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Grabbing Their Own Pussies: Reclaiming Trauma and the Female Voice in Toni Morrison's Paradise and Kathy Acker's Blood and Guts in High School

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Grabbing Their Own Pussies: Reclaiming Trauma and the Female Voice in Toni Morrison's
Paradise and Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
English
American Literature

by

Chloe Froom
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Abstract

Toni Morrison and Kathy Acker write their novels within the subversive feminist literary movement described by Helene Cixous in “Laugh of the Medusa”. Through Morrison’s *Paradise* and Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* they create a platform for women silenced by their bodily trauma to express and eventually liberate themselves from their traumatic pasts. These female writers are calling attention to the pandemic of misogyny-related violence and allowing assault survivors to speak through their pain

Toni Morrison; Kathy Acker; *Paradise*; *Blood and Guts in High School*; trauma narratives; misogyny-related violence; sexual violence

Western patriarchal culture has created works of fiction that are the basis of our understanding of the world--especially in terms of gender, sex, and power--but they exclude the female voice. As a reaction against this, female writers in the 1970s and 1980s began developing a literary tradition as a means to rewrite, critique, and appropriate the traditional Western narratives that oppress them. This included the detachment from second-wave feminism and the development of the third-wave, which sought what Leslie L. Heywood describes as “a form of inclusiveness” (xx). Second-wave feminism is largely critiqued for its essentialism and its notion of the universal woman as excluding the experiences of women who do not fit within the white female heteronormative demographic. The exclusivity of the second-wave is examined by Rebecca Walker who explains, “For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn’t allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories” (22). The second-wave’s rigidity and insistence on the universal woman has isolated women of color, queer women, and transgender women whose experiences differ from their own. Third-wave feminism is a reaction against this that seeks to explore the complexities of diverse female identities. Women writers began to incorporate the third-wave through subversive feminist fiction, which illustrates female characters with multiple identities and various cultural backgrounds as a means to include them in the mainstream conversation of feminism.

Although Helene Cixous has been accused of essentialism, I believe her inclusion in the conversation between Toni Morrison and Kathy Acker is a necessary means of bridging their intersectionality and experimentation. Placing Morrison and Acker in conversation with one another is difficult since their writing styles drastically differ--Morrison is more theoretical, whereas Acker is more vulgar and experimental-- which is why I am employing the scholarship

of Cixous. In Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" she combines the theoretical with the experimental to examine women's places in phallogentric literature while simultaneously calling on women writers to create a literary tradition that speaks from the female experience. In "The Laugh of the Medusa", Cixous leads by example by writing this theoretical text through the subversive, female writing style she calls on women writers to cultivate. In addition, Cixous describes what women's writing will do, arguing: "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women into writing, from which they have been driven away so violently as from their bodies... Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" (3). Cixous is calling for female writers to put their experiences into narratives in order to reclaim their autonomy and liberate their bodies from patriarchal oppression, which is what Morrison and Acker achieve in their narratives. Larry McCaffery examines the significance of this new female language Cixous is calling for in his article "Kathy Acker and the 'Punk' Aesthetics," stating, "women writers of the past 100 years... are united by a conviction that experimental strategies are required to disrupt the validated way words ordinarily function – and that only by devising such strategies can the nature of womanly experience be accommodated in language" (227). In order to combat patriarchal misconceptions of women, female writers must create a language that represents the complexity of their experience. These women write beyond the language of modern fiction, and experiment with writing styles and content, providing a visceral exploration of female identity and its relation to broader issues within Western culture.

In my thesis I will be examining Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997) and Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) to illustrate how subversive feminist fiction challenges the ways in which modernity constructs women, their bodies and their identities. I will be

analyzing these works within the feminist critical framework developed by Cixous, specifically at her article “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975). Cixous is calling for a female reaction against the phallogocentric system to spawn a literary movement dedicated to the female experience. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” she examines the impact patriarchal literary tradition has had on women, claiming, “writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that’s frightening since it’s often hidden and adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction” (6). Cixous argues for the damaging nature of androcentric fiction since it actively works to oppress women. Therefore, she argues, women writers must create their own literary tradition that works to reclaim the targeted subject for oppression in patriarchal writing: the female body.

The female body is a fundamental element within Cixous’s criticism that connects her to Morrison and Acker. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous poses the question “Why few texts?” when discussing the lack of female-authored literature. She responds: “Because so few women have as yet won back their body. Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations, and codes” (14). The female body has incessantly been shamed, objectified, and fetishized within the patriarchal literary canon, which filters the body through the male gaze. A woman must write from a place that confronts the damaging contradictions and stereotypes created by male writers; a place men desire, deny, and despise – her body. They must create a platform for the narratives of sexual assault, abuse, domestic violence, and female sexuality. Cixous urges female writers to “write through their bodies” (14) in order to reappropriate them and break free from the confines

of patriarchal tradition; and this is achieved by Morrison's and Acker's employment of the female trauma narrative.

Morrison and Acker push the female body into the foreground and speak through it by illustrating the traumas forced upon it by misogynist violence. They create narratives exploring the bridge between assault and sexuality by developing characters who are both sexual beings and victims of sexual trauma without conflating these two experiences. Morrison and Acker employ experimental rhetorical strategies that reject a singular narrative as a means to create a platform for women who are otherwise silenced by society. Morrison's *Paradise* and Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* challenge convention, tradition and language by constructing narratives that use the body as text and by lending a voice to female characters who have been weakened and silenced by their trauma and forced outside the confines of traditional society. Rebecca Solnit examines this patriarchal silencing of women in *Men Explain Things to Me*, affirming, "Violence is one way to silence people, to deny their voice and their credibility, to assert your right to control over their right to exist...to give rape, date rape, domestic violence, and workplace sexual harassment legal standing as crimes has been the necessity of making women credible and audible" (6). Through these narratives, Acker and Morrison provide varying accounts of misogynistic trauma as a means to expose the frequency and often blurred lines of consent and bodily violation. Their female characters speak through their bodily trauma in order to build a platform for them to understand their violation and eventually reclaim their bodies outside of their victimized identities.

In *Paradise*, Morrison develops a writing style that articulates the female experience through the juxtaposition of multiple narrative voices. This amalgamation of perspective is illustrated when the entire town is brought together for the controversial wedding of K.D. and

Arnette in which the narrator observes, “Over the heads of men finding it so hard to fight their instincts to control what they could and crunch what they could not; in the hearts of women tirelessly taming the predator; in the faces of children not yet recovered from the blow to their esteem upon learning that adults would not regard them as humans until mated” (145). Through this narration Morrison exposes the difference in perspective between genders and the role of heteronormative coupling and how children react to the awareness of this. I will be looking specifically at how the juxtaposition of male/female accounts exposes the patriarchal misconceptions of trauma through the narratives of Seneca, Billie Delia, Mavis, Pallas, Gigi, and Connie. I will also be examining the significance of race in each narrative and how this affects the experience of womanhood since these are all women of color. Each of the Convent women have a different story related to sexual assault or male violence and Morrison provides them with a platform to voice their trauma from their own perspectives.

Acker employs a similar narrative strategy, but instead of having multiple narrators/protagonists, she creates a central protagonist who rejects a singular identity. Acker projects the various perversities of sexual violence women are subject to onto a single character. This works to highlight the momentous effects bodily trauma has on the female perspective and the relationship to her body; for instance the protagonist remarks, “Abortions are the symbol, the outer image, of sexual relations in this world. Describing my abortions is the only real way I can tell you about [sic] pain and fear...my unstoppable drive for sexual love made me know” (34). Janey, Acker’s protagonist, speaks about her abortions because sexual and reproductive trauma is the only way she knows how to talk about love and pain. Acker tells her story through Janey, a thirteen-year-old girl who suffers through incest, illegal abortions, sex trafficking, sexual assault, and drug abuse. By projecting multiple trauma narratives onto a single protagonist Acker

illustrates the incessant damage and violation forced onto the female body. Acker and Morrison incorporate the body into the texts through the confrontation of female trauma narratives that provide a visceral and emotional account of misogynistic and racialized trauma on women.

In conclusion, I will examine the ways in which Morrison and Acker create a language separate from traditional Western narratives as a means to challenge patriarchal portrayals of female experiences and bodies. I will be focusing my analysis specifically on *Paradise* and use Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* as a comparative model for other contemporary female experimental rhetoric and narrative. By placing these novels in conversation with one another we can learn the necessity for female writers to challenge modernity's constructs of the female body since their female characters not only experience varying forms of sexual violence, but, taken together, they also represent varying ages, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds. Morrison and Acker re-write the body by creating a platform for *all* women to speak through and about their oppression as a means to break their silence and reclaim their autonomy.

