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The Postdomestic Woman:
Divorce and the Ex-Wife in American Literature, Film, and Culture

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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This project establishes and analyzes a new character type, which I have termed the “postdomestic woman.” The postdomestic woman is a female character who has been divorced or alienated from a marriage. Frequently this character has purposefully severed her marital relationship and thus deliberately operates as an independent agent based on her own desire to do so. Regardless of intention, the postdomestic woman must renegotiate her identity within society. Issues of freedom, femininity, family, and love are central to the postdomestic woman, as she must re-signify these once (seemingly) stable concepts according to her new postdomestic identity.

I begin my research in chapter one by investigating the history of divorce in the United States and examining the factors that have shaped the cultural life of this phenomenon. Chapter two is concerned with the politics of representation and the ways in which women and divorce are depicted in film. This chapter explains the relationship between custody law reform, feminism, and antifeminism in Hollywood film over the last fifty years. In chapter three I shift to literary analysis and examine the postdomestic

women characters in twentieth century novels featuring African American families. Chapter three centers on black literary matriarchs and interprets Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Percival Everett's *Erasure*, and Andrew Winer's *The Color Midnight Made* through the lens of contemporary rhetoric regarding single black motherhood, such as the Moynihan Report's argument regarding "pathological" family structures and Reaganite claims about black "welfare queens." In chapter four I demonstrate that the postdomestic woman is vital to the postmodern literary project of de-centering master narratives by performing close textual readings of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Joan Didion's *Play it as it Lays*, John Hawkes' *Death, Sleep, and the Traveler* and Don DeLillo's *Mao II*. Throughout this project I specifically focus on the representation of divorced female characters and, through an examination of such characters in film and literature, I establish a theoretical framework for defining and understanding the postdomestic woman within American culture.

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INTRODUCTION

The Postdomestic Woman:

Divorce and the Ex-Wife in American Literature, Film, and Culture

This [bullet] is a kinetic kill sidewinder vehicle with a secondary cyclotrimethaline trinitramine RDX burst. It's capable of busting a bunker under the bunker you just busted . . . It's completely elegant, it's bafflingly beautiful, and it's capable of reducing the population of any standing structure to zero. I call it: "The Ex-wife."

– Justin Hammer in *Iron Man 2* (dir. Jon Favreau)

More than any other recent phenomenon, divorce has impacted the composition of the American family. Stemming from changing gender roles, new attitudes about the function of marriage, and the introduction of no-fault laws, the incredible surge in the divorce rate during the last forty years has redrawn our national conception of the American family unit. Of the many outcomes produced by the prevalence of divorce in America, the development of new identity categories that are tethered this phenomenon is of particular interest to me. Though the title “ex-wife” was relatively unheard of just a century ago, that subject position now describes over 26 million women in the United States (2004 US Census).¹ Ex-wives are now not only pervasive in American culture but are also frequently represented in literature and film.

This project analyzes the ex-wife as she is fictionalized in American cultural productions. For this purpose, I have termed this new identity category and character type the “postdomestic woman.” The postdomestic woman is a female character who has been married and occupied the role of wife but has since rejected or been excluded from

¹ The actual number of women aged 15 and over in the United States, who have ever been divorced, as of 2004, is 26.9 million.

that role. Frequently this character type has purposefully severed her marital relationship and thus deliberately operates as an independent agent based on her own desire and willingness to do so. Regardless of intention or desire, the postdomestic woman must renegotiate her identity within society. Issues of freedom, femininity, family, and love are central to the postdomestic woman, as she must resignify these once (seemingly) stable concepts according to her new postdomestic identity.

To foreground my investigation of the postdomestic woman I begin by establishing the history of divorce in the United States. Chapter one documents the factors that have shaped the cultural life of divorce, specifically: the relationship between church and state, the accuracy of census collections (in regard to white, minority, and mixed-race couples), the social stigma of abandonment and marital dissolution, and the economic and social emancipation of women. Additionally, by examining lithographs and other works of popular art and writing, I track changes in social attitudes toward long-standing marital conventions and document the emergence of love based marriages.

Chapter two investigates the representation of divorce in film and documents the trajectory of divorce law as it developed alongside various cinematic productions. Specifically, this chapter explains the relationship between custody law reform, feminism, and antifeminism in Hollywood film over the last fifty years. For example, the 1979 Columbia Pictures film *Kramer Versus Kramer* can be understood as both a direct response to second-wave feminism and as a driving force behind the demise of the Tender Years Doctrine, which, until the 1980s, was the chief custody law upheld in

American courts.² Moreover, the rhetoric of rights and responsibilities (for children, mothers, and fathers) has a vexed presence in American film and law. Divorce legislature has granted increasing rights to fathers over the last forty years but filmic depictions of divorce continue to reflect stagnant social values that hold mothers accountable for the emotional and psychological wellbeing of children.

Furthermore, when juxtaposing changes in legal statutes with divorce films from the 1990s and 2000s, such as director Noah Baumbauch's 2005 production *The Squid and the Whale*, for example, antifeminist social attitudes about gender are highlighted. In particular, these films reveal the ways in which American culture is tenaciously attached to longstanding inequalities about childrearing that implicate mothers while acquitting fathers of the psychological trauma children experience as a result of parental divorce.

This chapter also examines the depiction of African American within divorce films. The relative absence of minority families in Hollywood films about divorce points to the centrality of whiteness in American family ideals. In this chapter I discern how raced bodies are portrayed on screen and how non-white postdomestic female characters respond to the challenges of forming alternative family structures and ideals – a challenge that, according to critical theorist Hortense Spillers, has been present for African American women throughout American history. Importantly, in this chapter I call attention to the overlap and difference between minority and non-minority postdomestic characters.

² The Tender Years Doctrine dictated that children who are under the age of 13, or in their “tender years,” belong in the custody of the mother. For a more detailed explanation, see chapter two.

In chapter three, I begin an analysis of divorce and postdomesticity in novels centered on African Americans by putting contemporary rhetoric regarding single black motherhood, such as the Moynihan Report's depiction of "pathological" family structures and Reaganite claims about black "welfare queens," in conversation with three postmodern novels. My discussion of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* serves as a frame for an investigation into the material circumstances linked to single motherhood, the commodification of social prescriptions of blackness, and the relationship between economics and "good" mothering in Percival Everett's *Erasure* and Andrew Winer's *The Color Midnight Made*. I also examine the way in which the absence of a patriarch has become an authenticating feature of black subjectivity and argue that destructive identity formation patterns have become naturalized and essentialized in some divorce novels centered on African American communities. For instance, in *Erasure* and *The Color Midnight Made* being abandoned by one's father is narratively constructed as a rite of passage for young black men, which subtly situates this event as central to African American identity and culture.

Statistical and historical data is central to my research, especially in chapter three, as I rely on this data to establish and track divorce trends within the overall United States population and in ethnic sub-groups. Though this project is primarily rooted in literary and film analysis, my methodology deviates from the pure close reading based approach prevalent within my discipline because I often foreground my interpretation with sociological reports. Chapter three raises interesting questions regarding the relationship between race and family; more than any other chapter in this project, chapter three seems

to invite more inquiry in response to every question it answers and I anticipate taking on those questions in future projects.

Chapter four addresses and defines the postdomestic woman character as she emerges in white-authored, canonical postmodern fiction. In terms of classification, marital status is a crucial aspect of the postdomestic character, as she is divorced or in some way severed from her domestic role as wife. Though she may have created a new, alternative family unit, the postdomestic woman has experienced the dissolution or disintegration of marriage (or relationship that fulfils the marriage-function) and has socially reemerged as a single woman. In some novels, Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, for example, the postdomestic woman is clearly divorced and has not remarried, while in other texts, the postdomestic woman's marital status is ambiguous, but she is estranged or distanced from her husband. For instance, in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, the protagonist, Oedipa Maas, emotionally and physically separates from her husband and is sexually unfaithful to him within the first few pages of the novel. In Joan Didion's *Play it as it Lays* the postdomestic character, Maria, is separated from her husband, Carter, and a divorce is impending, but the legal process is not finalized. Though these characters have not completed the divorce process, both Oedipa and Maria are involved in alienated spousal relationships that mimic divorce. Most importantly, the postdomestic woman functions outside of a traditional family unit and does not occupy *normative* domestic or maternal roles.

Additionally, the postdomestic woman is not reminiscent of non-domestic female character types present in earlier modes of fiction. Her social situation is quite distinct

from prostitute, widow, or spinster characters featured in literature, as she has experienced marriage and rejected or been alienated from it. Most significantly, the postdomestic woman has occupied the role of wife, but she is narratively showcased *after* she has ceased to occupy that identity. In other words, the moments and experiences captured in the novel – and, by implication, *worth capturing* – occur after and outside of a traditional marriage.

In chapter four I examine the ways in which postdomestic women function in literature, devoting specific attention to identifying what this character type enables or prohibits in terms of narrative and plot construction, because I believe that the postdomestic woman plays a crucial role within the development of a distinctly postmodern mode of fiction.

A brief survey of postmodern novels reveals that the postdomestic female character can function in a variety of ways. For example, in novels featuring male protagonists, wherein the postdomestic woman is a supporting character, she is frequently portrayed as unimaginative and, as a corollary, subservient to the creative prowess of her male counterpart. In some cases she is a force that impedes the creativity of the male protagonist and in other situations she bows to his elite literary capabilities; but, in either case, the intellectual dominance of the white male lead is asserted. For example, postdomestic women in novels such as Delillo's *Mao II* and Hawkes' *Death, Sleep, and the Traveler* are portrayed as intellectually and artistically subordinate to the male protagonists. Interestingly, in Delillo's work in particular, the postdomestic woman functions to establish the intellectual superiority of the lead male character but also of the

white, male author and literary elite – an aspect of postmodernism that has incited criticism from feminist thinkers such as bell hooks and Barbara Creed, who suggest the recentering of male academics is a key aspect of postmodern studies.

Interestingly, looking at novels where a postdomestic character *is* the protagonist reveals something quite different. In Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Joan Didion's *Play it as it Lays*, Oedipa and Maria independently navigate the new wilderness of postdomestic life. For these women, signs and signifiers that once were ascribed stable meanings in society are now empty of meaning or have new meanings. The concepts of marriage and love – particularly for Maria – require new semiotic coding. Maria and Oedipa are confronted with the absurdity of the modern wasteland and must redefine themselves, as postdomestic women within this space. Interestingly, these novels find further commonality in their lack of narrative closure. In Pynchon's novel, Oedipa finally reaches what appears to be the culmination of her investigation of Tristero and the reader anxiously awaits, but does not hear, the crying of lot 49. Similarly, in Didion's novel Maria finds no answers or closure but instead determines to stop asking questions and "play anyway"; she will not attempt to resolve life's complexities or locate fixed meaning and will continue living despite life's seeming absurdity. In these Pynchon and Didion novels there is a relationship between postdomestic women and narrative form that enables these novels (about women) to decenter master narratives and master aesthetics, which seems to be the goal of postmodernism.

In sum, this project engages in an in-depth investigation of divorce in America and establishes a new character type. In chapters one and two I examine the historical

framework of divorce in American culture, film, and law. In my culminating chapters I turn to an investigation of the postdomestic woman, a new character type that offers fertile ground for literary investigation. As this character type has only recently emerged in fiction, little has been said about her function within and impact on the novel, until now. Moreover, while the negative impacts of divorce on children have been explored in psychological and sociological scholarship, little has been written about how best to remedy the trauma of this event or what, if any, positive outcomes might be produced by divorce. Considering that, according to an April 2011 study produced by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, one in four children in the United States are being raised by a single parent (and five out of six single parents are mothers), it is clear that this dissertation is both timely and relevant. I believe that this project establishes a foundation for exploring postdomesticity, motherhood, and divorce within American culture and I hope that others will build on the work that I begin here.

CHAPTER ONE

The History of Divorce in the United States

For all puritans, society was rooted in the family, and both church and state, being really one, were but the family writ at large.

– Carl Bridenbaugh, *Jamestown 1544-1699* (64)

In 1639 the first American couple to divorce was granted legal permission to do so from the Puritan Court of Assistants in Massachusetts Bay (Noble and Cronin 89). In 1900 the divorce rate in the United States was four per 1,000.³ Less than a hundred years later, in 1981, the divorce rate peaked at about 23 divorces per 1,000 marriages.⁴ During the latter half of the twentieth century, divorce dramatically changed the landscape of family and gender dynamics in the United States.

Until the mid-twentieth century, the Western family unit had remained fairly stable in structure for hundreds of years. Contrary to common misconceptions that the modern nuclear family is a relatively new development, historians Scott Coltrane and

³ The statistics cited in this paragraph are documented in Glenda Riley's *Divorce: An American Tradition*, Stevenson and Wolfer's *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Papers* "Marriage and Divorce: Changes and their Driving Forces," and U.S. Census Bureau revised special report "Marriage and the Divorce: 1867-1906." Pre-twentieth century divorce statistics offer unreliable and incomplete data regarding race. In his collection of marriage and divorce statistics for the years 1867-1886, Commissioner Wright reported: "The instructions to the field agents who collected the data concerning divorce included directions to ascertain the color of the litigants. The agents found, however, that information bearing upon this point was very rarely included in the papers in the case, and hence the attempt to secure accurate statistics upon this subject had to be abandoned" (Wright 20).

⁴ In the 1980s approximately one of two marriages ended in divorce (Riley 5). The number of divorces in 1981, the all-time peak year, was 1,213,000 (Feinleib 1).

Randall Collins establish its longevity in their book *Sociology of Marriage and the Family: Gender, Love and Property*.⁵ Coltrane and Collins suggest that sociologists, anthropologists, and historians have mistakenly assumed the family structures of our ancestors were reflected in the literature and religious writings of their time. These writings, which centered on the aristocracy rather than commoners, led scholars to believe that extended family homes based on complex kinship hierarchies were prominent throughout history. However, examining writings focused on the experiences of common citizens reveals that the modern nuclear family is not a recent development. The nuclear family appeared in Europe by the middle ages and was transplanted to the United States several hundred years later. In fact, from about the 1200s in Europe and continuing to the U.S. colonies, most households were nuclear, rather than extended family households.⁶

What Coltrane and Collins call the “love revolution” occurred gradually during the 1700-1800s and became the dominant ideal by the twentieth century. Marriages became less a matter of practical necessity as they were no longer held together by a

⁵ For more information, see the writings of nineteenth century French sociologist Frederic Le Play, whose foundational thesis suggests that “the complex family household [gave way] with proletarianization in the nineteenth century to nuclear families” (Kertzer and Barbagli 67).

⁶ Interestingly, Coltrane and Collins also document that the age of marriage and age of child bearing were much older than we have assumed (in seventeenth century England the typical bride’s age was between 24-27 and the typical groom’s age was between 27-30). This data is particularly interesting in light of the commonly held notion that there is a correlation between divorce and age of marriage. During the mid-twentieth century, individuals generally married very young and, statistics show that during the peak years of divorce, the largest proportion of divorces was for men and women who had married between the ages of 20-24 (Feinleib 4).

larger political and economic structure. For the upper class this change resulted from the rise of bureaucratic power and the loss of royal power; for the lower class this change resulted from business moving away from the home and wives thus becoming less economically crucial to the household (and finding themselves relegated to a domestic space that was separate from the market economy). These economic shifts would ultimately lead to larger changes within the family unit and in America's workforce.

Significant occupational transformation began after 1880, when (mostly single) middle and lower class women began to appear in the labor force in large numbers as clerical workers such as secretaries, typists, bookkeepers, and schoolteachers. These types of employment positions had traditionally offered men opportunities for upward mobility; however, the "glass ceiling" limitation quickly became an aspect of clerical work as women entered the labor force. Though these clerical ghettos institutionalized the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres and cut off further progress that women might make to become less dependent on the patriarchal home, they also opened the door to changes in cultural and sexual matters.

The first wave of feminism began in the U.S. in the 1830s but feminists were often persuaded to forgo the issue lest it compromise antislavery movements. Most of the feminists were middle and upper class white abolitionists and this political bind plagued the feminist movement continuously. Though women won the right to vote in 1920, the feminist movement virtually collapsed after this victory. Some modest advancement occurred (a woman's right to keep her own earnings was legally recognized), but by the early 1960s the degree of occupational segregation was about the

same as it had been in 1900 and a smaller percentage of women were enrolled in universities in the 1960s than in the 1920s.

Likewise, the family unit and many other social relationships remained essentially the same before and after suffrage; though women could vote, the sharp separation of male and female spheres remained intact. According to Coltrane and Collins, this was the case for two reasons. First, Victorian attitudes opposing “manly” vices such as promiscuity and alcohol consumption remained prevalent, thus saddling women with a moral obligation to remain pure and separate from such sins. Second, working class and non-white women had not been represented by the women’s movement. These women already worked outside the home in fields, factories, and sweatshops and were exploited by both men and women.

Though winning the right to vote did not dramatically alter the everyday lives of most American women, it was a pivotal ideological and political victory. Suffrage marks the historical moment when American women asserted political entitlement to self-representation. Women began to publicly lay claim to equal rights in cultural, political and personal decision-making. Scholars link this change in gender roles to the rise in divorce rates during the twentieth century and, indeed, statistics show that women petition for divorce more frequently than men (Feinleib 4).⁷

However, feminism and the growth of women’s rights are not the only causes of the increase in divorce during the twentieth century. Changing attitudes toward marriage

⁷ The data verifying this statement only takes into consideration the years from 1975-1988. During this time women petitioned for divorce almost twice as frequently as men (in any given year, 60-67% of petitioners were women and 29-33% were men).

and the widespread transformation of the American notion of marriage itself have significantly impacted the longevity of marriages. In his study, “Divorce and the American Family,” sociologist Frank Furstenberg writes that Americans regard “marriage as a central locus for emotional gratification” (380). Furstenberg’s research about Americans’ preoccupation with the personal rewards of marriage coincides with Coltrane and Collins’ discussion of the “love revolution,” which they say began in the 1700s and has gradually become the dominant paradigm for American relationships.

First documented by sociologist Ernest Burgess in 1948, large-scale cultural movement from the “contractual marriage” to the “companionate marriage” has occurred over the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Individuals value emotional contentment, personal fulfillment, and love over all other factors in determining marriage partners. These ideals about marriage have replaced the economic and social concerns that previously dictated choice of spouse. Many scholars view the subsequent rise of divorce as the predictable outcome of love-based marriage parameters: “Divorce is the inevitable byproduct of a marriage system that puts a high premium on voluntary choice and that values emotional satisfaction above all” (Furstenberg 380). The cultural zeitgeist dictating marital longevity in the twentieth century demands that individuals marry for love and only stay married if they remain in love.⁸

Changes in divorce law have also made it easier for an individual to obtain a divorce and, in fact, the increase in joint petitions for divorce in the late seventies has

⁸ See Roderick Phillips’ *Untying the Knot: A Shorter History of Divorce* (Cambridge, 1991) for further reading about the relationship between liberalization and divorce in twentieth century U.S. culture.

been directly attributed to the introduction of “no-fault” laws at that time (Feinleib 4). As divorce legislature is determined by states, it is difficult to maintain a comprehensive discussion of divorce law. However, by the late 1970s, most states had begun implementing some form of no-fault divorce law. Prior to this legal change, individuals seeking divorce were required to allege and prove spousal fault. Cruelty and financial abandonment were common grounds for divorces (Riley 79). The fault-based nature of divorce law often led spouses to engage in vitriolic disputes in court and, in some cases, motivated petitioners to falsify evidence of fault. It is not surprising that the divorce rate peaked around the same time that many states’ divorce petitions were amended to include no fault options, such as “irreconcilable differences.” Though the divorce rate was at its highest in 1981, it had been on the rise for over a century and, in fact, social concern regarding marital dissolution has been prevalent in the United States since colonization.

Marriage Problems in Early Colonial America: Ecclesiastical Versus Civil Legislation

Though the above overview offers a general account of divorce in American history, in the remainder of this chapter I will take a closer look at the specific cultural and social factors that comprise this phenomenon. From its colonial inception, the United States has upheld civil, rather than ecclesiastical marriage customs.⁹ According to

⁹ For the purposes of this project, I will primarily focus on divorce in the United States from the colonial era to the present. However, it should be noted that divorce is not a modern phenomenon; social anthropologists such as Wissler, Spencer and Gillen, and Hobbhouse state that their studies of pre-literate tribes reveal that not all communities consider marriage a lifelong bond and many had divorce customs. For further reading see James Pendleton Lichtenberger’s *Divorce: A Social Interpretation* (Whittlesey House, McGraw Hill book company, 1931).

James Pendleton Lichtenberger, marriage was only under the legal authority of religious mandates for a brief period in European history. Relying heavily on the research of historian George E. Howard, Lichtenberger explains that the sacramental nature of marriage was established in Europe in the late middle ages and deconstructed during the Protestant Reformation.¹⁰ The ascendancy of civil-contract marriage began in Holland in 1580 and culminated in England in Cromwell's Civil-Marriage Act of 1653, which is regarded as the basis for modern era conceptions of marriage.

When the Puritans left England in the 1600s they brought with them the laws and customs of their homeland: "In the Unites States, from Colonial days, the civil-contract concept of marriage has prevailed and matrimonial jurisdiction has rested within the domain of civil law" (Lichtenberger 97). However, the Puritan's commitment to civil marriage was largely based on the attitudes cultivated during the Protestant Reformation, which was essentially a rebellion against the Roman Catholic Church. Though the Puritans originally required that all marriages be solemnized before a justice of the peace, their laws were quickly modified to allow ministers of all denominations to legally serve as civil officers for the purpose of ordaining marriages.¹¹ Anglican colonists followed British law regarding divorce; divorce did not legally exist in England until 1857 but parliament could grant a divorce on the grounds of adultery and the church permitted a

¹⁰ The Council of Florence confirmed the sacramental nature of marriage in 1439. This confirmation meant that, as viewed by the Roman Catholic Church, marriage is only valid when it is consecrated in accordance with the rites of the Church.

¹¹ This history is established in George E. Howard's three volume series *A History of Matrimonial Institutions* (Humanities Pr., 1964).

menso et thorno, or bed and board divorce, which allowed parties to live apart (but enforced marital obligations).¹²

Though divorce was not actually illegal in Puritan society, in the early colonial years it might as well have been. In 1660 Puritans officially granted authority to the Court of Assistants to hear divorce actions. Female adultery, male cruelty, bigamy, desertion, failure to provide, and impotence were recognized grounds for divorce.¹³ Male adultery was rarely a cause for divorce but unfaithful women were often fined, divorced, or made to wear the infamous letter A, which was sometimes even branded into their foreheads or hands. Glenda Riley attributes this legal disparity to the agrarian and property-based nature of Puritan society; female adultery was punished so severely because, if an adulteress became pregnant, her behavior could result in false property inheritance. Women who were victims of a philandering husband fared poorly in divorce courts. In her study of the Massachusetts Bay Puritans, Riley found that the court was generally unwilling to grant divorces for male adultery, as evidenced by the following case:

In 1655, the Court of Assistants gave Joan Halsall a divorce after she changed her husband, George, with “abusing himself with Hester Lug” and branded him “an uncleane yoake-fellow.” George Halsall appealed the divorce in 1659 to the General Court . . . [which] voided the divorce and declared, presumably much to

¹² See Max Rheinstein, *Marriage, Stability, Divorce and the Law*, Chicago UP, 1972.

¹³ Glenda Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*.

Joan's chagrin, that George could "have and enjoy the said Joan Halsall, his wife, again." (13)

Precedent setting cases like this did not bode well for women wishing to divorce unfaithful husbands.¹⁴

The initiation of divorce by women during this time was quite rare due to the aforementioned legal complexities and the gender roles that shaped all law and society. Though Emory Elliott has documented the nuanced and paradoxical nature of Puritan thought, in general Puritans felt that women who "sought to expand their limited, gender-defined roles were sinners" (Elliott 49). A 1645 speech by John Winthrop crystallizes this attitude. Though Winthrop was discussing the relationship between the ministers and the people, his comments reveal a great deal about the Puritans' understandings of marriage and gender roles: "The woman's own choice makes such a man her husband; yet being so chosen, he is her lord, and she is to be a subject to him, yet in a way of liberty, nor of bondage; and a true wife accounts her subjection her honor and freedom, and would not think her condition safe and free, but in her subjection to her husband's authority" (Elliott 64). Winthrop's speech makes clear the Puritan expectations of "true" and good wives and provides an account of the social and religious mandates governing marriage and divorce norms.

¹⁴ Other legal trends were more favorable for women, however. For instance, by 1641 Massachusetts had instated an alimony law whereby innocent female victims of bigamy or cruelty would receive divorces and financial support from their husbands. However, in the entire eighteenth century only two divorce actions ordered alimony for wronged wives (Riley 15).

Though religion and legal precedent generally deterred women from seeking divorces, men's pursuit of divorce was also infrequent.¹⁵ The overall uncommonness of divorce during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is linked to the religious beliefs of the people but is also related to legal stipulations that actually remained in effect in most states until the 1970s. Since its inception in the United States, divorce law has been predicated on fault-based resolutions. Husbands and wives wishing to divorce would assert wrongdoing or criminal behavior on the part of their spouses and, as such, these behaviors were punishable. Spouses convicted of marital crimes could be punished by monetary fining, confinement in the stocks, or forcible adornment of the aforementioned infamous A. As a result, divorce cases often became vitriolic and highly complex.

The blame aspect of divorce also solidified the social and communal nature of this event. The Puritans felt that the family was the core unit of society and, therefore, fought to protect it by allowing divorce to those who were not fit to function as spouses and by ensuring that all aspects of divorce cases – from the trial through the punishment phase – were publicly monitored. Conveniently, the publicity and scandal associated with divorce deterred petitioners from seeking it.

Hannah Thrall's divorce case exemplifies the tedious and communal nature of divorce; for Hannah "what seemed to be at first an entirely private matter, an internal family squabble, became a highly public issue" (Speth 45). On May 12, 1732 Hannah

¹⁵ A record of the number of divorces in Massachusetts is as follows: In 1639, the first divorce in the U.S. was granted. In 1643, the second divorce was granted. Between 1639 and 1692, forty petitions for divorce were filed and thirty-one were granted (Riley 12, 16). It is important to recall that Anglican colonists continued to abide by English law during this time and thus regarded divorce as illegal (except in special cases that called for Parliamentary intervention).

Thrall of Windsor, Connecticut left her husband and went to live with her parents two miles away. Hannah accused her husband of cruelty but claimed that she intended to return home after his temper had cooled. Though her husband William Thrall felt that Hannah never intended to return to him, he was forced to endure a waiting period of three years to document her abandonment before he was allowed to sue her for this crime in court. After the three-year period elapsed, William took Hannah to court. Though by this time both petitioners seemed to desire a divorce, the matter of financial support rested on their trial. If she could prove extreme cruelty on his part, Hannah would be entitled to a third of William's estate but, if he could prove her infidelity, William would retain all his assets.

During the trial William accused Hannah of adultery, though he would initially not say with whom. He also charged her of refusing to perform proper wifely duties such as preparing meals. Hannah, on the other hand, described William's violent behavior and claimed that he refused to care for her when she was sick. During the trial William called seventeen witnesses and Hannah called about a dozen; the proceedings required the testimony of their families and friends and became a colony-wide problem as citizens sided with one petitioner over the other in depositions. The entire community was privy to this spousal conflict as husband and wife revealed the private details of their marriage to the court. After a spectacular trial the court postponed action until the next session would occur in Hartford in 1736. Ultimately, William was not considered an ideal husband by the court and it was determined that he had driven away his wife and would not get a divorce. While William was fighting this decision he became ill and prepared

for his death by amending his will to exclude Hannah completely. In 1739, William died and, after fighting for the next several years, Hannah – who was still his wife - obtained much of William’s property and became a wealthy woman. Though the outcome of the conflict was positive for Hannah, her marital woes were not actually resolved by divorce. The dispute dragged on for nearly a decade, required the active involvement of dozens of community members, and was ultimately resolved by death. Moreover, though William was not granted a divorce on his terms, it seems unlikely that Hannah wished to remain married to a man she had clearly deserted. Based on this example, it is not surprising that divorce was rarely sought in colonial America.

The Thrall case demonstrates the highly public nature of divorce cases but, in fact, the circumstances of this particular case are unusual because of Hannah’s decision to remain living in the same town as her husband. Most women who abandoned their husbands during this time endeavored to disappear. Running away allowed women to carry on relationships with other men, avoid divorce proceedings like the one outlined above, evade punishment for wrongdoing, and forgo forced reunions with their husbands. Many women opted to elope with their lovers and colonial newspapers such as the *Boston Evening Post* and *South Carolina Gazette* often featured advertisements for absconded spouses. Announcements for lost wives like those seen in Figures 1 and 2, which appeared in the 1746-7 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, ran right alongside notices for runaway servants and strayed mules.

Figure 1

Philadelphia, February 10. 1746-7.

WHereas Anne, the wife of Charles Pope, of Duck Creek, hath again eloped from her husband; this is to desire all persons not to give her any credit on his account; for he will pay no Debts of her contracting from the 27th of January last, being the day of her elopment; and they are likewise desired not to take her Receipts for any debts that may be due to her said Husband

£

CHARLES POPE.

Philadelphia, February 10. 1746-7.

THere are now in the hands of William Hartley, Chief Ranger for Chester county, the following strays, viz. A small chestnut sorrel mare, branded DC; a bay filly; an old chestnut gelding, G in two places; a bay mare, her back full of saddle spots; a brown bay gelding, with something like a fistula on his shoulder; a chestnut sorrel mare, about 3 years old; a bay filly, about the same age; a mouse coloured dunn colt, with a black list. The owner, or owners, by applying to me, may have them again, paying moderate charges.

WILLIAM HARTLEY.

P. S. Any person or persons, having any stray or strays, are required to deliver them, or send word to the said Hartley, in order that the proper owners may have them again.

⊖

To be sold by FRANCIS BOWES, near the Tun, in Water-street, where Mr. Ro-

Figure 2

Philadelphia, January 20. 1746-7.

WHereas Mary the wife of Thomas Warner, of Philadelphia county, hath at sundry times eloped from her husband, these are to warn all persons not to trust her on his account, for he will pay no debts of her contracting, from the date hereof. ☉

Philadelphia, January 20. 1746-7.

RUN away the 18th instant, from William Hudson, of this city, tanner, an Irish servant man, named Daniel Brady, about 20 years of age, sandy complexion, 5 feet 9 or 10 inches high. Had on a black Irish frize coat, a brown waistcoat, and another of a lighter colour without sleeves, a fine homespun shirt, leather breeches, and good shoes and stockings: Took with him besides, a pair of stockings and shoes, two brown homespun shirts, and a pair of linnen breeches. 'Tis probable he will endeavour to pass for a tanner, tho' he is not a workman. Whoever secures the said servant, so that he may be had again, or brings him to his Master, shall have Twenty-shillings reward, if taken within 10 miles of this city, or Forty if farther, and reasonable charges, paid by
WILLIAM HUDSON.

Philadelphia, January 20. 1746-7.

To be **LETT,**

A New house, within two Doors of the White-horse, in Elbow-lane, opposite the Presbyterian burying-ground, three story high, with two good Cellars, three rooms on a floor, handsomely finished, a pretty kitchen back, and a yard for wood, and other conveniencies. Enquire of Henry Dexter, at the corner of Strawberry-alley, opposite the stables. ☉

Philadelphia, January 20. 1746-7.

To be Lett for the Term of Five Years,

These declarations warn the townspeople of each location that Charles Pope of Duck Creek and Thomas Warner of Philadelphia Country, whose wives have eloped, will not pay any debts accrued by their respective spouses. Both husbands wish to notify business owners and “all persons” not to trust or give credit to their wives, for neither man will pay any debts collected after their wives’ elopements. These announcements were not rare or uncommon in colonial newspapers and were generally posted alongside other business advertisements, such as notices for rentable houses. The placement of these announcements reinforces the commercial and contractual nature of marriage in early America. These abandoned husbands do not seem embarrassed or personally wounded by their wives’ elopements; rather, they take advantage of and benefit from the social attitudes that rendered marriage a public, contractual, and religious agreement. By announcing their personal business in the newspaper they could simultaneously expose their wives’ sins and protect their financial assets.

However, protection of or entitlement to assets was not only a concern for husbands. Though my survey of colonial newspapers indicates a much higher rate of runaway wife reports in early America, in the nineteenth century a larger portion of runaway husband complaints began to appear in the forms of posters and advertisements. In 1908, when reflecting upon Census Bureau marriage and divorce statistics (which I will discuss later in this chapter), Labor Commissioner Wright claimed that the “divorce rate increases as one goes westward.” Based on ephemera collected from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, it would seem that the desertion rate had been growing alongside the divorce rate. For instance, the Oklahoma Territorial Museum in

Guthrie houses a series of “wanted” posters from this time period, many of which announce the destitute circumstances of wives and children whose husbands have abandoned them to go west. Of course, the location or intent of the absconded spouse was never certain, as reflected in some posters that announced spousal abduction instead of desertion.

Though it is impossible to account for all cases of abandonment and desertion, newspapers verify that runaway spouses were a legitimate problem in colonial America. The rate of divorce in New England is easier to determine, though it varied from location to location, often fluctuating in relation to population growth.¹⁶ Interestingly, “disappeared” spouses seemed to be as much of a concern as divorce and provisions for abandonment were made throughout the colonies.¹⁷ Moreover, the prevalence of notices for runaway spouses points to the rising social concern about the condition of the family unit.

Growing Divorce Rates and Animated Debates

¹⁶ According to Sheldon S. Cohenin “‘To Parts of the World Unknown’: The Circumstances of Divorce in Connecticut, 1750-1797” there were at least 1,000 divorces cases in eighteenth century Connecticut, but Massachusetts, the state with the second highest divorce rate, had only 229 cases from 1692-1786 (*Canadian Review of American Studies II* (1980): 275-93). Because there was no census in those years, it is difficult to determine relevant information that would help us evaluate this data, such as how many couples were married (and thus eligible to divorce) and, therefore, comparisons between colonial and contemporary divorce data are subjective and somewhat unreliable.

¹⁷ Generally, spouses that had been missing for over three years were presumed dead and thus the abandoned party was allowed to remarry.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries divorce was regarded as necessary only in cases of marital crime but, “after the American Revolution, divorce experienced a rapid expansion in the new United States” (Riley 34). During the years between 1776 and 1850, the states held legal control over all divorce proceedings, but in the early 1850s the “problem” began to gain national attention. Some public officials, like the Judge of the Ninth Judicial Circuit in Wisconsin, E. Ray Stevens, felt that divorce was the natural outcome of the real problem of irresponsible marriage choices. Stevens cites bachelor taxes and hasty decisions by indulgent young people as the cause for the “ill-considered, wholly bad marriages” that have caused the divorce surge (6).¹⁸

Others, like editor and politician Horace Greeley, vehemently opposed the revolving door operations of greedy divorce practitioners, one of whom reported to providing “eleven divorces one day before dinner” and once to a man who obtained his divorce around noontime and by that evening “was married to his new inamorata” (Greeley 572). Reverend Gwynne Walker put it succinctly in *Divorce in America Under State and Church*: “There is no more momentous social, religious, and political problem facing the people of America today than that of marriage and divorce” (19). Religious officials and citizens alike expressed growing concerns about divorce’s impact on the moral fiber of American people.

¹⁸ Stevens’ essay was published in the *Outlook* in June 1907 but he cites the problem as emerging in the years following the Civil War. Stevens proclaimed that “divorce is a remedy, not a disease” and that the terrible conditions of some marriages absolutely call for divorce.

In response to the rising national divorce rate, and specifically in reference to the high divorce rate in Indiana, Greeley published a scathing critique of the laws in that state. Though marriage was regulated by civil laws, religion maintained control over many of the social aspects of this institution. In fact, the Protestant Church's disapproval of divorce was so deeply embedded into the fabric of American culture that divorce was socially and culturally regarded as illicit, though it was not legally so.¹⁹ An example of this kind of confusion can be seen in a discussion between Horace Greeley and politician Robert Dale Owen that was published in *The New York Tribune* in March of 1860 and later reprinted in Greeley's *Recollections of a Busy Life*. Greeley argues on behalf of the people of New York that "we would not dissolve the marriage obligation to constancy for any other cause than that recognized as sufficient by Jesus Christ," namely on the grounds of extreme hardship (Greeley 573). Greeley lambastes Owen's alleged revisions of divorce law in Indiana and what he views as the excessive and wanton granting of divorce in that state. Owen replies to Greeley on March 5 and explains that the law remained virtually unchanged the entire duration of his time in office, and perhaps long before: "I found that law thirty-four years ago, when I first became a resident of the State, in substance nearly what it is now; indeed, with all its essential features the same" (Greeley 573). Because of the increase in divorces during the late 1800s, Greeley

¹⁹ In South Carolina absolute divorce was prohibited, though divorces of bed and board could be granted under extreme circumstances.

assumed that legal reform had occurred but, in fact, divorce had already been legal but had been extremely rare due to the Christian Church's disapproval of it.²⁰

Another factor influencing public concern regarding divorce stemmed from instances of interracial adultery. In the years between 1800 and 1835 North Carolina courts received 266 applications for divorce in which almost eight percent of petitioners "charged their spouses with committing adultery with African Americans" (Riley 35). At this time southern states that had originally opposed absolute divorce in favor of rare allowances of bed and board divorce made drastic legislative changes. Cases in which married white women bore mulatto children caused considerable anxiety for legislators faced with the task of determining the legal position of the child. Generally the husband was able to break all bonds with the woman and held no financial obligation to her or her child. Wives whose husbands engaged in trysts with black slaves were able to obtain

²⁰ Though they are both Christian denominations, Puritans and Anglicans held divergent views on divorce. Christians base their disapproval of divorce on their respective understandings of the Bible; while some Christians find that adultery is grounds for divorce, others do not. In *Divorce in America Under State and Church* Reverend Gwynne interprets the Biblical Sermon on the Mount wherein the Lord says, "It was said also whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement, but I say unto you, that everyone that putteth away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, maketh her an adulteress and whoever shall marry her when she is put away committeth adultery" Matt. 31-32. Gwynne explains that "fornication" seems to mean "adultery" here and elsewhere in the Bible; though these terms clearly do not have the exact same meaning, the passages suggest that divorce may be granted on the grounds of "fornication," or adultery. However, the Reverend continues to state that under Old Testament Jewish law the punishment for adultery was death by stoning, so in cases of adultery a divorce would not be necessary because the offending spouse would be publicly killed. Though this law was in effect during his lifetime, Jesus Christ makes clear that he does not condone it when he meets with an adulteress in John 3-11 and says: "Go and sin no more" and "Go and seek thy husband's pardon, as thou hast obtained Mine." Gwynne's analysis makes clear Christianity's complex relationship with divorce (a relationship that is very much a part of American culture).

divorces on the grounds of cruelty. The concern over miscegenation was so severe that it prompted states that had not allowed absolute divorce to institute laws that would completely dissolve marital obligations as a way of protecting the assets, property, and reputations of white petitioners. Of course, early nineteenth century white society's fear of interracial adultery would soon be exacerbated by anxiety over interracial marriage and courtship, as represented in a Bromley and Company 1864 political cartoon from *Harper's Weekly* titled "Miscegenation, or the Millennium of Abolitionism" (Figure 3).

