Male- and Female- Centered Plots in the Neo-Slave Narrative

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MALE- AND FEMALE-CENTERED PLOTS IN THE NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE

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INTRODUCTION

African American literature cannot be examined without the historical and social aspect being considered. This is very much due to the theme of slavery, and its representation, which was the burning issue ever since its beginnings up to the antebellum era, while even today African American literature deals with the negative consequences of slavery that are still vivid. Even though it has been 155 years since the passing of the 13th Amendment and the abolition of slavery, the African American community in some ways is still affected by the repercussions of slavery. It is difficult to imagine the atrocities that African Americans went through, and that is why the community of black writers, intellectuals, and activists have dedicated themselves to raising awareness of their history.

With the growth of the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s, black authors recognized the necessity to rework the image of slavery as represented in the slave narrative. Such reconfiguration was needed in order to change the stereotypical representations of black people that were still vibrant at the time. Furthermore, they needed to accept the facts about the institution of slavery, while creating their own understanding of it. This new form of self-consciousness would help them rewrite the negative implications regarding their history and race, while creating a form of historical consciousness which would help them working through the traumatic remembrance of slavery.

The neo-slave narrative, as a result of the new form of self-consciousness, is a work of fiction that takes the form of 19th-century slave narrative. The point of view is that of a slave, who dreams of freedom and manages to obtain it, but realizes that slavery did not completely end upon its abolition. Due to this newfound experience, one decides that many years will pass until

races are equally valued. The author of the neo-slave narrative uses the slave's revelation regarding the impact of slavery to describe the socio-political situation of the 1960s and onwards.

For that reason, I will discuss the neo-slave narrative based on male- and female-master plots, while foregrounding the gender stereotypes revolving around them. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the authors of these novels subvert the received stereotypes for the novel's advantage, while employing a new identity of a strong and self-conscious black subject. For the representation of male neo-slave narratives, I will use Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* and David Anthony Durham's *Walk Through Darkness* in order to discuss the themes of masculinity, racial identity, and authority. Also, I will deal with the theme of fatherhood to show how it is incorporated and rewritten in the neo-slave narrative, while underlining two fatherly representations: a runaway slave and a white father. Female representatives of the neo-slave narratives are Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*. Authors of these two novels use the figure of the mother, be it in biblical terms (Vyry) or as a convicted felon (Dessa Rose) as an act of resistance against ruling stereotypes, while simultaneously reflecting on the political sphere of the 1960s and the women's rights movement.

Chapter 1

1.1. Black intellectuals and the representation of slavery

Even though the first slave narrative, or rather "the prototype of the slave narrative" (Ito 82) was written by Olaudah Equiano under the title *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), the role of the "founding father" of "the Afro-American nation" (Olney 3) is reserved for Frederick Douglass. In his autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave – written by himself* (1845) Douglass presents his opinion regarding slavery and recalls in particular the conflict with his former slavemaster Edward Covey, which served as a "turning-point" because "it recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired [him] again with a determination to be free" (78). In this instance, Douglass felt empowered, almost resurrected "from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom" (ibid.). His viewpoint on the matter of slavery had the purpose of confirming his African American identity while simultaneously describing the barbarities of the slave system, which he rose from as a literate and self-made man. James Olney stresses the importance of the appendix "written by himself" in the title of Douglass's autobiography. He sees it as a stand against the illiteracy and the ignorant behaviour of those who prohibited education to the black masses (5). Therefore, the act of writing an autobiography, while defending the basic human rights, has created a new kind of tradition – "a tradition of resistance to oppression" (ibid.), which continues to inform African American letters.

Unfortunately, not everyone shared Douglass's negative opinion of slavery. After Douglass's death, Booker T. Washington was given a spotlight in the post-Reconstruction South and he had managed to establish leadership in the black community. Unlike his predecessor, Washington entertained a somewhat positive perspective regarding slavery – not that he had any

long term experience of it. In his autobiography, Washington stated that both sides of the system of slavery suffered immensely; although, the slavery proved itself as a good learning mechanism for the African American community since it altered the bewildered "negro" into a civilized man. Furthermore, he suggested the compromise between the opposing sides, while reinforcing the idea of forgetting the past; he even mentioned the "Ku Klux Klan" period of the Reconstruction era, stating that "there are no such organizations in the South, and the fact that such ever existed is almost forgotten by both races" (95). Arnold Rampersad states that Washington wanted to inflict "amnesia" on the people, or at least to debilitate the memory of the past, but W.E.B. Du Bois thought conversely that "blacks may not be able to remember Africa but they should remember slavery, since it has hardly ended" (118). Ironically, Washington has presented his autobiography *Up from Slavery* evoking the well-known "form of a slave narrative" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 183) in order to appeal to the African American community, while its content encouraged Blacks' repudiation of the rights to social equality. It is evident that Douglass's antebellum and Washington's postbellum rhetoric were substantially different.

Since Washington founded the Tuskegee Institute in 1881, he was a powerful man who had many political connections; therefore, his word meant something. Because of this, Du Bois felt that Washington's ahistorical approach to the matter of slavery could be dangerous for the African American community. Du Bois refused to patronize Washington's "policy of submission" which, "asks [of] black people [to] give up (. . .) political power, insistence on civil rights [and] higher education of Negro youth" (39). Furthermore, Du Bois explained how Washington's unconscionable preachings did not ameliorate the status of the African Americans but, vice versa, "the disfranchisement of the Negro" and "the status of civil inferiority" have been intensified (ibid.). Another set of Du Bois' accusations revolved around Washington's betrayal of his own race for the sake of personal triumph among the elite.

To counter Washington's bland and submissive views, Du Bois offers his outlook on the past and the future of the black race, also as regards slavery. Du Bois believed that slavery was a horrendous experience that shaped all African Americans, and even though the institution of slavery was abolished, its repercussions were vibrant. The *Jim Crow* state laws were the perfect example of the policy which damaged the African American community, economically, socially, and psychologically. These laws were enacted after the failure of the Reconstruction era, and their enforcement lasted roughly until 1954, although not comprehensively. Even though the African American community wanted to see the end of segregation, "many writers of the Harlem Renaissance created the illusion that they could forget that shame and horror, epitomized for many by slavery and its legacies" (McDowell 165). They thought that "the clang and glitter of the Jazz Age and the modernist drumbeat" (ibid.) could hide them forever. Soon enough, their illusion was shattered and they returned to the modern version of "the Quarters".

Du Bois understood the unfortunate situation of the black community and that is why he advocated the importance of literacy. Prior to the social movements of the 1960s, the only means of power, for the black community, could be attained through education and literacy. "The idea that the word could make them free remained an article of faith in Afro-American literature of the antebellum era" (Andrews 66) and Du Bois tried to propel the same idea into the postbellum era. One of many contributions to social studies is his theory of "double consciousness". According to him, the African American is "born with a veil" in "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (13). Du Bois uses the literary figure of "the veil" as a metaphor of the race to demonstrate "the two-ness" that a black person experiences. This "two-ness" contains his African identity and the struggle of the American experience, and he wants to merge these identities into one, so he can cease to be the Other. It is evident that Du Bois gives significance to the interiority of a person, which is a novelty compared to the slave narrative, especially since "the antebellum slave narrative had

excelled at cataloguing the physical and material realities of slaves" (McDowell 175). Du Bois was aware of the interconnection between "the psychic and the social," and that is why he accentuated the importance of the "inward turn" (ibid.). Later on, this shift "to the spiritual realm" (McDowell 160) will serve as the groundwork for the neo-slave narrative.

1.2. The socio-cultural and historical context

Given the past centuries of African slave trade and slavery, it is no wonder that "in 1950, blacks constituted 10 percent of the US population" (Eyerman 175). What is more, the demographical chart started changing rapidly since the turn of the 20th century. The black community was massively leaving the South because the institution of sharecropping saw its end, while the industrial development started flourishing. Because of this, black people increasingly started inhabiting Northern cities in search of jobs and a better life. However, segregation was still raging and the newcomers from the South were welcomed disparagingly by the white and even the elitist black community. The social gap between the opposing sides was immeasurable; likewise, there was a great discontinuity regarding the wages and the family income. Ron Eyerman states that "black families continued not only to lag behind whites, but to worsen in comparison. Black families earned 54 percent of the median income of their white counterparts in 1950" (ibid.).

It can be observed that the 1960s were the period of great turmoil. It was a decade that was marked by the assassination of J.F. Kennedy, the Vietnam War, and many socio-political movements. The Civil Rights Movement served as the upheaval for the black people because they used it to rebel against the disenfranchisement of their community. In 1963, the March on Washington happened whereby "a quarter million people came to the nation's capital to petition their duly elected government in a demonstration known as the March on Washington for Jobs

and Freedom" (Archives – The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom). It was a non-violent protest that changed the course of history, and it raised a worldwide interest, especially due to Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech *I Have a Dream*. In 1964, with Lyndon B. Johnson as a president, Congress enacted the Civil Rights Act which "prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin" (DOL - Legal Highlight: The Civil Rights Act of 1964). Additionally, the following year the Congress enacted the Voting Rights Act which would enable African Americans to vote since it was their right under the 15th Amendment[1].

Even though new legislation was passed, the belittlement did not cease to exist. However, ever since Richard Wright's book *Black Power* (1954) has been published, the black community welcomed it with delight. There were young intellectuals in the black community whose goal was the transformation of the consciousness of their people. They were using the symbol of Africa and the experience of slavery as grand narratives of their history, and "while the new Africa was important here, it was more the heritage of slavery that formed the focal point of identity-formation" (Eyerman 181).

Because black nationalism was "modernized and revitalized" (ibid.), the black community further employed "both religious and secular forms of black nationalism" (Eyerman 184) for the sake of identity-formation. The religious form of black nationalism was promoted and celebrated by Malcolm X, who was highly controversial. Apart from the religious form of black nationalism, there was also a secular form of nationalism. In cultural terms, it was different from religious nationalism because it did not place ancient Africa as a focal point; instead, "its Africa was modern and revolutionary, forward looking and traditional at the same time" (190). The black community started accepting and creating the cultural representation of Africa while

[1] "The most direct attack on the problem of African American disfranchisement came in 1965. Prompted by reports of continuing discriminatory voting practices in many Southern states, President Lyndon B. Johnson, himself a southerner, urged Congress on March 15, 1965, to pass legislation "which will make it impossible to thwart the 15th amendment." Johnson cautioned Congress that "we cannot have government for all the people until we first make certain it is government of and by all the people" (Our Documents – 15th Amendment to the Constitution: Voting Rights (1870).

incorporating African features into American citizenship. They were creating symbolic clothes, style, and art to strengthen their culture and identity; furthermore, "traditions were formed to suit the needs and desires of a new generation of ghettoized black communities, some in desperate need of regeneration and hope for the future" (193).

