WRITING NEW BOUNDARIES FOR THE LAW: BLACK WOMEN’S FICTION AND THE ABJECT IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

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WRITING NEW BOUNDARIES FOR THE LAW:
BLACK WOMEN’S FICTION AND THE ABJECT IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

A Dissertation Presented

by

ANGELIQUE WARNER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2018

W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies
WRITING NEW BOUNDARIES FOR THE LAW:
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DEDICATION

For Octavia Butler
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I would like to thank my advisor, James Smethurst, for his years of encouragement and his expertise in an area of literature that is so important to me.

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ABSTRACT

WRITING NEW BOUNDARIES FOR THE LAW: BLACK WOMEN’S FICTION AND THE ABJECT IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

May 2018

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Many Black women authors have been pegged as mere victims by oppressive societies; their characters have been deemed psychotic or suicidal and the emphasis of the majority of the criticism on authors such as Adrienne Kennedy is on the oppressive society and not what Kennedy does with the terms of the oppressive society; that is, as an agent, as opposed to an object / victim. Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, delineated in her *Powers of Horror*, is a critical tool that allows us to see the agency and operation of the egos of characters such as those of Adrienne Kennedy, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Octavia Butler. I argue that these Black women deploy ideas and terms comparable to Kristeva’s and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, which allow them to point out what is indeed abject in their respective racist, sexist and / or colonial worlds—that is, the oppressor who denigrates its victims, and lies, and creates what Fanon terms “zones” that isolate their would-be victims is abject as the creator of the abjection of these worlds.
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## SECTION I: ABJECTION IN ADRIENNE KENNEDY

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INTRODUCTION: THE ABJECT IN BLACK WOMEN’S FICTION

In this project, I argue that Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject and its manifestations in the psyche of the individual and her collective (society) is a tool that opens the boxes that, in literary criticism, compartmentalize as psychotic some Black female subjects who expose the nonsensical basis of the laws of their respective oppressive societies; an examination of slavery demonstrates that customs that have become laws are, in fact, simply that—laws that exist because they are customary and have been bestowed with the attributes of being “god-given” and “True,” whereas in reality the Law is what is necessary and its “authority is without truth” (Sublime Object 36). While many critics have maintained that characters created by writers such as Adrienne Kennedy have ceased to be subjects, in effect (because they have lost their hold on the symbolic), a close psychoanalytic reading of these texts demonstrates that what Kennedy is describing is a subject trapped within an impossible universe (which coincides with Žižek’s description of the moral Law: “The voice of the Other telling us to follow our duty for the sake of duty is a traumatic irruption of an appeal to impossible jouissance”[89]; that is, Kennedy’s subject is in fact positioned to observe the tautological repetitions of the obscene ideology of racism, au fond; even given the fact that Sarah in Funnyhouse of a Negro arguably crushes her own face with “an ebony mask,” it is because she has “listened to her friends” and that is why her hair has fallen out).

The texts of the writers I examine here revolt against degrading regimes in performative ways and in outright refusals to allow others to violate their personal boundaries; the subjects of these texts demonstrate a contrast between the social laws of individuals who are clearly capable
of signification (that is, they have the symbolic register), and the impossible “morality” of others who would like to turn them into objects, in effect. Even when a subject is destroyed by others around her, it is obvious that her boundaries have been irreparably dismantled, and what Kristeva would call abject literature takes the place of the dialogues and framing explanations of what has happened. Abject literature is essentially when suffering is the place of the subject, a narrative in which the inside / outside, subject / object boundaries are “incandescent”; finally, the “unbearable identity of the narrator and of the surroundings that are supposed to sustain him cries can no longer be narrated but cries out or is described with maximal stylistic intensity (language of violence, of obscenity)”; finally, narration itself becomes essentially impossible—“the theme of suffering-horror is the ultimate evidence of such states of abjection within a narrative representation. If one wished to proceed farther along the approaches of abjection, one would find neither narrator nor theme but a recasting of syntax and vocabulary—the violence of poetry and silence” (Powers 141). This is not to say, however, that the voices of Black women merely show that their respective oppressive worlds have silenced them; rather, they have used the abject support of the ideological fabric of their worlds against the people who have inflicted racist / colonial ideologies on them. My core argument has always been that Black women writers do more than display the filth of the outhouse (in Kennedy’s The Owl Answers); it is that they leave the abject with its owners. The arguments that Black women writers like Kennedy recognize and articulate what the social fabric of the racist / colonial Self cannot name, and that the horror these writers articulate is universal, coincide easily with Kristeva’s theory of abjection; the way in which these women writers’ works (that I analyze) have similarities demonstrates the potential agency granted by the theory of abjection, and, more than that, that these Black Diasporic women writers, across a huge continuum of historical time and space,
make use of what Kristeva calls abjection in the way in which Kristeva herself uses it. “For abjection, when all is said and done, is the other facet of the religious, moral and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and breathing spells of societies rest. Such codes are abjection’s purification and repression. But the return of their repressed make up our “apocalypse,” and that is why we cannot escape the drama of religious crises” (Powers 209).

Writers as diverse as Adrienne Kennedy, Suzan-Lori Parks, Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maryse Conde, Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid demonstrate that “the artist is an undoer of narcissism and all imaginary identity as well, sexual included” (Powers 208)—that is, Black women’s use of what Kristeva calls abjection, the uncertainty in regard to boundaries (208), to speak back to societies that are deaf to them, and make that dismissal itself abject. As Jamaica Kincaid’s Xuela puts it, in the layered contexts in which she exposes the abject, scarred boundaries created by exclusion of the humanity of Lazarus and herself and everyone left out of the happy picture of the group assembled outside the church, “To condemn yourself is to forgive yourself and to forgive yourself for your transgressions against others is not a right that anybody can claim” (Kincaid 220)—the only way someone who has committed the sins of colonialists could atone would be to have no defense of himself whatsoever, and to have the list of his sins cried out forever (Kincaid 60); Kristeva states essentially the same, when she makes the point that “Who… would agree to call himself abject, subject of or subject to abjection?” (Powers 209). That is, Kincaid expands Kristeva’s point, in that since abjection is what exposes as imaginary, and thus threatens, social boundaries of colonialists / racists, which colonialist or racist would truly be able to repent for the shreds and patches of ideologies that have made his world what it is?
This project differentiates where literature of Black women becomes “abject”: precisely when the respective subjects are presented with abject circumstances, carefully framed by characters and textual nodes throughout their respective works; it is not the abjection of Black subjects that Black women are merely showing us to exhibit what has been done--the crimes that have been committed; I maintain that they accomplish much more—they deconstruct the societal circumstances that violate their personal boundaries and present the rhetoric used to assault their boundaries. These subjects are confronted consistently with objects that are an assault to their positions in their worlds, their work and their physical beings (that is, their respective positions as subjects); these subjects’ respective abject objects are created by history, avoided for as long as possible, until subjective barriers are confronted to the point where these subjects face the confrontation between their breathing nightmares and their physical substance—and sometimes the subjects are able to consistently stay physically alive. But, I maintain, none of the subjects in any of the works I discuss arguably dies as “abject” subjects—even when their plays end in death or suicide, it is consistently the case that the respective rhetoric of these works maintains its logical integrity; and the works I discuss have counterparts in which the respective subjects reappear, in effect, as alive again in some world (created by their respective historical scorn or by historical circumstances it is necessary to closely examine in order to read them between the lines and their respective social and moral Laws).

At this point, a definition of Kristeva’s theory of abjection is in order. Much of Kristeva’s research involved her essential argument, in which the register of the semiotic (that is, the level on which the body makes a frame and “language” that allows the subject to enter the stage of the Oedipal break in the first place) is interwoven with the ensuing symbolic worlds of the subjects in question. In this context, the definition of how the state of the abject threatens one’s physical
respective barriers connects cogently with how the subjects in question react to symbolic interpolations and responses. Kristeva notes, in the beginning of *Powers of Horror*, that the abject does not allow the subject a corollary, or provide it with “someone or something else as a support,” which would provide for some level of detachment and autonomy (1); instead, the abject is a state in which whatever object (which has been jettisoned by the subject in question as impossible) “is radically excluded and draws me toward that place in which meaning collapses” (2). And from this position “of banishment,” the abject challenges the superego of the subject: “without a sign (for him)... it beseeches a convulsion, a crying out... it is a brutish suffering that “I” puts up with, sublime and devastated, for “I” deposits it to the father’s account *[verse au pere—pere-version]*: I endure it for I imagine that such is the desire of the other. A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it may have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either... A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture” (2; italics in original). The “not that” Kristeva refers to is the state which a given subject’s superego cannot tolerate—hence the “not me”; the “I” that is in doubting quotes above signifies the dilemma of “an elementary ego, struggling for autonomy” (Lechte 194), and need to expurgate the other, to have an object (to such a point in which the concept of boundary itself becomes an object (for how can “I” exist without a boundary / border? *[Powers 4]*)). The state of abjection is “a frontier” (Powers 9), which is breached in a subject’s fall into jouissance when its *objet a* (in Lacanian terms) is shattered with its mirror; but abjection is “above all ambiguity” in which it holds the subject in perpetual danger. Abjection itself is “a composite of judgment and
affect, signs and drives… Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (Powers 9-10; italics mine).

Critics of Kristeva have argued that she does not contend with patriarchal laws—that she “safeguards the notion of culture as a paternal structure and delimits maternity as essentially precultural reality” (Judith Butler qtd. in Reading Kristeva 9-10), and that her theory of abjection allows subjects the limited options of being abjected or abjecting (Foster); instead, given works by Black women like Adrienne Kennedy it is easily possible to read Kristeva as Kelly Oliver essentially does—that is, as framed by Freudian and Lacanian theories and rhetoric, but as dramatically revising this framework by including a lower case “symbolic” order within Lacan’s Symbolic order (outside which there can be no language or dialectic), in which this “symbolic” is “opposed to semiotic elements”; while the semiotic can move “inside or beyond” the Symbolic, it does not move within the “lower case symbolic”; “The symbolic is the element within the Symbolic against which the semiotic works to produce the dialectical tension that keeps society going” (10). Through Kristeva, claims John Lechte, “the semiotic has opened the way to an appreciation of the material incarnation of language… language is seen as being enacted in a specific place or time—in a given context… Now it is possible to appreciate that the subject is not fixed and static… but is always in process because the subject is nothing other than material enactments of itself” (195). As Octavia Butler especially demonstrates in Kindred (1979), a year before Powers of Horror appeared in its original French, there is quite a dialectic produced by the lower case “symbolic” and the Symbolic order of the subject’s superego (as I argue below, Dana, the protagonist of Kindred, rhetorically aligns her genealogical forbearer, Rufus the slave owner, with what is an impossible state for Octavia Butler’s protagonist’s subjective “I”;
however, the floating status of Butler’s protagonist’s husband [neither threatening or entirely trusted] continually produces the question of how much *Kindred*’s protagonist’s subjective borders are threatened by the husband, who does effectively return from the dead—and this floating, undefined state of the white husband figure, within the context of the white slave owner progenitor’s historical state [to which Dana is drawn physically, against her will, without at all meaning to go there, and in which her boundaries are continually violated until she physically rebels against the ultimate violation of her person {that is, rape}. This particular violation would have required Dana’s linguistic consent, however soft the proverbial hand of velvet is, and placed her in the position of a slave; the continual reminder that haunts Dana throughout the novel is, effectively, the taunt she articulates to herself, “See how easily slaves are made?” (177)] forces the reader to examine how much the America of 1976 has changed since the America of 1819; any analysis of the husband character coincides with the question asked of Dana at the beginning of the novel by the police [rather pointed messengers of Dana’s symbolic]—they want to know how what has happened to Dana has happened and Dana has no answer. This lack of answer, of course, begs the question of how Dana physically loses her left arm—and it is obviously not merely a question of the dynamics of “how” Dana’s arm seemingly “just grows” into the wall of her home; it is a question that requires a historical context, which still follows the reader out of the novel with still unanswered questions regarding the respective injustice of Dana’s place in 1976 society as a Black woman and how impossible that place may be for Dana and her husband as a couple.). Like Oliver, I will differentiate between Lacanian and Kristevan usage of the concept of “the symbolic” when necessary.

So, Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror*, states that what causes the abject is what “disturbs stability, system, order. What does not respect positions, borders, rules” (4); the abject is not
merely what is unclean—it is what is unclean to a subject. Hence, in terms of social mores, “the traitor, the liar, the criminal with good conscience…. Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the Law is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts its disrespect for the law… Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses your body for barter” (4). While Oliver highlights the aesthetic dimension of the abject (that is, the style, the rhythm of language is still present in “abject” literature because even though that literature threatens the borders of its readers, the style of the literature is left), John Lechte points out concretely that the psychoanalytic meaning of abjection is that who is can be derived from one’s strong affects, both likes and dislikes—and also that “within the moral frame, a friend who stabs you in the back, science (which is supposed to save life) producing weapons of mass destruction, a politician on the take all exemplify abjection… on a socio-cultural level, feelings of horror can be evoked in purification rituals, rituals which are enacted so as to avoid defilement, and which are intricately tied to the sacred” (10-11); the abject comes into play when boundaries do, which is why one of the implications of Kristeva’s work is that humans also “think with their bodies”—that is, the affect of revulsion of the body can occur when one’s socio-cultural taboos are threatened; Mary Douglas discovered that in societies without a state, or with a weak state, “those things that were sacred, and the subject of an interdiction or taboo were also things that were essentially ambiguous because they were on the border between different states or processes. Thus nail clippings, hair, faeces, tears and menstrual blood, often deemed to be polluting and subject to taboos, all invoke the borders of the body: they are neither wholly inside or outside” (10). Hence,
artists of abjection have used such body products in their art work, hoping to produce “an affective response to art in place of a relation that had become too cerebral” (11).

While characters in Black women’s literature have been dubbed suicidal, borderline, traumatized, because of what has often been assumed to be their dispute with the symbolic (for example, Sara / Clara in Adrienne Kennedy’s Funnyhouse of a Negro and The Owl Answers), my use of Kristeva’s concept of the abject permits a different reading of these characters: if the plays are read within the ideological context of the abject of their lives and deaths, they can be better appreciated (and many things about their textual styles noticed) if the characters whose positions in the perspective of the subjects in question are seen as objects that only have meaning when they are recognized as respective non sequiturs; they voice what Slavoj Žižek would call the obscene, evil “god” of ideology (this respectively “evil” god of ideology appears in the “traumatic irruption of an appeal to jouissance… this perverse, obscene dimension of the Kantian moral imperative appears in Fascism” (Sublime Object 89-90). This moral Law, whose structure reflects the logic of “we can because we must” (90), is itself perverse. I argue that it is the perversity of the logic of racism, in its traumatic displays, that is enacted in the dense, early plays that are often characterized as having subjects that ended tragically; it is because the subject is in the act of ab-jecting, jettisoning, these objects (as opposed to being imprisoned in them) that it makes perfect sense that Funnyhouse and Owl were once the same play, but were arbitrarily split in half to make two separate plays, with a protagonist that reappears to accuse a Dead White Father in the second half (that is, the Owl’s answer in regard is to what is really a bastard, illegitimate in terms of its ability to exist in the social Law of its own symbolic [as per Oliver’s “smaller case symbolic”]; the fact that Kennedy states that she split Funnyhouse and Owl in part to make two plays demonstrates her use of the Lacanian / Kristevan drive— that is, what is up for
analysis is not the symptom merely, but the drive organization that causes the symptom of racism; that is, racism itself is inconsistent, contradictory, tautological, in terms of its own moral Law to the point where the viewers watching Mark Essex’s last stand were forced to ask themselves, “Is this America?” [In Chapter Two, I discuss many works from Adrienne Kennedy’s opus, among them her *Evening with Dead Essex*].

Hence, the abject is what is created by the white racist society that persecutes and surrounds the Black female subjects in the works that I analyze, as well as what is abjected by the Black female subjects, when faced with the abjection created by this racist society. The racist societies faced by all these black authors, like Celine’s, in Kristeva’s analysis in *Powers of Horror*, attempt to attain a state of plenitude, a state resembling the wholeness of the chora, of the primary narcissism attained by the pre-subject before a subject-object division creates the Subject; these racist societies do this by creating a mythos that allows for socio-symbolic unity, and this mythos requires a sacrifice, an abjection, in order to attain this mythos. This mythos is in the register of fantasy spaces, which can be another time, another object, another conversation—etc—except that the fantasy space is by definition frozen; nothing can move on, the subject is stuck in progress, until a sense of time can be cut and established (Breen). This is important because it connects with the concept of the abjection in melancholia (discussed below), which is, roughly, the inability to release, to mourn (which shares the basic structural elements of the fantasy space; hence a key to the abject racist elements that these Black women writers are pointing out can be found through the frozen spaces and blank pages and timelessness that never seems to pass for the abject figure in the picture (ex. Rufus the slave holder becomes the slaveholder; he expects the same from people whom he believes have similar appearances, and, just as he expected his mother to never tell him “no,” he expects both Alice and Dana to “stop
hating” him for being a rapist, and, in his fantasy, seems unable to separate the two women as individual subjects—he himself has lived in his abject world for too long to not become the father that has once marked his back with the lashes typically reserved for people of darker complexions; Rufus’ fantasy world involves everything remaining the same—if there is something missing, it can be replaced with another person [he expects Dana to take the place of the dead Alice]—who hung herself after he made her believe he sold her children. Even Rufus’ subconscious way of “calling” Dana to save him is part of his fantasy—he claims that there must be something “mighty crazy about both of us,” for Dana to be transported to the past to save his life, and concludes, “I’ll be an old man and you’ll still come looking the way you do now.” Similarly, Rufus’ dreams show that he maintains a fantasy space that involves Dana with the same hurtful jealousy that will not permit him to allow Alice to escape; Rufus’ incursions into Dana’s life intrude in multiple ways that show how the real and Kristeva’s abjection are equally indigestible, psychically speaking).

The Black female protagonists in the works that I analyze (whose experiences span representatively the displacement of the Diaspora) is confronted with this surrounding abjection and psychotic reversion to a state of plenitude on the part of the respective society. The psychotic spectacle this society demands in order to exist in its social mythos is precisely what is abjected by the Black woman subject, in order for that Black woman subject to survive with her own mythos, her own plenitude, her own ability to have Bliss / jouissance. In my project, I show the process of development and the continual need to abject per stage of the development of the Black female subjects in the works by Kennedy, Suzan-Lori Parks and Octavia Butler, whom I analyze in depth (and employ most of the respective opuses of both Kennedy and Butler); I have done my best to give a window to all the people who deserve that analysis and used their work as
best as I could to show how the concept of abject applies across historical and psychological time periods, which I analyze in depth. My project shows Black women as subjects that abject what they must to remain subjects in the face of the psychotic plenitude assumed on a mass scale by the societies that surround them.

Other critics have, of course, used psychoanalytic theory in conjunction with material culture to discuss the coping mechanisms of oppressed groups. For example, Victoria Burrows notes that melancholia, in psychoanalytic (Freudian) terms, occurs when a subject is so involved with a trauma that has not been worked through that the subject loses a sense of time, place and identity in the present. Burrows links Jamaica Kincaid’s work (Lucy) with Toni Morrison’s (Sula) because both authors deal with subjects in the midst of the experience of “belatedness—the protective numbing that initially accompanies a traumatic experience, the repeating intrusions that are unavailable to conscious assimilation, and the moment of unexpected recognition that can unexpectedly occur, thus moving the traumatized person out of a perpetual melancholia and into the possible healing of mourning” (116). Specifically, Burrows brings three texts together (Wide Sargasso Sea, Lucy and Sula) because “they all examine mother / daughter relationships in order to explicate the way history can wound and incapacitate” (11). Burrows, in her analysis, obviously privileges where the texts differ as well as ring similarly. “Trauma itself may provide… a link between cultures”; Burrows uses trauma theory, much of which is based in psychoanalysis, but her methodology concerns a materialistic cultural reading of the effects of trauma on those who live within a specific socio-historical and racial context” (20). Following Burrows’ strategy in part, I focus on the concept of the abject (as discussed by Julia Kristeva) and describe how people placed in this category by other people recognize their placement as abject and redefine and reclaim their places as subjects in the social structure; my project deals
with the material cultural and historical circumstances of each of my authors, which were chosen for their explicit use of what Kristeva would call the abject, and explores how these authors name and identify the space of the abject in relation to their immediate circumstances, wider cultural conditions and themselves.