Published during the Civil War about a year before the enactment of the Thirteenth Amendment, this absurd political caricature forecasts the possible outcomes of abolition in a series of images showcasing African American and white citizens interacting socially. By this time, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was in effect and over 20,000 slaves living in Union-occupied states had already been freed.²¹ The caricature predicted that, because slaves were being freed all over the country, interracial courtship and matrimony would become commonplace. The cartoon portrays a vibrant townscape, bustling with activity as citizens dance, drink tea, and enjoys carriage rides. The couples are comprised of black men with white women or white men with black women, while the single white characters are employed as carriage drivers or baby nurses for the black characters. The African Americans are clearly enjoying the luxuries and privileges of emancipation, as one woman remarks that the "cream" is "bully," and a love-struck man proposes to his white girlfriend, "[N]ame de day, when Brodder Beecher shall make us one!"

²¹ Keith Poulter, "Slaves Immediately Freed by the Emancipation Proclamation," *North & South*, 5.1 (December 2001): 48.

The cartoonist clearly suggests that this social scene is inverted and perverse; for example, a white nursemaid remarks, “And is it to drag naggur babies that I left old Ireland? Bad luck to me” while an astonished white gentleman cries out, “Most hextwadinary!” Furthermore, President Lincoln seems to enjoy the foreshadowed consequences of the Civil War and confirms that he “shall be proud to number [African Americans] among my intimate friends.”

The caricature projects a future in which black citizens are as prosperous as whites, and sometimes more so, and interracial courtship and marriage are accepted and celebrated. Interestingly, the two instances of “backwards” labor relations are displayed behind four sets of interracial couples. These four intimate couples are fore grounded as examples of the miscegenation to which the caricature’s title refers. According the *HarpWeek* online presentation of “The Presidential Elections: 1860-1912,” two of the couples feature notable Republican politicians. The first couple displays Senator Charles Sumner introducing his “dear friend” to President Lincoln, while nearby politician and editor Horace Greeley announces to his black female companion, “[W]e have at last reached our political and social Paradise.” In this satire the black women are quickly maneuvering – or being maneuvered – up the social and political ladder. The other two couples feature young white women who are pursued by and enthusiastically encourage the affection of two black dandies. Both of the white women are physically intimate with their male suitors; one woman rests comfortably on the lap of her boyfriend, while the other lovingly wraps her arm around her companion’s neck. This satirical cartoon set up

a ludicrous but ominous image for white Americans, whose fear of racial mixing was aggravated by abolitionism.

Ultimately, though slavery was abolished in 1865, white citizens' hatred of interracial companionship led to an increased desire to control and monitor all interactions between black and white individuals, as evidenced by Jim Crow laws and other forms of policing. Though the push to research and monitor marriage and divorce statistics was certainly linked to many factors, cases of interracial adultery and the possibility of interracial marriages that seemed to loom on the horizon impacted Americans' attitudes toward the institution of matrimony and, specifically, what measures needed to be taken to "protect" it.

As divorce began to occur more frequently and for a more diverse array of reasons in the mid-1800s social concern likewise mushroomed. Indeed, in 1887 the Honorable Carroll Wright, the Commissioner of Labor, was charged with the task of collecting and reporting the statistics of and relating to marriage and divorce in the states, territories, and in the District of Columbia. One of the most significant findings of these early and incomplete records was "the persistency of the increase in the divorce rate," the movement of which "has been almost without exception upward" (Wright 13).²² Indeed, the number of divorces per year for all states and territories combined nearly doubled in decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century, increasing from 483,069 in 1887 to 853,290 in 1906 (Wright 55). The governmental commissioning of a census collection devoted solely to this topic documents increasing public interest in what would

²² Wright's *Report of the Commissioner of Labor on Marriage and Divorce* was commissioned in 1887 and covered the period from 1867-1886. In 1905 another census was approved and William C. Hunt, with the help of Wright, produced a census that covered the dates from 1887-1906. These two reports were compiled into one document published by the Department of Commerce and Labor in 1909.

soon be called the “growing divorce problem” by the National League for the Protection of the Family.

Changing Attitudes and Gender Roles

By the mid-nineteenth century two prominent cultural revolutions were underway: women’s rights began to gain public attention and the notion of romantic love began to influence courting and marriage practices. Several women’s magazines, such as *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* sprang up in the late 1800s and newspapers featured editorials about gendered behavior and women’s roles in society. For instance, among its opinion, social life, and society section, the August 28, 1882 edition of the *New York Herald* printed the following viewpoints about “Sensible Girls” and “Woman’s Rights in Hungary”:

Figure 4

questions, one of which has just been decided by Justice Field at San Francisco. This was the case of a steamer whose Chinese sailors not being provided with the certificates required by the law were not allowed to land. It was shown that the crew had shipped before the passage of the act and Justice Field held that to such persons the law does not apply. Hence they were permitted to land by order of the Court. Of course the same freedom will be accorded to all Chinese seamen who shipped before the law went into operation.

A Good Sign.

The Cornell machine, which seemed to be all-powerful a week or ten days ago, has suddenly broken down. In nearly all the districts which have thus far chosen delegates to the coming Republican State Convention the people have outvoted the machine men, and the result is an anti-Cornell delegation from almost every district. Wielding all the vast patronage of the State, with thousands of interested followers working for him everywher, Mr. Cornell has been unable to make the slightest headway. The people this year are evidently resolved to smash the machines, and it will be a mistake on the part of the political managers to set up one when the Convention meets. There is an apprehension in the public mind that the administration will in some way endeavor to force a subservient candidate on the Convention. It is to be hoped that it will not make so grave a blunder. The President now has the confidence of the country, the confidence particularly of his own State. He should not be so foolish as to do anything to weaken it. A selfish, interested following is, it is to be feared, endeavoring to persuade him to adopt the old methods and start up

on large cities and determined to own their own homes and become producers of necessities of life and staples of commerce. May the good work go on! The farming community is the basis of the nation's prosperity.

Sensible Girls.

Nearly a month ago half a dozen young ladies started on a walking tour in North Carolina, just to look at the scenery and enjoy the society of one another, and recent advices report them alive and safe, having walked about four hundred miles, camped out every night, enjoyed themselves greatly, and suffered nothing worse than sore feet and sunburn. Similar parties, properly chaperoned, might have glorious tramps in the Middle States and New England between now and the stormy end of September. American girls think they are rustivating and taking the air when they lounge or flirt on piazzas in the mountains or at the seaside, but they do not know anything about the exaltation of health and spirits that comes from enough steady exercise out of doors to induce free breathing and large appetites for plain food.

PERSONAL INTELLIGENCE

The following Americans were registered at the Paris office of the NEW YORK HERALD on Sunday, August 27:—

Adair, J., Chicago, Hôtel Continental.
Alcott, Mrs., Cleveland, Ohio, Hôtel de Normandie.
Allen, Rev. John, Tarrytown, N. Y., Rue du Colisée.
Apple, Mrs., West Chester, Pa., Hôtel Bellevue.
Bartleman, F. Jr., Boston, Hôtel des Musées de Cluny.
Battles, Dr. M., and family, New York, Hôtel Splendide.
Belloni, Miss, Waldo, N. Y., Hôtel Continental.
Bodesheimer, Baron, New York, Grand Hôtel.
Drennan, J., New York, Hôtel Borzeau.

Figure 5

victed and sentenced to punishment are in striking contrast with the frequent failures to detect the perpetrators of far less mysterious tragedies in this city and the delay in bringing to justice criminals who are detected and arrested.

Will the Governor Try to Explain Further?

Said a befogged critic, satirically endeavoring to reflect his entangled impressions of a hopelessly involved composition, "Such a song so sung always is and has been one of the few performances so seldom offered to the public. We perhaps did not know it always is and was, but we think it were." Something of the same style of criticism may be written of the Governor's involved, entangled, contradictory and evasive explanation which he has published as a supplement to his more terse than polite, but now historical, "pagoda speech."

We have heretofore considered the main points in the Governor's reply, but there are some minor details which may be referred to with a suggestion that he be allowed so to amend his answer as to cover the case more fully. "I have been connected with the telegraph business all my active life," says the Governor. "I began as a telegraph operator at sixteen." This is all very well as a beginning, but the Governor does not grasp the situation fully. There is nothing dishonorable in the calling as ordinarily practised at sixteen; what the public object to is the kind of telegraph operator the Governor is at fifty. As for the mysterious "blind pool" the

Woman's Rights in Hungary.

It is gratifying to learn that on this earth there is at least one place where women who are tired of their husbands know how to do something more practical than get together for a grand talk. The place is Gross Becskerek, in Hungary, where a hundred women are charged with poisoning their husbands. Probably Gross Becskerek contained a hundred husbands who were fit for nothing but to fill coffins—most villages do; still, we think the women acted without proper caution. There are other means than poison to put a superfluous husband out of the way. If the Hungarian wives had taken counsel of American wives they would have innocently talked their husbands to death. No court could have taken cognizance of that. It is an unwritten law of all nations that a woman has the right to talk her husband to death.

The Amusement Season.

The amusement season has already begun, although it cannot be considered fairly under way until Wallack's, Daly's and the Union Square theatres have opened their doors for the regular autumn and winter campaign. Thus far the dramatic horizon has been lurid with the thunder and lightning of the sensational pieces booked at several playhouses, and within the fortnight the melodramatic storm will have burst forth in all its grandeur at more than one theatre hitherto devoted to comedy or music. "The Black Flag" at the Union Square, "The Blackbird" at the Theatre Comique and "Youth" at

Not only was the *Herald* the largest daily paper (a triple-sheet, twelve page paper), it also boasted the largest circulation in the United States and was sent all over the country.²³ Newspapers, particularly major metropolitan publications like the *Herald*, were arbiters of American conversation; the dailies reflected the topics of the day and announced the issues circulating in society. In his study of the newspaper, George H. Douglas writes that, during the mid-1800s the large newspapers became “powerful influences on public opinion” (56). Readers turned to the newspapers not only to learn about foreign and domestic affairs but also to remain abreast of cultural debates and social happenings.

While each opinion piece jabs at American women’s alleged lazy and talkative habits, both also acknowledge women’s desires for greater quality of life. In “Sensible Girls,” for instance, the writer encourages other young women to follow the example set by a group of North Carolina girls who had the initiative to embark on a scenic walking and camping trip. The author unequivocally praises the women for being active and robust, qualities that were not part of traditional ideals of femininity. In “Women’s Right in Hungary,” the author remarks that most villages contains “a hundred husbands who were fit for nothing but to fill coffins,” which recognizes that many women are subjected to maltreatment by their husbands. While these newspaper entries by no means indicate that gender equality in social or legal arenas was on the horizon, the fact that opinion pieces were published that acknowledged women’s rights and praised a group of girls’ activeness suggests the beginning of a large-scale shift in gender roles. Certainly, these

²³ In 1860 the *Herald* had the largest circulation of any daily in the world.

perspective pieces deviate drastically from the “runaway wife” reports prevalent only a hundred years earlier. In the mid-nineteenth century American society began to discuss women’s rights to public and private identities that were not subsumed under their husbands or fathers. Women’s insistence on independence resulted in increased utilization of divorce as an option for escaping unfortunate marriages.

Interestingly, social conceptions of what constituted an unfortunate marriage also began to shift as the idea of romantic love proliferated. These two issues – women’s independence and romantic love – were often seen as entangled co-causes of the frequency of divorce as documented in commissioner Wright’s report. Even President Theodore Roosevelt eventually weighed in on the issue in a 1906 article in the *Ladies Home Journal* in which he states that individuals who seek divorce because of “transitory personal preferences,” “personal comfort,” “love,” or a “desire to avoid duties” cause our collective regard for marriage, which is the “unit of national life,” to diminish. Though the idealization of romantic love was clearly not new, the notion that it should be the foundation for marital coupling was. Romantic courtship had been glamorized in western fiction, poetry and art for centuries without any large-scale influence on marital practices; matrimonial unions were primarily generated by financial factors, family dynamics, and male business relationships. In the mid-nineteenth century, however, love began to take center stage as the impetus for marrying and remaining married and the artifacts produced during this time period reflect this cultural change.

The Smithsonian Harry T. Peters 19th century American lithography collection “America on Stone” showcases the “love revolution” and its perceived consequences.

Lithography, the art of engraving images in stone and transferring them to paper, was a popular method of creating posters, art, and advertisements. The prints were affordable and therefore many Americans could purchase them. The “America on Stone” collection is particularly interesting because, according to the archive’s “About the Peters Collection” page, the “prints offer direct pictorial evidence of subjects and treatments used for advertising, illustration, home or business decoration, and ‘moral improvement’ or instruction” (“America on Stone”). Not only does the collection document love, marriage, and divorce as subject matter prevalent in art and advertising, it also offers insight about the opinions and attitudes of the consumers purchasing these popular lithographs.

Images like “Woodland Vows” (Figure 6) suggest that courtship should be amorous and playful. In this lithograph, a dapper lad carves into a tree a heart containing, presumably, the initials of his companion (or both of their initials) while she eagerly watches. In *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in 19th Century America*, Karen Lystra writes that, “While the ratio of those who married for love versus those who did not can never be determined with certainty, evidence strongly suggests that American middle-class youth were selecting their own partners by at least 1800, with little interference from their parents, and that ‘the heart’ played an increasingly large role in mating as the century progressed” (28). Citing, among others, Daniel Scott Smith’s analysis of historical courtship trends, Lystra suggest that by 1830 the process of falling in romantic love was essential to middle-class courtship. Based on the young man’s top hat and leather shoes, and the puffed sleeves of the young women’s dress, the individuals

in “Woodland Vows” appear to be middle-class. The two are engaged in the vital process of expressing their personal feeling of devotion to one another and, importantly, to the public world by carving their initials into a tree.

Figure 6
“Woodland Vows”
Vance, Parsloe and Company, 1875²⁴



Harry T. Peters “America on Stone” Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

²⁴ This image is particularly interesting because the race of the male figure is unclear. Although he appears African American it is unlikely that a favorable depiction of interracial courtship would be printed at this time.

Common interests were a major element of romantic love but the pleasure of companionship was tantamount as represented in “The Angler” (Figure 7). This image depicts young lovers engaged in reading and fishing; importantly their respective hobbies seem enhanced by their togetherness. Again, based on their clothing and their engagement in leisure activities, this young couple appears to be middle or even upper class. This image highlights one of the crucial elements of romantic love: the concept of the romantic self. Resulting from the Second Great Awakening and the rise of the Romantic Movement, the notion of an independent, emotionally charged, freethinking individual became central to white America’s understanding of a national identity. This idea of personhood centered on the idea that one’s deepest identity was often masked by and could never be fully expressed by performing one’s cultural roles, and this “sense of a hidden, but purer individual essence is the basis for the ‘romantic self’” (Lystra 30).

Rather than worrying about custom and tradition, the man and woman in “The Angler” have separated themselves from the public sphere and are partaking in activities that, it seems, they truly enjoy. The woman is defying convention by openly reading for pleasure, and the man is nestled into the grass in a way that may sully his fancy clothes. The natural setting enforces the lovers’ romantic connection and references religious and cultural movements of the 19th century which maintained that spending time in nature was an important way of emotionally connecting with one’s deeper self, a higher power, and the world at large.²⁵ These visual clues suggest that the young angler and his

²⁵ Movements such as the Romantic Literary Movement, the Protestant (Second) Great Awakening, and the Transcendentalist Movement all included the idea that there is a

girlfriend enjoy and feel comfortable revealing and exploring with one another their true selves, and that these factors are pivotal to the development of their romantic love.

The tenderness of an engagement proposal is showcased in Figure 8, “Popping the Question,” which features a sultry debutante that is the sole focus of her suitor’s attention. While this upper-class couple is featured in a traditional parlor or sitting room environment, both the lithograph’s title and its meaning demonstrate the decline of contractual marriages. First, it is clear that the matter of the couple’s marriage will be determined by the woman’s reply, rather than by negotiations between her suitor and her father. Second, it is significant that “popping the question” is depicted as a noteworthy event that holds a particular relevance for the couple as individuals, and as participants in a larger social community; to get engaged is an important event that occurs during a singular moment between the man and woman, it is part of a process which will be shared by the lovers and perhaps later described to the community, rather than an outcome or fact which is determined and announced by the woman’s father. This lithograph showcases the proposal act as an important event in the couple’s relationship, an event that is defined by the element of surprise and excitement of “popping” a question, and by the element of uncertainty inherent in asking “the question.”

profound relationship between nature and that which is true and pure in oneself and in the universe.

Figure 7
“The Angler” by Kelloggs & Comstock, 1852



Figure 8
“Popping the Question” by Sarony & Major, 1846



Harry T. Peters “America on Stone” Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

Although courtship and romance were much more popular topics for lithographs, divorce was also a common subject of art. Several lithographers seemed particularly interested in exploring the ways that romantic courtship impacts marital longevity; for instance, the disappointing outcome of many marriages is highlighted in “Courtship/Matrimony” (Figure 9). The title of this image seems to specifically announce the artist’s recognition of a disparity between the joys of courtship, as represented by the smiling faces of a couple, and the apparent drabness of marriage, which is evidenced by the frowns displayed when the image is turned upside-down. Figure 10, “The Seven Stages of Matrimony,” also indicates the harsh reality awaiting those who commit to marriage as a result of a passionate and tender courtship. After courtship, marriage, and children, the final stage of matrimony is divorce.

These images showcase American society’s increased devotion to the ideal of romantic love as a vital component of marriage. Moreover, they display escalating anxiety about the ways in which love-based expectations would impact marriage practices and the family unit. Ultimately the fears expressed in “Courtship/Matrimony” and “The Seven Stages of Matrimony” were not unfounded. Sociologists Coltrane and Collins, Furstenberg, and Burgess believe that the “love revolution” is directly related to the increase in divorce rates in contemporary American society.

Figure 9
 "Courtship/Matrimony" by Kelloggs & Comstock, 1850

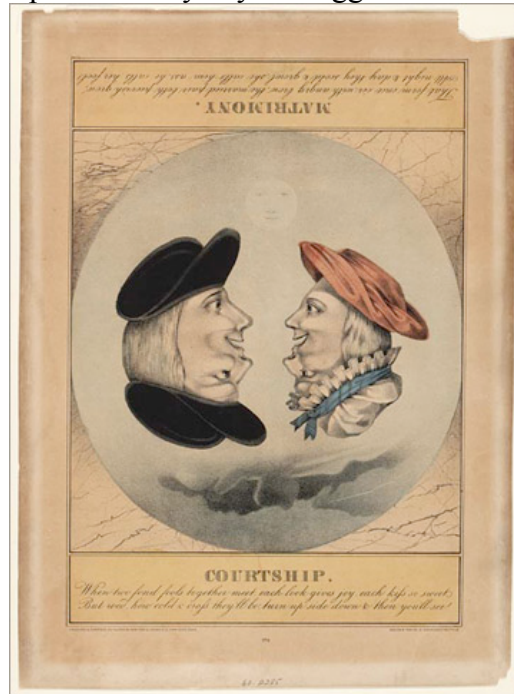


Figure 10
 "The Seven Stages of Matrimony" by E.C. Kellogg and Company, 1852



Harry T. Peters "America on Stone" Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

The relationship between young couples' commitment to love-based unions and the rise in the divorce rate that sociologists suggest, and which these lithographers depict, is difficult to empirically prove. It is possible that high numbers of couples in contractual or companionate marriages throughout history have desired divorces, and the social taboo (or illegality, for Anglicans) proved too strong of a deterrent for those individuals to pursue divorce. It seems probable, however, that placing value on romantic connectivity over all other factors related to marriage may lead couples to divorce if the relationships fails to provide emotional gratification.

Importantly, while the "love revolution" benefited women in that it gave them more power to determine their own spouse, both men and women were proponents of love-based marriages. Many of the aforementioned male-dominated literary and cultural movements of the nineteenth century centralized emotional satisfaction and the exploration of one's feelings as crucial to achieving one's highest and truest potential. Women were not alone in their insistence that marriage should be a gratifying institution for both husband and wife and by the twentieth-century this idea permeated American culture.

For instance, novelist Upton Sinclair openly touted his belief in the individual's right to marital bliss, and this idea ultimately became central to his divorce.²⁶ Devotedly following her husband's proclamations, Sinclair's wife, Meta, took a lover and thus began one of the most scandalous divorce cases of the early twentieth century. Meta's

²⁶ William Brevda, "Love's Coming-of-Age: The Upton Sinclair-Harry Kemp Divorce Scandal," *North Dakota Quarterly*, 51 (1983): 59-77.

journals, which revealed Sinclair's sexual inadequacies and implied that Sinclair himself had approved her affair, were read in court. In 1911 Sinclair traveled to the Netherlands to obtain a divorce because New York courts refused to grant him one.²⁷ Sinclair's alleged approval of Meta's affair demonstrates the prevalence of romantic ideals by this time; although it compromised his reputation and his masculinity, Sinclair permitted infidelity in order to uphold his commitment to each individual's right to romantic love. Sinclair's case is also another typical, albeit scandalous, example of the spectacular nature of divorce; divorce trials disrupted the private world of marriages and forced litigants to submit their affairs to the scrutiny of the community.

Though men's conceptions of marriage also shifted in favor of companionate unions, the right to legally sever ties with an unwanted spouse was subsumed under the goals of the feminist movement. The conflation of divorce, women's rights and companionate marriage ideals that began in the nineteenth century continued in the twentieth century.²⁸ Feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who was an outspoken supporter of divorce, paved the way for the "New Woman" and suffragists who would fight for changes to divorce legislature in the twentieth century. Cofounder of the New England Women's Suffrage Association, Olympia Brown, traveled across the United

²⁷ It is important to again note the problematic nature of fault based divorce law. Though his attempt was denied, Sinclair was suing his wife for adultery as a means to obtain a divorce. Divorce litigation was always couched in terms of fault and therefore usually required one party to sue the other for a marital crime.

²⁸ In *Beneath the Fault Line: The Popular and Legal Culture of Divorce in Twentieth-Century America* Herbie DiFonzo documents the feminization of divorce and asserts that, from the early twentieth century, divorce in America has been regarded as "an expression of women's growing independence from men" (14).

States in the late 1800s giving speeches that called for, among other goals, more liberal divorce laws.

Women's changing status was regarded as intrinsically related to the growth in divorce rates. By the 1920s intellectuals were publicly addressing the stigma of divorce; magazine and newspaper writers like Dorothy Dix and Clarence Darrow announced the dissipation of the "disgraced woman" and the emergence of liberated divorcees.²⁹ The 1940s and 1950s were rife with discussions about the double standards women faced in the home and the workplace; new publications like *Independent Woman*, for instance, actively defended the rights of working women.³⁰ Following on the heels of publications like *Harper's*, *Literary Digest* and *Good Housekeeping*, cigarette company *Virginia Slims* joined the conversation in the 1970s by publishing a series of opinion polls which asked women to weigh in on the pressing topics of the day. These polls confirmed the effects of the "love revolution" foreshadowed in nineteenth century lithographs. Rather than practical or financial circumstances, contemporary women routinely consider romance, sexual satisfaction, shared values and interests, and love when selecting a spouse. Moreover, twentieth century ideals dictate that lifelong love is a factor in remaining married; falling out of love or shifting desires are not uncommon grounds for divorce. As the following poll shows, in 1974 about half of Caucasian and African American women and men view "no longer being in love" as a sufficient reason to consider divorce:

²⁹ Darrow's "The Divorce Problem" essay was printed in August 1927 in *Vanity Fair* in Aug. 1927 and Dix, who was a popular columnist, was quoted in Lynd and Lynd's *Middletown* (DiFonzo 18).

³⁰ I will expand upon this brief gloss of twentieth century events in later chapters.

Figure 11
Virginia Slims American Women's Opinion Polls 1974

SUFFICIENT REASONS FOR CONSIDERING DIVORCE

	Answers of Women										Answers of Men— Total %
	Total %	White %	Black %	18	30	40	50	8th Grade %	High School %	College %	
				to 29	to 39	to 49	to 59				
Severe drinking problem on part of spouse	54	55	46	53	51	54	57	56	54	54	50
Being in love with someone else	52	51	59	63	53	50	45	46	53	53	52
No longer being in love	49	48	61	59	47	45	45	50	51	44	49
Sexual infidelity on part of spouse	49	50	36	44	51	52	49	40	50	51	39
Lack of communication — not talking about things that matter	44	46	35	54	43	43	39	29	43	57	40
Unsatisfactory sexual relationship	32	32	34	35	35	30	29	26	33	33	37
Not liking the same kind of life, activities, friends, so that there is little in common	27	27	25	32	27	25	24	16	26	36	25
Having different views on whether to have children	21	22	16	25	21	20	18	14	20	28	17
Feeling you have no real identity of your own — that you must be what spouse expects you to be	19	19	20	27	21	18	13	11	18	27	16
Conflict over how money should be handled	17	16	24	17	15	19	17	17	17	18	18
Very different ideas about how children should be raised	15	14	23	18	12	15	15	16	14	18	14
Feeling romance has gone out of marriage	10	9	18	10	9	11	10	15	10	7	14
Conflict over wife wanting to work	5	5	5	6	3	5	6	5	4	7	3
None of these	5	5	3	3	5	6	6	9	4	5	6
Don't know	2	2	3	1	1	1	4	4	2	1	2

Figure 12
Virginia Slims American Women's Opinion Polls 1974

Observation:

While women and men agree for the most part on the reasons for divorce, there are some differences. Men are more concerned about an unsatisfactory sexual relationship in marriage. And they are more apt to overlook infidelity as sufficient reason for divorce.

The young — particularly women — place heavy emphasis on failures of love. For college-educated women, one marital problem overshadows all others: lack of communication between partners.

Black women have different views from white women about what constitutes the breakdown of a marriage. Loss of love or romance looms larger, while sexual infidelity and drinking are taken more in stride.

Attitudes Toward Alimony

Two out of 3 women (66%) feel that if a divorced woman can earn a reasonable income, she should not receive alimony.

Strongest supporters of alimony are women who are black (32%), poor (25%), and those with grade school educations.

Because of these new ideals and the slow de-stigmatization of divorce, the rate of divorce increased steadily throughout the twentieth century, with infrequent plateaus, until it reached an all-time peak in 1981. Some changes occurred in divorce law in the early twentieth century – for instance, almost half of the states implemented some form of living apart stipulation by which a couple could avoid a fault-based divorce by living apart for a set number of years to demonstrate incompatibility. However, the public largely ignored these provisions because the “unappetizing waiting periods” robbed them of time (anywhere between 18 months and 10 years) as single adults (DiFonzo 77). To cope with rising concerns about the psychological aftermath of divorce, especially in regard to children of warring spouses, some states instituted courts that were designed to address family conflicts. The first family court appeared in Ohio in 1941 and other states eventually followed suit. In 1969 the most significant twentieth century change in divorce law occurred when California Governor Ronald Regan signed the Family Law Act (which went into effect in 1970), the first divorce legislature to allow no-fault provisions for divorce. The circumstances and consequences of this event were monumental.

The controversy surrounding no-fault divorce law is addressed in chapter two, which centers on the relationship between twentieth century feminism, divorce, and custody law. Chapter two also focuses on Hollywood film as a critical site of visual representation wherein social attitudes and morays governing divorce procedures (legal and otherwise) are both reinforced and challenged. Having established the legal, religious, and social history of divorce in the United States, I turn now to an investigation

of the ways in which divorce is represented by American filmmakers and novelists. Beginning with nineteenth century lithographs and early divorce novels like William Dean Howells' *A Modern Instance*, divorce has become increasingly prevalent within literary and artistic culture. Novels like Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* were the first to present divorcees while others, like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, remind readers that, particularly before divorce was a socially viable option, women wishing to escape wifedom sometimes turned to suicide.³¹ Importantly, these novels paved the way for the advent of the postdomestic woman.³² Ultimately representations of divorce in twentieth century literature and film provide meaningful insight into the cultural life of this phenomenon.

³¹ Eileen Connell's University of Virginia dissertation *The Age of Experience: Edith Wharton and the "Divorce Question" in Early Twentieth-Century America* presents an interesting overview of the framing of the "divorce question" and investigates the way that divorce factors into Wharton's literature.

³² Wharton's Undine Spragg could be regarded as an early American postdomestic character. Spragg is presented as a gold-digger and therefore she certainly sets the stage for the treatment of postdomestic women in the novels of DeLillo and Hawkes, as discussed in chapter four. Divorcees did appear in early and even pre-twentieth century literature but economic independence is a key factor in comparing these characters with those presented in the postmodern texts examined in chapters three and four. Early American divorcees needed to remarry or find other forms of patronage while permanent independence is a financially viable option for modern postdomestic women.

CHAPTER TWO

Life After Marriage: Divorce, (Anti)Feminism, and the Postdomestic Woman in Contemporary Hollywood Film

She's over 50, divorced, and she sits in night after night after night because available guys her age want . . . somebody that looks [younger]. The over-50 dating scene is geared towards men leaving older women out. And as a result, the women become more and more productive and therefore, more and more interesting. Which, in turn, makes them even less desirable because as we all know, men - especially older men - are threatened and afraid of productive, interesting women. It is just so clear! Single older women as a demographic are about as fucked a group as can ever exist.

– Zoe in *Something's Gotta Give* (dir. Nancy Meyers)

In the majority of films about divorce prior to the 1970s, divorce functions as a plot-organizing device that propels humor and romance. Perhaps because the Hayes Code required films to uphold the sanctity of marriage and the home, mid-century films tend to center on spousal romance.³³ At the heart of these narratives is the fundamental assertion that the squabbling couple belongs together; romantic comedies from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s such as *His Girl Friday* (dir. Howard Hawks), *Divorce American Style* (dir. Bud Yorkin), *The Philadelphia Story* (dir. George Cukor) and its remake *High Society* (dir. Charles Walters), center on heterosexual couples that eventually realize the foolishness of their divorces.³⁴ Even the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers 1934 picture

³³ The Hayes Production Code, which was in effect from 1930-1968, functioned as a device for maintaining moral order, as defined by the general principles of the code, in Hollywood films. From 1930-1934 the code was not heavily enforced and therefore the films produced during that time, such as *Baby Face* (dir. Alfred E. Green), were more scandalous than those made in later decades. After 1934 Production Code Approval was required before a film could be released and thus major censorship of film content began.

³⁴ These films diverge from silent pre-code era films, which were very saucy and often featured bloody violence (particularly in Westerns), scantily clad women, and premarital sex. Before the advent of sound in the late 1920s, physical slapstick films were also very

The Gay Divorcee (dir. Mark Sandrich), which seems in favor of divorce, incorporates the sexy Mimi's pursuit of divorce in order to facilitate humorous shenanigans and song and dance numbers – and the hilarity ensues. The marketing of these films highlighted their comedic nature; for instance the tagline for *High Society* announced the film as “The Hilarious Low-Down on High-Life” and *His Girl Friday*'s tagline proclaims that film to be “The Year's Wildest, Wittiest, Whirlwind of a Love Battle!” Divorce on screen led to absurd adventures, clever dialogue and, sometimes, upbeat songs.

Children were conspicuously absent from these films and, when children did appear, they contributed to the humor of the film (rather than adding emotional weight, as would begin to occur in the later 1970s). For example, in the 1961 version of *The Parent Trap* (dir. David Swift), twin siblings Sharon and Susan are not portrayed as emotionally abused victims, but rather appear to be playful strategists as they propel the narrative via comedic pranks. The opening credits of *The Parent Trap* feature a song performed by Annette Funicello and Tommy Sand that captures the tenor of divorce films of this period; they sing, “If their love is on the skids / you've got to treat your folks like kids / Or your family tree's gonna snap / ... / you gotta rig / ... / The Parent Trap!” Divorce is

common. Theda Bare's “vamp” character in the 1915 silent film *A Fool There Was* (Dir. Frank Powell) is widely considered the first cinematic sex symbol, but even risqué films like Bare's rarely featured divorce. According to filmmaker Erich Kuersten's essay “Dizzy from the Altitude, Happy to Plummet,” Hollywood films produced during the brief time between the advent of sound and the enforcement of the Hayes Code often devalued marriage and instead focused on the redemption of stigmatized mistresses. Kuersten explains that the disastrous depictions of marriage in films like *The Animal Kingdom* (dir. Edward Griffith) and *Possessed* (dir. Clarence Brown) led to the rise of moral reformers and the enforcement of the Hayes Code.

the foil that facilitates comedic plot scenarios and twists; it is the obstacle over which love will inevitably triumph.

Starting with *Kramer Vs. Kramer* (dir. Robert Benton), which debuted in December 1979, a new type of divorce film emerged. These films contrasted sharply with the lighthearted romantic farces of earlier decades and, instead, highlighted the emotional anguish caused by divorce. The legislative films of the 1980s, the cross-dressing comedies of the 1990s, and the morose dramas of the 2000s all find commonality in their thematic attention to the negative psychological and emotional consequences individuals, and particularly children, experience as a result of divorce.

This change in filmic representation of divorce coincides with the growing appeal of second wave feminism. At this time in history women were challenging long-standing political inequalities such as gender-based labor discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace. When the personal became political, domestic space became the site for complex gender debates. Beginning with Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of the social construction of womanhood in *The Second Sex*, activists started articulating gender problems that had never before been publicly addressed or theorized and the voices of second wave feminism began to emerge. Almost fifteen years later, in 1963, Betty Friedan published her groundbreaking text, *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she claims that women are oppressed by limited identity options. Friedan points out that women have long been trapped by the constraints of socially prescribed notions of femininity and that women are oppressed by domesticity. Friedan challenges the notion that women's

identities are inextricably linked to their husbands and children and that the family is the sole source of identity validation and pleasure for women.

The backlash against the ideas of Friedan, Beauvoir, and others was severe and many anti-feminist organizations emerged. STOP ERA was founded by conservative political activist Phyllis Schlafly in 1972 in an effort to halt the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, which was intended to eliminate legal gender-based discrimination. Social backlash against women's transition from the home and into the workforce emerged on many fronts. Women were challenging gender roles and rejecting culturally assigned domestic identities such as those defined by the cult of domesticity, which I will discuss at greater length in chapter three. One mode of backlash came in the form of frequent portrayals of feminism as an attack on masculinity. Patricia Sexton responds to this issue in her 1969 book *The Feminized Male* wherein she asserts that mothers and female schoolteachers are responsible for feminizing boys because they, as women, have been excluded from all other forms of authority and can only exert power over children. Sexton seems to call for a change in the division of labor, which would empower women so that they would not need to assert power by feminizing male children. While Sexton's argument essentially overlaps with the goals of the second wave feminist movement, it also highlights the already controversial relationship between women, power and emasculation. Ten years later second wave feminists would be accused of emasculating their husbands, dismantling "natural" gender roles and, as a result, destroying the nuclear family. The divorce films of this time period reflect the cultural anxiety regarding

changing gender roles. *Kramer Vs. Kramer*, which I will discuss later, in particular, is often viewed as a direct reaction to second wave feminism.

One of the most prominent antifeminist leaders of the 1980s was Connie Marshner, director of the Free Congress Foundation's "family policy" division and founding executive editor of the *Family Protection Report*. Founded in 1977, the Free Congress Foundation (FCF) is a politically and culturally conservative think tank – it boasts endorsements by individuals such as Phyllis Schlafly and Edwin J. Fulner (president of the Heritage Foundation) on its 2008 informational flyer. Marshner also worked for Ronald Regan as a "pro-family" advisor. Within the context of divorce legislature, the term "pro-family" is used to describe the beliefs of conservative thinkers who seek federal protection for the nuclear, heteronormative family structure. Marshner continues to be a powerful anti-feminist presence in her current position as director for the FCF's Center for Governance. During the late 1970s Marshner first launched her claim that the women's rights movement was the enemy of the New Traditional woman. According to Marshner, the New Traditional woman coped with the pressures of modern life while holding fast to the "truths of faith and family," whereas the women's rights woman was "macho" and ruthlessly pursued individual success regardless of the consequences (Klatch 145). Marshner claimed that this new type of woman was aptly depicted in *Kramer Vs. Kramer*'s Joanna, who abandons her son and husband to "find herself."

Contemporary conservative thinkers continue to support the idea that Joanna is an accurate representation of feminist women. Radio host, best-selling author and self-

proclaimed “cultural crusader” Michael Medved claims that *Kramer Vs. Kramer* “could connect with a mass audience through its sensitive and realistic portrayal of fundamentally decent people caught in the grip of a painful divorce” (Medved 127). Medved’s claim that this film’s portrayal of divorcing spouses is “realistic” reveals insight about his understanding of “real” feminists because the progressive Joanna is, in my opinion, mentally unstable, cold, and – as Marchner has stated – “macho.” In other words, according to Medved, *Kramer Vs. Kramer* accurately represents unfeeling feminists and the havoc and trauma they cause their families. Moreover, Medved links the success of this film to its ability to “connect with a mass audience” through the subject of divorce, thereby implying that divorce is a relatable social, rather than private, matter.

In the 1980s, new post-divorce rhetoric and ideals emerged which promoted the passing of joint custody legislation. The notion that children are best served when they are able to continue participating in relationships with both parents became commonly accepted. Though this idea seems reasonable and productive, the way in which it was disseminated was not. This ideal was promoted by father’s rights groups, which argued that men were discriminated against in custody cases because women were assumed to be naturally better caregivers. In order to advance their agenda, these groups propagated the idea that, while some women are good caregivers, divorced women are unfeeling, ruthless and unfit to mother.³⁵

³⁵ According to Scott Coltrane and Neal Hickman, certain claims – such as the joint custody ideal promoted by father’s rights groups - were favorably received based on the groups’ ability to make child custody and support a social issue. In their examination of

Traditionally, in instances of divorce children were considered assets and were legally awarded to the patriarch, but by the twentieth century divorce law had shifted and, in most cases, mothers were awarded child custody. In the mid-1970s father's rights groups began developing the custody debate into a social issue, one in which fathers were routinely said to be victimized and subject to prejudice. In 1979 only five states had joint custody statutes, but by 1988 thirty-four states had adopted various forms of joint custody statutes (Coltrane and Hickman 402). Clearly, father's rights groups were successful in convincing American society of the social nature of custody debates and in depicting custody law as discriminatory against fathers.

Popular film during the 1980s reflected the agenda of father's rights groups.³⁶ *Kramer Vs. Kramer* centers on Ted Kramer (Dustin Hoffman), a successful businessman whose wife, Joanna, (Meryl Streep) unexpectedly leaves him and their young son, Billy (Justin Henry). Almost two years later Joanna reemerges and attempts to take custody of the child and a complex courtroom custody battle ensues. By this time Ted and Billy have bonded, Ted has sacrificed his career for his child, and the two have created a flawed, but wholesome, family unit. In the film Ted is portrayed as a struggling but

divorce discourse, Coltrane and Hickman suggest that effective rhetorical strategies must be invoked in order for the divorce-based personal problems of individuals to be transformed into social problems in need of legal reform. Sociologists (Spector and Kitsuse 1987, Toumlin 1958) have established that advocacy groups must first assert and prove the existence of a condition and create controversy over it. In other words, claims makers must establish a social problem and incite public concern for that problem. After the situation has been constructed as a social problem, the claims makers can propose potential actions to rectify the situation.

³⁶ Although *Kramer Vs. Kramer* debuted in December 1979, it primarily circulated during the 1980s and the film won its five Academy Awards during 1980.

inherently loving father and husband, and Joanna is portrayed as emotionally detached and mentally unstable.