Even though the term "Black"[2] carried different connotations in the 1960s than it did a hundred years ago, the relationship of the black community "to the dominant society needed to be renegotiated" (221) for the sake of the black people's future, and the memory of the past. However, "the meaning and memory of slavery [remained] unresolved" because the collective identity of the black community was "filtered through cultural trauma" (ibid.). Nevertheless, because of the Civil Rights Movement and the ideas it brought forth, the understanding of the Black nation was redefined because it gained "aspects of the progressive and the redemptive narrative" (ibid.). These aspects will permeate the new form of the black narrative, which will be discussed hereafter.

[2] "I witnessed my family, and Black people in general, over a five-year span go from using the term 'Negro' in 1963-64, to using the term 'colored' in 1966-67, to using the term 'Black' and using it with pride by 1968" (qtd. in Eyerman 220).

Chapter 2

2.1. Why a neo-slave narrative?

As with other socio-political issues in the 1960s, the concept of black subjectivity was revised by intellectuals, historians, and writers. The Black Power movement prompted the African American students and people to take "charge of their lives by forcing changes in the policies of state agencies, prompting the national government to create and enforce new legislation" in order to "provide all citizens with social and educational services" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 4). It was evident that the African American community managed to cause disruption in the social order, which stimulated intellectuals to reconsider the black people's role in American history. Soon after, the spotlight was given to those who have occupied the bottom of the social hierarchy, such as African Americans, minority groups, and women. This meant that the meaning of the black subject will be studied retrospectively while foregrounding the experience of slavery. Significantly, the most vivid experience of slavery was represented in the slave narratives; for this reason, these narratives served as the cornerstone for the upcoming cultural movement.

Slave narratives served as a plausible insight into the world of slaves, however, the contemporary writers considered them to be incomplete since they were lacking in psychological description. Due to this, the writers have focused on the creation of a fictional representation of the slave narrative, which would emphasize the interiority of the slaves. Therefore, they enriched the old version of the slave narrative and called it the neo-slave narrative. That being the case, Toni Morrison, for one, dedicates herself to exposing the "truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it (which doesn't mean that they didn't have it)" (93) and she states that this would not be possible without the help of memories, recollections, and imagination (92). Ashraf

Rushdy defines neo-slave narratives as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 3). The term was coined by Bernard W. Bell, and it was firstly mentioned in his study *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987) (Smith 168). The temporal dimensions of the neo-slave narrative are impressive since they "include texts set during the period of slavery as well as those set afterward, at any time from the era of Reconstruction until the present" (ibid.).

Furthermore, they emphasize the importance "of the history and the memory of slavery," especially when connected with the "racial, gender, cultural, and national identities" (ibid.). Likewise, they examine traumatic memories caused by the "peculiar institution". It is important to differentiate the standpoint of the contemporary writer from the slave narrative writer; the contemporary writer has the ability to move back and forth in time, which gives him the knowledge of "the complicated history of race and power relations in America" (Smith 169), and the knowledge of the future. Therefore, the contemporary writer combines his knowledge and imagination to create a story that is arranged in the past but has everything to do with the future. The purpose of such a method is to psychologically examine the "effects of the institution of slavery upon slaves, slaveholders, and their descendants" (ibid.). Needless to point out, it is past recollections and memories that matter, but it is the act of imagination that gives authority to the writer. The authority enables the author to reshape, leave out, or add components of one's own liking. Therefore, the contemporary writer has the freedom to induce the "change in the historiography of slavery" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 3); similarly, this freedom is also evident in the narrative in the form of a self-conscious protagonist. For this reason, instead of the term *neo-slave narrative*, Angelyn Mitchell uses the term *liberatory narrative*. She states that the liberatory narrative "is self-conscious thematically of its antecedent text" but it "is centered on its enslaved protagonist's life as a free citizen; and is focused on the protagonist's conception and articulation of [oneself] as a free, autonomous, and self-authorized self" (Mitchell, qtd. in Smith

170). Since the neo-slave narrative is "self-conscious" of the slave narrative, its "interior psychological landscapes are tangled" and the "perspectives are ever widening" (Babb 235). Because of these "widening perspectives," the contemporary writers want to demonstrate how "dehumanization, commodification, and exclusion" (ibid.) are still alive, but articulated differently.

2.2. The neo-slave narrative as a medium of expression

Even though Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), as a forerunner of the neo-slave narrative, has inspired dozens of writers to share their bits of imagination with the world, William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) served as the basis for many literary works that were created for the sole purpose of debunking Styron's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel (Mitchell 70). Styron's novel is considered to be the first novel that has adopted "the formal conventions of the first-person antebellum slave narrative" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 4). Certainly, the literary mainstream praised Styron for such an achievement, whereas the black intellectuals found it faulty because of various issues. As Rushdy explains, Styron's erroneous depiction can be seen in the narrative's "representation of a nonheroic slave rebel, its presumption of assuming the voice of a slave, its uninformed appropriation of African American culture, its deep, almost conservative allegiance to the traditional historiographical portrait of slavery, and its troubling political message in a time of emergent black empowerment" (ibid.). Although many authors of the neo-slave narratives were not satisfied with Styron's representation, they did not ridicule it; instead, they wanted to intervene "into the cultural, historiographical, and intellectual debates surrounding Styron's novel" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 18).

The contemporary authors have decided to depict the cultural and political situation of the 1960s while using "the form of the antebellum slave narrative" (ibid.) as a backbone, and there are several reasons why they have done it.

The first reason for using the slave narrative form happened due to renewed interest in the historiography of slavery. The first spark of interest occurred in the 1940s when the Federal Writers' Project was launched with the purpose of collecting "the oral narratives of the last generation of blacks born into slavery" (Beaulieu 3). Unfortunately, the interest in the project started fading away and it was shut down just a decade later. However, with the rise of the Civil Rights movement, the new shift happened. Suddenly, the New Left social historians acknowledged the need for studying history "from the bottom up" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 4). The followers of the Black Power movement also expressed their interest in historiography since there was an urge for "a new communal identity and a renewed sense of black pride" (49). From that point onwards, the past and the theme of slavery served as bottomless sources of inspiration.

The second reason for using "the literary form of the antebellum slave narrative" was to protect it from the distortion of historical facts and white appropriation – the same issues that permeated Styron's novel (6). Rushdy associates the neo-slave narrative authors' "act of recuperation" with the "acts of the fugitive slaves who had originally written slave narratives in order to assert the authority of their experience" (ibid.).

The third reason revolved around the fictionalized African American subjects who would express "their political subjectivity to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 7). The authors of the neo-slave narrative could not ignore the irresistible link between the antebellum period and the 1960s; they wanted to encourage people to remember the past, and to "evaluate the present" (Babb 235). Even though

the ignorance of the African American community and its history of slavery was still rampant, the black intellectuals sought to change that. Activism was successfully rising in different spheres, even in the literary sphere where the contemporary authors have created a new social subject who, along with the text, questions the notion of race, racial identity, cultural sphere, power, and authority.

2.3. Identity and trauma

The transition from a "Negro" to a black citizen in the minds of black "folks" was evident, and it was conditioned by the Black Power movement. Jean Smith stated that Black Power "was the other side of the coin of 'black consciousness'" (Smith, qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 49). Smith also became aware that the system is based "on [one's] absence and degradation" (ibid.). Because of this, she realized that African Americans should not identify themselves with the ruling white society; instead, they "must turn inward to find the means whereby black people can lead full, meaningful lives" (ibid.). Therefore, Smith debated how Black people need to become fully conscious of themselves because their "blackness calls for another set of principles" which are "derived from their 'own experiences'" (ibid.). Accordingly, "African-centeredness celebrates the conscious choice of racial identity and uses African identity as a wellspring for political organizing and ideological theorizing" (Nunn 292). Because of this, the feelings of connectedness, support, and allegiance organize the framework of their racial identity (Stubblefield 343).

However, the problem with this cultural program is that it takes an essentialist[3] standpoint. Following the non-essentialist[4] standpoint, Anna Stubblefield argues how "the act of

[3] "Essentialist conceptions of race hold that the characteristics of physical appearance referred to by racial terms are indicative or more profound characteristics (whether positively or negatively construed) of personality, inclinations, 'culture,' heritage, cognitive abilities, or 'natural talents' that are taken to be shared by all members of a racially defined group" (Stubblefield 341).

identifying oneself or others in terms of race," or how she calls it – "labeling,"[5] can cause a negative impact; this happens when a person is perceived "as a representative of the category," instead as a "unique person" (345). On the other hand, Kenneth B. Nunn claims that the Afrocentric society shares a different set of values from the ones represented by the mainstream. The values that Nunn talks about prefer "communalism and collectivity," more than "individualism" (ibid.). Therefore, Nunn does not see anything wrong with the essentialism; on the contrary, he perceives it as "necessary for African-descendant peoples to organize and act collectively" (291).

The African American identity and its formation cannot be examined without the concept of cultural trauma. It appears that the cultural trauma is conditioned by the collective memory, whereas the collective memory is "a form of remembrance that ground[s] the identity-formation of people" (Eyerman 1). The important characteristic of trauma is its "belated temporality," which means that trauma is defined by "the repetition of an earlier event that is forgotten or repressed and so is neither recalled nor known as traumatic" (Madsen 2).

In terms of the African American community, the extension of the experience of slavery is shown through present-day social inequality and lingering segregation. Certainly, because of the entrenched social inequality and segregation, the memory of slavery seems almost palpable. That is why Cathy Caruth states how "it is not the experience itself that produces the traumatic effect, but rather the remembrance of it"; also, due to its "reflective process, trauma links past to present through representations and imaginations" (3). In order to deal with the influence of trauma, the authors in their narratives use the "individual memory," and by doing that, they "sharply contrast with public memory or family history found in the slave narratives" (Pun 60).

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[4] "Non-essentialist conceptions of race claim that similarities and differences in physical appearance do not entail further similarities and differences" (ibid.). Modeled after postmodernism, non-essentialism states that the understanding of identity as "static, natural, and unchanging," is "theoretically wrong" (Nunn 290).
[5] The act of "labeling" is the act of rejecting one's "self" (Stubblefield 353).

Pun also adds how the "subjective treatment of memory enables the narrator to establish a relationship with the African Americans' identity" (ibid.). With the act of delivering "alternate narrative patterns," the authors also manage to unveil "other versions of history," which are crucial for the re-establishment of collective identity (Pun 61). In reading that "history anew" (Anim-Addo & Lima 4), they reconstruct Black and national history.

Moreover, this new understanding of their identity will help African Americans to "work through" their traumatic remembrance while building the nation as subjects who have "suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together" (Renan 19). However, the problem of racial identity deepens with the inclusion of gender roles, which are troublesome due to various stereotypes that are concerning them. For this reason, the following discussion will deal with the novels which serve as the representatives of the male neo-slave narrative, whereby the issues of masculinity, fatherhood, and racial identity will be examined as central.