Acker and Morrison both open their novels with the portrayal of misogynistic violence told from the male perspective to immediately illustrate patriarchal biases. Morrison opens *Paradise* with the male account (told in third person close point of view) of the massacre at the Convent to unravel patriarchal misconceptions, including issues of racial purity. The opening line of *Paradise*-- "They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time" (3)-- indicates the tensions surrounding race and gender in the town of Ruby. The ominous opening lines imply the men of Ruby's enjoyment of the hunt for the women of color who remain. An account of the murder of the white woman is then repeated again to illustrate the electric feeling of power from acting on their hatred of "impure women": "Shooting the first woman (the white one) has clarified it like butter: the pure oil of hatred on top, its hardness stabilized below" (4).

This immediate act of violence reinforces Ruby's patriarchs' terrorization of women of their own race, validating their stance as a town that thrives on its particular formulation of "pure" patriarchal blackness as above white law.

The Ruby men have constructed an idealization of blackness, meaning anything that differs from their own "pure" dark complexion is considered an impurity or even a threat to Ruby. Although majority of the Convent women are African-American, they vary in skin-tone and background, whereas the Ruby men come from "8-rock blood" (217). Since Ruby was built on a foundation of blackness defined by the blue-black skin of the 8-rock, they are fixed on maintaining the supposed purity of their bloodline. In order to do so they have created a strict regime: "Unadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby. That was their recipe. That was their deal. For immortality...In that case...everything that worries them must be women" (217). Ruby's patriarchs have, therefore, created a crisis they believe can only be resolved through the death of "impure" women. These men can feel their town deteriorating and they need a scapegoat to separate themselves from its collapse, which is where the black women of the Convent come into play. The sexual taboo of the black female body is important to address; for instance Toni Irving examines this history in her article "Borders of the Body: Black Women Sexual Assault and Citizenship," declaring, "Black women's sexual assault is framed to suggest a private, possibly pathological, but nonpolitical act. While lynching was construed as a necessary measure to protect white female purity and white male power, prevailing stereotypes of hypersexual black women depoliticized the sexual assault of black female bodies, regardless of the assailant's race" (70). Since black women have been entrapped within the stereotype of hypersexuality the abuse of their bodies fails to be perceived as violent or non-consensual. The men of Ruby employ this prejudiced and misogynistic

slandering of the black female body as a means to justify their murderous invasion of the Convent, thereby committing themselves to an ideologically rigid form of black idealism. Despite their rejection of white superiority, ironically, they still are abiding by the patriarchal construct that forces women to uphold an ideal of “white” womanhood – i.e. pure, domestic, submissive. Women, such as those in the Convent, who refuse to conform to these hierarchal standards are thus scapegoated for personal or societal collapse.

The patriarchal accusations against the black female body become more severe as the Ruby men move throughout the halls of the Convent, transforming all they see into evidence of deviance: “They exchange knowing looks when they learn that each woman sleeps not in a bed, like normal people, but in a hammock...No clothes in the closets, of course, since the women wore no-fit dirt dresses...a letter written in blood so smeary its satanic message cannot be deciphered...not a cross of Jesus anywhere” (7). As the Ruby men violate the feminine space of the Convent they make judgments based on a patriarchal hierarchy that condemns women who do not ascribe to their ideal of (Christian) womanhood. The extent of their judgment onto the Convent women is illustrated through one of the Ruby leaders who thinks to himself, “How can their plain brains think of such things: revolting sex, deceit and sly torture of children? Out here in wide-open space tucked away in a mansion – they managed to call into question the value of almost every woman he knew” (8). Since these women have created an amorphous, non-hierarchal community within the Convent, the Ruby men utilize what they find as evidence to the true nature of women without male influence. This patriarchal assumption prompts him to question even the morality of the women he does know. He believes this is a female problem, as if to imply there is something inherent in women that makes them impressionable to this way of being. Since the Convent women live in a space unbound by male control the men of Ruby

assume this is the cause for their “impurity.” Therefore, Ruby patriarchs justify their murder of the women as a noble act of duty to protect the women and community of Ruby as a whole.

The male perspective of the massacre also illustrates how myth has gendered cultural biases. As the male narrative comes to an end, the massacre is described as follows: “Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary, they are like panicked doves leaping toward a sun...God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby” (18). In this moment the men are stating what they believe is their divine purpose to kill a group of unarmed women. They equate the Convent women with the myth of Eve as a rhetorical/ideological strategy to further impose onto them the notion of impurity. In Linda J. Krumholz article “Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*” she examines the employment of the Genesis myth, proclaiming, “From the men’s perspectives, the women, like Eve, embody a loss of innocence and an ejection from the Garden of Eden, the earthly Paradise, a loss the men fear and wish to prevent” (22). Eve is incessantly used as the crux of the patriarchal argument that women are inferior to men due to their supposedly overt sexuality and their acquiescence to temptation. Morrison opens her narrative with the myth of Adam and Eve as a means to gradually dismantle patriarchal misconceptions of the female experience and expose the false yet enduring religious justifications (indicting Christianity, in particular) for misogynistic violence. Since these women do not embody the men of Ruby’s definition of womanhood they are perceived as a threat to the community. They are not married and do not live under the roof of a man, instead they live among women and run their lives as they please.

In *Blood and Guts*, Acker begins with the chapter “Parents stink [sic]” with an account of Janey’s relationship with her father, stating: “Never having known a mother, her mother had died when Janey was a year old. Janey depended on her father for everything and regarded her father

as a boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father” (7). Acker makes it clear Janey is completely reliant on her father to fulfill the relationships she should be developing outside the home. He is her everything, but as the final line suggests he is her boyfriend first and father last. Acker pushes the nature of their relationship beyond comfort levels through dialogue and illustration. The line “boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement and father” is repeated on the next page under an illustration of male genitalia to illustrate Janey’s association of these relationships with sex. The chapter is written almost exclusively in dialogue as a literary device to expose the thoughts of both speakers as well as the nature of their relationship. The dialogue begins with an argument between Janey and her father:

Janey: You’re going to leave me. *(She doesn’t know why she’s saying this.)*

Father *(dumbfounded, but not denying it):* Sally and I just slept together for the first time. How can I know anything?

Janey *(in amazement. She didn’t believe what she had been saying was true. It was only out of petulance):* You ARE going to leave me. Oh no. No. That can’t be. (7)

This exchange of dialogue is written in a manner intended to evoke the sense of turmoil between jealous lovers, which is made more horrifying since it is also an exchange between father and daughter. Janey’s father has engaged in an incestuous relationship with her for years and now that he has found a new woman, he wants to rid of her.

Janey’s identity as a victim of incest is crucial to understanding her character. Her actions, desires and way of thinking are directly linked to this trauma. Susan E. Hawkins

comments, “Janey, as an incest victim, blames herself for her father’s indifference and thus can’t handle Johnny’s [her father] romantic interest in the starlet...Janey rationalizes Johnny’s outright desertion in the only terms she understands: ‘Daddy no longer loved me. That was it. I was desperate to find the love he had taken away from me’” (646). Janey does not know how to survive without the sexual love of her father. Since Janey’s entire identity is enwrapped in her incestual relationship, she is desperate to find a replacement or even a replica of her father.

