their larger knowledge base before they can process and heal from those traumas. Her argument illuminates both the neo-slave narrative’s general appeal and the cultural relevance of Beloved and A Mercy as documents for rediscovering and integrating enslaved women’s histories.

Psychiatrist Judith Herman presents an extended trauma study wherein she asserts traumas must be remembered and told for both individuals and social groups to heal (1). Traumas happen particularly when an individual or group suffers captivity; Herman believes recovery only becomes possible after victims remember and admit their experiences. Herman’s witnessing discussion provides useful context for thinking about Morrison’s novels. Herman argues traumatized individuals and communities “have been cut off from the knowledge of [their] past [yet] need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future. Therefore, an understanding of psychological trauma begins with rediscovering history” (2).

Caruth, Kaplan, and Herman all identify the relationship between history and trauma as an important one. Consequently, the connection between history and trauma coupled with trauma’s need for testimony make Gothic fiction a useful contextual framework for trauma processing. Despite Gothic literature’s association with run-down castles and hauntings, Teresa Goddu argues that it is not an escapist genre, but a frame through which to understand history
“Cobbled together of many different forms and obsessed with transgressing boundaries,” she claims that American Gothic “represents itself not as stable but as generically impure” (5). I prefer to view the Gothic not as generically impure, but generically malleable; multiple forms fit under the Gothic umbrella, as Chapter 3 of this study illustrates. Goddu persuasively claims that “[t]he gothic's focus on the terror of possession, the iconography of imprisonment, the fear of retribution, and the weight of sin provided a useful vocabulary and register of images by which to represent the scene of America’s greatest guilt: slavery” (133). The mode is particularly useful for African American writers, whom Goddu contests employ it “to resurrect and resist America's racial history” (153). Goddu offers an extended reading of Beloved as a gothic tale, not only for its obvious supernatural elements but also because of the historical work the novel does. She concludes that “[f]or Morrison as for [Harriet] Jacobs, the gothic serves as a mode of resistance. By writing their own gothic tales, these authors combat the master’s version of their history; by breaking the silence, they reclaim their history instead of being controlled by it” (155). In other words, authors like Morrison use the Gothic as a framework to rediscover the raced, gendered traumas of slavery and give voice to the traumatized victims of the past.

Gothic elements coupled with the neo-slave narrative provide a powerful vehicle for contemporary authors to explore the themes and traumas of slavery with a safety the authors of the original slave narratives did not possess, as Morrison illustrates with Beloved. Ashraf Rushdy defines neo-slave narratives as “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (3). According to Rushdy, “[t]he study of American slavery was invigorated by a renewed respect for the truth and value of slave testimony, the significance of slave cultures, and the importance of slave resistance” in the late 1960s (4). Neo-slave narratives emerged from a desire “to return to the
literary form in which African American subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity in order to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject” (6-7). The neo-slave narrative’s emphasis on community makes it a powerful genre for exploring trauma. Rushdy notes that in such narratives “the narrating subject is not an autonomous individual but part of a communal, collective whole” (231). Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu explains that African American women’s writing from the 1970s-1990s explores “a direct connection between awareness of and connectedness with the past and self-knowledge, that which invests everyday life with meaning. These characteristics culminate in the neo-slave narratives and afford the works wide-reaching significance” (141). Based on the current scholarly evidence, I contend that the neo-slave narrative’s literary-historical connection to the past, testimonial nature, and communal focus make it a powerful genre for contemporary African American women writers to explore trauma.³

Chattel slavery created multi-generational trauma and the contemporary neo-slave narrative is a testimony to that trauma across the historical gap. While the slave narratives of Chapter 3 illustrate the need to tell, the neo-slave narrative emerges from the need for present-day African Americans to know. European-Americans, by and large, can easily trace their ancestry and enjoy a rich repository of family lore. Alternatively, each successive generation of African Americans only moves further from their ability to trace a family history. If, as Herman argues, rediscovering history is the first step to trauma recovery, then the inability to rediscover history suspends slavery’s descendants in a state of trauma. The slave narrative testifies to the facts; the neo-slave narrative is an authorial attempt to process the facts, to rediscover history through the art of fiction. Neo-slave narrative speaks to what the slave narratives were restricted

³ While African American women writers were not and are not the only authors publishing neo-slave narratives, other authors are outside the present scope of my study. For more on these authors see Tim Ryan’s *Calls and Responses: The American Novel of Slavery since Gone with the Wind*. 
from saying outright. Nineteenth-century slave narrators like Harriet Jacobs had to hint, albeit rather blatantly, at sexual abuse, but the neo-slave narrative arises from African American women writers having established enough safety as a group via the distance of history and centuries of activist struggles for racial and gender-based justice to speak the traumas of their foremothers; trauma must be told, and black women writers use various generic forms to tell it.

Slave and neo-slave narratives are not the only genres that lend themselves to traumatic testimony, nor is slavery the only captivity that renders African American women vulnerable to sexual abuse and rape. The short story cycle is both fragmented (into stories) and connected as a larger narrative, making it a useful vehicle to explore more contemporary experiences of race-based traumas and captivities such as housing crises and economic insecurity. As Naylor’s *Women of Brewster Place* illustrates, the short story cycle emphasizes the connection between community and trauma recovery. The traditional slave narrative has, of course, one narrator. Neo-slave narratives like Morrison’s *Beloved* use third-person narration to show trauma in greater detail. However, while the neo-slave narrative is somewhat restricted by its nineteenth-century predecessor, the short story cycle can more freely explore trauma recovery’s cyclical nature. Robert Kellogg asserts that multiple narrators “place the primary narrator in the position of histor[ian], seeking to find out the truth” (263). Neo-slave narratives and short story cycles seek truth but also illustrate truth’s complicated nature. Crystal Lucky asserts, “For some writers, particularly those whose careers span the twentieth century, the short story allows for experimentation with magical realism, narrative voice, and language where the writers can consider the experiences of black Americans that simply do not fall along neatly demarcated lines of gender or experiences” (251). In other words, the short story cycle is less bound by strict
generic conventions, which frees authors like Naylor to replicate the messy realities of traumatic experiences.

Specter of Testimony: Sethe’s Quest for Healing

Born Chloe Wofford in Ohio in 1931, Toni Morrison left an unparalleled imprint on American literature. Morrison earned a B.A. from Howard University in 1953 and an M.A. from Cornell in 1955. She married Harold Morrison in 1958 and had two children, then went on to have both an eighteen-year career as an editor at Random House and a seventeen-year career as a professor at Princeton University.4 Her first novel The Bluest Eye was published in 1970; by the time she died in 2019, she had authored ten more novels,5 a host of critical works, a collection of children’s books (with her son), and even the libretto for an opera titled Margaret Garner.6 Her final novel God Help the Child (2016) explores skin color hierarchy in the African American community. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for her novel Beloved; the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993; the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Obama in 2012; and several Lifetime Achievement awards.7

Morrison’s most famous work is undoubtedly her 1987 novel Beloved, which enjoyed mainstream cultural attention. In addition to earning Morrison the Pulitzer Prize, Beloved became both an Oscar-nominated film starring Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glover and a Grammy-

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4 The Princeton University Library has housed the Toni Morrison Papers since 2014; the collection became available to scholars in 2016.
5 Morrison only published one shorty story, “Recitatif” (1983). In Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination Morrison explains the story “was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial” (xi).
6 For more on Margaret Garner and Morrison’s historical revision to grant agency to African American women see Leon James Bynum’s “Toni Morrison and the Translation of History in Margaret Garner.”
7 For more on Morrison’s life and common themes in her writing see The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia by Elizabeth Beaulieu.
nominated spoken word album in 1998. Beloved is inspired by Margaret Garner and set during Reconstruction. The novel tells the story of Sethe and, according to Morrison’s preface, Beloved herself—Sethe’s murdered infant daughter. Sethe, her husband Halle, and several other enslaved individuals at Sweet Home plan to escape after Schoolteacher becomes the plantation’s overseer. Sethe sends her three children ahead but a series of events require her to flee Sweet Home on her own, heavily pregnant with her fourth child. She manages to escape, deliver her baby, cross the Ohio River, and arrive at her mother-in-law Baby Suggs’ home before Schoolteacher and his compatriots find her. The Fugitive Slave Act is in effect and, rather than condemn her children to lives of slavery, she attempts to kill all four of them. She only injures the other children but kills Beloved, who haunts Sethe’s home as a ghost for years before returning as a flesh-and-blood person. Beloved died as an infant but returns as an adult in a black, female body with smooth skin and unlined hands. Only after several months of Beloved’s questions and the “click” of hearing Beloved sing the song Sethe’s mother sang to her does Sethe realize Beloved is her dead daughter returned. After the “click,” the two become increasingly obsessed with each other until Denver reaches out to the community’s women who return in solidarity to free Sethe.