Chapter 3

3.1. The Male Master Plot

> The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.
>
> (Du Bois 3)

Du Bois's famous statement in the introductory part of *The Souls of Black Folk* perfectly describes the socio-political situation of the 20th century. Even though the institution of slavery and *Jim Crow* state laws were abolished, the social hierarchy stemming from the past was left intact. Patricia Hill Collins expresses her perplexity with the new type of racism since, in the past, slavery and racist practices were justified with the help of biological theories (45). The black people were seen as "inferior" both biologically and institutionally (ibid.). However, with the sudden "erasure" of the color-line, the "color-blind perspective assume[d] that discrimination [was] a thing of the past" (Ferber 14). Because of this new perspective, any social or legal problems that black people experienced were due to their "own poor choices," not to racial inequality (ibid.).

Black Power fought against vilifying views, and even though it presumably included all black people, it was also mainly regulated by men. The reason why it was mainly regulated by men had to do with the urge of showing masculinity to be perceived as human and a full-fledged citizen. Therefore, the differences revolving around gender were vibrant and patriarchy usurped the space. Black women had to fight against gender- and race-related negative representations, while black men were "only" troubled with the question of race. Black men had to fight against racist imagery which depicted them as "big, strong, and stupid" (Hill Collins 56). Racial

stereotypes defined black men as "hypersexual, animalistic, and savage" (Ferber 15), and were employed when the purity of a white woman was presumably threatened.

The negative representations regarding black men had the purpose of downgrading them, and some of those representations are used even today, e.g. a "deadbeat dad" (Connor & White 2). This term describes "absent fathers[6] who are financially irresponsible and rarely involved in their children's lives" (ibid.). However, this type of attitude was created toward black men in the first half of the 20th century. Black men struggled with "police brutality, substandard housing, lack of adequate health care, long jail sentences for minor offenses, poor education" (ibid.), and so forth. With the renewal of slave narrative, the writers have recognized the chance to rewrite adverse representation and to inscribe the new meaning whereby the black pride will rise from the ashes.

The aim of the traditional slave narrative was "to persuade the reader" (Vint 242) how slavery should be abolished, and there was not a lot of room left for other themes except for those that discussed literacy and freedom. Most of the slave narratives were written by male slaves and they followed the paradigm of "literacy-identity-freedom" (Newman 27), as in the case of Frederick Douglass. Slave men's paradigm was substantially different from women's, which focalized "family-identity-freedom" (ibid.). However, the renewed slave narrative depicts a black man in a different light, and the usual slave male plot experiences alterations to it. Black writers and intellectuals discuss the need for changing the narrative that portrays slave men as runaways who, once they are free, forget about their offspring.

[6] Even though the statistic regarding black household composition shows an increase of single-parent units (mainly single-mother families) from 11.7% to 20.5% from the 1880s up until the 1980s (Ruggles 138), many researchers, such as Libra R. Hilde, beg to differ. Hilde directs attention to the "economic and life stage challenges" that black people faced more "than many other groups" and for that reason "we may expect their family structures to be even more diverse and complex" (22). Although the family structure of black people was different from the one of white people, Hilde states that black fathers did provide for their families during and after slavery, be it in food or clothing supplies.

Writers of the male neo-slave narrative rewrite their characters and tackle the questions of racial and masculine identity. These narratives draw male slaves as daring black men who will do anything to protect their families. By employing the theme of fatherhood, or at least social fatherhood[7], these writers manage to create a heroic character – a slave father, who can be placed alongside the slave mother. The notion of patrilineage is involved, and it serves as a portal to their past where they can reflect on their relationships with their fathers and make amends; at the same time, it helps them in rebuilding and strengthening their father roles. In this sense, these narratives are a mirror image of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and its matrilineality. Furthermore, these narratives discuss freedom and bondage, which is an extended commentary on the socio-political scene of the 20th century. Certainly, the matter of literacy also plays an important role, but it is not staged as the only possible act of resistance. The idea is that acts of resistance reside in forgiveness and acceptance of one's past. At last, these narratives deal with the notion of representation, and their goal is to show how there were bad black men, just like there were good white men, which is a fact that is commonly overlooked. In order to exemplify the aforementioned statements, I will discuss Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* and David Anthony Durham's *Walk Through Darkness* as my representatives of the male neo-slave narrative.

3.2. Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990)

Johnson's *Middle Passage* is a neo-slave narrative published in 1990. When his master dies, Calhoun leaves the plantation and starts a new life in New Orleans, as a freed slave. However, his life is not an honest one, since he steals and gambles for a living. When he acquires a large gambling debt, Isadora Bailey saves him from the local criminal Papa Zeringue, whom

[7] Rebekah Coley defines the term "social fatherhood" as the role which "encompasses both biological fathers and father-figures," it refers to "men who are not biological fathers but provide a significant degree of nurturance, moral and ethical guidance, companionship, emotional support, and financial responsibility in the lives of children" (Coley, qtd. in Connor & White 3).

Calhoun owes a large sum of money. Isadora convinces Papa to forgive Calhoun's debt if the two of them get married. In order to escape his destiny, Calhoun boards the ship *Republic*, only to find out later that he is on a slave ship that is heading towards Africa to collect indigenous people. The captain of the ship is Ebezener Falcon, a deranged sociopath who plays mind games with his crew. When they finally reach Africa, Calhoun finds out they will be harboring the Allmuseri tribe and their god.

With their shipment on board, strange incidents start to happen. Because they are dissatisfied with Falcon, the crew decides to organize a mutiny. Calhoun's role is that of an observer; he manages to form good relations with everyone involved, even the Allmuseri tribe. What is more, he uses the captain's log as his diary. On the night of the planned mutiny, they run into a storm of epic proportions, while the members of the Allmuseri tribe free themselves and take over the ship. Many people die, and those who are left alive feel as if they are lost. The storm is associated with the Allmuseri's god, and the crew starts to believe that Allmuseri are, in fact, sorcerers. A few days later, Calhoun goes to feed the Allmuseri's god but has a vision that leaves him unconscious for several days. Their ship is completely damaged, and they end up being saved by another ship, called the *Juno*. Calhoun finds out that Isadora is aboard, as well as Papa, whom she is forced to marry. Calhoun learns that the *Republic's* voyage to Africa was sponsored by Papa Zeringue, and he proceeds to blackmail him with the ship's log, where all the transactions are gathered. Papa frees Calhoun and Isadora, the two of them decide to get married, and they adopt a child from the Allmuseri tribe.

3.2.1. Revisiting and rewriting history

Johnson's portrayal of the protagonist certainly diverges from the usual representation of a black male character. Even though his Calhoun is not "defamed" in the same measure as Styron's Nat Turner, he is still depicted negatively, as opposed to Frederick Douglass and other

heroic black subjects. The readership learns about Calhoun's character traits in the very beginning when Master Chandler says that Calhoun is "born to be a thief" (Johnson 50) as if delivering a prophecy. However, by constructing a narrative whose protagonist and the narrator is a liar and a thief, the narrative risks its veracity and may be perceived as untruthful. Timothy Spaulding explains how Johnson's depiction contains "parodic (. . .) aspects of white postmodernist texts," and in doing so, "undermine[s] traditional or romanticized conceptions of a stable or autonomous black subject" (7).

Johnson's alteration of the usual slave narrative is also evident in Calhoun's flight from freedom to a slave ship, wherefrom he occupies the role of a spectator, not a slave. Calhoun's personal account becomes more complicated with the arrival of the Allmuseri. The social distance between him and the white crew is something he is accustomed to, however, upon the Allmuseri's arrival, he notices the distance from them too. Calhoun comes to realize that he occupies the space "in-between" (Fagel 625). Brian Fagel draws attention to the notion of spatiality in Johnson's novel, wherein Calhoun's position of "middle-ness" (626) is entirely conditioned "by the color of his skin" (627). While he is "externally excluded from the crew," he turns out to be the one who "internally excludes himself from the Allmuseri" (626). Even though Calhoun idealizes the Allmuseri's culture and desires to be a part of it, he realizes that his identification with them is doomed to fail. They share the same origin, but Calhoun's identity is mostly shaped by the American experience. Calhoun realizes that "they were not even 'Negroes.' They were Allmuseri" (72), and even though they share the same skin color, it does not necessarily mean they share the same culture.

In portraying Calhoun as "neither/nor" or "both/and" (Scott 648), Johnson opens up a realm of multiple explanations. Timothy Spaulding pays attention to the philosophical and political approach and identifies the *Republic,* the Allmuseri tribe, and Calhoun as "opposing cultural archetypes of the Middle Passage" (102). While the slave ship represents the Western

culture, the Allmuseri tribe stands as an uncorrupted and idyllic standard of the African culture (ibid.). Calhoun occupies the middle ground and represents a combination of both cultures. Regardless of his manumission, Calhoun is still portrayed as a slave character who embarks on a journey to find himself (Still loc. 2144). However, the implication here is that Calhoun does not need to join a particular side (nor can he), in order to attain identity, but he can continue to live as he is because he has already been shaped by both of these cultures. Spaulding defines this cultural junction as a "transcultural aspect of black subjectivity," while identity is perceived as fluid and prone to change (92). If transcultural ideology incorporates multiple cultures, then the difference between people is almost non-existent. The Allmuseri's culture suggests the same thing because "in their mythology, Europeans had once been members of their tribe – rulers, even, for a time – but fell into what was for these people the blackest of sins. The failure to experience the unity of Being everywhere was the Allmuseri vision of Hell" (64). Similarly, earlier in the novel, Calhoun expresses his hunger for "new 'experiences'" (16), and he needs to rob people of their "experiences," or so to say – identities. Only after he accepts his past and a multifaceted identity, can he truly free himself. Lastly, Johnson's departure from black nationalism expresses his thoughts regarding the socio-political situation at the time. He warns his fellow African Americans to do the same; to distance themselves from the Black Power movement and similar activities, because those are at risk of becoming "an ideology, even kitsch" if they "fail to fit the facts" (Johnson, *The End* 38).

3.2.2. Masculinity, fatherhood, and racial identity

In order to read *Middle Passage* as a male master plot, we need to examine the questions of masculinity, fatherhood, and racial identity. Under the influence of slavery, these determinants cease to exist, which often leads to intergenerational trauma. This is evident in Rutherford Calhoun's relationship with his father Riley. Throughout the novel, Calhoun repeatedly mentions

his father in a negative context and tends to blame him for the lack of family traditions and the past. Calhoun explains how he "hated [his father] because he had cut and run like hundreds of field hands before him" (141). However, that is not even the worst part of his escape, but the fact "he wasn't working to buy [them] out of bondage or living nearby with the Indians, as some black men did" (99). Calhoun was so haunted by his father's "presence" that he even "searched the faces of black men on Illinois farms and streets for fifteen years, hoping to identify this man named Riley Calhoun, primarily to give him a piece of [his] mind, followed by the drubbing he so richly deserved for selfishly enjoying his individual liberty" (99). Calhoun was unaware of the negative impact that the institution of slavery imposed on his father, thereby he proclaimed him as self-centered and selfish.