Joanna's mood is a shaping factor in establishing Ted as a victim in need of legal protection. Importantly, Joanna seems perpetually depressed during the film – she rarely laughs, smiles, or expresses joy; in many scenes her eyes are glassy and unexpressive. For instance, during one of the prominent court scenes Joanna unfeelingly allows her attorney to badger Ted. While on the witness stand, Ted is accused of poor parenting by Joanna's attorney who describes an incident in which Billy fell from a playground jungle gym while in Ted's care. Though this scene takes place in a large courtroom and technically consists of a dialogue between Ted and the attorney, the film angles demonstrate that the conversation occurring is actually between Ted and Joanna. The camera transitions between medium shots of Ted and cutaways to medium shots of Joanna; Ted struggles to defend himself as he is bullied by the lawyer and Joanna twiddles her thumbs and plays with her hair. The scene closes with a medium close-up of Joanna averting her eyes from Ted and cuts immediately to Ted who, instead of looking at the lawyer, is gazing at Joanna in despair and shock. The transitions and camera shots highlight the disparity between Ted and Joanna's emotional investment in the scene. Ted's intense, desperate testimony is juxtaposed with Joanna's detached voyeurism and, as a result, the viewer is positioned to identify and sympathize with Ted.

Outside of court, Joanna often appears emotionally distraught and inconsolable, as when she leaves Ted or when she announces her decision *not* to take custody of Billy at the end of the film. Ironically, in the film's emotional final scene, Joanna is calmed by

Ted when she inquires about her appearance and is told she looks “terrific.” It is ironic that Ted must function as the nurturer and, moreover, that his opinion remains a factor in Joanna’s self-esteem, although she claims to have become empowered through her departure.³⁷ Unlike Joanna, Ted supports Billy emotionally by attending his school events, taking him on play-dates to the park, teaching him to ride a bicycle, and rushing him to the emergency room after the aforementioned accident on the local jungle gym. As a parent, Ted certainly appears to be more skilled than Joanna. The script is rich with dialogue that invokes the gender based parenting debates of the time; Ted even complains that he “has to bring home the bacon and cook it, too.” Meanwhile, Joanna vocalizes concerns central to second wave feminism, as she explains the premature ending of her successful career and her desires to continue working during her marriage – desires that were unacceptable to Ted.

The court scene in particular presents dialogue that is directly connected to legislative battles regarding divorce law. During his testimony Ted asks, “What law is it that says a woman is a better parent simply by virtue of her sex?” Here the film is explicitly addressing and calling for reform of divorce laws. At that time the most widely utilized divorce legislation was the Tender Years Doctrine, a law that dictated that during a child’s “tender years” (generally considered to be under the age of thirteen) the child

³⁷ In court Joanna claims that her inability to function as a mother stemmed from her lack of self-esteem and that her self-esteem was linked to Ted’s controlling behavior. Joanna claims that she has been empowered through leaving Ted and asserting her right to have a career and a life apart from motherhood – both of which were important concerns of the second wave feminist movement. Yet, Joanna’s final query about her appearance suggests that her self-esteem is still contingent on Ted’s validation, despite her attainment of the aforementioned feminist goals.

belongs in the custody of the mother. The law was based on the assumption that women were the primary care-givers during childhood and was deeply rooted in gender roles which dictated that women were inherently more nurturing and better equipped to care for children.

Interestingly, the Tender Years Doctrine marks a time in legal history when the feminist agenda and the patriarchal father rights groups' agenda appear to be in alignment. Feminists at that time were working to remove gender-based discrimination from the law and to assert equal rights in the workplace. Fathers' rights groups employed the rhetoric of gender discrimination to develop a claim regarding custody law. However, although both groups were concerned with gender-based discrimination, fathers' rights groups employed stereotypes of bad mothering and cold, frigid wives – pejorative gender based caricatures – to propel their attack against the Tender Years Doctrine.

An amalgamation of the types of horror stories father's right groups promoted in order to advance their agenda can be seen in *Kramer Vs. Kramer*. From the film's first scene Joanna emerges as a bad mother; she loves her son but is portrayed as incompetent, menacing, and dangerously capricious. Joanna abandons her child while he sleeps; without explaining her departure to her son she simply disappears from Billy's life and leaves her (ex)husband to repair the psychological consequences. Later, before initiating the custody battle with Ted, Joanna stalks Billy menacingly from a coffee shop near his elementary school. Though she is simply observing her son from across the street, Joanna seems threatening as she silently leans on a store window, her hands pressed

against the glass as she eerily peers at the children through the city traffic. Joanna's reluctance to approach Billy gives the viewer the impression that she is unsure of herself – perhaps unsure if she belongs with her son, or worse, unsure if she wants him back. The cut shots between Joanna, who hovers alone behind a glass window, and Billy, who talks and laughs among the school children, make the viewer acutely aware of Joanna's disconnection from her son. The physical staging of this scene, which places Joanna's body in a sort of isolated bubble, reflects the character's emotional and mental detachment from her child. Moreover, Joanna's appearance is out of place and unsettling as viewers are confronted with the sharp contrast between her silent stillness and the bustle of the busy street.

The cinematography in *Kramer Vs. Kramer* repeatedly works to cast the ex-wife as dangerous. Another menacing image of Joanna surfaces, for instance, when she reunites with Billy for the first time. Though Billy runs eagerly to his mother when she calls out his name, the camera angle presents her as a dangerous character. Specifically, when Ted sees Joanna, he kneels to speak with his son and the initial shot of Joanna is from this perspective. Because Ted is crouching, the camera is positioned below Joanna. The low-angle wide shot of Joanna gives the viewer the impression of a stiff figure looming in the distance. The jagged branches of bare winter trees curving over her head and Joanna's attire and posture work to cast her as villainous. The stiffness of her stance is enhanced by the behind-the-back positioning of both of her arms and her long trench coat is ominously foreboding. Joanna is visually presented as threatening in this shot. Later, in court she is explicitly charged with the danger she represents when Ted

describes the suffering her departure caused. Ted pleads, “Please, don’t do this to him again” and begs Joanna not to re-traumatize Billy through additional painful changes to Billy’s routines and home life. The dialogue explicitly labels that which the visual cinematic presentation of Joanna has already implied: Joanna is a powerful and dangerous woman who is destructive to her family unit.

While Joanna is depicted in a variety of negative ways, perhaps the most damaging aspect of her character is that she has no culturally recognized motivation for leaving Ted and Billy. Ted is faithful, financially dependable, and never physically aggressive with Joanna or Billy. Apart from her essential inability to function as a wife and mother, Joanna has no socially acceptable cause for abandoning her family.³⁸ This depiction is in keeping with the father’s rights groups’ insistence that men are the perpetual victims of their wives and the custody laws that are predicated on women’s natural abilities to parent. Coltrane and Hickman recognize the “vindictive wife,” a wife who purposefully and unjustifiably torments her husband, as one of the most common horror stories deployed by father’s rights groups. Moreover, the spousal struggle does not take place in the home but rather in the courtroom, subject to witnesses and public adjudication. The public nature of the filmic custody debate emphasizes the issue’s proper place as a genuine *social*, rather than private, issue.

³⁸ Joanna feels unfulfilled at home and this is her rationale for seeking divorce. However, it is important to keep in mind that, until no-fault provisions were introduced in California in 1969, divorce law was contingent upon the verification of a marital crime such as bigamy, cruelty, adultery, or financial abandonment.

In fact, legislative themes run through many divorce films of the 1980s. In addition to *Kramer Vs. Kramer*, which won five Academy Awards, *Irreconcilable Differences* (dir. Charles Shyer) and *The War of the Roses* (dir. Danny DeVito) also garnered popular success and each was nominated for multiple Golden Globe Awards (*Kramer Vs. Kramer*, which earned \$106 million, and *The War of the Roses*, which earned \$83 million, are considered blockbuster hits, while *Irreconcilable Differences* only earned about \$12 million and is considered a minor box office success).³⁹ The public legal thread that runs through these films is evidenced by the court case in *Irreconcilable Differences* and the litigator-narrator of *The War of the Roses*. In *Irreconcilable Differences* a young child named Casey (Drew Barrymore) takes her already-divorced parents to court in an attempt to divorce them so that she can live with her maid. Although the central narrative of the film purports to be about Casey, the parents' struggles lie at the heart of this film. More importantly, the characters' relationships are negotiated via a public court case, again suggesting that family issues are of paramount legal and social concern. Also, while Casey offers several wise arguments in favor of her efforts to divorce her parents, in the end it becomes clear that the only way for Casey, and the family at large, to truly "win" is for her parents to reunite.⁴⁰

³⁹ Box office earnings are taken from the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) and represent gross U.S. revenue for theatre viewing (these amounts exclude rental and foreign sales).

⁴⁰ Interestingly, this film –although maintaining kitsch value and popularity in part due to its young star, Barrymore – was not as successful as other divorce films of the decade. In fact, this film has not been recorded in Digital Video Disk (DVD) format and is unavailable on videocassette in corporate video stores such as *Blockbuster* and

The War of the Roses also paved the way for the developments in divorce rhetoric that would take place during the 1990s. Much like *Kramer Vs. Kramer*, this film showcases a wife character whose behavior is depicted as unjust and cruel. Although the husband's emotional neglect and career-minded nature is implied, the audience is not privy to any clear instances of emotional abuse by him. At best, the women in these films are mentally unstable. While *The War of the Roses* does not contain a custody battle over children (as the children are away at college by the time the parents divorce) it maintains a link to public legal discourse via the lawyer-narrator (Danny DeVito) who tells the story as a warning against divorce. Ultimately the wife character, Barbara Rose (Kathleen Turner) causes the untimely death of herself and her husband, Oliver (Michael Douglas). Throughout the film the message is clear: divorce causes an unbearable amount of stress and trauma and should be avoided at all costs. This film depicts Oliver as a committed and decent husband who is victimized by his violent and uncompromising wife. These elements of the narrative support the father's rights groups' horror stories described by Coltrane and Hickman, which assisted these groups in recasting personal complaints as legitimate social problems.

Hollywood Video (most of which have transferred all in-store films to DVD format). The marginal success of this film in comparison to the aforementioned divorce films from the 1980s suggests that audiences were unreceptive to the vocal child. In terms of economic rewards, spectators responded more favorably to films that focused on parental claims. In other words, children's rights seem to be most important when parents are allowed to speak on their behalf; children's rights significantly increase in value when they are coupled with the interests of a parent. Despite abundant rhetoric regarding children's rights, the film garnered less popular support than films that focused explicitly on parental adult rights. It seems that children's needs are of most import when they catalyze parent's rights – an issue that would become more apparent during the pro-marriage campaign of the 1990s and 2000s.

The divorce films of the 1980s follow the unfolding legislative debates of the time, supporting conservative and patriarchal ideologies. Each of these films depicts divorce-seeking women as neglectful and self-obsessed, at best, and violently destructive, at worst. In her bestseller *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, Susan Faludi claims that: “Usually hidden fears about strong women’s powers are on bold display” in films of the late 1980s, and “the wives are virtual witches, controlling and conquering their husband with a supernatural and deadly precision” (137). By the end of the 1980s the perceived social concern over unfit mothers had caused a dramatic shift in both filmic representation of divorce and court appointed custody arrangements. While the divorce battles of the 1980s were ostensibly about the best interests of the children, a filmic representation of the issue suggests that child custody essentially represents a power struggle between wives and husbands.

Kramer Vs. Kramer has been credited as “the beginning of a social movement of the 1980s which led to reform of the Tender Years Doctrine” (UCLA Divorce Research Archive). The link between this Academy Award winning filmic representation of divorce and the legal changes to custody law during this time period documents the growing public concern regarding divorce. As would become even more apparent during the 1990s and 2000s, women bear the brunt of socially assigned responsibility for failed marriages and dysfunctional children. This idea was already being fostered in *Kramer Vs. Kramer*, as there is significant overlap between the film’s narrative and the rhetoric surrounding divorce law reform created by father’s rights groups at the time; both

representations of divorce insist that women who are unable to remain committed to marriage are also unfit mothers.

The Equivocation of “Pro-Family” and “Anti-Divorce” by Political Conservatives

While some gender based rights groups are still advocating custody reform, the more common agenda regarding divorce in the 1990s and 2000s focuses on family values. The historical trajectory of divorce both culturally and legally has placed various identity groups at the center of divorce victimization. Prior to the twentieth century, children were considered financial assets and were always awarded to men in the rare occasion of divorce. As previously noted, during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century women were awarded custody via the Tender Years Doctrine and fault-based divorce law, which necessitated the victim/victimizer binary. However, by 1981 all states, except for Illinois and South Dakota, had added no-fault provisions to fault options for divorce and by 1988 most states supported joint-custody laws, thus eliminating the institutional victim/victimizer binary of divorce law (Friedman).⁴¹

However, organizations such as The Institute for American Values (IAV), which was founded in 1987, have since asserted that children and the American value system itself are victimized by divorce. While children’s suffering had already been at the

⁴¹ Although most states allow no-fault divorce, it should be noted that many state laws contain complex requirements that often cause conflict and discord amongst petitioners and their children. For instance, in Connecticut divorcing couples must live separately for eighteen months, which is designed to prove incompatibility, before a no-fault divorce will be granted. During this time property and income allocation is pending thereby promoting on-going competition between parties who may use these months to build asset claims based on fault or victimization.

forefront of divorce rhetoric, in the early 1990s family moralists began to link divorce and its subsequent effects on children with declining moral values at a national level. The Institute and its offshoot, the Center for Marriage and Family, claim to “contribute intellectually to strengthening families and civil society in the U.S. and the world” (IAV website). These groups rely on research by conservative scholars like Judith Wallerstein to document the ways in which divorce causes permanent emotional damage to children. However, while many individuals readily accept children’s suffering that is caused by divorce as a genuine social problem that requires attention, the Institute for American Values proposes controversial conservative solutions to the problem.

Multiple psychologists and therapists (Hetherington, Duenwald, Wallerstein, etcetera) have documented the short and long-term negative impacts that divorce has on children. It seems that there is genuine and legitimate concern for the ways in which children are harmed by divorce. However, rather than promoting counseling or other potentially helpful solutions that might aid children in healing from their trauma, conservative groups such as the IAV suggest that divorce itself is the root of the problem and should be less common, if not eliminated altogether. Thus the focus for these groups is not on helping children cope with divorce but on making divorce more difficult to obtain and supporting intact marriages.

In the 1990s pro-marriage groups received a great deal of public attention and funding. Organizations such as the IAV, the National Marriage Project, and the National Fatherhood Initiative received millions of dollars from politically conservative organizations (Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, Hudson Institute) to

promote the pro-marriage agenda (Coltrane 2001, Coltrane and Adams 2003). Citing research from conservative social scientists, these groups communicated through heavy media saturation the idea that lifelong marriage should be supported because it is unambiguously positive for the national community. Men, women, and children benefit from enduring marriage and thus this institution should be bolstered through the support of government subsidies and programs. This agenda makes no room for marriages that are unhealthy or damaging to spouses and children and simply rejects divorce as a viable option because, according to conservative researchers, most notably Maggie Gallagher (president for the National Organization for Marriage), it leads to moral decay and permanent psychological problems.

The IAV has devoted countless research projects to documenting the importance of the nuclear family structure. The research projects produced by the IAV, many of which are based on research previously produced by the IAV, emphasize the relationship between the traditional family unit and healthy psychological development in children. In the last decade the IAV's Center for Marriage and the Family has produced a variety of research reports that "prove" that marriage is directly connected with the positive resolutions of various social problems. For example, a September 2005 report titled *Why Marriage Matters, Second Edition: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences* included the following paragraph headings: "Marriage is important in civilizing men, turning their attention away from dangerous, antisocial or self-centered activities"; "Marriage influences the psychological functioning of adults and children in ways that have important social consequences"; "Marriage benefits poor Americans." Though

these claims may have some merit, the report does not substantiate them by documenting how or why marriage allegedly produces such outcomes. Moreover, *if* marriage produces such results, the IAV report fails to consider ways in which these positive results might be reached by other means and under other circumstances.

Another research report titled “Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages” attempted to prove that divorce does not have a positive emotional outcome, stating as part of its corollary findings that “unhappy marriages were less common than unhappy spouses” (IAV Report). This seemingly oxymoronic conclusion was based on data from the National Survey of Families and Households produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s that statistically showed that three out of four unhappily married adults were married to someone who was happy with the marriage. The Center’s unscholarly and imprecise methodology has led to many dubious claims that are not only subjective but moreover are produced from internal research data. However, the Center’s lack of substantive rigor has not significantly impacted the popularity of its website or publications, as indicated by IAV president David Blankenhorn’s best-selling book *Fatherless America*.

Conservative Politics and the Rhetoric of Children’s Rights

While the IAV claims to be a nonpartisan group, other pro-marriage groups openly proclaim a political agenda. The Family Research Council, for instance, aggressively champions a Judeo-Christian worldview and proudly includes George H.W. Bush as a participating member. Much like the anti-feminist claims put forth by

conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s, anti-gay marriage claims invoke the rhetoric of the victimized child. In a September 2006 report called “The Revolution in Marriage,” the Center for Marriage and Family researchers stated that “the relationship that is most core and vital to children’s very survival, that of parenthood, is being fundamentally redrawn through new laws, proposals, and practices affecting marriage.” Also in 2006 the Family Research Council (FRC) produced a report entitled “Homosexual Parenting: Placing Children at Risk,” which attempted to document the psychological damage caused by single-gender parenting. These reports and a plethora of other articles like them parlay research regarding children’s needs and rights into arguments against gay marriage.

The Family Research Council is openly opposed to divorce and gay marriage and, more specifically, is concerned with “address[ing] the growing social problems brought about by the instability of marriage and no-fault divorce” (FRC History/Mission Statement webpage). Essentially the FRC and IAV have used research regarding children’s rights and needs to fuel public opinion that the institution of heterosexual marriage is a moral good that requires federal protection. The basis for claiming that marriage is a moral good comes from the idea that children are entitled to psychologically healthy and safe home environments – a “consensus” idea in America. Interestingly, the legislative proposals set forth and/or supported by the FRC have little to do with children’s rights. Rather than drafting or supporting legislature that would provide children of divorce (or any method of alternative parenting) with psychological counseling and emotional support, protect children from lengthy or vituperative custody battles, or offer social programs that would assist children in developing self-esteem,

social skills, and/or educational skills, the FVC focuses on other legislative issues. For example, recent topics featured on the FVC website “Legislation” page include stem cell research and Mexico border policy. The “Action Alert” scroll bar on March 27th, 2008 called for readers to “Help Kentucky Pass Three Important Pro-Family Bills” stating “100,000 Petition Signatures [are] Needed to Protect Children.” In other words, the FVC utilizes social concern for children to fuel its own conservative ideology regarding a variety of political issues.

While the rhetoric of children’s needs is widely used by these groups, their political agenda has little to do with helping children; in fact, research suggests that policy changes since the late 1980s have done exactly the opposite. In his important book *Caught in the Crossfire: Kids, Politics, and America’s Future*, Lawrence Grossberg documents the ways in which children’s rights have been compromised in the name of economic growth. For example, school districts are increasingly regarded as businesses and children are bartered in a commodity exchange system that constructs them as consumers within spaces allegedly reserved and protected for education. Specifically, children’s culture and everyday lives are commercialized by corporate advertising in schools, which procures significant state-level financial rewards. The rhetoric of children’s rights often references children’s rights to innocence and childhood; in other words, adults claim to care about children’s rights to “be children.” Yet the implementation of year-round school systems and/or lengthened school year schedules combined with decreasing play/recess time and budget cuts to art, athletic and music programs rob children of these rights. In other words, policy makers claim to believe that

children should be exposed to a variety of play and artistic activities but instead limit creative activities that would help children develop skills beyond those instrumental for typical service industry jobs or low and mid-level jobs in corporate America.

George W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" Education Act is one obvious example of hypocritical political employment of children's rights rhetoric. Interestingly, the act's phrasing was co-opted from previous bills drafted by The Children's Defense Fund, a private, non-profit organization that does not accept governmental support and seeks to be "a voice for children, who cannot vote" and "pay[s] particular attention to the needs of poor and minority children and those with disabilities" (CDF "About Us" webpage). Bush's campaign reappropriated the CDF's phrasing in order to legitimize its own agenda.

The CDF has since attacked Bush's education budgets, which have "slashed programs to help abused and neglected kids, to provide child care for low-income families, and many others aimed at alleviating the terrible situation of so many children in this country" (Grossberg 63). To be specific, the CDF claims that Bush's "2002 budget made 50 percent cuts in 14 programs and froze 21 programs for kids (totaling literally billions of dollars) and the 2003 budget proposed an additional 25 percent cut" (Grossberg 63). Furthermore, welfare reform has left almost two-fifths of America's children living in poverty, with the poverty rate for children under the age of five on the rise. While broadcasting (literally) governmental commitment to protecting children, those in power have committed devastating attacks on children's rights. Changes in policy and budget have dramatically impacted children at a material and everyday level.

Federal policy has egregiously disempowered and harmed children, all while espousing the rhetoric of children's rights and needs, and using this rhetoric to mount an attack on gay marriage and divorce.

Psychosexual Perversion in *The Squid and the Whale*

Interestingly, the two most critically acclaimed and popular divorce films of the 2000s, *The Squid and the Whale* (dir. Noah Baumbach) and *The Royal Tennenbaums* (dir. Wes Anderson), perform some of the ideological work that is the project of conservative organizations like the Institute for American Values and Family Values Council.⁴² Excluding divorce films featuring minority families, which I will discuss in part later, recent divorce films reveal the grim and perverse consequences children suffer as a result of divorce. For example, *The Royal Tennenbaums* (2001) centers on a dysfunctional family whose three children are emotionally and psychologically crippled when their parent's marriage disintegrates. Prior to their parent's separation, the children are prodigies – financial, literary and athletic geniuses, respectively. Post-separation the children develop into depressed, suicidal and perverse adults.

The Squid and the Whale also focuses on parental divorce's impact on children.

This film circulated amongst "Indie" film viewers and critics and was nominated for

⁴² *The Royal Tennenbaums* was the most financially successful divorce film of the 2000s thus far, grossing about \$53 million. While *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003) and *Le Divorce* (2003) both out-grossed *The Squid and the Whale*, these films are not considered blockbuster successes based on their respective budget/gross ratios. For example, *Irreconcilable Differences* grossed about \$35 million but had an estimated budget of \$60 million. *The Squid and the Whale*, on the other hand, is considered a very successful independent film as it earned two Sundance Film Festival Awards and earned \$7 million, more than quadrupling its \$1.5 million budget (IMDB Box Office Reports).

several Independent Spirit Awards, the criterion for which requires that the film must have: “Original, provocative subject matter; Uniqueness of vision; [and] Economy of means” (Indiewire.com). The film is also recognized as a semi-autobiographical retelling of director Noah Baumbach’s childhood. *The Squid and the Whale* was shot on Super 16 millimeter film and predominantly relied on a handheld camera. The “Indie” reputation of the film, its autobiographical nature, and its use of a handheld camera combine to give the film a sense of authenticity. The film was widely reviewed as realistic and revealing; Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* said the film displayed “unsparing honesty.” Clearly then, this film was widely received by viewers as an authentic and true representation of children’s experiences of divorce in America. The film’s dismal portrayal of post-divorce family life resonates with audiences and, while the film communicates a different, albeit equally conservative, political message than do the IAV and FVC, critics and viewers alike seemed to feel that it convincingly documents the psychological and emotional devastation experienced by children of divorce.

While much can be discerned about the film by examining its circulation and reception, *The Squid and the Whale* is also particularly well suited to a psychoanalytic analysis of its narrative. This film tells the story of two boys coping with their parent’s divorce in Brooklyn in 1986. The father, Bernard Berkman (Jeff Daniels), is parsimonious and condescending and the mother, Joan (Laura Linney), has been unfaithful to him. The younger child, Frank, is so traumatized by the divorce and subsequent feuding and neglect that he begins secretly drinking alcohol and ejaculating on public property, such as library books. The teen-aged son, Walt, experiences powerful

father-worship and mother-hatred throughout the film, but eventually distances himself from his father in the film's final scenes.

The boys each undergo compelling and painful transformations in the film. From the beginning of the narrative, books represent the power struggle between Bernard and Joan, both of whom have doctorate degrees in literature. Several scenes suggest the symbolic nature of books; for instance, early in the film Joan begins hiding *her* books from Bernard under Frank's bed, much to his confusion. Later Bernard signs a copy of his famous novel and gives it to Walt, who is obsessed by the shifting literary fame of his parents. Also, throughout the film Walt regurgitates his father's ideas about literature in order to impress others and bolster his own self-image, despite the fact that he has not read any of the books about which he professes to be knowledgeable. Thus books seem to contain knowledge that the children cannot access or understand. Books represent the private and controversial world of their parents. Also, books are especially representative of the parent's connection with one another; Walt feels that his father "introduced" his mother to writing and books, and Bernard judges Joan's new relationship harshly because she is dating a philistine, or as he phrases it, "someone who isn't interested in books."

In many ways, the children's relationship with books represents their respective efforts to cope with the ending of their parent's marriage and the knowledge that has emerged within their new family structure. More specifically, each child must cope with the resurfacing of the sexualized parent, as both Joan and Bernard are sexually active soon after the divorce. Because new suitors are involved, each child must renegotiate the child/parent psychosexual relationship, which, as Freud states, should have been resolved

during infancy. In the film, this process, which should have been “completed before puberty” is portrayed as perverse and unnatural (“Femininity” 103). For example, Frank unconsciously seeks to reassert his presence within the family by masturbating and smearing books, symbols of his parents union, with his sperm. Frank’s sexual development is stunted and he regresses to a point at which his sexual identity is primarily linked to desire and anger regarding his parents. The books serve as fetish objects that rekindle Frank’s feelings of emotional connectedness with his parents. As a result of their divorce and subsequent reemergence as sexual individuals, Frank is unable to redirect his sexual desire and project it elsewhere, onto more socially acceptable objects of desire.

Walt’s sexual development is also complicated and tainted with confusion as he and his father simultaneously develop sexual desire for Lili, a university student enrolled in one of Bernard’s courses who temporarily lives with Bernard and the boys (who are moving between parental homes due to a joint custody arrangement). Walt and Bernard’s overlap of sexual desire suggests the way in which, again, divorce interrupts and perverts children’s sexual identity development. Walt’s idealization of his father and identification with his father’s persona and desires leads to increasing sexual tension in his relationship with his mother. Joan’s affairs and post-divorce liaison become for Walt a personal sexual betrayal, and rather than criticizing Joan based on her (in)ability to mother him, Walt expresses his anger by calling her a “whore” and “slut.” Walt verbally positions his mother within an explicitly erotic framework, thus consciously articulating the desire to “bring his mother (who is the subject of the most intense sexual curiosity)

into situations of secret infidelity and into secret love-affairs” (“Family Romances” 199). These desires, however, according to Freud’s description of normal development, should only be addressed in fantasies and dreams. Walt’s anger at his mother is directly connected to repressed sexual energy that has remerged as a result of his parent’s divorce and the subsequent interruption of his psychosexual development.

Walt’s relationship with his mother is also expressed via the film’s title, *The Squid and the Whale*. The title is drawn from a childhood experience described by Walt wherein he and his mother visit the American Museum of Natural History and enter a room displaying an enormous diorama of a sperm whale and giant squid entangled in a vicious fight. Walt recalls being unable to look at the display because it was “too scary” but says that each time they visited the museum, he would ask his mother to recount the scene later that night. Walt states that hearing about the squid and the whale from his mother was not frightening and was even fun. Walt’s description of his mother/son bonding experiences reveals much about the film’s understanding of women’s relationship to their children’s psychological welfare.

Walt’s inability to face the squid and the whale display can be interpreted in a variety of ways. First, the squid and the whale represent the scientific hierarchy of species, the food chain, and the violent nature of the natural world. The brutal fighting is terrifying and too difficult for Walt to face directly. The squid and the whale also symbolize Walt’s parents, two powerhouse figures attempting to destroy one another. Though the creatures are not explicitly gendered, the masculine association of the sperm whale suggests that this creature represents Walt’s father. This interpretation also works

because the squid, though it fights aggressively with the whale, is dwarfed by the whale's massive size in the same way that Joan's literary abilities are dwarfed by the largeness of Bernard's success and reputation. More broadly, the frightening display seems to make a claim about the naturalness of strife and conflict within all relationships.

Walt's response to the display reveals important aspects of his relationship with his mother. During his initial description of the squid and the whale Walt recalls his mother's sheltering and protective presence and, when retelling the story, he develops newfound affection for her. At the end of the film Walt visits the museum again and the final scene of the film shows Walt approaching and standing in front of the squid and the whale, looking directly at them for the first time. Walt has come to the realization that his interaction with frightening aspects of the world can no longer be mediated through his mother, that she can no longer be relied upon to protect or guard him. Importantly, the changes in Joan's relationships with her children are not linked to the aging of the children; rather, these changes are explicitly linked to her divorce from Bernard. Divorce is the event that disrupts and alters the family dynamics. Thus Joan's decision to divorce Bernard also modifies her relationship with Walt and Frank, transforming her from a protective caregiver into a sexualized deserter.

Via the squid and whale theme, this film portrays divorce as a mother's decision to stop protecting her children. Rather than shielding Walt from the brutally painful reality of the world, Joan has abandoned him to precipitately face the frightening scene without help. Importantly, the relevance of the squid and whale display is set up earlier in the narrative during a conversation between Walt and a therapist. The therapist asks

Walt to describe a pleasant childhood memory and Walt recalls trips to the museum with his mother in which he felt “like [they] were pals” as she protected him from the scary display that is “less scary” because of her. The therapist asks, “Where was your father during all of this?” and notes that Walt did not mention his father in the story. Upon reflection, Walt cannot recall where his father was and stumbles over his words as he seems to realize that his father was not a part of the childhood events through which he was imbued with a sense of safety and happiness. While the film does suggest that Bernard is a terrible father, Walt’s story also suggests that – because his father offered him little emotional or psychological support throughout his childhood – the divorce affects the mother/son relationship much more significantly than the father/son relationship.

In this way the film reinforces traditional, patriarchal ideas about femininity and women. Although divorce law and film for the last several decades have emphasized fathers’ abilities to parent and emotionally nurture children, clearly mothers still bear more socially and psychologically implicit responsibility for their children. Although the film highlights the imperfections of both parents and indicates that the divorce was the fault of both Joan and Bernard, only Joan is linked to the image of the abandoned child. Although Bernard is not innocent or particularly likable, an analysis of the film’s symbolic and psychological elements suggests that he is not responsible for the emotional and psychological damage to his children that has been caused as a result of the divorce. Essentially, although neither parent is at fault for causing the divorce, the film suggests that Joan should have prevented it in order to protect her children.

At the end of the film Walt stands in front of the display and appears tiny and fragile while the enormous exhibit looms in the background. As the shots change between close-ups of Walt's face, the fighting beasts, and a long shot of the empty, sterile room, a blue light emanates that gives the viewer a sense of the somber and melancholy tenor of this moment. "Street Hustle," Lou Reed's overtly sexual song about a woman who pays for sex and then dies plays throughout the scene. The explicit lyrics of this song make clear that, upon this visit to the museum, Walt is fully exposed to sexual, violent, and terrifying force of the battling beasts.⁴³ Walt needs his mother to protect him from the ugly and frightening reality represented by the squid and the whale, yet he is forced to prematurely face the terrifying image alone.

Placing this psychoanalytic examination of the film in conjunction with its critical and popular reception suggests that *The Squid and the Whale* presents an "authentic" account of the ways in which divorce causes sexual perversion and stunted psychological growth in children. The film's implication of divorce in causing psychosexual dysfunction in children reinforces the "child as victim" trope that has risen in popularity in the last thirty years (Coltrane and Adams 366).⁴⁴ At first glance, *The Squid and the Whale* appears to be simply reinforcing the public's understanding and awareness of this

⁴³ The song is graphically sexual, especially in the later lyrics when Reed uses derogatory words like "cunt." The section of the song that we hear before the film cuts abruptly to black is: "Waltzing Matilda whipped out her wallet / Sexy boys smiled in dismay / She took out four twenties, 'cause she liked brown figures / Everybody screamed for a day / Oh, babe, I'm on fire and, you know that I admire your body."

⁴⁴ Media saturation of the public sphere with divorce horror stories, kidnapping, and child abuse have institutionalized the child as victim image prevalent in recent history. Child victimization is a considered a consensus issue, a problem that most Americans believe requires attention.

problem. However, upon closer consideration of the film a different political statement emerges.

Some conservative thinkers feel the representation of family and divorce in films such as *The Squid and the Whale* offer an attack on marriage: “Hollywood’s current fascination with the most disastrous, bizarre, and destructive family situations goes well beyond the normal tendency to focus on dramatic, real-life difficulties and amounts to a stacked deck against the very institution of marriage” (Medved 127). However, a psychoanalytic reading suggests that these films are very much in-keeping with conservative ideology. The film does not forge an attack on marriage, as Medved would have us believe; rather it mounts an attack on women. Walt’s memories of and subsequent visit to see the squid and the whale condemn his mother for abandoning and failing to protect her child. The film reinforces traditional gender roles, which dictate that women bear ultimate responsibility for children’s emotional and mental wellbeing. Despite legislative developments that allegedly eliminate gender-bias within divorce law, this film suggests that gender is very much at the heart of parenting and reveals the ways in which American culture is tenaciously attached to longstanding inequalities that implicate mothers while acquitting fathers of responsibility for their children’s emotional and psychological well-being.

Minority Women in Divorce Films

The close readings of *Kramer Versus Kramer* and *The Squid and the Whale* I have provided offer meaningful insights into the relationship between divorce film, gender and

children. Yet, in taking a broader look at the topic of divorce in film another vital area of investigation emerges. Specifically, it is necessary to examine the way that race is situated within divorce film and to consider what meanings might be deduced from the lack of minority figures in these films.

The dearth of non-white families in Hollywood films about divorce points to the centrality of whiteness in cultural conceptions of the American family. One might presume that the absence of minority families on screen in divorce films suggests the cohesiveness or wholeness of such families; one might assume that minority families rarely experience parental marital dissolution, but statistics show that this is not the case.⁴⁵ Rather, the lack of minority figures in divorce films calls attention to race as a primary signifier in American family ideals and in particular it highlights the sinister history of slavery in America. Minority families have always been excluded from cultural idealizations of family in America but African American families have a particularly vexed relationship with American family ideals due to the historical legacy of slavery.

The enforced separation of African Americans from their biological family members via forced family dissolution and legal disruption of marriages disrupted the notion of family bonds and called into question the very nature of kinship itself. Hortense Spillers puts it best in her pivotal essay, *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, "In the context of the United States the enslaved child becomes the man/woman on the boundary whose family status has yet to be defined. This enforced state of breach is another

⁴⁵ See chapter three for statistical data on African American families.

instance of vestibular cultural formation where ‘kinship’ loses meaning *since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by property relations*” (639, italics in the original). African American family lines were forcibly redrawn during slavery, thus resulting in (while simultaneously stemming from) the idea that minority families are more porous and fluctuating than white families, which maintain fixed kinship delineations. This cultural conception of African American families as shifting has become a lasting idea in American society, which continues to imagine such families as detached from normative kinship regulations that dominate white family structuring.⁴⁶

In *The Sociology of Marriage and the Family*, Scott Coltrane and Randall Collins assert that the family unit has been the principal organizing entity in American society. This unit has historically been imagined as a white, middle-class family consisting of two parents, and (often) two children. The divorce films featuring African American protagonists show the way that this ideal has been detrimental to black families.⁴⁷ During

⁴⁶ Slavery’s influence on family formations remains under-addressed even today as academics strive to explain divorce’s impact on families. For instance, in their essay “Restructuring African American Families in the 1990s,” sociologists Barker and Hill claim that any understanding of divorce must be rooted in the important fact that marriage is a less organic bond than parenting (they rely on this idea to assist children in coping with divorce). However, this “important” idea, which seems essential in regard to white families, is rendered irrelevant in relation to black families within the context of slavery. Biological bonds were inconsequential and continually subordinated to property relations during slavery, and therefore Barker and Hill’s kind of family sociology may not be applicable to African American families even today.

⁴⁷ I have opted to focus on black family films not because I believe they are necessarily representative of trends established in films about all minorities, though they may be. Rather, this decision is motivated by the unique historical background of African Americans which, I believe, has caused black families to experience a different relationship to assimilation practices than that experienced by other non-western American subgroups. Moreover, while there are relatively few African American divorce

slavery African American families were prevented from participating in structuring their own family relationships, and after slavery African American families were encouraged to embrace the dominant American conception of family. However, the two divorce films I have selected that feature African American families highlight heroines who attempt to delineate family relationships according to their own desires, regardless of cultural norms.⁴⁸

The 1998 film *How Stella Got her Groove Back* (dir. Kevin Rodney Sullivan) and the 2005 film *Tyler Perry's Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (dir. Darren Grant) both feature female protagonists attempting to heal from the wounds of divorce and find personal fulfillment. Interestingly, both women are able to find happiness via new relationships that enable them to reconnect with their black roots. Stella's young Jamaican lover, Winston, is disconnected from the capitalist concerns of American society and instead offers an exuberant, simple worldview that is portrayed as more authentically African than Stella's rigid persona and views. Likewise, Helen, the

films, there are almost no divorce films featuring Asian or Hispanic families; although, films like *The Joy Luck Club* or *Like Water for Chocolate*, which center of family dynamics, may be peripherally appropriate for this chapter.

⁴⁸ It is important to acknowledge that the selection of these films was somewhat arbitrary. In my search for divorce films featuring African American families, I found several films that feature children with single parents such as *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), women negotiating relationships with one another as in *Soul Food* (1997), and women struggling with relationships with men, as in *Waiting to Exhale* (1995). However, while some of these films feature divorced or divorcing couples, I would argue that none of them are about divorce (though in *Waiting to Exhale*, one character's husband leaves her for a white woman). Furthermore, I do not believe that *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* should be described as a divorce film. However, because it contends with the same issues as those described above and also centralizes a divorced woman, I feel that it is the most appropriate sample from the black family film genre and pairs well with *Tyler Perry's Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, which I see as a divorce film.

protagonist of *Tyler Perry's Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, is able to reconnect with the lively “ghetto” neighborhood of her childhood via Orlando, a blue-collar worker who is marked as urban or “from the streets” by his personality and “corn-row” hairstyle.

Winston and Orlando enable Stella and Helen to reconnect with (what are presented as) their authentic black identities. These films suggest that reconnecting to race can resolve trauma caused by divorce and will interrupt the process of mimicry of and conformity to exclusionary family ideals associated with white America.

Stella and Helen eventually detach emotionally from their wealthy breadwinner husbands and reject nuclear American family structuring. Through the reconstruction of alternative family units, these films denaturalize contemporary ideals. In order to recreate authentic family bonds and relationships, African Americans must cast off both the forced illegitimacy of the black family unit in America and the family ideals set forth by white America. The women in these films are eventually able to reconstruct family units that, in both cases, do not fall into the normative white nuclear family ideal. Stella's new family consists of her young son, herself and her Jamaican lover, who is over twenty years her junior. Helen's new family consists of her urban, blue-collar lover and an extended family network of relatives and friends, including a drug addicted cousin-in-law and a cantankerous matriarch. Only by acknowledging their own desires can Stella and Helen form families that validate their racial identities and offer personal fulfillment.

It is important to place Stella and Helen in conversation with their white female counterparts. In divorce films featuring white families, the women are generally

demonized and placed at fault for the divorce. The wives in these films are portrayed as incompetent or vindictive, and are ultimately complicit in the negative effects of divorce on their children and on American culture. In *How Stella Got her Groove Back* and *Tyler Perry's Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, Stella and Helen are unambiguously marked as victims. Because of her divorce, Stella supports her son alone and is thus increasingly overworked, and Helen is violently physically abused by her cruel husband. The unmistakable victimization of black female heroines, paired with the demonizing of white female protagonists, points to the complex intersections between race and gender within conceptions of family in America.