On the surface, Beloved is a novel about a haunted house—124 Bluestone Road—whose ghost takes human form; 124 is by turns spiteful, angry, and quiet. However, the novel is not a simple ghost story but a medley of gothic elements that offer a window to explore the historical complexities of slavery. Timothy Spaulding argues, “Morrison manipulates the symbolic

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8 Beloved can be disorienting for first-time readers. Paul McDonald offers a guide to support readers, Reading Toni Morrison’s ‘Beloved’: A Literature Insight. Other scholars who address pedagogical concerns include Durthy Washington, Nicole Coonradt, B.H. James and Elizabeth James, and Kathryn Earle and Nellie McKay.

9 For more on ghosts in Morrison’s work see Blessing Diala-Ogamba, “Supernatural Elements in Toni Morrison’s Beloved”; Robin Roberts, Subversive Spirits: The Female Ghost in British and American Popular Culture; Barbara Hill Rigney, “‘A story to pass on’: Ghosts and the Significance of History in Toni Morrison's Beloved”; and Daniel Erickson, Ghosts, Metaphor, and History in Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude.
dimensions of the gothic and places them in opposition to the historical detachment of traditional narrative history” (22). Furthermore, “Morrison creates an alternative representation of slavery that mines the formal dimensions of the gothic novel but forces readers to shift their focus away from the fantastic elements like the haunted house and the ghost toward the ‘real’ gothic elements of the text: slavery itself and those who systemically perpetuated it” (63). Slavery defies clean descriptions, however; reality, truth, and history are messy matters, as Spaulding explains: “Morrison’s characterization of Beloved and her treatment of rememory work in tandem to emphasize the inherent complexities of representing the history of slavery in either realistic or gothic terms” (66).

The most vulnerable body a person can occupy in nineteenth-century America is that of a childbearing-age woman of African descent. The intersectional identity Sethe and other African American women in Beloved occupy as women, slaves, and mothers render them vulnerable to racialized, sexualized violence. African ancestry equals slavery, particularly for Sethe’s mother and Nan who survive the Middle Passage. Enslaved women are denied personhood because they are property; paradoxically, though, they also have value precisely because they are enslaved women—sources of reproductive labor able to sustain the highly profitable chattel slave economy. Race makes the women slaves, while womanhood leaves them vulnerable to rape. Because slavery is inherited through the mother, enslaved women reproduced the labor force. Sethe realizes the enslaved woman’s vulnerability when she is young; hers was the one non-10

10 Jennifer Williamson reads Beloved as a meta-sentimental fiction of sorts, a sentimental text that critiques sentimentality, and identifies the separation of families as the novel’s defining trope, while Jean Wyatt argues mothers and the communal nature of mothering in Beloved disrupt Lacanian language assumptions. Sandra Cox identifies maternal loss as symptomatic of cultural trauma, and Klarina Priborkin analyzes the mother/daughter relationship between Sethe and Denver through Theory of Mind, arguing Beloved ultimately enables Denver to empathize with Sethe.
traumatic birth her mother had. Sethe learns “that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. 'She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never” (74). Sethe's mother survived the Middle Passage, enduring multiple rapes during the voyage. She could not make herself keep the children she saw as byproducts of violent Western patriarchal power. Her relationship with Sethe’s father, though, was the one consensual relationship she had. Sethe herself, then, is a product of Morrison’s revision of history that allows enslaved women bodily integrity and a modicum of reproductive choice.

Slavery’s cruel disregard for humanity leaves readers unsurprised that, like her mother, Sethe experiences sexual assault. Sethe’s assault is different, though. She tells Paul D: “After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn’t speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still” (19-20). Schoolteacher’s boys physically restrain Sethe and violate her body by taking the milk she produces for her child, then mark her with a visual reminder of the assault. A scar is technically the mark of an old wound but Sethe’s tree is a permanent testament to her trauma, from which she still suffers as the tree grows. Even if her brain could forget her assault, her body remembers. She is revictimized when she learns her husband Halle witnessed her sexual assault and did nothing to stop it. Stunned, she asks, “He saw them boys do that to me and let them keep on breathing air? He saw? He saw? He saw?” (81). Halle was also enslaved, so he did not have the power to protect her from schoolteacher or
his nephews, but Sethe, as an enslaved woman of childbearing age, had both the most value and the least safety at Sweet Home.

Sethe is most vulnerable when she escapes Sweet Home heavily pregnant with Denver. Exhausted, lying down, Sethe hears someone on a nearby path. Her recent sexual assault surfaces in her mind, as the person's voice “was all she needed to know that she was about to be discovered by a whiteboy. That he too had mossy teeth, an appetite. That on a ridge of pine near the Ohio River, trying to get to her three children, one of whom was starving for the food she carried; that after her husband had disappeared; that after her milk had been stolen, her back pulped, her children orphaned, she was not to have an easeful death. No.” (38). Sethe is aware of her extreme vulnerability in this scene. She has been brutally assaulted, had her flesh pulverized, wandered pregnant and without food (making her physically weaker), and she is already lying down. Her knowledge that the disembodied voice has “mossy teeth” connects to her description of schoolteacher's nephews, which indicates Sethe expects to be assaulted and killed. This is a particularly Gothic scene as well, for Sethe’s terror comes from what she cannot see. A disembodied voice represents her fears; once the voice has a body—a woman’s body—Sethe feels a bit more secure, albeit not completely safe. The Fugitive Slave Act is in place and a white woman can easily turn Sethe over to the authorities.

Slavery holds the women of Beloved captive; Sweet Home is Sethe’s prison, a beautiful landscape that hides unspeakable horrors. Therefore, unsurprisingly, Sethe assumes Beloved is an escaped captive; “she believed Beloved had been locked up by some whiteman for his own purposes, and never let out the door. That she must have escaped to a bridge or someplace and rinsed the rest out of her mind. Something like that had happened to Ella except it was two men—a father and son—and Ella remembered every bit of it. For more than a year, they kept her
locked in a room for themselves” (140). Sethe is not entirely incorrect; Beloved is a captive in her own way, but she has escaped sexual captivity via her death. The novel’s other women get no reprieve, as Ella’s experience illustrates: Ella's “puberty was spent in a house where she was shared by father and son, whom she called ‘the lowest yet.’ It was ‘the lowest yet’ who gave her a disgust for sex and against whom she measured all atrocities. A killing, a kidnap, a rape—whatever, she listened and nodded. Nothing compared to ‘the lowest yet’” (301). In other words, Ella was held captive and repeatedly raped by white men. Her captivity lasted for a minimum of a year, as she “had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by 'the lowest yet.' It lived five days never making a sound. The idea of that pup coming back to whip her too set her jaw working, and then Ella hollered” (305). Ella refuses to sustain the byproduct of her rape, and the thought that her trauma could assume a body and return to haunt her pushes her over the edge. While the thirty women chant to free Sethe, Ella also chants to free herself.

The common thread of the women’s captivity is a lack of sexual agency. Sethe’s mother and Nan experience rape, Sethe experiences sexual assault and assumes Beloved has as well, and Ella survives captive sex slavery. Additionally, Baby Suggs’s “eight children had six fathers” (28). She unsuccessfully attempts to use sex—the only currency she has—to protect her children and have some agency over her reproductive labor, but to no avail: “To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her—only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did. That child she could not love and the rest she would not” (28). Baby Suggs can neither choose to keep her children nor use the exchange value of sex to protect them. Later, however, Sethe successfully uses sex as currency, exchanging “ten minutes for seven letters” on Beloved’s headstone.
Beaulieu argues that Sethe revising her memory to recall only Sweet Home’s beautiful landscape and not the beatings and lynchings enslaved people endured there “bears witness to the psychological effects of slavery that lingered long after the institution itself died away” (57-58). Intrusive flashbacks to Sweet Home support this claim. Sethe often goes about her business until “something. The plash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes” (7). In other words, she experiences triggers that transport her to her past; to protect herself, though, she does not allow herself to remember the plantation’s gruesome realities.