Little did he know how the lack of authority that Riley experienced in the fields and elsewhere was also transferred into domestic area. While women thrived in domesticity, men were perceived as mere bodies. Erica Still explains that "masculinity is understood as a performed identity" (loc. 1571). Accordingly, Riley's inability to perform the role of paterfamilias left him feeling emasculated. Calhoun proceeds to explain how Riley's dignity was taken away, that he could not even "look his wife Ruby in the face when they made love without seeing how much she hated him for being powerless," and the same goes for his children "who had no respect for a man they had seen whipped more than once by an overseer" (142). Sick and tired of being powerless, Riley decided to run away, while traumatizing his children who are bound to keep the same cycle running for the generations to come. With a powerless father figure at home or no father at all, Calhoun was soon to learn that domestic spaces are not reserved for men. He despised slavery, which was one of the reasons why he had been a mischievous child and expressed his dissatisfaction, but also his resistance through "breaking things, petty theft, lies, swearing, keeping bad company, forgetting to bathe, fighting" (100). He was not overly fond of his brother who, like a real "gentleman of color" (101) served his Master Chandler, and stood

by his side even on his deathbed. Because of this, Calhoun perceived every form of help to another human being as servitude, even marriage, and he closely related it to his father's "emasculation" at home.

Calhoun's resentment toward any kind of bond can be seen in his refusal to marry Isadora after she liquidated his gambling debts. While Isadora mercifully asked for his hand, convincing him it is for his good, Calhoun expressed his rage and shouted: "I'm not getting married! Never!" (26). Isadora's act of proposing and paying off his debts signalizes that she had taken authority over their relationship, which scares Calhoun and reminds him of the outcome. That is why he embarks on a journey to run away from slavery that marriage and home represent. At this point, escape becomes a part of black subjectivity, and to thrive, it needs to create a space for itself, or as Erica Still calls it – "a fugitive home" (loc. 1609). Still continues to elaborate on "a fugitive home" and describes it as a "site of belonging that bear[s] the trace of the previous displacement" (loc. 1564). Calhoun ends up in one such place, together with "all refugees from responsibility and, like social misfits ever pushing westward to escape citified life" (44). He enters a male-dominated space where the conventional rules of domesticity do not apply; quite the opposite, now they feel pressured to prove their manliness to one another.

As time goes by, Calhoun's quest for masculinity and identity melts into something completely different. While trying to escape a feminine world of domesticity, Calhoun finds himself in one. Marc Steinberg observes the relationship between Falcon and Calhoun "which almost resembles a surrogate family" and compares it to the one Calhoun's brother and Master Chandler had (385). However, Falcon's and Calhoun's "surrogate family" also includes other members of the ship, for example, a little Allmuseri girl Baleka, whose mother dies during the voyage. Calhoun develops a fatherly affection for her, which only grows stronger day by day. His skills as a caretaker start prospering when the Allmuseri rebel and overtake the *Republic*. Now, with many "passengers" becoming ill, Calhoun needs to take care of his surrogate family:

> Whenever Baleka cried bitterly for her mother and no one could calm her, when Diamelo threatened to beat Squibb because the Falstaffian cook couldn't decipher orders he gave in Allmuseri, or when one of the Africans was too weak to work and fell behind, the first thing I was forced to do was forget my personal cares, my pains, and my hopes before repairing to the deckhouse where the sufferers were sprawled. I placed a hand on each of their foreheads and listened. Though tired and sleepless, I clowned and smiled for the children; I told American jokes that failed miserably in translation. I prayed, like my brother, that all would be well, though I knew the ship was straining at every seam. (136)

He resembles a parent who must separate fighting children, needs to make sure all of them have eaten, and finally, tell stories to calm them down. The progress in Calhoun's character is visible, however, since by escaping genderless objectification of domestic spaces, he acquires feminine traits. Ironically, self-centered Calhoun, who was repulsed by servitude in such a measure that he escaped to a slave ship – now becomes a servant. Johnson rewrites the usual slave narrative and positions a freed man on a slave ship, only to condemn him to a life of servitude.

Johnson situates Calhoun and the Allmuseri together to demonstrate two different halves. Calhoun considers himself to be a fatherless child without family tradition, whereas the Allmuseri are recognized as "the Ur-tribe of humanity itself" (60). The disproportion between them and their histories is immeasurable. However, having seen the atrocities that the Allmuseri went through, Calhoun's visions of the past start appearing. The most important one happens when Calhoun goes below deck to feed the Allmuseri god, only to discover that god "dressed (. . .) in the flesh of [his] father," and he could not "separate the two, deserting father and divine monster" (141). Because of their encounter, Calhoun finally learns about Riley's post-slavery life, which did not last long since he was killed shortly after being captured. Calhoun

distinguishes this information from "a seriality of images" (141) that unfolded before him. Apart from his father's past, he also saw many others. Calhoun perceives it as "the complete content of the antecedent universe to which [his] father, as a single thread, belonged" (141). This display of images left a cathartic influence on Calhoun. Suddenly, he did not feel betrayed anymore but enlightened since he finally realized the suffering his father went through.

The revelation of his father's history helped Calhoun in forgiving his father, as well as identifying with him. Erica Still explains how Calhoun's "sorrow becomes a means of entering into community with his fugitive father" (loc. 1942). Before this, Calhoun thought that his masculinity should have been shaped by his father's presence until he realized that his masculinity is shaped by his father's absence. At last, Calhoun rejects conventionally appropriate notions of masculinity and patriarchy, and decides to be a part of, previously mentioned – "fugitive home," where "belonging [is] possible even while acknowledging the trauma that has led to the experience of displacement" (loc. 1987). By revisiting his past, Calhoun manages to rewrite it. Moreover, Calhoun's inscribing of his "Word" (157) in the captain's logbook symbolizes the act of rewriting. In doing so, he makes "peace with the recent past" (157). His writing confirms him as the narrator, a speaking subject who asserts his authority and, therefore, decides about the truth of the narrative. Calhoun's writing resembles the usual pattern of a male slave: literacy-identity-freedom because Calhoun truly finds his freedom through writing. When talking about identity, Calhoun realizes that he cannot be identified reductively because he belongs to humanity itself. Calhoun's new identity is the one that accepts "complexity and community" (Still, loc. 1999).

At last, Calhoun's acceptance of complexity and community can be noticed in his relationship with Baleka and Isadora. Upon being rescued by *Juno*, Calhoun meets Isadora and describes Baleka to her as "the girl, as dear to [him] now as a daughter" (158). Both Baleka and Calhoun show affection for each other. He proceeds to explain their relationship: "She's one of

the children orphaned by the voyage. And no, I'm not her father, if that's what you're thinking, but I might as well as be. Whenever Baleka is out of my sight I am worried. If she bruises herself, I feel bruised" (161). Kyle Pruitt explains this type of affection as "fatherneed," the term signifies "the powerful physical, psychological, and emotional force that pulls men to children" (Pruitt, qtd. in Connor & White 4). Such connection happens because men want to be fathers, whereas children want to experience being fathered (ibid.). Together with Baleka, Calhoun and Isadora were to form a family. However, Isadora's and Calhoun's attempted intercourse resulted in them lying next to each other because Calhoun "wanted [their] futures blended, not [their] limbs, [their] histories perfectly twined for all time, not [their] flesh" (171). Calhoun's transformation is obvious because he would rather maintain a Platonic love with Isadora than sexual, which is a big difference when compared to the beginning of the novel. It seems as if he stopped objectifying himself, first and foremost, and accepted his identity while creating alternative masculinity. Towards the end of the narrative, the male pattern literacy-identity-freedom also includes family. That is why, in the end, we are presented with a character who will eliminate an image of a runaway father.

3.3. David Anthony Durham's *Walk Through Darkness* (2002)

Durham's novel follows the storyline of two men – a runaway slave William and a bounty hunter Morrison. William is a young man who escapes the plantation to find his pregnant lover named Dover, who has been taken away to Philadephia with her mistress. Throughout his journey, William reminisces about the moments spent with Dover but also reflects on his familial background. He remembers the stories about his father who was a white man of Scottish origin. He came to the New World to escape from the wretched life that Scotland, at the time, offered. When William was not thinking about his past, he was running into, or out of, troubles. On his

journey towards family and freedom, William meets many men, both good and bad. When he finally reaches Dover, their plans for an escape almost fail. Luckily, with the help of Morrison, they reach their freedom.

The second storyline follows a Scottish man Morrison, whose journey in the novel starts with the role of a hunter, and it ends with him being a savior. Morrison is an old man who, on his journey to find William, also reminisces about his past and describes the hardships of life experienced in Scotland and the United States. Morrison and his brother Lewis came to the United States, and while they were experiencing everyday struggles, Lewis fell in love with a slave girl Nan (Annabelle). Morrison felt a certain disgust towards black people, and at the same time, he was incredibly jealous of his brother. His temper cost him a great deal because one night he ended up raping the poor Nan and accidentally killing his brother. This deed, and many others, scarred him for life. Many years later, he receives a letter from Nan where she states that she gave birth to a baby boy whose biological father is Morrison, but his real father is the belated Lewis. Because of this, Morrison sets out on a journey to find his kin and repent.

3.3.1. Revisiting and rewriting history

In order to explain the reasons for slavery's existence in the past, people entertained an explanation that concerns religion. According to such beliefs, the cause of slavery was to turn savages and infidels into civilized people[8]. Durham uses the motif of religion throughout his novel but strips it of artificial altruism to show its falsity. The first example can be seen in young

[8] This section refers to the proslavery religion that was promoted by slave owners. Also, it is important to distinguish southern proslavery religion from the one promoted by abolitionists. According to John R. McKivigan, abolitionists were "heavily influenced by evangelical trends," and they "branded slave owning [as] a sin that required repentance in the form of immediate emancipation" (13). That is why "early abolitionists hoped that the churches would become the leading agencies for the eradication of human bondage" (ibid.).

William's conversation with his master Mason, who used the biblical story[9] to identify his race with Shem and Japeth, while William's race was identified with Canaan's: "You and I are both descended with mastery of the world, while yours is assigned a place just beneath me. Each race has been ordered in such a way to allow them to shine. You do see the logic in this, don't you?" (Durham 34). Then master continued to tell him a story about a free black man whose "liberty only led to the basest of degradation" because "he took to theft and developed hunger that he hadn't known as a slave" (35). Not long after, that man was found dead and "his head bashed into mush by clubs, genitals severed from his body so that they were no longer a threat to female virtue" (35). In his sermon, master Mason managed to delineate black people as uncivilized and undeserving servants who are, if set free, "a threat to female virtue." Later on, Nan told William to disregard master's word and that a Bible is "just a book writ down by some white men to explain themselves to themselves. Don't be fool enough to study on no Bible" (70). By positioning the picture of master Mason and a slave woman Nan, Durham diminishes the master's power over the narrative and draws Nan as a strong black woman who can see through the crooked religious doctrine that was used as justification for slavery.