My project concerns black women writers who find ways to articulate domains that have been pronounced the stuff of the abyss, actions that have implicated their victims, and who describe the societal polis with the voice of the exile that has the authority to point out what was done to him within oppressive societies—and even more important than what was done, why it was done. The victim is no longer defined by the crimes against her. As Linda Myrsiades points out, race studies has progressed from mere “race identity and difference to rewriting race without obliterating the fact of having been raced” (2); my contribution to this field of study is to point out how societal exiles show their intrinsic part in oppressive societies while refusing the labels that categories that these societies used to make them the zone of what Julia Kristeva terms the abject: the exile, the outlaw. In Myrsiades’ collected essays, Mara L. Dukats points out that Conde’s Tituba creates a space in which the protagonist of the canonized Scarlet Letter can think about herself as well as giving Tituba a space for her voice to be heard. Dukats at once “takes a page from Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark” in that she sees Tituba as a space where Hester Prynne can speak about herself (Myrsiades 7), as well as demonstrates that Tituba has a new tribunal against which to be heard. As in my representation of Conde and Black women writers as disparate and as similarly motivated as Cliff and Aidoo, the exile is at once used to define the walls of the polis, but also has a voice to show her integral part in the polis and in the Symbolic.

As many critics have noted, Africana women writers have a common ground of forced and unforced migration, self-re/invention (Liddell and Kemp) and oppression. As Ama Ata
Aidoo underscores, the struggle of Black women to have their struggle given validity along with the national struggles of Black people for equal rights should be considered equally valid (qtd. in Liddell and Kemp 1). However, this has not always been the case: Black women have been cast as other in the context of women’s studies, and have been degraded in the context of the Black tradition of resistance (Liddell and Kemp quote Stokely Carmichael’s statement that the only role for a Black woman in the SNCC “was prone” [2]). Africana women have fought for recognition and an audible voice in the context of the definition of nationalism and the privileges demanded by Blacks asserting their agency from the Americas through Africa: nationalist moments, as Anuradha Dingwancy Needham points out in her discussion of Aidoo, have often ignored Black women’s agency and their right to a voice as important parts of nationalist movements. Liddell and Kemp note the crucial role of Black women in the Black Power Movement and the struggle for the national independence of their countries in a now neo-colonial world.

The concepts of Lacan’s theories and his drives are not only consistent with Kristeva in the ways that matter to this project, but also make the basic psychoanalytic point that what is the problem is not merely the symptom of racism but how it develops—what abject drive force insists on the Evil Big Other of racism, as it were; in psychoanalysis, once the subject has learned to substitute his / her objects, and learned the meaning of substitution (e.g. s/he has the means to resolve his/ her issues), then the subject should be able to be able to see an actual other when he looks at his fellow man—as opposed to merely an other that reflects what the abject subject would like to do to this “other,” and is convinced that the other is completely compliant with the demands of, what to another, would be an abject other. Kristeva notes that “on close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no
matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject / object—etc.) do not exist or merely barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, abject” (Powers 207); the important thing is whose character representation in which literature is in fact abject to the other characters respective to it, and how Black women writers refuse to be abject so that someone else can retain the borders of his self and / or fantasy universe of racism, in which everyone should have forgotten about it already, by Dana’s time (in 1976)—Rufus asks plaintively that if slavery is over by Dana’s time, “why are they still complaining about it?” This is precisely before he asks her to burn the book she brought with her about slavery, which contains a rough map north, to freedom; Dana thinks bitterly that oppressive societies always knew the threat of dangerous books, and that even a friendly white can hardly be trusted (a thought she has several times throughout the novel). The map to freedom going up in flames (which was part of the book that Rufus insists that she burn) is a figment of literacy that is abjectly destroyed because of the symptom that Rufus associates with Dana (that is, he associates her with the ability to go on living—as opposed to refusing to get into life endangering exploits on his own; his sexual and death drives and his succumbing to them [at several points, Dana wonders whether Rufus actually wants to die, and it is only the knowledge present in his unconscious that allows him to “call” her across the centuries to save his life] make him an abject subject, and in the context of slavery, doubly so.).

This work (of Kristeva’s, that is) with boundaries and the self extends to a spiritual level, where the subject (ideally) attempts to attain plenitude, the unconditional acceptance of a group of others, and which at the same time does not refuse others membership for the reasons of their separate identities. Kristeva’s entire point in regard to the Christian Ecclesia is that the melancholy foreigner, unable to expel the old country and the old self in order to become a true
citizen of her new country, can triumph over psychosis by seeing the necessary splitting between old and new selves as an ongoing spiritual commitment that allows for the self to exist with others in a spiritual unity that goes beyond the borders of a country and thus at the same time permits plenitude (Strangers 82); the stranger and the resident of the home country create borders, splits, between the self and the other, and can continue to do this in a way that prevents psychosis (the inability to distinguish between the self/other) because they are offered a splitting that is also a transcendence over boundaries: the Ecclesia was a spiritual unity in which boundaries exist only to be replaced by the more important boundaries (between the body and spirit) that apply to everyone, regardless of spatial, patriotic boundaries, equally. That is, we all abject what is dead to us; we create societies around similar identifications with a particular abjection (creating a boundary in and of itself means that something is excluded, ab-jected, by this boundary); as humans, we find ways to create a land to exist in with others who ratify our identifications and belongings as their own. To a point that connects with the opposite of Kristeva’s notion of the Ecclesia, the attempt to expel those that do not belong in a body of people in which unconditional acceptance is granted to all its members (e.g. the dubbing of some colonial peoples as cannibals): when Michel de Montaigne delineated the “puny” self that everyone could perfect and therefore belong to, he decried the incursions of the Church and colonialist powers against the Indians of Peru and Mexico: Montaigne decries the butchery and creation of slaves as flesh food, because all humans have the capacity to attain a oneness in a self whose qualities extend beyond the superficial borders of language, culture and country (Strangers 118-123). “A new cosmopolitanism is being born, no longer founded on the unity of creatures belonging to god… but on the universality of a self that is fragile, casual and nonetheless virtuous and certain. Montaigne’s self, which never ceases to travel in the self is
already an invitation to explore the world and others with the same uncompromising kindness” (123). Octavia Butler’s Oankali (in her trilogy that comprises Lilith’s Brood) offer, by virtue of travel in terms of going through many selves in their vast lives and incorporating many selves by living as these selves in their loves, live out something very much like what Kristeva describes in her analysis of Montaigne: the concept of the self itself can be a concept of inclusion rather than exclusion, in tune with the goal of the Christian Ecclesia in which superficial divisions are possible to contain because they are overridden by a transcendent identification with a godhead that welcomes everyone regardless of patrilineal and patriotic origin; however, Butler problematizes what can superficially appear as a realized Ecclesia—everyone who doesn’t want to be part of this Other that accepts everyone, offered by the Oankali, is not allowed to “live in themselves” (Lilith’s Brood 443). As James Baldwin, in his “White Man’s Guilt,” states, “everyone deserves to live through everything life has to offer as themselves, in black and white as the printed page (as opposed to skin colorations that, in reality, range from what can be found in England and “the Russian steppes to the Golden Horn to Zanzibar”[324]), in a reality that is not written out for them as their fate by another subject’s Other (that is, black people need not fall into the trap of believing they deserve their fate, just as white people can avoid the even more terrifying trap of believing they deserve their own fate as oppressors—and that “black people need only do as white people have done to rise to where white people now are… white people carry in them a muffled fear that black people long to do to others what has been done to them… the history of white people has led them to a fearful baffling place where they… are not truly happy for they know they are not truly safe [322-23]). As Octavia Butler also demonstrates in her work, as a warning, is that if the abject of racism exists, the transcendence that allows for a merging of subjects is not possible—the difficulty experienced by Butler’s protagonist to
actually wield the knife when it comes time for her to kill her white ancestor who is in the act of raping her shows the anguish and the psychosis produced by racism and precisely not by the objects that racist societies have identified as other and therefore culpable for the clandestine desires that racist societies have projected onto their victims.

To discuss the abject, the concept must be understood in several phases: first, in the most basic terms of the bodily rejection of what it must reject to remain a subject (shit, vomit, objects that produce nausea, etc); second in terms of the subject-to-be’s rejection of the body of his mother as part of his own body—the ability of the subject to distinguish between his body and his mother’s; and, finally, this plays out in the lives of adults in terms of phobias, fetishes and socio-political relationships. Both children and adults deal with the abjection that structures phobia and fetish (the phobic object is one that must be turned from, cast off, at all cost—it is the object of dread, that causes disaster; to the same point, the fetish is an object that one is drawn to precisely because one knows it should not exert the draw that it does [Kristeva on phobic objects; Henry Krip on the fetish]). As Robert F. Reid-Pharr shows, what is termed abject can be a source of both pleasure and pain, and this is what works out in both phobic and fetish objects. Finally, on a socio-political level, the way the abject works in society involves the existence of a law that society obeys; Kristeva argues that with the crumbling of a religious law, our societies have crumbled into fascism of various kinds—her juxtapositions between her love for churches and her hatred for political persecution and genocide as a result of Communism and fascism in her *Interviews* bear out this point. On the same socio-political grounds, Frantz Fanon’s theories are valid on this basis: Fanon mentions the need to exclude the other in order to create the ordinary and the “civilized” zones of what is called society by the conquering nations and groups. Indeed, I discuss, with David Spurr’s work as a central help, the way the abject works in the dynamics of
colonialism and post-colonialist aesthetics and social-political rationale. All this is important in the way that adults in the novels that I discuss see the world, and these theories are worked out throughout my analysis of these novels. I provide some sources and definitions at the outset to prevent confusion here, however.

In order to become a subject, a child before the mirror stage must separate himself from the abject mother (the mother whose boundaries are mixed up with his own); this process of exclusion extends to the psychic work of the subject throughout her life: the blood and guts of the womb of the mother, which is the boundary that the subject once shared and now no longer shares, is the literal substance of the contaminating interior of the self that emits shit and blood, the substance that supports the life of the symbolic subject. “If abomination is the lining of my symbolic being, ‘I’ am therefore heterogeneous, pure and impure, and as such always potentially condemnable” (Powers 112). The rage of Louis Ferdinand Detouches, otherwise known as Louis Ferdinand Celine, who for Kristeva is the epitome of the struggling literary subject whose dilemma is the abject, is against the symbolic because of the heterogeneity that makes the symbolic necessary: if it were not for the abject, lawlessness, shit, which creates the symbolic law and makes necessary the skin, the boundaries, of the physical body, there would be no symbolic (McAfee 55). This dilemma of the subject plays out through the Bible (which gives Kristeva her earlier examples of the phenomenon of the abject in her Powers of Horror; Celine is her latter example) and its exclusions; Celine demonstrates the need to substitute a mystical return to the plentitude of the pre-mirror stage of development for the denigrated symbolic, as well as the function of using the abject to create the necessary boundaries of the symbolic. According to Kristeva, Celine’s anti-Semitism is his revolt against the Judeo-Christian law as well as his need to create boundaries for himself by exclusion: he is at least a member of the
group that is non-Jewish and therefore a member of a symbolic unity. This duality of reliance on
the symbolic and revolt against it, where it entails the exclusion of the stranger, the social others
in a given society, plays out through the dilemma of the literary work of the excluded: such as
Black women writers in the Diaspora.

Here I should also say a few words about how the abject functions in terms of the phobic
and the fetish objects: The phobic object substitutes for the object that makes us afraid, because
we cannot deal with the actual object itself. Discovering why one is afraid of spiders, for
example, may cure us of our fear of spiders—since the fear of spiders (that is, the phobic object)
was merely a substitution for our real fear that took the guise of spiders. Melanie Klein points out
that “the phobic defenses are erected against unconscious fantasies, which are linked to the death
instinct, in an attempt to control the external objects; this attempt is proportional with the attempt
to exercise omnipotent, obsessive control over internal objects” (Narrative of a Child Analysis).
Jay Lynn emphasizes how far afield the actual phobic object is from the real internalized object
that torments the patient—he gives, among many examples, one of a woman afraid to drive a few
miles in her car for fear that something terrible will happen; she knows rationally that driving a
few miles to go to a dance recital will not logically be likely to harm her, but she has replaced the
fear of driving with the fear of the reason she is afraid of driving (Monster in the Cave). This
structure of the phobic object, which can be described as, “I know that this is not the case, but
even so I fear / believe that this is really a dangerous object” coincides with Henry Krip’s
structure of the fetish, in which he uses a variation of my above phrase: “I know that it is not, but
even so… [I am afraid that what I know is not the case, is, in fact, the case].” Both of these
structures are important in my use of the abject because they show how the adult mind expels
what it cannot deal with in the form of the object of phobia and is drawn to the object of the
fetish. As Robert F. Reid-Pharr demonstrates in his paper on the behavior of men in prison who are drawn to anal sex, the absolute abject zone for a heterosexual man, the abject contains a lure of pleasure as well as a threat of fear or a need to expel the abjected object. All this is important in how Black women contain and abject the lure and the fear of the racist societies that contain what is abject for them as subjects. The entire thrust of my book is worthwhile because it emphasizes that in the midst of the abuse of racist societies, Black women function as subjects, not merely as abjects because racist subjects want to see them that way—these Black women are fully capable of ab-jecting the racists that would reduce them in this way in the novels that I analyse.

At this point, I bestow gratitude on Darieck Scott’s Extravagant Abjection, in which he summarizes Kristeva’s central gist in Powers of Horror thus: Scott points out that Kristeva’s definition of abjection emphasizes the processes of exclusion which are necessarily for the subject to develop the boundaries necessarily for a subject. “In Kristeva’s mapping of the development of subjectivity, this use of the term abjection describes how the (always incomplete and at-risk) achievement of an identity depends on certain objects-to-be (such as phobogenic elements or the female body or excrement) become reviled and cast off in order to consolidate the subject, which thereby becomes not only itself…but [an idealized self] that is “clean” and “defended”—while retaining an attraction and repulsion relationship to what is abjected. This process reflects and is reflected by social boundaries between races, genders and sexualities” (17). Scott goes on to point out that in queer use of the term abjection, it is emphasized that the borders of the self and the abject are always slippery and porous, and this formulation of the abjection underlies his use of the term. For Scott, the lack of political power black men have had over their self definition on the uneasy ground of homosexuality in the black community (in
terms of black men deprived of their status as men by a racist society [which makes it doubly hard for black men to own a queered definition] and exposed to homosexual relations due to unjust prison sentences) especially over their masculinity problematizes and provides room for slippage and definition in terms of the abject; “In reading representations of violations and humiliations in various scenes, [Scott] refers to the abject as accessing gender in a state of relative non-differentiation, gender as (however momentarily) not-yet-defined” (19). In Scott’s reading of the abject, the abject can be a resource of redefinition of the subject and the empowerment of the subject—of what the subject consciously chooses to exclude. While Scott’s project revolves around queer studies, his use of the abject is helpful to mine because it shows how the use of the concept can provide a space for ab-jection, of refusal of old boundaries that constituted what was of yesteryear, in Fanon’s terms, the white male subject whose Other was necessarily non-white, and of a redefinition of the boundaries of the subject.

The next section of my introductory chapter deals with how Black women writers and critics who deal with Black women writers’ subjectivity discuss how the Black female subject abjicts the degrading history that surrounds her from her ancestry throughout the Diaspora that included slavery. Christina Sharpe’s work helps with this in that she points out that Hortense Spillers’ list of “confounded identities” encompasses by implication the figure of the mammy that artists like Kara Walker have made abject in their dealing with how the significance of the mammy has figured in white, mainstream society. “The figure of the mammy is a quintessential example of the national and rhetorical wealth that Spillers articulates…. Her figure is strangely omnipresent in popular and high culture, advertising, film, music. There is an uncanny pleasure located in U.S. culture in the Aunt Jemima or mammy figure and her many appearances” (160). Kara Walker, as Sharpe points out, denormalizes the figure of the mammy by creating art that
some have called obscene—such as the silhouettes of several women suckling each other. This figure, according to Walker, was a metaphor for history: “My constant need to suckle from history… for myself, I have this constant battle, this fear of weaning. It’s really a battle that I apply to the black community as well, because all our progress is predicated on having a very tactile link to a brutal past” (qtd in Sharpe 161). What Walker describes sounds very much like Derieck Scott’s description of the abject as retaining a constant attraction and repulsion situation—the object of the brutal past, of what was made of the mammy in slavery and in its brutal aftermath (both physically and culturally), must be expelled, but in order to expel it, it must be examined and the part of it that is damaging must be abjected from the subject.

I go on to point out how white feminist psychoanalysis at times ignores points that are helpful in showing the functioning of a Black female subject and how she would deal with the attraction to the white phallus of power and how she would destroy it in the way that white female subjects are expected (according to Fanon and others) to destroy the phallus whose power they wish to claim. I intend to use Adrienne Kennedy’s texts as case study examples, simply because it interacts so perfectly with the case studies cited by Jean Walton and Christina Sharpe. My entire point revolves around the fact that Black female subjects have not simply sat idly by while black male subjects defined the abject as female in order for them to reclaim maleness in a racist society that forbade masculinity to blacks (as Scott points out the temptation and trap was such for some early advocates of the Black Power Movement [20]), but rather that there is a body of literature that discusses the abject in a way that allows a space for slippage and discovery of the subject (to borrow from Scott’s summary of his use of Kristeva’s concept of the abject).
It is important to emphasize that psychoanalysts like Melanie Klein, in their zeal to point out the infantile object present in the psyche of the adult woman who requires a reparation with her mother, whom she has desire to overtake, disembowel and destroy as a child and therefore fears likewise treatment from the mother, overlook the way that white female subjects have included the Black female body in their attempt at reparation, of creating a whole mother, with whom she has made psychic peace, by creating a portrait of this mother. Jean Walton points out that such a white female subject, in the empty space left for her by her artist brother in law, created a masterful work whose subject was a naked Black female subject; Klein uses this case of Ruth Kjar, the aforesaid white female subject, as evidence of the healing of the anxiety felt by little girls in regard to their mothers when such acts of reparation (the reproducing of the whole, undisemboweled “mother”) are made (qtd in Walton 242). The fact that the woman in Kjar’s painting was black demonstrates the anxiety on the part of a daughter of a white racist culture that has indeed disemboweled many black “mothers” in order to bestow upon white “daughters” the value of their bodies; Walton points out that “the white female imaginary is occupied not only by a fantasized retaliatory white mother but also by a racially differentiated Other. This Other will not be… white and is apparently crucial in negotiating how attempts at achievement will be received in a world where achievement is traditionally a white man’s prerogative”; after all, the brother in law of Ruth Kjar accused her of not creating the portrait of the naked negress, and Walton notes that Kjar’s choice of her subject may have denoted her need to show her brother in law that her art was but that of a primitive subject, unworthy of competition with his own artistic abilities (239-242). Jean Walton’s essay shows the need to demonstrate how the white woman who creates this picture of the Black woman is seen as an other / Other by the Black women she paints; in my essay on Michelle Cliff’s Free Enterprise, I show how the body
of the black slave woman is verbally inscribed by the after dinner dialogue following the display of Turner’s *Slave Ship* in the painting itself—and how Mary Ellen Pleasant (as drawn by Michelle Cliff) shows the picture of the Black woman, in whose body the infantile desire of the white woman seeks the reparation / forgiveness of her social and biological mammy / mother, looks back at her own racial ab-jected (m)other / object.