Trauma is slavery’s legacy, and its nature is generational; the children of enslaved individuals, even when not born into slavery, inherit their foremothers’ trauma. Sethe is conscious of her trauma as she tells Denver “[s]ome things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world” (43). She continues:

Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and blade of grass dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you ever go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you. (43-44).

Morrison speaks not only for Denver, but for the African American community when Sethe says the place is always waiting. Escape attempts, particularly while the Fugitive Slave Act was in effect, were incredibly risky. Sethe’s flight itself made her vulnerable. Her sexual and physical
assault, advanced pregnancy, and lack of travelling companion put her in the most vulnerable state a slave woman could possibly occupy.

Morrison’s choice to let Denver identify Sethe’s fear that Beloved will abandon her illustrates slavery as a generational trauma. Denver knows Sethe wants Beloved to understand “[t]hat anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up” (295). Denver is not enslaved, but her mother’s slavery traumatizes her—she understands the shame associated with sexual assault.11

Sethe resists the vulnerability inherent in telling Denver much about her traumatic past, about the place that is always waiting. Trudier Harris theorizes that Sethe resists because “storytelling is an active rather than a passive art, for it has the power literally to heal or kill” (141). Sethe only begins to feel the power of testimony when Beloved, whose requests she cannot seem to refuse, insists on hearing stories. The idea that Beloved wants to bear witness to the suffering that took her life “amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost . . . But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it—in any case it was an unexpected pleasure” (69). Here, Beloved’s willingness to hear Sethe’s trauma and testimony offers Sethe a measure of relief; the potential for recovery exists.

Trauma recovery is possible but recursive, and Sethe reexperiences her assault after she learns Halle did not protect her.

11 Denver’s understanding of sexual violence and shame are not the only ways she is traumatized, of course. Slavery destroys families on several levels; after Beloved’s death Sethe is too traumatized to engage emotionally with Denver, her remaining child.
She shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once, could it say, No thank you? I just ate and can’t hold another bite? I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up. I am still full of that, God damn it, I can’t go back and add more. Add my husband to it, watching, above me in the loft—hiding close by—the one place he thought no one would look for him, looking down on what I couldn’t look at at all. And not stopping them—looking and letting it happen. (83)

Significantly, Sethe does not speak her pain; rather, she suffers silently. Sethe is frustrated with her brain for the post-traumatic stress symptoms she suffers; her internal monologue shows that she sees her brain as an entity separate from her body, an entity that forces her to reexperience her assault in vivid detail. Learning of Halle’s betrayal revictimizes her, forcing her not only to relive the most humiliating experience of her life, but revise the experience to include the new knowledge that even with and for her husband, safety was an illusion.

Sethe begins to gain her voice at the end of section one, when she tells her story to Paul D for herself. Like Margaret Garner, Sethe refuses to let her children be enslaved again, deciding to take them “over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe” (192). She reiterates that she stopped schoolteacher by “put[ting] my babies where they’d be safe” (193). Above anything else, Sethe wants safety for her children. Safety is the first step in trauma recovery. Without the ability to establish safety for herself and her children, Sethe’s recovery process is halted. Beloved, it seems, represents stagnant recovery; in other words, recovery is possible, but while her embodied reminder of Sethe’s inability to keep her children safe occupies 124, Sethe can never truly heal. Of course, trauma recovery is recursive; a traumatized person does not simply move forward through each stage and arrive
happily at peace. Beloved is filled with characters aiming for recovery but accomplishing mere survival.

Sethe knows survival is important but does not want her children to suffer the trauma or post-traumatic stress she endures. Sethe remembers her assault, relieved she does not have to explain to Beloved “[h]ow if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. . . Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took from me—they held me down and took it” (236). She cannot endure the thought of her children experiencing sexual slavery. She insists Beloved would have died if not for being killed and immediately remembers her own assault; clearly, she sees a connection between slavery and assault, and her daughter’s innocence is what she knows “would have died.” Sethe breaks the abuse cycle, albeit through extreme measures, telling Beloved she refuses to suffer nightmares about “whether a gang of whites invaded her daughter’s private parts, soiled her daughter’s thighs and threw her daughter out of the wagon” (296).

Beloved is a novel of healing-in-process, but not a novel wherein characters achieve recovery. Sethe reexperiences the day she killed Beloved when the thirty women come to sing and Mr. Bodwin tries to pick up Denver for work. When a wagon approaches 124, she hears the hummingbirds from the day Schoolteacher found her, which transports her to the past; the women have to restrain her from killing Mr. Bodwin, whom she believes is Schoolteacher. Brian Norman argues Beloved “does not recognize a distinction between the past and present, a distinction central to narratives of progress, survival, or healing” (91). While narratives of recovery do often make this distinction, it is not required. Morrison’s quest to represent slavery’s traumatic horrors is powerful precisely because trauma recovery is recursive, not linear. Neo-
slave narratives, as a genre, make room for that truth, the ability and requirement to simply be, rather than be defined. Beloved is an emblem, if not quite a personification, of both individual and collective trauma. In the end, Sethe’s individual trauma affects her whole community and it takes her whole community to put her on the path to healing. Paul D cannot do it alone; it takes the thirty women. Nevertheless, Sethe still experiences flashbacks by the end of the novel, and everyone forgets Beloved. Neither Sethe nor the community at large has healed; recovery requires that traumas be told and integrated into life’s larger narrative and, as the novel’s final decree indicates, theirs “was not a story to pass on” (324).

Colonial Slavery in A Mercy

J. Brooks Bouson argues, “Morrison is intent on investigating not only the collective memories of the physical traumas the slaves endured but also the internalized and abiding psychic wounds caused by racial shaming in a white supremacist system of differentiation that imprisons African Americans” (133). Victoria Burrows further argues that Morrison’s texts employ belatedness, which she defines as “the protective numbing that initially accompanies a traumatic experience, the repeating intrusions that are unavailable to conscious assimilation, and the moment of belated recognition that can unexpectedly occur, thus moving the traumatized person out of a perpetual melancholia and into the possible healing of mourning” (116). Morrison’s novels not only investigate trauma, I contend, but engage the fundamental recovery stages to move toward individual and collective healing. Burrows believes, “The extraordinarily powerful metaphoric logic inherent in Morrison’s literary fiction offers . . . a particularly imaginative conduit between repressed traumatic experience(s) and an awakening into consciousness of the previously excised experience of black historical trauma which is . . .
continually damaging to the psyche” (122). Morrison’s 2009 novel A Mercy exhibits movement from repression to knowledge as the protagonist, Florens, shifts from abandoned and confused girlhood into confident womanhood.12

A Mercy portrays early colonial slavery through the three narrative strands of Florens, a sixteen-year-old enslaved girl; Lina, a Native American woman; and Rebekka, the wife of farmer and slaveowner, Jacob Vaark. Vaark travels to the D’Ortega plantation to collect a debt. When the vicious slave trader D’Ortega cannot pay, he offers Florens’ mother as partial payment; she begs Vaark to take her daughter instead. Readers learn at the novel’s end that, like Sethe in Beloved, Florens’s mother believes her actions might protect her daughter from sexual violence.13

Although the events in A Mercy occur before the American Revolution, thus there are no “Americans,”14 Morrison retrospectively explores the psychic effects of traumatic memory born from slavery.15 Florens experiences recurring dreams of her mother, and realizes, “In those dreams she is always wanting to tell me something. Is stretching her eyes. Is working her mouth. I look away from her” (119). Her mother needs to transmit an important message, but Florens refuses to listen. Gabriele Schwab believes, “Torture and rape, the two most prominent forms of soul murder, eradicate psychic time because time cannot heal the victim’s suffering in the same

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12 Scholarship on A Mercy, while not as substantial as the body of work available on Beloved, is rich and varied. Marc Conner uses A Mercy to position Morrison’s American landscapes as liminal spaces between human and spiritual realms, while Morten Hansen argues for more Morrison scholarship to adopt a global lens. Sandy Alexandre reads A Mercy as a quest narrative centered on hope and desire, wherein Florens’ quest is for a lover. Biwu Shang reads Florens’ mother’s actions through the frame of narratology, arguing she “reads” the situation on the D’Ortega plantation, while Jami Carlacio discusses the parallel journey between Florens and the reader. To clarify, I mean there are no Anglo-Americans or African Americans; there were obviously several Native Americans, though they did not identify themselves using such terminology.