Furthermore, Durham wants to change the belief wherein all white people are presented as racist and horrible, as much as he wants to straighten the account wherein all black people are considered noble and pure. To do this, Durham introduces us to the characters named Oli and the Captain. Oli is a black man whom William stumbles upon while running away from the plantation. During their first encounter, William is startled because he hears that someone has been following him for quite a time, and now he finds out that his "pursuer" is Oli. However, Oli manages to calm him down and convinces him that he is just a runaway slave, like himself. The

[9] "Noah planted a vineyard, drank too much wine, and passed out. His son Ham (the father of Canaan) saw his father Noah naked and told his brothers Shem and Japeth, who covered his naked body. When Noah woke up, he was angry with Ham, so he cursed Ham's child Canaan. On the other side, he blessed Shem and Japeth, while cursing Canaan to be a servant to Shem and Japeth. This signalizes that the white race is the successor of Shem and Japeth, while the black race is Canaan's successor, and therefore – a servant to Shem and Japeth" (34).

two of them decide to pause their journey so they can rest and eat. Oli offers food and whiskey to William, who eventually gets drunk and falls asleep. When William wakes up, he sees a white man dragging him towards the wagon. The white man laughingly tells him “Hope you enjoyed your taste of liberty, cause it’s over. Finished and done with. It’s as official as Waterloo. You’re back to bondage. My nigger Oli made sure of that” (51). William is entrapped with the help of Oli, one of “his own”. Later on, when William succeeds in freeing himself again, he sneaks into a ship where he meets the Captain of the ship.The Captain is a white man who is careful around William, but his suspicion is not a product of racial ideology. Instead, the Captain wants to make sure that his ship is not harboring a criminal since there was a massacre recently, and white men were killed. William refuses to answer, so the Captain continues by saying “Perhaps no white man has ever asked for your thoughts before, but that’s just what I’m doing. I’m giving you the opportunity to speak for yourself. You would be wise to take it” (102). Finally, when William agrees to talk, he finds out many things about the Captain. One of those things revolves around Captain’s purchase of a slave Adam, who is now his friend. The Captain elaborates his decision “The trader had him stripped, and put on display each portion of his body. He was made to bend and contort and ... It was very degrading, for both of us” (109). And he continues “Do you understand why I did that? Some acts of men degrade all of mankind, not just the individual. I had watched as that boy was made to display himself, and that was a crime in its own right. I had the silver, and I sought to absolve us both” (109). By juxtaposing the Captain and Oli, Durham wants to highlight the irony of a white man who is freeing slaves and a black man who is capturing them. With this image, Durham wants to point out how history is not black and white, instead, it is many shades of grey.

3.3.2. Masculinity, fatherhood, and racial identity

For a male master plot, the themes of masculinity, fatherhood, and racial identity are of enormous importance. Durham situates his character William in various situations to show his actions regarding the aforementioned themes, and what the meaning of those actions is for our understanding of the male past and future. First of all, the notion of masculinity is a tricky variable for a slave man, especially since masculinity is positioned in correlation with femininity. But, as we know, womanhood in a slave system is refuted because women are perceived as "genderless" (Beaulieu 19), therefore, manhood is also non-existent. It is not a secret that slave men endured overseer's and master's attempts of demasculinization. In order to demasculinize slave men, slaveowners "informed" slave men that they did not have any authority regarding themselves and their families.

Durham's William also battles with the notion of authority when he finds out about Dover's departure. This realization affects him emotionally and physically, which results in him "slacking" while in the fields. His master notices his unsatisfactory performance and decides to punish him because "[he] had [himself] a case of nigger love" (47). William was whipped twice, and the second time it was by the hand of a white man who was "cursing at [him], talking bout the slave girls he'd had, bout the things he did to them. It put a rage in [William]. Not just the beating, but the way he was talking" (48). Then William decided to resist, so he "put out [his] hand and grabbed a hold of that whip" (48). William proceeds to say:

> I knew just then that he was an evil son-a-bitch, and that I could've snatched the whip from his hand. Could've turned it on him and beat him down. Could've bitten off his nose and spat it back into his face. Could've done anything, I was so full of hating him. (. . .) Just held the whip twined round my arm. Just held it ready. Just waited to see what he

> would do, and to see what I'd do. But he didn't do nothing. Just had me get up and walk back to the plantation. (48)

This part contains two examples of demasculinization: the first one is the separation of family, and the second one is the white man's "recital" of abusing black women. Libra R. Hilde reflects on the unfortunate situation of a slave man and his authority and states: "To become a husband and then a father, hallmarks of antebellum masculinity, underscored a bondman's powerlessness. That which defined him as a man, according to the standards of the dominant society, most revealed his lack of authority" (39). If a slave man lacks the authority, or if he is unable to provide help, then his masculinity is at risk of being shattered. Furthermore, white man's "recital" of rape is also another form of demasculinization. Angela Y. Davis offers an explanation regarding massive sexual exploitation of black women:

> It would be a mistake to regard the institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery as an expression of white men's sexual urges, otherwise stifled by the specter of white womanhood's chastity. That would be far too simplistic an explanation. Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men. (25)

William decides to resist these techniques of demoralization and demasculinization, therefore, he stops a white man from whipping him and refrains from doing the same thing.

However, by resisting the oppression, William's narrative bears a strong resemblance to Douglass's narrative wherein Douglass decides to stand against Covey, a slave-breaker, and his inhumane actions (77). As Vint explains, "This decision to fight back is more in line with the male slave narrative which equates freedom with coming into masculinity" (259), but fighting back is not the usual practice for slave fathers because it is risky. The masters and overseers could easily become enraged and punish a slave man's family for his disobedience. That is one of many

reasons why slave fathers decided to embark on a solo journey, instead of taking their families along. Libra R. Hilde explains the difference between a single slave man and the one who has a family when escaping the plantation. She mentions Henry Bibb, a husband and a father, who escaped from slavery, and Frederick Douglass, who was already separated from his kin. Thus, Henry Bibb experiences "the ongoing pain" and struggles "with the guilt of having left a wife and child in slavery" (57). By leaving his family behind, Bibb is not able to fulfill "the dominant society's ideals of manhood" (ibid.). As opposed to him, Douglass does not suffer from the same "illness" because he does not have any family; his "narrative of masculinity" deals with "his sense of self-worth" (ibid.). However, Durham rewrites this slave convention with the character of William, who refuses to be affected by demasculinization and still decides to run away.

William's power is reflected in his statement "I wasn't running from something, but *to* something" (54). Durham reverses the usual male plot wherein the most important intention is the acquiring of one's freedom. Instead, he draws the character to whom the loss of family is more fatal than slavery:

> Yes, he hungered for freedom, for vengeance. But these paled in comparison to a
>
> bone-deep longing that he couldn't explain, that began and ended and went on forever in the possibility of that child. To look upon that face, to kiss that face and to know that child was he and Dover made immortal, to see that child walk and to hear it speak the wisdom of innocence: these were all the things he wanted. (119)

Durham's novel experiences a shift and layers up a male plot with a female paradigm of family-identity-freedom. By employing this pattern, his male plot, which resembles Douglass's, melts into a female plot, that resembles Harriet Jacobs's, which serves as an archetype of the female-centered plot (of which more in the second part). To William, freedom is not liberating per se, if it has to be spent in solitude. While most men run towards freedom, William's trajectory points to

his unborn child. Karla Kovalová explains this attachment and states how the birth of William's child will allow him to transform himself from "a person with an enslaved mind, broken by experiences of bondage, into a man with a new vision and purpose to live" (43). Durham manages to create a heroic representative, a slave father, who can be placed alongside Walker's mother figure – Vyry. What is more, Durham's reinvention of manhood serves as a direct response to the contemporary culture that perceives black men as runaway, "deadbeat" dads.

Lastly, one of the burning issues in the novel revolves around William's racial identity. His mother is an African American, while his father is a white man of Scottish descent. In the scene where Nan warns William not to study the Bible, she takes him to the graveyard where his father is buried to show him "what to study on" (70). She tells him of his father, who was "a good man" (71), and the fact that he was buried with black people speaks for itself. William had a hard time believing that he was not a product of rape. He thought that "there could never be such a man" and he strongly believed for his father to be "a ghoul" (73). He also believed that his mother "was only trying to shelter him from the shame of it" (73). In the end, he was both right and wrong. Even though William was a product of Morrison's violent sexual assault, Nan considered Morrison's brother Lewis to be William's father, because love was stronger than blood relations. However, William develops an internal conflict – double consciousness, which is evident in his relationship with his mother, who represents Africa:

> You take it for granted. Think that's just how a woman is gonna be. Think you can act the fool and treat her cold. Then you get ashamed of her and stop coming around to see her. Think all her stories must be nonsense cause she only an old woman sick with love.
>
> You get to figuring you ain't gotta love her back proper. You forget she's the one made you and start to think you done made yourself. But that ain't true, is it? (140)

William harbors mixed feelings regarding his heritage; while he looks at the African heritage with a look of contempt, through the eyes of white racist society, he also looks at his white heritage with a feeling of shame. His contempt is evident in the scene where a young white romantic couple visits his hiding place, and William hides from them while listening to their conversation. Upon hearing everything, he thinks to himself how, "there were people on earth who lived an entirely different existence than he. The gap between them was unbridgeable, far greater than just that of master and slave" then proceeds to think how "there would always be parts of himself that he hated. Those of privilege would never be able to understand him and neither would he know himself" (201). Durham suggests that William needs to acknowledge his African heritage and discard the look of contempt. At the same time, he needs to acknowledge his white heritage, which will help him in dealing with the feeling of shame. As Ashraf Rushdy explains, "Slavery, in other words, functions in American thinking as the partially hidden phantom of a past that needs to be revised in order to be revered" (*Remembering Generations* 2). By revising and accepting his past, Nan and Morrison/Lewis, matrilineage and patrilineage, Africa and America, will he be able to heal and look into the future. In the end, we are presented with a scene of William, Dover, Morrison, and a newborn baby girl. Morrison represents the past, William the present, and the child signifies the future. The patrilineage is complete, and the author suggests that the "friendship" between the past and the present, will result in the future – free future. Just like a child is born into freedom, America could do the same.

Chapter 4

4.1. The Female Master Plot

Besides the Civil Rights and the Black Power movement in the 1960s and the 1970s, there was also the Women's Rights movement, which publicly articulated women's demands for social and economic equality between women and men (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 3). This call for the abolishment of patriarchy caused a disorder in the social hierarchy, which resulted in women's intensified sense of self-awareness and empowerment.

However, the issue of gender inequality becomes more complicated when the notion of race is added. Deborah Gray White explains that a black female subject "stands at the crossroads of two of the most well-developed ideologies in America, that regarding women and that regarding the Negro" (27). Her fight against the "racial windmill" goes one step further, for she needs to deal with the troubling stereotypes that were formed during slavery and afterward.