To very much the same point, but with a more direct focus on my own emphasis on the point that it is the Black female subject who grapples with the socio-psychological abject created by a racist society and within which her subjectivity struggles and ab-jects the abject of racism to define its own perimeters. Frantz Fanon has noted that the common fantasy on the part of white female subjects is to be raped by a large black man; Joan Riviere has similarly noted the need on the part of the white female subject (a specific one in her case analysis) to be ravaged by a large black man and then turn this black man over to “justice” [sic], which would include castration of this man whose sex she required to satisfy her own desires. Adrienne Kennedy’s work shows the psyche of a Black woman who continually identifies with signifiers that denote white women in her society (her narrator in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* repeatedly reminds us that the mother of the narrator was a white woman for all practical intents and purposes, “her hair as straight as any white woman”); in Kennedy’s work, we see the pattern described by Melanie Klein: the need to imprison, behead, disembowel and observe the mother’s rape, a process that is then feared by the female subject by way of reprisal; this fear makes the female subject want to take the place of the father in relation to the mother in other to make amends for the disembowelment / rape (or the desire to do so)—except Kennedy shows us that this pattern that is described for white female subjects is in fact enacted by Kennedy’s Black female subject. Where the abject (that is, in this case, the socially forbidden / taboo or violating object that must be expelled for the subject to
become a subject) comes into Kennedy’s play and into Klein’s scenario is here: the phobic figure of the black man who is supposed to disembowel the mother and whose role is then taken by the white father (that is, the role is taken in the ideation of the girl who takes her father’s role to make reparation) is a substitute for the abject white father who rapes, disembowels and can never make reparation to the Black female subject. When Kennedy’s subjects denounce their black fathers from the point of view of imprisoned, raped, or beheaded mothers, it is because they can never make reparation in a normal way because the father they are dealing with is not a normal father but one that is truly socially illegitimate and abject: the Dead White Father is what prevents Kennedy’s early protagonists from reaching their mothers and making peace with them in the process of reparation that Klein describes as necessary for the maturation of the femininity of little girls. What Adrienne Kennedy shows in her work is precisely how the raced / non-raced subject intersects with the masculinity / femininity binary so important to ego formation in psychoanalysis: as Jean Walton points out, blackness was irrevocably associated with libido and masculine libido in the early twentieth century (Fair Sex 25-26). The continual blame of the black father in Kennedy’s Funnyhouse of a Negro is answered conclusively in The Owl Answers when it is the identification with the white father at the end of the play that causes the psychotic breakdown (Clara loses her human identity to turn into the Owl that the Dead White Father has already been associated with). If little girls dream of taking their father’s genitals (the genitals represent power and the need to seize power for the little girls), using them to disembowel their mothers, and then making reparation to the mother by taking their father’s benign place with the mother (Fair Sex 22-27), the racial abjection of Adrienne Kennedy’s society refuses Kennedy’s protagonists this reparation: Kennedy’s protagonist is only allowed to castrate / lynch the black male, the action of which is considered quite proper in the ideation of Joan Riviere’s patient, and
indeed in the white female fantasies observed by Frantz Fanon [qtd in *Fair Sex*]. Adrienne Kennedy shows the abjection through which she must form her subjectivity by abjecting, refusing, this horror, this non-human state of being, when she shows that Clara loses her humanity by identifying with the Dead White (rapist) Father—in a word, Kennedy shows what Klein and psychoanalysts of her day miss out on: the maleness ascribed to black sexuality stands in as a phobic object for what cannot be dealt with by the society of the day (and perhaps even in our current society, given [for example] so many critical readings of Kennedy, which fail to notice the place the Dead White Father holds in the insanity and abjection in the play): the racist, rapist white father, whose abject violations are most felt by people like the real life counterparts of William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*. In Brown’s narrative (which reflects the actual relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings—with a twist; while Jefferson freed the Hemmings children, Brown’s novel demonstrates what could have easily been the fate of even a daughter of a president of the United States: Clotel [“the president’s daughter”] is forced to escape from a white man who offered her apparent security, after purchasing her at a slave auction, only to hold her as a slave and sell their daughter, Mary, at the bequest of his white wife; Clotel is, at the end of the novel, forced to jump off a bridge into the Potomac to avoid enslavement after she has returned, from a position of relative safety, to rescue her daughter, Mary).

To very much the same point, Hortense Spillers points out that the “I” of psychoanalysis and the social subject of race must be “built up from the ground”—psychoanalysis, according to Spillers, needs to admit that the “subject’s profound engagement with and involvement in symbolicity is everywhere social…the interior intersubjectivity would substitute an agent for a
spoken-for, a “see-er” as well as a “seen.” Spillers points out that Du Bois, in his theory of double-consciousness, observes the black subject looking at his face in the borrowed mirror from racist society and who “recognizes the falseness of that consciousness, as in a kind of theatrical mask, but also how he had come to wear it” (Spillers 141-43). Spillers argues that it is not enough simply, in Du Boisian terms, to be seen and to be spoken for by DuBois; it is necessary to understand what it meant to be seen, and to this degree “DuBoisian thought posed an instance of self reflexivity” (144). The problems that Spillers points out, in Kristevian terms, is the problem produced in primary narcissism when the subject in process is unable to differentiate himself from the body of the other: in this case, an uncertainty, an abjection, threatens the subject that cannot fully detach himself from the body of his mother (Powers 62-63) (be the mother biological or social, in this instance). The need for self reflexivity that Spillers / Du Bois point out is the need to differentiate the black body as a subject rather than an object, ab-jecting the object of the white, racial society that has handed the black person a mirror in which he only recognizes a theatrical image, as it were. The basic concept that Spillers / DuBois is dealing with here is abjection because it is abject to be unable to dissociate one’s subject from the non-speaking, objectified mask, which stands in for the mother’s body that the emergent subject needs to ab-ject in order to be a subject; as I show above, the lack of differentiation from the mask that Spillers notes parallels perfectly Kristeva’s discussion of the failure of primary narcissism (Powers 62-3). Theorists such as Michael Epp point out how the early minstrel performers on stage made this dissociation between the masks that they were forced to represent themselves with in the gaze of white society and themselves precisely through the complexities demanded by their performance: by the token by which they knew they had to perform according
to the expectations of the white gaze, they realized the existence of the gaze and how they as subjects dealt with this gaze.

To the same point, Du Bois’s Paris photograph exposition of middle class black people show the face of the black subject as presented as a subject in the face of the white gaze; as Smith points out, the hint of the prison mug shot that lurks in the framing of some of the photos makes the ironic point that the white gaze would prefer to see these black subjects as criminals, whereas they are as middle class in terms of the poses and all the social props that would be expected of any white subject. Contemporary with Du Bois’s Paris Exposition are the photographs taken by the Hampton Camera Club, which illustrate the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar—and in which black subjects are seen as subjects notwithstanding the ironical prejudice of the white oriented vision of some of the camera lenses. The point is that the gaze of the white camera catches itself in producing a fabled “negro criminality” and it is this that Du Bois in turn catches in his 1900 Paris Exposition: “Du Bois’ portraits are disturbing, shocking, in the way they mirror turn of the century criminal mugshots. Indeed, the images appear uncannily doubled, connoting middle class portraits and criminal mugshots simultaneously… by replicating the formal characteristics of the middle class portraits and the criminal mugshots, Du Bois’ “American Negro” photographs subvert the visual registers and cultural discourses that consolidated white middle class privilege in opposition to an imagined “negro criminality” at the turn of the century” (Smith 582). Du Bois destabilizes the stereotype of criminality, the mask projected by the white gaze of his time onto the face of black people and in its place produces replications of what would be middle class people if they were white—inferring the criminality within the white middle class that members of this class would like to project onto black bodies. Du Bois, in essence, ab-jects the criminality that is characteristic of the social body that black
people were / are burdened with in America and shows the source of the creation of the need to abject criminal desires and crimes—Du Bois shows that black bodies were used as objects to receive the blame that a white middle class could not possibly be thought guilty of harboring in their own terms and therefore, like Takaki’s early Puritans, needed a black beast loose in the fields to hunt down and blame and to thus consider their own criminality, their own clandestine, lawless urges tamed. My point is that Du Bois shows, in his exposition (under the light of Shawn Michelle Smith’s careful analysis) the fact that at least Du Bois’ “talented tenth” do not suffer from the primary narcissism that would be the result of failing to separate one’s identity from the white social body that accepts one’s body as criminal and blameworthy and as a member of this social body only as such.

I am assisted to a great degree by the examples of theses that resemble my own, created by critics who have pointed out the duality of representation of the self among various audiences as represented by single films and literary texts (my hand-picked examples, due to lack of space, are Keith M. Harris’ analysis of Boyz in the Hood and Rita Keresztesi’s analysis of Countee Cullen’s novels); these representations involved the abject self from the perspective of one group of criteria and a self with firm boundaries by the lights of other audiences within the same medium, which represents two respective audiences. The fact that an otherwise abject character can choose a different representation of the self for other audiences problematizes the analysis that Spillers offers concerning the reduction to “flesh” created by the socio-cultural contexts of slavery and Jim Crow; while of course one cannot confuse a limited audience that involves the oppressed groups themselves with the dynamics of the larger racist culture, the fact that the larger racist culture is unable to dehumanize its surviving victims that are not nailed to ship’s hulls and burned allows room for analysis of how these survivors establish and maintain their
subjectivity among the abject racist world. As Octavia Butler’s heroine, Lauren Olamina writes of the community she has established and in which, notably, it is not strange to the children of the community that the community is made up of an absolute racial mix, “We are a harvest of survivors” (*Parable of the Sower*).

Harris’ analysis of *Boyz in the Hood* shows that while “as a visual image Doughboy is narratively and aesthetically abject… the dispossessed… very much a black man, not removed from the film’s range of black masculinity, but nonetheless not what a black man should be,” he is a self-conscious character that makes a persona and a community out of the circumstances and qualities of his own abjection. Harris argues that it is to Singleton’s credit that *Boyz in the Hood* is not a simple morality play, with the abject character being a bad character on the road that will, through many trials, transform him into a good character. “Dough-boy is an anti-hero, conscious of his abjection, knowing of his environment and mastering of it. As the rejected son and the ex-con, Doughboy creates his own community of men in which he is the leader and protector” (92-3). In the world of this film, then, what is abject in one social context is a set of circumstances manipulated to include an accepting community within another social group.

To the same point, Keresztesi points out that an apparently abject character, Sam Lucas in Countee Cullen’s *One Way to Heaven*, functions as the abject confidence man in order to unmask racist, exotic expectations on the part of white readers later on. “Sam is scarred in body and physically marked as abject from the first moment he appears in the novel… . [his] scarred body serves as the organizing center for the second, trickster narrative” (26-29). “Cullen counteracts the discourse of exoticism of the New Negro movement with a narrative of abjection and death. In order to expose white desire for the “black sublime” (for primitivism and sexualized and linguistic exoticism) as well as black moral exceptionalism… as artificial and
displaced fantasies, Cullen projects a castrating image of black male sexuality and a pretense of religious conversion” (29). Keresztesi points out that while Cullen’s character may appear abject on superficial levels, the function of this character’s abjection is to disappoint those who would, in fact, objectify the black body in one way or the other—the abjection of Sam Lucas, in the end analysis, implicates the society that would have abjected him in the first place.

In this project I point out that Black women writers, as subjects in process, use the abject to create boundaries and to exclude and reform the oppressive symbolic of racist and sexist societies. Like Celine, they construct a group to exclude, to create a symbolic as well as a state of plenitude (unconditional belonging) for themselves; healing, I argue, is shown in Black women’s literature where members of the initially excluded group are permitted back into the symbolic of the novels without threatening the symbolic of the principle characters of the novels. My project points out where Kristeva’s abject intersects and extends the questions of Frantz Fanon’s concept of social zones (the creation of excluded areas of a city / country so that the social other can reside apart from the colonizer, the racist); it also furthers the work of critics such as Henry Krips, who points out that the respective social contexts involved give meaning to Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory. I point out that Black women subjects call into question the symbolic of the moral, scientific and political edifices of society (the church, the medical profession, political bodies and the police, etc) because these edifices beg the heterogeneous chaos that they create through their racist and sexist exclusions. These Black women then, in turn, in a way homologous to Kristeva’s Celine, create mystical substitutions for this emptied symbolic, which exclude, abject, this symbolic-as-abject in its turn. That is, Celine abjects Jews, because he dislikes the laws that extend out of Judeo-Christian society; to the same point, Black women
writers abject various aspects of the white society that has made them outcasts, including the white women that have been sanctified and made into a basis for the mores of these racist societies.

The concept of abjection, where it means the dehumanization of the racial / colonial / gendered other to the level of an object (Judith Butler calls this abjectification), has long been present in post-colonial studies (see my discussion of David Spurr below). This dehumanization entails associating the victim with filth, defilement and an outlawed, othered state, and is, as Frantz Fanon has demonstrated, necessary for the creation of the colonial State / Subject: without a zone containing the irrational and allegedly criminal, which shows which part of society is ordered and rational (e.g. that of the controlling race, gender and / or colonial system), the State as Subject lacks definition. Carol E. Henderson points out that the white male body serves to represent the American body politic (12), while the American prison system according to several Black prison narratives works for the abjectification of black men—that is, it consigns them to a zone whose denizens “do not enjoy the status of a subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject” (Drake 130).

Julia Kristeva, I argue, in her analysis of the abject, takes up where Judith Butler’s definition of abjectification and Fanon’s description of the vegetable classification of the native in colonial studies before any revolt has been successful (Wretched of the Earth) leave off. Just as a corpse is the abject of the subject, without subjectivity or the ability to be a subject, so genocide is the abject of a State whose laws were supposed to protect its citizens. The implications of this definition of abject act on two levels: the evidences of genocide (e.g. a heap of children’s shoes as an exhibit on the Nazi holocaust) are abject to the subject as a corpse is abject (Powers 232); they show us how the law of the State can break down into the chaos of
destruction and how fragile that law is. By this same gesture, a given State has never protected those against whom genocide or racial destruction is committed is an abject “State” (as in abject “subject”), an entity whose laws creates pollution and chaos instead of order for everyone.

Kristeva, in her analysis of the abject, points out the changing definitions of what is considered the exile, the outlaw (Strangers), as well as the role of the abject for the individual subject: the abject is not merely an object but rather the dynamic of a socially constructed relationship, both external and internal. The abject is the need to expel what threatens the integrity of the subject; it is vomit and it is a dead body; it is also a crime that shows how fragile the control of the legal system of the State / Subject is; the abject may also be a fetish when it loses its status as objet a, “a piece of shit,” according to Lacan and Kristeva. “Abjection,” Kristeva says, is “the only signified of the [signifier of] want”—desire that requires being reduced to a body, and a debased body at that (Powers 233).

The process of abjection as it relates to the common experiential denominator, the abandonment of the maternal in favor of the paternal in patriarchal culture, is as follows: The subject finds it necessary to expel the maternal in order to enter social relations; however, this maternal is still important in some way to the subject (for the male child, it returns as erotic; for the female child, it must be mourned and given up; stultifying this mourning process is melancholia). The expulsion of the (m)other takes place on both a psychological level and a physical one: the individual subject requires a boundary that separates her from the other, whom she associates with the body she has left behind to become a subject, the non-speaking flesh and blood of the mother; this physicality is associated with the “inside” and “outside” distinction that is also made in the case of bodily wastes. However, at the same time, the subject is integrally related to what it must exclude; the abject is somewhere between an object and a non-object
(contrary to Freud who constitutes the body of the mother as outside subjectivity \([Powers 226]\)).

The expulsion of the (m)other and its implications for the female sex relates in terms of the dynamic of the abject to the way the colonial other is abjectified and the way the colonized subject necessarily abjects her condition as mere filth that can be exploited by the powers that are (who, necessarily, create this filth rhetorically as well as the physical filth of Fanonian zones and prisons).

I argue that Kristeva’s social and psychoanalytical analysis is a crucial tool for race matters, gender studies and post-colonial studies precisely because the raced, gendered subject shares the basic components of the experience of humanity with the colonial / gendered / racial subject in a sexist / racist / colonial world, and vice versa; the “ethics of psychoanalysis implies a politics: it would involve a cosmopolitanism of a new sort that, cutting across governments, economies and markets, might work for a mankind whose solidarity is founded on the consciousness of its unconscious—desiring, destructive, fearful… impossible” \((Strangers 192)\). The individual’s exclusions of the mother and then of whatever other is culturally set out for exclusion (relative to the place, time, economical expediency and social habits of a given society) are something that potentially unites people precisely because of this shared difference. The abject becomes the refusal of this shared difference that creates death and destruction because of societal / individual hate or intolerance for those defined as other. By shared difference, I mean that each individual necessarily has an abject that defines the borders of her subject; the version of the self that relates to this abject is a “stranger” to the image of the self that the subject recognizes. The concept of the abject works on two levels: it shows how the rhetorical debasement of the other is constructed by racist / sexist / colonial systems, and how this rhetorical debasement justifies physical dehumanization and abuse (e.g. saying slaves, in
their native lands were “primitive” and hyper-sexualized was used as an excuse for raping slaves); and it gives us a window through which to analyze the way the abject functions for subjects who are also slaves: how slaves dealt with being the subject of abuse and how they viewed the abusers who created and / or maintained and perpetuated the filth of the slave system in the first place.

Kristeva’s definition of the abject allows the critic to observe that the oppressed subject is still a subject, and makes exclusions of his / her own. Kristeva’s abject also allows the critic to realize that what is abject to the subject (colonial or colonized) has the uncomfortable relationship of being “on the border” between the subject and is what the subject expels (Powers), whether it is a criminal whose crime shows the fragility of existing laws (Portable Kristeva 232); or whether it is a society in which the hands of a lynch victim can be set on display in a shop window—a society that DuBois has tried to belong to, attempted to reason with in the academic sphere, and which produces evidence that it is irrational (Dusk of Dawn 67). In a world that attempts to use the oppressed subject in a way that defines the normative Subject, the oppressed subject is not without her own subjectivity, not without her own need to expel as psychic waste the codes that would make her a non-human. Reading Black women writers for their recognition of their society’s abject and abjectification of its others is to read how their protagonists as subjects create their own abject out of the material that their society layers onto them and which they cannot simply internalize and psychically survive.