The WASP girl he leaves her for enhances Janey’s father’s betrayal since it reinforces the dichotomous cultural archetype of femininity. A woman considered a “WASP” ascribes to the standards of idealized white womanhood – tall and thin, typically with blonde hair and blue eyes. Although Acker provides no physical descriptions of Janey, we do know she is from Merida, Mexico, of which she provides a detailed description. We can also infer from her comments on the WASP woman that she does not have access to the privileges of white feminine beauty or is at least living a differently racialized womanhood. The difference between their physical appearances speaks to Mexican cultures la Virgen / la Malinche dichotomy, also known as the Madonna / whore paradox. The duality of these cultural archetypes is exhibited by Leslie Petty in her article “The ‘Dual’-ing Images of la Malinche and la Virgen de Guadalupe”: “the characterization of women throughout Mexican literature has been profoundly influenced by two archetypes present in the Mexican psyche: that of woman who has kept her virginity and that one who has lost it” (119-120). La Malinche represents the dark, sexual, violated woman whereas her binary counterpart is reflective of the pure, light, nurturing woman. Janey cannot help but perceive herself in contrast to the WASP woman: “Even though I’m younger, I’m tough rotted, rotted, putrid beef. My cunt red, ugh. She’s thin and beautiful...Like a model. Just the way I’ve always wanted to look and never will. I can’t compete with *that*” (18). Janey is forced to

perceive herself within the la Malinche side of the dichotomy, creating the assumption she was left for her white, pure, therefore, better counterpart. The myth of la Malinche and la Virgen parallels the paradox of Eve / Madonna we see in *Paradise*. Since Janey and the Convent women do not ascribe to the pure ideal of womanhood they are perceived as hypersexual. For the men of Ruby, the temptation of lascivious women poses a potential threat to the purity of their community, whereas in *Blood and Guts*, Janey's father uses Janey's body as a sexual plaything for him to enact his desires onto. Janey is then cast out when he finds a white/whiter woman to potentially start a loving relationship with.

Following the opening chapters that illustrate the misogynistic violence and abuse Morrison and Acker's female character have endured, they turn the narrative over to their female characters. The first woman Morrison lends a voice to is Mavis, a housewife who accidentally causes the death of her twin girls by leaving them in a hot car. Although the taboo of a mother murdering her children is shocking, this is undermined by the disturbing account of her relationship with her husband. Throughout her narrative there is a building sense of her husband's abuse. It starts small through his absence from the interview about the death of the twin girls, which Mavis attempts to excuse by giving him a fake name and remarking, "he wasn't feeling so good" (21); when in fact, he was "sitting on the edge of the tub drinking Seagram's out of the glass" (21). This can easily be explained away by his being depressed about the loss of his infant girls, but his drinking straight from the bottle alludes to a deeper problem. As the interview continues, the disharmony within their marriage is clarified when Mavis explains to the reporter why she didn't leave the babies at home with her husband: "They wasn't crying or nothing but he said his head hurt. I understood. I did. You can't expect a man to come home from that kind of work to have to watch over babies while I go get something decent to put in

front of him” (23). Her husband is completely reluctant to care for the infants, and Mavis is afraid to even ask him to watch them. She so desperately needs to please him, which explains why she took them with her and left them in a hot car. Mavis was not thinking of the danger her children were in because she was so consumed in her fear of her husband.

The familial tension transforms into violence when the reporter leaves, and Morrison provides a deeper insight into the relationship between Mavis and her husband. While Mavis is sleeping, she wakes suddenly from the feel of her husband’s presence: “‘You all right?’ Frank was already under the sheet, and Mavis woke with a start of terror, which dissolved quickly into familiar fright” (25). The sound of his voice and the feel of his body next to hers causes Mavis to jolt awake in horror that is then subdued to a habitual fear. Hence, her husband’s actions are not a result of the death of the babies, but a common occurrence in their marriage to the point that Mavis anticipates it. This anxiety has since manifested itself into trauma. The severity of Mavis’s trauma is illustrated as she awaits her fate for the night: “Did he have his shorts on? If she knew that she would know whether he was looking to have sex, but she couldn’t find out without touching him. As if to satisfy her curiosity, Frank snapped the waistband of his boxers. Mavis relaxed” (25-26). The knowledge that her husband is partially clothed enables Mavis to release the tension from her body. Mavis clearly does not want to sexually engage with her husband since she is only able to relax when she feels confident this will not occur. Unfortunately, before she even gets the chance to fully relax herself her husband “pulled her nightgown up” with the narrator observing, “She had misjudged. Again” (26). The single use of the term “Again” creates an ominous tone of repetition. Morrison is making it clear this sexual abuse from her husband is a constant feature in their marriage.

The drawn out manner in which Mavis's trauma narrative is told replicates the panicked process of waiting that dominates her reality. With this narrative pacing, Mavis leads the reader through the patterns of her spouse's abuse. She describes how it usually plays out, reporting: "Would it be quick like most always? or long, wandering, collapsing, wordless fatigue" (26). She then describes this exact moment of her sexual assault and how it makes her feel: "He didn't penetrate – just rubbed himself to climax while chewing a clump of her hair through the nightgown that covered her face. She could have been a life-size Raggedy Anne Doll" (26). This is a form of abuse rarely considered as such because the abuser is her husband, but Morrison renders this act as both traumatic and violent. In this scene Mavis is no longer human, she is reduced to a doll. Their sex life is not based on mutual pleasure, but based solely on the desires of her husband. He even separates her from the act by covering her face with a sheet and using her body as a sexual object. Solnit examines the prevalence of domestic abuse in *Men Explain Things to Me*, explaining: "So many men murder their partners...that every three years the death toll tops 9/11's casualties...if we talked about crimes like these and why they are so common, we'd have to talk about what kinds of profound change this society, or this nation needs. If we talked about it, we'd be talking about masculinity, or male roles, or maybe patriarchy, and we don't talk much about that" (23). Spousal abuse is a persistent crime, but since the institution of marriage was founded on the male ownership of a woman this crime goes widely unreported. Women are expected to please their husbands and told their happiness comes after their husband and children. Morrison is exposing the horrors and sexual abuse women are forced to endure in their own homes. In fact, throughout this moment Mavis can feel her children watching and laughing as her husband abuses her: "The other children would be behind the door, snickering"

(26). She can feel them taking pleasure in her suffering, leaving her isolated and vulnerable in her own home.

The trauma and internalized misogyny of her husband's sexual abuse permeates Mavis's narrative; for instance, she proclaims, "Frank was right. From the very beginning he had been absolutely right about her: she was the dumbest bitch on the planet" (37). Mavis is speaking from the voice of trauma. Her abuser constantly belittled her and made her feel powerless, causing her to perceive herself in the same light. Janey shares similar trauma symptoms to Mavis since she is also blamed for her abuse by her abuser, illustrated in Janey's paraphrasing of her father's words: "he had wanted to be close to me and I refused; all the times I had driven him away when he loved me" (20). Although this rendering is impossible since incest is a form of abusive conditioning instigated by the parent, he convinces her she is at fault and he is the victim. Like Mavis, Janey then speaks through the voice of internalized misogyny, remarking: "I get hysterical when I don't understand" (12). Janey and Mavis disregard their emotions as something related to their gender, and internalize their abusers' blame.

However, Morrison and Acker discredit this internalized blame. The trauma narratives are broken down through careful narrative pacing as a means to clearly illustrate the powerlessness of sexual assault. While Morrison gives voice to domestic violence, Acker exposes the difference between sexual fantasy and sexual assault in the chapter "Janey becomes a woman" (56). The scene begins with Janey alone in her room "lying on her mat, writing this, two teenage hoods, one black and one white, came into the apartment" (59). As these two men destroy the apartment, Janey remains unaware of their presence, Acker observes: "While Janey was still lightly masturbating and fantasizing about young black men breaking in and raping her, they broke into her room and laughed at her" (59). This is a significant moment in the text

because Acker illustrates the divide between fantasy and reality / desire and assault. Janey is masturbating “lightly” to the fantasy of being raped, but is then interrupted by the reality of this possibly occurring. There is a colossal difference between having a sexual fantasy of rape and the act of rape – one is imaginary while the other is a violation. In the article “The Nature of Women’s Rape Fantasies: An Analysis of Prevalence, Frequency, and Contents,” Jenny Bivona and Joseph Critelli define the term “sexual fantasy”: “we use the term *sexual fantasy* to refer to almost any conscious mental imagery or day-dream that includes sexual activity or is sexually arousing. Sexual fantasies are acts of imagination rather than direct observations of external events” (33). Sexual fantasy, therefore, does not mean the fantasizer wants the event to take place. For instance, Janey does not emerge from her fantasy excited about the possibility of being raped by these “two teenage hoods” (59); instead, it is a moment of horror:

She felt that thing – whatever it was – of which she was most scared, the most terrifying thing in the world was happening to her. The thing – whatever it was – she didn’t know. The thing – what she most didn’t want to happen – she was now right in the middle of. This was the most awful thing that could happen to her. She had to get away. (59-60)

Janey is filled with so much fear she is having difficulty processing what is happening to her. All she knows is this is the worst possible thing she can endure and she needs to escape. This moment of panic while men invade her home contrasted with the power she maintains while masturbating solidifies the difference between desire and assault. Janey does not want to be raped by these men or any man, which is made clear through the repetition of her fear of “the thing” (59). She is sexually aroused by the fantasy of rape not rape itself since fantasy enables her to be in control. Janey has no desire to be sexually assaulted, and by being pulled out of the solo pleasure fantasy and into the horrific victimized reality, Acker is exposing this difference.