That is why some scholars, like Joanne Braxton, accentuate the need for the recognition of female slave narratives. Because of that, she thinks that Harriet Jacobs's autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) should be placed in juxtaposition with Douglass's *Narrative* "as the 'central text' in the genre" (Braxton, qtd. in Beaulieu 9). Therefore, Braxton concludes how "the violated woman should be recognized as the archetypal counterpart to the male hero" (ibid.). Fortunately, Jacobs's autobiography has gained a much-needed recognition, and the Black female subject manages to position 'herself' as the archetypal counterpart to the black hero with the help of neo-slave narratives. One of many reasons for the alteration of the slave narrative was to subvert negative connotations regarding the black female subject and motherhood. Those

negative representations were burdensome for contemporary black women. An instance of the damaging impact of stereotypes carrying over from slavery is the Moynihan Report (1965)[10].

The second reason was to acknowledge the African American women whose stories of slavery were unknown or ignored. That is why black female writers study history from the "bottom up," and then they pay "close attention to the details of everyday enslaved existence" (Beaulieu xiv) of women. Their detailed inspection of everyday fragments serves as a "homage to the very humanity of the protagonists" and their "hardships" (xiv). The neo-slave narrative is charged with revisionist ideas that have the power to alter our perception of black women and mothers. The contemporary writers want to demonstrate black mother's family-oriented demeanor in the antebellum and postbellum eras; she is proud, while her whole existence is inspirational, as will be further shown.

In constructing female master plots of the neo-slave narratives the writers accentuate the importance of family and community, which is why the pattern family-identity-freedom is frequently used. Also, the theme of oral tradition is extremely important because it symbolizes the authority of the female narrator, and allows her to take her voice back. What is more, orality works as an intergenerational portal and serves to warn successors to acknowledge and remember their past, because that is the only way to make peace with it. The questions of womanhood, motherhood, and their place in society are also rewritten. Instead of presenting motherhood as a burden, these narratives define it as inspiring. Black women's role in society is also heavily rewritten because they are drawn as strong and independent subjects who can make their own living, and turn the system of slavery back on itself.

[10] Written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the notorious *Moynihan Report* is believed to be "one of the most damaging works to the public perception of black women in America" (Beaulieu 5). Moynihan names it the "matriarchy thesis" and blames the women's "smothering" behavior as the main reason why black males are deprived of "healthy sex-role development and self-respect" (5). Moynihan states how such a matrifocal family structure, along with the prevailing racism in the U.S., prevents the black community from social and economic betterment.

This section will be dealing with Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986). With the help of these two novels, this section will demonstrate how authors Walker and Williams use different methods in order to subvert stereotypical representations about black women stemming from the period of slavery but still embedded in popular culture, as my previous discussion has shown.

4.2. Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966)

Walker's *Jubilee* is considered to be one of the first novels in the genre of the neo-slave narrative (Newman 31). It is a historical novel, published in 1966 after Walker had spent 11 years working on it. The gist of the story was transmitted to her through oral narration by her grandmother, which prompted Walker to revive the story in written form. Walker is one of the first authors examining the social and historical context from "the bottom up"; and she does so while fictionally merging her family's oral tradition with the nation's history. The story is set in antebellum Georgia, and it follows Elvira or Vyry from her childhood spent in slavery until she is released from it upon the Civil War's completion. As we sink into her story, it becomes more complicated since she is the daughter of the slave Hetta, while her father John Dutton is also her "Marster". Vyry could pass as a white person, which was confirmed by her physical resemblance to Miss Lillian – Dutton's legal daughter; especially since "they could pass for twins – same sandy hair, same gray-blue eyes, same milk-white skin" (Walker 23). Furthermore, Vyry meets a free black man called Randall Ware, and she gives birth to their two children. Unfortunately, Vyry and children are considered slaves, while Randall Ware is free to roam around, for a while. After Randall's persuasion to run away from the plantation while leaving their children behind, Vyry brings her children with her, which turns out to be a fiasco. Needless to say that she receives a "good portion" of flogging after her capture, which nearly kills her. Afterward, Randall

disappears for 12 years, and in the meantime, slavery gets abolished. Vyry meets Innis Brown, and the two of them decide to be together. The newly formed family hits the road in the pursuit of their new home and happiness. While on the road, they face many difficulties concerning their race, and almost lose their hope, but they manage to dust themselves off and continue. In the end, they create a home while finding a purposeful place in society.

4.2.1. The duality of the master plot

Interestingly enough, Walker expresses her affinity to detail by describing the everyday lives of those who are "at the bottom of a malevolent system" (Painter 160). Her take on the Southern history would not be credible in such measure if she was not well-equipped with the knowledge of black tradition, which was transmitted to her through oral narration. Due to this, Walker puts an immense amount of effort into preserving that oral tradition between the lines of the novel. According to her, she feels as if "writing a revisionist history," because she has the power to challenge the "dominant interpretations of American history" (Carby 129). The oral tradition stems from memory, and according to Pierre Nora, memory is "susceptible to being (. . .) periodically revived" while history is "always problematic and incomplete"; memory is tied to the present while history represents the past (8). Therefore, Walker permeates the storyline with memory and history, and they function dually; while "memory complements history, history corrects memory" (Assmann 63). This interchangeability of memory and history complements Walker's narrative, which is interwoven with themes of quest and sacrifice.

Walker sets the theme of the quest as her master plot and layers it up. She uses the historical plot as the background that follows the timeline of the American Civil War and the Reconstruction era, and she enriches it with "excerpts from speeches, letters, and newspaper articles" (Bell 287). At the same time, she places the character Vyry and her family at the center

of the story; she describes their journey to freedom with the newly-acquired citizenship, and how the intricate socio-political climate affects them. However, the duality of the plot is evident in its transition into a female master plot. Walker alters the representation of womanhood and motherhood in slavery while positioning Vyry as the ultimate role model, who gives birth to the doctrine of suffering and endurance. The examples of the duality of Walker's master plot will be discussed hereafter.

The quest for freedom and restoration covers the emotional and physical journey of Vyry's family in the antebellum and postbellum South. To make it historically accurate, Walker impregnates the plot with government orders and racist hate crimes that were existent at the time. Therefore, Vyry describes brutal acts of violence on the Dutton plantation, and she continues to describe the cruelty upon the completion of the Civil War. Walker even covers the story of Vyry's former husband Randall Ware, to show how the system and society negate his freedom, even though he is born as a freedman.

Even though Randall is literate, politically oriented, and owns a smithy, his freedom is jeopardized. For example, the very fact that he owns a smithy is not welcomed by the authorities, that is why he needs to pretend as if he is "working for some respectable white man," to avoid being "a suspect" (Walker 266). Obviously, his "worth" means nothing and he needs someone of the higher (racial) rank to account for him. His unworthiness is also shown in the scene where a white man Ed Grimes insists on buying Randall's smithy and property. Upon Randall's refusal, Grimes's goons get a chance to practice their violence on Randall and his property. Regardless of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment, Randall and the rest of the black people are susceptible to the Black Code[11].

[11] The Black Code refers to laws that were enacted in 1865 and 1866. Their purpose was to "replace the social controls of slavery" and "to assure the continuance of white supremacy" by limiting the economic and social rights of the African Americans (Black Code).

If a literate man, such as Randall Ware, experiences hardships, then Vyry and Innis's quest is even trickier. Their newly-formed family has tried settling down a couple of times, but their intentions were met with great turmoil. One such occurrence happened when they were deceived by a white family that generously handed over their house since they were moving out of it. Shortly after, they have been surprised by the arrival of the actual owner of that house, who persuaded them into signing a contract whereby they would live in the house while cultivating the owner's land and splitting the profit. Innis's "X" as a signature of the agreement also meant that they were unaware of the disadvantage they have put themselves into. Even though the Browns worked heavily on the cultivation of the land, it was not overly fertile. Later on, when the owner Mr. Pippins came to their house to collect his share of the crop and the rent, but the problem arose when he also asked Innis to pay him back for the "six sacks of feed, twenty-five pounds each" (293) that Innis allegedly took from Mr. Pippins's store. Innis and Vyry were startled by Mr. Pippins's claims, who also said that his honest storekeeper can confirm it because "he's got [Innis's] mark to prove it" (293). Once again, Walker highlights the problem of illiteracy and rounds it with the systems of sharecropping and crop-lien in order to show how, despite the abolition of slavery, the society is still regressive and weakens freedmen's social and economic position.

Not to be fooled again, the Browns decide to leave Mr. Pippins's property in search of a new homeplace. Innis tells Vyry how he has heard that freedmen will be given 40 acres and a mule[12], which rushes them to the next county in pursuit of their happiness. Soon after, they end up in a place where they meet a wealthy man Jacobson, whom Innis and Vyry start working for. They are placed in the neighborhood which was previously a slave quarter, and they are surrounded by "colored folks [who are] low-class and just nothing but riff-raff" (298). Vyry's

[12] Forty acres and a mule is a part of the Special Field Order No.15, raised by General William Sherman during the Reconstruction era. Its purpose was to authorize the Freedmen's Bureau "to rent or sell land in its possession to former slaves" (Foner).

discontent is visible from the beginning and it culminates one night when the Browns witness a "big commotion in the streets" and see "the riders (. . .) all dressed in white sheets" with "masks on their faces" (299). Obviously, those were the members of the notorious Ku Klux Klan, who took a hold of the black woman to teach her "a lesson". Tomorrow, Vyry pays a visit to the unfortunate woman who was "Ku Kluxed," or, to put it simply – tortured. Vyry states that KKK "poured hot tar all over [the woman] and she is just blistered from head to foot. Then they covered her with chicken feathers, and just ain't no ways to help her at all. Even if you gits the cold tar off without tearing off her skin and her flesh she still burned black underneath it" (299). This incident was the last drop that spilled the cup and the Browns were eager to leave.

Fortunately, their employer Jacobson helps them in finding a public place for homesteading[13]. The Browns were delighted with their new home, especially since they have put a lot of effort into building it. However, their happiness ceases one Sunday morning upon their return from the Sunday Mass gathering, when they see a dozen members of the KKK while burning the Browns' house to the ground. The family was devastated, but they picked up what was left of their possessions and continued to travel to the next county, with a bit of help from the "Negro community" (316) and Freedmen Bureau policemen.

Finally, the family manages to find a homeplace and a welcoming community. What is more, Vyry accidentally becomes a midwife, which turns out to be a green card into the community, and it elevates her position in society. In the end, the family is depicted as satisfied and harmonious with their new surroundings.

[13] The Homestead Act meant that "any U.S. citizen, or intended citizen, who had never borne arms against the U.S. Government could file an application and lay claim to 160 acres of surveyed Government land" (National Archives – The Homestead Act of 1862).

4.2.2. Womanhood, motherhood, and social position

The complexity of citizenship for emancipated black people is evident, but Walker also adds a layer, whereby the subject of woman and her role in the system of slavery is highlighted. Just like many black female writers of the 20th century, Walker wanted to place a spotlight on black female ancestors who were marginalized or depicted unfavorably. Walker wants to set the record straight by placing the protagonist Vyry as a "symbol of nineteenth-century black womanhood that challenges historical stereotypes" (Bell 290). *Jubilee* rewrites the negative representation of a Black woman that was usually presented as helpless and wretched. Instead, Walker draws Vyry as a forgiving mother who has the ability to endure any obstacle while sacrificing herself for the betterment of those around her, like a true "othermother" (James 45). The protagonist Vyry resists the oppressive system in the most dignified and Christianlike manner while guiding her children, and the audience, after all, to do the same. The following paragraphs will address the themes of black womanhood and motherhood, and the ways these are rewritten or revalued.