According to my reading of divorce films, in films featuring white families, white women destroy American family ideals, which are portrayed as wholly good and productive, whereas in films featuring black families, black women are destroyed by American family ideals, which are portrayed as repressive and counterintuitive. Both types of portrayals are disempowering to women but black women's film narratives offer the protagonists the opportunity for redemption. The dramatic victimization of the black female heroine suggests that she is less responsible for, and should be less invested in, upholding traditional American family patterns. As a result of racism, "black relationships in the United States [have been] repatterned to resemble more closely community between white subjects" (Holland 49). This "repatterning" is an imposed regulation of form and must be rejected. These films' narratives encourage black women to disconnect from an idealization of family that has never centralized or served black women by suggesting that African American women should cast off socially prescribed

mandates and instead create alternative family relationships according to their own desires. As slavery in America de-legitimized African American kinship relations, so must African American women denaturalize ideals of family that preference white subjectivities.

Ultimately, however, these films also suggest that, rather than privileging one race over another, American notions of family must expand to allow for cultural diversity. Through Helen's experiences with her husband/ex-husband, Charles, and her new boyfriend/fiancé, Orlando, Tyler's Perry's film makes a particularly interesting argument about the modern black family and its relationship to whiteness. Perry's film world is insulated; there are very few non-black characters in the film and no white main characters. As such, the film's conflict exists not between African Americans and other races but rather within the African American community itself.

Based on his violent and cruel treatment of Helen, Charles is clearly the "bad guy" in this film. Yet, these crimes are placed on equal footing with other ways in which he has traumatized Helen. For instance, Charles strives to disassociate himself and Helen from the black community in which they met; Helen explains: "He has alienated me from my entire family. He made me put my mother in a home because she didn't fit into his American dream." Charles's understanding of the American dream is not explicitly tethered to whiteness but, importantly, it is disassociated from blackness – both literally, in the form of family members, and figuratively, in the form of a past that reminds him of his race. Charles comes to identity by labeling what he is *not* – he is not part of black culture.

In her 1978 book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* Michelle Wallace claims “there is a profound distrust, if not hatred” between black men and women (13). In the book’s 1990 reprint, Wallace adds an introduction that tempers and clarifies some of her original claims. About the above quote, she says:

I think it is true to some degree that as the men of an ethnic group become middle-class, educated and prosperous in America, they may grow to resent in an unconscious way the working-class women of a prior generation - more specifically their mothers - who remained behind and who may come psychologically to represent to them the old ways before assimilation and success.

(xxiv)

Indeed, Helen’s family – which consists of criminals, junkies, and a bible-thumping mother – reminds Charles from where (and who) he has come. Helen’s commentary makes the relationship between Charles’s new and old lives clear; she says: “With every dime and every case, he has changed” and later, “Charles wanted us to move away from anything that reminded him of the past.” The sentence structure of the dialogue deliberately labels Charles as the agent of change; he is not a passive victim who is altered by money, he has actively pursued money to enable changes he desired for himself. Charles seeks wealth and prestige because he views them as antithetical to blackness and, therefore, instrumental in erasing his own history.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Though Charles strives for and represents a lifestyle that purports a kind of implied whiteness, it is important to note that there is nothing about his identity that is explicitly white. Charles’s life choices are *stereotypically* white: he is an affluent attorney, he lives in a mansion on an expansive plot of land in suburbia, and he does not have daily contact with extended family. Though these characteristics are culturally marked as typical of

Though at first glance it would seem that Charles is striving to become white, the film resists this reading by featuring a Latina as Charles's mistress and the mother of his children. The fact that this film is not about Charles's pursuit of whiteness but instead about his hatred of blackness is crystallized during a conversation between Charles and a black criminal named Mr. Jackson. Mr. Jackson offers Charles bribery money in exchange for a guaranteed reprieve in court and Charles responds by explaining, "I don't deal with your kind anymore." Mr. Jackson replies angrily, "My kind? Brotha, before you started defending all these rich white boys it was *my kind* that got you down." Though Charles expresses aversion to Mr. Jackson's illegal doings, it is clear from their conversation that race is a prevalent factor in defining his disgust for Mr. Jackson's "kind." Moreover, Charles's all-inclusive reference to "your kind" indicates that he views blackness and crime as conflated.

Though Helen does not explicitly align her views with Charles's, she submits to his will and loses contact with her family. During their marriage Helen's relationship with her family and the black community of her childhood is almost nonexistent, she is physically removed from black neighborhoods and emotionally cut off from her friends and relatives. Though she is surrounded by acquaintances (many of whom are black) and accompanied by her husband, the first scene of the film reveals Helen's feelings of isolation. As Charles professes his gratitude to his wife in an award acceptance speech and fellow audience members applaud, Helen narrates her feelings of loneliness and

white men, they are no more inherently white than poverty is inherently black; that is, though these identity features and social positions are historically associated with particular ethnic groups, they are not natural. As Stuart Hall notes, we cannot mistake what is historical and cultural for what is biological and genetic (27).

insecurity in an inner monologue: “To look at us you would think that we’ve got it all together, but looks can be deceiving.” Helen desires a genuine, loving relationship with her husband and attempts to bond with her colleagues, but it is clear that she feels that she and her husband are putting on a show. The sharp contrast between Helen’s melancholy voiceover and the cheering audience forces the viewer to recognize Helen’s longing for integration and connection. It is through Orlando that Helen reunites with her true self and comes to equate blackness with intimacy.

After Helen temporarily moves in with her grandmother, Madea, Helen chooses to participate in activities that culturally represent blackness, such as going to church and dancing to jazz and rhythm and blues music, as a way of healing from her past trauma. At one point Helen narrates, “I find myself laughing more . . . that’s it, I’m finding myself,” and viewers get a glimpse of our protagonist working as a waitress as she sports a new haircut that emphasizes her curly black hair.⁵⁰ For Helen to heal from the wounds of her bad marriage, she must learn to love herself and negotiate her own relationship with the cultural markers of her race.

Unlike Charles, who makes it clear that Helen’s body is undesirable to him, Orlando sees in Helen “a beautiful black woman.” Though Helen is young, fit, and attractive, Charles states that he has not “touched [her] in years,” while Orlando’s positive perception of Helen’s body is integrally linked to her race. Helen actively compares Charles and Orlando throughout the film: Charles was supposed to be her

⁵⁰ In the film’s early scenes when she is still living with Charles, Helen straightens her hair or pulls it back. The new haircut and uniform (as opposed to the designer gowns of earlier scenes) symbolize Helen’s psychological shift.

knight in shining armor but Orlando turns out to be the fairytale hero and Charles is callous and cruel while Orlando is “strong, beautiful, sensitive, and Christian.” Orlando is an ideal man not only because he is kind but, more significantly, because he loves his race and its cultural signifiers. Through Orlando, those cultural signifiers take on positive meanings.

Early in the film the viewer is privy to Charles’s expansive, lonely mansion but, later, Helen experiences true intimacy when she visits Orlando’s apartment. While lying in Orlando’s arms, Helen narrates that they wanted to make love but instead “he gave me something better; he gave me intimacy” and then, “I thank Charles because, if he hadn’t been such a terrible man to me, I wouldn’t know what a good one feels like.” Though Helen explicitly compares Charles and Orlando, it is clear that she is contrasting more than their personalities. Helen’s emotional closeness with Orlando is represented by his cozy couch and tiny patio dinner table, which force the viewer to recall Charles’s massive bed and austere wooden dining table. On Orlando’s balcony Helen is immersed in the downtown neighborhood, while Charles’s mansion, on the other hand, had isolated her from the community. Charles despises black culture, but Orlando embraces it and helps Helen to reconnect with it. Ultimately the viewer is guided to believe that Helen has come to value her race and its cultural markers as she lies blissfully in Orlando’s arms while soft, jazz saxophone music – an iconic sound that represents black culture – plays in the background until the scene fades to black.

Through Orlando, viewers come to see that the American dream can be achieved – can fit – within an environment that is traditionally associated with blackness. Orlando

is a blue-collar worker who labors 12 hours a day and earns enough to live comfortably. Importantly, he does not see his financial success and his race as mutually exclusive. Charles views success as represented by his departure and separation from the black community; Orlando views success as investing his money back into that community, as evidenced by his favorite jazz bar, *Chandra's*. Orlando's pursuit of happiness and prosperity entails marrying a beautiful black woman and settling together, near family and friends, in their community.

Helen reconnects with her past and works to help Charles (who has since suffered a shooting that leaves him conveniently paralyzed for a brief time) dismantle the psychological association between blackness and failure that has caused him to hate himself, Helen, and their community. The film's argument, then, is not solely about race and in fact is more explicitly about culture: to stop hating one's race – one's skin color and body – one must stop hating the cultural markers of race.

When discussing self-loathing in the black community Michelle Wallace concludes that one's relationship with one's family and past significantly shapes our understandings of race as adults. Like Charles, Wallace came to see her background as shameful yet, later in life, she concludes that her shame was derived from the common beliefs that, first, black and white families were very different and, second, black families needed to conform to be more like white families.⁵¹ Wallace ultimately concludes that black and white families are not entirely different and that, regardless, cultural diversity must be understood as necessary and positive: "The problem was not with the black

⁵¹ Wallace states that these ideas were propagated, in part, by the Moynihan report, which I will discuss in chapter three.

family but with the family; not with “black” or “white” culture but with the fact that in the U.S. cultural diversity is thought of as something superficial that we need to get rid of” (xxx). In other words, the goal of African Americans is not to hate or reject whiteness, but rather to stop hating blackness and to make room for it in their lives. Instead of trying to erase racial difference, we must celebrate it.

The absence of minority families in Hollywood divorce films calls attention to our collective unwillingness to allow for cultural diversity in shaping modern notions of the American family. It is easy to find a film featuring black actors that is about rap, social violence, sports, or sex, but black family films remain uncommon because the black family continues to be peripheral to our national understanding of family. In *How Stella Got her Groove Back* and *Tyler Perry’s Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, Stella and Helen are able to heal from the wounds of divorce by reconnecting with their African/African American roots and sculpting new, alternative family structures that do not adhere to cultural dictums. By delineating their own bonds and learning to love their cultural backgrounds, these black women emerge as powerful heroines. Hortense Spillers asserts that understandings of African American identity should be traced through the maternal and argues that African Americans must engage in a reworking of genealogy. Perhaps cultural conceptions of African American families are following this trajectory as Helen and Stella participate in creating their own relationship structures, both of which place powerful women at the head of the family.

Undesirability and the Transformative Process in *Something’s Gotta Give*

Unlike many of the more subtle films examined in the foregoing discussion of divorce and family in Hollywood cinema, *Something's Gotta Give* (dir. Nancy Meyers) overtly tackles gender and cultural issues that are particularly relevant to divorced women. This Caucasian-centered romantic comedy centers on the relationship between Erica Edwards (Diane Keaton), a successful middle-aged playwright, and Harry Sanborn (Jack Nicholson), a sixty-three year old music mogul who never dates women over thirty years of age. *Something's Gotta Give* explicitly announces its interest in advancing feminist thinking about divorced, middle-aged women through provocative dialogue. For instance, Zoe, the protagonist's sister and a Women's Studies professor at Columbia University, articulates early in the film the issues divorced women over fifty experience in regard to desirability. Zoe states that, because men exclude divorced older women from the dating scene, these women are able to "become more and more productive and, therefore, more and more interesting, which, in turn, makes them even less desirable because, as we all know, men – especially older men – are threatened and deathly afraid of productive and interesting women." Here and elsewhere in the film, Zoe explicitly subjects social interactions to feminist scrutiny, in this scene gesturing toward the Freudian concept of castration anxiety, which has been recuperated by psychoanalytic feminists such as Laura Mulvey. Specifically, Zoe's dialogue calls attention to the fear that men feel toward women, especially empowered, single women, whose independence from heterosexual coupling intensifies man's castration anxiety because it indicates his loss of phallic power.

Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" provides an insightful lens through which we can analyze the castration anxiety showcased in this film. In the initial "meeting" scene, in which the main cast members join on screen for the first time, Erica returns to her house in the Hamptons to find Harry rummaging through her refrigerator. Not realizing that Harry has been brought to the house by her daughter, Marin, Erica mistakes him for a burglar and directs her sister Zoe to grab a kitchen knife while she calls the police. Sexual difference is at the forefront visually and verbally in this scene as Harry stands in the kitchen, scantily dressed, while the women gesture toward him threateningly with a large, shiny knife and a phallic cordless phone. The situation is humorously resolved when Marin interrupts the scene and explains to her mother that Harry is her date. Erica apologizes and Harry responds by mockingly describing her behavior as "very strong, very macho." Harry even tells Erica, "If I ever catch a guy in his underwear in my freezer, I hope I'm half the man you were." Clearly, in this scene Erica represents the anxiety that women have always represented, "her lack of a penis, [implies] a threat of castration and hence unpleasure" (Mulvey 64). Yet, Erica does not merely connote sexual difference based on her biological sexuality, she also signifies the castration threat by wielding a phallic instrument (the phone), and holding power over the man in the scene, who has been psychologically castrated but may also be literally castrated by Zoe's huge knife.

According to Mulvey, the fear and "unpleasure" evoked by women is mitigated or "escaped" by the process of scopophilia. Woman's erotic impact enables male viewers and characters to cope with castration anxiety but, in this film, Erica is explicitly marked

as absent of erotic spectacle. Erica is not, as Mulvey puts it, “pleasurable in form,” according to the characters within the film and American cultural standards of feminine beauty, which are based on youth. Erica has already been identified as the opposite of Harry’s “type,” and is dressed in a frumpy white sweatshirt, which appears overly conservative next to her daughter’s bikini and her sister’s fitted T-shirt and trendy pigtail hairstyle. Zoe later describes Erica as “staying in night after night” without any dating options and Erica herself explicitly confirms that she is not sexy. Thus, Erica, a middle aged postdomestic woman, represents a castration threat without mitigating that threat via visual pleasure. Erica is the feminine subject of this romantic comedy, yet she resists and is rejected by the voyeuristic male gaze.

I want to stress here that in regard to Erica’s relationship with desire, her status as a postdomestic woman is as significant as her status as an older woman. Clearly, age is a dominant factor in locating Erica’s undesirability within the narrative, as Sadie Wearing has demonstrated in her analysis of this film in “Subjects of Rejuvenation: Aging in Postfeminist Culture.” However, Erica’s status as a divorced woman is equally relevant due not only to her ambiguous subject position but, moreover, due to the way that divorce itself ages a woman⁵². For instance, Erica continually refers to the way that she “used to be,” back when she was young, married and, evidently, more attuned to her own desires. Erica has already lived out her utility in terms of women’s traditional functions in society

⁵² Erica’s subject position is ambiguous because the post-domestic woman is a relatively new identity category, and thus the behaviors that are culturally required of these individuals are not yet clearly fixed or regulated with the same rigidity as behaviors ascribed to other identity categories. This ambiguity complicates the postdomestic woman’s relationship with desire.

– to mother, or to be objects of sexual desire. Being divorced is, in a way, synonymous with being old – perhaps not physically old in terms of age (though in this case the protagonist is both divorced and over fifty) - but divorce defines a woman based on what she has already experienced, how much she has lived, what she has rejected or been rejected from. The identity title “divorced” finds definition in its relationship to the past and to a sense of having *already lived* or *already experienced* the activities associated with a woman’s youth, such as dating, falling in love, marrying, and becoming a mother. Thus Erica’s classification as a divorced woman compounds her undesirability, exacerbating her biologically “older” status by rendering her culturally and socially old as well.

Because, according to Mulvey, the film heroine’s beauty and sex appeal enable the male spectator to mollify his castration anxiety, we must ask, can this anxiety be mitigated under circumstances wherein the woman’s appearance is not “coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (Mulvey 62)? Ultimately, Harry does overcome his fear of Erica *and* comes to desire her. Eventually, Harry engages in one of the two avenues of escape from castration anxiety that Mulvey describes, both of which are contingent upon desire. The development of Harry’s desire for Erica occurs alongside his efforts to investigate and demystify her. The film initially suggests that in order for Erica to become desirable, she must alter her identity. This process is predicated upon the characters’ and audience’s complicity in constructing Erica as unacceptable and in need of transformation. A critique of Erica is launched from the film’s beginning, and she is quickly labeled by others and by herself as asexual, neurotic, and uptight.

Erica's dialogue with Harry highlights the film's central problem. Harry urges Erica to wear less restrictive clothing by referring to her conservative turtleneck shirts and inquiring if she ever "gets hot" in a sarcastic tone that punctuates his double entendre. He also points out to Erica her propensity to collect only white stones for use in decorating her home. Erica deduces that her behavior indicates that she is "unadventurous" and "controlling" and Harry later tells Erica she is "flinty" and "impervious." Ultimately, Erica's rigid personality is connected to her age and marital status. Harry pigeonholes Erica's opinions and personality, responding to her cheerful acknowledgement of his long-ago engagement to Diana Sawyer by saying, "Women your age love that about me." Harry suggests that Erica's thoughts and feelings are representative of her age category and, though Harry initially denies it, Erica understands that her age is culturally linked to the so-called negative aspects of her personality and lifestyle.

For instance, when critiqued for her solitary, dateless lifestyle, Erica announces, "I like this time in my life. Why do I have to defend myself? I was married for twenty years; I'm done!" In the context of the scene, this statement is unmistakably meant to imply that Erica is finished modeling her behavior and appearance according to cultural norms of desirability in order to garner sexual attention and approval from men. Here Erica directly connects her conservative clothing and rigid personality with her status as a postdomestic woman; she is no longer willing to perform socially prescribed feminine behaviors, such as pursuing beauty and maintaining a passive, congenial personality because she is "older" and has already been married. The film clearly sets up a central

problem in the narrative: Erica is old and divorced, thus, undesirable. According to the norms of the romantic comedy genre, spectators assume that Erica will undergo a metamorphosis that will render her desirable. Based on character dialogue, the film suggests that in order for Erica to be desirable, the stigmas of divorce and age must be shed; Erica must be resexualized and “girled,” as Diane Negra would put it. Thus the film centers, in part, on Erica’s ostensible rejuvenation.

However, the requisite transformation does not unfold according to the traditional pattern of the romantic comedy genre. Most film viewers have witnessed a typical “reveal” scene wherein a once undesirable, unpopular, or awkward woman enters a scene (usually via a staircase) and, having been made-over, showcases her transformed appearance, which is now beautiful, sexy, and desirable. Though not all transformation scenes are quite so dramatic, the woman’s transformation is visually indicated by feminine attire and a new color palette.⁵³ In *Something’s Gotta Give*, Erica’s restrictive turtleneck shirts, her propensity for white or black monochromatic clothing, and her collection of white stones are visual markers of her undesirability. Two transformative scenes occur that suggest Erica is morphing into a more feminine, erotic subject. The

⁵³ The new color palette is a staple of filmic transformation scenes and can be applied to clothing, hair, and make-up. Boring, repressed women, who typically wear black or white before the transformation scene, are revealed in bright clothing that is often red, blue, or green. Conversely, wild, rebellious women are often toned down in the reveal scene and are showcased in neutral colors such as browns and pastels and subtle cosmetics. Though the specific shade and hue transformations are not consistent from film to film, the woman’s transformation is almost always visually indicated by a color transformation. These patterns can be seen in a plethora of romantic comedies, such as *What a Girl Wants* (2003), *She’s All That* (1999), *She’s Out of Control* (1989), *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987), *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *Pretty Woman* (1990) and many more.

first occurs when Harry and Erica are sexually intimate and Erica begs Harry to literally cut away her turtleneck shirt. Erica feels liberated and passionately calls out “Yes!” as Harry moves the scissors through her shirt and tears away the fabric. Later, when Harry departs, Erica presents him with a decorative jar filled with black stones, suggesting that she no longer collects only white stones and is receptive to the suggestions of her male lover (as it is Harry who has initiated her interest in black stones). Both of these scenes suggest that Erica is transforming into a more desirable subject, that she is liberating herself and learning to celebrate her femininity (or, to be specific, to allow the influence of a man in her life).

However, according to the conventions of the romantic comedy genre, the aftermath of Erica’s transformation is anticlimactic. Following these scenes, Erica continues to wear only black and white clothing. She occasionally wears a v-neck shirt but remains visually conservative. Erica does not change her appearance or participate in any of the usual transformative activities – she does not dye her hair, begin an exercise routine, participate in a shopping extravaganza to replace her old wardrobe, or purchase new cosmetics. According to Hollywood tradition, Erica’s transition from undesirable to desirable is contingent upon her enactment of more feminine behaviors. Yet a visual analysis of the film suggests that Erica has not been feminized or “girled.” Erica does experience an emotional outpouring that spurs a prolific period of creative writing but, visually, Erica does not change much during the film - she does nothing to create a more youthful appearance. This film does not follow the traditional pattern of its genre and offers a different resolution to the “problem” of Erica’s undesirability. Though the

spectator is led to believe that Erica's undesirability is directly linked to her status as a divorced, older woman, these factors do not change. Ultimately the plot resolution in this film offers a more feminist interpretation of the "problem" of the older postdomestic woman by exposing the limitations of traditional gender roles.

Gender ambiguity is a prominent problem that emerges immediately within the film. Erica is described as "macho" and asexual, while Harry vacillates between emasculation and hypersexuality. Harry's hypermasculinity is even news worthy, as his sexual exploits have been featured in *New York Magazine*. Moreover, Harry is verbally depicted as a desirable bachelor who has "escaped the noose" of marriage, he is sexually attractive to beautiful Marin, he is a rap music mogul (a genre that is described by Erica as "a tad misogynistic"), and he smokes large, phallic cigars. Conversely, Harry is repeatedly emasculated by Erica, who threatens him with a kitchen knife, rescues him during his heart attack, and forces him to extinguish his robust cigar. Harry's emasculation seems almost hyperbolic, as his heart attack occurs while Marvin Gaye's classic lovemaking song "Let's Get it On" plays in the background and he is forced to announce in front of Erica, Marin, and Zoe, his use of the erection enhancing drug Viagra. For the first half of the film, Harry is not an appropriately gendered subject, as he vacillates between the polarities of emasculation and hypermasculinity. Erica also fails to perform according to traditional gender roles. She is overly strong and rigid, and she is markedly non-domestic, as indicated by the conflation of her work and home space (she writes significantly more than she cooks and, during the only dinner scene at her home, Erica drops the dishes on the kitchen floor).

At the close of the film, the inappropriate gendered identities ascribed to Harry and Erica at the film's opening are no longer apt, yet neither have these two conformed to discrete, traditional gender roles. For instance, at the end of this love story Harry comments, "Look who gets to be the girl," while he weeps in the night on a bridge in Paris. More importantly, in the final family dinner scene of the film, Erica wears an off-white pantsuit, which is typical for her character in regard to both color and style. Had the film continued upon its initial trajectory (the underlying plot centering on destigmatizing Erica) she would have been visually feminized via a dress or markedly gendered attire. Though she is newly in love, Erica has been able to participate in her new relationship on her own terms. While she is indeed more sexually and emotionally receptive, other aspects of her identity have not been feminized; Erica continues to dress conservatively and successfully pursue her career ambitions, and she maintains her status as a divorced woman. The fact that Erica and Harry meet Marin, along with Marin's new husband and baby, at a restaurant, rather than at Erica's home, where she could prepare food for her family, affirms that Erica has not been remodeled into a traditional, feminine woman. Erica represents a postdomestic femininity, a sexually desirable womanliness that is a combination of traditionally masculine and feminine traits and is severed from the institution of marriage.

Though feminist scholar Judith Butler claims that "we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right," in this film, behavior that does not perform traditional gender requisites is eventually rewarded (178). By her very existence, the postdomestic woman complicates the gender continuum because the act of divorce severs women from

femininity as it has historically and theoretically been constructed. However, when we examine Erica, a filmic example of a postdomestic woman, it is clear that her disconnection from traditional femininity does not prevent her from achieving a meaningful relationship with her child or an emotionally and sexually fulfilling relationship with a man.

In fact, in stretching the rules of gender, Erica facilitates a freeing experience for Harry, as well, who unabashedly expresses his emotions, apologizes to former lovers for pain he may have caused, and affectionately holds Marin's baby. Ultimately, it is Harry, not Erica, who transforms. Harry even enters the final scene of the film wearing a grey "family-man" suit that is unlike the upscale black pea coats and designer suits he has worn previously on screen. In the dramatic climax of the film Harry informs Erica in a confessional monologue that he is a changed man. He explains that he has undergone a journey of self-discovery wherein he has visited all of his former lovers and allowed them to critique his flaws. Harry states that, "I listened and then I listened harder," thinking that "in listening to some of the women I'd known, it might help me understand myself." Through this process of self-discovery, Harry transforms into a man who is able to love openly and who is not threatened by Erica's powerful presence.⁵⁴

It is Harry who must change in order for Erica to be socially accepted as desirable; Harry is the "problem" in this narrative. Because Harry is able to overcome his fear of emasculation and chooses to celebrate and love Erica, she can flourish as a

⁵⁴ Though I will not address it in this project, I believe that Harry's transformation from a bachelor playboy into a monogamous, understanding partner, also suggests that postdomestic womanliness may enable postdomestic masculinity.

desirable postdomestic woman. Though Harry is not African American, bell hooks' astute discussion of black masculinity seems particularly apt here. Bell hooks states, "As an advocate of feminist politics, I have consistently called attention to the need for men to critique patriarchy and involve themselves in shaping the feminist movement and addressing male liberation" (*We Real Cool* xv). Erica addresses feminist concerns from the beginning of the film, but it is not until Harry begins considering the concerns of women that their love is able to grow. Harry's newfound confidence results from listening to women discuss their needs and feelings. By participating in resolving gender inequalities (that he has hitherto imagined as beneficial to himself), Harry mitigates his own castration anxiety. In this film, Erica is not responsible for alleviating Harry's fear of castration; instead, Harry must realize his own investment in feminism, which ultimately empowers him to mitigate his own anxieties.

Something's Gotta Give celebrates the postdomestic woman and calls upon men to participate in feminist thinking for the benefit of all. The postdomestic woman stretches normative gender categories and, in so doing, urges a rethinking and reshaping of romantic relationships. *Something's Gotta Give* veers away from antifeminist representations of divorce seen in films such as *Kramer Versus Kramer* and *The Squid and the Whale* and begins productively theorizing the postdomestic woman. Like *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* and *How Stella Got her Groove Back*, this film acknowledges the cultural and theoretical maneuvers made possible by the postdomestic woman. In other words, though depictions of divorce in Hollywood film over the last thirty years have often demonized ex-wives, some recent films are beginning to make room for this new

identity category and productively explore the new familial and cultural dynamics that are contingent upon her very existence.

CHAPTER THREE

Single Mothers, Race, and Capital:

Divorce and the Black Family in American Literature

Like other specters created during slavery, Jezebel reappears in contemporary American culture through such figures as the “welfare queen,” the image of an unwed and unfit black mother feeding voraciously on white tax dollars and producing hordes of . . . “dangerous” black children. . . . At the center of these phantasmagoric associations is the black woman’s alleged sexual degeneracy, her inability to fit within the boundaries of “acceptable” (married) sexuality.

– Candice M. Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (11)

In his now infamous 1965 report “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote:

In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well. (29)

Citing the atypical predominance of matriarchal households within the African American community, Moynihan insists that it is pathological for a racial subgroup to live according to patterns that differ from American society in general. Though Moynihan’s perspective on what was then called by President Johnson “the Negro problem” was especially crass, the Moynihan Report was not unique in its insistence that the black family was in crisis; the discourse on this topic throughout American history has been

and continues to be overflowing.⁵⁵ Though African Americans are no longer the nation's largest minority group, their public and private lives have been common subjects of political and scholarly inquiry for at least the last hundred years.⁵⁶ Moreover, the abundance of woman-headed black households has been of particular interest.

This project is not concerned with explaining our cultural interest in the black family; rather, it is interested in examining the postdomestic woman and divorce in American culture. The African American family unit has been culturally marked out as a site of critical difference; thus, investigating divorce and postdomesticity in relation to the African American family may yield recursive new insights about both the subject of this project and the lens through which it is being examined. Before discussing African American families, however, it is necessary to first establish the different relationship black women have (from white women) to concepts that are central to this project, namely femininity and domesticity. Certainly these terms, which apply to a woman's body, character, and social role, take on unique meanings for black women, especially given the terrible history of slavery in our country.

⁵⁵ Writers from W.E.B. Du Bois to Hortense Spillers have addressed African American family and kinship dynamics in scholarship. Many of Moynihan's ideas have been linked to claims put forth in E. Franklin Frazier's 1939 book *The Negro Family in the United States* and Bayard Rustin's 1965 essay "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement" (Massey 34). For sociological texts concerning black families, see the SAGE Publications *Understanding Families* (1999) series and Harriette McAdoo's *Black Families* (2007).

⁵⁶ As of 2000, Hispanics are the largest minority group in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Census 2000).

Indeed, literary critics have established the ways in which black femininity and white femininity were different in antebellum culture. Though all women were subjected to the same expectations upheld by the cult of true womanhood, slavery interfered with black women's potential for maintaining traditional feminine virtues.⁵⁷ In "Loopholes of Retreat" Valerie Smith examines Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in the context of the conventions of sentimental fiction and notes that Jacobs aspires to the same virtues as her middle-class white readers. Jacobs sets up a "familiar paradigm" by which her readers can relate to her struggles and begin to understand "the ways that slavery converts into liabilities the very qualities of virtue and beauty that women were taught to cultivate" (219). While Smith contends that Jacobs' strategy for activating her readers' sympathy "trivializes the complexity of her situation," Jacobs does succeed in calling attention to the fact that adhering to the universalizing norms of femininity was a luxury that black women were not afforded under slavery (219). As Jacobs shows, white women's rights to uphold the virtues of modesty, chastity, and morality were legally protected, while black women's bodies were legally property and thus subject to violation.

⁵⁷ Barbara Welter's influential essay on the topic defined the cult of true womanhood, which is also often referred to as the cult of domesticity: "Woman, in the cult of True Womanhood presented by the women's magazines, gift annuals, and religious literature of the nineteenth century, was the hostage in the home. . . . The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and her society could be divided into four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter 151-2). Women were to avoid reading and books and keep to morally uplifting tasks, such as housework, which instilled in women qualities like patience and perseverance.

Like the virtues associated with femininity, the rights associated with domesticity were “a particularly meaningful symbol of civil equality for African Americans,” who could not legally marry or protect their families from dissolution under slavery (Romero 27). Though domesticity came to be seen as a restrictive cultural ideal by the mid-twentieth century, in *Home Fronts: Domesticity and its Critics in the Antebellum United States*, Lora Romero points out that its origins were antipatriarchal. In the mid-nineteenth century, white women writers urged their female audiences to use the power of influence within the home to shape the character of the nation, and soon many black women writers followed suit. Feminists have called attention to the ways that women’s domestic influence was limited because its function was to address men’s needs and to improve from afar the broader political and cultural spheres in which they could not directly participate, but during the nineteenth century women’s influence in the home helped launch the women’s rights movement.

Ultimately, however, the power that women could exert in the home was limited. Women could not exercise force or directly impact society; rather, they attempted to influence society by shaping the moral fiber and opinions of their children, and altering the tempers of their husbands with loving manners and good housekeeping. But, again, even these limited opportunities for empowerment were not always available to black women. The majority of free blacks in the North “lived in poverty and depended on menial employment for their survival” and, after emancipation, freed slaves also entered the (paid) workforce in droves (Romero 128). Though they could legally marry and raise their children, black women did not spend as much time in the home as middle-class

white women, instead they eeked out a living in the workplace (alongside lower-class women of all races).

In the context of race relations, the term “domestic” also calls to mind the image of the black female domestic laborer: “In the first part of the twentieth century, the greatest percentage of working African American women performed some type of domestic work” (Boehm 4). While white women performed unpaid domestic duties for their own families, “black women workers were the nation’s earliest and largest group of women who labored outside their own homes” and primarily filled the roles of laundress, cook, childcare worker, and maid for middle and upper-class families (Boehm 5). The same chores that rooted white women firmly within their homes, took black women away from their families. Of course, we must not forget that black women completed these duties as paid labor for others *and* within their own homes, for their own families, as unpaid labor. The cult of domesticity insisted that all women’s work was in service to men and the family, and for black female domestic workers this subservience was compounded.

Though Romero acknowledges that different measures of access to financial support shaped black and white women’s relationships to domesticity, her scholarship successfully positions the home front as a space from which subversive, feminist maneuvers could be accomplished by and for both black and white women. Importantly, Romero’s analysis suggests that domesticity assumes increasing potential for female

empowerment when merged with other discourses.⁵⁸ I would ask, however, in its original conception as a tenet in the cult of true womanhood in the mid-nineteenth century (without merging domestic power with any accompanying social and political power) to what extent could domesticity, and the proposed power it allows, ever truly be radical or place women on equal footing with men? Despite current scholarship, such as Romero's, that explores the subversive potential of domestic space, I maintain that the cult of true womanhood and domesticity was a cultural prison for both black and white women; social expectations that woman maintain the virtues of piety, submission, and domesticity restrained women from full and active participation in the arts, politics, and public life. Black women were doubly bound by domestic obligations because their labor took place in their own homes and in the homes of others. Moreover, we must not forget that, despite women's pivotal role in the home, men were still regarded as the head of their households and retained decision-making power in all aspects of home life, from child rearing to financial matters. Though this term takes on different meanings for black and white women, when domesticity is solely in service to patriarchy, and when it prevents women from operating or participating in the public sphere, it is a limiting and oppressive construct for women in general.

The Structure of Black Families in the United States

⁵⁸ For instance, in the chapter "Black Nationalist Housekeeping," Romero says this about Maria W. Stewart: "Refusing to honor the gendered division of labor, representing herself as both maternal and militant, she voices connection between violence and nurture" (69). Stewart's disruption of binaries and deviance from traditional domesticity would not have been possible during the height of the cult of true womanhood.

While I believe that working toward the subversion of repressive domestic parameters is a point of feminist alliance between all women, postdomesticity and divorce look different for black and white women. To explain, I will begin by establishing the structure of contemporary African American families according to U.S. census records. Since 1970, the divorce rate for the black population has remained slightly higher than the overall national average and, in 1992, 66% of black women in the United States were single mothers, compared with 32% of white women (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992). Based on the cultural tumult about the structure of black families and the statistical data documenting the prevalence of single-parent matriarchal households, one might assume that a plethora of divorce novels by and about African Americans permeate contemporary American literature. Surprisingly, this is not the case.

A closer look at the U.S. Census Bureau data provides some insight about divorce within African American families. For example, the statistics above state that in 1992 66% of black women in the U.S. were single mothers. While this data seems to reflect divorce rates, in fact, it correlates more significantly with marriage rates. The marriage rate among African Americans is lower than the marriage rate among whites and is declining (Lawson 2). The largest category of single women in the United States consists of individuals who have never been married. Census data from 2002 reports that while 90% of white females are likely to marry, less than 75% of black women are likely to do so (Staples 287). Furthermore, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, in 1988 over 58% of births to teens younger than 15 years of age were to black mothers and, of those young women, 92% were unmarried at the time (Hale 297). Unmarried teen

births are more common among black girls than any other racial group in the United States.

Moreover, while many single black mothers are unmarried, others are separated from their spouses. In 1993, 16% of black women between 18 and 44 years of age were separated, compared to 4% of comparable white women (U.S. Census Bureau 1993). This disparity had not diminished by 1997, at which time 15% of the entire black population was separated, compared to 5% of the white population (U.S. Census Bureau 1997). This data underscores the aforementioned statistics regarding unwed black mothers and helps to explain the pervasiveness of single-parent families among African Americans. These factors are, in large part, responsible for the prevalence of black, single-women headed households and, importantly, these factors are unrelated to the legal process of divorce. In other words, divorce is not the only, or even the most common, cause of non-normative family structuring within black households.

The divorce rates for black and white families are similar, with black families divorcing in slightly higher numbers.⁵⁹ However, as of 2008 the number of separated black women continued to more than double the number of separated white women. black women are considerably more likely to remain in a state of separation with a spouse than white women. Additionally, the number of never married black women is

⁵⁹ The 2008 U.S. Census Bureau's *America's Families and Living Arrangements* report documents that 9.9% of white individuals over the age of 15 years old are divorced, while 11.2% of blacks in the same age group are divorced.

almost double the number of never married white women.⁶⁰ For white families, divorce is the *primary* event related to single parent households or alternative family structure. For black families, a variety of different events are likely to produce this outcome.

The two most common avenues, apart from divorce, that lead to matriarchal single-parent homes for African Americans place the mother and children in precarious circumstances. While an unwed mother can gain financial help from state and federal governments, she has little recourse for obtaining monetary assistance if her child's father is unresponsive, without first obtaining a paternity test.⁶¹ Until "legal paternity" has been established, a father has no rights *or responsibilities* in regard to alleged children. In cases when an alleged father fails to respond to requests for a paternity test or attend court hearings, the court can and will resolve paternity and child support issues without his input; however, this ruling can be contested. Without a paternity ruling, no child support can be collected via the court system from alleged fathers.

Though separation is generally considered a precursor to divorce proceedings, for African Americans this is often not the case. Separation is constituted by a statutory time frame, usually determined by the physical departure of one spouse from the primary family residence. Once the couple is no longer cohabiting, separation is established and

⁶⁰ The 2008 U.S. Census Bureau's *America's Families and Living Arrangements* report documents that 2.1% of white women in the U.S. are separated, compared with 5.2% of black women and that 23.8% of white women have never been married, compared with 44% of black women.

⁶¹ An unmarried father can choose to support his children, but obtaining financial support from him through legal means requires time-consuming and often expensive procedures.

all assets are regarded as separate property.⁶² Though a parent can pursue child support once abandonment or separation has been established, long term alimony and child support procedures are generally determined at divorce settlements.

It seems, however, that the benefits of a legal divorce settlement are questionable for black women. In 2006 single black parents received only half of the state-mandated child support owed by the non-custodial parent.⁶³ Statistics show that parents who do not pay child support do so because of one or more of the following reasons: the non-custodial parent cannot afford to pay (24%); the parties do not feel the need to make payments legal (33.7%); paternity has not been established (7.7%); the non-custodial parent cannot be located (14.5%); the non-custodial parent provides what he/she is able, but the amount is less than the legally determined child support (27.9%).⁶⁴ Significantly, in 2006 “the proportion of black children in families who live[d] with their custodial parent while their other parent lived outside their household (48.5%) was more than twice as large as the proportion of white children” and 5 of every 6 custodial parents of any race were mothers (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). To summarize, single black women generally have custody of their children and do not receive full child support from their children’s fathers, primarily because these men cannot be found or cannot afford to pay.

⁶² In the 11 states that have some form of “separate property” regulations, assets are legally regarded as individual property, even during marriage.

⁶³ As of 2005, for every \$4,500 owed to a single black parent, only \$2,200 has been collected (U.S. Census Bureau 2007).

⁶⁴ In reading this data, is important to note that the percentages provided on this chart (when listed in their entirety) add up to greater than 100% because participants were asked to select all applicable factors contributing to their child support delinquency.

Thus, it seems that separated black mothers have little to gain from a divorce and it is not surprising that many choose to avoid paying the costs for this expensive legal process.

Sociologists have sought to explain the prevalence of single-mother households in black communities, taking into consideration factors such as the long-standing population shortage of black men and the social acceptance of single mothers in black communities. Some disagreement has arisen regarding the notion of an increase in black single-women headed households. For example, Duke University professor John Hope Franklin believes that “racially hostile governmental and societal practices, policies, and attitudes” led to dramatic increases in the number of single-women headed households (6). Franklin explains that long marriages were common among rural and southern blacks until the 1960s, when, according to a study he published in the Joint Center for Political Studies, rapid ghettoization of black communities and the inability of black men to find work in urban environments “sapped family strength” (6).