Janey's life depends on her fighting back in this moment, but winning this fight is not always a possibility for women in this kind of violent situation. Acker illustrates Janey's attempt and failure to escape, asserting: "Before she could scream, the white one clapped his hand over her mouth. She tried to bite him, but she couldn't. She tried to kick her legs. The black man was holding her legs down and experimentally running his nails up the inner sides of her legs. The black hands came up to hold her arms; the huge body covered her. She felt enclosed" (59). Janey does everything she can to get away from these men. She wants to fight them off, but is incapable of doing so, especially since she's already in a compromising position. Acker is exposing the inequity of power dynamics that play a prominent role in misogynistic violence. Janey, a thirteen year-old girl, cannot physically fight off two men and is, therefore, incapable of protecting herself even in her own home. This kind of violence is often blamed on the female victim through a series of intolerant patriarchal assumptions, such as, "Why were you alone in a room with two men?" or "Why didn't you fight them off or scream?" In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* she examines the damage of these questions and assumptions that work to shame victims of sexual violence, proclaiming: "Recently a young woman was gang-raped in a university in Nigeria, and the response of many young Nigerian's, both male and female, was something like this: 'Yes, rape is wrong, but what is a girl doing in a room with four boys?' Let us, if we can, forget the horrible inhumanity of that response. These Nigerians have been raised to think of women as inherently guilty. And they have been raised to expect so little of men that the idea of men as savage beings with no self-control is somehow acceptable" (32-33). Adichie's discussion of victim shaming broadens this issue to a global problem and her analysis exposes the attack of victims for what it really is: inhumane. Women are incessantly placed in the position of fault for something that is out of their control. In *Blood*

and Guts, Acker is answering those questions unfairly asked of trauma victims by illustrating the impossibility of fighting against this kind of violence. Janey is overpowered before she gets the chance to put up a real fight. In fact, she is completely “enclosed” under their bodily strength.

This break-in scene is also significant in its exposure of how men abuse the power of physical strength. Acker illustrates a black man and a white man working together to bind Janey’s body to highlight the gendering of this form of violence. The white man explains his boss, the Persian slave trader, “taught me how to be a man” (60) and this act of violence against Janey is a reflection of that lesson. This violent display of manhood is described as: “The white punk stuck one of her scarves in her mouth and knotted another around her wrists and another around her ankles. She still couldn’t move ‘cause the black man was sitting on her ankles” (59). With Janey being “enclosed” under the black man, the white man is able to bind her body to the bed to prevent her from breaking free. Now that they no longer have to hold her with physical strength they feel free to taunt her with her vulnerability. The white guy begins to trash her room and “kicked her a few times” (59). He even “took out a razor blade, starting slicing things up” (59). The situation becomes more violent when the black guy reminds the white guy they are “no longer in high school anymore” (59). This insinuation that they are no longer boys but men enables the violence to become more horrific: “The black guy hit Janey across the face a few times for the hell of it. ‘Maybe I’ll kill you now: maybe I won’t. He looked at the expression on her face” (59). This is a clear abuse of power. He hits her simply because he can. He threatens her life because he wants to scare her, more importantly he wants to see the fear in her eyes. He wants to feel the power of a man who can take the life from a girl incapable of defending herself. The powerlessness Janey feels in her own body is described when the men kidnap her: “As if she was a doll, they were walking her up past Fourth Street” (60). This feeling of objectification

parallels Mavis's description of feeling like "a life-size Raggedy Anne" (26). These men perceive themselves as sexually entitled to Janey and Mavis. This notion of entitlement justifies their reduction of these female bodies into objects for them to act out their misogyny, toxic masculinity, and sexual desire.

In Cixous's "Laugh of the Medusa" she examines the significance of maternal female bonding, arguing: "The mother, too, is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return the love the body was 'born' to her. Touch me, caress me, you the living no-name, me my self as myself" (10). Cixous is arguing women who have felt out of control or uncomfortable in their bodies can discover how to love themselves through the support of other women. The power that lies at the heart of a female community is the ability to understand one another and the willingness to provide a space of safety. In Morrison and Acker's novels they provide their female characters with a space that shelters them, if only temporarily, from patriarchal influences. These spaces are characterized by their conspicuous absence of a men. In *Paradise*, the Convent is the obvious safe zone for the community of women within the narrative. The significance of the Convent to the female narrators is observed by Melanie R. Anderson who emphasizes that, "Each of the women is running from a traumatic memory of violence or betrayal, or both. When they attempt to communicate with the outside world, they are ignored or told to leave...they remain in the Convent because they have nowhere to go and no one to return to" (314). All of Morrison's female narrators have been weakened and silenced by their trauma and forced outside the confines of traditional society in order to survive. The Convent provides these women with a space isolated from the society that has rejected them while simultaneously encouraging the discovery of individuality. This is made apparent upon Mavis's arrival at the

Convent in which Connie tells her, “Lies not allowed in this place. In this place every true thing is okay” (38). Connie is acknowledging this as a space where a woman’s voice will be not only heard but also listened to.

The notion of the Convent as a safe zone for women has historical significance within the female community of Ruby. These women know the Convent as a place of retreat from their lives at home. For instance, the narrator states: “it was women who walked this road. Only women. Never men. For more than twenty years Lone had watched them. Back and forth, back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost” (270). Men are never found on this road walking to the Convent because it’s not a space for them. After all, Solnit argues: “We have an abundance of rape and violence against women in this country and on this Earth, though it’s almost never treated as a civil rights or human rights issue, or a crisis, or even a pattern. Violence doesn’t have a race, a class, a religion, or a nationality, but it does have a gender” (21). Domestic abuse, rape, and various other misogyny-related traumas stand apart from other violence because they are primarily inflicted by one gender (male) and onto genders (female, transgender, non-binary, queer) considered culturally subordinate in a patriarchal system. The Convent, therefore, offers a release from the pressures that oppress women in a patriarchal system in which it is not safe for women to speak out against physical, emotional, or verbal abuse. The Convent is liberated from this, as a home run by women, for women, as a space of safety and recovery. It also offers them a sense of power they have never experienced before. Seneca, one of the Convent women, states: “The whole house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too. As though she might meet herself here – an unbridled authentic self” (177). Although there is conflict between the women, the fear of being violated, raped or harshly judged is largely

absent within the protective walls of the Convent and under the maternal watch of Connie. There is a powerful sense these women can grow into themselves and discover who they are outside of their traumatized bodies. The Convent offers the opportunity for liberation through a female community based on nurture and support.

The nurturing atmosphere of the Convent is illustrated through Pallas, the youngest of the female inhabitants. She is also the most resistant to acknowledging her traumatic past due, most likely, to how recently it occurred. For the few days Pallas has been in the Convent, her place there has been characterized by silence, panic, and a child-like attachment to Seneca, but this changes when she is embraced by Connie:

“Who hurt you little one?” asked Connie.

Seneca sat down on the floor. She has scant hope that Pallas would say much of anything at all. But Connie was magic. She just stretched out her hand and Pallas went to her, sat on her lap, talk-crying at first, then just crying, while Connie said, “Drink a little of this,” and “What pretty earrings,” and “Poor little one, poor, poor, little one. They hurt my poor little one.”

It was wine soaked and took an hour; it was backward and punctured and incomplete, but it came out – little one’s story of who had hurt her. (173)

This scene illustrates the power of a female community. Pallas (and traumatized women in general) need someone to listen to them – someone to nurture and believe their story. Connie knows exactly what to say and do in a situation in which a woman is experiencing trauma. She allows them not only to express themselves, but she also provides them with validation of what lies at the core of their trauma.