Many studies to date have discussed how the normatively defined abject is used by the Subject / subject to create its boundaries (without which, as Tara Green points out, the subject fades into an unthinking unity with her background; her terms recall Fanon’s description of the vegetable condition of the native before he rebels against colonial regimes). Laura Wexler, for
example, points out that analyzing the Real of history shows what cultural texts in other historical periods screen and exclude in order to create their relative Subject / subject in a way that is socially acceptable to them (“Seeing Sentiment”). Robert F. Reid-Pharr points out that the abject of homosexuality is used by Eldrige Cleaver in his prison account is “the specter of black boundarylessness” (603); Tara T. Green’s edited book of essays on what she sees as the trope of confinement in black writers’ works (which in and of itself deals with the expulsion of the alleged black “other” from society), clarifies the way the cultural abject of homosexuality interacts with the way the prison system abjectifies its inmates to dehumanize them. And before any of the abovementioned critics wrote, W. E. B. DuBois in his 1900 photograph display for the 1900 Paris Exhibition evokes the image of the prisoner mug shot in the well-dressed, well-groomed portraits of middle class African Americans to define by way of exclusion the power of these African American subjects to define themselves as every day citizens as opposed to criminals (Shawn Michelle Smith). The point of my study is to show not merely how the would be victim of racist societies does not subscribe to the defiled other that these societies pretend to expel, but rather how these others themselves see these socially defiled terms as necessary threats to their subjectivity, as abject. For example, Adrienne Kennedy’s Dead White Father is himself an abject other for Sarah / Clara, the subject of her plays; on the same point, Rufus, the white slave owner of Kindred (who really is Dana’s ancestor [as opposed to the irrational question posed by THEY in Owl, “If you are his ancestor, why are you a Negro?”]) demands that Dana take the place of the scarred, horrific body of Alice, Dana’s Black female ancestor, after he has caused this ancestor to take her own life; Rufus insists that Dana position herself in the way that would make her a body, mere property (“a slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her”[260]) on the terms that Dana and Alice were, for him, “One woman, both two halves of a
whole” (257). In this context, Dana threatens Rufus with “Abandonment. The one weapon Alice hadn’t had. Rufus didn’t seem to be afraid of dying… But he was afraid of dying alone, abandoned by the person he had depended on for so long” (257). Butler demonstrates that Rufus’s vision mirrors the insanity of the ideological system that makes it possible to absorb people’s bodies between the lines of property deeds—he is unable to differentiate Dana from Alice, in effect, because of the way he sees them as “a man of his time,” as Dana refers to him. And like the abject threat to the borders of a symbolic, Rufus’s presence in Dana’s life is not qualified by his time period; instead it floats, a question mark, even when her husband claims that they have “some chance” of staying sane “now that [Rufus] is dead” (264); the context within Rufus’s presence appears is marked by the marks on Dana’s body that were made during her historical past—the scars that she has from going to the past to save the life of her white ancestor (264), and are part of the history that exists for her in the missing spaces that are left by the historical society Dana and her husband visit after her arm heals (to attempt to assure themselves that these things, these people they met in the past, did indeed exist—although, suspiciously, “the house was dust, like Rufus”[262; italics mine]. That is, the structure of the house set aside for plantation owners, apart from the slave quarters, is a part of the past that is conspicuously absent and present; it is absent in the historical past, but Dana is mentally positioned to accept it as resembling the house that she and her husband could have afforded in their present, and as “home.”). Dana’s missing member and anxiety in the “Epilogue” of the novel characterize “the danger to [her] personally” that “walked and talked and sometimes sat with Alice in her cabin in the evening” (234); that is, Rufus becomes “the danger,” “The boy,” “He. Rufus. He was such a fixture in [Dana’s] life that it wasn’t even necessary to say his name” (242), a representative of an ideology that threatens Dana’s subjective borders. Rufus ceases,
finally, even to be more than undifferentiated dust, which has become a question, a source of anxiety that prods the larger question as to how safe Dana’s sanity is now that this has happened, in the contexts of what she has to see as potentially her society (that is, the American past that has been influenced by racist ideologies). However, the novel is interesting for an analysis of abjection because it shows the degeneration of this white slave owner’s son’s mentality under the influence of “his time.” When Rufus succeeds his father as owner of the Weylin plantation, he takes his father’s place and even has Dana hurt immediately after his father has died while threatening Dana that he will have her killed if anything is allowed to happen to Rufus while she is present in this past; Rufus literally takes his father’s place in terms of the threat of the system of slavery, under which Dana has no rights, and is referred to as a danger, a threat, reducible to an interchangeable oppressive force that cannot, in any meaningful way, be distinguished from any other oppressive force, a “formidable grip” (when Dana attempts to stop him from irrationally separating a Black man from his family because Rufus is jealous [238]). Rufus’ degeneration into a mere agent of oppression is underscored when he hits Dana in a way that reminds her of the way the patroller hit her during an attempt to rape her (just as Rufus has attempted to rape her), after she stabs him to stop his attack (260).

What my project attempts with Black women writers is to show precisely how they are cognizant of the abject and abjectification processes in their world and how they go about defining the boundaries of their own subjects, in spite of the all but overwhelming, brutal attempts on the parts of their societies to destroy them. Using the terms of the abject to examine the African American subject (as opposed to the African American abject “subject,” as critics such as Linda Kintz refer to Adrienne Kennedy’s protagonists) allows a focused glance at what women of African descent in the Americas, when faced with slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, other
so-called more humane social exclusions, do to define the oppressive forces as abject in their own right. As subjects, the right to define boundaries entails the right to define the abject anew and in their own terms. These ways in which black subjects create the racist / sexist / colonial oppressor as abject is the focus of my study.

David Spurr notes that Kristeva’s idea of the abject is useful for establishing a relation “between abjection in the individual human psyche and the procedures of exclusion and vilification which enter into the hierarchy of class difference… both structures seem to depend for their internal coherence on a symbolic exclusionary tactic: the horror of the Other, the repudiation of the scapegoat” (78-9). Kristeva herself says that the importance of noting that the abject is not subject or object, but rather a dynamic that represents “the crisis of the subject insofar as it would not yet be or no longer be separated from the object. Its limits would no longer be established… it is a question then of a precarious state in which the subject is menaced by the possibility of collapsing into a chaos of indifference” (qtd in Spurr 78); this “indifference is the lack of difference towards which there is always a temptation to return, a temptation cut short by the laws of exclusion, such as the incest taboo… by which the subject wards off the object and constitutes it as other” (Spurr 78). I can elaborate further, however, on how Kristeva’s concept of the abject is useful in post-colonialist / gender / race studies: the abject is useful in discussing how subjects retain their subjectivity when a structure that offers to provide them with law and morality has been removed; that is, the concept of the abject allows a discussion of how subjects find a new source of boundaries, new definitions for their respective subjectivity. This fact shows it is possible to find a new source of boundaries after the collapse of an older system of values—that is, subjectivity itself is not contingent on any one structure that offers to provide boundaries (e.g. a code as to what constitutes “sin” and threatened undifferentiation). Or, the
subject can retain the core of an older system of values, and the abject for this subject would be what would defile this older system of values: for instance, Africans who came to this continent with their native culture and religion were able to retain the morals they had always had; what defiled their people and their morals was abject. The process abjection itself is what actually structures institutions such as colonial regimes and religions to begin with: “religion is based on the exclusion of the abject through certain taboos that serve to reinforce the Symbolic against any threats from the semiotic” (Reading Kristeva 125). The fear of abjectification (becoming the object) itself shows the mutability of the roles of subject and object: the presence of the abject (present in the threat to the melancholic [which is, after all, an identificatory disorder where subject and object become indistinguishable from one another {Anlin Cheng 123}]) begs the question of “the structure of desire and need nurturing the power distinction [of agent and agentless, oppressor and oppressed]” (Anlin Cheng 124). Anlin Cheng points out that the identification of subject and object is not so simple as a system of racial and colonial binaries would lead us to believe, because the abject of a racist society can be assumed even by a melancholic who cannot abject the dehumanization of the racist society and who repeats that societal structure of racial oppression. A subject, then, that can reject a racist society is capable by definition of locating his own abject, and, as I point out in my discussion of DuBois, can find that abject as what is produced the racist society itself.

Anlin Cheng points out that focusing on the psychic injuries of the racially oppressed is often considered “strategically harmful and to be studiously avoided”; these psychic injuries, she argues, are extensive for the raced subject because it must incorporate the loss that is the injury inflicted by racism (175). However even if Anlin Cheng’s description of limited agency for racial melancholics is correct on a wide scale, her analysis of the racial melancholic’s process of
identification shows the fluidity of identity and a possible transference of the abject even among melancholics. “Identification is a fluid and repetitive process that in a sense opposes the certitude of identity, providing an origin of identity that identity would just as soon forget in order to maintain its own immediacy and wholeness” (177; my italics). The thing that the melancholic would just as soon forget, of course, is the object that the melancholic cannot replace, the object of a livable society that has been taken away by racist attacks: that is, what makes the melancholic thus is the intrusion of an object that threatens the melancholic’s identity and which cannot be expelled / replaced. The problem of the melancholic is that he cannot expel an object that is necessarily abject for his subject—he cannot dissociate himself from the abjection of a racist society. However, as Anlin Cheng notes, the racially melancholic subject can “incorporate power’s identity, if not its abjection” (179): the racially melancholic subject can take the place of the societal Subject in that he goes on to discriminate on a racial basis as he has been discriminated against (175-79). Anlin Cheng’s study of melancholia, then, demonstrates the fluidity of a subject and the fact that racist power’s abject can be assumed by the melancholic. Since it is not the case that all sufferers of racism simply accept the racist society’s abject, it is arguably the case that they can see the racist society that created such abjectification as itself abject—a zone of chaos and illogic and bloodshed. DuBois can be said to draw this conclusion, because he makes a comment on the rational audience that exists in his society after the lynching of Sam Hose—he concludes that “there was no such definite demand for scientific work of the sort that I was doing, as I had confidently assumed would be easily forthcoming” (67). The immediate context of DuBois’ realization shows he is commenting on the society, not an identification with the power or the abject of the racist society. The fact that DuBois recoils from rather than face the sight of Sam Hose’s knuckles in the window of the grocery store just down
the street from him (67) demonstrates that he identifies not only the horrifying, bloody object as such, but also the fact that the grocer has adorned his window with this bloody object. The language that DuBois uses here is not the same language that would have been used in racist or colonialist discourse that defines “native” and/or raced subjects as abject—the racist society (as my discussion of Ida B. Wells and lynching below shows) decked out evidences of its abject to best extol the horror of its objects. DuBois simply turns away from the expected and all too common horrifying sight; his refusal of the abject is his own and is hardly melancholic.

Kelly Oliver argues that Kristeva herself manifests melancholia, which appears in her refusal of homosexuals as people who “attempt to replace the father with a mother” they cannot separate from; Kristeva herself, Oliver argues, does this with her theory of the paternal mother (that is, the mother is not merely a body from which the subject must detach herself but rather the semiotic language that prepares the individual for subjectivity; the function of the Symbolic, attributed to the father, is held by a mother that can introduce the infant to subjectivity). “She longs for the real maternal body that lies beyond the Symbolic, even while she realizes that it is always already a representation” (140). However, Kristeva arguably allows for individuals to form their own sexuality and subjectivity and (therefore, by implication) their own abjections when she says that sexuality is something unique to each individual (140-41). If Kristeva, as Oliver posits, is melancholic, even though Oliver acknowledges at the same time that Kristeva believes that individuals form their own sexuality (and therefore not a sexuality that requires any one abjection—Kristeva’s lesbian love, the expression of which takes her back to her mother, is part of her individual sexuality and permitted in these terms, for example), it follows that Kristeva’s abject is a dynamic that happens for each individual, even individuals who struggle with melancholia; indeed it is the analyst’s job “to provide these individuals with new fantasies
with which they can live with what Kristeva sees as their primary loss—the loss of the mother” (141). Therefore, what the abject might mean to Kristeva per se both illustrates the function of the abject in her theories as well as opens the door for individual expressions of the abject.

Kristeva’s longing for her mother devolves into what can be seen as her longing for her mother tongue and mother country. Kristeva may express this sense of being an exile in terms of religion—which she repeatedly says has no replacement in its capacity of the symbolic in the modern world. “The religion that meant nothing to the exile in her own country becomes the authority of law in her new country… it is possible that foreign law (with its apparent arbitrariness) combined with mourning for her lost motherland led the exile back to her abandoned religion” (Reading Kristeva 133). Kristeva’s response to Communism in Bulgaria, from which she was exiled since she accepted French citizenship, may have been her acceptance of a law (religion) to replace what she sees as a law that itself creates her and her religion as abject, exiles. Kristeva’s descriptions of sometimes wild sexual behavior of foreigners who leave their morality behind in their old country demonstrates that the abject is a choice selected with the law that one chooses (134), since it is apparently equally as easy to adopt a religion / morality that meant nothing to the individual when she was in her native country while she is in exile. This adopted religion does, however, relate Kristeva’s family’s values (Kristeva’s melancholic attachment to her mother, left behind, and the icon of the Virgin which is forever associated with her mother [Reading Kristeva 133]), which are not the values of the state of Bulgaria. It influences Kristeva’s description of Sofia in terms polarized around the structures of the church and masses of corpses that are what comes to mind for her when she thinks of war torn Bulgaria.

What Kristeva states in her numerous interviews shows that she sees religion as a language of the speaking subject; to be denied or deprived of one’s religion is to lose access to
the source of a language upon which her subjectivity is based. “Religion was once the privileged vehicle of the speaking subject’s expression. In modern capitalism, however, destructuring takes precedence over structure and excess overrides restraint…. Religion has no longer been able to acknowledge the speaking subject. And when social groups or classes rely on instinctual forces no longer held in check by moral constraints, they cloak them in totalitarianism, which is why capitalism has led to different forms of fascism (Interviews 96-97). Kristeva’s juxtaposition between the order of her remembered church in Sofia and the waste and corpses that surrounded it through war illustrates her feelings in regard to abjection where it applies to the creation of a social law and the need for a social or religious law, which in turn hinges on the ability of the speaking subject to be constituted. In her interview on Sofia and what it means to her, she refers to its meaning to her as “a springboard to time regained” (139); in the context of these interviews, this time, this cultural space and meaning, has to do with the law and the constitution of the subject. Hence, Kristeva’s constitution of her subjectivity in the terms of the law and the destruction of the law through the forces of fascism / Communism is, in her own words centered around the image of a church (e.g. the law of religion) and the bodies that surrounded that church in the battle over this piece of cultural heritage that was the Sofia that Kristeva remembers. The bodies appear in the church of the Dragalevtsy monastery, near Sofia, where Kristeva as a child used to spend vacations with her family. Kristeva recounts, in this context that, “Personally, I knew Levsky; Levsky fought against the Turks. After he was arrested, he smashed his skull against the prison wall to avoid torture. You can see the Levsky monument when you go to Sofia…” Off of this recollection of a defender of Sofia against the Turks, Kristeva segues, apparently, into a story of other defenders of sacred things and the body count that accrued as a result of this defense: “Sofia is [one of the] the only European capital[s] to have a mausoleum”;
this mausoleum housed the body of the subject of the anti-Nazi and the Reichstag trial, Georgi Dimitrov, who was blamed for the Reichstag burning because he was a Soviet (Interviews 139-40). This mention of a body killed because of the rise of fascism, in Kristeva’s interview, fits thematically with her point that the lack of religion and the lack of law have allowed the incurrence of fascism in many forms (including the fascism that arraigned an anti-Nazi like Dimitrov in order to accuse Communists for affronting the Nazi party). What abjection means, on a social-political level, then, to Kristeva, in light of her personal reflections, her history (as recounted by Kelly Oliver) and her interviews, is that the law that creates the possibility of the symbolic is lost when we refuse to acknowledge a law, a religion (the juxtaposition between the bodies of defenders of their political causes, the reference to the crimes of the Nazis and Kristeva’s attachment to old churches shows this connection between religion and a symbolic law). This definition of a sociopolitical abject is important in the way the abject is used by writers like Adrienne Kennedy, who invoke literal images of the law in history and politics in order to show their vindictiveness and destructiveness in the light of a helpless or hurtful religious image that is unable to rescue the would-be victims of these destructive historical and political images (as discussed in Chapter Three, which illustrates that Kennedy’s Rat’s Mass is set up in contexts that suggest the operation of the Dead White Father’s traumatic gaze objects [the religious statues that turn into Nazis at the end of the play]).

Since Kristeva notes that the corpse is the ultimate abject of the subject and the evidence of genocide / masses of corpses shows the fragility of the law in its violations, Kristeva’s interview, “Sofia,” can be read in terms of the law of religion that cannot contain or control the abjection of Bulgaria under the regime of its governments. This shifting of laws and the abjections they exclude makes sense in the light of the definition of Kristeva’s subject-in-
process: the other is within, and must be embraced; the subject in process is a forever ongoing affair, and so one’s rejections and abjects are an unending process; there is always a relationship between the self and the other (Reading Kristeva 188). On the other hand, “an obligation to the other cannot come from the isolated, unified subject [presupposed by traditional ethics] because the very existence of the other is presented as an afterthought or as a fight to the death” (188).

This changing of one’s country marks, this acceptance of the other and of changing others and of the changing subject, makes the discussion of what is considered abject very fruitful in a discussion of Black women novelists whose work necessarily involves exile, subjects-in-process and changing homelands.

From Kennedy through Conde, Black women writing in a Diaspora that represents the traumatic separation of Black women from what would have been their original, African cultures respond to the psychotic mythos of their racist societies in a way that allows them to attempt to abject madness to preserve their own sanity. In Adrienne Kennedy’s Funnyhouse of a Negro and The Owl Answers, her society, in the form of a dead father, will not stay away from her door; it persists in dropping dead bodies in her hands and at the same time removing her power to take care of them. The mythos of this society is the cause of insanity; the fact that it is beyond the rationality it contradictorily claims is what torments Clara who is unable to abject the madness of this world to save herself: for example, Clara’s is a society of literature and books, but it repudiates any attempt to stick with the creeds it boasts; in reality it has so poor a hold on the ideologies it professes to support that it is homologous to Clara’s inability to preserve and order the pages of her notebook. In Michelle Cliff’s Free Enterprise, the moments in the novel that take its protagonists closest to insanity are those moments when they encounter the reality of the “peculiar institution” (the institution of slavery that Southern apologists attempted to glamorize
in language that presents a state of plenitude); in these moments, they are surrounded by this reality. When Cliff’s protagonists take the form of the outcasts of society, it is because they are, in fact, abjecting any role they could rationally have in this society: Cliff’s Mary Ellen Pleasant leaves the South in the guise of a limping, defective slave, and murders some white boys who attempted to make her play “Jump Jim Crow” for them on the way out. Pleasant notes, “I don’t think I had ever been more frightened than on that journey. I had been born into freedom… And here I was, just like that, my mother’s gun the only thing between me and it. And signs of it were everywhere, of course” (139). And Conde’s I Tituba Black Witch of Salem cries out, “Who, who had created this world”—a world where old women are hanged for no crime in marketplaces, a world where insanity is let loose in the form of the perfect society created by Puritans. The mythos of these respective societies is what creates the abject that these Black women protagonists must expel to remain subjects; failure to expel the terms of these societies is what creates insanity (as Kennedy’s early plays exemplify; her later plays, such as her Evening With Mark Essex, show what is sometimes necessary to abject the insanity that society would inflict upon us: a ring of black people say of Mark Essex, “We thought he was an angel of mercy. We thought he was trying to save us… Dead Mark Essex.”). The actions of the 1973 New Orleans hotel sniper, Mark Essex, are actions that produce a oneness, a mythos of a black savior, a state of plenitude that must offer a sacrifice to attain this state, in the face of a social system in which the continual police murder promotes the societal vision of a white-run society.

Having defined the thrust of my analysis in this dissertation, I now step back and define the stages and types of the abject according to Julia Kristeva, and how they work in my analysis. The abject, in concrete terms as it emerges initially in human experience, is what we expel from the boundaries of the self, thus creating these boundaries by virtue of exclusion: shit, piss, vomit;
later, the abject is what we associate with the urge to vomit or with defilement (the sight of milk skin is enough to make Kristeva want to vomit [Powers 3]—that is, the abject, unlike Freud’s repressed, is continually present in symbolic terms that interact with the semiotic [the milk skin is revolting in Kristeva’s symbolic terms and semiotic reaction: the urge to vomit complements this symbolic categorization in semiotic language, the language of the body that expresses the feeling that she is about to vomit]); later, the abject functions in the creation and destruction of society and social mores, calling subjects to return to what the culture has repressed in terms of mystical developments (Kristeva cites art, music, dance, literature as manifestations of the mystical in society; these developments include the brutality of exclusions made by them: they allow for plenitude [the sense of belonging unconditionally to a group], as well as for exclusions such as racism and anti-Semitism) (Powers 179-80). From Kristeva’s point of view, Frantz Fanon’s zones can be seen in the light of the precondition for subjectivity—abjection: the zones that are created by colonialist societies to compartmentalize (and hence construct) the other (according to Fanon), are duplicated on the scale of the individual as well as in the terms of social groups that refuse and abject the colonialist divisions and zones, in a process of definition and exclusion that is never quite stable or forever set. Kristeva lets us see that if colonialism created zones, so do the oppressed subjects of these colonials. Remarking this points up the fact that these repressed subjects are not merely victims but also agents, by definition of their subjectivity.