Conversely, in her essay “African American Female-Headed Households: Some Neglected Dimensions,” anthropologist and president of Lincoln University, Niara Sudarkasa contends that there has not been a dramatic increase in single-mother households in African American communities in the twentieth century. Sudarkasa claims that census data is misleading and, in fact, single mothers have been common throughout African American history. She explains that, in the late 1950s, public welfare and housing policies were instated that discouraged or disallowed multigenerational families. Until that time, single black mothers tended to live in larger family households consisting of senior relatives and children. Sudarkasa explains that, prior to these policies, two

single mothers living with their brother and their own mother (who helped to raise her grandchildren) would be counted by census data as one single-woman headed household. The welfare policies implemented in the 1950s and 1960s required that each family lived in an independent residence. Building on this example, then, what was once counted as one single-mother household is now counted as three single-mother households. Sudarkasa points out that though the census count in this example is technically accurate, the number of unmarried black mothers remains unchanged. Importantly, the residential arrangement that sustained each mother no longer exists, leaving the women with less financial and social/familial support for all aspects of child rearing.

Though Sudarkasa questions the interpretation of census data by pointing out its vexed relationship to social policies, she affirms the prevalence of single mothers within African American communities. While the complex and interesting history of single-woman headed households has been explored by social scientists, it remains unexamined in relation to literature and literary productions. Though novels centering on African American families rarely discuss divorce, the identities and roles of single-mothers and their children are explored in depth; indeed, the reality that 43% of black families in America are “maintained by women with no spouse present” factors tremendously in contemporary black literature (US Census 2002). Considering the prevalence of this alternative family structuring in African American communities, it is necessary to examine the ways in which single-parent matriarchal households are constructed and addressed in literature.

Liberalism, Welfare Queens, and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

One of the most striking features of postdomestic women in novels centered on African American families is that, in many cases, their alienation from marriage tethers them to motherhood. As I will discuss in chapter four, novels about white families commonly feature postdomestic women with grown children or without children at all. black ex-wife characters, however, are often left with the task of raising young or teen-aged children.⁶⁵ This is the case in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Percival Everett's *Erasure*, and Andrew Winer's *The Color Midnight Made*. Though they are incredibly different, each of these contemporary novels contends with issues of race and culture, which are investigated within the context of alternatively structured African American families. In these novels, the presence of young children leads to narrative exploration of the roles and identities of the children's absent fathers. This is especially the case in *Erasure* and *The Color Midnight Made*, in which paternal figures factor prominently in shaping the sons' racial identities. Morrison's *Beloved*, on the other hand, can be read as much more concerned with "the law of the Mother" (Spillers 404). This novel tells the story of, Sethe, an escaped slave who commits infanticide to prevent her baby daughter's capture. Years later this daughter, Beloved, returns as a young woman who is both ghostly and eerily corporeal.

While *Beloved* is clearly a story about slavery and its haunting legacy, in "Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison's *Beloved* and the Moynihan Report," scholar James Berger

⁶⁵ Not all characters who fall under the label of "postdomestic women" are in fact *legal* ex-wives.

suggests that the narrative can also be read as Morrison's reaction to twentieth century debates about American race relations. Specifically, Berger says that Morrison revives the liberal position of Moynihan but "revises traditional liberalism by insisting on African American personal and cultural agency and on a powerful role for women" (Berger 415). Berger sees Morrison's treatment of characters, specifically the abolitionist Bodwin, as directly related to discourse regarding the Moynihan Report. Because of the divisive nature of its primary thesis, the Moynihan Report both stifled and instigated debates about race in America. Politicians and scholars from the left and the right focused solely on Moynihan's bigoted suggestion that matriarchy is a "pathological" structure for black families. As such, many of Moynihan's economic propositions were ignored and the materialist concerns of liberals were pushed aside (not only by the right, but also by the New Leftists, who were outraged by Moynihan's Report). Fifteen years later neoconservative Reaganites reinvigorated Moynihan's critique of single black motherhood by linking black poverty to the "ghetto pathology" of "welfare queens," unemployed black women who allegedly took advantage of government aid.

Roderick A. Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer Critique of Color* traces the way that the Moynihan Report produced a domino effect that resulted in the cessation of federal aid for low-income black families.⁶⁶ The report's pathologization of

⁶⁶ Ferguson's text presents an analysis of canonical sociology, sexual difference, and the pathologization of African American culture, thus its primary interest in the Moynihan Report lies in its relation to heteronormativity. Interestingly both scholars, Ferguson and Berger, place Moynihan in conversation with Morrison novels. Later in his book Ferguson employs Morrison's *Sula* to demonstrate the ways in which the Moynihan Report established a framework for disciplining gender and sexual normativity as it stressed the state's responsibility (and right) to engage in citizen formation.

black female-headed households created an image of African American matriarchs as lazy and incompetent, thus justifying the institution of invasive and distorting welfare (and welfare policing) policies, and, ultimately, the minimizing of all forms of aid. Ferguson further suggests: “Displacing the contradictions of capital onto African American female-headed households established the moral grammar and political practices of the very neoconservative formations that would roll back the gains of civil rights in the 1980s and 1990s and undermine the well-being of black poor and working class families” (124). Though Berger would concede that the Moynihan Report led to the institution of regressive welfare policies, he would also argue that Reaganites misused Moynihan’s ideas to mobilize their conservative agenda. Berger insists that Moynihan’s “strong endorsement of major investments in employment, housing and health care programs was forgotten” (412). While Ferguson views the Moynihan Report as fundamentally degrading to African American culture and nonheteronormative families, Berger sees the controversy surrounding the report as thwarting a national opportunity for change in social policy.

Though Berger admits that the Moynihan Report, and much of the ideology that stems from it, was “hypocritical” and “implicitly critical of the victims of racial oppression,” he also argues that Morrison’s novel presents another side to the story of the white liberal and thus to the Moynihan report (417). In *Beloved*, Sethe and her children escape from slavery and take up residence in 124, the vacant homestead of a white abolitionist named Edward Bodwin. At the close of the novel Sethe attempts to attack Bodwin, mistaking him for Schoolteacher, a violent man who worked for her former

owner. Morrison's depiction of the Bodwins reflects ambivalence; he and his sister are the kind of people who are "most likely to help, since they had done it twice" but they are also the kind of people who display by their backdoor a coin bowl depicting an open-mouthed black boy kneeling on a pedestal that reads, "At Yo Service" (Morrison 252, 255). Edward Bodwin's dualism is confronted each time he appears in the story. Though the black townsfolk believe that, "He's somebody never turned us down. Steady as a rock," Morrison also shows that Bodwin's motivations in helping Sethe are not entirely born out of his disapproval of slavery, "Nothing since was as stimulating as the old days of letters, petitions, meetings, debates, recruitment, quarrels, rescue, and downright sedition" (265). Here Morrison shows that Bodwin's contributions to abolitionism are tethered not only to his attitudes toward slavery but also to the thrill of political activism and rebellion. Morrison seems intent on juxtaposing Bodwin's nostalgia for the "heady" days of his youth with his interest in the African American community (260). Indeed, Bodwin believes that "human life is holy, all of it," which is related, but not identical, to the belief that human life is equal, all of it (259).

In "Ghosts of Liberalism," Berger interprets the novel's depiction of Bodwin as Morrison's response to liberalism, especially the sentiments expressed from the 1960s through the 1980s. Just like Bodwin, the liberals of this time were disconnected from African American experience; they did not live under and could not relate to the material conditions that shaped impoverished black communities. Beginning with the cultural reaction to the Moynihan Report, this oblivious and disconnected state was interpreted as an even more insidious form of racism than that practiced by conservatives (which,

according to Berger, is why many liberals avoided discussions of race relations in the U.S. for over a decade following the release of the Moynihan report).

While Sethe's attack on Bodwin initially appears as an attack on hypocritical white liberalism, Berger argues that this is not the best interpretation of the event. Berger's reads the attempted assault on Bodwin as Morrison's insistence that "we recognize Bodwin's contribution and therefore realize that Sethe's attack on him is delusional" (Berger 417). In her frenzied state, Sethe does not realize she is attacking the very man who saved her from the gallows and has allowed her to live in his abandoned childhood home. Sethe attacks Bodwin because she mistakes him for the malicious slaveholder, Schoolteacher, just as the left mistakenly attacks Moynihan. Berger contends that, "For all the liberals' spiritual failings, jobs and housing have always been at the center of their agenda – including its embodiment in the Moynihan report" (417). Berger further asserts that Bodwin's relationship to the house at 124, his burial of important things on that property, and his attitude toward the accusation that he is a "bleached nigger," all document his deep and powerful connection with the African American community (Morrison 260). Though he is inexcusably self-absorbed, Bodwin's obliviousness is produced by his own relationship to history, which he seeks to atone for by helping Sethe and her family. Bodwin and Moynihan contend with the trauma of historical memory and seek to mend it in ways that, while flawed, demonstrate a commitment to rectify the material realities produced by slavery.

Berger is not the only scholar to link *Beloved* to twentieth century political discussions of race in America. English professor Dean J. Franco extends Berger's

analysis, claiming “several scenes in *Beloved* respond to Ronald Reagan’s condemnation of black ‘welfare queens’ by revising the terms by which we understand single parenthood” (84). Franco claims that there is a sort of “double vision” inherent to images of the black single parent. One image is produced by the experience of living the difficult and emotionally complex life of a single parent, while another image is produced by the process of looking in and evaluating that life from the outside. In *Beloved*, for example, Sethe spends her entire life savings on frivolous items; she and Beloved end up looking “like carnival women with nothing to do,” and eventually become dependent on the welfare of the community for sustenance (240). This conspicuous consumption, is produced by Sethe’s desperate need to “make [Beloved] understand what it meant – what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby pump blood like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on,” to save her from slavery by killing her (Morrison 251). Because of their history, and by “their” I mean not only these two women but also many individuals within the larger African American community, Sethe and Beloved are tangled in a web so consuming that neither of them have the strength to remedy their hunger or poverty. Though they might look like “welfare queens” from the outside, this Reagan-era term “misses the story comprising the picture” (Franco 84). In other words, each family contains its own complicated system of emotional debt and payment that is ignored by social depictions of frivolous single mothers. Categorizing single mothers as prodigal welfare queens also distorts and hides the injustices embedded in labor relations; that is, because women never got paid the

same wage as men, it is questionable to what extent Sethe's labor could have remedied their poverty.

Franco's point can be expanded by a closer examination of the way that community donations are distributed in *Beloved*. Significantly, it is not the single mother herself who benefits from charity. Beloved, the ghostly child who represents the haunting legacy of slavery, consumes the gifts of food and resources delivered to the house at 124. Sethe, the single mother, nearly starves, "Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur" (250). The material realities caused by slavery – realities that make charity, welfare, and donations necessary for the survival of low-income blacks – reinforce the power of the historical trauma of slavery. The novel implies that, once the need for welfare is removed, the trauma will heal; until then, the disabling power of the memory of slavery – like Beloved - will continue to grow. Through Beloved and Sethe, Morrison responds to the institutionalized poverty and disabling welfare policies instituted and upheld by Reagan by showing the way that these practices deplete and disable the African American community.

Only Denver, Sethe's other daughter, is able to escape from the psychological quagmire occurring at 124 and address their need for food and money. Importantly, Denver is incapacitated by her family's history until she begins to value herself and recognize her subjectivity. On the day that Denver realizes she must save her mother, she also decides to "take care" of herself, "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (252). Once she begins to believe in her own value, Denver immediately

sets out to find work and to become an active member of the larger (urban and bi-racial) community. Through Denver, Morrison prescribes self-esteem and assertion of self-worth, not welfare and charity, as the keys to mitigating poverty in the African American community.

Thus, an investigation of *Beloved's* portrayals of commodities and wealth is crucial in determining this novel's message about the material reality of African American life. In this novel love, freedom, and self-respect are presented as the most valuable "things" one can have. Perhaps because the women in the novel are too enmeshed in its central tragedy, and the protagonist Sethe is hysterical at points in the story, Morrison relies on Paul D.'s calm, rational commentary to communicate her perspective on material culture and its relationship to African American history. Upon reuniting with Sethe years after escaping Sweet Home, Paul D explains that: "For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one" (45). Here Paul D explains that loving deeply is something that slaves cannot afford. His description of love as something that must be parsed out, conserved, and saved for the future conflates the emotion and gesture of loving with money; the conditions of slavery have taught him that Sethe shouldn't spend all her love in one place, so to speak.

In the material culture of the antebellum south, freedom – the most vital commodity – is intertwined with love. In defining freedom Paul D says that "to get to a

place where you could love anything you chose – not need permission for desire – well, now *that* was freedom” (162). Paul D.’s comments suggest that the commodification of freedom results in the commodification of love. A slave’s freedom could be bought and sold; indeed, when it was permissible by their master, slaves attempted to earn enough money (through after hours labor) to buy their freedom. Under a perverse system that rendered bodies property, the slave’s greatest ambition was to possess oneself and to have ownership over one’s body and emotions: to have the right to love. Under these circumstances, love does not maintain its traditional abstract parameters and instead becomes conflated with physical property. Understanding love as a material asset impacts our understanding of Sethe’s (and all poor black women’s) relationship to the traditional material world of money and capital. Even when Sethe is ostensibly living like a “welfare queen” as she survives due to the good will of her neighbors, she never craves wealth or money. Sethe’s “best thing” is always centered on family and love.

Initially, Sethe values her children above all else: “The best thing she was, was her children” (251). In this novel the single mother has little concern for material goods and prioritizes loving her children, and seeking the freedom to love her children. In the final pages of the novel Paul D addresses the ongoing theme of Sethe’s “best thing,” telling her, “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (273). The climax and resolution to Sethe’s haunting occurs when she begins to imagine loving herself. Morrison is suggesting that welfare cannot resolve past trauma and the Reaganites who would suggest that, as Franco puts it, black single mothers simply wish to use “food stamps to buy steaks and champagne” need to examine the larger psychological impacts of history (84).

For, as *Beloved* demonstrates, self-esteem and the ability to love and be loved are more valuable commodities to black “welfare queens” than money and, in the end, working to instill these qualities in individuals can produce powerful changes for the entire community. In other words, the psychological legacy of slavery must be addressed and dismantled in order for race relations in the U.S. to improve.

Slavery and its legacy have had devastating impacts on the role of mothers and mothering within African American culture. For Sethe, the right to mother her children is integrally linked to her own identity. When Sethe is allowed to mother her children, a privilege that can be snatched away at any time, she laments the lack of access to support from other women. Sethe explains, “I wish I’d a known more, but, like I say, there wasn’t nobody to talk to. Women, I mean. . . . It’s hard you know what I mean? by yourself and no woman to help you get through” (160). In addition to the many other ways that slavery affected mothering, Sethe’s ability to care for her children is affected by the disavowal of black female communities. Importantly, it is not only Sethe’s ability as a mother but also her confidence to mother that is affected by this dynamic. Sethe expresses her sorrow and shame that during her children’s early years, she did not know when it was time to feed them and she had to resort to extreme measures to keep them safe because she did not have a collective of women at Sweet Home to teach her about mothering. Later in the novel Sethe’s eventual salvation from her murdered child comes in the form of a concerned female community, a group of “women assembled outside 124” (261). As she attempts to provide mother love for her children, part of what Sethe

craves, and what slavery had disrupted and disallowed, is a cohort of women to model and impart habits of mothering.

When examined through the lens of motherhood, Morrison's novel can again be read as a powerful commentary on the welfare policies in place during the second half of the twentieth century. Sudarkasa's sociological research investigates the aftermath of the "public welfare policies and public housing policies that, over the years, discouraged and/or disallowed the multigenerational households that were characteristic of black families" (175). Though slavery no longer exists, communal mothering continues to be thwarted by legislature. Regardless of their own desires, black women are discouraged from working and living collectively with other women as a means of raising children. Though there are, of course, material and financial consequences to welfare policies, we must not neglect the psychological effects of the legislature. Much like the Moynihan Report, welfare policies suggest that family structures that are out of line with the heteronormative, two-parent household majority are pathological, deviant, and disadvantageous. Indeed, in her groundbreaking essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Hortense Spillers points out that these social beliefs stem from "the provisions of patriarchy, [which] . . . declare Mother Right, by definition, a negating feature of human community" (403). Patriarchy, especially as it was enforced during slavery, renders all female-generated forms and practices of family subordinate and pathological. Morrison's depiction of Sethe aligns with Spillers' interpretation of kinship during slavery and can likewise be read as a critique of the cultural denial of motherhood as "the founding terms of a human and social enactment" (Spillers 404).

By focusing on the psychology of Sethe's desire for empowerment as a mother, Morrison calls attention to the ways that black mothers' experiences were mediated not only through slavery but also through the *social attitudes governing slavery*. Sethe's yearning for and separation from a female community of mothers also highlights the ways that black mothers continue to be impacted not only by welfare policies but also by *the social attitudes dictating welfare policies*. In order for black mothers to be empowered, alternative family structures that are dictated by choice and desire, rather than by conformity and judgment, must be accepted and valued by American society. The stigmatization of matriarchy must be removed from our cultural imagination if the legacy of slavery is to be defeated.

Turning now to the subject of divorce, I believe that Morrison's depiction of marriage under slavery is helpful in understanding contemporary statistics regarding African American families. As previously noted, the divorce rate for African American families is higher than the rate for any other ethnic group, and the percentage of marriages between African Americans that end in separation or abandonment is as high as the percentage of divorce. However, black women's vexed relationships to these legal processes are not unique to the twentieth century. Morrison explores these institutions through her portrayals of the spousal relationships between Mrs. Baby Suggs, Sethe, and their husbands.

As historians have noted, during slavery marriage between African Americans did not have the same social semiotic coding or legal rights as white marriages.⁶⁷ During slavery, legally unrecognized marriages were formed and, after emancipation, many former slaves sought official public recognition of their marriages, “In 1866, for example, 9, 452 former slaves from 17 North Carolina counties registered their marriages by entering their names on the marriage records and paying a fee of 25 cents” (Franklin 4). Though we now know that many privately recognized marriages were formed between slaves, much of this data has been lost and records do not accurately reflect their marriage statistics. In *Beloved* Morrison addresses this issue when Sethe expresses her desire to marry Halle, “ ‘But I mean we want to get married.’ / ‘You just said so. And I said all right.’ / ‘Is there a wedding?’ / Mrs. Garner put down her cooking spoon. Laughing a little, she touched Sethe on the head, saying, ‘You are one sweet child.’ And then no more” (26). Later Sethe makes a dress in secret and she and Halle privately acknowledge their marriage. Here Morrison is responding to the fact that black couples’ marriages were not recognized or valued by the culture at large. During slavery there were many *legally* unmarried single mothers; today black women are the least likely female ethnic group to marry and comprise the largest group of single mothers. Marriage, like all institutions, is historically and culturally shaped; thus contemporary unions are also shaped by the historical reality of our legislature. Unions, relationships and marriages do not cease to exist simply because they are undocumented. I interpret statistics regarding

⁶⁷ For further reading see Brenda E. Stevenson’s *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South*, Amy Dru Stanley’s *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Era of Slave Emancipation* and Paul Finkelman’s (ed.) *Women and the Family in a Slave Society*.

single African American mothers as revealing more about black women's relationships to the law and to legal practices associated with the institution of marriage than about their actual family structures.

Just as marriage was constituted differently for enslaved black couples than for white couples, separation also had unique meanings and forms for slaves. When discussing the discrepancy between the name she prefers to be called and the name listed on her bill of sale, for instance, Baby Suggs thinks, "[her name] was all she had left of the 'husband' she claimed. . . . The two of them made a pact: whichever one got a chance to run would take it; together if possible, alone if not, and no looking back. He got his chance, and since she never heard otherwise she believed he made it" (142). In slavery, spousal abandonment was often linked to an opportunity for freedom for African Americans. Baby Suggs and her "husband" (quotes in the original) acknowledge the brutality of the system under which they live and grant one another permission to abandon their marriage if necessary. Just as Franco has argued in his discussion of welfare queens, slavery and its effects can be related to patterns regarding abandonment and separation within black families today. Perhaps, as he puts it in regard to welfare statistics, contemporary data about abandonment "misses the story comprising the picture" (Franco 84). During slavery, pressing and unavoidable reasons led to spousal desertion and its acceptance by the abandoned spouse; likewise, any understanding of this behavior today requires more thorough contextualization and an investigation of underlying causes.

Interestingly, as noted earlier in this chapter, one survey suggests that more than 33% of contemporary abandoned women, the majority of whom are African American, “don’t feel the need to make [child support] payments legal” (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). When juxtaposed with Morrison’s representation of abandonment in *Beloved*, this statistic can be interpreted to mean that relationships, negotiations, and agreements made within African American families maintain a tradition of privacy that has been present since slavery. Because their relationships did not (and could not publicly or legally) conform to the normative standards of either marriage or separation as practiced by white couples, African American couples created and continue to maintain relationship dynamics that are not tracked or understood within the confines of the American public, and specifically legal, system.

Being “Black Enough”: Authenticity, Commodification, and Motherhood in *Erasure*

Like *Beloved*, Percival Everett’s *Erasure* is a postmodern novel that concerns itself with issues of race and family; however, *Erasure* considers what it means to be black in contemporary culture, more than a hundred years after the cessation of slavery. It is doubtful that many readers conceptualize *Erasure* as a divorce novel because the narrative does not center on naming or identifying the word or phenomenon of divorce. As previously noted, however, divorce is a legal term that does not always accurately represent what happens in single-parent black families – just as marriage was differently recognized and named for African Americans during slavery, black families experience social ties and social separations that mimic the experiences of Caucasian families but do

not always have the same name. Likewise, novels centered on black families often contain an absent or missing father and, though divorce is not named and the reader (and character) often has no knowledge of the father's whereabouts or history, the father is indeed missing and the mother operates as an independent, single, postdomestic woman. This is the case in *My Pafology* (later renamed *Fuck*) the “novel” within the novel *Erasure*.

In *Erasure* we have two connected but very different narratives: the metanarrative of Monk Ellison and his experiences as a black academic and writer, and the embedded novella Monk writes about a black high school drop out named Van Go Jenkins. In the framing narrative, Monk, a scholar and author, must move from Los Angeles to Washington D. C. to care for his aging mother after his gynecologist sister is murdered by a fanatical anti-abortionist. *Erasure* represents Monk's journal, as he relates his experiences to the reader in a memoir-style confessional, frequently interjecting memories of his childhood and snippets of information about hobbies and intellectual pursuits into the narrative. Monk writes *My Pafology*, the novella implanted into the larger narrative, under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh – a man who is nothing like him, yet, of course, *is* him. The brief “memoir” documents a few days in the life of Van Go Jenkins as he verbally abuses his mother, sexually assaults women, reflects on his four children and their four different mothers, appears on a taping of a daytime talk show, murders a shop owner, shoots a wino who turns out to be his father and, finally, gets arrested after a high speed chase. In juxtaposing these two starkly different stories, Everett calls attention to the characters' shared dilemma: to determine one's identity in

contemporary American culture, which is laden with expectations and mandates about what it means to be black.

Within the first few pages of the novel we learn that Monk's aesthetic sensibilities and life experiences defy stereotypes of blackness and that his identity has been shaped by pressures to perform blackness in a specific way. Monk's esoteric literature is rejected by publishers for failing to capture the gritty realism of so-called black experience and, indeed, Monk claims that, throughout his life, "I felt I had to prove I was *black enough*" (2). Literary scholar Ana Maria Sanchez-Arce reads *Erasure* as Everett's response to the discourse of authenticity which, in the context of the fiction publishing industry, insists that literature by African Americans depict characters and situations that dominant American culture has established as authentically black. Citing Stuart Hall and others, who have recognized the racist and essentialist dangers inherent in claims of authenticity, Sanchez-Arce describes Monk's dilemma as a choice between fortifying racist ideology by performing "authentic" blackness (by publishing *My Pafology* and taking on the persona of Stagg R. Leigh) and retaining his actual authentic identity by writing unpublished, unappreciated texts according to his own selection of style and content.⁶⁸ Sanchez-Arce asks the reader to consider Monk's quandary, "Should he project a seemingly authentic identity and ventriloquize the accepted 'literary blackness,' or keep writing as he sees fit regardless of what is expected of him? It is left to the reader to decide whether writing the mock-novel is Monk's literary downfall or an overdue

⁶⁸ Hall, Stewart. "New Ethnicities." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995. 237-241.

recognition of his roots” (148). While I agree that Everett presents Monk’s predicament in these terms, what Sanchez-Arce fails to point out is that both of Monk’s choices, if followed to their final conclusions, imply cultural and artistic inferiority. Either Monk is a failure as a writer, one of the innumerable wannabes who never gain inclusion into the elite literary canon they aspire to, or he is just another black man whose “roots” verify all of the negative stereotypes that insist black men are violent, sexually voracious, and dishonest.

Monk’s initial response to his catch-22 is to reject dominant race stereotypes and to define black experience himself, “I told [the book agent] that I was living a *black* life, far blacker than he could ever know, that I had lived one and that I would be living one” (2). According to Monk, then, it would seem that “living a black life” means to live a life filled with angst about one’s racial identity and pressure to behave in particular ways that have been socially constructed as black. Several scholars have recognized the significant overlap between Monk’s life and the life of his creator, Everett; as English professor Margaret Russett points out, “It is certainly easy – too easy – to identify Everett with Thelonious (“Monk”) Ellison, and to read *Erasure* as a fictionalized account of Everett’s career” (258).⁶⁹ If we interpret Monk’s declaration of what it means to live a black life as Everett’s take on authenticity, then being black means coping with precisely these kinds of dilemmas. To struggle with identity and authenticity under the pressures of social

⁶⁹ Most of the references cited in this chapter along with several other articles and book chapters published by literary scholars acknowledge, to differing degrees, the seemingly autobiographical relationship between Everett and Monk.

constructions of race is not only central to “living a black life” but, indeed, is “far blacker” than the gritty, urban images that ostensibly represent black life.

Through his own claims of authenticity, Monk becomes caught in the web of essentialism and labeling that he loathes. Though Monk’s description of blackness may not be offensive, and indeed harkens back to the well-regarded DuBoisean notion of double consciousness, his attempt to define black experience repeats the cycle of essentialism under other terms. Through the seemingly inescapable web that is the discourse of authenticity, Monk and Everett perpetrate the very practices they critique; both the author and his protagonist are caught in rippling catch-22s at every turn.

In any case, because social prescriptions about Monk’s racial identity conflict with the identity he claims, he is forced to make a choice between two flawed options: authenticity coupled with impending hardship, and inauthenticity coupled with wealth.⁷⁰ Monk chooses to commodify himself – to invent a false identity and to sell it for profit. Initially driven by artistic and political outrage at novelist Juanita Mae Jenkins’ success with *We Lives in Da Ghetto*, a novel Monk believes is “an idiotic, exploitative piece of crap,” Monk writes *My Pafology* as a satire (188). However, Monk’s satire is misread as an authentic portrait of black life and he willingly sells it, and himself as Stagg R. Leigh, to publishers, allowing them to believe that “the novel is so honest, so raw, so down-and-dirty gritty, so real” (260). Monk actively performs the stereotype of a black radical,

⁷⁰ Monk perceives his current and worsening financial dilemma as hardship, but the term “hardship” is subjective. In relation to the extreme poverty experienced by the characters Monk invents, his own financial situation is clearly marked as middle or even upper-class.

while also allowing interviewers and critics to believe that his novel is, at least in part, autobiographical.

Though we know from Monk's earlier discussion of the struggles inherent to being black that there is no ideal option for a man in his situation, Monk's justifications for his decision to sell out reveal other, subtler ideas about race in America. Monk decides to betray his true self and perform a false identity because he is facing financial hardship. This is the defense Monk mounts for readers as he parallels the news of his financial boon with descriptions of his overwhelming responsibilities:

I never before felt so stranded. Alone in that house with Mother and Lorraine. But with the new bit of change I would be collecting for that awful little book, I could hire someone to come in and care for both of them. Perhaps for dramatic effect, I should have had to wait longer for my windfall, given my brother's newfound flakiness and my sister's debt . . . but it didn't happen that way. The news of the money came and I breathed an ironic and bitter sigh of relief. (137)

Monk's mother is suffering from Alzheimer's disease; he feels obligated to support Lorraine, the family's longtime housekeeper; he must pay his murdered sister's financial debts and support himself; clearly, Monk is a victim of circumstances that render him desperate for money (just like those living in the ghetto, just like Van Go). The ethical ambiguities of Monk's choices are ignored and the reader is persuaded to accept the notion that this kind of genuine peril and crisis justifies the commodification of oneself and one's race. Everett carefully and deliberately (though perhaps unconsciously)

ensures that Monk's rationale for self-commodification appears virtuous and acceptable to readers.

The sequencing of events in the narrative ensures that any discussion of Monk's decision will be couched in terms of burden and need; indeed, scholar Brian Yost explains that "the weight of Monk's economic responsibilities finally necessitates his producing commercially viable work instead of adhering to other aesthetic or moral beliefs" (1329). Monk's honorable but desperate need of money is a vital precursor to his pursuit of money and the lengths to which he will go to obtain it, but why is such validation necessary to justify Monk's choice? Though Monk is accused within the novel of failing to be "black enough," Everett also takes careful steps to avoid assigning Monk any markers that would associate him with capitalistic, white America. In America, commodifying black bodies for the accumulation of wealth is considered a strictly white practice; for Monk to commit this crime his reasons must be legitimized.⁷¹ Family crisis and poverty are legitimate – and distinctly black – reasons to sell blackness, whereas profit for the sake of profit clearly is not. It seems that Everett has constructed a protagonist who performs blackness, just like Monk's Van Go performs blackness.

Importantly, Monk makes clear that Van Go is not meant to be read as an authentic portrayal of black life; Van Go is performing an exaggerated version of urban, lower-class black masculinity. Monk's desire to satirize this type of character is driven by his outrage at writers like Juanita Mae Jenkins, and readers, like his lover Marilyn and

⁷¹ While the commodification of black bodies for the accumulation of wealth is *considered* a strictly white practice, this is in fact not the case. As I will discuss briefly, many black artists (especially musicians) profit by selling images of black ghetto culture and the stereotypical identities, such as gangsters, pimps, and hos, found therein.

the book club committee, who have never “known anybody who talks like they do in the book” but continue to perceive characters like Van Go as authentic portrayals of black life (188). Because of Monk’s troubled emotional state and overt biases regarding race and performance theory, he lacks the critical distance that would allow the reader to fully engage with him as a reliable point of identification and narration. However, regardless of whether the reader aligns with Monk’s interpretation that Van Go does not represent an authentic version of black masculinity, the reader is privy to the point that Monk continuously attempts to make (that the other characters in the novel fail to grasp), which is that there is something very problematic and sad about the notion that being black is tethered to features of life and personhood that include illiteracy, poverty, and an absent father.

Yet, ironically, Monk performs a version of this type of blackness in his insistence that he is not wealthy. When meeting Lorraine’s fiancé’s family, Monk insists that he is not rich and is embarrassed by his family’s employment of a “maid” (194). In another section of the novel, Monk laments that he might have to take a poorly salaried lectureship and bemoans his financial status. Perhaps Monk is oblivious to his own privileged position, but I would argue that he is aware of his class status and seeks to ignore or hide it in order to align himself with the very version of blackness he resists.

Monk’s aversion to being perceived as rich reminds us again of the affects of the Moynihan report in relation to welfare queens. Black single mothers on welfare were depicted as devious and incompetent; according to Reaganites, their need for and ability to responsibly handle federal aid was negligible and they took advantage of government

assistance. This rhetoric persists today in the social assumptions that presume African Americans in possession of financial capital to be in some way criminal or deviant. Indeed, it would seem that Monk is influenced by these social ideas because he feels guilty for his upper middle-class childhood, and doubly guilty for profiting from the stereotypical images of black ghetto culture that he depicts in his novel. Because commodifying black bodies is supposed to be a white practice, Monk seeks to displace his guilt onto The Man, so to speak: "I felt a great deal of hostility toward an industry so eager to seek out and sell such demeaning and soul-destroying drive!" (137). Later, however, he admits to the relationship between his own capitalistic impulses and his decision to profit from images of poor, illiterate blacks: "So, I would not be economically oppressed because of writing a book that fell in line with the very books that I deemed racist" (212). Monk's initial efforts collapse and he is unable to distance himself from the historically racist practices of white capitalism.

Interestingly, Monk is not unique among African American artists in his utilization of black stereotypes as a vehicle for commerce. In the reality outside of the novel, black artists openly pursue money and profit off of the commodification of black stories and bodies. This raises an important question: to whom does the black outlaw image belong? Monk is disgusted by Juanita Mae Jenkins because she profits under a system by which racialized stories and language have a salable market value. Monk, and presumably Everett himself, who openly aligns his resentment of racial politics within the publishing industry with his protagonist, despises the blatant commodification of so-called black culture by black artists, but this gesture is not something new or rare.

Writers, filmmakers, and musicians have adeptly marketed representations of black, rebellious, “street” outlaws for profit; this image has been mainstreamed into popular culture and even those artists who never participated in ghetto culture can profit from its commodification.⁷² Like other artists, Monk capitalizes on blackness by invoking a particular kind of style and form. Though he claims he cannot perform blackness in his real life, Monk adeptly mimics other black artists, like Jenkins, as he deploys and sells social ideas of blackness in *My Pafology*.

Throughout the novel Monk easily transitions between academic jargon, Ebonics, and other “languages,” including the stilted speech of the uneducated ex-con Stagg Leigh, who, not surprisingly speaks like he has a Ph.D.⁷³ Everett’s easy code switching between styles forces the reader to acknowledge the disconnection between identity and style;

⁷² Take for instance, rap superstar Jay Z, who was raised in a middle class suburban neighborhood but has marketed himself as an inner city thug, hustler and pimp. The attitude among some scholars who study the contemporary music industry is that accumulating wealth through marketing racial imagery is a form of resisting racial oppression. In “Popular Culture as Oppositional Culture: Rap as Resistance” Theresa A. Martinez writes: “Much of the contemporary discourse on rap recognizes the complexity of rap’s relationship to the dominant culture, as well as capitalist production and consumerism, yet seems to agree that ultimately rap is the voice of urban African American youth, and that this voice is a form of resistance to and survival within the dominant social order” (272). Though Martinez relates the notion of resistance to a specifically urban identity, she also remarks that many rappers “are getting rich,” which disconnects them from the impoverished, street lifestyle about which they rap. However, regardless of this commodification of the music and the rappers themselves, Martinez agrees with black studies scholar Houston Baker that “rap’s message is still threatening to the powers that be” (273).

⁷³ Although Monk chooses not to use Ebonics when he pretends to be Stagg R. Leigh, he does attempt to prove he is “the real thing” (a product of the ghetto) by suggesting he went to prison for allegedly killing a man with the leather awl of a Swiss army knife (218).

there is no inherent relationship between the two.⁷⁴ Though this argument may seem obvious in the context of cultural scholarship from the 1980s and early 1990s, it is a point that needs to be (re)made. Scholarship arguing for understandings of identity mediated through style often meant to empower black artists by highlighting the unique power of their voices.⁷⁵ This position was fortified by scholars who began to turn to style as an object of study; Stuart Hall put it simply in “What is This “Black” in Black Popular Culture?” when he wrote, “First I ask you to note how, within the black repertoire, *style* - which mainstream cultural critics often believe to be the mere husk, the wrappings, the sugar coating on the pill – has become *itself* the subject of what is going on” (Hall 27). Despite this methodology’s important potential to create spaces for celebrating difference, it is easy to see the dangers inherent to equating a particular kind of style with a specific identity. Everett points out the limitations of analyses of style by masterfully bouncing between styles of diction and forms of genre within *Erasure*.⁷⁶

Everett’s nimble transitioning within and between styles establishes critical distances between text, reader, and author. As with much postmodern fiction, the reader cannot relax into the narrative but is urged to continually question which styles are being deployed and why. Because Everett deliberately divorces style from identity, his

⁷⁵ In Theresa A. Martinez’s aforementioned essay she makes this claim and aligns her argument with thinkers like Tricia Rose and Houston Baker.

⁷⁶ Here I am referring not only to the novella within the larger narrative but also Everett’s inclusion of numerous snippets of imagined dialogue, mini plays, and even Monk’s curriculum vita.

deployment of Ebonics and other tropes of ghetto culture as qualifiers of race crystallizes the material nature of style.

Just as *Beloved* demonstrates that, under slavery, freedom and love were commodified (a problem that continues to impact contemporary economic structures), *Erasure* shows that, in today's society, Ebonics and other indicators of black experience have become commodities with exchange values. In canonical literature these indicators of blackness, or Africanist idioms, as Toni Morrison puts it in her critical text *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, have been "used to establish difference. . . the dialogue of black characters is construed as an alien, estranging dialect made deliberately unintelligible by spelling contrived to disfamiliarize it" (52). Certainly the language Monk ascribes to Van Go works (in both form and content) to differentiate Monk from Van Go; for example, Monk cannot play basketball and has a Ph.D., whereas Van Go "can dunk from the top of the key and all like that . . . but shit, how you gone get into college and get all that big money when you ain't nuffin to begin wif and when the muthafuckas make it so you cain't stay in school" (70). The way that Van Go speaks and behaves is exactly what makes him different from Monk and profitably marketable.

Morrison argues that "Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful..." (52). Does this formula change when the individual writing the Other is not a white oppressor but an African American? Ultimately Morrison's argument has limited applications in regard to Monk. Rather than feeling free and powerful, Monk experiences existential despair and artistic failure. However, despite

Monk's personal attitude toward his novella, employing disparaging Africanist idioms has in fact made him financially free, desirable to publishers, and powerfully able to care for his family. Importantly, Monk's Othering of Van Go creates a plurality of Others – Lisa/Baby Sister, Marilyn/Cleona, Mother/Mama, Father/Willy the Wino and, of course, Stagg Leigh, who is an Other version of both Monk and Van Go. These characters cannot be reconciled with one another; they are neither similar nor opposite and they each represent unique individuals. As readers, when we have multiple conflicting images of blackness, we are forced to question the authenticity of Africanist idioms, which, importantly, are not always ugly or repulsive but are, more significantly, always markers of difference.

Through this lens it would seem, then, that there is no authentic black style, black experience, or blackness. Indeed, the novel's protagonist would agree with this claim; Monk's position on the issue is announced early in the novel when he informs the reader, "I don't believe in race" (2). Yet, in the end, Monk experiences soul-crushing guilt as a result of utilizing racialized images, that he views as demeaning, for profit. Though race may not be "real," it has real effects. Monk's journey indicates that race is best understood as a sociopolitical construct; the authenticity or "realness" of race is irrelevant; it has a *function* that is real and has a visible material presence.

Having established the way that performances of race function as commodities, I would like to turn now to a discussion of *Erasure's* depiction of African American family dynamics, specifically motherhood and its role in black culture. The two postdomestic women featured in the novel offer different representations of motherhood: Van Go's

“Mama” is uneducated, overworked, and living in the ghetto, while Monk’s “Mother” is literate, supported, and living in upper-middle class D.C. Mama has no relationship with the father(s) of her children, while Mother, whose husband had been unfaithful to her, loses her husband to suicide before the novel’s beginning. Comparing these two postdomestic characters highlights the complexities of black mothering.

Considering that the title of Monk’s novella, *My Pafology*, seems like a deliberate reference to the Moynihan Report and the way that black motherhood has been pathologized in American culture, it is not surprising that the story begins with Van Go’s shocking matricidal nightmare. In his dream, Van Go’s passionate ambivalence toward his mama causes him to lash out against her, “I look at my hands and they all covered wif blood and I realize I don’t know what going on. So, I stab Mama again. I stab her cause I scared. I stab Mama cause I love her. I stab mama cause I hate her. Cause I love her. Cause I hate her. Cause I ain’t got no daddy” (65). From this violent first paragraph, the reader learns that Van Go projects his rage, fear, and identity issues onto his mother.