At the very beginning, we can see how Walker situates two opposing images, one of Vyry's mother Hetta and that of Vyry. Hetta is dying at the age of 29, due to the frailty of the body and difficult childbirth. What is more, Hetta gave birth to 15 children, most of whom are the product of John Dutton's manifold sexual assaults. However, his rampaging over her body started when she was "given" to him by his father, while she was a young girl – "a pickaninny". Dutton reminiscences Hetta at her young age looking like "some African queen from the Congo" and remembers how she had satisfied his "youthful lust" by providing "him with all the physical release he needed" (18). Evidently, Dutton sees Hetta only through the image of the well-known stereotype Jezebel, and as the money-making machine – "the breeder". Perceived as such, her "Jezebel character" provides her with insatiable libido, and she does not "lead men and children

to God" because "piety [is] foreign to her" (Grey White 174). Also, Jezebel pushes forward "matters of the flesh" while leaving domesticity and prudery aside (ibid.).

It seems almost purposely that Walker begins the novel with Hetta's death. With this act, she buries the Jezebel and introduces a new type of black woman, the one that was always there but never acknowledged. This woman is not represented as lewd or immoral; on the contrary, her character is so uncorrupted and pious, that she resembles a saint. Unlike her mother who was robbed of her humanity and perceived through the eyes of the stereotype, Vyry manages to resist these disconcerting images through acts of resistance.

One of the ways to resist the effects of slavery is to celebrate the notion of home. Vyry is aware of the sanctity that a home provides, and that is why she postpones the rebuilding of the house until she feels that a certain place can be their safe haven. For Vyry, and African American women, the home was a place "where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where one could be affirmed (. . .) despite poverty, hardships, and deprivation" (hooks 42). Vyry needed it to be the place where she can teach her children how to resist, and she bases her resistance on endurance, compassion, generosity, and forgiveness. But, the sacredness of home gets disrupted by the conflict between Innis Brown and her son Jim. Even then, she calms down the tension with her divine nature, while explaining to Jim that he must forgive Innis for lashing him because "keeping hatred inside makes you git mean and evil inside. We are supposed to love everybody like God loves us. And when you forgives you feels sorry for the one what hurt you, you returns love for hate, and good for evil. And that stretches your heart" (370).

In order to understand Vyry, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu highlights the necessity of acknowledging the fact that "the paradigm family-identity-freedom is at work in shaping *Jubilee*" (17). Just like Vyry, this paradigm also positions the institution of family as the foundation that is intertwined with identity. The paradigm furthermore suggests that, in order to obtain freedom,

family and identity need to be connected in harmony. This is evident in the scene when Vyry attempts to escape from the Dutton plantation, while dressed in men's clothes. The plan was to leave her children behind to make the getaway more successful. However, upon her departure, her children wake up and she decides to bring them along. Their flight to freedom was soon ended by Dutton's overseer Grimes and his men. Vyry's punishment included "seventy-five lashes on her naked back" (146). Walker suggests that Vyry's attempted departure from her children ended up in her being flogged because she wanted to run away from family and motherhood, which are the basis of her identity. For that reason, her freedom could not be earned. However, Christine Levecq disagrees with Beaulieu's approach because it suggests that "African American women's identities [are] dependent on families and communities", "unlike stories of heroic male loners such as Frederick Douglass" (136), a duality observable in the tradition of slave narratives from the beginning.

Vyry is not a mere hypocrite but actually lives her doctrine. Her beliefs that a person should be compassionate, generous, and forgiving, can be seen in her actions throughout the novel. The very fact that "she felt terribly unhappy over Miss Lillian" (250) and her loss, indicates that she is compassionate and humble. Even though the abolition of slavery took place, Vyry decided to stay by Lillian's side to help her. Her altruism is also shown in the scene when the Browns meet Mr. Pippins's white tenants. Vyry notices their malnourished bodies and decides to feed them, twice. After their departure, Vyry walks into the house and notices how dirty it is, then thinks to herself how "that poor woman ain't had strength enough if she had a mind to clean up" (287). Once again, Vyry does not judge the woman for leaving the house in mess but tries to understand her. Even after she finds out that Mr. Pippins is the real owner of the house, which means that the previous tenants lied to them, she does not hold any grudge.

With her actions, Vyry has proved herself as an (other)mother who will endure anything for the sake of her children and the perseverance of the family. However, it is important to

mention how Walker rewrites Vyry's role as a woman. The domestic sphere in the Browns' household is not usurped by matriarchy nor patriarchy. Innis and Vyry are equal, and the "sexual division of domestic labor" is not hierarchical (A. Y. Davis 14). Instead, they are "both equally necessary" (ibid.) and both of them contribute to the household while completely investing themselves into the creation of a functional African American family.

Another instance, that is quite often promoted by Vyry, is the matter of education and literacy. Vyry herself is not educated, but recognizes the importance of education for her children and insists on its execution. By becoming literate, Vyry's children will be able to see through people's deceitful propositions, and it will be easier for them to conduct themselves in a world that otherwise negates their citizenship. At last, by positioning Vyry into a working scheme as a midwife, Walker highlights the importance of black women's participation in society. As opposed to white women whose labor force participation "increased from 16.3 percent to 33.7 percent (. . .) between 1890 and 1960," black women's "remained almost constant (39.7 percent to 41.7 percent)" in the same period (Goldin 87). What is more, Walker takes a step further when a pregnant woman's mother explains how "the best grannies in the world is colored grannies. They doesn't never lose they babies and they hardly loses they mothers" (352). By inserting this part, Walker wants to straighten the historical account wherein African American women "were abundantly represented in the ranks of the unskilled" workers (Goldin 96). Evidently, Walker "restored to the enslaved woman the right to be a woman of integrity who contributed to her family and her community with dignity" (Beaulieu 23).

4.3. Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986)

One of the most notable neo-slave narratives is Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* that was published in 1986. To create a story, Williams combines historical records about two women. One of them is a pregnant black woman who leads a slave coffle uprising in 1829, while the other one is a white woman who, in 1830, gave refuge to many fugitive slaves. By merging these two unrelated incidents, Williams tackles the problems regarding the representation of women, as well as the race issues. Not only that, her novel serves as a response to William Styron's novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (29), as shown by its structure.

Dessa Rose consists of three sections named "The Darky", "The Wench", and "The Negress", and they represent the perspectives of Nehemiah, Ruth, and Dessa, respectively. The first section shows the imprisoned Dessa, who is being kept alive due to her pregnancy. While Dessa awaits the birth of her baby and her own demise, the white writer Nehemiah uses Dessa's enslavement as his opportunity to collect the information about the slave revolt for his new book. "The Wench" is a second section and it describes Dessa's flight to freedom and her new life on the plantation that is governed by a white woman Ruth. Both Dessa and Ruth serve as the representatives of their respective races and types of womanhood, and their viewpoints are rather conflicting. The final section describes the trickery of selling black men back into slavery, which functions as a mutual agreement between Ruth and runaway slaves. Besides the successful scheming, the members of the mischievous group manage to form friendships and romantic relations with one another.

4.3.1. Revisiting and rewriting history

In order to use her neo-slave narrative as a medium of expressing history, Williams takes a hold of two separate stories, merges them into one, and adds various issues that have been neglected or silenced. One such example is the taboo of white female sexuality. For this matter,

the character of Nathan, a runaway slave, serves as someone who has experienced both the violent and tender side of white female sexuality. He tells his story of the sexual encounter, or more specifically sexual abuse, that he experienced when he was 15 years old. His former white mistress Miz Lorraine ordered him to strip, and she was laughing "gently, mockingly" while Nathan was "frightened half out of his mind" (131). She took him as a lover, and when the time came, she had him sold to another slave owner. The reason why she took him as a lover, and not a white man, was because Nathan had to be silent about it. She wanted "to be in control" and if he boasted about it, "she could have his life" (132). By incorporating this type of plot whereby a black man is depicted as a victim of sexual exploitation, Williams wants to show how black women were not the only ones who were sexually abused by slave owners. What is more, Williams wants to set the record straight by implementing this part because the male-written slave narratives fixated on the sexual harassment of women, while glossing over that of men (Foster 67).

Another instance regarding the white female sexuality revolves around the romantic relationship between Ruth and Nathan. Even though interracial romantic relationships were rare, it did not mean they did not occur. Calvin Hernton explains "that both white women and black men were in semi-oppressed positions in society and this pulled them together as in the case of two magnets" (Hernton, qtd. in Lemelle, Jr. 7). Their relationship becomes a public matter when Dessa accidentally barges into the room and finds Nathan and Ruth in bed. While being completely astonished, she also becomes mad because of the notion that Nathan would get involved in an interracial relationship. What is more, Dessa's state of shock must be acknowledged because "the most suppressed text of the 19th century [concerning] the sexuality of the White woman" is revealed (Mitchell 78). By shattering this image of a taboo topic, Williams manages to add and rewrite one historical aspect of the sexual mores of slavery, usually overlooked in the studies of the institution.

However, Williams also inverts the dynamics of the usual sexual triangle, which consists of the white master, white mistress, and a slave woman. Instead, she forms a triangle consisting of a white mistress, black man, and black female. The usual plot deals with the sexual encounter between a white master and a female slave, while the mistress feels angry and humiliated because of her husband's misdeeds. More often than not, the husband's debauchery leads the mistress to identify herself as a victim. Because of this, the mistresses "found their men's relations with slave women almost impossible to bear" (Fox-Genovese 325), and they would think of their black female counterparts as competition. Nell Irvin Painter draws attention to the relationship between black women and white women as "a vital dimension of southern history" which "helps to explain the thorniness of women's contacts across the color line" (162). Such a "thorny" relationship is also present between Dessa and Ruth. However, instead of portraying a competitive and angry white mistress, we are presented with the jealous Dessa: "I couldn't put into words all this that was going through my head. I didn't have the words, the experience to say these things. All I could do was feel and it was like my own flesh had betrayed me" (146). Apparently, Dessa feels betrayed, even though she is not involved in a romantic relationship with Nathan. She feels certain disgust that Nathan would willingly get involved in an interracial relationship, in the same way that white mistresses felt disgusted with their husbands who would go after "women who though black and poor and powerless seemed somehow more attractive" (162). Even though Williams incorporates the sexual tension into the story, later on, she tends to "heal" the rotten relationship between white women and black women, which sprawled across the twentieth century.