The concept of the abject functions on several levels: it describes the repulsion of different foods and the expulsions of bodily matter; the breaking of legal / social laws; and it plays a part in phobia and fear; finally, and not least, it is resident in many types of desire. Kristeva unravels her thread that takes us through the maze from the state of indifferentiation
with the mother (the first and always already archaic other), the rejections necessary to
subjectivity (the subject must make a distinction between himself and his mother just as he must
make a distinction between himself and his own shit); the food rejections of the individual;
through the collective, social meanings that food rejection take on in respective cultures (that is,
in many cultures religions demand abstinence from various substances in order to be in
accordance with the Law of religion, which stands in for the Law of the Father. The individual
rejects phobic objects that s/he must separate from him/herself: the subject lives in fear of the
ambiguity that exists in the dichotomies of the self / other, subject / object, inside / outside;
abjection (implicit in ambiguity) blurs the line of differentiation that must exist for the subject to
be a subject as opposed to an undifferentiated object (in archaic terms, the (m)other who
threatens envelopment; in colonial terms, the undifferentiate primal hordes of natives who are, as
Jamaica Kincaid puts it, “a people, not a man.”). Hence, phobia, fetishization / perversion
function in the same terms as abjection: phobia, fetishization / perversion revolve on the drive of
unspecific want, desire without an object and therefore without a defined, definable subject
(*Powers* 14 qtd in MacCormack). At the same time, this is the mechanism of jouissance: this
threatened reabsorption in the body of the (m)other, the shock of loss of identity, is the dynamic
of pleasure. The archaic object (in terms of phobia and fetish) is the mother, hence the abject
objects that threaten reabsorption in colonial terms are the primal hordes of the natives in
colonial discourse (Spurr), feminized bodies, raped countries, men deprived of the rights of man
/ paternity in the slave system. Kelly Oliver points out that phobia is our defense against the
ambiguity of the abject; “what we exclude as abject recalls our own ambiguous borders in
relation to animality and maternal origins. Phobia is the result of the subject’s own fear and
aggressivity which, when projected onto others, seem to come back at him from the outside: “I
am not the one who devours, I am being devoured by him.” This is precisely what Frantz Fanon describes when he discusses what he calls the white man’s Negrophobia—Fanon’s Negrophobia points to the threat of ambiguity associated with the abject (ex. a negrophobic white woman may fantasize about being raped by black men in what is their desire for sexual fulfillment)… The colonizer’s superego protects its own humanity by dehumanizing the other as a foreclosed, phobic object. The colonized, phobic object enjoys bodily pleasure, while the white man gets to be the civilized controlled of pleasure” (“Good Infection” 90-91) and associate himself only with what he defines as legitimate pleasure. Hence, abjection happens on the individual and social level and involves both fear and pleasure. As Robert F. Reid-Pharr shows us in his example of male sexual relationships in prison, what the heterosexual male subject fears is that he will enjoy homosexual sex so much so that prison will become the world he is content within. I wish to point out how Black women writers deal with abjection of their own while exposing the abjections of their persecutors. Frantz Fanon termed the psychological assault of being accused of enjoying the promiscuous violations of the primal horde (to go back to Oliver’s example of a black person who is such a sexualized object that s/he doesn’t object to being used for sex by white men) a mass attack on the ego. The Black women writers whose work I examine detail such mass attacks on their egos in their respective racist societies, resisting these attacks by exposing them in their work. But these women writers do more than merely expose—they demonstrate the dynamics of their own abjections and phobias; tracing the angst and abjection of these Black women in a racist society, which entails viewing white oppressors as agents of ambiguity that creates the confusion of self / other, inside / outside that is abjection, provides a fresh look at what is already a long, fruitful critical discourse that has discussed the survival methods of oppressed Black women in Diaspora.
The various uses of the label and myth of the cannibal are good examples of where the psychotic breakdown of metaphor, attributed to those cast into an abject social category by colonial powers, is in reality not psychosis on the part of those to whom this breakdown is attributed, but is rather the need for definition on the part of those who created this abject. As Peter Hulme points out, in his introduction to Cannibalism and the Colonial World, both Europeans and members of colonized countries invented stories concerning cannibalism for the other (or, as the backlash to racist discourses on cannibalism have done, denied that cannibalism ever existed and declared it was created to justify European expansionism), in an effort to define what precisely did not constitute themselves (or the groups represented by critics involved in the backlash of racist discourses). Hulme points out that the fascination of some Europeans with cannibalism can be explored by examining the scandals in which some Europeans, when denied food by the natives, were driven to eating each other (24); comparatively, as Ronald Takaki points out in his A Different Mirror, Puritan society created its boundaries by projecting its taboo qualities onto the bodies of others. As Ronald Takaki quotes Orlando Patterson in A Different Mirror, the Puritans said of themselves and of their others, “We are not great bucks in the fields…. But a great black buck is loose…” (51 in A Different Mirror). In other words, the great black buck which they wished to disown was the other that they came to America to escape, when they escaped from the laws of the religion of their own world (to use Toni Morrison’s observations in Playing in the Dark in Kristeva’s terms), to be “born again in new clothes” (Morrison). To the same point, white sexist, patriarchal society, through the ages, has created the myth of the Medusa in order to have an other with a religious valence that must be expelled from society for some legendary, imaginary sin (Medusa was turned into a Gorgon because she had sex with Poseidon on Athena’s temple floor—thus violating the virgin goddess so closely
associated with the phallic head of Zeus, a Zeus who can usurp the female function of creating life); as Helene Cixous has observed, in her “Laugh of the Medusa,” the patriarchal concept of the Medusa was necessary to create patriarchal law. The actual Medusa is “beautiful and laughing.” I use this example from Cixous to point out how Black women writers create an abject and an other of their own in creating their own religions, laws and subjectivities: Cixous offers that a Gorgon might observe, “What lovely backs” (of the Perseuses coming to behead them), “let’s get out of here.” But the threat that Cixous’ Gorgons’ avoid is indeed an other that is expelled from the Black female subject. This same other appears in stories like Kincaid’s *Autobiography of My Mother*, when Xuela can’t bear to watch Philip, her white husband, eat and she can’t bear to see his “face without skin” (the language is from *Beloved* but the description is true in essence to Kincaid’s description of Philip—she sees white skin as repulsive, as though it were attempting to grow a “real” skin).

I emphasize that this process of definition and exclusion necessarily includes all subjects, and this process of exclusion of the abject as integral to the subject-in-process needs to be observed on the part of Black women writers as well; that is, Black women writers create their own boundaries and taboos in relation to a society that insists on its own mythos of belonging at the expense of non-Europeans. Examples of what Black women writers are up against can be easily found in the rhetoric of plenitude, if you will, that surfaces in the rallying cries for white race wars: Herbert Shapiro documents the rhetoric used by white churches and newspapers in regard to many incidents of white on black mass race carnage; one such example is what was said in a church after the 1917 clash between the racist Houston police authorities and the black army forces stationed at nearby Camp Logan: after a riot on the part of the black army forces, in
the face of many cases of white racist police brutality, the minister at the First Methodist Church declared that those “who died that night to stem the black tide of death sweeping toward the homes of Houston… entered into the Glory of God Himself” (qtd in Shapiro 109). This minister’s picture of this group of whites who exerted violence against the dehumanized (e.g. abjected) “black tide of death,” gives them an unconditional acceptance before their god, and by extension allows the group of whites that stands together with them in this racist oppression an unconditional belonging (e.g. plenitude) in the presence of their deity. In the terms of the writers my project takes into consideration, Adrienne Kennedy’s Sarah is confronted, throughout the play, by a world that revolves around the figure of the character’s own lynching: Sarah’s character appears with a noose around her neck, and it is arguable that Sarah sees the action of the play through the vertigo ridden hindsight of a lynching victim at the moment of her death. In order to achieve sanity, it would have been necessary for Sarah to jettison the “black tide of death” forced onto Sarah’s psyche by the white racist world. Kennedy’s early plays at once show what constitutes the abject for her subjects-in-process and the attack made on the egos of her subjects-in-progress. Rather than viewing these subjects-in-progress as merely driven insane by the racist pressures of their societies, it is far more instructive to see them as under attack and struggling to abject the dehumanized black tide created by these racist societies (the problem most of the existing criticism, at its best, has interpreting Kennedy’s protagonists, is caught in a nutshell in a conversation between Howard Stein and Gaby Rodgers. Stein says that, “She’s caught in a madhouse. But the world is not as crazy as Sarah is. Now maybe the world is the crazy place and she’s sane”[205]; Sarah’s sanity deserves far more credit and confidence than a weak “maybe” [even if the reader chooses to read such a “maybe” as a rhetorical “maybe”].). Sarah’s repeated attempt to shut her black father out of her life amounts, in effect, to her attempt
to prevent her own lynching (which happens after the banging at the door ceases and “a black shadow rushes toward Sarah”). The fact that the lynching and the entrance of the black father converge in the play makes it evident that the image of the black father is not a black created image that need be owned by black people that survive it, but an image created by racist ideologies, which is fatal to the actual Black subject (both psychically and literally—the constant threat that is made of Black men throughout many racist histories has been the excuse for massacres of Black people throughout the histories that oppress Kennedy’s subjects throughout her work).

The perceived state of plentitude (unconditional social acceptance) was part and parcel of the peculiar institution: slave owners wanted to believe that they were the agents of order and cleanliness in the lives of otherwise dirty and dissolute people and that these enslaved people therefore loved them for the order that they imposed on them. “The alchemy of southern slavery: the strong desire of white southerners to believe that they knew and could trust their enslaved domestics and the equally intoxicating belief that purchasing human property enabled an owner to refashion both his own and his new slaves’ identity” (Brown 213). Kathleen Brown points out that, in the midst of these assumptions on the part of white owners of slaves, a black man, Robert Roberts, was able to publish a guide for the good manners of house servants, which was very well received by this public. This sort of example shows, in light of my argument, that even in the midst of a society bent on the delusion that whites were purveyors of civilization and purity, black people found space to maneuver and not only create an identity apart from that typically relegated to blacks that were servants or slaves, but benefit monetarily from this identity (he published a manual on how to be a good housekeeper). To the same point, white women were extolled as bringers of mercy to the slaves under their charge; even though many white Southern
women were in actuality found to be lazy, slovenly and immoral (Gilmore), the mythos that gave white women universal protection and acceptance under the patriarchal gaze of the South was quite to the contrary. “[The white Southern woman] proceeds to subdue, to reform, to elevate, to ennoble, and to perfect every thing around her; and by this supernatural power, she so softens the affections and refines the feelings of the lords of creation, as to dispose them to ameliorate the condition of classes of his fellow beings still more abject” (Weiner 280). Again, in the terms of the abject, this exalted realm placed upper class white women in a state of unconditional acceptance under the guise of what they were believed to be. Marli F. Weiner points out that while “the parameters of white women’s expected moral behavior were clear, but the distance could be great between what women were told to do and what they actually could do or were willing to do (281).

In Black women’s fiction, issues of societal exclusion on the basis of signifiers of pollution and degradation have been described in detail. Many Black women writers demonstrate persuasively that the debased signifiers projected onto the subjects of their works describe the society whose terms their protagonists must refuse if they are to remain psychologically whole subjects. In the process of these fictional arguments, the abject signifiers that the respective racist / colonialist / sexist societies attempt to contain African American women with apply to the social and psychological structures of the oppressor, not the oppressed. Robert F. Reid Pharr points out that the threat of the abject is not that a subject in society will forget that she is a subject, but rather that the subject will “lose hold on the logic of the inside /outside binarism” altogether. That is, the abject is what challenges the structures of subjectivity and identity of the subjects in question, suggesting an alternate logic that causes subjects to cease to be subjects that
relate to an object (that is, if one accepts that life in a dirty shack and slave labor is the extent of the benefits you can attain from your society [which is what the son of Grange Copeland accepts in effect], that one no longer sees himself attempting to better himself, but rather descends to an unthinking, all but psychotic state; in Frederick Douglass’s terms, “Behold the man become a brute”); the relationship between the subject and the object is no longer viable when interfered with by the vehicle of the abject threat (Reid Pharr 613-15). The roles that the oppressed groups represented in the novels I discuss are often threatened with “restrict [their victims] to the realm of the corporal and the dirty,” such as the roles of the sex slave and the exploited laborer (Reid Pharr 618); moreover, this defilement is only superficially symbolic because it dictates the subjected actions of these oppressed groups (that is, they are forced to be exploited labor, sullied sex slaves, victims of the ghetto system). That is, this defilement is as real as being physically contaminated with feces represents real defilement; it is not metaphorical (618).

Reid Pharr discusses the threat of the abject to black subjects within a society that allows for such threats; I go on to point out how such racist societies, and the characters that represent those who establish their privileged subjectivity with these societies as their basis, are in fact supported by the structures like the ghetto, slavery and the prison system (which represents the black primal horde, according to Red Pharr) and are thus implicated in their very attempts to dissolve the subjectivity of their victims by continually exposing them to an abject alternate mode of existence that is singled out for them (in Reid Pharr’s terms, accepting life in prison is accepting an abject existence, denying the possibility of an “outside” and thus dismantling the distinction between the inside and the outside; a racist society presupposes that all black men are jail bait). In Julia Kristeva’s writing (which Reid Pharr relies on), the alternate reality offered (threatened) by the abject is what threatens and renovates the law in its cultural and social
exclusions and manifestations: the abject is the filth that is excommunicated by religions’
purifications and the outlaw who is relegated to the prisons that represent the primal horde of
interchangeable bodies for the groups that a racist society exiles to prison (Reading Kristeva 101-
3; Feminine and the Sacred 91-94); at the same time, the language of the abject offers an
aesthetic challenge to the binaries and exclusions of the symbolic system. This language of the
abject is homologous to the rituals that “act out” the abject, such as the Dionysian rituals that
produce an alternative to the symbolic structure of religion, challenging these structures with
formless ecstasy that is both a lure and a foreclosure of the symbolic structures this ecstasy
ignores (Oliver 103). The society, the superego, that requires its own abject is implicated by its
abject as well as supported and seduced by it. In my project, I point out that the rituals of
exclusion and defilement that are required by racist societies assault the identity of the characters
and societies that rely on these exclusions and definitions of defilement in the Black women’s
novels in which these characters and societies are represented. The people who built the prison
and define their masculinity by a debased populace of the “other” (into which is often clumped
women / the maternal abject, minorities and gays) are implicated by the structures they have built
and the filth that is collected by those structures; in the terms of Octavia Butler’s novel that
directly discusses slavery, Kindred, the role of being a slaveholder is just as much a
contamination of the personality of the slave holder as the blood and filth that results from being
beaten by one of the people who refuse to be a slave contaminates the slave holder’s physical
body.

My current project (I focus on works by Adrienne Kennedy, Suzan Lori-Parks, Toni
Morrison, and Octavia Butler; much of Butler’s and Kennedy’s respective opuses have been
discussed in detail) is devoted to showing how the terms of the abject are used by Black women
writers to show how, as subjects, they refute racist / colonial / exist debased signifiers, and, what is more, exclude the aspects of social groups that would define them as abject as abject in themselves; the abject created by processes of racial and sexist othering, such as slavery, implicates the social group that defined slaves / racial other as abject and is in itself abject for Black women subjects: the exclusionary zone that systems of racial othering creates becomes for Black women subjects evidence of the primal horde, a source of defilement and filth; the racist / sexist / colonial other that created this zone is the one who requires it, peoples it, lives in it and is implicated by it. In Julia Kristeva’s definition, the abject is a dynamic through which the subject defines its boundaries through expelling / exiling its “other”; the issue of defilement and abjection is psychological, not literal (though it may be literal in some applications of the concept, such as physical vomiting, etc). As Helene Cixous points out (and in this instance is in agreement with Kristeva), if a group of people who have been linked together through categorization for whatever reason were truly “other” they wouldn’t be recognizable at all (Sorties). The work of both feminist critics can be used to show that the subject in question necessarily defines her own boundaries; the subjectivity demonstrated by Black women writers does not stop at merely refuting the claims of the “other” but shows the racist “other” to be unclean, defiled in its own defilement. My work is the logical extension of observations such as Fanon’s and Radhika Mohanram’s, who observe that “it is the racist who creates his inferior” and constructs some bodies that are made visible by dint of race, economic status and gender for the purpose of allowing other bodies to be “invisible,” respectively (Mohanram 39): I examine these “invisible,” colonial bodies in the light of the system that they create; the people who these colonial systems attempt to victimize are uniquely placed to identify these would be
“invisible” bodies as the very visible constructors of zones of filth and dehumanizing circumstances.

David Spurr, in his description of the trope of debasement, discusses the political dynamics of abjection (in Kristeva’s terms, which he uses) in colonial discourse. The rhetoric of debasement describes the colonial other as filthy, indolent, lazy, unclean, drunken, etc. It refuses the possibility that the colonial other, thus described, can ever improve—there will be some tell-tale sign of this “otherness” in the form of some mess, something left out, a stench in the council chamber that emanates from the colonial city (in this instance, Calcutta) that is populated by the colonial others that the colonial other speaking in the given council chamber is attempting to represent (85). This rhetoric is used to describe individual others within the colonial system; these individual others’ faults are then viewed as their political counterpart: the entire people seen as this “other” have the social faults resulting from the behaviors attributed to individual colonial others. “In colonial discourse, every individual weakness has its political counterpart—uncivilized society, according to this logic, being little more than the uncivilized mind and body writ large” (76). The problems of abject poverty and lack of hygiene resulting from it are read as the “other side of the coin” of abjection: “the physical suffering of colonial peoples can be associated with their moral and intellectual degradation: disease, famine, superstition and barbarous custom all have their origin in the dark, precolumbian chaos… the immoral qualities of the savage have in common the failure to impose a series of distinctions necessary for modern civility… reason and passion, work and pleasure seem impossibly confused with one another. Nakedness is public as well as private and the body is not kept pure of its inner foulness” (77-81). The indigenous peoples are described in colonial accounts as reveling with abandon, vomiting and “besmearing themselves with blood and gore” (qtd in Spurr 81), and are aligned
with Darwin’s association of indigenous peoples with the Cyclops of the Aeneid, who vomits “clots and bloody wine and bits of flesh as he slept” (ibid).

The above discussion of Spurr emphasizes that the rhetoric of debasement is precisely this—rhetoric that justifies a colonial regime. Spurr notes that what he calls the trope of debasement can be considered an extension of what he calls the trope of classification: the grouping of the colonial other into a verbal zone that corresponds to the spatial and political ones to which the colonial other is assigned. “The notion that societies can be classified according to their degree of advancement along the same path works to support the notion of inherent ethical differences between races, that is differences in character” (Spurr 65). The classification of Third World societies as such relates to categorizing their peoples as being unable to govern themselves (70). To the same point, Frantz Fanon uses language that fits Kristeva’s description of abjection in his description of the verbal zones to which the colonial other is relegated by colonial discourse: “Those hordes of vital statistics, those hysterical masses, those faces bereft of all humanity, those distended bodies that are like nothing on earth, that mob without beginning or end… that vegetable rhythm of life—all this forms part of the colonial vocabulary” (42-43). Allusions to the animal world are used to describe the colonial “native” (43).