Though Van Go’s murderous penetration of his mother only occurs in his dream, he is certainly abusive toward her in his waking life as well. Mama, however, steadfastly works to civilize Van Go: “ ‘I be serious, Van,’ she say. ‘And I don’t want you hangin round wif that Tito none either. He be bad news,’ to which Van Go replies “ ‘Shut the fuck up’ ” (79). Despite Van Go’s disrespectful behavior, Mama cooks for him, obtains a job for him, and responsibly chides him about his use of profanity. Near the end of the novella Van Go’s public humiliation on *The Snookie Cane* show causes Mama to tearfully say into Snookie’s microphone, “I didn’t raise him up to be like this” (117).

Though Van Go is the protagonist of this sad story of ghetto culture, Mama is the true victim. Despite Van Go's cruelty, Mama continues to love and nurture her unruly child. She is an all-sacrificing, all-enduring beacon of martyrdom who has no support and who raises and nurtures her children with inadequate resources in the context of a morally corrosive ghetto neighborhood.

Though some have argued that the cult of true womanhood does not apply to African American women because of their relationship with labor, Mama resolutely maintains an idealized ("true woman") mothering relationship with her children.⁷⁷ While she is not dainty, Mama faithfully nurtures her children, submits to her domestic role, and unwaveringly trumpets good Christian values. Mama's status as a true woman is reinforced by her sacrificial mothering behavior. Moreover, while Mama's body is not feminine according to Victorian expectations of delicate fragility, she is feminine according to modern terms of womanhood that conflate femininity with sexual desirability. The homeless junkie, Willy the Wino, who eventually emerges as Van Go's father, reinforces Mama's feminine desirability as he recalls the pleasure of intercourse with her and later lasciviously refers to "that mole just under her tittie" (94). Mama is not frigid, old, or overly masculine; according to modern cultural gender norms Mama is

⁷⁷ In "Black Women, Mothering, and Protest in 19th Century American Society," Marci Bounds Littlefield argues "the cult of domesticity excluded black women" (54). See also chapter one of Andrea O'Reilly's *Toni Morrison and Motherhood* (SUNY 2004). In Welter's 1966 essay, she says that it was a woman's obligation to uphold the pillars of the nation with her "frail white hand," but I believe this language simply highlights the divergent nature of early feminist projects (152). Welter was intent on showing the ways that women were penned in by their social roles and, like many early feminists, she focused solely on middle-class white women and failed to address the ways that the cult of true womanhood impacted women of color or lower-class women.

sexually desirable and feminine. Thus according to both nineteenth century and contemporary understandings of womanhood and femininity, Mama is a true woman, a desirable partner, and a “good” mother.⁷⁸

Indeed, her relationship with her children – even Van Go – seems to affirm the latter. Despite his disrespectful behavior toward her, Van Go is attached and close enough to his mother that she is the first person he thinks of upon his televised arrest: “The cops be laughin. . . . But I don’t care. The cameras is pointing at me. I be on TV. The cameras be full on me. I on TV. I say, ‘Hey, Mama.’ I say, ‘Hey, Baby Girl. Look at me. I on TV’ ” (131). Although he is an illiterate, degenerate criminal, Van Go remains emotionally tethered to his family. Mama has not been able to ensure Van Go’s success or prosperity in life, but she has managed to cultivate an affectionate relationship with her son.

The novel’s other postdomestic woman, on the other hand, does not participate in an emotionally affectionate relationship with her son, Monk. Monk is raised in an upper middle-class environment surrounded by a family of doctors. Because we know that

⁷⁸ The narrative of pathology generated by the Moynihan Report and the resulting label of “welfare queen” assigned to poor single black mothers propagated early American social conceptions of “good” and “bad” mothering. According to this paradigm, “bad” womanhood and mothering is oppositional to a traditional Western model of femininity. As described in Welter’s essay on true womanhood, women are to be judged according to four cardinal virtues: “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (151-2). These ideals remain influential today; thus, “good” women and mothers uphold these virtues and devote their lives to the service and wellbeing of their children and husbands, while those who are “bad” fail to nurture their children and to comply with the domestic obligations of marriage. For black mothers, the welfare queen label also carried with it the implicit label of sexually wanton Jezebel and neglectful “bad” mother. Because Mama is a poor black matriarch, she is socially expected to be a welfare queen and “bad” mother, but she does not fit into this paradigm.

“some of [his] ancestors were slaves” we also know that Monk’s family has strived for and achieved upward financial mobility over the last century and a half (1). According to the novel’s portrayal of Mother, however, the economic gains of her ancestors have had dire affects on the intensity of mother/child bonds. As a result of her financial status, Mother can afford to hire Lorraine, a sort of mammy who cares for the day-to-day needs of Monk and his siblings.⁷⁹ Monk describes the duties of the women who raised him saying, “If we had a problem, we went to Mother. If we needed rides someplace, we went to Mother. If we needed food or clean clothes, we went to Lorraine” (33). Lorraine shouldered the traditional motherly duty of physically nurturing the children, while Mother analytically resolved issues or helped to connect the children to the larger world via transportation. Though Monk is Mother’s favorite child and she regularly praises him, their relationship lacks the emotional intensity of Mama’s bond with Van Go.

Regardless of Mother’s emotional attachment to him or lack thereof, Monk is not emotionally attached to her. Though Monk is kind to “the old lady,” he admits to emotional distance between them when considering how best to care for her: “The leave of absence seemed the most logical course. . . . I couldn’t simply place her somewhere. . . . The saddest part of it all was the callousness of my consideration that I would only have to be gone a year because my mother would probably die. I felt like shit when I tracked down and identified that thought” (35, 53). Monk feels guilty that he is not closer to or

⁷⁹ Monk describes Lorraine as a mammy figure on several occasions, most notably when he says, “Lorraine, as far as I knew, never had a life away from my family. She had days off, but I didn’t know where she went, if she went anywhere. She even went with us to the beach in the summers” (33). Though this material certainly requires further analysis, I think Monk’s dismissal of the housekeeper’s private life mimics depictions of mammy figures in American novels and films.

more bonded with his mother, but he was not raised to prioritize his relationship with her. From a young age Monk's interests in elements outside the home have been cultivated; he was praised for being an intellectual and a creative thinker, for producing theoretical arguments and scholarship, and for achieving recognition within the larger world of the humanities and arts. Because of his upbringing, Monk was pre-disposed and then heavily encouraged to succeed in an adult life that would be independent from his mother's.

Though she helps to raise a successful son, Mother is not feminine according to historical or contemporary ideals of womanhood. Monk's belief that Mother's lack of affection toward the family "impair[ed] my attempts at relationships later," highlights the incredible expectations mothers face to emotionally nurture their children, while also preparing them for the intellectual and financial challenges of modern life (152). Mother fails in the former category because, according to Monk, she is not very loving or emotional during his childhood. Further, she is not domestic in the sense that she does not nurture or directly attend to the needs of her children. She does not participate in the sedative duties of the home nor does she perform the "great task of bringing men back to God" (Welter 162). Though Monk's father is primarily responsible for the strong atheist beliefs in their family, mother does not serve as a beacon of pious Christianity in their home.

Mother is also devoid of femininity according to more modern ideals of womanhood as she is desexualized via her marriage. Monk's father cheats on his mother and later regrets his decision to remain married rather than abandon the family to be with his mistress. The coldness between Monk's parents is clear to the degree that Monk

recalls that they “never seemed terribly close” and “were not outwardly affectionate” (152). Monk does not view this marital distance as solely his mother’s fault, but he does recall that, “My mother saw her life as a wife and mother as a service” (152). Here Monk seems to be using the word “service” as a synonym for labor; in other words, Mother does not view her domestic role as a calling that gives her life meaning as a “true woman” would, but rather as a duty that she is obligated to fulfill.

Indeed, Mother’s marriage is an act of service to her children as she seeks to better their opportunities for success. As a woman from a poor family “with names like Janelle and Tyrell” Mother works to “become an Ellison,” and her education “functioned as a wedge” between her past family and her future family (151-2). Mother’s dissociation from her working-class childhood is in the best interest of her children, but it also situates her as tool for their prosperity, rather than as an emotional nurturer. Mother’s efforts to enable herself and her children, to separate from people with “big smells and big laughs” and to escape from working in a plant or on a farm, ultimately result in her emotional detachment (151). In bettering herself she becomes less womanly; Mother’s financial empowerment requires pragmatism over emotion and agency over victimization, thus she becomes detached from social signifiers of femininity.

In *Erasure* both images of black postdomestic mothers are problematic. Mama’s status as a nurturing parent and good woman is narratively linked to her acceptance of a ghettoized identity (for herself and her children). Though she tries to “raise up” Van Go, Mama’s influence is limited to moral teachings in the home and an effort to procure menial labor for her son. Conversely, Mother is stripped of her womanhood as she

actively changes her economic status through marriage and pragmatically trains her children for successful middle-class public lives. The implicit suggestion is that financial and educational advancement can only come at the cost of family unity. More specifically, pursuing class and status advancement requires sacrificing the loving and precious emotional bond that uniquely tethers children to their mothers. By juxtaposing Mama and Mother, Everett makes readers aware of the contradictions embedded in African American mothering and what it means to care for and nurture children. The critical commentary about upward mobility presented in *Erasure* is also reminiscent of the material concerns brought to light in *Beloved*. Sethe yearns so deeply to bond with Beloved that she is unable to pursue financial gains; ultimately, Sethe's psychological fixation and paralysis almost cause her to starve to death. Just as in *Erasure*, in *Beloved* economic advancement and loving mothering are constructed as incommensurate.

In telling the stories of Mama and Mother, Everett portrays two very different images of mothering and reveals the vexed nature of single black motherhood as an identity category. For, what kind of mother would choose to detach from her children to focus on their future success or, conversely, what kind of mother would lovingly bond with her children at the cost of their potential for escaping a ghetto lifestyle? Social and personal consequences abound with either choice. Turning a critical lens onto these women highlights the political complexities of mothering that are unique to African American women.⁸⁰ Furthermore, by presenting two different images of motherhood,

⁸⁰ It is important to note that class status is a primary factor underscoring this dilemma. Sacrificing the emotional connection between mother and children is depicted as a prerequisite of upward mobility. I think that this thesis will also apply to non-African

Everett avoids essentializing a specific mothering experience.⁸¹ Everett has sought to avoid and critique notions of authenticity throughout the novel and, through these postdomestic characters, he is eventually able to construct a plotline that attends to the very unique, individual ways women cope with issues that are conceived of as universal.⁸² As feminist scholar bell hooks points out, “When black folks critique essentialism, we are empowered to recognize multiple experiences of black identity that are the lived conditions which make diverse cultural productions possible” (2483). I would add to this that Everett’s critique also recognizes the lived conditions that made diverse forms of mothering not only possible but necessary.

Moreover, through Mama in particular *Erasure* mounts a poignant critique of the narratives of pathology and welfare queen-ism represented by the Moynihan Report. Because she is both a matriarch and an impoverished single woman, Mama is supposed to be a “bad” mother, but she does not fit into this paradigm. This postdomestic woman thwarts the stigmatization attached to single black motherhood by in fact emerging as a “good” mother according to the standards of those who have pathologized her. Thus

American lower-class mothers. However, the African-American ethnicity has and continues to align with class stratification in the United States. Because African Americans comprise a larger portion of the lower class than other races and because multi-generational matriarchal African American households have been pathologized in U.S. culture, this dilemma is more prevalent for black mothers and more influential in shaping that identity category (than other race sub-categories of mothers).

⁸¹ If we consider Lisa, a young professional who is pressured to bear children, and Lorraine, an older woman who has opted not to have children, Everett has actually presented a myriad of characters who must cope in some way with issues of motherhood.

⁸² Everyone’s identity is located at some intersection of race and class; these are universal identity categories.

Everett is able to establish the critique of authenticity that seems to be the novel's central project via portrayals of postdomestic woman that undermine the narratives of pathology established by the Moynihan Report and American welfare practices.

Identity and the Idealized Black Mother in Andrew Winer's *The Color Midnight Made*

In Andrew Winer's *The Color Midnight Made* the protagonist, Conrad Clay, struggles with the same dilemma that Monk faces in *Erasure*: the inability to be black enough. Con fails to be black enough for a variety of reasons - most notably because he is in fact white. Conrad is unsure of his identity, stating, "I got a color for everybody. Except me," but because he lives in the inner-city slums of Oakland and is surrounded by African Americans, Con considers himself to be part of the black community (1). In the end, Conrad finds a way to cope with his angst by learning to see a new color in the world around him, a light that defies the limits of traditional colors. Though the novel didactically stresses the message that racial categories, or "colors," are not real, characters in the story are alternately abused or idealized based on racial categories. The novel's titular character, a blind teen-ager named Midnight, insists "It's all in everybody's head. . . . People arguing about some brown, some black, some white - it's a seeing man's problem," but as with *Erasure*, the characters' efforts to disprove the realness of race ultimately allow for a deeper examination of the functions and effects of race within the story (237).

In the first chapter of the novel Conrad, one of only fourteen white children at his primary school, expresses his desire to fit in with his black schoolmates. Though he is

enmeshed in an African American community and feels more bonded to his black best friend Loop's family than to his own, Con suddenly feels like an outsider when he is diagnosed with color vision deficiency, or partial color blindness: "I wanted to see things like everyone else did. If I practiced my colors enough maybe I'd see them right – like a brutha" (4). As much as he endeavors to fit in, however, Con is consistently marked by his whiteness. Eventually even Loop lashes out at Con, calling him a "faggot whiteboy" in front of a popular all-black clique.

Though it does not strictly adhere to the conventions of a Bildungsroman, *The Color Midnight Made* is a coming of age story. Conrad is exposed to sex and nudity for the first time; he contends with his father's drunken violence and his mother's neglect; he faces older bullies; and he makes a mature decision regarding the bomb he creates. In a sense, the narrative is about Conrad's quest for identity, a quest in which he is compelled to emotionally avoid his own home life until he can revisit it with a greater sense of self. Ironically, it is his abusive home life that enables him to stake his claim to the black racial identity he desires.

Though Con and Loop playfully engage in sexually driven dialogue about women, enjoy the same active, youthful hobbies, and share a mutually created slang vocabulary, these elements of identity are not significant enough to fortify their friendship. A racial divide that threatens to destroy their bond separates the two boys. Loop originally feels that Con belongs in the African American community: "Loop said I musta been black in a past life, so it was cool I was hangin wid the bruthas in *this* one, since I had prior experience and did not be comin at it on the honkey-ass tip" (2).

However, Conrad realizes that he is not black and, after their fight, he must convince both himself and Loop that he belongs. Interestingly, Conrad does not engage in any grand gesture to prove his loyalty, nor does Con confront Loop and directly battle Loop's hostility. Instead, an event occurs that profoundly changes the way that Conrad feels about his identity.

Conrad's father's permanent departure is explicitly identified as a rite of passage by which Conrad is initiated into the black community. Because African American families have been socially and statistically marked by the predominance of single-parent matriarchal households, desertion by a neglectful father or father figure is a shared experience that has become culturally tethered to black identity. Prior to his father's abandonment, Conrad desperately wants to erase his whiteness but cannot; his family structure is normative and lacks the "pathological" matriarchal structure identified by Moynihan as the key signifier of African American households. When his father leaves town with a mistress, Con visits Loop's blind older brother, Midnight. In an attempt to resolve the conflict between Con and his brother, Midnight assures Conrad that race is a matter of perception, "And what he said to you – 'bout being a whiteboy . . . All that shit – you gotta swat it down 'cause it's nothing. . . . It's all up here, noamsaying?" (237). Conrad wants to be part of the black community and is given explicit verbal permission to imagine himself as such. Midnight makes their bond more specific by sharing his deepest secrets with Con and announcing, "That makes us homeys" (239). Throughout this scene Midnight unequivocally asserts that racial categories, as we understand them,

are not real or relevant and that Conrad can color the world around him, including himself, any way he desires.

After his visit with Midnight, Conrad skateboards to the bay and responsibly discards the pipe bomb he has created, then rides to a barbershop owned by Loop and Midnight's mother, Mary. On this visit Conrad feels an increased sense of belonging at the shop; throughout the novel Mary and her friends have treated Conrad kindly but on this visit he identifies why he has often felt that he "needed to be in that room with everyone" (215). Conrad is comforted and liberated by the barbershop conversation: "It was the sound of women's voices in that barber shop – Mary's, Roz's, even the old wilma's - that lifted me up and set me back down like no flying carpet ever could" (247). Being privy to the relaxed and personal banter exchanged by the women allows Conrad to feel a sense of belonging and to imagine himself as part of their community. Moreover, Conrad articulates that the women's voices and the *way* that they speak to each other are vital components of the ambiance, "It was good to be back at Mary's, where the air was warm and filled with lots of lip" (244). Having already been given permission by Midnight to imagine himself as any color he desires, Conrad is able to more fully express and label the sense of belonging he feels within the black community. Moreover, rather than interrogating issues of style, as *Erasure* does, Winer's text can be straightforwardly situated in the Africanist idiom paradigm Morrison sets up in *Playing in the Dark*. Mary's style of speaking is different from Con's and, by highlighting that difference, Con is able to discover aspects of his own identity. Through Mary, Conrad is

able to engage in “exploration of [his] fears and desires” and acknowledge his dissatisfaction with his own home life (Morrison 17).

Also during his visit to Mary’s, Conrad is forced to confront his conflict with Loop. Conrad is angry at Loop for alienating him from the black community and compromising their friendship, but then Con narrates, “I turned back to Loop and realized something I hadn’t thought of before. Both of our pops were gone” (250). At this juncture, Conrad realizes that he and Loop both have absentee fathers and no paternal guidance. Immediately afterward Conrad invites Loop to go skateboarding and states that, because of their commonalities and their history, they were “uneasy tag team partners”; though their relationship is rocked by trauma, they remain part of the same team. While Conrad claims that he still does not know what color he is, he does confidently assert himself as part of Loop’s community. Loop and Conrad are raised by single mothers, thus their friendship is strengthened by the “pathology,” as Moynihan would put it, of their shared circumstances.

Additionally, following the trajectory set up by Morrison who states that Africanist presences enable self-discovery for white characters, Conrad’s relationship with Loop’s mother, Mary, becomes a crucial instrument that enables Con to come to terms with his own broken family. Conrad’s parents’ failings are juxtaposed with Mary’s affectionate mothering and she is unambiguously celebrated for her warmth and no-nonsense parenting style. Mary often intuits Conrad’s emotional state of mind, sensing when he is distraught and subtly addressing his needs in ways that his mother does not. Conrad begins to label his desires as he watches Mary interact with her children and

friends, thinking, “Somehow their arguing was the best thing I’d heard in a long time,” and eventually openly acknowledging, “I wanted this to be *my* house” (217, 220).

Conrad idealizes Mary for her superior mothering ability, a skill that his own mother seems to lack. Importantly, Mary seems to have negotiated a space between the poles of financial stability/detached mothering and poverty/nurturing mothering set up in *Beloved* and *Erasure*. Because she merges her workplace with her home life by having her children visit her in the barbershop (an option not available to most women), she is able to avoid the pitfalls of this binary and emerge as an idealized mother in Con’s eyes.

In their discussion of the black female literary canon, scholars have debated the effects of some fictions’ unequivocal celebration of the maternal presence.⁸³ In

“Theories of Family Change, Motherhood and Education,” Miriam E. David argues that:

“There are significant dangers involved in idealizing and mystifying the certain

biological experience of motherhood and in so doing reviving an identification between femininity and maternity that in the past has not served the interests of women” (37).

Because of the white male authorship of this novel it clearly does not belong in the black female canon; however, its depiction of Mary, the novel’s postdomestic woman, certainly

can be scrutinized according to David’s critique. As a result of his confusion and

dissatisfaction with the complexities of his own identity, Conrad views Mary solely in

terms of reductive positive traits; though Con glorifies Mary, in so doing he also reveals

⁸³ For further reading see the Miriam David text referenced in this paragraph. In her book, David cites the research of Hazel Carby (1990), Michele Wallace (1990), Paul Gilroy (1990) and Hortense Spillers (1990) and puts into conversation their claims regarding black female literary productions. Also see Jane Gallop’s *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1992) in which she discusses the glorification and exotic sexualization of black women in literature.

society's implicit desire for homogenous black families. In white-authored texts the "dangers involved in idealizing" black mothers are inextricably linked to the desire to believe in family dynamics that are serenely simple; for Conrad this fantasy becomes a haven whereby he can imagine an escape from his own painfully complex family life.

Furthermore, if, as David's research suggests, black women writers idealize mother figures in order to imply generational continuity between women and their daughters, then Conrad's idealization of Mary and dislike of his own mother can be interpreted as extensions of his desire to be black. Feeling loved by Mary gives Conrad the sense that he does belong in her family and, likewise, preferring her methods of mothering is vital to his assimilation into black culture. Though he knows it is impossible, Conrad wants to believe that he *could* become a part of Mary's family - a desire that is textually symbolized by Mary's name, which evokes images of the Biblical mother Mary. Like the symbolic mother of all, Mary is portrayed as naturally innocent and nurturing to everyone. When homophobes vandalize the property of her gay friends, Mary passionately scrubs away the profane graffiti; when a lonely customer expresses the need for companionship, Mary earnestly defends and befriends her. Indeed, Mary has all of the virtues mandated by the cult of true womanhood and serves as a mother figure for many of the characters in the novel. Importantly, though the Biblical Mary did not naturally conceive her son, she became the mother of Jesus through divine intervention. Mary's link to the Holy Mother further signals her maternal preeminence and, moreover, bonds her to Christian motifs of biologically transcendent mothering – which is

particularly significant in regard to her relationship with Conrad, who dreams of being her child.

Importantly, Conrad's longing to be a part of Mary's family is not a desire to which he easily admits. Conrad is troubled by guilt and confusion, with which he is able to cope via his relationship with Mary. Ronald Jackson's *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity Discourse and Racial Politics in Popular Media* explores the treatment of black bodies in fiction and offers another productive way of understanding Mary's function in the novel. Jackson's premise is that white-authored cultural productions inscribe black corporeal subjects with social and personal meanings: "The body is forced to hold the contradictions and anxieties laced within the inscribed meanings because it inescapably exists in a social habitat preoccupied with these meanings" (12). In other words, the black body contains the angst of the white scripter and, indeed, Conrad's narration depicts Mary's body as a receptacle for his ambivalence toward his maternal relationship.⁸⁴ For example, when Mary's boyfriend lifts her shirt to show everyone her stomach, Conrad notes that her body bears a mark indicative of his own confusion, "A silver scar sagged across her entire belly, with a smaller scar on each end. Her stomach was smiling at us" (Winer 230). Though her stomach is permanently disfigured from childbirth, it also bears a sign of joy and symbolizes her journey through pregnancy and

⁸⁴ I believe that because Conrad is the narrator and teller of this story, it is his anxiety that is revealed. However, one could argue that the anxiety belongs to the author, Andrew Winer. As with *Erasure*, this novel is often regarded as semi-autobiographical in nature and, when I met Andrew Winer in winter 2008, he stated that Conrad's childhood experiences very closely resemble his own.

labor. The way that Con describes Mary's body reveals his mixed emotions toward Mary and his own mother.

Creating a family scars women; they must emotionally and physically sacrifice in order to become mothers and sustain families. The idea that women sometimes *choose* pain and suffering (even in the hope of great reward) confuses and angers Conrad. The image of a smiling scar on Mary's body symbolizes Con's ambivalence toward his mother's choices. Though Con's father, Ray, is abusive, Con's mother attempts to maintain a relationship with him and she even allows him to return home after his first departure. Conrad struggles with his mother because she desperately clings to Ray, begging him not to leave after he abuses her and, later, allowing him back into their lives (before he abandons them permanently). Con's conflicted emotional state is compounded by the guilt he feels for preferring Mary over his own mother. In his narration, Conrad inscribes Mary's body with an image that represents and conveys the anxiety he feels as a result of the motherly influences in his life. Mary's body bears meanings assigned by Conrad and, additionally, her presence serves as an instrument through which Conrad can resolve his ambivalence toward his mother. For instance, after observing Mary drunkenly interacting with her boyfriend, Conrad observes, "I could see the worry in her face. It was a part of Mary I didn't remember seeing before – a part that needed someone, but maybe someone better than Bobby. When I thought of it like that, Mary didn't seem that different from Moms" (Winer 229). Though Conrad is ostensibly learning something new about Mary, he transforms it into knowledge about his own life.

Mary's presence is a medium through which Conrad can discover something about himself and his family; as Morrison notes, "The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary mediation on the self" (Morrison 17). After witnessing Mary's intoxication, Conrad begins to get a sense of the vulnerability of single mothers and to consider his own mother's victimization. Moreover, Mary's elite status has been tarnished; while on his way home, Con thinks: "I didn't know what to think now about Loop's house. His family has always been perfect to me and they still were, kind of. . . . But tonight, even Mary had gotten drunk" (Winer 232). Once Conrad's fantasy is shattered, he can begin to cope with the real problems facing his family. Mary's fall from grace is a vital precursor to Conrad's reevaluation of his mother's predicament.

From this point forward, Mary exits the novel and Conrad begins watching his own mother, paying attention to her and seeing her in a new way. His ability to see her clearly – an ability facilitated by Mary – enables Con to forgive his mother: "Halfway to the stand, I looked back at her. She was facing the water, crying. She pulled a Kleenex out of her purse and wiped the runny makeup from her cheeks. I watched her lower the tissue to stare out at the bay, and I felt all the anger leak out of me" (255). Through his relationship with Mary, Con is able to forgive and accept his own mother. Moreover, Con's recognition of the women's similarities causes him to realize that his own mother might be capable of loving and nurturing him as well as Mary has.

Importantly, we must remember that Mary is able to achieve her initial idealized status as a good mother (according to Con), in part, due to the unique circumstances of her occupational environment; because she works in a casual, family friendly shop, she is

able to invite her children to visit and thus spend time with them while she is working. Regardless of their race, most women are unable to bring their children into the workplace. When we put Mary's story in conversation with Sethe, Mother, and Mama, the postdomestic women in *Beloved* and *Erasure*, it is difficult not to acknowledge the unique and unlikely nature of the work arrangements that are required for a black mother to stave off accusations of welfare queen-ism or detached drive for upward mobility.

Though Winer's novel seems to offer a concrete example of "good" black mothering, and thus thwart the central premise of the Moynihan Report by showcasing a thriving African American matriarchal family, the novel ignores the context of the characters' material circumstances. Because Mary successfully works and raises her children, *The Color Midnight Made* might have us believe that the problems surrounding welfare and social aid programs have been resolved, but the reader must ignore the incredibly rare circumstances of Mary's employment in order to participate in this façade. While it seems clear that addressing the specific historical politics of African American matriarchy set up in the Moynihan Report is not central to Winer's project, his novel nonetheless invites readers to consider how social pressure to support one's family without federal aid impacts single black women's roles as mothers. Importantly, Winer, like Everett, thwarts the narrative of pathology set up by Moynihan by presenting a "good" single black mother in an impoverished community. Moreover, Winer's text reminds us to question easy labels of mothers, even when our narrator tells us one mother is "good" while another is lacking.

While it is never objective to discuss representation in terms of “positive” or “negative” images, the complexity of these subjective terms is compounded by the depictions of African American postdomestic women in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Percival Everett’s *Erasure*, and Andrew Winer’s *The Color Midnight Made*.⁸⁵ One commonality that has emerged between these texts is their collective concern with the material realities and the maternal responsibilities that shape the lives of their black postdomestic characters. As we will see in chapter four, white-authored canonical texts featuring divorced mothers rarely center on the characters’ methods for earning a living or caring for their children.

At the beginning of this chapter I remarked on America’s national fascination with and scholarly commitment to examining black family dynamics. Perhaps as a response to attempts by thinkers like Moynihan to promote reductive identity categories, these authors have endeavored to create images of black women that resist easy labels. Just as fictionalized black bodies bear the scripting of their inscribers, novels about African American families are themselves inscribed with the concerns of their authors. Thus, it is clear that American writers remain fascinated by black matriarchs but are committed to acknowledging a plurality of images of black mothers. After examining the fictional lives of Sethe, Mama and Mother, and Mary, it is difficult to tell who is “good” and who is “bad” but, of course, that is not the point. In regard to discourses of feminism and ethnicity studies, the productive work performed by these novels lies not in their

⁸⁵ For further reading on images of women debates, see “Positive Images: Screening Women’s Films” by Linda Artel and Susan Wengraf, “What’s Wrong with ‘Images of Women?’” by Griselda Pollock, and “There’s More to a Positive Image Than Meets the Eye” by Diane Waldman.

ability to craft specific kinds of images but, rather, in their ability to expand readers' conceptions of black female subjectivity.

Morrison's *Beloved* expands readers understanding of African American mothers by revealing the incredibly complex psychology of child-rearing under slavery and establishing the relationship between economics and mothering that is foundational to contemporary ideas regarding black matriarchs. Through Sethe, Morrison reveals the insidious way that social attitudes about black motherhood, which began during slavery and persist today in the Moynihan Report and welfare practices, debilitate black matriarchs by dis severing them from womanly communities and invalidating their desires. In *Erasure*, Everett adeptly promotes a plurality of images by critiquing authenticity, exploring the consequences of the commodification of style, and demonstrating the ways in which motherhood is shaped by material reality. Additionally, Everett undermines the notions of "good" and "bad" mothering predicated on the Moynihan Report and established via Regan-era welfare practices through Mama, who upholds the virtues of true womanhood and "good" mothering that are constructed as antithetical to her single, ghettoized, matriarchal identity. Winer's *The Color Midnight Made*, on the other hand, relies heavily on social ideas of "authentic" blackness in order to enable his white protagonist to ponder his own racial identity and relationship with his mother. However, Conrad's self-reflection and personal growth are tethered to Mary and work to reveal the incredible challenges faced by single mothers who must provide financially and emotionally for their children, and who must do so without government aid in order to be regarded as "good" mothers. Moreover, each novel challenges the

social narrative of single black motherhood that is represented by the Moynihan Report and, via postdomestic female characters, works to dis sever the black family from its label of pathology.

CHAPTER FOUR

“What can a heroine do?”:

The Postdomestic Woman in Canonized Postmodern Literature

Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: that what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant . . . If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else?

– Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

In her 1972 essay “What can a heroine do? Or, why women can’t write,” feminist writer and literary critic Joanna Russ states that the stories and myths upon which Western culture is built are “tales for heroes, not heroines, and . . . there are so very few stories in which women can figure as protagonists” (Russ 201). Russ explains that in literature female protagonists are constructed as devoid of an inner life. Female leads do not possess complex inner motivation but instead behave according to a prescribed or projected essence; they are not women but essentialized images of women and have no personhood or true internal life.⁸⁶ Russ asks, “What myths, what plots, what actions are available to a female protagonist?” and ultimately concludes, “Women cannot write - using old myths” (204, 211). Nearly forty years later, Russ’s argument remains valid; I agree that women cannot write, or equally as important, *be written* according to the old myths. New stories, new character types, and new methods of narrative construction must be developed in order for female protagonists to move beyond mythologized,

⁸⁶ Russ provides a helpful comparison of the Noble Savage with the Bitch Goddess. The Noble Savage is noble for complex reasons, such as ambition, loneliness or his relationship with his father. The Bitch Goddess and other female character types, such as the faithful wife, healing Madonna, or seductive destroyer, have no internal motivation but instead behave according to a mysterious essence (e.g., the Bitch Goddess is a bitch).

essentialized images and into the realm of personhood and self-determined agency. The postdomestic female protagonist possesses this radical potential.

The postdomestic protagonist experiences a new kind of story, one that is not about pursuing marriage. The postdomestic woman's story occurs outside of the realm of domesticity and tracks a path of self-discovery. That the postdomestic woman's narrative begins *after* she has married, divorced, and/or mothered suggests for the first time in literary history that women have relevant stories and identities that continue to develop outside of the domestic world that has traditionally been imagined as the center and limit of a woman's existence.

However, it is important to note that not all accounts of the postdomestic woman are liberatory and radical. In some cases, particularly in postmodern novels featuring male protagonists, the postdomestic woman character is flattened into a doting or spiteful caricature. For example, in Don DeLillo's *Mao II* and John Hawkes' *Death, Sleep, and the Traveler*, the postdomestic female characters are depicted as unimaginative, devious, and intellectually subordinate to the male leads. These texts exemplify postmodernism's obsession with reinscribing the intellectual prowess of the white male literary elite.

Indeed, feminist theorists have critiqued postmodern scholarship for excluding women and minorities.⁸⁷ Cultural critic and scholar Barbara Creed accuses some male academics of ignoring women's scholarly contributions and refusing to engage feminists in theoretical conversation: "Some theorists of the postmodern – such as Jameson – have been completely indifferent to feminism and its theorization of the current crisis," she

⁸⁷ For example, see Barbara Creed's essay "From Here to Postmodernity: Feminism and Postmodernism" and bell hook's "Postmodern Blackness."

writes (415). High theory seems still to be the project of male scholars, who retain ownership over the intellectual domain of creating the textual and conceptual category of postmodernism.

The ideas put forth by scholars attempting to define postmodernism are varied and sometimes contradictory.⁸⁸ There seems to be some consensus amongst academics that postmodernism is defined, in part, by its suspicion of and resistance to master narratives. This idea originated in Jean-Francois Lyotard's oft-cited text *The Postmodern Condition* wherein the philosopher states, "I define postmodernism as an incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv). Lyotard explains that postmodernism challenges the grand theories and stories of social progress on which contemporary culture and knowledge is built. In other words, postmodernism questions the legitimacy of truth-claims and recasts the overarching paradigm of social knowledge that has prevailed since the Enlightenment as ethnocentric, heteronormative, and patriarchal. Postmodernism urges changes in the relationship between knowledge and power and questions the authority and agenda of those who have traditionally produced knowledge (Seidman 9-12). Further, postmodern thinking asserts that forms of knowledge, such as science, are value-laden and embedded within a normalizing tradition of social control.

Feminist postmodernists such as Barbara Creed, bell hooks, Donna Haraway, and Gayatri Spivak have since used postmodern theories to advance critiques of patriarchy. Though feminists have taken postmodern concepts in various directions, most agree that deconstructing Western binary theories of knowledge, which have traditionally

⁸⁸ For an overview of scholarly attempts to define postmodernism, see Steven Seidman's introduction to *The Postmodern Turn*, New York: Cambridge UP, 1994.

positioned women as inferior to men, is a critical maneuver for the advancement of feminist thinking. In “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’,” Judith Butler suggests that if postmodernism can be conflated with poststructuralism, it might mobilize alternative meanings and productions of sexed categories and material bodies: “To deconstruct these terms means, rather, to continue to use them, to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power” (168). Here Butler acknowledges the radical potential of postmodern thinking for feminists and explains the process of deconstruction as it applies to corporeality.

Feminists have also been attracted to postmodernism in part because the universal human subject underpinning Western, and particularly Enlightenment, philosophical and scientific modes of inquiry has traditionally been conceptualized as male. Maintaining incredulity toward metanarratives implicitly means challenging the notion of an objective, universal subject. The automatic gendering of universal subjectivity is a pivotal element of patriarchy, under which women’s knowledge and power is illegitimated and subordinated. Even those feminists, such as Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, who seek to contradict Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism, insist that we must “dispense with the idea of a subject of history” (258). In “Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism,” Fraser and Nicholson claim that dispensing with metanarratives need not be a core principle of postmodern thinking, yet they insist that we must reconceptualize “the subject of history” as plural, complex and shaped by gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual

orientation. Thus even critics of Lyotard suggest that the project of postmodernism is to challenge the notion of an objective, rational, truth-seeking white man, who has been conceived of as the originator and center of all knowledge and creativity.

Clearly then, the disruption of phallogocentrism and its corollary method of social control, patriarchy, is central to postmodernism. Gayatri Spivak articulates this in an interview for the United Kingdom Channel 4 *Voices* series in which she discusses scholarly attempts to define postmodernism:

Well, the field is fraught But it seems to me that the narrative that they are perhaps all of them agreed upon as the object of investigation, is precisely the narrative that you were talking about to begin with, the rationalist narratives of the knowing subject, full of a certain sort of benevolence towards others, wanting to welcome those others into his own – and I use the pronoun advisedly – into his own understanding of the word To an extent that is if you like, *grosso modo*, the object of investigation. But the word is also phallogocentrism, so that there is a certain sort of understanding that the hero of this scenario, of this narrative, has been in fact Western man. (19)

Here Spivak states that the “object of investigation” at the heart of postmodernism is phallogocentrism, the privileging of the phallus and masculinity and the assumed superiority of a rational male human subject. Relying on the premise that postmodernism is a mode of thinking that maintains incredulity toward metanarratives, and phallogocentrism produces a metanarrative, the conclusion that follows is that postmodernism must be, by definition, wary of phallogocentrism. To be incredulous

toward phallogocentrism, one must engage in the feminist project of challenging and deconstructing the centrality and authority of Western man as the knowing speaker and writer, the subject of history and narrative. Hence, attempts at postmodern thinking and postmodern cultural production can only be successfully postmodern if they are simultaneously feminist.

Rather than thinking about moving toward a feminist postmodernism or “postmodern feminism,” as Fraser and Nicholson urge, we must begin to consider feminism as a requisite of postmodernism, as a hermeneutic which is embedded within the very notion of postmodernism. In other words, literary texts that fail to deconstruct patriarchy also fail to be postmodern. Such texts’ employment of contemporary and seemingly progressive narrative techniques and characters conceals their participation within and maintenance of the dominant, Enlightenment paradigm that reinscribes a masculine universal subject. Though some of these texts may seem formally postmodern, an analysis of their *use* of postmodern devices such as self-reflexivity, lack of plot closure, or the characterization of postdomestic women, reveals that, in fact, many of these narratives recentralize and empower the white, male Enlightenment subject, and thus are not engaging with the postmodern project of deconstructing the master narrative of patriarchy.

I argue that writers working within the postmodern era have harnessed the tools and devices associated with this literary mode to embark on divergent political projects. One set of “postmodern” texts advances phallogocentric thinking by reinforcing the supremacy of the white, male intellectual and, in so doing, ultimately reveals the authors’

fears of women gaining power, particularly within academia. Another set of postmodern texts genuinely undermines patriarchy and deviates from dominant novelistic traditions. The ways in which postdomestic women are drawn and come to life within these novels is a clear indicator of the political messages embedded within the narratives. It is to postdomestic women characters such as Pynchon's Oedipa Maas and Didion's Maria Wyeth that we can look for a deeper understanding of the gender politics of postmodernity.

The Male Writer and his Postdomestic Worshippers

Rather than engaging with the complex potential of postdomestic female characters, some narratives seek to reinforce masculine intellectual supremacy by flattening these women into doting or bitchy caricatures. For instance, in Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, the postdomestic women valorize and deify the male protagonist, a famous writer. This novel tells the story of a reclusive novelist, Bill Gray, who abandons his newest novelistic venture to embark on a hostage rescue mission in Beirut. Interestingly, Bill pursues the mission to avoid exposing the artistic failure of his current book project. Bill wishes to avoid coping with his own lack of ability to complete the manuscript according to his own aesthetic standards but, moreover, wishes to retain his status as a literary icon and knows that the novel will not be published posthumously: "The novel would stay right here, collecting aura and force, deepening old Bill's legacy, undyingly" (224). Bill will do anything to prevent the deterioration of his literary legacy, even risk physical death to sustain his intellectual survival. This choice hints at the underlying

thematic currents flowing through this novel, specifically, the anxiety felt by men whose intellectual authority is diminishing. Moreover, this plot point hints at the desperate fear experienced by men who see cultural changes as threatening to the social historical status that positions them as creatively and intellectually superior to others.