Pallas's breakthrough is then commemorated by Gigi, Seneca, and Mavis. When Seneca and Pallas return from the cellar, Seneca asks, "Is it okay to open the bottle, Mavis?", to which Mavis responds, "Not just okay, it's an order. We got to celebrate Pallas, don't we?" (178). With that, the remainder of the night is transformed into a celebration. They drink wine, prepare and devour a delicious feast, and dance. Although Gigi is usually alone in this venture, everyone joins in the moment: "When last year's top tune, 'Killing Me Softly,' came on, it was not long before they all followed suit. Even Mavis. First apart, imagining partners. Then partnered, imagining each other" (179). This is a beautiful moment in which women, who have felt so damaged by their traumatic pasts at the hands of men, are able to come together and to dance in celebration, thereby resignifying "Killing Me Softly". Roberta Flack longingly belts "Strumming my pain with his fingers/Singing my life with his words/Killing me softly with his words," inspiring the women to come together in their pain. In this subtle manner, Morrison is commenting on the violence of language. The harmful words of the past have left them isolated, but their joining together to "Killing Me Softly" represents their movement towards a liberated state of selfhood no longer paralyzed by their trauma.

In *Blood and Guts*, Acker's feminine sphere for Janey takes the form of an abortion clinic. The overall makeup of the clinic parallels Morrison's Convent since it's a space outside the bounds of society made solely for women as a place of refuge. The "malelessness" (*Paradise* 177) of the space is illustrated as Janey describes the clinic: "I walked into this large white room. There must have been fifty other girls. A few teenagers and two or three women in their forties. Women lined up. Women in chairs nodding out...Most of us were alone" (32). Since most of these women are alone and this clinic is likely an illegal one, due to the fatality report forms and "half-dead" (33) girls, this has to be a scary experience. Janey goes into more detail regarding

these forms they are required to sign, which state that “she gave the doctor the right to do whatever he wanted and if she ended up dead, it wasn’t his fault. We had given ourselves up to men before. That’s why we were here” (32). Acker is speaking to the larger realities of women’s lack of access to reproductive control. The doctor, representing patriarchal authority, poses as both a threat and a savior to these women since he essentially has their lives in his hands, while also providing them with a procedure they desperately need. This dichotomy of life and death reinforces the authoritarian “system of control” (27 Solnit) that operates on the phallogentric domination over the female body.

Acker uses the space of the abortion clinic as a narrative entry point to expand on the importance of women’s access to reproductive healthcare. For instance, Janey describes her difficulty in finding a form of contraception that works for her: “I couldn’t figure out what birth control method to use... There was a druggist in Harlem who’d slip me some pills every month if I’d give him a blow job. . . All the boys I fucked refused to use condoms” (34). Again, we see men controlling women’s reproductive health while simultaneously freeing themselves from the physical consequences of an unwanted pregnancy. This is a decision the woman is left with and these girls are so desperate to remain childless, due to lack of income and the prospect of single-parenting, that they will risk their own lives, as Janey proclaims: “I decided that if I got pregnant again, I’d stick a broken hanger up my cunt. I didn’t care if I died as long as the baby died” (34). Janey has no means to raise a baby and neither do the majority of the girls in the abortion clinic. Most of them are teenagers and have the same limited access to contraception as Janey. In addition, girls are not told to stand up for themselves to boys, especially in sexual situations, which is why they capitulate to unprotected sex. Janey’s observation that “[m]ost of us are

alone” (32) suggests that these girls are abandoned either after sex occurs or when they discover their pregnancy. They are victims of an anti-abortion culture that isolates women.

This shared feeling of desperation, abandonment, and fear creates a community of female support in the waiting room, despite the fear of death and patriarchal authority exerted by the doctor: “We girls knew everything there was to know without having to say a word and we knew we had put ourselves here and we were all in this together” (32). Janey and these women are all here for the same procedure and have likely suffered a similar form of rejection, neglect, or abuse from men. Within this space of communal femininity they are able to reach out to one another and offer support:

I remember a tiny blonde, even younger than me. I guess it must have been the first time she had ever been fucked. She couldn't say anything...All of us gathered around her, held her hands, and stroked her legs. Gradually she began to calm down. There was nothing else to do. We had to wait while each one of us went through it. Finally, they came for her. (33)

Similar to Pallas' demeanor when she first arrives at the Convent, this young woman's fear is so great she is incapable of speaking and the women take notice to this. They gather around the young girl, creating a barrier from the outside; then they fill that space with maternal touches that provide her with a sense of comfort and safety. This moment of communal nurture parallels Connie's maternal treatment of Pallas, evidenced in her embracing Pallas on her lap, rocking her, and offering words of support. A lot of the women in these spaces have never experienced the feeling of safety provided by a maternal figure, which is why these spaces are so important to them. Janey describes the significance of the female-centered unit of the abortion clinic,

exclaiming: “I got to like that pale green room, the women who were more scared than I was so I could comfort them, the feeling someone was taking care of me. I felt more secure than in the outside world. I wanted a permanent abortion” (33). Janey is expressing her desire to live in a sphere free from patriarchal influence. Her drastic statement of wanting a “permanent abortion” speaks to how intensely she feels this way. Within the abortion clinic, filled with suffering and traumatized women, that Janey feels safest because it is built on the foundation of female support. Morrison and Acker are illustrating how female spheres provide the “crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost” (*Paradise* 270) with a safe space of retreat. The Convent and the abortion clinic provide women who have been otherwise abandoned by society with a matriarchal space where their needs are not only heard but come first.

The power of Morrison and Acker’s narratives is through the illustration of the various ways in which trauma impacts the female mind and body. By lending a voice to the silenced female victim, Morrison and Acker provide them with the tools to deconstruct and rewrite their pasts. In *Paradise*, Morrison illustrates a diverse presentation of trauma, but most importantly, she highlights the suppression of these feelings. The wedding of K.D. and Arnette serves as a culminating point for the realization of the weight and damage of the Convent women’s traumatic pasts. Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas attend the wedding “dressed as go-go girls: pink shorts skimpy tops see-through skirts; painted eyes” (156). The women go with the intention of having fun, not being scrutinized by fellow guests: “The Convent girls are dancing; throwing their arms over their heads, they do this and that and then the other. They grin and yip but look at no one. Just their own rocking bodies” (157). The girls are not there to tempt the men and intimidate the women. They simply are there to dance and have a good time, but due to the

patriarchal culture of Ruby these actions are perceived as threatening. The Reverend Pulliam silently observes the women in judgment, proclaiming: “He knew about such women...that fun-obsessed adults were clear signs of already advanced decay. Soon the whole country would be awash in toys, tone-deaf from raucous music and hollow laughter. But not here. Not in Ruby” (157). This statement reflects the same threatening tone as the men in the first chapter who avow “[f]or Ruby” (18) to justify their massacre of the Convent. The Reverend thinks he knows who these women are from the flouting of their clothes, bodies and enthusiastic dancing. He reads morality into their appearance and behavior as sex/pleasure/body positive, thus, reducing them to “toys” that are a product of the male gaze. The Reverend and the men of Ruby as a whole perceive women who refuse to conform to bourgeois standards of respectability as threatening to the purity of society. As a result, the women are forced out of the wedding and turn their rage towards one another.

Once the women are back in their car, Mavis and Gigi turn towards each other to act out their anger. They begin ferociously attacking one another while Pallas and Seneca embrace in the backseat. Simultaneously, a man driving by in a truck revels at the spectacle of women fighting: “The driver slowed...he stayed long enough to see outlaw women rolling on the ground, dresses torn, secret flesh on display. And see also two other women embracing in the back seat. For long moments his eyes were wide. Then he shook his head and gunned the motor of his truck” (169). From his perspective he is watching wild, untamed women acting out a sexual fantasy for him to enjoy and judge. What people from the outside do not see is the trauma these women are fighting against in this moment. The rage and shame they have been feeling for so long is finally coming to the surface. In Sarah Appleton Aguiar’s article “‘Passing On’ Death: Stealing Life in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” she examines this scene as a delayed reaction to trauma, proclaiming:

These women are enacting survival strategies they had previously been afraid to deploy. Both Mavis and Gigi fled from confrontation... Then, in physically attacking each other, they, in essence, reverse their earlier failures. Likewise, Seneca and Pallas, abandoned and betrayed by their mothers, alleviate their fears of female abandonment by reaching for each other. (517)

Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas are using each other's bodies as a therapeutic process to realize and react to their traumatic pasts. Until now, they were never given the opportunity to respond to their pain. They have been forced to hold onto it and have it fill them with shame.