13 While my analysis centers on enslaved women’s trauma, Susan Neal Mayberry offers a compelling reading of Morrison’s treatment of masculinity and Mar Gallego-Duran explores white masculinity in A Mercy. Josep Armengol compares Morrison’s construction of slavery to Frederick Douglass’s Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.
way time heals other wounds” (3). Applying Schwab’s hypothesis suggests that Florens’
dream-mother borrows her daughter’s time and subconscious to create a healing space for
herself. Since, according to Schwab, “Violent histories generate psychic deformations passed on
from generation to generation across the divide of victims and perpetrators” (3), Florens’s
recurring dreams of her mother connect the two women. Florens feels abandoned, yet she
realizes her mother tries to convey an important message to her. Schwab contextualizes psychic
disassociation within a transgenerational framework. She posits that while many modern-day
African Americans may seem dissociated from slavery, “we also witness a continued working-
through of its legacy, including in new forms of rewriting the history of slavery” (21). Schwab
discusses Morrison’s Beloved, but A Mercy also navigates transgenerational trauma.17 Within the
framework of seventeenth-century slavery, A Mercy illuminates rape’s impact on the mother-
daughter dyad. Schwab explains, “Memories are passed on from generation to generation, most
immediately through stories told or written, but more subliminally through a parent’s moods or
modes of being. . . . Formed during the earliest phases of life, the latter are often remembered not
as thoughts or words or stories but existentially as moods or even somatically in the form of
embodied psychic life” (51). Florens lives with her mother long enough to enter puberty, well
beyond enough time to unwittingly inherit her mother’s trauma. Schwab believes
transgenerational psychic transmission “becomes particularly significant in the presence of
unhealed wounds, unbearable secrets, or unspeakable violence” (51). Florens must understand
her mother’s trauma; in fact, such knowledge is vital to her existence. Abandonment plagues her
life as she wonders frequently why her mother gives her up. Both mother and daughter remain

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16 For an extended discussion of the soul murder concept, see Nell Irvin Painter’s Soul Murder and Slavery.
17 Alice Eaton traces Morrison’s trajectory of Black women’s sexual agency from The Bluest Eye through A Mercy.
captive to the mother’s sexual trauma until Florens begins writing. Schwab continues, “The dead pass on their unresolved conflicts to their descendants. . . . An individual or generation can unwittingly speak the unconscious of a previous individual or generation in a cryptic speech marked by an unspeakable secret” (52). Florens’s mother may be alive, but the mother-daughter separation signals her physical death from Florens’s life. Thus, Florens must unknowingly voice both women’s traumas.

Morrison begins the novel with a ghostly voice who commands, “Don’t be afraid. My telling can’t hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark—weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more—but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth” (1). Images of fear, darkness, blood, and gnashing teeth prefigure the novel’s violent content. The voice quickly instructs, “You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog’s profile plays in the steam of a kettle” (1). The narrator grants the audience permission to believe she admits something, but her image of the fragile kettle steam indicates that the magnitude of her experience defies graspmable representation. Nevertheless, her focus centers on telling.

Writing is a concrete form of telling. After Florens experiences trauma, she writes compulsively, carving her words into the wall of her dead master’s house. She expects catharsis through her testimony, and, although she does not cry, she cannot resist writing: “In the beginning when I come to this room I am certain the telling will give me the tears I never have. I am wrong. Eyes dry, I stop telling only when the lamp burns down. Then I sleep among my words. The telling goes on without dream and when I wake it takes time to pull away, leave this room and do chores” (Morrison 185). Within the perceived safety of her deceased master’s room,
she reconstructs her trauma story until “[t]here is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor. . . . I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I cannot tell it to anyone but you. I am near the door and at the closing now. What will I do with my nights when the telling stops?” (188). Despite physical pain and exhaustion, Florens cannot control the compulsion to write her story; she even deems the telling a “need.” As the end of her story approaches, she expresses fear of the unknown. She does not directly decide what to do with her empty nights, but she does experience closure as she connects with herself: “I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving” (189). After she writes her trauma story, she finally accepts herself, including the unchangeable aspects of her identity. She recovers, but admits, “I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. . . . you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress” (189).

Florens’s mother, although central to the novel’s action, narrates only the final chapter, wherein she simultaneously discloses her own sexual trauma and Florins’ origins: “I don’t know who is your father. It was too dark to see any of them. They came at night and took we three including Bess to a curing shed. Shadows of men sat on barrels, then stood. They said they were told to break we in. There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below” (191). Florens is a child of rape, although she may never fully know it. Her mother explains certain atrocities are inevitable for female slaves. Scars symbolize the physicality of rape, as scars generally form over deep, bloody, or very painful wounds. Scars regenerate the skin but leave individualized marks on the injured person, as Sethe’s tree illustrates in Beloved. Even if the missing part of a woman can regenerate, the scars serve as continual reminders of the injury. Truthfully, the enslaved woman
can never be whole; she survives despite the threats of rape and child-loss that plague her daily existence.

To suggest a form of survival mechanism, Morrison has Florens’s mother rationalize the extreme violence she suffers. She humanizes her brutalizers: “Afterwards, the men who were told to break we in apologized. Later an overseer gave each of us an orange. And it would have been all right. It would have been good both times, because the results were you and your brother” (194). Because the men apologize, feed her, and provide her with two children, she focuses on the positive consequences of her assault. Even though her pregnancies result from rapes, she clearly loves her children. She gives up Florens to shield her from sexual violence. Ultimately, Florens resolves her abandonment trauma and connects with her mother on a spiritual level. Her mother asserts, “In the dust [is] where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you. . . . to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing” (195). Florens’s mother uses her spirit to teach her daughter and to process her own guilt. As a rape victim, she does not give control of herself freely. Her body is not legally her own as an enslaved woman; nevertheless, she understands the value of having control over one’s own mind, spirit, and body. She promises persistence until Florens understands her message. Incidentally, Florens’s dreams stop after her lover, a blacksmith and free Black man, rejects her in order to devote himself to his orphaned ward. Through telling her trauma, Florens’s heals herself and her mother as they complete the final fundamental recovery step and restore their mother-daughter connection, even if restoration is only possible on a spiritual level.

Trauma affects multiple generations beyond the individual or group that suffers the initial violence. In many cases, trauma must be told, either directly or indirectly, for healing to begin.
Florens feels a compulsive need to tell her story. In both *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, Morrison uses the gothic spirit to haunt the protagonists as a way to help them rediscover their respective histories. Beloved haunts 124 Bluestone Road and Florens’s mother haunts Florens. However, the community banishes Beloved and everyone forgets her. Because Florens is embodied, she literalizes the connection between place, memory, and the healing power of testimony when she inscribes her story into the house.

Slavery holds the women of *Beloved* and *A Mercy* captive in appalling ways. Fortunately, after the women of *A Mercy* suffer the perils of slavery, coercion, fear, and rape that hold their minds captive, they successfully engage the fundamental stages of trauma recovery. Writing provides a space for healing across generations, which is symbolically relevant because the neo-slave narratives parallel reality. Just as Florens must recover from trauma for multiple generations, Morrison illustrates the ongoing real-life need for archival work and speculative fictions to recover slavery’s still-untold traumas.