Black men and Black women are relegated to the abject by the definitions of a State that excludes empowered blackness from its definitions and empowered women from even states that are supposedly liberated from colonialist influences. The privileging of the white, male subject in the definitions of the state (Henderson) denies black identity by depriving the black victim of racist hate of the status of maleness (Weigman). “[The American system] is a white supremacist system asymmetrical in its economic and political allotments, triumphant in its ability to mask deep disparity on one hand and yet thoroughly rigid in its maintenance of naïve individualism
and rhetorical democracy on the other” (Wiegman 42). The privileged, white masculinity of this system appears in the system’s refusal of the status of citizenship in the form of denying masculinity altogether—to deny the latter is to cancel any claim to the former. This expulsion of black men from the possibility of citizenship is what was achieved in the spectacle of the lynched, castrated black body: “In severing the black male’s penis from his body, either as a narrative account or a material act, the mob aggressively denies the patriarchal sign and symbol of the masculine, interrupting the privilege of the phallus and thereby reclaiming, through the perversity of dismemberment, the black male’s (masculine) potentiality for citizenship.” (Wiegman 83).

Women, especially “native” women, are treated in ways descriptive of Spurr’s rhetorical trope of negation. According to the trope of negation, without the influence and definition of Western culture (Western concepts of history, Western languages, etc), the land inhabited by the “natives” in question is the equivalent of a vacant space, because the “native” has no ability to differentiate himself from nature, from the land, to create culture. “The savage, in this view, lives in a continual state of self-presence, unable to leave that trace on the world which serves as the beginning of difference, distinction, opposition and hence, progress. This failure leads to the identification of Africans with the unchanged and ever present earth… the historical immobility of the people themselves” (Spurr 99). Like colonial / oppressed subjects in general, “native” women (such as Algerian women) are used to embody the country without possessing subjectivity recognized by the state, an arrangement homologous to the American Southern way of life being embodied by its peculiar institution: the liberation of Algeria entails an erasure of Algerian women from visibility in politics, a relegation of them to the “timeless” and undifferentiated “traditional” figures that embody the state without being represented by it (78).
“In the construction of the national narrative, the Algerian woman is excluded. There is no proper place for her in the new Nation State” (Mohanam 79).

The feminization of the landscape itself demonstrates that women do not have access to representation as subjects of the State; Mohanam uses as an example the feminine description of the newly colonized and settled U.S.: in this description, the woman’s body “functions as a mediator for the male citizens to experience the landscape and the nation as nurturing, comforting, familiar. Given that her body functions to mediate the connection between male citizens and nation, a female citizen cannot experience the national landscape in an identical way to her male counterpart, in that her body functions to nurture him” (83). Mohanam notes that the status as a subject of a nation is homologous to the relation of the phallus to power in psychoanalysis: “Just as the phallus suggests power, authority and the constitution of the subject, so is the nation the constitution of the subject”; like the relationship of the woman to the phallus / penis, she embodies the nation (she is the body that reproduces the nation), but she does not really have the privilege of the political subjectivity promised by nationhood (85). To the same point, the presence of Sycorax in The Tempest’s account that so well reflects the mentalities and fears of the colonizers of the day (A Different Mirror) is one of negation and threat—it “motivates [Prospero’s] actions of incarceration and state control,” but is itself inarticulate and invisible, leaving the land a void, open for colonization. Within imperialist logic, the savage, undifferentiated from his land and at the same time without morals, accused of cannibalism, needs to be civilized. To the same point, “the body of the indigenous woman, [is] on the one hand virgin landscape, on the other the site of abjectness through which notions of nationhood emerge, both invisible, “banish’d,” and visible “blue eyed hag.” The bloated and emaciated body of Sycorax—first to be sacrificed on the altar of nationhood, last in line for sovereign
statehood—encapsulates the dilemma of indigenous struggles in modern nation states” (Joseph 219; my italics). The body of the indigenous woman as epitomized by Sycorax is presented by colonialist discourse as the ultimate abject: physically repellent, without the ability to differentiate herself from the void that is her native land, her native foliage, without the ability of self representation via the differentiation of speech.

The fact that Black women expel an abject of their own, which is produced by white society, is supported by many sources. The dynamic inflicted on African American subjects is the one that supports the collective white superego: the African American / colonized subject is (ideally for the white superego) not able to mourn and expel the coda that supports the white superego; what supports the white superego is the assumption that black people, as abject, support the white superego and cannot come to grips with it, abject it in a violent fashion. “The success of the colonization of [black] psychic space can be measured by the extent that the colonized internalized—or become infected by the cruel superego that abjects them and substitutes anger against the oppressors with an obsessive need to gain their approval. In other words, the colonization of psychic space depends on the colonized internalizing the superior-inferior dichotomy that sustains the colonizer’s self identity” (Colonization 54). Indeed, white colonialists / racists construct whiteness as the very condition of humanity: “Whiteness poses as nature or being, or more precisely, the essence of a human being…all of us are raced subjects trying to live up to the impossible ideal of whiteness. Within the colonial logic, whiteness becomes an ethical good impossible to obtain; and the phobic object must be excluded to sustain the good and clean or proper body image” (55). Fanon’s advocation of black violence against the white subject can, in the terms of this analysis can be taken in a new way: “Fanon prescribes
violent resistance to colonialism to regain not just territory and physical freedoms, but also a sense of agency, which is underdetermined through the colonization of public space” (58). In other words, violence frees the colonized subject from what would be the white superego. The matrix of oppression that the white man creates in colonial / racist societies—this system creates an abject boundary that threatens both the white man and the non-white oppressed. Fanon notes that the “black man enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike because in accordance with a neurotic orientation” (qtd. in Colonization 61); “This pathological relation between inferiority and superiority perverts humanity. It is not just the black man who is dehumanized in the colonial system; the white man also loses his humanity. This is why Fanon insists on the need for a new humanity to put an end to colonization and oppression” (61). The abject, then, created by the white system in order to dehumanize blacks and expel them from their society is an abject that infects anyone. It affects everyone, because, as Kelly Oliver points out, no one can live up to the impossible ideal of whiteness; this implicates everyone in the abject that the ideal of whiteness creates to define its own boundaries. The abject the ideal of whiteness creates is an abject that needs to be debunked and refuted so that everyone can share the idea of humanity.

Indeed, evidence that many black people feel the need to expel an abject from their collective subject can be chalked up to their need to refuse to be the “abject subject” themselves in a racist society. “What lies at the heart, I believe, of black America’s pervasive cultural homophobia is the desperate need for a convenient Other within the community, yet not truly of the community, an Other to which blame for the chronic identity process afflicting the black male psyche can be readily displaced, an indispensable Other which functions as the lowest common denominator of the abject… an essential Other against which black men and boys
maturing, struggling with self-doubt, anxiety, feelings of political, economic, social and sexual inadequacy… can always measure themselves and by comparison seem strong, adept, empowered, superior” (Riggs 293).

Black women have suffered this societal role of the abject and have developed their own means of dealing with this abject image, means of making themselves invisible in the sense of being subjects who can be the observer and categorizers rather than the observed and categorized as abject. The exposure of the female body in slavery was constructed as abject by people such as Frederick Law Olmstead, who observed female slaves at their work alongside black men. He observed that the Black women slaves were physically exposed to the same extent as the men, and the significance of this, for him, was that Black women slaves were therefore possessed of a host of qualities that pegged them as the abject: he conflated labor and sexuality in his descriptions of Black women who were forced to do field work: they were “clumsy, awkward, gross, elephantine in all their movements… sly, sensual and shameless… I had never witnessed, I thought anything more revolting” (qtd in Peterson 20). Other white observers pegged Black women slaves as “disorderly and improper.” Carla Peterson concludes, from all this, that “such cultural constructions could quite possibly result in the transformation of the Black female subject into an “abject creature’”; one remedy for this was Black women becoming preachers, taking on the use of the word, since “the human subject seeks to alleviate pain by giving it a place in the world through verbal articulation; in the Judeo-Christian tradition, God authorizes man to divest himself of his body and seek power through the making of material artifacts, including language… endowing man with an immortal voice. Similarly, for Kristeva, abjection may be spiritualized by means of the Christian ritual of communion in which all corporeality is elevated, spiritualized, and sublimated… it is the Word that purifies from the abject” (qtd in
Hence, Black women found ways of refuting the image of the abject that racist white society attempted to project onto them. This shows, of course, that Black women and black people in general were not bound to accept and internalize the abject projections of white people, but that they rather created their own source of invisibility in the sense of subjectivity (they became the speaker as opposed to the spoken-of). “Reading these particular negotiations of black feminist performance provides a means of incorporating a narrative strategy that for … socially, politically, and culturally marginalized women in particular, circumvents the dichotomy between being visible and abject [e.g. a body] and being “pure” and disembodied” (Brooks 48). This is not to say that the corporeal was necessarily considered bad by Black women; it means that they used the tools of their existing society to show that their corporeal existence made them something other than abject bodies in the terms of the surrounding white society. A good case in point is that of Sojourner Truth and her need to expose her body to prove that she was indeed a woman: by proving she was a woman, she emphasized that she was using the power of the word as a woman and had to be respected as a woman who could do this (as opposed to being an abject by virtue of being a Black woman who was often considered as just a body by whites); also, by her act of offering to expose herself before her white audience, she demonstrated that the abject designation that they wished to peg her body with belonged to the white audience (she stated that “their shame” was not “her shame”; their desire for her to disrobe her breasts was an abject act that they were responsible for; the abject designation they wished to project upon Truth was in fact something that belonged to them).

Dr. T. W. Strain’s interrogation of Truth was that of a white man suspicious of Truth’s sex. Strain demanded that “Sojourner Truth submit her breast to the inspection of some of the ladies present, that the doubt [of her sex] might be removed by their testimony… Sojourner told
them that she would show her breast to the whole congregation; that it was not her shame that
she uncovered her breast to them, but their shame” (Sterling qtd in Brooks 49). Brooks notes that
Truth’s use “of the corporeal as a narrative strategy amounts to a performative twist: her breast
relays a textual meaning articulating the history of a slave past and work in contestation of
discursive circumscription here by her allusion to what she calls “the deeds done to my body”…
These “deeds” potentially recover her flesh as unreadable to a shamed congregation forced to
acknowledge their spectatorical and social complicity in her abjection” (Brooks 29-31). Truth
placed the abject imputation placed on her slave body exactly where it belonged—in the laps of
the social community that had created this abject in the first place.

Additionally, Truth tapped into the breast as it was used as a phobic object during
slavery. She stated, in her speech to the white church community that demanded that she prove
she was a woman, the fact that she nursed the children of white people with these breas
(Brooks 29). In stating this, Truth pointed out that she was a slave and that she reversed the white
phobic object of the white woman’s breast, which, if used to nurture a black person, would have
been abject, abhorrent, a violation of societal boundaries (Kristeva [on the phobic use of the
white breast] quoted in Colonization 58). Truth turns this use of the white woman’s breast as a
phobic object whose use by a black man would be abject on its head by pointing out the abject
(“shameful”) demands of the white men who demanded that she prove that she had breasts: the
abject use of people’s breasts was actually something done by white people to black people, not
the other way around (albeit it was the white fear that it was the other way around). Truth
pointed out, in effect, that the people who created black people as abject (particularly in relation
to their use of the white breast) were the people who were “shameful” or abject in their
discursive and would be visual use of her breasts. The creator of the abject here, then, was not “naturally” black, but rather white people in their abuse of the black body.

The way black people and scholars of African American studies have addressed the abject / abjection (when the use of the term “abject” has a meaning consistent with Kristeva’s usage of abjection) has been refutation of the construction of non-Whites as abject, and / or the demand for redress of crimes that were indeed abject. The inclusion of writers in history and historians, in the appropriate respective contexts, is necessary in order to show how debates among historiographers, and subsequent changes to the ways in which historical subjects are discussed, parallel and contrast with the consciousness of threats to the boundaries / subjectivity of Black subjects in fiction by Black writers. From the writings of writers such as David Walker, Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown (who described abject circumstances during slavery and demanded redress); to Du Bois’ sociological studies that refute claims of black immorality and point up how little protection Black women (who were so accused of being immoral) received from white dominated societies; to modern psychoanalysts who note that traditional psychoanalysis left out the issue of race in its definitions and then used that issue to define itself, language that describes the condition of the abject in Kristeva’s terms (the outlaw, the exile, the person whose body is strung up to be an object that testifies to the power and rule of a racist society) has been used for a long time in the black canon. What I wish to show for my project at hand is that this concept of the abject has shown itself in one form or another before Julia Kristeva defined the term; this relates to my arguments that Black women writers use the language of the abject to demonstrate the revolting nature of those who have set up and / or benefit from colonial / racist regimes. Since the writers I refer to, and the contexts to which they
refer, span immense periods of time, it is necessary to step into the realm of historiographical arguments here for a moment to demonstrate the importance of a focus on the historical realities that form the respective presents of the works of the writers I discuss (in detail and in passing). A central argument among historians of Black histories has revolved around the agency of Black people in circumstances of extreme duress—while many historians, whose research has set the stage for current thought among historians such as Ira Berlin, focus more on white paranoia revolving around black uprisings / resistance, as opposed to examining history according to Black people (whereas, for example, Ira Berlin points out that the fact that someone was a slave at some point of time in America’s history is only one thing to know about the subject in question; the need to include what historians can deduce would be the perspectives of Black people under slavery is well underscored in Maryse Conde’s work especially (which I discuss in detail in the following chapters): Conde and Berlin demonstrate and emphasize that people who were enslaved had individual circumstances, personalities, ways of dealing with their respective worlds; that is, slaves were not a people without a culture and a past, shell shocked by the Middle Passage and by the experience of enslavement).

Examples of historians of slavery whose research is invaluable, but whose perspectives in producing that research lack focus on a Black perspective, include Herbert Aptheker and Peter Wood. While Aptheker’s work (in American Negro Slave Revolts) is about slave resistance, his focus posits slaves as within the slave system whose paranoia about slave revolts is central to his arguments; this allows his perspective to at times sound (in terms of its implications) the way a Southern apologist for slavery may have: for example, Aptheker states that a misunderstanding among slaves in regard to the Missouri debate (that it was meant to free the slaves) led to a revolt; Wood exposes the slave owners’ justifications of their system as false (the slaveholders
refused to allow that slaves had a human need for freedom and explained their running away as mere perversity), but his own main focus often effectively works to disprove slave owners’ barbarity: the convenient assumptions of the slaveholders in regard to slaves (e.g. that they were childlike, careless, etc) are evident in their explanations as to how so many slaves died under their regime (for instance, Wood quotes a slaveholder’s statement that “[the slaves] are incorrigibly careless and wantonly expose themselves to the dangers which result from sudden changes in weather”[78]); but Wood’s focus too often seems to show a need to defend slaves from these allegations. “Overwork, far more than carelessness, appears to have been an inducement to such illnesses” (79). The fact that Wood’s emphasis is on simply disproving the assumptions of slaveholders causes what can be read as a slip into those very assumptions—he argues that it may have been easy for slaveholders to argue that Blacks were somehow better able to survive the diseases associated with their hard labor because “the semi-tropical “disease region” from which the Africans originated, “bore a closer resemblance to coastal Carolina than did most parts of Europe” (91); Wood assumes that the slave owners rationally acknowledged a non-dehumanizing cause for the Africans’ partial immunity to the afflictions of the climate. Be the level of enlightenment of the slaveholders what it might have been, Wood somewhat confuses his own awareness of why the Africans may have had greater immunity to disease with that of the slaveholders he cites: Wood states he sees how “its effects must have done a great deal to reinforce the expanding rationale behind the enslavement of Africans” (91; italics mine).

Wood’s description of the misinterpretation of and indifference to Black identity and culture on the part of the slaveholders implicitly contradicts Wood’s notes on the suspicion of Blacks on the part of slaveholders and the fact they were chary of teaching slaves English—because it was thought that slaves who had English were more likely to rebel; while Woods states that later
generations of slave holders grew to accept as “god given” the “social imbalance that was created out of the severe tensions of the eighteenth century, and if white supremacy could one day be taken as a forgone conclusion through the benefit of biased hindsight, contemporaries found themselves drawn into a conflict in which everyone’s situation was precarious and no one’s survival was assured (196). While Wood’s study is, of course, an anomaly of its kind, given its date and historiographical context, the “biased hindsight” that Wood refers to in the above quote seems to have leaked into his study when there is so much emphasis on the slave owners’ restrictions, hindrance of Black attempts to create bearable lives within American society, and attempts to disprove the assumptions of the slaveholders; by contrast, Manisha Sinha’s [title] coincides in terms of ideological analysis with Slavoj Žižek’s description of an ideological fantasy such as anti-Semitism (his analysis, necessarily, works equally well for racism) when she examines how antebellum politics were formed by the values of slavery, as opposed to examining slavery as affected by antebellum politics; this makes her study much more like how Black people of the period in question would have seen the powers that were in their case. Sinha points out that the ideology of the Southern confederacy essentially defined the freedom of slaveholders as their freedom to enslave other human beings. Sinha points out that the ideology of slavery dictated that the power ladder could not be broken, only the positions of the parties standing on it could be reversed: “in conferring the right to suffrage on workers, whatever may be their color, you do not elevate them to the character of freemen, but degrade liberty to their level” (35); in other words, the boundaries of the white Subject were threatened by the possibility that they would be placed outside the power that dictated, for them, their status as subjects. To very much the same theoretical point, Žižek notes that “The proper answer to anti-Semitism” is not an argument as to how Jews “are not really like that,” but rather that “the
anti-Semitic idea of the Jew has nothing to do with Jews; the ideological figure of the Jew is a way to stitch up the inconsistencies of our own ideological system” (Sublime Object 49). In short, the traumatic fact that the ideology of American slavery proponents represses is, in Žižek’s terms, the fact that slavery was a custom that time and use made “god-given,” that the truth and justice that its proponents insisted was inherent in their “peculiar institution” need not be accepted as such—that slavery was a de facto institution that continued to exist out of custom and functionality.

David Walker uses the language of the abject (and indeed the term “abject”) in his complaint that on one hand African Americans must assert their manhood by rising up against oppression, and on the other that slavery itself (e.g. the whites who benefited and protected the system of slavery) is responsible for this abjection. In Boston, Walker concluded that African Americans “were the most degraded, wretched and abject set of beings that ever lived.” This was so, he wrote, not just because of the horrid abuse heaped upon them by whites, but because they had allowed it to go on… . David Walker’s Appeal argues the criminality of white supremacy and exhorts blacks to rise up against it. In part one, he focuses on slavery as the principle cause of the African Americans’ “wretchedness” and the principle example of white inhumanity” (Kai Wright 145). The progression of thought that Wright sums up is interesting: the abject state of African Americans is not innate, it is something that has been done to them by a system they have not yet shattered; however, white supremacy itself does show an example of “white inhumanity.” The negative qualities that people generally do not claim for themselves but rather expel or abject from their self concepts are present, in Walker, in those that promote white supremacy per se; they are not present in their victims, who are only living within this oppressive system created by others without demolishing it.
Frederick Douglass goes into detail on the nature of the system of slavery to brutalize the people it would enslave and the abject state this brutalization entails. Again, however, this is a state that Douglass sees he can surmount by resisting, which leaves the onus for the abject state on the people who beat him, exhaust him, and will not even save him on the basis of his being a valuable property. Douglass shows the “sinking into the stupor of bestiality” to be at the opposite pole of choking his would be tormentor. The terms in which Takaki summarizes Douglass’s mental state after his master refuses to rescue him from physical abuse are terms which Kristeva would align with the abject: “alienated from his master, himself, his God, Douglass in the darkness of the woods was now willing to exchange his manhood for the bestiality of an ox” (Takaki 22). Kristeva has pointed out that religion is an Other for a subject—it aligns the boundaries of the subject and “sin” against religion can constitute being an outlaw, a transgressor, abject. Takaki notes that Douglass, when alienated from his master, he was also alienated from “himself, his God”—it is not until Douglass takes on a new criteria for subjectivity than adherence to his master, to the state / subject that has enslaved him, that he finds liberation from the feeling that if he were a beast of burden he would be rescued from abuse because he was a valuable property. This part of Douglass’s Narrative is important because it shows the existence of the abject as the “sin” or transgression against social structures—the social structure of slavery is what Douglass must absent himself from because in its terms he is not even as well valued as an ox. Douglass’s Narrative shows the influence of the abject in relation to social systems, and that the abject can change with the casting off reliance on such racist social systems. When Douglass broke from the nonviolent approach to freeing the slaves, “charged that slavery was a system of brute force and had to be met with his own weapons” (Takaki 23). The brutalization that offered to degrade Douglass to below the level of
an ox belongs to the social system of slavery; the life and speeches of Douglass demonstrate that the system of slavery is implicated by and associated with its own abject: just as slavery would make brutes of human beings, it must be remembered that as a social system it was dependent on this brutality to give it strength and form as a social system. The people it degraded as abject were, in effect, what slavery was—the abject that allowed the abjection of people to continue. Takaki’s description of Douglass’s narrative shows that it is the racist system that creates the abject that is responsible for the abject—and can thus be viewed as abject itself by people who escape from it. This point is important in that many Black women writers’ work, where the point is that the subject that a racist system wishes to degrade is not automatically degraded, but rather that the system that is built upon degrading people is itself an abject system by the standards of the subjects who refuse the terms of such a system. To anticipate my point and demonstrate that the religion of a subject is (as Julia Kristeva said) the structure of the subject, I note that Sojourner Truth was recorded as saying to Frederick Douglass, “Frederick, is God dead?” “No, God is not dead,” he answered, “And therefore slavery must end in blood”; this quote appears in Michelle Cliff’s Free Enterprise—and shows the religious entity that Douglass and Truth adhere to as a subject for whom slavery is abject (i.e. “and therefore slavery must end in blood” [my italics]).