In this novel, writing, intellectualism, and masculinity are continuously intertwined. As Bill puts it in a macho conversation with his literary agent, Charlie, literature involves “getting drunk and getting laid” (122). Throughout the novel, character dialogue and commentary perpetually identify literature as the rightful project of the male intellectual. Brita, a divorced photographer, claims that she “cannot converse in the private language” of writers; Bill and other male intellectuals speak an exclusive language that the postdomestic woman cannot master (37). Karen and Brita, the two postdomestic women in the novel, adore Bill and gladly celebrate him as superior. These postdomestic women are depicted as sans agency and complex (non-archetypal) internal motivation; Karen and Brita exemplify the feminine characters described by Russ, who are “not women, but images of women” (202).

At the beginning of the novel, Karen “fades into the thousands” of other individuals participating in a mass marriage arranged by their “Master.” This imagery immediately suggests to the reader that Karen either lacks the ability to choose her own life path or prefers to have decisions made on her behalf by a male authority figure. Later, after Karen has left the Korean cult and lives with her two lovers, Bill and Scott, she is described as “blank faced” and is amazed by Brita, who works as a photographer, because “it sounds so important. Having a career” (57). Karen is repeatedly depicted as

a daydreamer and a follower: “If it’s believers you want, Karen is your person. Unconditional belief. The messiah is here on earth” (69). Indeed, Bill becomes a sort of messiah for Karen, as she fawns over him intellectually and sexually. Despite, or perhaps because of, her bizarre mental state, Karen possesses an uncanny self-awareness of her role within the novel and is complicit in her own objectification. While engaging in foreplay, Bill asks Karen if Scott is aware of their sexual relationship and Karen replies, “Didn’t he bring me here for you?” (86). Karen realizes that the men in her life regard her as a therapeutic plaything, brought to live with them to help Bill cope with his current writing crisis. Importantly, Karen is not disturbed by this knowledge and continues to adore Bill and to intimately engage with both men.

Moreover, the narrator provides no commentary that would suggest Karen has a broader identity than that presented through the characters’ dialogue. On one occasion Bill momentarily questions Karen’s level of self-awareness, but ultimately forgoes investigating the subject in favor of having sex with her. The more closely we read Karen the more obvious her functionality seems; ultimately it is clear that she “is not a person at all, but a projected wish or fear” (Russ 203).⁸⁹ Karen is the archetypal vacant, adoring damsel. Bill provides Karen with purpose and she gladly participates in upholding his hallowed image. Karen’s adoration of Bill is importantly coupled with her own childlike dependence on the patriarch. As she outfits Bill with a condom, the

⁸⁹ For example, in the scene discussed in this paragraph, Karen mentions that Scott brought her to Bill’s house “for” Bill (to enjoy as a districting, relaxing sexual partner). Bill wonders how Karen “hit upon much of what she said” but, instead of exploring this question, he reorganizes the event around his own psyche and the narrator remarks that “maybe [Karen] thought it was true and maybe it was and how interesting [it was] for Bill to imagine he was betraying Scott all along by the other man’s design” (86).

narrators tells us that Bill sees how absorbed Karen is in her task, “dainty fingered and determined to be expert, like a solemn child dressing a doll” (86). Karen is incapable of caring for herself, as evidenced by this depiction, as well as by her past when, left to her own devices, she was brainwashed by a cult. She perceives Bill as an intellectual and creative messiah and she is dependent upon him for basic survival.

Karen has no identity of her own; she has only that which has been assigned to her and projected onto her. As “others” have always been constructed by the ruling class, Karen is written by the men in her life (including Delillo), who position her as intellectually inferior and useful only as a sexual distraction as a way of ignoring the legitimate subjectivity of women. Toni Morrison’s identification of an Africanist presence in American literature is relevant here because the postdomestic women in this novel function in much the same capacity as black characters throughout American literature. Karen reinforces Bill’s elite status and validates the idealized identity to which he clings. She exists in the novel merely to reinforce Bill’s position as culturally and intellectually superior. Karen is not so much a woman character as a caricature of woman.

The novel’s other postdomestic woman, Brita, also substantiates Bill’s rightful glorification. Brita obsessively photographs writers and is awestruck when given the opportunity to photograph Bill. When arranging her equipment for the photo shoot Brita “felt the uneasy force, the strangeness of seeing a man who had lived in her mind for years as words alone – the force of a body in a room. She almost could not look at him” (35). As she has no prior relationship with Bill and is simply a fan of brilliant writers,

Brita is narratively positioned as representing an objective perspective. When Bill modestly claims that he is doubtful of his relevance and that he often engages in self-exaggeration, Brita reassures him that “[w]riters have long range influence” and that he is a “monolith” (42, 44). Interestingly, because of the dual meaning of monolith, this word choice invites investigation.

As it is commonly understood, a monolith is a large block of stone that may be a natural rock feature or a monument erected by people. However, the *Encarta World English Dictionary* offers an additional, alternative definition: “Something massive and unchanging, especially a large and long-established organization that is slow to change, uniform in character, and difficult to deal with on a human level.” There is some ambiguity regarding Brita’s intended meaning because, while the more common definition is consistent with her apparent adoration of Bill, the second meaning subtly implies that Brita may feel overwhelmed and trapped by the patriarchal order that Bill represents. This word choice may be DeLillo’s way of hinting that Brita may be aware of the larger cultural framework that shapes the gendered dynamics of her relationship with Bill. However, as Louis Althusser explains, even if we are aware of ideology, we can never escape it. Bill’s power stems from patriarchy but, while Brita may unconsciously feel invalidated by his elite status, she nevertheless consciously endorses it.

Apart from the singular ambiguity of Brita’s word choice, there is little indication that her reverence for Bill is ironic or satirical. The narrator’s reports of Brita’s opinions and desires, what “she likes” and what “she thinks,” perfectly align with Brita’s verbal affirmations of Bill: “She almost could not look at him. She looked indirectly, trying to

conceal her glances in flurries of preparation” and “she liked the feel of the room with him in it” (35, 38). Brita’s feelings toward Bill are presented as genuine in both the dialogue and narration. Though she is not as mentally vacant as Karen, Brita venerates Bill with the same passionate commitment.

The postdomestic women in this novel are caricatures designed to bolster the egos and assuage the anxieties of the white male author, within the text as well as the author of the text. Though scholar Joe Moran argues in *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* that DeLillo and Bill Gray should not be conflated, I believe that Bill represents DeLillo’s perspective and functions as a conduit for his ideology. According to Moran, “DeLillo can sound a little like his characters in print . . . it is better to think of Bill Gray, though, as a means by which DeLillo has interrogated issues raised by his own celebrity” (130).⁹⁰ Regardless of the similarities and divergences of their biographies, Bill is a vehicle through which DeLillo can explore the intellectual and philosophical conundrums of the image world, consumer capitalism, and aesthetics.

Though Bill may or may not be DeLillo’s doppelganger, his dialogue is a venue through which DeLillo can indulge his “hostile attitude toward the publicity machine, the public sphere, and even the public itself” (Moran 130). While there is always some measure of separation between author and character, the critical distance between DeLillo and Gray is collapsed by the significant overlap in their shared ideology as men and as

⁹⁰ Moran begins the chapter by admitting that *Mao II*, over all other DeLillo novels, is particularly used by DeLillo “as a way of making sense of and dealing with some of the issues raised by the trajectory of his own career as he came to terms with major-league fame” (117). Moran insists that the novel is not a “crypto-autobiography” and goes to great lengths to show that DeLillo is not Bill Gray, though they share the same problems, opinions, and careers.

celebrity authors.⁹¹ Importantly, Brita functions as the listening device that transforms DeLillo's monologues about postmodernity, violence, and media into conversation. Brita is at least constructed as a worthy receptacle for these ramblings. Furthermore, there is some sense that DeLillo is not concerned with hiding himself in Bill who openly claims to be a "bad actor" (42). Brita responds to Bill's assertion by stating: "I see the person, not some idea he wants to make himself into" (42). Here Brita seems to be remarking on DeLillo's presence in the text, which is embedded in and transmitted through Bill.

While Brita is presented as moderately intelligent, the portrayals of the postdomestic women within the narrative become even more problematic when compared with the commentary about Bill's ex-wives, postdomestic women who are not featured as characters in the novel. Bill's first ex-wife is depicted as a paranoid gold-digger who "didn't like writers" but married Bill in order to "secure the future," with the expectation that they would "adapt to each other" (85). This description suggests that Bill's ex-wife approached their marriage strategically and without any true respect or love for Bill as a man or an artist. This same ex-wife also "despised [Bill] for liking doctors because she thought he was contriving to outlive her" (207). These snippets of information cast Bill as a victim of his paranoid, accusatory, and possibly delusional ex-wife.⁹² Notably, the

⁹¹ DeLillo's opinions on authorship and the "celebrity-making apparatus of media culture" are established in John N. Duvall's *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* and Joe Moran's "Don DeLillo and the Myth of the Author." DeLillo reveals his own thoughts first-hand in a *New York Times Magazine* essay called "The Power of History" (Sep. 1997).

⁹² In *Muse in the Machine: American Fiction and Mass Publicity* (Ohio State UP, 2004), Mark Conroy suggests that Bill's ex-wives' complaints about him are a component of DeLillo's desires for the reader to understand that Bill's sensibility is "under siege by the

earlier quoted material is Bill's dialogue, while the narrator provides the latter information. While Bill is not the narrator of the novel, the narrator frequently reiterates Bill's perspectives in (seemingly) detached informational segments, which works to validate Bill's opinions as "truth."

Also, though Bill is a successful novelist, he is not wealthy because, according to Scott, "most [of the money] goes to his two ex-wives and three ex-children" (52). Though this statement implies that Bill's ex-wives greedily leech off of his hard-earned income, when paired with the knowledge that Bill has no relationship with most of his children, this comment also seems to imply that Bill's ex-wives have poisoned them against him. At the very least, this language suggests that many of Bill's children choose to forgo a relationship with him, which again positions Bill as a victim. In light of the portrayals of Bill's ex-wives, the depictions of Brita and Karen seem highly flattering, though of course, this impression is deceptive. In this novel there are two types of postdomestic characters, bitchy ex-wives or doting worshippers, neither of which has agency or an inner life apart from that which the male protagonist ascribes to her.

Importantly, the postdomestic women are not the only features of this postmodern novel that serve to reinscribe the elite status of the white, male lead. While the characters revere Bill, the novel itself also works to position Bill as superior. In chapter two, for

forces of publicity and personality" (157). In order to communicate this "subtext of the narrative" Bill must remain shadowy and mysterious; the ex-wives' complaints, therefore, serve as "fugitive glimpses of what one would call his personal life" (157). Though he does not discuss the ex-wives in-depth, Conroy's analysis highlights the narrative functionality of these postdomestic women. It is important to also note that these "glimpses" are delivered second-hand by Bill, Scott, and the narrator, who each retell the alleged thoughts and opinions of the ex-wives.

instance, the reader is introduced to Bill via narration that is laden with suspense and import: “The room was dark and the man stood at the window waiting for headlights to appear It was not eager or needful waiting but only a sense that the thing was about to happen” (28). At this point in the story, the reader is not certain who “the man” is and the scene closes without any clarification, but with added drama: “He closed the door and stood in the dark room, moving his hand across the desktop to find his cigarettes” (29). For the first thirty pages the protagonist only exists for the reader as an intriguing, perhaps troubled, man standing in a darkened room.⁹³

Before Bill finally interacts with the other characters in chapter three, Brita quietly and reverently examines his work and other papers: “There were old handwritten manuscripts, printer’s typescripts, master galleys. . . . There were stacks of magazines and journals containing articles about Bill’s work and his disappearance, his concealment, his retirement, his alleged change of identity, his rumored suicide, his return to work, his work-in-progress, his death, his rumored return” (31). The tone and content of the narration indicates that Bill is extremely important, sensitive, and venerated. Though the reader has some sense of who Bill is and what he might be like when he finally interacts with other characters, the suspenseful and anticipatory mood aligns us with Brita, Karen, and the outside world; in other words, the narration positions the reader as an adoring fan.

⁹³ The relationship between mass media and the image of the lone writer is investigated further in Richard Hardack’s “Two’s a Crowd: *Mao II*, *Coke II*, and the Politics of Terrorism in Don DeLillo” *Studies in the Novel*. 2004. Vol. 36. 3 (2004): 374-391.

The narration works in conjunction with other aspects of the story to establish the relationship between the reader and Bill. The peppering of self-reflexive metacommentary throughout this novel is seemingly in keeping with postmodern literary tradition.⁹⁴ However, much of this commentary labors to tether the protagonist to powerful, elite men and to place him within his rightful place on the teleological timeline of history. For example, Bill's disappearance "made Scott [his assistant] think of great leaders who regenerate their power by dropping out of sight and then staging messianic returns" (141). This comparison to a messiah and other, more explicit, references to Jesus Christ and Mao Tse Tung suggests that Bill is part of a set of grand historical leaders. The other characters unironically depict Bill as one of the master's of master narratives. For example, Brita's awareness of the idol-worship she feels toward Bill does not render it any less powerful. The narrative begins with Scott's visit to the city to meet and escort Brita to Bill's reclusive home for their photo shoot. We later learn that the flurry and bustle of the world is too shrill for Bill, who waits at home in solace like a celebrity. When Brita meets Scott, she comments: "I feel as if I'm being taken to see some terrorist chief at his secret retreat in the mountains" (27). While Brita's statement self-reflexively satirizes Bill's later depiction as an important leader, it is nonetheless a statement of her emotional attitude. Brita's commentary on the humor of her feelings

⁹⁴ I use the word "tradition" advisedly. I believe that the newness of postmodernism's form is often mistaken for a newness of content. The fact that self-reflexivity, lack of plot or lack of plot closure, and non-linearity have become the traditional devices and strategies of postmodern writing points to the ever-present risk postmodern writers face of simply repeating old patterns. This word choice also signals the tensions that reside between newness of form and newness of narrative content, which, as I demonstrate, are not always coexistent.

does not preclude the sincerity of those feelings; in fact, this device heightens readers' anticipation as we prepare to meet the glorious Bill.

Moreover, Bill even deifies himself when discussing his decision to shun public appearances: "The writer who won't show his face is encroaching on holy turf. He's playing God's own trick" (37). Bill's commentary makes clear the correlation between masculinity, elitism, and writing. As American studies professor Leonard Wilcox puts it, Bill is "a devote modernist in a postmodern world" (93). Bill, whose perspective is repeatedly aligned with the narrator's, seems intent on reinscribing the white, male author as a bearer of omnipotent power. The text positions Bill as a universal human subject whose juxtaposition with deities and world leaders (and the narrator) works to recast his thoughts and opinions as validated truth-claims. Though this novel was written during the postmodern literary period, it attempts to reposition Western man as the center of knowledge and, like some Modernist texts, is rife with nostalgia for a time when society and culture were unquestioningly organized around static and reliable principles.

Various reflective moments in the text further reveal its modernist sensibility and nostalgia for Enlightenment thinking. Bill in particular expresses a longing for an organizing principle in society, which he imagines as a set of narratives that are retold without alteration. In a long, reflective moment of self-expression that seems more like narration than believable dialogue, Bill states that, "Children memorize parts of the stories their parents tell them. They want the same story again and again. Don't change a word or they get terribly upset. This is the unchanged narrative every culture needs to survive" (162). In this scene Bill speaks about the relationship between audience and

narrative and equivocates “children” to “every culture,” asserting that the storytellers must repeat the same stories without deviation in order to sustain culture. Bill links our very survival to the unaltered repetition of narratives, in turn suggesting that attempts to tell a new kind of story will cause the destruction of culture.

Importantly, Bill’s responsibility to tell and retell the same stories is depicted as a noble and vital occupation because he must die for it. Bill claims that his books are “the reason I’m dying before my time,” which suggests that his righteous endeavors will take his life, and also that his life is being unjustly cut short, as he has so much more to offer the world. We later learn that his relationship with writing will indeed be the cause of his death, as he expires in his sleep while traveling to Beirut, a journey fueled by his desire to avoid coping with his failed manuscript. Through Bill, DeLillo philosophically examines the writer’s burden and the sacrifice authors make to sustain culture via the retelling of vital narratives.

Significantly, this storyteller is gendered male not only because Bill, the writer within the story, and DeLillo, the writer of the story, are both male, but also because, according to the novel, writers possess masculine sensibilities. George, Bill’s connection to the terrorist group in Beirut, puts it this way, “And isn’t it the novelist, Bill, above all people, above all writers, who understands this rage, who knows in his soul what the terrorist thinks and feels? Through history it’s the novelist who has felt affinity for the violent man who lives in the dark” (130). George’s phrasing is relevant on several levels. First, his parallel between the novelist and the terrorist and his deliberate use of the

possessive pronoun “his” genders the novelist male.⁹⁵ This implicit assumption then becomes the foundation for depicting the act of writing itself as a rogue, masculine pursuit that is driven by male rage.⁹⁶ The parallel drawn between writing and violence, anger, and terrorism drives a deeper wedge between writing and femininity or femaleness, which, according to Cartesian binary logic, is represented by qualities such as temperance and passivity, which oppose the above listed “writerly” qualities.

It is important that, while the novelist becomes more masculine through this linguistic tethering to the terrorist, the terrorist also becomes more noble and artistic via this comparison with the novelist. During George, Charlie, and Bill’s conversation, and throughout the novel, the terrorist is cast as a misunderstood idealist who has opted to engage with the deepest and most complex problems facing mankind.⁹⁷ The terrorist is

⁹⁵ Of course, women can operate as terrorists, though the majority of well-known terrorist leaders (ranging from class heroes like Che Guevara to religious zealots like Osama Bin Laden) have been male. Furthermore, in the passage George refers to terrorists as “violent men” (130).

⁹⁶ For further reading on gendering the terrorist, see Jasbir K. Puar *Terrorist Assemblages*, Durham and London: Duke UP, 2007. Puar explores the relationship between terrorism and heterosexuality, noting: “Terrorists are quarantined through equating them with the bodies and practices of failed heterosexuality, emasculation, and queered others” and later that efforts to depathologize the terrorist “foreclose a serious evaluation of the female terrorist by positing a failed masculinity and an investment in patriarchy as compulsory for the growth of terrorism” (47, 60).

⁹⁷ In the London conversations between Bill, George and (occasionally) Charlie, the men philosophize about the relationship between writing and violence. These scenes are notably devoid of narrative commentary; the narration functions solely to move the scene forward, without offering analysis or remarks about the men’s conversations. Though the men disagree on aspects of the issue, the reader gets no sense that there is or should be an additional voice in the conversation. Because DeLillo’s presence in the novel is generally blatant, his stark absence from these scenes suggests that these are particular spaces wherein he is letting his own psychological dilemmas play out, which Moran

driven by rage because he has been mistreated by “the colonial police, the occupier, the rich landlord, the corrupt government” (130). Significantly, it is the “novelist . . . above all writers,” who can best empathize with the grand, philosophical dilemmas of the misunderstood terrorist.

In his essay “Terrorism and Art: Don DeLillo's *Mao II* and Jean Baudrillard's *The Spirit of Terrorism*” Leonard Wilcox examines Bill and George’s discussion of the “curious knot that bind novelists and terrorists” (DeLillo 41). According to Wilcox, Bill believes that, because of its “multi-vocal texture and discursive interrelations,” the novel is deeply incompatible with terrorism and it is the novelist who is responsible for extending the realm of our collective human potential (94). George, on the other hand, believes “that terrorism brings the message of totality, faith, and belief, a message that inevitably accompanies the break up of older nations and political blocks, and the emergence of a new power politics of nationalisms and tribalisms” (Wilcox 94). Though both men agree that novelists and terrorists are locked in an intimate relationship, the nature of that relationship is not conclusively resolved through their dialogue.⁹⁸ The narrative ultimately endorses George’s position and suggests that novelists are aligned with terrorists, regardless of intention. Bill opts to travel to Beirut alone to exchange

argues is a prominent function of fiction for DeLillo. One character’s perspective is not favored over another and they are each contributors to the larger truth; as Charlie puts it: “You are I know better. We understand how reality is invented” (132). Though each man has a different interpretation of “reality,” they collectively possess an understanding of how it comes into being.

⁹⁸ For further reading on the relationship between terrorism, writing, and politics in the novel, see Vlatka Velcic’s “Reshaping Ideologies: Leftists as Terrorists/Terrorists as Leftists in DeLillo’s Novels.” *Studies in the Novel*. 36.3 (2004): 405-429.

himself for the hostage, “taking his sacrificial aesthetics into the world” in an attempt to honor his democratic ideals, but dies on the freighter in passage (Wilcox 95). This sequence of events demonstrates that, even if Bill desires to exchange places with the hostage, he cannot. Regardless of his momentary burst of idealism, Bill is a purveyor of master narratives and this cannot be changed; he cannot transition from his position as a masculine maker of meaning to a feminized hostage whose purpose and use is determined by the terrorists.

Furthermore, during Bill and George’s conversations and through Bill’s failed attempt to exchange places with the hostage, the novel itself is depicted as a masculine writing genre. That the hostage with whom Bill cannot trade places is also a poet does not seem coincidental. The novel has historically held an elevated status in the realm of writing; it is expected to reach the greatest “moral and aesthetic heights” (Trilling 206). Male authors have written the bulk of canonized novels, though women continue to fight for inclusion. The female novelist has long struggled to demonstrate the merits of her work, but “if she does not conform to [masculinist] myth, she is understood to be writing minor or trivial literature” (Baym 514). Though many contemporary feminists rightly refuse to address the offensive historical question of “whether ladies can write novels or not” confronted in the essays of George Eliot and Virginia Woolf, it seems that this insulting question continues to find its way into novels and novelistic discourse (Fern 93).

If the novelist, over all other writers, shares an affinity with the raging underdog who lives in the dark, because he has the same masculine sensibilities and because these men struggle with the same complex philosophical dilemmas, it is implied that this elite

writing task, over all other genres, is the most masculine. Moreover, this commentary suggests that novel writing can only be mastered by men, who, like renegade terrorists, must tap into their darkest feelings and thoughts to reach the core of humanities' dilemmas. The conversation between Bill and George seems to suggest that women cannot reach the soulful, artistic depth or complex philosophical height of the novelist. Because women lack the masculine sensibility to identify with suffering, violent men, they cannot tell the grand stories contained in novels; implicitly, this genre of writing is a creative endeavor best left to men.

The Male Dreamer and the Postdomestic Oppressor

In John Hawkes' *Death, Sleep, and the Traveler* we are introduced to a postdomestic woman who functions in an entirely different way than *Mao II*'s Karen and Brita, a woman who works to undermine the intellectual and creative endeavors of the male protagonist. This novel tells the story Allert Vanderveenen's voyage on an ocean liner, which concludes with the disappearance and presumed murder of Allert's young lover, Arriane. The narrative is a pastiche of events, as stories from Allert's life with Ursula, his wife/ex-wife, who, after his murder trial, decides to end their marriage, are interspersed with the telling of Allert's journey on the ocean liner. Though Ursula and Allert do not divorce until the end of the novel, the narrative is not chronological, so Ursula's post-divorce departure occurs on the first page of the novel. Also, Ursula and Allert's marriage has already deteriorated by the time the reader becomes a spectator to their relationship and prior to Allert's ocean journey. Allert's reflective narration of the

events leading up to his wife's final departure depicts Ursula as a cold, cruel, and sexually unfaithful woman.

The reader is positioned to sympathize with Allert through Hawkes' use of intimate first person narration. Also, while Allert does describe Ursula as insensitive, he also frequently refrains from analyzing her behavior. Though Allert maintains power over the context in which he presents Ursula's dialogue, he often quotes her speech with little or no reflective analysis. The reader is then left to interpret Ursula's behavior and statements without explicit guidance from the protagonist. Because of his restraint, Allert appears increasingly trustworthy to the reader so that, when he does provide his opinion of Ursula, the reader is more inclined to agree.⁹⁹

In this novel, the postdomestic woman is an unimaginative, restricting force that deliberately destroys the profound intellectual and psychological potential of the male protagonist.¹⁰⁰ Ursula's antagonism highlights Allert's thwarted aptitude and impedes his personal growth. This is especially the case when Allert attempts to share his dreams with Ursula. Allert has a ripe and vivid imagination and much of the novel consists of him experiencing dreams or retelling dreams to Ursula. He feels that, through dreams, his subconscious self is attempting to communicate important information to his conscious self, and he thinks that interpreting and understanding his dreams are vital

⁹⁹ For a discussion of the reliability of narrators in Hawkes' fiction, see John Kuehl's *John Hawkes and the Craft of Conflict*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1975.

¹⁰⁰ Ursula is depicted this way by Allert, who relates her comments and actions to the reader. Ursula's statements are so outlandishly harsh, however, that it seems impossible for the reader to like her at all, much less sympathize with her point of view. Though Allert's reliability as a narrator is debatable, he appears calm and rational; his only agenda seems to be self-understanding and self-preservation.

steps in his life. Yet, when Allert relates his dreams to Ursula, she mocks and shames him. Allert's psychological development is set in direct opposition to Ursula's presence in his life. Moreover, he is doubly victimized by the fact that – not only is Ursula abusive to him during their marriage – but *she* leaves *him*.

Allert is portrayed as a victim throughout much of the novel and his most striking predicament, the problem that he articulates incessantly, is the fear that he is not moving, that he is stuck and cannot gain the momentum or inspiration to move in any direction. Considering the psychoanalytic undertone of this novel, Julia Kristeva's notions of abjection and liminality are apt theoretical tools for scrutinizing Allert's dilemma. In her seminal work *Powers of Horror* Julia Kristeva describes the abject as that which is neither subject nor object and exists in "the place where meaning collapses" (2). Kristeva specifically discusses vomit, waste, and refuse as examples of the abject, as these aspects of physicality signify death but enable life by being jettisoned from the body. One of the most striking aspects of the abject is that it perpetually exists in a state of liminality. The abject is that which is dangerously close to subjectivity and, in many cases was once a part of the subject, but can never be either subject or object. Kristeva articulates this clearly: "The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *P*" (1). The abject exists in between subject and object, in a space where it is perpetually in transition, never reaching a fixed point of identification.

In light of Kristeva's conceptual parameters regarding abjection, Hawkes' protagonist, Allert, seems uncannily drawn. Throughout much of the novel Allert is on vacation on a cruise ship, a space that is in transition, moving between two fixed

locations. Beginning in the first few pages of the novel and continuing throughout the text, Allert repeatedly expresses a paralyzing fear that the ship will or has stopped and will “remain forever in the midst of . . . natural desolation” (Hawkes 70). Each time Allert senses that the ship has stopped he is gripped by panic and fear. Allert even concludes irrationally that losing momentum would place the ship in extreme peril: “[S]uddenly I knew the ship was making no forward progress whatsoever. The knowledge was startling . . . To stop, to lose headway, could only put the vessel in gravest danger” (Hawkes 2-3). The ship is a metaphor for Allert’s personal crisis. Allert’s fears are produced by Ursula’s insistence that he is a “psychic invalid” (Hawkes 8). Allert repeatedly attempts to make decisions, to move in self-determined directions, and to fruitfully interpret his dreams, yet each gesture is thwarted by Ursula’s harsh criticism. Ursula calculatingly defines Allert and will not allow him to act or think on his own, telling him, “It’s just that you don’t know yourself, that you have no idea of what you are, that in my opinion you are an open cesspool” (Hawkes 46). Allert attempts to escape from Ursula’s brutal depictions of him, which define him as liminal and abjected, but he cannot seem to reject her authority. Allert cannot create a proper boundary between himself and Ursula; he *wants* to exist apart from her but cannot (Hawkes 9).

In *Crystals out of Chaos: John Hawkes and the Shapes of Apocalypse*, literature professor Lesley Marx examines Allert’s complex liminality. In her discussion of Allert’s claim that Ursula leaves him because he is Dutch, Marx notes that Allert’s surname, Vanderveenan, links him to the peat bogs of the barren landscape of northern

Holland.¹⁰¹ Marx believes that Allert's link to desolate places and his fears regarding the ship point to the tale of the Flying Dutchman as a mythic foundation for the novel. Like the man in the Flying Dutchman, Allert seems cursed to float on the oceans of his dreams for eternity. Marx notes that Allert's "ungainly body, suspended between sleep and death, is an image of stagnancy and introversion. . . . [B]oth Allert and the ship on which he sails suggest the entropic state" (72). Allert literally floats between fixed spaces; the placeless ship – which Ursula insisted Allert board – is a symbol of his position of abjection

Allert is not only abject in that he is placed within the liminal space of the vast open sea, but he also hovers on the margins of relationships. The abject is both the border and the other side of the border; "It is something rejected from which one does not part" (Kristeva 4). Within the plotline, Allert occupies the space of the abject for his wife/ex-wife Ursula. Ultimately Ursula divorces Allert and he is ejected from their marriage. However, prior to the final dissolution of their relationship, Allert exists on the fringes of a sexual coupling between Ursula and a mutual friend, Peter. While Ursula and Peter welcome Allert as a third sexual partner, it is evident that they compose the primary unit of the relationship. Peter sleeps in Ursula's bed, while Allert sleeps in the guest room and Ursula even claims that Allert is "destroying [the] romance" she shares with Peter (Hawkes 114). Further, although Allert *appears* comfortable with his place in the love triangle, his complicity is ambiguous and tinged with resignation as he recognizes that Ursula and Peter may have become intimate prior to and without his

¹⁰¹ "Van der veen" translates to "of the peat" in Dutch.

approval. Allert exists on the margins of Peter and Ursula's affair; Ursula has rejected Allert as a primary lover (and eventually as a husband), but he remains connected to her psychologically and sexually.

Interestingly, during his sexual encounters with Ursula and Peter, Allert is able to articulate his abjected condition. While watching Ursula and Peter engage in sensual foreplay on a bearskin rug, Allert asks Peter, "What is your professional opinion on the inability to believe in the reality of the human self?" and elaborates, "Today...I felt pleasantly athletic. But also that I did not exist" (Hawkes 90, 92). Here Allert poignantly enunciates his own abjected nature. Although he cannot fully understand that which haunts him, clearly Allert is plagued by the idea that he does not exist as an autonomous subject. Ursula and Peter, those who interact with him most, support Allert's suspicions. Ursula agrees that "Allert is not real" and Peter later wonders, "Has it ever occurred to you [Allert] that your life is a coma? That you live your entire life in a coma?" (91,144). While Peter and Ursula are both disturbed by Allert's condition – Ursula because he is unemotional and Peter because he might be psychologically ill – neither of these characters deny nor assuage Allert's fears.¹⁰² Importantly, Peter does attempt to provide counsel to his friend through meaningful dialogue but Ursula actively belittles and mocks Allert in ways that he has identified as "especially thoughtless . . . or especially cruel"

¹⁰² For a further discussion of the psychiatric components of the novel, of Peter's role as a psychiatrist, and of his comments about living life in a coma, see page 233 of Patricia Ann Carlson's *Literature and Lore of the Sea*. Carlson points out and investigates Peter's reference to comas as a sort of drowning into the sea of oneself. This text also offers an interesting discussion of the role of the sea in a novel I will discuss later in this chapter, Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*.

(46). Each time Allert turns to Ursula for comfort and reassurance that he has authority over his identity, he is brutally rebuffed by her.

Though Ursula seems responsible for Allert's insecurities and thwarted potential, she is disgusted by his inability to overcome his limitations. In phrasing that is also used by Kristeva to describe the abject, Ursula calls Allert an open "cesspool" (Hawkes 46; Kristeva 3). To Ursula, Allert has "the face of a fetus," a being that feeds off her and must inevitably be expelled; he is "already dead" and must be sloughed off (Hawkes 75, 129). Like a fetus, Allert is still too much a part of the subject; he cannot be described as a distinct subject from which Ursula is separate, or as a discrete object that helps consolidate her subjectivity. Allert is, like the abject, a "real threat [that] beckons" to Ursula and may "end up engulfing" her (Kristeva 4). In divorce Ursula is finally able to disconnect from Allert; he is the abject that must be jettisoned even though, in so doing, she "abandon[s] [him] to death, sleep, and the anguish of lonely travel" (Hawkes 2). Ursula is revealed to be unconscionably cruel as she forsakes Allert to protect herself, an act that is unquestionably opposed to normative feminine behaviors, which dictate that women must be self-sacrificing and nurturing.

At the end of the narrative Ursula ejects Allert from her life, telling him, "Don't worry . . . You will find some nice young thing to hear your dreams" (Hawkes 179). These parting words recall a major point of contention in their relationship: Allert's obsession with his dreams. Ursula criticizes Allert for dreaming his life rather than living his life and even asks him, "[H]ow can you tell the difference between your life and your dreams?" (Hawkes 62). Indeed the line between dreams and "reality" within this novel is

blurry for both Allert and the reader, as the dream sequences become an alternate method for understanding Allert's predicament. Allert insistently recalls and analyzes his dreams but cannot fully grasp the symbolism they contain.

Critics have often approached Allert's dream vignettes via Freudian psychoanalysis.¹⁰³ One scholar claims, "The details are few and fuzzy, yet the reader understands that the narrator was abandoned by his mother through death and that somehow her abandonment made him psychologically impotent and physically passive" (Kuehl 153). The most frequent readings of Allert's dreams center on the notion that Allert is struggling to get back to his mother, to find her and return to her womb. However, although Allert's dreams center on struggle and movement, it is not toward his mother that Allert moves, but rather toward Ursula, the woman who dictates and articulates his identity and has replaced his mother in his adult life. Allert's dreams function in two ways, first as windows into his state of abjection, and second as fantasies that suggest that, if she is willing, he can realign with Ursula in a union that will be psychologically redeeming for him.

One of Allert's most humorous dreams occurs early in the novel and introduces the theme of direction.¹⁰⁴ In this dream Allert is equipped with a powerful tool that

¹⁰³ For a brief but insightful discussion of Hawkes' fetishism and "verbal eroticism" see Bercovitch and Patell's *The Cambridge History of American Literature: 1940-1990* (455). For a study of the novel in relation to Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* see *Innocence, Power, and the Novels of John Hawkes* by Rita Ferrari. Also see "The Cannibal to The Passion Artists: Hawkes's Journey Toward the Depths of the Unconscious" by Paul J. Emmett.

¹⁰⁴ For a study of humor in the novel, see Donald J. Greiner's *Comic Terror: The Novels of John Hawkes*, Tennessee: Memphis State University Press, 1974.

guides him; “In my dream I am somehow endowed with the rare North Penis, as if the points of the compass have become reliable indicators of sexual potency with north lying at the maximum end of the scale” (Hawkes 16). Allert’s dream presents a striking contrast to his waking life; in his dream he is endowed with the ultimate directional tool, whereas in waking life he lacks the agency to direct his own movement and construct his own identity. The North Penis of Allert’s dreams offers him the illusion that he can escape liminality, the illusion that he can move purposefully out of his abjected state.

Ultimately, however, as his later dreams reveal, Allert cannot escape the abjected status assigned to him via his relationship with Ursula. In one of his most provocative dreams Allert is traveling in the night toward a chateau. As he walks toward the chateau he must traverse a field riddled with blobs of congealed blood and he is simultaneously aware that he is moving backward in time. When Allert reaches the chateau he finds an animal-skin tent, which he crawls into and, to his disappointment, finds nothing but a few bones lying in ashes. Upon analyzing this dream, Allert mentions the uterine imagery and Ursula replies that “it was obviously someone else’s womb, not hers that had become so inhospitable to my regressive drives. Her womb, she answered me, was warm and receptive as always, as I surely knew” (Hawkes 75). But Allert is not confident that Ursula’s womb is welcoming to him. Though Ursula claims to be receptive to Allert, in fact she deserts him sexually in favor of Peter, and later divorces him. When Ursula articulates her status as a mother figure in Allert’s life, asking him, “[H]ave you ever realized that you have the face of a fetus? The eyes, the jowls, the florid complexion are all deceiving. If you look closely enough you’ll see, as I have just seen, that actually you

have the face of a fetus,” her vindictive and authoritative role is crystallized (Hawkes 75). Functioning as a cruel mother figure, she determines and dictates Allert’s identity, labeling him as a revolting and incompetent character and eventually expunging him from their marriage.

In the animal-skin tent dream Allert is desperately seeking to find redemption through reunification with Ursula. Though the abject is defined by its condition of liminality, it will seek to cross borders and merge with the subject of origin. The abject can never reconnect with the subject, “And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (Kristeva 2). In the end, however, when Allert psychically enters Ursula’s womb in his dream, he finds only ashes, dust and bones and admits he “had hoped for more” (Hawkes 74). Before his dream ends, though, Allert offers a different interpretation of his endeavor: “My disappointment is nothing compared with the journey I have just taken and the barren actuality I have at last discovered” (Hawkes 74). Allert is unable to alter his condition, but his instincts and fears have finally been confirmed. Through this dream Allert gains awareness of the “barren actuality” of his existence. He cannot realign with Ursula; she is repulsed by him and has jettisoned him from their union. Rather than helping Allert to determine and shape his identity, Ursula again reveals that, as Allert puts it, she is “quite capable of preserving herself psychologically at my expense” (Hawkes 78).¹⁰⁵ Ursula represents the antithesis

¹⁰⁵ In *John Hawkes and the Craft of Conflict* John Kuehl suggests that the conflict between Eros and Thanos, or love/life and death, is central to Hawkes’ career and discusses the mythic and psychic patterns that, he believes, underpin this novel and all Hawkes’ fiction.

of normative femininity; she not only protects her own interests but also subjects her husband to harmful recriminations along the way.

In this novel, Ursula is responsible for all of Allert's troubles. Ursula is the bossy wife who forces him to go on a sea voyage. It is implied that Ursula arranges Allert's onboard tryst with Ariane, a relation which implicates Allert in Ariane's murder. Ursula verbally abuses Allert by calling him a disgusting, unemotional, psychic invalid. Ursula's most heinous crime, however, is her rejection of Allert as a husband and sexual partner. Sexual activity, with others or via masturbation, enables Allert to temporarily deny Ursula's scathing, definitive evaluations of his identity and to assert control over his own life. During a discussion of Allert's pornography collection, Ursula claims that, "Allert's theory is that the ordinary man becomes an artist only in sex" (Hawkes 153). He needs sex in order to imagine that he is the creator of his life, his identity and his choices; through sex Allert can participate in the fantasy of discrete subjectivity and autonomous selfhood. Ursula articulates the nature of Allert's psychological dependency on sex, revealing that her unfeeling sexual decisions are consciously mediated through this knowledge. Throughout most of the novel, Allert's identity and movements are entwined with Ursula's desires. Yet, during sex, Allert asserts agency and taps into what is ostensibly his true, artistic self. Ursula's rejection of Allert as a husband and her earlier betrayal of Allert via Peter, represent her callous efforts to destroy Allert's creative and independent self.

Despite her blatant and frequent cruelty, Allert does not want Ursula to leave and urges her to stay right up to the moment of her departure. Shivering outside "corpulent

and wrapped in [his] dressing gown” standing there “until she drove from sight,” Allert is presented as the epitome of a victimized and heartbroken man (177-8). Yet, after she is gone, Allert decides, “I shall simply think and dream, think and dream” (Hawkes 179). The last line of the novel is Allert’s first claim of independent subjectivity; he states boldly “I am not guilty,” announcing his identity without mediation from Ursula. Without his ex-wife’s overbearing presence, Allert can reclaim his subjectivity and begin to realize his own intellectual and creative potential. Throughout the novel Allert rejects Ursula’s condescension, claiming, “I do not like her egocentricity, her psychological brutality, her soft voice, her harsh personal judgements,” but he continues to desire her presence in his life (6). Yet, after she is gone, Allert can begin to embrace his own imaginative and artistic self, which he does by proclaiming his innocence and making plans to think about whatever he desires: “I shall think of porridge, leeks, tobacco, white clay, and water coursing through a Roman aqueduct” (179).