Short Story Cycles and the Cyclical Nature of Trauma in *The Women of Brewster Place*

Gloria Naylor was born on January 25, 1950 in New York City, the eldest of three daughters of Roosevelt and Alberta McAlpin Naylor. While she began writing poems as early as age seven, she is undoubtedly best known to audiences as a novelist. Naylor graduated with honors from Andrew Jackson High School in 1968 but did not attend college immediately. Instead, she spent seven years as a Jehovah’s Witness missionary; she received a B.A. in English from Brooklyn College in 1981 and an M.A. from Yale in 1983 (Wilson). Naylor became a
prominent voice in African American women’s literature, publishing eight books and winning several awards before her death from a heart attack in late 2016.\textsuperscript{18}

Naylor’s 1982 short story cycle \textit{The Women of Brewster Place} began as a short story titled “A Life on Beekman Place,” published in 1980. By 1983 it earned the American Book Award for Best First Novel, and it was adapted as a TV miniseries starring Oprah Winfrey in 1989. Like Hannah Crafts’ \textit{The Bondwoman’s Narrative}, Naylor’s \textit{The Women of Brewster Place} anthologizes the stories of several women; however, Naylor’s position as a twentieth-century writer along with the short-story cycle’s generic conventions allow her to give individualized voices to the marginalized women of Brewster Place even as the text reveals how each woman ends up living in the run-down housing project. The cycle opens by chronicling Mattie Michael’s life from her teenage years through her arrival at Brewster Place. From Mattie’s story through the end of the cycle, multiple narration provides credibility to the major female characters.

Mattie fills the role of historian and matriarch in Brewster Place, as nearly every woman’s story connects to an event in Mattie’s life. Each woman lives her individual story and the cycle’s final story, “The Block Party,” returns to Mattie’s point of view but connects to all of the major female characters. Almost every female character in \textit{The Women of Brewster Place} suffers some form of trauma. There is a wall at the end of the street which separates Brewster Place from the rest of the city; the wall represents female individual and communal trauma, and tearing down the wall at the end of the cycle symbolizes the women forcing society to hear their voices.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{The Women of Brewster Place} was Naylor’s first novel, but much Naylor criticism, particularly in recent years, centers around her 1988 novel \textit{Mama Day}. For example, Joanne Chassot discusses Naylor’s treatment of ghosts; Pamela June studies embodiment and memory; Yomna Saber examines the influence of folk belief systems while Thomas Frosch argues the character George must die to fulfill the goddess myth; and K. Merinda Simmons argues the novel’s action centers around the displacement of women.
I view *The Women of Brewster Place* as a testimony to which its readers bear witness; we, the readers, rediscovery history alongside Naylor’s characters as she reconstructs their trauma stories. While I apply Herman’s ideas to Naylor’s novel, I recognize the work of trauma scholar E. Ann Kaplan is a useful extension via her ideas about levels of trauma. Kaplan’s work discusses various levels of trauma. Kaplan delineates “the following relationships to perception of trauma: 1) direct experience of trauma (trauma victim); 2) direct observation of another’s trauma (bystander, one step removed); 3) visually mediated trauma (i.e. moviegoer, viewing trauma on film or other media, two steps removed; 4) reading a trauma narrative and constructing visual images of semantic data” (91-92). *The Women of Brewster Place* shows three of Kaplan’s four stages, but ultimately acts as testimony to which the reader bears witness through Herman’s recovery stages.

Few scholars address the trauma present throughout the cycle. Several responses may result from trauma, and *The Women of Brewster Place* clearly displays Kaplan’s first two levels. Several of Brewster Place’s women experience trauma at men’s hands, beginning with Mattie, who suffers physical abuse. Mattie’s is the first story in the cycle and establishes her as a central character throughout the collection. Her own story begins with her move to Brewster Place, then flashes back to reveal how she arrives there. The unmarried Mattie conceives a child with a boy.

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19 Scholarship on Naylor in general and *The Women of Brewster Place* more specifically addresses concerns other than genre, some of which are culture, sexuality, intertextuality, and gender. Maxine Montgomery argues Naylor situates home as a cultural and vernacular space in *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor: Houses and Spaces of Resistance*. Courtney Thorsson examines James Baldwin’s influence on Naylor’s portrayal of same-sex desire between women. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discusses the influence of Ann Petry’s *The Street* on *The Women of Brewster Place*. Linden Lewis explores black masculinity in Naylor’s works. Crystal Lucky explains that the black American experience is unique, and Naylor exemplifies Lucky’s explanation. Scholarship on the short-story cycle is abundant, but specific scholarship dealing with *The Women of Brewster Place* from a genre-informed perspective is relatively limited. Lori Duin Kelly focuses on the dream sequence in “The Block Party” but gives little attention to the entire short story cycle. Similarly, Maxine Lavon Montgomery also treats the dream sequence, but explores the cycle’s end through an apocalyptic lens, citing the importance of the number seven. While Kelly, Montgomery, and other scholars discuss the dream sequence.
her father dislikes, which serves as the catalyst for her traumatic experiences. She will not identify the child’s father, so her own father beats her mercilessly: “Mattie’s body contracted in a painful spasm each time the [broom]stick smashed down on her legs and back, and she curled into a tight knot, trying to protect her stomach” (Naylor 23). Mattie suffers a beating from her previously non-abusive father, which is a traumatic event to her. Additionally, she is overwhelmed with her pregnancy, but has accepted it and attempts to protect her unborn child. Her concern for her unborn child foreshadows Mattie’s significant role as a matriarchal figure. She runs away from home as a result of the abuse, but always finds a way to take care of her son, Basil.

Mattie establishes her safety through another woman’s help. She meets her benefactor, Miss Eva, after living in several undesirable places. Miss Eva tells Mattie she will let her know how much she charges for room and board, then “showed her to the bedroom upstairs, and Mattie was to die with the memory of the smell of lemon oil and the touch of cool, starched linen on her first night—of the thirty years of nights—she would spend in that house” (Naylor 35). In time, Mattie loses Miss Eva to death and both her house and her son to the judicial system. Mattie’s direct experience of trauma (level one) throughout her life connects her to each of the women on Brewster Place; their traumatic experiences mirror hers, further re-traumatizing her while establishing her as the ideal matriarch of Brewster Place.

While Mattie suffers at her father’s hands, men use Etta Mae Johnson and Cora Lee for sexual gratification. Etta is a progressive woman and finds out in her youth “that America wasn’t ready for her yet—not in 1937” (Naylor 60). However, being progressive does not provide Etta

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20 For more on domestic abuse see Heather Duerre Humann’s Domestic Abuse in the Novels of African American Women: A Critical Study.
security from financial hardships or loneliness, both of which prompt her to seek potential husbands. Etta goes to church one evening with Mattie and settles her desires on the preacher, Reverend Moreland Woods. Etta meets Reverend Woods after he delivers a sexually charged sermon. Soon after the sermon, the reverend’s deceptive nature and intentions are clear. Montgomery asserts that following Etta’s return from her one-night-stand with Reverend Woods, “Her return to the community is indeed a descent of sorts, an admission of failure, for she is the victim in the primitive mating game between herself and Reverend Woods. Woods assumes the role of Satan in a topsy-turvy Eden, and Etta Mae is a fallen Eve, forever banished from the Eden of marriage and social status that would be hers as the pastor’s wife” (“Fathomless” 43). Reverend Woods uses Etta Mae for his own gratification and then abandons her forever in Brewster Place. The pastor is her final hope for a middle-class life. Now, Etta must acknowledge the divide between herself and the middle class. Upon her arrival home, “Etta stood looking at the wall that closed off Brewster from the avenues farther north and found it hard to believe that it had been just this afternoon when she had seen it” (Naylor 73). Etta realizes that the avenues to the north, which represent upward social mobility, are inaccessible to her. For Etta, the wall symbolizes the barriers that separate her from the life she desires.