This moment enables the Convent women to fully realize the scope of their trauma. For instance, the sight of blood immediately transports Gigi to the political protest she was involved in that resulted in the death of a young boy, proclaiming, "it oozed a trickle of blood and suddenly everybody was running through the streets of Oakland, California. Sirens – police? ambulance? fire trucks? – shook her eardrums" (170). Mavis uses Gigi's body to break free from her old self, speculating, "Pounding, pounding, and even biting Gigi was exhilarating... It was more proof that the Old Mavis was dead. The one that couldn't defend herself from an eleven-year-old child, let alone her husband" (171). Meanwhile, as Pallas is "mesmerized by the bodies roiling dust and crushing weeds," she is forced to look away for she begins "feeling again the repulsive tickle and stroke of tentacles, of invisible scales" (169) and hearing the voices of her abusers calling "Here, pussy. Here pussy" (163). The necessity of subverting and resignifying the language of the Western literary canon is exposed in the fight scene between Mavis and Gigi as each woman becomes aware of the damage their pasts have imbedded inside them. Their fight is wrongly perceived by the male truck driver as the acts of shameful and wild women, but it is actually a form of therapy to aid in their trauma recovery. They brutally attack each other's

bodies, not to hurt the other person out of hatred, but to use the other's body as a representation of their own pain and the person who inflicted it. This should not be read as advocating for female-female violence, but rather as an expression of the all-encompassing nature of sexual trauma. Mavis, Gigi, and Pallas have an almost hallucinatory reaction in which they return to the scene of their trauma, causing them to have a powerful physical reaction in the form of fight or flight. The return to their traumatic pasts enables the Convent women to realize the scope of their trauma and begin the process to move forward.

In *Blood and Guts*, Janey's trauma is a theme incessantly unveiling itself throughout the text. Unlike *Paradise*, there is no one big moment in which Janey realizes the scope of her trauma. Instead, Janey continually expresses her trauma through fragmentations of various art forms such as illustration, poetry, and prose. Glenn A. Harper examines Acker's subversive writing style, explaining: "The voice of her [Acker's] women is much more ambiguous than the idealized 'strong women of much feminist fiction... The voice of women in Acker's work is a disembodied moan, trying to communicate from outside traditional dialogue" (48). A pervasive sense of desperation filters throughout Janey's narrative. She does not know how to communicate her trauma, which creates a growing sense of restlessness in her narrative.

The most common form of trauma expression is through Janey's negative perceptions of herself; for instance, she states: "I knew that I was hideous. I had a picture in my head that I was a horse, like the horse in *Crime and Punishment*, skin partly ripped off and red muscle exposed. Men with huge sticks beating the horse" (20). In this description of herself Janey is illustrating how the incessant abuse of men has destroyed her self-perception and physical relationship to her body. In the allusion to Dostoevsky's image from *Crime and Punishment*, Acker is illustrating the impact of the pervasiveness of male-authored narratives. The lack of female-centered

narratives limits Janey to relating herself to a beaten animal since there are so few texts that illustrate the complexity of the female experience. She is also commenting on the incessant theme within the phallogentric tradition that compares women to animals as a means of reducing their humanity in comparison to men. Cixous speaks of the damage driven by the lack of valued representation of women in literature, asking: “Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that well-adjusted normal woman has a...divine composure), hasn’t accused herself of being a monster?” (4). This brings us back to the dichotomous representation of women in literature formed through the Madonna/whore or la virgen/la malinche. Women are either placed on a pedestal of divine purity or as damaged and villainous. Similarly limited to this patriarchal female paradox, Janey compares herself to a beaten, skinned animal, a kind of monstrous figure.

Frustrated with her inability to convey her pain through words, Janey employs a more visual expression of bodily trauma through child-like illustrations. These borderline pornographic images consist almost entirely of male and female genitalia, creating a visual confrontation with the reader. The reader must engage with the perception of Janey’s body from the men who abuse her. When Janey first arrives at Mr. Linker’s, her slave master, he tells her: “You are going to remain in this room until you have become a whore. You have no other choice except to die. When you are ready I will let you out of this room and you will bring all of the money you have earned back to me” (61). In this moment Janey is being stripped entirely of her autonomy by being confined to the fate of either death or sex slavery.

The two pages that follow convey Janey’s feelings about being reduced to a sexualized object for male consumption through a series of drawings. Under the line “GIRLS WILL DO ANYTHING FOR LOVE” is a quickly sketched image of a vagina. The legs of the woman are

horizontally spread open across the page to reveal the labia and the clitoris. On the next page above the text “ODE TO A GRECIAN URN” is another drawing of a woman, but this time the body is stretched vertically across the page. Her arms and legs are bound with rope, leaving her naked body completely exposed. These images work to create an interruption within the narrative since Janey is unable to speak in this moment due to the presence of Mr. Linker. As he’s explaining her fate, Acker confronts the reader with the objectification and abuse Janey’s body will continue to suffer by way of reference to John Keats’ poem, a classic in the Western literary canon. Again, Janey’s literary allusion is limited to male-authored narratives, proving Cixous’s argument: “Nearly the entire history of writing...has been one with the phallogocentric tradition” (7). Even through illustration, Janey is incapable of finding a language inherently female due to the male-authored literary allusion as the default. Susan E. Hawkins provides an analysis of these images in her article “All in the Family”: “That she is headless places her in the category with colonial populations – too often pure body, no mouth, no mind. At the same time, such a female prisoner evokes the passive harem inmate whose body represents a tabula rasa upon which Western white men may write their most perverse sexual fantasies” (650). Janey’s body is being reduced to a sexual object in a manner that parallels the Convent women’s diminishment to “toys” by the male observer. As Janey and the Convent women are severed from their bodily autonomy and left faceless, Morrison and Acker illustrate how female personal identity is erased through the male gaze. They exist only as sexualized bodies for the pleasure and judgments of male fantasy.

After going through various practices of representation Janey exclaims: “TEACH ME A NEW LANGUAGE, DIMWIT. A LANGUAGE THAT MEANS SOMETHING TO ME” (96). Janey struggles to find her voice within the literary language provided by male-authored

narratives, such as Dostoevsky and Keats, because she is not represented. When she is listing the verbs she's familiar with--"to have Janey / to buy Janey / to want Janey / to see Janey / to come Janey / to beat up Janey / to eat Janey / to rob Janey / to kidnap Janey / to kill Janey / to know Janey" (83)--they reflect the diminishment and objectification of women through patriarchal language. Cixous examines the inevitable shrinking of women as a result of the Western canon: "She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow" (8). Janey can, therefore, only perceive herself as something to be possessed by a man. Cixous continues, declaring, "We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman" (8). Janey subtly pleads for the "whole woman" through the last verb listed in the above quote: "to know Janey" (83). Janey not only calls for a language she can see herself in, but also one illustrative of the physical and emotional impact sexual trauma has on the body. Now Janey is ready to confront her past: "At this point...in my life politics don't disappear but take place inside my body...I have to figure this out: I have certain characteristics from childhood traumas, etc" (97). The only thing missing is the language to do so, which she is able to achieve through the complete destruction and recreation of her body.

After the Convent women and Janey go through the realization of trauma they endure a process of healing. The healing is inspired by the frustration of feeling entrapped in a traumatized body without having the resources or knowledge to escape. The women have been battling their trauma on their own bodies, thus perpetuating the notion they are at fault for their abuse. In order to transform this notion and free themselves from victimhood, the women begin a process of release. In *Paradise*, Connie is a central fixture in the women's healing process, but she cannot help them until she comes to the realization of her own trauma. Initially unable to deal with her own traumatic past, she is constantly in a state of drunkenness in which she

attempts to gain the courage to silence or harm the women in her home. At her lowest moment, Connie retreats to the cellar where she is “facing extinction, waiting to be evicted, wary of God, she felt like a curl of paper – nothing written on it – lying in the corner of an empty closet” (247-8). Connie feels completely empty. She believes she has never and will never have anything to offer the world. Connie’s feelings of self-hatred and hostility towards the women in her home begin to change as she regains consciousness of her traumatic past: “One of the reasons she so gratefully accepted Mary Magna’s hand... was the dirty pokings her ninth year subjected her to” (228). Before Connie was brought to America she was raped as a young girl. She never had an adult figure care for her until she met Mary Magna, the Convent’s previous head. The remembrance of her past trauma awakened her and she emerges from the cellar a new woman declaring to the Convent women, “I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you how hungry you are” (262). Connie reclaims her past wounded self by taking back the name Consolata Sosa. American missionaries changed her name to Connie when they took her from her home as a means to both free her from her past life and whiten her identity. Connie was tired of living in a home in which these battered women were constantly arguing with each other and with themselves. They were engaged in self-mutilation and self-hatred. Connie transformed (back) into Consolata Sosa to make them work through their trauma to help them understand they are more than their abuse.