Furthermore, Williams uses the "relation" between Nehemiah and Dessa as a representative case to demonstrate the actions performed by white abolitionists, where they would compel slave narrators to change their remarks regarding slavery. Nehemiah perceives Dessa as the Other, and as a genderless object that reeks. He continually calls her "darky," and

even when he tries to call her by her name, he misnames her "Odessa" (M. K. Davis 547). Even though his disgust towards Dessa is evident, he continues to stay to collect information for his book. However, when questioned about the coffle uprising, Dessa talks disconnectedly and hardly ever gives out any information. Nehemiah pressures her to talk while saying "girl, what I put in this book cannot hurt you now" (36). Certainly, Nehemiah "expects to sell her words for his own economic gain" (Mitchell 75). However, Dessa realizes that Nehemiah is not suitable to be the narrator of her story; he is not able to address her properly, let alone narrate her story. She completely rejects him because, to him, she is a mere beast. Because he misinterpreted Dessa as a text, Dessa's repetitive act of undermining him is her act of resistance. Dessa's act of resistance also signifies Williams's response to all the "editors" who have tried to control the slave's narrative; it also warns the future generations to fight "against the adverse power of literacy and codification" (McDowell 150).

Another example of revisiting history happens when Dessa and Ruth get into an argument concerning Mammy. As Ruth talks about her childhood and about Mammy as a caretaker, Dessa interrupts her by stating that Ruth does not even know mammy[14]. The two of them start arguing until they realize that they are talking about two different women. Only then Ruth realizes that she does not know the name, or anything about a woman who took care of her since she was a little girl. Ruth's ignorance regarding Mammy (Dorcas) symbolizes her objectification and the complete disregard of Dorcas's humanity and individuality. This realization prompts Ruth to change her perspective. On the other hand, the furious Dessa perceives Ruth's casual objectification of Mammy as the objectification of all black women. Only when she remembers that her mother's "name was Rose" (99), does she stop thinking about Ruth's act. By recalling her mother's name, Dessa revisits her past and remembers her mother, brothers, and sisters. Mary

[14] Williams deliberately uses upper and lower case letters, because Ruth knows her caretaker only by the stereotypical black role of Mammy, but not her name. On the other hand, Dessa thinks of her own mother, hence the lower case letter (M. K. Davis 553).

Kemp Davis juxtaposes Dessa's "amnesia" with Williams's text, and explains that if Dessa's "state were to continue, her amnesia would parallel the amnesia of written texts that Williams's own text is designed to heal" (554). Through the act of remembrance, Dessa "historicizes her personal past, and reasserts her individuality" (Mitchell 83). From this point onwards, Dessa and Ruth remove and distance themselves from the "objectifying gaze" (ibid.), which helps them in forming a friendship.

4.3.2. The site of womanhood and motherhood

In Williams's world, female and male characters seem to occupy different hierarchical positions compared to the conventional ones. According to the usual patriarchal scheme, white men are at the top, below them are white women, then black men, the following are black women, and lastly black mothers (Beaulieu 31). However, Williams overturns the usual race and gender order and positions women on top, especially black mothers. The reversal of roles is evident from the very beginning; women are presented as field workers, usurpers, tricksters, and leaders, whereas men are perceived as house workers, nurturers, and sexual victims. Therefore, the following paragraphs will focus on the issues of womanhood and motherhood, to determine how exactly the author subverts the harmful image regarding slave women.

In her portrayal of Dessa, Williams deals with the notion of power. In the beginning, Dessa does not hold any power but acquires it upon her realization that she is pregnant, and when she witnesses the murder of her beloved "spouse" Kaine by the slave master's hand. She becomes furious after seeing Kaine murdered and resolves to hurt the master. At that moment, she grasps power into her hands, even though that act dooms her to the coffle. From that point onwards, her life becomes filled with episodes where she exercises her strong will and power. Even when she is questioned by Nehemiah about the reasons why the slave coffle rebelled and tried to kill white men, Dessa proudly answers "I kill white mens cause the same reason Masa kill Kaine. Cause I

can" (14). Then Nehemiah thinks to himself "Who would think a female that far along in breeding capable of such savagery?" (14). However, Dessa's pregnancy is the very reason why she is so madly driven, it is also the reason why Dessa's life is spared until the child is born. Evidently, "Williams dramatizes the fact that motherhood provides the inspiration and motivation for Dessa's emancipation" (Beaulieu 62). Dessa's "state of bliss" distinguishes her from other characters and charges her with incredible power and will to survive and thrive.

Throughout the novel, Williams foregrounds the notion of womanhood and comradeship between women. The comradeship is visible due to various rescuing sessions that were enacted by women. The first time that Dessa gets rescued from captivity is with the help of Sheriff Hughes's cook Jemina. The second time happens with the help of Ruth and Aunt Chole, who save her from Nehemiah's accusations and imprisonment. On the other hand, Dessa also gets an "opportunity" to become a savior and assists Ruth in defending herself from their host's assault. By doing this, Dessa realizes that "the white woman was subject to the same ravishment" (169) as she was, and that "women of all races are essentially powerless" (Beaulieu 66). As if to echo the women's movements, the novel offers "a story of a woman's triumph in a (white) man's world" (60). It is also a statement against dependency since women demonstrate their potential, e.g. by being able to govern a plantation (Ruth), by leading a coffle uprising (Dessa), or by scamming slave buyers and earning their financial freedom (Dessa and Ruth). These women are autonomous; they perceive themselves as a force of resistance, not victims. Ultimately, they prove themselves to be capable of surviving without men's emotional and financial assistance. This individuation is also Williams's response to the backlash that women, in general, experience.

Towards the end, Williams strategically shapes the narrative and uses capitalist and patriarchal rules for the advantage of those who are marginalized. It happens when Sutton Glen's inhabitants decide to get involved with a scheme of selling slaves, who would, later on, escape

from their imprisonment. To carry out the plan successfully, Ruth plays the role of a Southern belle who governs the plantation and slaves all by herself, while Dessa acts as the family's Mammy. By becoming playacts in this charade, Deborah McDowell states that Dessa "and her comrades turn 'authoritative' texts of slavery back on themselves. They use all the recognizable signs of those texts but strip them of their meaning and power" (158). In doing so, they become the owners of their bodies and stories, while simultaneously mocking the system.

At last, the trickery ends with a final scene when Nehemiah stumbles upon Dessa and tries to imprison her[15]. Ruth and Dessa deny Nehemiah's claim wherein Dessa is a notorious, runaway "devil woman" (118). Nehemiah does not have the right to refute Ruth's claims and call her a liar, because, in a patriarchal system, white women are perceived as gentle and honorable. What is more, Nehemiah knows that Dessa has scars from flogging which show her "history of misconduct" (14), and ultimately – her identity. However, since it is inappropriate to inspect her on his own due to her womanhood, a black woman Aunt Chole comes into the picture and denies seeing any marks on Dessa's thighs. At this point, the female power seems unshakeable because "these women (. . .) find a power within that system by turning it back on itself, by turning its assumptions about blacks and women topsy-turvy" (McDowell 159). Williams makes it clear that Nehemiah cannot identify Dessa, nor carry on her narrative; only Dessa can do that.

With the help of various examples from *Jubilee* and *Dessa Rose*, my goal was to demonstrate how these authors navigate the novel as a medium of expressing history, and what the themes are that permeate a female master plot. As opposed to Williams, Walker's narrative deals with themes of forgiveness and reconciliation. It considers characters "from the bottom up," while simultaneously displaying hardships in postbellum America. On the other hand, Williams inspects the interiority of her characters and literally elevates her characters "from the bottom

[15] It is important to highlight the fact that Williams criticizes the ways how women have been treated, while Walker could not have done the same thing because of the time when she was active.

up," while availing herself of the feminist rhetoric. Walker and Williams want to show that themes of womanhood and motherhood are not burdensome, instead, they serve as "agents of salvation" (Beaulieu 51). Lastly, both of these novels promulgate remembering over forgetting. While Dessa's son Desmond Kaine[16] represents a future that is strongly rooted in black tradition, Vyry's newborn represents a successor who will cherish family and community, just like its mother.

[16] "Des" – the name of his mother & "mond" – men who helped Dessa escape the prison (represents the present). "Kaine" – the name of his father (represents the past).

CONCLUSION

Evidently, the horrendous experience and remembrance of slavery left an immense impact on the African American community. Even though post-slavery generations did not experience slavery firsthand, they were exposed to racism in decades to come. During the first half of the 20th century, racial segregation was raging, and African American community was pushed into a corner. Since there was no indication that racial segregation would see an end soon, the African American community recognized the necessity for the development of stronger communal ties and black tradition. However, black history was intertwined with the experience of slavery, which was perceived as a shameful part of the black identity. That is why various black intellectuals and writers decided to revisit and rewrite history. Such renewed history could cease to be "shameful," instead, it could serve as a vehicle for the invention of the black tradition and a proud black subject. Soon after, the Black Power movement arose, which enabled the black community to openly express their discontent with the social and political situation at the time. Along with the protesters, writers also decided to take a stand against discrimination. That is when the neo-slave narrative comes into the picture as a new take on the, almost forgotten, slave narratives.

Furthermore, it is important to distinguish male- and female neo-slave narratives. In the case of the male neo-slave narrative, Johnson's *Middle Passage* and Durham's *Walk Through Darkness* serve as the representatives whose goal is to debunk the stereotypes of the runaway father and a white father. Instead of aiming for one's literacy and freedom, these men are presented as caring fathers who will not leave their kin behind. What is more, both of these stories deal with the themes of the past, patrilineage, and slavery, which, eventually helps them in forgiving their fathers for wrongdoings that have been influenced by slavery. In the case of the female neo-slave narrative, Walker's *Jubilee* and Williams's *Dessa Rose* serve as representatives. These stories aim to accentuate the importance and the strength of motherhood and to discard old

beliefs which considered motherhood as burdensome. Other themes that permeate these novels are forgiveness and (cross-racial) female friendship. Similar to the male narratives, female neo-slave narratives also highlight the importance of remembering and forgiving. In the end, all of these narratives share the same theme, the theme of a redemptive future. Because they are able to remember and forgive, they are also able to free themselves from the social constraints of slavery. Therefore, the future, in all its freedom, can be achieved only through reconciliation with the past.

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to discuss the neo-slave narrative, which developed during the Civil Rights Movement, as a much-needed reconfiguration of the image of slavery that usually filled the slave narratives. The neo-slave narrative is a historical fiction which represents the everyday lives of marginalized African Americans and foregrounds their experiences in slavery and its aftermath. By doing so, it rewrites the hurtful past and inserts a new form of black-consciousness which aims to help with the traumatic remembrance. Furthermore, the paper deals with the gender-oriented master plots. The representatives of the male master plot are Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* and David Anthony Durham's *Walk Through Darkness*. These novels distance themselves from the usual slave narratives by incorporating the theme of fatherhood. The representatives of the female master plot are Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose.* These novels proudly deal with the theme of motherhood, while simultaneously commenting on the women's secondary position in society. The purpose of this study is to discuss and exemplify how the old patterns of the slave narratives are rewritten, and what the new implications are that will help in dealing with the troubled past for African Americans and for the nation.

Key words: the neo-slave narrative, cultural trauma, black tradition, male, female, racial identity