After Reverend Woods uses and abandons Etta Mae, the wall becomes a symbol of oppression and fear. Etta observes, “Now it crouched there in the thin predawn light, like a pulsating mouth awaiting her arrival. . . . an uncanny fear gripped her, and her legs felt like lead. If I walk into this street, she thought, I’ll never come back. I’ll never get out” (Naylor 73). Etta realizes she has no hope for attaining middle class status, as the wall represents the harsh divide between socioeconomic classes; she responds by abandoning her penchant for one-night-stands and accepting her fate. Etta’s experience is connected to Mattie’s situation with Basil’s father,
Butch. Mattie and Butch conceive their child in the woods, while Etta performs sexual acts with a reverend named Woods. The onomastic connection between the two men links Etta’s fate to Mattie’s; the lifelong best friends are destined to spend their lives without the perceived security of marriage.

In a later generation, men also use Cora Lee for sexual gratification. As a child, Cora is obsessed with new baby dolls and a new doll is her only wish each Christmas. As she gets older, she maintains this Christmas wish but when it is denied she turns to her own body. She is caught in a sexual situation; the narrator reveals that Cora’s mother “would call her older daughter to her and hear her recount with a painful innocence that it wasn’t nasty, he had just promised to show her the thing that felt good in the dark” (Naylor 109). Cora loses her virginity but does not lose her innocence. She fits Kaplan’s description of level one trauma through her premature sexual experiences and the harsh disconnect between her child mind and her adult body. Cora cannot understand herself as a sexual being but continues to be sexually active. Men prey on her innocence well into her adult life, as she becomes a stereotypical welfare mother with no husband. Predictably, Cora’s response to her premature sexual experiences is to have babies. The trauma of her father’s refusal to allow her to play with dolls leads her to make her own dolls: infants. Cora tires of the infants once they become toddlers, so she simply replaces them with new infants and disregards her older children. As with Etta Mae, Cora’s life mirrors Mattie’s. Both women become pregnant out of wedlock and Mattie literally loses her son when he runs away to avoid imprisonment. While Cora does not literally lose a child, she figuratively experiences the loss of a child when her parents stop giving her dolls for Christmas. Cora’s sense of loss continues after she becomes a mother, as she figuratively loses each of her babies when they become toddlers. Thus, both Mattie and Cora lose children, but each woman responds
differently. Mattie dismisses male relationships entirely, while Cora settles for empty ones that provide her with the babies she so deeply desires.

Significantly, Naylor situates Lucielia (Ciel) Louise Turner’s story in the middle of the cycle; Ciel’s trauma and subsequent healing are possible because Mattie is a supportive woman. While Ciel and her partner, Eugene, argue, their daughter Serena plays a game that serves as the cycle’s turning point. She attempts to catch a roach, but it disappears into a light socket. Serena wants to catch the roach so “[s]he tried once again to poke her finger into the slit. Then a bright, slender object, lying dropped and forgotten, came into her view. Picking up the fork, Serena finally managed to fit the thin flattened prongs into the electric socket” (Naylor 99). Naylor’s powerful image of Serena’s death establishes the trauma Ciel suffers as a result. Notably, right before Serena’s death, Eugene forces Ciel to abort their second child because they cannot afford to support two children. Ciel loses two children in a short amount of time and subsequently suffers a deep depression:

People had mistaken it for shock when she refused to cry. They thought it some special sort of grief when she stopped eating and even drinking water unless forced to; her hair went uncombed and her body unbathed. But Ciel was not grieving for Serena. She was simply tired of hurting. And she was forced to slowly give up the life that God had refused to take from her. (Naylor 101)

People are correct to mistake her reaction as shock; clearly no one expects to lose a child in the way she has. Ciel shows clear signs of depression following her daughter’s death. She stops eating and drinking, dismisses personal hygiene, wants to stop feeling, and is preoccupied with death. She wishes she had died with Serena and cannot understand why she did not. Therefore, she stops performing basic life activities in an attempt to fade into death.

Ceil moves through Herman’s stages of recovery via her relationship with Mattie. Mattie understands several aspects of Ceil’s trauma. Both women lose their children and their lovers
and both of their lives symbolically end. Mattie undergoes several cycles of death and rebirth. She leaves her parents behind during her pregnancy, representing Mattie’s death as a child and rebirth as a mother. Eventually her son runs away, which symbolizes the death of Mattie’s role as a biological mother, but the birth of her role as a matriarch. Mattie understands Ceil’s grief. As Mattie bathes Ciel, Ciel is finally able to cry, to reconstruct her trauma story, and do the work of remembering and mourning while she is safe with Mattie.

The first story in the cycle that is not named after one female protagonist is “The Two.” “The Two” is the story of Lorraine and Theresa, a lesbian couple. Lorraine and Theresa have the financial stability to live away from Brewster Place but live there because it is a last resort attempt to escape homophobia. Sadly, Brewster Place proves just as intolerant as the other places they have lived. Sophie, the resident gossip, reveals Lorraine and Theresa’s secret at a Block Association meeting. Only Lorraine attends this meeting and the revelation of her secret is enough to evoke a physical reaction. When Ben asks if she is all right, “Lorraine shook her head jerkily and sank her nails deeply into her palm as she brought her hand to her mouth. I mustn’t speak, she thought. If I open my mouth, I’ll scream . . . or I’ll throw up” (Naylor 146). Lorraine’s knowledge that the neighborhood knows her secret overwhelms her to the point of physical illness. Interestingly, Lorraine’s experience at the meeting causes her to be more assertive; one night she decides to go to a party alone. Similarly, it is not until Mattie experiences overwhelming events in her youth that she makes the out-of-character decision to experience life alone.

Mattie, the matriarchal figure of Brewster Place, calls the cops more than once on C.C. Baker and his friends for marijuana use, but the cops never respond to Mattie’s concerns. Thus, Naylor foreshadows what will happen when Lorraine steps into the alley between the wall and
the last building on Brewster Place as soon as the smell of marijuana fills the air. Lorraine’s shortcut through the alley proves fatal, as she is raped, sodomized, and beaten. Laura Tanner discusses Naylor’s positioning of her audience during Lorraine’s assault. Tanner argues that “In Naylor’s representation of rape, the victim ceases to be an erotic object subjected to the control of the reader’s gaze. Instead, that gaze, like Lorraine’s, is directed outward; it is the violator upon whom the reader focuses” (198). Tanner believes that Naylor’s descriptions situate the audience as Lorraine, as audiences figuratively see the various assailants and identify with Lorraine’s inner pain. Directing the gaze toward the victimizer instead of the victim is rare; significantly, this approach objectifies the victimizer instead of the victim, reducing the power of the victimizer by allowing the reader to assume Lorraine’s position. Naylor does employ a unique perspective in making the victimizers the objects of the gaze. However, Lorraine is still physically, sexually, and emotionally traumatized. She attempts to assert a voice, but Tanner explains, “Naylor represents Lorraine’s silence not as a passive absence of speech but as a desperate struggle to regain the voice stolen from her through violence” (199). Lorraine attempts to assert herself but finds it impossible to combat such severe violence.

Lorraine, as one of the newest residents of Brewster Place and a lesbian woman outed against her will, has almost no power; rape is a power-based crime. The narrator reveals, “C.C. Baker . . . knew of only one way to deal with women other than his mother. Before he had learned exactly how women gave birth, he knew how to please or punish or extract favors from them by the execution of what lay curled behind his fly . . . the thought of any woman who lay beyond the length of its power was a threat” (Naylor 161-62; emphasis added). Naylor establishes that C.C. has assaulted women in the past and he fears any woman he cannot use sex to control. The boys perceive Lorraine as a threat to their masculinity because, as a lesbian, she
has already rejected them before they even approach her. There is clearly no motivation for Lorraine’s or the gang’s sexual satisfaction; rather, the boys intend to punish her both for embarrassingly rejecting them and for being a lesbian.21

Naylor illustrates the far-reaching consequences of sexual vulnerability through Ben’s murder. After Lorraine’s rape, “There was nothing moving that early October morning—except Ben” (Naylor 172). The narrative reveals Ben’s location near the wall, and after Lorraine’s assault, she responds in the only way she is able: “She crept up on her knees, making small grunting sounds like a wounded animal. As she crawled along the alley, her hand brushed a loose brick, and she clawed her fingers around it and dragged it . . . toward the movement on Brewster Place” (Naylor 172). Naylor describes Lorraine crawling toward movement instead of toward Ben, which reveals the extent of Lorraine’s trauma. She has assumed animalistic qualities, and her focus rests on destroying movement; she does not connect her friend Ben with the movement she sees. Her attack on Ben further emphasizes the extent of her response to trauma: “Lorraine brought the brick down again to stop the moving head, and blood shot out of his ears, splattering against the can and bottom of the wall . . . rendering his brains just a bit more useless than hers were now” (Naylor 173). Lorraine does not see Ben; rather, she sees a moving head. Any movement threatens her, so she kills him to stop the movement. Ben’s brains are destroyed literally, which represents the figurative destruction of Lorraine’s brains. The boys brutalize Lorraine so severely that she cannot form coherent thoughts or words; she can only scream.