In this novel the postdomestic woman functions as an oppressor of the male protagonist’s abilities. She thwarts his potential, which is the focus of the narrative. The juxtaposition of the male lead with a domineering and vicious postdomestic woman recentralizes man’s intellectual and creative pursuits as the rightful topics of literature. Though in this case Allert is unable to reach his full potential, his struggle to be free from the repressive constraints of the postdomestic woman asserts the notion that man’s intellectual journey – his ability to explore and express psychological, philosophical, and intellectual issues – is at the forefront of elite literature and woman’s role is as helper or obstacle.

Authorial Patterns in Postmodern Writing

Though I have only closely examined two novels, these patterns emerge in a plethora of other postmodern works. DeLillo's *White Noise* features the divorced and remarried Babette, who is portrayed as ditzy, devious, and disloyal. John Barth's *Sabbatical: A Romance* centers on Fenn, whose ex-wife, Marilyn Marsh, possesses an astonishing "capacity for self-righteous deceit" (153). Even Fenn's second wife, Susan, is described as having an intellectual "chip on her shoulder" because so much literary criticism is either "incomprehensible to her" or irrelevant to her naïve belief that theory should shed light on literature (231). Raymond Carver's short stories are rife with women who obviously maintain life's status quo as their marriages fail and their unfulfilled husbands become estranged from them, as in "Feathers" and "They're Not Your Husband." Many of Donald Barthelme's short stories do not contain women at all. When criticized for being an obscure postmodernist, Barthelme retorted that "art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, rather because it wishes to be art," a notion that seems particularly telling when coupled with Barthelme's tendency to avoid female protagonists in favor of investigating the complexities of manhood, boyhood, and masculinity (Charters 1068). Indeed, complex female protagonists who possess agency and internal motivation are a rarity in postmodern novels and postdomestic female protagonists are even more exceptional.

Despite the problems posed by poststructuralists in regard to authorial intention, the features common to many postmodern literary texts reveal significant overlap in authorial habits and tendencies. In "The Death of the Author," French structuralist

Roland Barthes claims that “writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (1466). Barthes insists that the author’s intention and identity are irrelevant to making or determining the meaning of a text. However, this erasure of authorial intention or ownership also eliminates a political critique of authorship and the privilege and power of constructing narratives. The politics of authorship must be examined, especially when a particular set of authors and narratives have been labeled and canonized as definitive of a particular literary mode. In this case, DeLillo, Hawkes, Barthelme and others have become synonymous with postmodernism. Furthermore, the trends outlined in my analysis of texts by these authors cannot be completely severed from current trends in academia. In fact, the narrative patterns that have emerged in these novels can be read as the authors’ reactions to a range of institutionalized intellectual changes that have occurred over the last forty years, changes that paved the way for the rise of female scholars and critics, who now assertively jockey for recognition in academia. The ways in which particular postmodern writers construct or exclude postdomestic women point to their conscious or unconscious fears of postdomestic women and, more generally, women who are not normatively feminine, particularly women who challenge the status of white, male intellectual superiority.

Postdomestic Protagonists and Semiotic Emptiness

Examining novels in which postdomestic women function as protagonists rather than marginal character reveals the complexities of reworking once stable identity

categories such as motherhood and femininity. For the postdomestic woman, many signs and signifiers that once held stable meanings are devoid of meaning or laden with new, alternative significance. The postdomestic woman must determine anew how one goes about being a woman, once severed from the domestic categories by which women have traditionally been defined. This question is at the heart of Joan Didion's *Play it as it Lays*, though the narrative's main character, Maria, would never articulate the problem as such. Maria does not ask ontological questions; Maria does not seek out answers to questions designed to make sense of life, such as: What makes a person evil? Why is life unfair? What makes a man cruel? In fact, this refusal to question is the one dominant, defining aspect of Maria's identity as a postdomestic woman, an identity that is asserted on the first page of the novel, "What makes Iago evil? some people ask. I never ask. . . . To look for "reasons" is beside the point" (3). Maria realizes that life simply *is*, these are the facts, the way it is, "just so" (3). Maria arrives at this conclusion at the beginning of the novel, which is the chronological end of the novel's events.

After brief reflective sections narrated by Maria, Carter, and their friend Helene, the novel is turned over to a close third person narrator.¹⁰⁶ The narrator tells the story of Maria's youth in Silver Wells, Nevada, her divorce from Hollywood director Carter Lang, and her relationships with her parents and her mentally ill daughter, Kate. These plot points are chronologically disordered and interspersed with memories of Maria's painful abortion, conversations with film industry acquaintances, and descriptions of

¹⁰⁶ Didion states, "I wanted to make it all first person, but I wasn't good enough to maintain a first. . . . So I began playing with a close third person, just to get something down. By a "close third" I mean not an omniscient third but a third very close to the mind of the character [Maria]" (Didion xv).

Maria's feelings about the films in which she starred. At the end of the story, Maria ends up in a mental hospital after passively witnessing the suicide of her friend BZ. Though she must tell her story to doctors, who "will extrapolate reasons where none exist," Maria seems content at the close of the narrative (4). Also, despite her passive behavior throughout the events of the story, at the novel's close Maria assertively states, "One thing in my defense, not that it matters: I know something Carter never knew, or Helene, or maybe you. I know what 'nothing' means, and keep on playing" (214).

In "*Play it as it Lays: Didion and the Diver Heroine*," emeritus literature professor Cynthia Griffin Wolff suggests that "Didion demands we use Maria's agonized explorations as a vehicle for the examination of nothing less than our heritage as Americans" (481). On the contrary, I believe that Didion's novel urges the reader to refuse an examination of our heritage, to reject pre-determined meanings, and to resist old ways of ordering the modern wilderness in which we currently live. Ultimately, as the title of the novel suggests, Maria's journey is not one of answering questions, but one in which she learns to stop asking, stop examining, and to simply "play it as it lays."

Prior to her divorce from Carter, Maria's life is one of inherited meanings. Maria's childhood is shaped by her father's gambling debts and her mother's yearnings; she is taught to play craps and to "believe that what came in on the next roll would always be better than what went out on the last" (5). After she meets Carter in New York, Maria becomes for him an on and off screen visual spectacle and, from this point forward, her identity is dictated by Carter and his filmic vision of her.

In the first film he makes of her, Carter simply follows Maria around New York City, filming her as she experiences everyday life. Maria is ambivalent about the on-screen image of herself. She hates watching *Maria*, the film Carter edited: “She never thought of it as *Maria*. . . . The girl on screen in that first picture had no knack for anything” (21). Maria feels disconnected from the version of herself that Carter has pieced together. In the second film, however, Maria sees a “girl on screen [who] seemed to have a definite knack for controlling her own destiny” (20). Maria enjoys watching images of herself as a woman with agency, yet she still cannot connect to the cinematic version of herself; she views Carter’s second film twice “and neither time did she have any sense that the girl on the screen was herself” (19). Though Maria has trouble reconciling the images of herself with her own corporeal reality, she does grasp and is repelled by Carter’s violent restructuring of her identity, which is represented through the film.¹⁰⁷ Maria is repulsed by the ways in which Carter can manipulate images of her via “cuts” and, eventually, becomes so estranged from the on screen version of herself that she cannot watch the film and must leave the room when it is being screened. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff puts it, “Carter was assembling and reassembling ‘Maria,’ putting her together so that he could exhibit her. Not a person anymore, Maria has become a property: anybody can look at her whenever he wants – speed her up, slow her down, run her backwards” (488). Maria is literally created by Carter, as he edits and pieces her together. Though she feels “flushed and not entirely in control,” Maria does not

¹⁰⁷ In *Literature/Film Quarterly* “The Hollywood Novel: American Dream, Apocalyptic Vision” (1995) K. Edington examines intersections between morality, images, and the American dream; she states that Maria’s experiences as a starlet highlight the “nightmarish aspects” of competitive Hollywood culture.

articulate her feelings (Didion 112). She does express her instinctual reaction of dread and repulsion by leaving the house as Carter plays the film, demonstrating that she senses on some level that she is being violated through a cinematic representation of herself over which she has no power. As feminist psychoanalyst Laura Mulvey would say, Carter is the maker of meaning and Maria is the “bearer of meaning” (58). In controlling and manipulating her on screen image, Carter mollifies his own (castration) anxieties and renders Maria nothing more than a pleasurable plaything.¹⁰⁸

Carter’s authority over Maria’s identity is not limited to the film reel. Ultimately Carter exerts control over Maria’s physical self when he threatens to take their daughter, Kate, unless Maria aborts the pregnancy produced by her infidelity (though their separation and subsequent divorce is already in progress). Against her instincts and desires, Maria agrees to have the abortion and Carter finds a doctor who does “clean work” (54). Throughout the procedure the doctor dictates to Maria how she should feel and behave, telling her it is “nothing to have any emotional difficulties about” (82). The doctor not only explains to Maria how she should feel but also becomes an intermediary

¹⁰⁸ In Carter’s original ending of the film *Angel Beach* the closing shot centers on the motorcycle gang who raped Maria’s character, but the studio re-edits the ending to feature a shot of Maria walking across the beach as if she is “controlling her own destiny” (20). Carter’s editing decisions and real-life violence toward Maria indicate his desires to maintain sexual and psychic power over her. Moreover, after Maria and Carter sleep in the same bed in an attempt to reconcile but do not have intercourse, Carter becomes angry with Maria, telling her: “You don’t want it” (184). The “it” in this sentence could stand for a variety of things (their relationship, their marriage, reconciliation), but most explicitly it refers to Carter’s penis. Clearly feeling emasculated, Carter reacts to Maria’s sexual indifference with verbal assaults: “Well go to sleep, cunt. Go to sleep. Die. Fucking vegetable” (185). After this Carter begins sleeping with other women and is even involved in assaulting a women during sex. Carter’s behavior seems indicative of his unconscious fear of losing phallic power.

who translates for her the workings and experiences of her own body: ““Hear that scraping, Maria?” The doctor said. ‘That should be the sound of music to you . . . don’t scream Maria . . . now I’ll tell you what’s going to happen, you’ll bleed a day or two, not heavily, just spotting, and then a month, six weeks from now you’ll have a normal period, not this month, this month you just had it, it’s in that pail”” (83). In this moment both Carter and the doctor are exerting authority over Maria’s body and further attempting to control her thoughts. For Maria, the abortion represents extreme corporeal and psychological subservience and, ultimately, it is a breaking point in her life.

Until this point in the narrative, Maria’s opinion, thoughts, and desires have been constructed as irrelevant by others. Maria’s ideas are dismissed and trivialized by Carter, for whom she is merely a commodity; Carter regards Maria as beautiful and profitable but ultimately over-sexed and incompetent as a socialite, movie star, mother, and wife. Despite her urges to react to the trauma of the abortion, Maria feels instructed by the doctor to believe that, “No moment [is] more or less important than any other moment, all the same: the pain as the doctor scraped signified nothing beyond itself, no more constituted the pattern of her life than did the movie on television” (82). Carter and the doctor have labeled Maria’s abortion as devoid of meaning and they compel Maria to comply with their semiotic coding of the situation. However, in the aftermath of her abortion, Maria begins to assert agency for the first time in the novel, stating over dinner with a Hollywood producer, “I am just very very very tired of listening to you all”

(85).¹⁰⁹ Maria comes to the realization that she is dissatisfied with the ways in which she has been shaped and molded by the men in her life. Ultimately, it is this rejection of the way meaning in her life has been constructed by others that produces Maria's eventual rejection of meaning at all; once Maria concludes that the authority of meaning making is an illusion she can reject the meanings delivered to her by Carter and others.

The realization that meaning is not inherent or natural but rather is determined by those with authority, that meaning-making is an exertion of power, frees Maria from the constraints of the semiotic coding by which she had been confined. Importantly, along with this knowledge comes the understanding that true meaning does not exist and significance always must be crafted, a fact that Maria refers to when she says, "I know what 'nothing' means." The trauma of Maria's abortion and divorce pushes her toward this new understanding of meaning and motivates her to assert some authority over her own life: "In the first hot month of the fall after the summer she left Carter (the summer Carter left her, the summer Carter stopped living in the house in Beverly Hills), Maria drove the freeway. She dressed every morning with a greater sense of purpose than she had felt in some time" (15). Each day Maria is on the road by ten o'clock in the morning and drives up and down the California freeways, sometimes driving all the way to Nevada, the setting of her childhood. The persistent moving and traveling represent Maria's literal and figurative drive to shape her own identity. Though she often does not

¹⁰⁹ In *Reading Joan Didion* (Greenwood 2009) Lynn Marie Houston and William V. Lombardi suggest that *Play it as it Lays* offers a "gendered critique of the jet-setting Hollywood lifestyle, and Didion's portrayal of the movie business is not flattering" (62). This text offers concise insightful commentary about Maria's relationship to the Hollywood establishment.

know where she is going or where she will end up, Maria commits to the process of driving because it places her in a position of authority over her life, in the driver's seat, so to speak.

Within the story arc of the novel, Maria's passive participation in BZ's suicide is the climax that results in her hospitalization.¹¹⁰ BZ's wife, Helene, blames his death on Maria's selfishness and Carter cannot find a pattern to the events, no matter how frequently he "replay[s] these scenes" (14). However, one might also read this act as Maria's ultimate refusal to accept the identity labels projected onto her. It is unclear what BZ expects from Maria when he arrives at her door with a bottle of Seconal pills in his hand, but certainly he has brought with him the burden of his intentions to commit suicide, a burden that he wishes to share with Maria. As he dies BZ asks Maria to hold him, which suggests that he has come to her for comfort and companionship, though he also asserts that he knew she wouldn't "argue" him out of suicide (212). Despite BZ's ambiguous expectations of Maria, it is clear that Helene, Carter, and society in general expect Maria to interfere with BZ's suicide and to attempt to save him. Maria is supposed to perform womanhood by becoming a healing Madonna and angelic mother figure, steadfastly buoying BZ through his life crisis. Yet Maria does not attempt to change BZ's behavior or save him; she completely rejects the burden of traditional femininity, which insists that she nurture and care for BZ in his time of need.

¹¹⁰ BZ ostensibly commits suicide because he has become depressed and disillusioned with his life. BZ is a homosexual man whose mother procures financial rewards to compensate for his agreement to remain married to his wife, Helene. Before BZ's death, it is also implied that Helen, BZ, Carter, and Maria have or are engaging in a complex love quadrangle (though Maria and Carter are divorced at this time).

After BZ's death Carter tries to find "some order, a pattern" but finds none and realizes "the improbability of a rapprochement with Maria" (14). While Carter's anger seems subdued and blanketed by confusion, Helene openly attacks Maria: "*[W]hen Helene came to see me in Neuropsychiatric, I tried to explain how wrong she had been when she screamed that last night about my carelessness, my selfishness, my insanity . . . I told her: there was no carelessness involved. . . . But Helene only screamed again*" (203; italics in the original). Though it is interpreted as compliance or passivity, Maria's behavior is actually a deliberate assertion of agency wherein she rejects gendered social expectations. Moreover, Maria's actions are indicative of her belief in playing the hand one is dealt, that "it goes as it lays"; rather than bemoaning the deck or attempting to change the lay of the cards, Maria chooses to simply stay in the game (200). Ultimately Maria's rejection of socially mandated gender codes, her realization that meaning is crafted by those in power, and her subsequent decision to stay in the game, result in profound changes in her life that can be read as explicitly postdomestic.

However, before discussing the theoretical productivity of Maria as a postdomestic character, it is important to first address the fact that both Maria and her daughter end up in hospital facilities. At the close of the narrative Maria cannot care for herself, nor can she care for Kate. These problems are unavoidable for the reader and even more so for Maria herself, who thinks, "I don't mind it here. Nobody bothers me. The only problem is Kate. I want Kate." However thrilling the prospect of a woman casting off the cloak of patriarchal meanings and identity constructions, in order to emerge as a truly productive paradigm of postdomestic womanhood, that woman must

not be an emotional and mental invalid consigned to a sanitarium. Most specifically, she must be able to function within categories of motherhood and selfhood that she has crafted according to her own desires. Maria wishes to mother her daughter but cannot find a way to do so. Not only is she unable to mother, Maria cannot function at all as an independent person.

Maria, however, does realize that the only way to exist within the meaninglessness of modern life is to choose to do so, to make a conscious decision to live within the wasteland, despite its depressing absurdity. She determinedly resists the allure of nostalgia and refuses to embrace the process of questioning and searching for reasons that dominates the lives of those around her: “Everything goes,” Maria says, “I am working very hard at not thinking about how everything goes” (8). Though she is presently living in a sanitarium, Maria is motivated to overcome her depression and move forward in her life. She is, as yet, unable to pursue her desires as an independent postdomestic woman, but she has begun to label and announce those desires.

Near the end of the novel, Maria is asked to “Tell [BZ] what matters” and she replies “Nothing” (202). Maria’s response has dual meanings, one of which provides further insight into her postdomestic identity. First, Maria’s response can be interpreted as an assertion that there is no meaning at all in the world; that there is no “thing” that matters. However, rather than accepting this obvious (and somewhat depressing) interpretation, readers must seek out another layer in Maria’s notion of “nothing.” Indeed, Maria’s statement can also be taken to mean that nothing – nothingness, emptiness, absence – is most important, is *all* that matters.

The first response represents the postmodern dilemma of realizing that there is no meaning and following this to its logical conclusion that, because meaning is an illusion, it cannot exist. In the second interpretation there is a distinct hopefulness. What matters is that she has reached the understanding that meaning is inherently empty and so, therefore, she can create it herself.¹¹¹ In other words, because there are no true, intrinsic, or correct meanings, she can reject other's labels and assign value according to her own ideas. Maria has decided that she will no longer ask questions – an act that suggests that meaning lies in the response of others, that it is determined by inquiring of someone who has the answers. Maria will no longer relinquish her own power over meaning to the authority of others; she is empowered by “know[ing] what ‘nothing’ means” and will “keep on playing” (214). Though she has not developed a practical strategy for obtaining her goals, Maria has labeled her desires, “The answer is ‘nothing.’ Now that I have the answer, my plans for the future are these: (1) get Kate, (2) live with Kate alone, (3) do some canning” (210). Throughout her marriage to Carter and her life as a child, Maria's desires have been invalidated and trivialized, yet as a postdomestic woman Maria finally begins to privilege her own wants and needs.

In the introduction to *Play it as it Lays*, scholar David Thomson writes that, over the years, he has learned to be cautious in recommending this novel to others because readers often find the novel “hard-hearted . . . bleak and unpleasant” (vii). I agree that the

¹¹¹ In “Joan Didion's *Play it as it Lays* and the Vacuity of ‘Here and Now’” (*Critique* 1980) C. Barry Chabot claims that Maria's efforts to control her life are so radical that she “severs herself not only from the past but from the future as well” (53). Chabot's discussion interestingly explores Maria's dissociation from this world and from what he sees as her too painful, too raw feelings.

excessive violence toward women in the novel is painful for readers. Yet, if after all she has been through, Maria can play it as it lays, then there must be hope for women to eventually subvert the phallogocentrism that propels such violence. Though she is traumatized by her divorce and abortion, Maria decides – even from the confines of the neuropsychiatric ward of a hospital – to “stay in the action” (210). This philosophy is the dominant emergent feature of Maria’s postdomestic self; she will not fold her hand, so to speak, but will call it as she sees it and “keep on playing” (214). A hundred years ago a woman in Maria’s position might commit suicide; a hundred years ago even women who realized that meaning is empty had no power to subvert the illegitimate authority of meaning makers. As represented by Maria, because of her unique subject position (both in terms of her experiences and in terms of historical changes in gender roles) the postdomestic woman not only has the insight to understand what nothing means but also has the strength and courage to keep playing in this new wilderness, which hopefully will become less bleak as women begin to fill it with self-created meanings and desires.

Subversive Transmissions and an Ideal America

In Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas leaves a domestic life filled with Tupperware parties to attend to the last will and testament of her ex-lover, Pierce Inverarity. Though the plot of the novel ostensibly centers on the unraveling of Peirce’s complex financial and personal ties, from the first pages of Oedipa’s journey the reader learns that the revelations Oedipa will experience focus on the “magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from the outside” that works to keep her where she is and to

buffer her from the world (12). Oedipa's recognition of the "magic" that keeps her insulated from the world is caused by her discovery of (the possibility of) Tristero, an underground mail system dating back to Medieval Europe that enables secret communication between members of disenfranchised communities. Upon receiving her appointment as executer of Pierce's will, Oedipa leaves her home and disrupts her domestic lifestyle. In fact, the very night of Oedipa's departure she is unfaithful to her husband, Mucho, who also cheats on her and who is "sad to see her go, but not desperate" (13). Eventually, Oedipa's adventures and discoveries work to free her from her life as a Rapunzel-like girl who is isolated from the world and unable to access its intensity or see it clearly. Upon reflection, Oedipa describes her infidelity and rejection of domesticity as that starting point that would "bring an end to her encapsulation in her tower" (31). As Oedipa's investigation of the Tristero progresses, she transitions from a life of desensitization to one in which she pursues intense experiences and examines closely the systems and operations of the world around her.

In many ways, *The Crying of Lot 49* is a novel about that which is hidden and repressed. The struggle to see beyond obvious meanings and apparent truths is a central theme of both Oedipa's quest and the novel as a whole. In the end, it seems clear that unearthing that which is buried and secret can be both empowering and frightening; what is revealed can be terrifying as well as liberating. The sexual predilections of Oedipa's husband, Mucho and, later, her lover, Metzger, who both secretly desire underage girls, hint at Pynchon's efforts to recognize something that is deeply repressed in our society. The *Lolita* theme helps to explain Oedipa's fears to the reader; Oedipa is afraid of what

she might discover in her investigation into the Tristero in part because so much of what is repressed in society is foundational for obvious power structures that work to disempower women. She questions if learning about the Tristero will indeed be a liberating experience. This fear is articulated when Oedipa writes in her memo book, underneath the Tristero image of the muted post horn, “*Shall I project a world?*” (64). She is hesitant to step outside of the power structures that keep her insulated – buffered and dependent, but safe – and to take responsibility for creating her own life. In order to create a world, Oedipa will need to establish her own identity, determine and assign meanings, and operate independently of the men in her life who, thus far, have dictated her actions.

Much has been said about the relevance of naming in *The Crying of Lot 49*, specifically in relation to our heroine, Oedipa Maas, whose name is strikingly similar to the mythical Greek character Oedipus Rex¹¹². Though scholars like David Kirby and Michael Seidel insist that Oedipa Mass is the female version of Oedipus Rex, critical differences disrupt correlations between these two characters. The most significant difference between Oedipus and Oedipa is that, in the ancient myth, the Oracle rightly predicts Oedipus’ fate, whereas Oedipa moves against the grain of that which has been foretold and, in the end, her fate remains unknown. At the beginning of the novel Oedipa behaves exactly according to the social expectations and prescriptions that correspond with her feminine fate. In other words, as a woman, Oedipa has been trained to “pretend

¹¹² For an extensive explanation of the scholarly discussions about the Oedipus myth and naming in relation to the novel, see Debra Modellmog’s “The Oedipus Myth and Reader Response in Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*.”

not to hear” and feel, she has accepted the judgment that she does not know anything, and she has learned to “not make a fuss” (3, 13). Indeed, when assigned the task of executing Pierce’s will Oedipa claims she “didn’t know where to begin, didn’t know how to tell the law firm in L.A. that she didn’t know where to begin” (3). Like Oedipus, Oedipa’s identity is foretold; she will behave in certain ways, possess certain qualities, and produce certain outcomes based on an identity that has been assigned to her by external forces. Using Pynchon’s phrasing, Oedipa’s fate as a woman is to remain insulated in a tower, buffered from the intensity of the world. However, unlike Oedipus, Oedipa does not fulfill her predestined fate but instead defies it by resisting gender roles. Oedipus’ story unfolds as predicted, but Oedipa, “[h]aving no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic” manages to break free from her predestined life and, instead, actively investigates and reimagines the world around her.

Interestingly, the issue of predestination surfaces throughout the novel, frequently in relation to American history rather than Greek mythology. Oedipa’s journey, which literally takes her off the beaten tracks and into the wilderness, reveals some of the contradictions that lie at the very heart of American culture (148). Scholars such as Emory Elliott and Pierre-Yves Petillon have linked Oedipa’s eventual critique of America to the Puritan dream of a Christian promised land. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Early American Literature*, Emory Elliott explains that, in their pursuit of a Christian utopia, Puritans built a society that allowed for no middle ground. For the founding Calvinists, predestination (predestined damnation or salvation) was absolute and could not be altered or earned. Yet this belief was at the forefront of social and

religious conflict because it eclipsed magistrate control over the community. Social order was a constant topic of debate because, if God has already determines one's fate, then good works are irrelevant and there is little motivation to live a moral life. Seventeenth century Puritans argued bitterly over the relationship between grace, the idea that one is born saved, and works, the idea that ones earthly behavior is possibly indicative of grace or may result in earning grace.¹¹³ Failed binary logic permeated all aspects of Puritan life. Though Puritan society was fraught with a "remarkable number of contradictions" such that it was "from the start fragmenting from internal conflicts," the American national identity has emerged from the tropes and practices created by the Puritans (Elliott 29). Modern tropes emerged from binaries that were vital to Puritan life, such as wilderness/garden, salvation/damnation, and chosen people/others. These binaries persist and are the basis for contemporary either/or thinking (as evidenced by modern binaries such as patriot/terrorist). Essentially, we inherited a cultural foundation that did not function at its inception, over four hundred years ago.

Within their Christian utopia, the Puritans eliminated the possibility for compromise or multiplicity; every aspect of life was organized according to two opposing options or viewpoints. Likewise, Oedipa is compelled to deconstruct her dilemma according to binary logic: "Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only earth. . . . [E]ither some fraction of the truth's numinous beauty . . . or only a power spectrum. . . . Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true

¹¹³ The notion that one could earn grace implies that God has made an error in one's predestination. Thus, a covenant of Works, which implicitly suggests that God could mistakenly condemn ones soul to hell, caused religious and social upheaval on many occasions. This is one example of the many contradictions within Puritan teachings.

paranoia, or a real Tristero” (Pynchon 150). Oedipa’s experiences work to reveal the permeation of binary structures in America. From the first pages of the novel we learn that Baby Igor “is for salvation; [Daddy is] for the Pit” (30). Later we are told that thinking within categories of “[g]ood guys and bad guys” will prevent “get[ting] to any of the underlying truth” (36). Throughout the novel, characters remark on the limitations of binary thinking and point out its pervasiveness.

Interestingly, there is also a distinctly religious undertone to the novel, as Oedipa’s discovery is articulated as a “religious instant” and there are repeated references to Calvinist theology as well as to Puritans (14). The novel openly critiques the Puritans’ devotion to literal readings of the Bible: “You guys, you’re like Puritans are about the Bible. So hung up with words” (62). Later, a fictional story about “a sect of most pure Puritans” describes the way that the strict binary beliefs of the sect led to its own demise and caused its leader to alter the words of a local play in order to “damn it eternally” as a “moral example” to others (128). In his essay “A Re-cognition of Her Errand into the Wilderness,” Parisian literature professor Pierre-Yves Petillon discusses Pynchon’s attitude toward the Puritans:

Pynchon feels a compulsion to expose and indict the Puritan legacy and imprint, but he does so on behalf of and in the name of not De Soto or Daniel Boone, but an original Puritan settler, a shadow-image of the first governor of the Bay Colony. This is to recognize the counter-history of America, difficult at times to distinguish from the official version, and more accurately a ghostly double of it, just as the Tristero is both official and subversive. (154)

The original Puritan settler to whom Petillon refers is the idealist who came to America seeking refuge from tyranny and oppression. In their pursuit of perfection, Puritans betrayed their original purpose of merging with the land in creation of a holy utopia. When departing for New England aboard the *Arabella* John Winthrop sermonized that God had given a “special commission” to the Puritans that they should live in love and obedience to the Lord and that “we shall be as a city on a hill” (Elliott 40). Importantly, the “city on a hill” was metaphorical, for Winthrop and his people actually “sought a primitive medieval retreat;” their original errand was not centered on conquest, taming of the wilderness, and land acquisition but was one of holy ideals that included a desire for unity with the land, as nature enables communication with God¹¹⁴.

Petillon’s point is that, on behalf of the marginalized idealists, Pynchon seeks to expose the flaws and limitations in the power structures that have drowned out the voices of those seeking something different. The muted post horn, the iconic indicator of Tristero mail, symbolizes the communicative efforts of the marginalized, who have information to transmit and announce but whose trumpets are silenced by a system that does not allow for middle ground or multiplicity. Upon recognizing the way that binary structures and either/or logic has led to the utter neglect, rejection, and silencing of all outsiders Oedipa asks desperately, “[H]ow had it ever happened here, with the chances so good for diversity?” (Pynchon 150). The ideal of America, a nation that began when oppressed outsiders left England to start a new community where their voices could be

¹¹⁴ Of course, regardless of this idealistic vision of the Puritans, traveling to an inhabited land with the intention of claiming it for their own inherently requires conquest.

heard, remains unfulfilled¹¹⁵. For Oedipa, Tristero represents the possibility that an ideal America does exist, and has been thriving underground all along.

Toward the end of the novel Oedipa begins to articulate the limitations of the binaries that have structured American society since the time of the Puritans. She determines that the middle is excluded and that everything is organized according to ones and zeroes, which exist side by side but never touch. As she walks along the tracks of the railroad – independent steel bars with spaces in between – Oedipa reflects, “For it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above” (150). The ones and zeroes can be understood as metaphors for worlds that never touch, for the enforced simplicity of information, or, as N. Katherine Hayles suggests, as meaning and non-meaning. In any case, for Oedipa the world has been reduced to ones and zeroes in a computerized landscape that “shows a decreasing range of options” (Hayles 119). According to Hayles, Oedipa is caught in a dangerous binary that limits the possible outcomes of her investigation to meaning and non-meaning: either the Tristero exists and Oedipa has discovered an underground America, or it does not exist and she will be expected, but unable, to return to her former lifestyle and identity. Oedipa cannot fathom the notion of going back to her tower even if the Tristero does not exist and instead moves toward the development of other options. The Tristero represents the possibility for “another frequency” outside of the ones and zeros that have systematically organized communication and information (Pynchon 14). Whether the

¹¹⁵ Despite the longstanding presence of Native Americans in this country, I use the word “began” to describe the Puritans’ founding of modern American culture because I believe that the patterns developed during their colonization are the first signs of specific tropes that continue to underpin contemporary American life.

Tristero exists or not, Oedipa learns that she cannot return to a lifestyle with only ones and zeroes, but instead must begin to purposefully create middle spaces that can accommodate those “magical Other[s] like herself” (149).

In keeping with postmodernism, perhaps the most striking feature of the novel is its lack of closure. Oedipa’s questions about Tristero and the reader’s own questions ultimately remain unsolved. Ultimately, there is no definitive end to Oedipa’s investigation, but like Maria in Didion’s *Play it as it Lays*, Oedipa must decide her own fate. Before attending the auction of lot 49, Oedipa reflects upon the uncertain existence of Tristero and cannot decide if Tristero is real, if she is hallucinating Tristero’s existence, if the entire mystery is a plot against her, or if she is hallucinating that there is a plot against her (141). Oedipa attends the “crying” of lot 49 but the novel ends before this event takes place; thus, Oedipa never discovers if Tristero is real. Though the lack of closure is unsettling for the reader, it seems that Oedipa’s *not knowing*, coupled with her courageous attendance at the event, despite the cruel smiles of all the men who are “surprised [she] actually came,” are the central ideas of the novel (152). Perhaps (and certainly within the pages of the novel) Oedipa will never know if a secret, underground network of couriers operates to connect disenfranchised communities all over America, but her life will continue nonetheless. Oedipa must decide for herself what she believes, apart from the facts she can or cannot obtain from the powers that be. Importantly, Oedipa continues to be open to new information but acquires it directly, first-hand, without (male) intermediaries; Oedipa will do her own investigating and will evaluate information independently from the judgments of others.

Unlike the existence of Tristero, the problem Oedipa lays out within the first chapter can be resolved: “If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else?” (12). Oedipa must endeavor to dismantle the magic that insulates her in the tower by first choosing to believe that power structures can be subverted. Oedipa’s decision to attend the crying of lot 49 and to pursue the mysterious identity of the unknown buyer demonstrates that she chooses to believe in the possibility of Tristero. Though this belief may never be substantiated, Oedipa is finally driven to recognize the exhilarating power in the idea that there might be “[a]nother mode of meaning behind the obvious” (150).

However, Oedipa’s willingness to continue her pursuit of Tristero occurs only after she begins to believe in her own competence to discover it and to stand on her own. Throughout the novel, Oedipa struggles with her feelings about the Tristero, wondering why she is so “anxious that her revelation not expand beyond a certain point” (137). Oedipa is afraid of disrupting the world to which she belongs and deconstructing the Rapunzel tower that enshrouds her. Oedipa feels the impending reality that pursuing the Tristero mystery will result in her independence from those on whom she has traditionally relied for direction. Interestingly, all of Oedipa’s confidantes and advisors are men and once Hilarius, Mucho, Metzger, Driblette, Fallopian and, finally, the Inamorato Anonymous have abandoned her, she feels she has “lost her bearings” (147).¹¹⁶ Oedipa is intimidated, and later exhilarated, by the free will she expresses in her

¹¹⁶ Oedipa’s telephone conversation with the Inamorato Anonymous, in which she lists what has happened to the men in her life and explains that he is “the only one I have,” calls attention to the fact that Oedipa is the only main female character in the text. The

pursuit of the Tristero, because it severs her from the safety of her masculine advisors. Moreover, she is terrified of leaving “the cheered land she lived in” for the “exile” which comes with sharing in the Tristero secret (149). Ultimately Oedipa embraces her own escape from the metaphorical tower when she begins to acknowledge her own abilities and to determine what is at stake in the possibility of Tristero.

If Tristero exists, then the exiles of America have effectively subverted government efforts to control communication, to manage the transmission of messages and meanings, and to scrutinize and silence the individuals attempting to transmit other information. According to Oedipa’s research, Tristero began as an attempt to reclaim a usurped inheritance and, centuries later, inheritance remains at the heart of the Tristero mystery. Oedipa wonders, “What was left to inherit? That America coded in Inverarity’s testament, whose was that?” and leaves the answer unsaid. If Tristero exists, America belongs to those who participate in its vast, expansive networks and who have kept it alive for centuries. What is at stake in Oedipa’s investigation is America itself. Equally as important is Oedipa’s identity in relation to Tristero. As she begins to unravel the threads of the mystery, Oedipa feels so heavy with the knowledge she carries that she actually visits a doctor for a pregnancy test, but the “gynecologist has no test for what she was pregnant with” (144). Oedipa carries within her the power to reinvent America, to assign new meanings to the world around her, and to acknowledge the voices of exploited

juxtaposition of the solitary woman, Oedipa, and the many men who have dictated her life suggests the overwhelming nature of patriarchy and its ability to control and direct women’s lives.

and marginalized people. Through an empowered Oedipa the ideal America can be located and (re)birthed.

This newfound, independent Oedipa and the Tristero are entwined because, according to dominant power structures, neither of them should exist. Throughout her life, gender norms have dictated that Oedipa has nothing relevant to say; according to her lover, Metzger, Oedipa is one of those “lib, overeducated broads with the soft heads and bleeding hearts” (59). She has been silenced not only by patriarchy but also by her own insecurity and her willingness to buy into a system that disempowers and trivializes her. The power of the Tristero and Oedipa’s power as a woman rely on her willingness to believe that they exist and to invest in them. Oedipa must insist that there are Other ways of communicating and transmitting messages – subversive ways, in which women can participate. Thus, though the novel does not provide closure to the Tristero mystery, the novel reaches a finale in Oedipa’s decision to continue chasing the Tristero, despite gender roles that insist she return to her tower and cease her efforts to undermine dominant power structures, and despite the “pale, cruel” faces of the intimidating men inside the auction room. Oedipa’s choice represents a third option in the binary of ones and zeroes; rather than leveraging meaning or non meaning on the existence of the Tristero, Oedipa will invent meaning herself, choosing to believe in the Tristero regardless of its literal existence. Ultimately Oedipa’s attendance at the crying of lot 49 represents her assertion of a self-made identity as well as her emergence as a maker of meaning.

Final Thoughts on Postdomestic Women in Postmodern Novels

To conclude, it seems that postmodern novels centering on male protagonists with postdomestic women featured as sidekicks work to reassert the intellectual authority of the white, male artist and scholar. Conversely, novels featuring postdomestic female leads perform the function of establishing and fleshing out new gendered identities within the context of postmodern America. These novels attempt to create narrative from women's perspectives, a process that validates female subjectivity as relevant and central. Moreover, in novels featuring postdomestic heroines, the woman's viewpoint is never fixed or definitive; it is always fluctuating. DeLillo's *Mao II* and Hawkes's *Death, Sleep, and the Traveler* work to pin down, label and define women – to pull the narrative out of its state of chaos by constructing a steady, reliable, fixed set of female characters. The postdomestic woman characters in Didion's *Play it as it Lays* and Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* have a certain amount of freedom to do what is unexpected, to change, to define and redefine themselves, to be defined and to accept or rebel against those definitions.

However, there is a theoretical apparatus or framework that can be used to distinguish between these two types of novels – a dividing line more theoretically based than the fact that one type of novel features a female protagonist, while the other does not. The essential difference between these two types is that one is feminist while the other is not. In the aforementioned Didion and Pynchon novels, the postdomestic women, the plots structures, and the narrative content work to reposition women as active and productive agents in the world, capable of making meaning rather than simply accepting or bearing meaning. Through postdomestic female characters, these texts

question and challenge phallogocentrism, ultimately making clear women's potential to cause profound cultural and intellectual change. This feminist maneuver is exactly what positions these novels as postmodern, for, as I have explained, to be postmodern the text must also be feminist.

CONCLUSION

[W]riting is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.

– Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (416)

In this project I have defined and examined the postdomestic woman in order to establish her potential for promoting cultural and social change. By investigating the history of divorce in the United States I have shown that postdomestic women began to emerge in increasing numbers when the centralization of love within courtship practices caused profound changes to marital longevity in the mid-eighteenth century. In addition, my discussion of divorce reveals the beginnings of a vexed relationship between racial politics and divorce law – a relationship that would continue to be rife with injustice into the twentieth century.

While also considering historical and sociological data, I have endeavored to position representations of the postdomestic woman as central to my project. Because literature and film simultaneously reflect and create culture, they offer meaningful insights about the ways in which American society perceives this new identity category. The films and novels that I analyzed demonstrate that while many cultural productions suggest the postdomestic woman is an extension of “bad” wife or mother archetypes as she fails to fulfill the obligations set forth by the cult of domesticity, others highlight her potential for redefining femininity and motherhood in ways that might motivate beneficial social change.

Having provided this foundation, I hope that other writers will take up the task of examining the postdomestic woman because it is clear that her existence will continue to impact the United States both culturally and materially. Further, I believe that the emergence of this new identity category presents a rich opportunity for rethinking gender dynamics and cultivating less oppressive social definitions of femininity, masculinity, and gender normativity.

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