To much the same point, William Wells Brown argues that “the American slave… in abject bondage” that realizes that he can rise up to strike for liberty “rises up disenthralled—a captive redeemed from the portals of infamy to the true dignity of his nature—an elevated freeman” (qtd in Takaki 80). Note the difference between the concept of state in the system of slavery as opposed to “the true dignity of his nature”; the state that slavery has relegated people to does not define these people; it is still in them to exhibit their “nature,” their innate dignity as
people. In these terms, it is the system that would turn people into brutes that threatens the identity of these people—that threatens their status as subjects, and which must be expelled. To the identity of these subjects who happen to be black, the system of slavery is the abject that threatens their boundaries, that shows them sights and objects that have nothing to do with being human and insists that they somehow take on the appearance of these things (being an ox, a beast, for all intents and purposes; being a bloody corpse that was made so because it would not submit to slavery).

The systems of slavery and Jim Crow both relied on the demolition of people to demonstrate their power and the confines of these systems’ legal structures and boundaries. Robyn Wiegman points out that “lynching… is about law, the site of normativity and sanctioned desire, of prohibition and taboo. In the circuit of relations that governs lynching in the United States, the law as legal discourse and disciplinary practice subtends the Symbolic arena… Operating according to a logic of borders—racial, sexual, national, psychological…lynching figures its victims as the culturally abject—monstrosities of excess whose limp and hanging bodies function as spectacular assurance that the racial threat has not simply been averted, but rendered incapable of return” (81). However, this culture’s abject is only this culture’s abject, and can certainly show the horror of excess on the part of the lynch mob for another cultural group that is immediately threatened by the dynamic of such mobs who commit such abject spectacles. This reaffirming of the right to exclude and expel what is monstrous and excessive from the confines that we consider humane behavior can be seen functioning in black people who photographed lynchings.

J. P. Ball, African American photographer, photographed a legal lynching victim (William Biggerstaff) before and after his death. The series of photos that show his death
demonstrate the excessive pleasure of the crowd after performing this action (and this point is emphasized by a white photographer who also photographed the lynching)—in Ball’s picture, the lynchers are clustered about the body in obscene proximity to the corpse; in the white photographer’s picture, “the pathological public sphere where public and private spaces tear away at each other… where intimacy is inseparable from the shock of contact of the crowd in ceaseless motion, with faceless crowds of strangers” (Goldsby 241). This description is a good example of the abject, where the “inside” and the “outside,” the “public” and the “private” are confused. In J.P. Ball’s series of photos, however, the victim of this lynching is given a portrait picture—he sits dressed well, clean shaven, composed. “This seemingly prosaic picture raises profound questions about the proceedings that led to the visually disturbing execution scenes. Who is this man—so obviously dignified and cultivated… He appears to be trustworthy; why wasn’t his account… believed? Was his execution one in name only? Was it in fact a lynching?” (245). Here the term “lynching” is used to connote an illegal act, an inexcusable act that normal members of this society should have rejected. In the photo series J. P. Bell took before the lynching of William Biggerstaff, the act of lynching and the lynchers are abject subjects, not the lynch victim (as was so often the case with lynching photos, as Wiegman notes).

Lynching photos taken by people who believed the deed to have been justified were not the only form of abject spectacle that assaulted the gaze of people with J. P. Bell’s social perspective. Jacqueline Goldsby points out that Ida B. Wells exposes as abject the reporting process of one Royal Daniel, a staff correspondent for the Atlanta Journal, whose writing and reporting methods made it very difficult if at all possible to distinguish fact from fiction in regard to lynching episodes. Wells exposes the “evolution” of a lynching story (complete, in its final version, with sympathy details for the alleged victims of the lynched “monster” and images of
faceless crowds of “Negroes” without identity) over time by printing a series of Daniel stories without dates. The focus on the images and on the story show where the revisions (which justified the lynching in the language of the day that was used to justify lynching) occurred, because the language is different at later parts of this series of stories than it is in earlier tellings of these stories “over the wires” to the audience of the newspaper room. Wells’s Lynch Law reads “as if she were equally unnerved by the stark choice this method of reporting implied: lynching could be understood as a high point in a day’s history or as inconsequential to the meaning of any given day” (91). Goldsby points out that in one story, in the first telling the names of the nine “Negroes” attacked in one particular lynching episode appear, along with their ages and their injuries; but in a later revision of this story, Daniel removed from the text the names, ages and wounds of the victims so that “each black man and his particular wounds merge into one image of nameless “Negroes” whose “streams of blood were dying red the flood and spreading out in pools.” Figured as an orgy of spontaneous death, the wire report of these lynching murders not only makes the loss of nine black lives incidental to the history of this event” but absolves the mob that commits these crimes by multiplying their numbers: when the newspaper wanted to scale back the number of lynchers reportedly at the scene of the crime to twenty, Daniel insisted on the larger number, which represents the collective action of an outraged crowd, no one of which was responsible for the deaths of the lynching victims (91-94). Wells’ exposure of Daniel’s construction of lynching stories presents a view of verbal scenes that justified their monstrous actions for a white audience but which appear as abject scenes for a black audience of Wells’ sensibilities. The accounts that gloss over and implicitly justify lynchings are, in Wells’ portrayal, themselves abject collections of gore, hysterical language, and falsified numbers to depict obscenely large crowds.
Perhaps a keynote example of how women authors examine the abject threat to the black subject in a racist society is in Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*: the protagonist of the novel lives long enough to see his son take the place of the white oppressor in relation to his family, which he oppresses with the tacit consent of the white oppressor. The degradation that the son of Grange Copeland inflicts on his family entails violence that attempts to violate the boundaries of the family members as subjects: their subject vs. other, inside / outside relation to the world is threatened by the fact that they are forced by their father to live in a hovel with dirt (as opposed to a house, like that which people, like subjects dwell in). The vehicle of this threat of the abject (the violation of the subject / other dichotomy) is the son of Grange Copeland, and in this role he is degraded as he seems to wish his family to be degraded: he has been imprisoned, he cannot rise above a position where he grovels for a living from the white judge and he appeals to this judge for benefits on the basis of the fact that he has been degraded by this system. The fact of his degradation is the argument on Grange Copeland’s son’s part for favoritism from the judge: because he conforms to the judge’s idea of how a black person should behave, he deserves custody of his daughter. This situation that merits the judge’s favor is itself outside the boundaries that reflect a subject that has objects; it involves a confusion of whether the subject is really an object, whether the dirt of a shack is a “normal” way to live or what a subject would attempt to exclude from his life. The unforgettable image of Grange Copeland’s widow’s holey shoes constitute the social-symbolic position in which Grange Copeland’s racist world is frozen (she is dead), as well as an intrusion of the real of oppression and de facto slavery (Mem is wearing herself to death in order to provide a better home for her children by Grange’s son than a dirty shack; the dirt and the holes in objects constitute gaze objects that provide a social commentary).
In any event, some terms should be decided upon for convenience, in particular what can be called the ideology of racism; I refer to it occasionally as the ideology of whiteness (under the influence of Toni Morrison’s “On Herman Melville” and Baldwin’s compelling essay, “White Man’s Guilt”) for the sake of specificity regarding racial objects vs. actual individuals who may have a certain skin color but entirely different definitions as to what constitutes a threat to their social and personal boundaries and the language of abjection. Below, I discuss some representative authors whose work sums up some of the costs of racism (to subjects and abject objects alike); these authors’ definitions and delineations of what the fantasies of ideological whiteness costs are good parallels to the works discussed here. Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and bell hooks discuss what racism does and cultural appropriations that can leave the Black subject in the same place as the (unfortunately somewhat rare) white one like Melville—that is, left outside her own culture, denuded of its legacy and made to find it humiliating.

Toni Morrison, in “On Herman Melville,” an essay that anticipates themes she deals with in *Playing in the Dark*, points out that the rare white subject that cannot stand the horrors of his own cultural ideology is in the position of mirroring a lack in his Other. Morrison observes the predicament of humane white people confronted with “an idea of civilization” which they feel they must renounce and the idea of savagery which they “feel they must annihilate because the two cannot co-exist [because] the former is based on the latter”: that is, civilization constructed on bigoted ideology is based on savagery.

We can consider the possibility that Melville’s “truth” was his recognition of the moment in America when whiteness became ideology. And if the white whale is the ideology of race, what
Ahab has lost to it is personal dismemberment and family and society and his own place as a human in the world. The trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, a severe fragmentation of the self… It is white ideology that is savage, and if, indeed, a white, nineteenth century American male took on… the very concept of whiteness as an inhuman idea, he would be very alone, very desperate and very doomed. (Morrison 212)

Morrison’s picture of Melville may well be the predicament of the “white whore” who is married to the actual (living as opposed to dead and returning) Black father of Sarah, Adrienne Kennedy’s main character in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*; this character, who never has a speech in the play and is only mentioned in passing by the Funnyhouse Man, Raymond, is apparently situated as a “whore” because virtuousness is dissociated from being Black in the symbolic of Raymond (which is, I argue, what Sarah’s characters mirror for the purpose of commentary / mimicry). Morrison’s eloquent language in regard to what she sees as Melville’s awful symbolic predicament reminds me of Shakespeare’s description of why Desdemona would object to being called a whore: She “left her father and her country and her friends to be called whore? Would that not make one weep?” In almost exactly the same terms, Morrison argues in the quote above that Melville would have symbolically abandoned his family and his country and his friends and found himself psychically dismembered in a white nightmare.

Alice Walker feels similarly deprived of a situation in the symbolic of her culture by virtue of being made to feel ashamed of it. In her essay, “The Dummy in the Window: Joel Chandler Harris and the Invention of Uncle Remus,” Walker objects to having her culture represented in oppressive ways by the media of her oppressive culture that can “so easily make
us feel ashamed of ourselves, of our sayings, our doings, our ways”; Walker grew up in the same town as Harris, and is alienated from her own cultural legacy by his appropriation of it. The folklore that can so easily be misunderstood and made ridiculous has been run through too many hands, from Harris to Disney, for Walker to feel connected to what it has become, in effect. Walker asks rhetorically, “How did [Harris] steal [a good part] of my heritage?” Her answer is, “He made me ashamed of it. In creating Uncle Remus, he placed an effective barrier between me and the stories that meant so much to me, the stories that could have meant so much to all our children, the stories they would have heard from their own people and not from Walt Disney” (239). Walker’s concept of having to place a barrier between herself and what is now her abjected heritage (abject because it is sullied by Harris’s use of it) is an example of the use of rhetorical strategies to counter cultural attacks on the raced egos of subjects in a racist culture. I spend some time discussing Fanon and what constitutes a cultural mass attack on the ego—that is, the sense that one’s identity in the Symbolic world is questioned because of a specific fantasy of some ideology that situates the subject in process in question in some terrible, fixed, essentialized, colonized stereotype.

bell hooks comments that while Madonna protests that image is a cultural artifice, she also appropriates Black culture in the creation of her “artifice,” and at the same time takes advantage of the quintessential white “girl next door” image which, “when the chips are down is the image that [Madonna] most exploits” (310). hooks argues that Madonna, to maintain this quintessential white female image in American culture, must always approach black culture as a cultural other and appropriate it from the standpoint of an outsider. “It is the position of outsider that enables her to colonize and appropriate black experience for her own opportunistic ends,” even as she masks her act of cultural aggression with the guise of friendliness. “And no other group sees that
as clearly as black females in this society. For we have always known that the socially
constructed image of innocent white womanhood relies on the continued production of the racist
/ sexist sexual myth that black women are not innocent and never can be”; because black women
are “coded as the fallen women,” they can never, “as Madonna can, publicly “work” the image
of ourselves as an innocent female daring to be bad” (310). A final indignity is when Madonna
uses the black body of a blonde black man “as a mirror into which Madonna and her audience
could look and see only the reflection of herself and the worship of the “whiteness” she
embodies—that white supremacist culture wants everyone to embody” (313). bel hooks’
articulation of the way her oppressive culture defines and appropriates black culture and black
bodies is helpful because it encapsulates mentalities that many historians have documented.
hooks’ use of the term “whiteness” is consistent of my use of the term when it refers to the
ideology of white supremacy. Since Kristeva and all of the authors I discuss theorizes abjection
as it is created by culture / ritual, by the idea of defilement and guilt (you cannot violate the
boundaries of any law if the broken law never existed in the first place or was never held as the
symbolic of any subject), hooks’ succinct distinctions regarding media revisions and
appropriations of black culture (which is “bad,” because, of course, it is marginalized as the
forever suspect paranoid other by white supremacist ideology) are very useful to this project.

Baldwin describes, like Morrison, the cultural hell created by some people to make
money, and articulates how it is a chaos (as opposed to a harmonious fantasy, as white
supremacy / whiteness as ideology would have you believe; as I discuss at length, the
contradictions of what I refer to as “whiteness” discover the horror / chaos it creates, as opposed
to any consistent notion of social order for which anyone should logically be grateful). Baldwin
notes that the American situation is very peculiar—it subjects its most privileged subjects to the
conflicts that must be felt by, say, white Southern law enforcement officials barring a courthouse door, by rookie cops in Harlem—etc. The socially well positioned Southern sheriff is positioned suddenly so that he may have to club down people he may have known all his life, his playmates and friends and neighbors and relatives; to refuse to do this is to abnegate his privilege and to cross this line of brutalizing people that he knows as though they are outlaws, literally outside the Symbolic Law, members of some other species, is truly horrifying. Baldwin states that he has seen the eyes of the Southern sheriff, who for a moment seemed to be pleading with the crowd before him not to position him so that he must “commit yet another crime and not to make yet deeper the ocean of blood in which his conscience was drenched, in which his manhood was perishing” (324). Baldwin makes a sharp distinction between the racist symbolic and the actual Symbolic Law and presents thus the contradiction between the definition of crime under an unjust law and what is still culturally considered a crime (even if it is never penalized as such) under the terms of the Symbolic. For Baldwin, such concepts as conscience and manhood come from a subjectively better source than the definitions of a white supremacist culture; Baldwin demonstrates Kristeva’s point that the abject is constructed by cultural groups and what may be abject in one group may be acceptable in another. Clearly, Baldwin’s symbolic allows him to access to what constitutes horror, defilement, crime, and even manhood on terms that are not contaminated by bigotry. Manhood, for Baldwin, seems to mean “humane” or simply a subject with a rational symbolic code: when forced to be inhumane, the man who is losing his manhood to his crimes is full of “bitterness and anguish and guilt” (324) in regard to the people who have assembled before a courthouse and will not go away in spite of the crimes the Marine in question commits, while knowing that, in spite of the current laws, they are crimes in actual deed. Baldwin has seen the same anguish and bitterness and guilt—in a word, horror—in the eyes of
“the rookie cops in Harlem—rookie cops who were the most terrified people in the world, and who had to pretend to themselves that… the black mother, the black father were of a different species than themselves.” And the people who are positioned in the present just as the Southern sheriff and rookie cop have been in the past, who want to keep their positions, will “hide behind the color curtain… which eventually becomes the principle justification for the lives they lead”; in other words, these criminals are involved in the tautology of ideology, the justification of crimes committed finally for their own sake because so many other effectively identical crimes have already been committed. “They will thus barricade themselves behind this [racial] curtain and continue in their crime, in the great unadmitted crime of what they have done to themselves” (324). Baldwin uses the same logic as Morrison and comes full circle, back to all the people who are not like Morrison’s Melville, who can live in an utterly chaotic, irrational world and fantasize that it is the ideal of order. Baldwin is as eloquent as Morrison in his definition of hell: “White man, hear me! A man is a man, a woman is a woman, a child is a child. To deny these facts is to open the doors on a chaos deeper and deadlier and, within the space of a man’s lifetime, more timeless, more eternal, than the medieval version of Hell” (324). Baldwin demands of the “white men” who have made the racist symbolic what it is they have bought with all the human product, all the flesh food, that they have sold. “It is terrifying to consider the precise nature of the things you have bought with the flesh you have sold—of what do you continue to buy with the flesh you continue to sell?” Baldwin’s contrast between the paper mill of ideology and the “trust” in a life that is lived, “that will teach you in joy and sorrow all you need to know… The old men and women of Montgomery—those who waved and sang and wept and could not join in the marching but who brought so many of us to the place where we could march—know this,” but white Americans do not know life that is apparently worth living and “remain barricaded inside
their history, trapped” in their ideological factory which, like a Kafkaesque Trial, only
sometimes hands down an incomprehensible gift of shit, but typically keeps the door through
which only one person can enter, firmly shut on its tautological mysteries that are in fact only
absurdities. Baldwin’s very moving essay is helpful on nearly every point touched in this
dissertation, particularly because he draws a connection between different kinds of human
consumption and ideology as I do at length in my examination of the disturbing imagery of an
abject other that is truly abject (that is, without any factual, actual link to the Symbolic); the
imagery of an insane ideology that knows its own insanity and continues to perpetuate the
fantasies (or just lies) that allow that engine, that factory, to keep turning out fresh loaves (or, in
Baldwin’s terms, new paper dollars).