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21 The term “corrective rape” was coined in 2008 after the gang rape and murder of South African soccer star Eudy Simelane; while research on the phenomenon primarily discusses South African lesbians, the practice exists everywhere and originated long before there was official language to name it. For more information see Sarah Doan-Minh, Corrective Rape: An Extreme Manifestation of Discrimination and the State’s Complicity in Sexual Violence. For specific information about corrective rape at the U.S. border see Eithne Luihheid’s Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border, particularly Chapter 4, “Looking like a Lesbian: Sexual Monitoring at the U.S.-Mexico Border.”
Ben’s death is tragic but symbolically necessary to illustrate that violence and trauma are cyclical. Wendy Hesford discusses the film *Rape Stories* in the context of material rhetoric. Hesford believes, “The revenge fantasy could be seen as the equivalent of the talking cure—a speech act—which, like an unconscious testimony of a dream, presumably gives access to a psychic reality, in this case the trauma of rape” (195). Lorraine cannot speak; therefore, she is unable to offer verbal testimony of her assault. She represents violence through more violence. Killing Ben does not fulfill a desire for revenge, as Lorraine does not recognize individuals. However, Lorraine does claim a certain amount of agency through killing Ben. She cannot perform speech acts, but she still has the power to take a human life. Unfortunately, because Lorraine’s actions are real instead of fantasy, she does not gain the benefit of using them as a cure. So soon after her assault, she cannot process her thoughts or actions.

Lorraine’s rape and murder traumatize her entire community. Everyone connected to Lorraine’s assault is also connected to Brewster Place. Lorraine herself lives there, as do her assailants. Ben, another victim of her assault, is among the first to live on Brewster Place. Significantly, Mattie is the first to see what happens and rushes to Ben and Lorraine at the end of “The Two.” The final story in the cycle, however, is titled “The Block Party.” The cycle’s final story is Mattie’s dream sequence but serves as the community’s voice and thereby represents almost every major character. Karen Castellucci Cox supports the dream’s authentic status: “The community maintains this body of narrative which defines and orders it, but which does not exist within a literal, linear framework. Rather, the stories the members share act as an ahistorical communal identity, a reservoir of beliefs, memories, stories, and visions from which any member can recover a past” (159). Thus, the block party does not have to occur within literal reality in order for every woman to participate in the scene.
Through the dream sequence, the women of Brewster Place can heal as a community. Jill Matus asserts, “As the community’s best voice and sharpest eye, [Mattie] is well-qualified to express the unconscious urgings of the community and dream the collective dream” (52). Matus refers to a beautiful scene in The Women of Brewster Place that involves the wall. The Block Association hosts a block party as a fundraiser, where one of Cora’s daughters leads her to a startling discovery about the wall: “‘Blood--there’s still blood on this wall,’ Cora whispered, and dropped to her knees. She took the popsicle stick and started digging around the loose mortar near the brick. ‘It ain’t right; it just ain’t right. It shouldn’t still be here.’ The fragile stick splintered so she used her fingernails, the gravelly cement lacerating her knuckles. ‘Blood ain’t got no right still being here’” (Naylor 185). The blood upsets Cora, and the wall continues to harm the woman as it cuts into her knuckles. The popsicle stick splinters, and the community of women decides that is the last thing the wall will break. As the women begin to tear more bricks from the wall, the men gather the children and seek shelter.

The women embody a unified force with one mission: to destroy the wall. They continue to tear bricks and toss them into the street:

The blunt-edged whoop of police sirens could be heard ramming through the traffic on its way to Brewster Place. Theresa flung her umbrella away so she could have both hands free to help the other women who were now bringing her bricks. Suddenly, the rain exploded around their feet in a fresh downpour, and the cold waters beat on the top of their heads--almost in perfect unison with the beating of their hearts. (Naylor 188)

Each woman suffers hardship and trauma throughout the cycle, although some traumas are more gruesome than others. Nevertheless, the wall represents something painful to each woman, which motivates the community to destroy it. For Mattie, the wall embodies the pain her father and son cause her, as well as the suffering each of her daughters on Brewster Place endures, while for
Etta Mae and Cora each brick in the wall represents another faceless man who has used or abused them. The wall represents oppression to Kiswana, so tearing it down allows more interaction between social classes. Ciel cannot touch Eugene or her children, so for her the wall is a tangible way to grieve and then throw her sadness away. Theresa cannot look at the wall without remembering Lorraine’s rape, and the last conversation she had with her partner. For her, tearing down the wall represents tearing down Lorraine’s attackers, as the wall is what allows them the ability to lie-in-wait for her.

While individually based distinctions are certainly important, the most significant meaning of the wall lies in what it represents to the community. Of course, no one can now see the wall without thinking of Lorraine. Therefore, the wall represents violence, female subordination, homophobia, and heterosexism. In addition, the wall represents loss, pain, and disenfranchisement. Laura Nicosia asserts:

> Ultimately, after Lorraine’s gang rape and Ben’s death, the residents feel a sense of (albeit unacknowledged and unspoken) collective guilt. The women feel responsible in some way for Lorraine’s savage attack and for Ben’s violent murder. However, they are unable to accept blame publicly and achieve social penance. Consequently, each woman on the block suffers from eerie and angst-ridden dreams of the victimized woman. (189)

Nicosia’s logic applies to Caruth’s definition of trauma as a sometimes-delayed response to an overwhelming event. Therefore, not only does each woman gain agency through tearing down the wall, but the community of women achieve agency for Lorraine. Notably, after Ben’s murder Lorraine is physically absent for the remainder of the text, but she manifests through dreams and storms. Considering everything the Brewster Place wall represents to the women who live there, the wall exists as the ultimate symbol of communal trauma.
The women experience various levels of the trauma pattern Kaplan sets forth. Nearly all of the women experience direct trauma, and Lorraine suffers the most severely. Following Lorraine’s assault, “Although only a few admitted it, every woman on Brewster Place had dreamed that rainy week of the tall yellow woman in the bloody green and black dress” (Naylor 175). While the other women do not technically observe the assault, they do experience the aftermath; thus, they are vicariously traumatized bystanders, or what Kaplan considers level two trauma victims.

The women living on Brewster Place have a variety of experiences, and the short story cycle allows each of them to have their own voice. Mattie represents the community’s subconscious, which is evident as each female in Brewster Place collectively dreams of Lorraine during a one-week time frame. Thematically, each story in Naylor’s cycle contains disenfranchisement and trauma, thus “The Block Party” should and does unify the work. The narrative’s resolution depends upon Mattie, as Brewster Place’s matriarch, dreaming the women’s collective dream. Mattie experiences several traumatic events in her own life, then re-experiences them through each woman who lives in Brewster Place. Narratively, her dream resolves each woman’s trauma, even though Mattie, unlike Lorraine, is never raped. Mattie experiences both level one and level two trauma, which enables her to heal the community through her dream.

Several forms of trauma against women appear in The Women of Brewster Place, which guarantees that nearly any female reader will find personal relevance and empathetic connection with the cycle. Mattie Michael is a trauma victim and empathizer with others’ trauma, as well as a healer. Mattie’s dream not only heals her community but heals the reader as well in order to prevent level four trauma, which Kaplan believes occurs when someone reads a traumatic
narrative such as *The Women of Brewster Place*. Brewster Place’s women tear down the barrier between themselves and society as well as between the text and the reader, opening up the possibility for healing on multiple levels.