Now that Consolata Sosa is awakened, she asks the women to work with her to reclaim their identities. This process begins with an exercise (or exorcise) that forces them to step into, then outside, of their trauma. Consolata instructs them to create a template for their bodies: “When each found the position she could tolerate on the cold, uncompromising floor, Consolata walked around her and painted the bodies silhouette. Once the outlines were complete, each was

instructed to remain there. Unspeaking. Naked in candlelight” (263). Consolata is asking them to put themselves in a vulnerable position before her and each other. In order to liberate themselves from their traumatized bodies they must endure the process of communal healing. The Convent women must take in each others’ pain and work together to release it from their skin. The communal process of release is powerful and takes the form of a “loud dreaming” (264) monologue of trauma narratives that fill the cellar:

In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer’s tale. They enter the heat in the Cadillac, feel the smack of the cold air in the Higgledy Piggledy...They kick their legs underwater, but not too hard for fear of waking fins or scales also down below...Each one blinks and gags from tear gas, moves her hand slowly to the scarped shin, the torn ligament...Yelps with pain from a stranger’s penis and a mother’s rivalry – alluring and corrosive as cocaine. (264)

Under the guidance and instruction of Consolata Sosa, Mavis, Seneca, Gigi, and Pallas experience one another’s trauma and work through it as one. They have a physical sensory experience in which they are transported to the exact moment of the traumatic past that haunts each woman. They take their traumatic pasts head on and experience them together in the outlines of their bodies. Once this hallucinatory process is over they rise from their outlines and leave their traumatic pasts in their painted silhouettes. These silhouettes now encourage them to place their hate, pain, and fears away from their physical selves and onto these representations of their bodies.

Consolata enables them to remove themselves from their trauma while simultaneously creating a space for these women to record their pain so they can witness the damage they are

doing to themselves. The influence of this exercise is most strongly illustrated through Seneca: “Later on, when she had the hunger to slice her inner thigh, she chose instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor” (265). Seneca has transferred her trauma off of her self and onto the representation of her self. She can now use the template to impose harm on, freeing her physical/emotional body from victimhood. After this, “the Convent women are no longer haunted” (266).

In *Blood and Guts*, Janey has a similar moment of release from her traumatic past. Although it lacks the magic and community exhibited in *Paradise*, she manages to achieve this through both her writing and the deterioration of her body. After Janey has attempted to use varying art forms to illustrate her internalized trauma she endures a moment of liberation. In this moment she releases everything she has wanted to say or feel, but never knew how. This begins with the poem “The diseased”: “I want all of you out there to shut up. / I’m going to live the ways we want to live. / What do you want of me now? / Liver, blood, guts? / The only thing left is madness” (103). Janey no longer has anything left to give. Men have stripped her of everything and all that remains are some of her insides. She is tired of being abused by these men who perceive her body as an object for their sexual desires.

Janey then releases her frustration in a manner I can only describe as “word vomit.” The top of the page reads, “I don’t know what or who’s happening” (106), which is followed by three pages of an internalized rant: “SHITSHIT / SHITFACE / ME” , “SHIT SMEARS ON MY HANDS I STINK I GOOGOO STINK....life GLOOGLOO FUCK YOU SHIT PISS” (106-108). These words are mostly capitalized and thrown vertically, horizontally, and diagonally across the pages, illustrating Janey’s traumatic release visually. This is then followed with her espousing, “All you creeps get away from me” and the repetition of “No” (109) across the page. This

contrivance of words creates an image of Janey returning to her trauma sites, but instead of being silenced by her abusers, she is given a voice. This scene creates a parallel with the loud dreaming monologues of the communal healing ritual in *Paradise*. Since Janey is alone, Acker takes on the role of Consolata Sosa and provides herself with a safe space for self-expression. The moments of release in both texts reject a linear narrative of expression and the conventions of the Western literary canon, which has failed to portray or even understand the female experience. By destroying the ways in which words ordinarily function, Acker and Morrison are creating a new form of female expression that combines the frustration and emotions of bodily trauma and resistance.

Janey's release from her traumatized body comes to the crux when the Persian slave trader decides Janey has completed her training since she "demonstrated she knew how to make impotent men hard...make a man feel secure, desirable, and wild. Now she was beautiful" (116). At this moment, he learns she has cancer and rids of her since "having cancer is like having a baby" (116). The cancer is a burden for the slave trader who kidnapped Janey for her body to be used and exchanged as a sexual product. Now that her body is deteriorating he wants nothing to do with her, because a woman without a body to be sexualized is no longer of value. With the loss of her disease-free body comes the loss of Janey's worth, but only from the perspective of misogyny. This final rejection is Janey's paradoxical moment of freedom: "Janey was learning to love herself. Everything was shooting out of her body like an orgasming volcano. All the pain and misery she had been feeling, crime and terror on the streets had come out. She was no longer totally impotent and passive about her lousy situation. Now she could do something about the pain in the world: she could die" (116). Janey is liberated from the male gaze because she no longer has a sexualized feminine body that is desirable. The cancer works in a manner similar to

the outlines in the Convent because it provides her with a means of escape from the patriarchal influences that have oppressed her. The diseased body works as an extension of Janey's past violated body because it enables her to finally be autonomous.

Patriarchal systems thrive on inequality by placing men above women, positioning women as the ultimate threat. In Morrison's and Acker's narratives the female characters liberate themselves by reclaiming their bodies and taking back the power their oppressors held over them. Unfortunately, the threat of female empowerment is met with an increase in misogyny in both *Paradise* and *Blood and Guts*. Helene Cixous examines the patriarchal fear of the feminine, asserting, "Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. That's because they need femininity to be associated with death; it's the jitters that give them a hard-on! They need to be afraid of us" (13). There is a fear men have associated with women in order to provide themselves with justification to use violence against the female body. The power attributed to women is sexual, evil, and untrustworthy. Therefore, it is the man's duty to subdue this threat through oppression, which takes the form of verbal, emotional, and physical (sometimes fatal) abuse. Since the Convent women and Janey have liberated themselves from their male oppressors, they now pose more of a threat to the patriarchal system in place in Ruby and in Alexandria (where Janey ends up).

At the end of *Paradise* Morrison returns to the start of the novel with an extended account of the massacre that takes place at the Convent. Morrison employs the massacre as a narrative tool to illustrate the severity of the men's actions. She opens with the massacre, takes the majority of the novel to allow the women to express their stories, then returns to the men set on murdering them. After the door is kicked in (despite being unlocked), and they kill "the white girl first," the Ruby men enter: "Fondling their weapons, feeling suddenly so young and good

they are reminded that guns are more than decoration, intimidation or comfort. They are meant” (285). Morrison’s description of the invasion rings true to Cixous’s claim men are sexually stimulated by associating women with death. The initial murder of the white girl is a moment of transformation creating a perception of their weapons as sexual objects. They begin “fondling their weapons”--an image of masturbation is animated by the murder of a woman with “sensual appraising eyes” (285). These men are unaware of the change that has occurred in the Convent. They think they can walk in and easily pick them off, as if they are all trapped and fearfully hiding from them, but they are not up against the same women who first entered the Convent. Instead of hiding they are “bunched at the windows, all five understand: the women are not hiding. They are loose” (287). Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, Pallas, and Consolata Sosa have been liberated – they are powerful. In their newfound power they fight back against the men attempting to destroy the bodies they have just won back: “An alabaster ashtray slams into Arnold’s temple, exhilarating the woman yielding it. . .he doesn’t see the skillet swinging into his skull. He falls, dropping his gun...She crashes kicking at his head...Behind him a woman aims a butcher knife and plunges it so deep in the shoulder bone she can’t remove it” (286). The Convent women viciously fight back against the Ruby men, wielding household objects as a means of defense. Frying pans, ashtrays, butcher knives, and their own limbs are transformed into weapons forceful enough to make the men fall to the floor and drop the weapons that gave them so much power. The Convent women are taking a final stand against sexual entitlement and misogyny.

In *Blood and Guts* Acker creates a scene paralleling Morrison’s in which Janey is confronted by a panel of male judges deciding her fate for her. Janey is currently imprisoned in a hard labor camp for stealing books and marijuana from prominent French author Jean Genet. The

men in charge of the prison are having an issue with her voice and power because “she’s convincing criminals and prostitutes they’re people” (134). Similar to the Ruby men, the judges in *Blood and Guts* are intimidated by her; thus, they are trying to find ways to silence her. Although the threat of physical violence is made known--“We’re fully armed. We own all the weapons in the world and all the scientists who design the weapons” (135)--the situation does not become as physically violent as the massacre in the Convent does. Instead, Acker decides to continue her commentary on the violence of phallogentric language by having the judges use words as weapons in an attempt to emotionally destroy Janey: “**Judge 1:** You’re a woman / **Judge 2:** You whine and snivel. You don’t stand up for yourself... You’re a piece of shit. You’re not real / **Judge 3:** You’re a whore a thief a liar a smelly fish a money dribbler an egotistic snob / **Judge 4:** You have every vice in the world” (133). As many as eleven men take turns hurling insults at Janey as she is forced to sit alone in her cell. Despite being outnumbered, Janey, like the Convent women, fights back. She uses her voice, which they are working so hard to suppress, to defend herself against their aggression: “Go take your shit to the grave. That’s what I say. I’ll tell you something, / tonight / when night comes, I’m going to crawl / into your houses, and in your dreams where you have / no power, I’ll make you steal and whore. / I’ll turn you / around...[sic] (133). Janey takes their words and throws them back at the men to illustrate how it feels to be preyed on where you feel safest. Janey is speaking to the lack of autonomy of her past since she has been taken advantage of and forced into sexual abuse and slavery because of men like them. Janey and the Convent women fight fiercely to maintain their newfound autonomy against the men desperately trying to destroy them.

Despite Morrison’s and Acker’s portrayal of a tremendous amount of female strength in the face of misogyny, both texts end in the death of the female characters, but in a manner

cementing their place within the realm of subversive feminist fiction. The most conventional fate for female characters in narrative fiction is either marriage or death, and Morrison and Acker reject both of these options by providing their characters with rebirth after death. Once the massacre is finished, the town's hearse driver goes to Convent to retrieve the bodies of the women, but he finds the house empty: "He searched everywhere...No bodies. Nothing. Even the Cadillac was gone" (292). Before the Ruby men entered the Convent, the women were fully liberated from their traumatized bodies and were not going to allow their bodily autonomy to be stolen from them again. The missing bodies work to invalidate the male account of the massacre because there is no proof of death, creating a parallel to the invalidation victims of sexual assault are met with through victim-blaming. The men are now forced to tell a story that can never be proven, whereas the women of the Convent live on in power. The Convent women then return to the source of their trauma as changed, spiritual, and androgynous warriors dressed in military garb complete with swords and shaven heads. The women live on after death in a realm of their own creation that will enable them to work together in order to continue their fight against the phallogocentric system.

The pervasive sense that the female characters live on after death is something Acker also includes at her narrative's close. The prose section of *Blood and Guts* abruptly ends with the statement: "She dies" (140). A few spaces down is the line "**A second of time**" (140), implying Janey's story has not yet come to an end. The following page marks an extension of the narrative entitled "THE WORLD," which is composed almost entirely of images and poems inspired by Egyptian afterlife. There is a compelling sense that Janey lives on in this world, not necessarily as human, but as a bird. Cixous comments on the significance of flight within female writing, stating: "Flying is a woman's gesture – flying in language and making it fly...it's no accident:

women take after birds” (16). It makes sense, then, that Acker would transform Janey into an animal symbolic of female freedom. In this section there are over 18 images of birds. In one particular image, “the soul has the freedom to wander at will” is scrawled over the bird. In another, an alligator chases a bird holding onto a book with “dead me” written across the bird’s back. Both of these images illustrate Janey’s transformation or reincarnation into a bird. The later image is especially significant in its representation that Janey’s death works to invalidate male language and authority, and recalls her poem: “Even if we die, if we have to become monsters, and everyone hates us, we have to read the book because it will teach us how to avoid the alligator’s jaws, the wolves who wait in the forest, the huge snakes, and how to become birds” (152). Through this poem, Acker is commenting on the importance of female narratives. Women can never be liberated if there isn’t a language that speaks to the female experience since male-authored narrators teach women to trust, depend, or expect the alligators, wolves, and snakes of the world. Such narratives confine women to one of two categories (Madonna/whore) and strip women of their bodily autonomy. In the same way Gigi, Mavis, Seneca, and Pallas discover liberation through death, Janey reincarnates into the symbol of freedom to continue the dismantling of patriarchal institutions that actively suppress the female voice.

The final scenes of each narrative create an allusion to the place beyond death or the reincarnation site where the female characters will live on. In *Paradise*, there is an abrupt shift to an ocean scene on the final page: “In ocean hush a woman black as firewood is singing. Next to her is a younger woman...all the colors of seashells – wheat, roses, pearl- fuse in the younger woman’s face. Her emerald eyes adore the black face framed in cerulean blue. Around them on the beach, sea trash gleams” (318). Although this scene may suggest a hopeless ending since these women are isolated with their only company being trash and a broken radio, it is actually

the opposite. We learn the black woman on the beach is Piedade, which brings us back to the cellar scene in which Consolata Sosa guides them through communal healing. During this ritual she describes her vision of paradise: “she told them of a place where white sidewalks met the sea ...she spoke of fruit that tasted the way sapphires look and boys using rubies for dice...snakes roused by poetry and bells. Then she told them of a woman named Piedade, who sang but never said a word” (263-64). Therefore, the ending scene of *Paradise* concludes in Consolata’s image of paradise. The women of the Convent are safe in this space of Consolata’s creation under the protective guise of Piedade. Although the ending paradise is not as idyllic as the image initially described by Consolata, Morrison insinuates this space is not yet complete: “Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they created to do down here in Paradise” (318). The Convent women were sent to this space between life and death on a mission to create a feminine paradise in Consolata’s image.

Acker’s paradise strongly parallels Morrison’s in that it ends with an oceanic image. This illustration is framed in a shield, symbolic of its protective nature. Within the shield are six birds flying freely over water. On the shore is a snake moving towards a presumably male figure and an alligator devouring a body. My assumption that the figures are male is rooted in Acker’s imagery that has deemed women as birds and men as snakes and alligators. The images banner reveals, “So we create this world in our own image” (164), creating a parallel to Morrison’s paradise created in Consolata’s image. Through death, Janey has landed in a space created by herself. Within this world is the reversal of the world she was once part of. The women, or birds, fly freely above the realm of turmoil where men are now the victims of the violence of their own perpetuation.

Morrison and Acker's narrative ending falls in alignment with Cixous's definition of the ideal feminine text: "A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of the masculine investments...in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter" (16). This is exactly what Morrison and Acker achieve through the endings of their narratives. They destroy the typical andocentric narrative of the female by leaving the ending up to interpretation. Acker and Morrison's endings are in fact "volcanic" because they write beyond the bounds of death, marriage, and even the common desire in feminist fiction for "a room of one's own," by giving their female characters a world of their own--or perhaps a paradise.

Through *Blood and Guts* and *Paradise*, Morrison and Acker have broken through the realm of the traditional Western canon by creating a form of subversive feminist fiction that truly speaks from within the traumatized female body. They illustrate the pain, frustration, and bodily trauma women are forced to endure under a phallogocentric system that actively works to oppress the female voice. In Rebecca Solnit's *Men Explain Things to Me*, she addresses the significance and necessity of female narratives, asserting:

Some women get erased a little at a time, some all at once. Some reappear. Every woman who appears wrestles with the forces that would tell her story for her, or write her out of the story, the genealogy, the rights of man, the rule of law. The ability to tell your own story, in words or images, is already a victory, already a revolt. (78)

It is incredibly important for women to be able to tell their own story and reflect on their trauma since it has not been described accurately through male-authored narratives. The women of the

Convent, Janey, and women in general need to prevent their stories from being erased. They need to address the violence, damage, and shame they have experienced as women in a patriarchal society, and Morrison and Acker provide them with a platform to do so. They are calling on women to write their stories through the validation of numerous female trauma narratives within their texts. Morrison and Acker are asking women writers to take this space to write from their selves because it is the story that matters and cannot stand to be silenced any longer. The language that comes from within the female body is the language that will alter women's places in the world because, as Solnit claims, it is already a revolt.

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