Conclusion

The neo-slave narrative and the short story cycle allow contemporary African American women writers to explore trauma and recovery. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* exposes the trauma slave women endured but does not end with recovery for the characters, whereas in *A Mercy* Morrison allows a slave woman to achieve recovery; Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* employs the short story cycle to illustrate the cyclical nature of trauma and the communal recovery process outside of a slave-system setting. Women in earlier American women’s literature, such as Mary Rowlandson, assert their lack of victimhood, painstakingly assuring their community of their sexual purity. Later white women write sexual vulnerability, but the Republican-era notion that death is preferable to rape is ever-present. Slave women hint at sexual abuse, but their political purposes prevent full disclosure. In the twentieth century, though, women writers such as Morrison and Naylor are free to experiment with generic forms and nonlinear narratives to offer voice to generations of trauma, both past and present.

Morrison and other neo-slave narrative authors respond to the cultural master narrative of American slavery through gothic counternarratives. In *Beloved*, Morrison extends the haunted house trope to embody generational trauma through Beloved’s physical presence. Writing *Beloved* as a black woman’s body powerfully positions slavery as a horror that haunts everyone it touches. While *Beloved* embodies trauma, Florens embodies healing. Florens testifies to her inherited trauma, inscribing it into the walls of her master’s house and thereby usurping its power
to haunt her. Morrison writes literal haunting, but Naylor sets her gothic horror story in the
twentieth-century housing crisis, positioning Brewster Place itself as a symbolic haunted house
full of the horrors African American women have inherited from American slavery. The short
story cycle allows Naylor to develop a polyvocal narrative that prioritizes communal testimony
and healing without the restrictions of slave narrative conventions. Through the novel and the
short story cycle, Morrison and Naylor tell African American women’s trauma stories on their
own terms, using the relative safety of historical distance to testify to the communal trauma of
both enslaved women’s and free black women’s descendants.
CONCLUSION: JUST GETTING STARTED

The United States Department of Justice reports that 56% of American Indian and Alaska Native women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime; Native survivors report that their perpetrators are non-Native men 96% of the time. Deborah Miranda’s tribal memoir *Bad Indians* is a long history of the colonization of Native peoples in California, beginning around 1770 and continuing into the present moment. Miranda’s tribal memoir is a powerful testimony to multigenerational trauma; nowhere is this clearer than in the letter “Dear Vicenta.” A historical document records Vicenta’s rape by a priest called Father Real, and Miranda powerfully responds to Vicenta across the historical gap. After identifying herself as a childhood rape survivor to establish a connection with Vicenta, and elaborating that she hoped someone listened to and comforted the woman, Miranda promises, “And if no one did any of that for you, I hold on to this: Isabel remembered your story, and she told it to Harrington, and he told it to me, and *I’m telling it to everyone I can find*” (25; emphasis added).

In this dissertation I have assembled the beginnings of a canon of American women’s trauma literature that attempts to do what Miranda promises: to testify to everyone who will listen about the realities of women’s sexual trauma. My project allows women writers to form a multi-century discourse community wherein trauma and recovery may occur. The project’s temporal scope is ambitious, and I cannot analyze every piece of women’s trauma literature. My study is a starting point for more conversations about women’s vulnerability. I applied twentieth-century medical research about trauma and recovery, particularly that of Judith Herman, to argue that women create generic spaces and discourse communities that empower them to testify to and recover from sexual trauma through a survey of significant genres of American literature—
captivity narratives, slave narratives, seduction novels, sentimental novels, neo-slave narratives, and short story cycles—from the seventeenth through twenty-first centuries.

This study originates with Mary Rowlandson, who testifies as a direct result of the Mathers’ patriarchal religious goals. Alternatively, Ann Eliza Bleecker’s Maria Kittle transforms the captivity narrative from a factive account to a fictionalized healing space for a community of women. As chapter 1 illustrates, early American women’s testimony has the potential to heal when it is not appropriated for specifically patriarchal goals. In the eighteenth century, testimony and recovery become the purview of white heroines; Sansay’s Clara returns to America, leaving behind her abusive husband but also the community of women who helped her begin the work of healing. Rowson's genealogical novel Reuben and Rachel testifies to Indigenous traumas, but her Indigenous heroines die. In the nineteenth century, Stowe affords Cassy a superficial recovery at best, reducing her to a stereotype with no voice of her own. In the twentieth century, Morrison allows Sethe to approach recovery, but she does not fully heal by the novel's end. In contrast, Morrison allows Florens to recover in her 2009 novel A Mercy, eleven years after Sethe cannot. Naylor’s women recover as a community, but notably Lorraine, a lesbian, must die first.

In Chapter 1 of this study, I argued that the captivity narrative is a proto-therapeutic instrument for captives and the societies that so voraciously consume their narratives—in other words, survivors and witnesses. Chapter 1 examines both the traditionally structured captivity narrative through the example of Mary Rowlandson and the more novelized and fictionalized form of the genre using Ann Eliza Bleecker’s The History of Maria Kittle. Chapter 2 moved away from the Indian captivity narrative to explore how the sentimental novel represents compulsory domesticity as a form of captivity through Leonora Sansay’s Secret History and Susanna Rowson’s Trials of the Human Heart and Reuben and Rachel. I concluded that the
sentimental genre reflects the cultural anxieties of its time period, and specifically the sentimental novel allows early Anglo-American women a proto-therapeutic space to testify to and begin to heal from their vulnerabilities and traumatic experiences under patriarchal control. While Chapter 1 explored traditional accounts of Indian captivity and Chapter 2 turned to the epistolary novel, particularly the novel of sentiment, to explore the vulnerabilities and captivities early national women faced surrounding domestic companionate relationships, Chapter 4 returned to the patterns of Chapter 3, exploring the vulnerabilities of slavery, a more concrete form of captivity.

In nineteenth-century American women’s writing, tales of captivity merged with features of the sentimental novel to create compelling narratives. Ultimately, Chapter 3 argues Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Crafts’ novel *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, and Jacobs’ slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* employ testimony, either oral or written, to allow trauma victims to explore the trauma recovery process. Nineteenth-century women writers manipulate generic conventions to produce hybrid narratives that reveal, investigate, and understand the impact of sexual vulnerability and trauma on slave women. Finally, Chapter 4 argues that gothic elements provide a framework for contemporary African American women writers to explore trauma and recovery through the neo-slave narrative and the short story cycle. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* exposes the trauma slave women endured but does not end with recovery for the characters, whereas in *A Mercy* Morrison allows a slave woman to achieve recovery. Conversely, Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* employs a short story cycle to illustrate the cyclical nature of trauma and the communal recovery process outside of a slave-system setting. The neo-slave narrative and the short story cycle allow contemporary African American women writers to explore trauma and recovery. White women such as Mary
Rowlandson assert their lack of victimhood, painstakingly assuring their community of their sexual purity. Later white women write about sexual vulnerability, but the Republican-era notion that death is preferable to rape is ever-present. Slave women hint at sexual abuse, but their political purposes prevent full disclosure.

This dissertation’s major contribution lies in its temporal scope and methodology. I have applied feminist long history to develop a trajectory of American women’s trauma literature from its inception to the early twenty-first century. Other scholars may extend this research through a long history of specific populations, exploring Asian American or Latina women’s sexual vulnerabilities, both of which are notably absent from my study. Moreover, while I address one lesbian character in this dissertation, American literary scholarship would be richer with analyses specifically devoted to queer women’s intersectional experiences of sexual vulnerability and violence. Furthermore, future research may apply the medical framework of my study to more limited temporal scopes, such as more comprehensive studies of early, nineteenth-century, twentieth century, or twenty-first century literatures. Additionally, while my study’s temporal scope is broad, its geographical scope is limited to United States literature. Transnational scholars can add to this valuable canon of trauma literature through rich comparative analyses. Scholars must undertake further intersectional studies to expand the canon my research has begun.

Finally, I implore scholars to examine sexual trauma and recovery in Native American women’s literature. Miranda’s letter to Vicenta coupled with the Department of Justice report confirms the continued impact of European colonization on Native American women, who are the most sexually vulnerable population in America today. Analyses of how Native women
writers represent and respond to sexual trauma and the intersectional factors that keep them captive centuries after Mary Rowlandson’s death are long overdue.
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