On the note of fresh loaves, or newly born women (a.k.a. such as Cixous’ attempt to find
a new place, a position free of patriarchy), subjects in process or children, the last text I use as a
reference because it touches on a guiding point that recurs in multiple ways throughout this
dissertation is Marion Vera Cuthbert’s short piece, “Mob Madness”; Cuthbert’s work is helpful,
for it articulates the mirrored positioning and intersubjective relationship between a parent and
child she wishes to rear well (or at least sanely); Cuthbert also articulates the absolute lack of an
intersubjective relationship that this mother can have with her husband and her son by him who
mirrors him too well. In Cuthbert’s work, the insanity of a lynching is viewed from the margins
by a Caucasian woman whose lot is as unfortunate as Morrison believes Melville’s may have
been—that is, she cannot tolerate what is considered civilized and has to do what she can do to
absent herself from the savagery of her chaotic society. Cuthbert’s protagonist is unable to assist
Black refugees (everyone who is Black is endangered by the mob, once it is loose), and her silent
helplessness when she is faced with one is reminiscent of what Michelle Cliff means when she
writes that the oppressed and the horribly damned and some who may be considered mad are “in the silence,” in the leper colony in her Free Enterprise—that is, she recognizes the truth, the actual ideologically situated facts of the acts committed in her story, in her socio-cultural situation, but she is unable to tell anyone or influence anyone with her facts. Cuthbert’s protagonist’s medieval Hell, as Baldwin and Morrison would term it, consists in seeing the little version of herself, her daughter who has her face, grow up and learn all the things that she herself would rather have never lived long enough to learn. After watching her husband bring home an artifact from the lynching he and every “normal” (that is, white) member of the mob has witnessed (it functions, lying in his “filthy” handkerchief, in the exact way that the gobs of hair that Sarah loses in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* do when the audience first sees an indistinct black object that it cannot identify [in the first scene direction of *Funnyhouse*, the audience should see “a dark, indistinguishable object” on the pillow of Queen Victoria’s bed {12}]; the sight of “unleashed” black hair, intact on the head of a living Black woman, was shameful to some members Billie Allen’s audience [223], and that shame is precisely what is abject to Allen’s and Kennedy’s and Black women’s subjectivity; thus, the sight of clumps of black hair presented as a thing, an artifact of such abject shame, confronts the shamers with necessary horror—it is a gaze object because there are gazers whose eyes create the abjection of racism, with all its signs and signifiers [such as positioning Black hair as something revolting]), Cuthbert’s protagonist’s eyes are “wide with horror” and her dizziness with which she looks awry (in Žižek’s Lacanian terms) at the gaze object that is “a black object”—a piece of someone—forces her to the conclusion regarding her daughter’s life and her own. She looks at her sleeping husband and son, and thinks that her son is like his father and “most boys were like Jim,” whom she married before she knew he would hunt a person whose only referent is “It,” because “it” is hunted like an animal, but if
“it” had been an animal they would have killed “it” instead of hacking off “its” fingers and toes. She isn’t hungry though she hasn’t eaten and can only think about what has been done to “it”; she’s unable to respond to the plea for help from “the black woman” who asks her to hide her and can “only stare at her”; this stare is a Lacanian look, a mirrored image of horror—the one woman asking for help and the other knowing there is nothing she can do because her husband had “something black” in his “filthy handkerchief” and that she was never afraid of her brother after he had spilt blood in a knife fight, but… “Jim had something in his handkerchief,” and she is pregnant once again with yet another child and Jim, whom she did not know well enough when she married him, does not know about it. “The voice of the black woman seemed far away, lost in the shouting in her head” (338-40).

Cuthbert’s protagonist keeps returning to her daughter and thinking about what she knows is true now that she did not know when she was a child. The hysterical ellipses single out the concept that is an impossible breach of the boundaries she believed in when she was a child but now knows no longer exist, the intolerable anxiety surrounding the idea of another child who would grow into “a boy like Jim,” or another version of herself: “… when little Bessie grew up… some boy who could touch her soft, fair flesh at night, and go forth into the day to hunt a Thing in the brush and hack at its flesh alive…” (341). That is, the type of ellipsis used falls under Kristeva’s definition of an ellipsis deployed to “suspend main information in a description,” to hush it up; “what assimilates the attitude of the subject is intonation, suspense” (Powers 199). This sort of ellipsis pattern can carry “a deeper meaning that is not lexicalized” (200), or cannot be lexicalized—“an intense, passionate attitude beyond words” (200). “She looked and looked at the child,” and then makes her decision for herself and for her likeness who will never learn too much to live (in Baldwin’s sense of “life,” at least). She kills herself and her
daughter. Her husband, of course, wants to go “kill with his own hands every black man, woman and child within a hundred miles of the town,” but the sheriff, surprisingly enough, has seen more than one case like this one and says that she did it with her own hand and that the family was fortunate in that she didn’t touch Jim or the boy, since “when they go mad like this, sometimes they wipes all out” (341); and the neighbors, agog in the yard simply determine that something must have been wrong with the dead woman “when she held back from seein’ the burnin’. A rare, uncommon sight and she hid in her house, missin’ it!” The illiterate dialect is reminiscent of Conrad’s black individual who is allowed to speak long enough to announce the death at the Heart of Darkness, except this time that particular rhetorical trick is used to describe the lynch mob. Cuthbert’s work is helpful because it demonstrates what the literature of the abject would look and feel like—nothing in its literary universe makes rational sense, it reads like a dizzying scream and yet is nauseatingly realistic in its very unreality (a literary paradox). The one form possessed by the literature of the abject is precisely its style—rhetorical and grammatical style, glaring against the awful nonsensical real of its content.

Cuthbert shows us that a reading of works like Kennedy’s earlier plays as examples of what they present, instead of as sad case studies of sorts that involve a woman who has simply (if understandably) gone mad in an insane universe, is far more constructive than throwing the subject out with the abject lack of viable positions in the subject’s universe. Even though subjects like Cuthbert’s and Kennedy’s often end up dead in the end, they have, notably, ended their own lives and revealed their own agency (as limited as it may be) to themselves in the course of their stories. Even if the only people who observe these stories are as obtuse as Cuthbert’s Jim and Kennedy’s Landlady of the Funnyhouse (who laughs insanely at inappropriate moments), whose name is Mrs. Conrad, it may be said (in Kristeva’s terms) that
for the space of a work of literature a veil of literary style and meaning has been thrown over the abject hell it represents.

This work consists of the following authors and content descriptions:

Section One includes analyses of the majority of Adrienne Kennedy’s opus; it begins with a discussion of Kennedy’s subjects’ agency and the representation of her characters, as well as her use of literary and psychoanalytic devices. Then I extend this discussion to Kennedy’s use of impossible characters (that is, characters who extend Kennedy’s contradictory characterizations [such as dead characters that keep returning] and allow for a discussion of Kennedy’s use of colonial spaces) such as vampires and cannibals. I also place Kennedy’s work in a historical context by arguing that Kennedy’s Rat’s Mass and Baraka’s Black Mass have interrelated concepts of whiteness. Finally, I demonstrate the subtle but strong framing and agency exhibited in Kennedy’s earlier plays works in similar ways in Kennedy’s A Movie Star Has To Star In Black and White, The Alexander Plays, and An Evening With Dead Essex. I also include brief discussions of Suzan-Lori Parks’ Venus, and her Red Letter Plays to compare and contrast Kennedy’s work with the younger authors’.

Section Two deals with most of Octavia Butler’s opus, including the Seed to Tree series of short novels and the Xenogenesis novels. These series of novels are framed by a discussion of Butler’s contribution to the plantation and slave narrative genres, in her science fiction slavery novel, Kindred. The damage of ideologies appears in Butler’s parable novels, particularly in Parable of the Talents. Much time is devoted to the abject of slavery and how it develops in different forms in various contexts.
Section I: Abjection in Adrienne Kennedy
Much of the criticism on Adrienne Kennedy points out how Sarah / Clara as an individual is presented as mentally traumatized by racism. While I do not dispute that living in a racist society would be traumatizing to any victim of this society, I wish to focus on how this society creates its victimizers in the terms of Adrienne Kennedy’s plays: that is, I argue that the plays present the construction of the victimizer more than the damage caused by the victimizer, and in so doing make observable the awful power of the invisible typically assumed by the social symbolic of oppressive societies (that is, the ideologies behind the movements and the laws of these respective worlds). Many critics have pointed out that Kennedy destabilizes the identity of the subject, only to involve themselves in the implicit contradiction of then pointing out Sarah’s individual problems; I wish to point out that Kennedy deconstructs the identity of the white racist subject, while pointing to the need to see the black female / black subject in terms of subjectivity (as opposed to the terms of an abject that merely disrupts the white societal subject). While the subject will always be a subject-in-process, in Kristeva’s terms, it is by definition not an abject that only disrupts and never goes through any process, in and of itself. Arguably, the process of the subject in Kennedy’s plays emerges through her exposition of the contradictions (that is, the irrationalities) of racist societies and subjects. Kristeva’s theory of abjection (in psychoanalytic contexts provided by Slavoj Žižek) show this tricky author as asking questions of her audience in regard to what is being done and by whom, as opposed to merely presenting victims as such. A close reading provides answers that much criticism (particularly of *Funnyhouse* and *The Owl*
Answers) has overlooked by concentrating on Kennedy’s oppressed characters as victims instead of asking who or what is really governing the gaze and perimeters of the plays. I begin with a critical survey that displays the problems with approaches to Kennedy’s opus, and then present a close reading of the plays, to show the artist at work.

It is fairly commonplace to take plays like *Funnyhouse* and *Owl* literally. For example, E. Barnsley Brown states that Kennedy doesn’t “condone” what he sees as the attempts of her protagonists to “pass as white,” because she “reveals that her black protagonists ultimately reject their blackness, a core part of their identities, in favor of a deadening and deathly whiteness” (282). Such readings miss Kennedy’s conflicts—which are well encapsulated in her first published piece, “Because of the King of France”—which address the lack in the Other and the contradictions that expose the impossibility of the ideology of whiteness. Kristeva’s Abjection is particularly helpful precisely because Kennedy presents an assault on the boundaries of her characters, which begs the question as to how this assault is managed (and this presents an entirely different view of much of her work). That is, it is the ideology of whiteness that is sickening, that corresponds to physical reactions of revulsion, not the fact that some of her characters happen to be racially Black.

Similarly, critics like Linda Kintz make Kennedy’s Sarah (in *Funnyhouse*) a victim of the confusion of kinship groups that can withstand a cultural, racial attack with a claustrophobic family space (that is, an oppressive nuclear structure as opposed to a community) in which “tortured family encounters,” revolving around what Kintz sees as Sarah’s search for a father, “are nightmarishly reenacted in spite of their impossibility” (155). Kintz makes many helpful arguments, like, “in Kennedy’s work, it is not mixture that leads to death but its phobic devaluation by groups with power to enforce their own meaning through violence, shame,
humiliation and appropriation” (144), and associates Kennedy’s lack of phobic insistence on “cleanly separated categories, unities and singular identity” with Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival; “carnival imagery… reproduces the grotesque effects of the paranoid or phobic nature of civilization itself. [Funnyhouse] is filled with images of bestiality, evil, deformity and horror, which Bhabha might explain as white culture’s projections” (151). But Kintz’s emphasis is on her argument that “these Sarah characters find neither absolution nor coherence, partially because the father has none…. as a daughter, Sarah can only attempt to gain some agency from this position by bludgeoning her father with an ebony mask” (163). Kintz supplies so much useful historical data and overlooks what Kennedy may be doing with that data from a psychoanalytic point of view—that is, instead of looking only at what Kennedy strategically allows her characters to tell us, which is actually a reflection of the lack of the Other of whiteness, Kintz overlooks the agency asserted by the author who presents what has to be abjected in such contradictory ways that it is evident that Sarah’s actual family group, or even her perception of it, is not really at stake here; the point is not simply to reproduce “the grotesque effects of the phobic nature of civilization,” but rather to demonstrate how they happen in the funnyhouse of Kennedy’s racialized cultures. This is why Kristeva’s observation that literature of abjection does what literature of the carnival does not precisely because it shows the “narrative web as a thin film constantly threatened with bursting” (Powers 141). Kennedy uses the literature of abjection in order to demonstrate the irrationality of the ideology of whiteness; in short, her oppressors are the most self-condemnatory when they speak for themselves. Boundaries collapse as narrative collapses; Kennedy’s challenge is whose boundaries are we really watching disintegrate? Robert Scanlan never doubts that the play is merely about the racial trauma that appears in its suspiciously similar narratives (with important differences, of course),
and grants Kennedy the agency of an artist in what he sees as her control of form. Scanlan is correct in that Kennedy’s use of form certainly does demonstrate her control over this funnyhouse, but it requires a reading from Kennedy’s point of view, in the terms of abjection, to understand exactly how Kennedy’s disruptions of her narratives / scenes (a.k.a. the “BLACKOUTS” in *Funnyhouse* happen at interesting moments of the play, not merely to mark its end or the conclusion of a scene) are how she controls the way the Other sees its own lacks. (Robert Scanlan repeatedly notes that it’s difficult to keep track of any narrative / plot at all in *Funnyhouse*, and the “torrent of narrative” is something one would tell a psychoanalyst, and that the plot has to be carefully uncovered from where it is concealed beneath its themes and scenes; “It is difficult to keep strict attention on form alone”[94], Scanlan notes, although his conclusion is that “control over artistic forms and how they are related to materials exposes the arbitrariness of real domination which is otherwise hidden under the illusion of inevitability”[Adorno quoted in Scanlan 94] and that Kennedy shows her very real control over the plot [108]).

Rosemary Curb interprets Kristeva’s description of the tactics of third generation feminism to mean a re-cognition, a gaze at the woman in the social mirror in a self-conscious way. Kristeva describes this third generation in “Woman’s Time” as “an interiorization of the founding separation of the socio-symbolic contract… in such a way that the habitual… attempt to fabricate a scapegoat victim as founder of a society or counter-society may be replaced by the analysis of the potentialities of the victim / executioner which characterize each identity, each subject, each sex” (52). Curb argues that (in *Funnyhouse*) Sarah’s female selves reflect the white exterior that hides Sarah’s fear of the blackness within, while Sarah’s male selves (who are dead or dying) “mirror her consciousness as victim” (“Re/cognition” 306). Curb, however, does not consider that Kristeva also states that the act of sacrifice is a social acting out of the interior
violent and semiotic structures that shape the symbolic (Oliver 40); if this is the case, it begs the question as to what is sacrificed; it is made quite clear that Sarah’s Jesus, after declaring that he is not the son of God but instead of a black father, commits to performing the act of purgation of murdering Patrice Lumumba (which is, incidentally, where “the biblical logic of the Apocalypse as final purgation intersects with imperialism’s logic of ridding Africa of its militant leaders”[Kintz 163]), but as I argue below, it is unclear as to exactly what happens to the Black Father who is identified with Lumumba. All the audience sees is Sarah’s body, that which is sacrificed—her Duchess can hang herself and reappear again, but Sarah proper cannot—and it is, for some reason, necessary for Raymond to say that Sarah was “a funny little liar” after her death by hanging; this is but one of the clues Kennedy gives her audience that someone is lying about the spaces and positions in the world that the characters who are not Sarah have shared with her. (Raymond is the Funnyhouse Man, who incidentally controls the mirrors behind the blinds on the set [that is, blinds connote windows, a way to see out if not get out; in the funnyhouse, the outside world is only a reflection of the inside; and again, the question is who is controlling this interior, constructed social symbolic]). The executioner, then, is obviously the Other of whiteness, whose existence is supported by the construction of an abject. I argue that the speaking subject of the play sacrifices the other of the drives (which is associated with blackness / the myth of the black rapist) in an act (the sacrifice / lynching of Sarah) that releases the drive energy within the white subject’s symbolic. The potentialities of the role of the victim, in this case, are limited to the declaration of guilt and the act of the sacrifice. This allows me to draw the conclusion that it is not Sarah who is afraid of “the blackness within” (as Curb states), but rather Sarah performs the excision of the abject drives required to define the “pure” white subject. That is, Sarah’s death, in Funnyhouse, is so surrounded by contradictions in the racist
tropes and racialized figures of the play, that it is arguable that Sarah dies to escape the darkness of whiteness / racism, not the paranoid other that the ideology of racism requires for its existence (as Žižek would put it). I argue below that the Owl’s Answer is precisely that the white subject is not pure, but guilty (the Dead White Father is the owl, the “flying [rapist] bastard,” in effect); moreover, both rapists in both Owl and Funnyhouse (which at one time were the same play), take the historical and cultural position of the rapist feared by Black women in both plays. I demonstrate below that Kennedy’s use of the Black Father who is a rapist is a clever trick that shows her own use of Raymond’s mirrors and blinds (which can cover or reveal the mirrors), if you will.

Alternatives to my interpretation continue as follows. Claudia Barnett argues, in “A Prisoner of Object Relations: Adrienne Kennedy’s Funnyhouse of a Negro,” that “the theories of object relations of psychologist Melanie Klein are apparently used in Funnyhouse … Kennedy’s characters rarely progress beyond the point of the paranoid-schizoid position” (374); according to Klein, the infant deals with anxieties by projecting its negative and positive affects onto objects that become objects of good and evil; as the infant matures, it is able to integrate these objects into its own subjectivity (e.g. they are its objects). The infant is stuck in the paranoid-schizoid position when it fails to integrate its objects into its own subjectivity; it is trapped in the affects / object complexes created by its own splits (“Object Relations” 374). Melanie Klein (and therefore Barnett in her reliance on her analysis), according to Lacan, makes the mistake of analyzing the objects of the subject themselves (as though they have some objective access to reality [e.g. the patient’s true source of fear, etc etc]) rather than what they mean in relation to what cannot be symbolized and what the objects are merely replacements for: the real of the Symbolic (Gueguen 90). I argue that it is the abject created by racism that creates an intrusion of
the real into the Symbolic (by breaching the barrier of the inside and the outside of given subjects); by analyzing how the objects created based on this anxiety relate to the real allowed to slip in by the abject of racism, the focus is placed not on some objective reality that the objects of the subject-in-process reflect, but rather on the absolute irrationality that made the subject-to-be create the objects in the first place. This allows the analyst to prevent the fall into the trap of discussing Sarah’s monsters as though they are simply extensions of Sarah and Sarah’s objective problem. It is not that Sarah’s selves “cannot be separated into the “bad” selves and the “good” selves” (“Object Relations” 377), but the problem is what motivates the creation of the split-off objects in the first place, and what these objects mean—and to whom.

Claudia Barnett, in ““An Evasion of Ontology”: Being Adrienne Kennedy,” points out that Kennedy avoids the specific identification of herself as subject in her places by virtue of the fluidity and contradictions of identity in her plays. Kennedy states that the plays are “herself” but at the same time not necessarily about her. Plays that are apparent sequels contain contradictory details that refuse the assumption that characters of the same name reflect the same subject. “The female is marked by her difference from the [male] norm. The male retains the value of being unmarked while the female is deprived of value by being named Other…. There is a tremendous power in remaining unmarked” (“Being Adrienne Kennedy” 160). Barnett establishes that Kennedy, by marking different characters of her own in contradictory ways, succeeds in asserting what Kristeva would call her subject-in-process. The collapse of the “I” of many of her characters asserts the presence of the Other within the self; “one cannot stop being the self but one can become an Other” (165). This establishes the value of reading Kennedy’s work as a whole rather than as separate parts, but Barnett never discusses the way the Other portrays the subject that requires an other in Kennedy’s plays, even while she makes helpful observations that
can be used to support this point, such as that an early character, Aaron, resembles Sarah even though he is an obvious model for Raymond.

Carla McDonough, emphasizing the role of ideology rather than the cultural notions of subjectivity that support it, argues that in *The Owl Answers* the Kennedy heroine (Clara) is on a spiritual quest which is impossible because identification with the myth of the Virgin is impossible. McDonough argues that *Owl* covers much of the same terrain as *Funnyhouse* and “makes vividly apparent the damage to women’s psyche created by the strictures placed upon women’s bodies and minds by patriarchal religions, owing to their ideology that casts women in the role not only of something other and less than men, but also as the embodiment of carnal evil and sin” (8). By her focus on Clara’s impossible spiritual quest (to be accepted / absolved in a system that denigrates women by definition), McDonough misses the way *Owl* writes the white male split subject into the impurities it constructs for its support; of course Clara is posited as impure by white male society, but I argue that the white male split subject is implicated in this impurity by the play. For McDonough, the owl is always Clara; I argue that it is, in effect, the Dead White Father.

Georgie Boucher examines *Funnyhouse* and *Owl* and argues that the plays present the mulatta as a de-essentialized being, who does not embody either White supremacy or Black nationalism (85). The fluidity of the identities of Kennedy’s characters resist assimilationism and nationalism to open a liberating space for the “self in progress” (85-86). Boucher interprets the endings of the plays as a failure of assimilation (89). The protagonists have ability to threaten Whiteness because they cast doubt on racial identity (because of the shifting multiplicity of identities inherent in the protagonists and the plays), and this suggests potential empowerment (92). Boucher argues that Kennedy contrasts “the externally imposed second skin of racism and
a more personal experience of self” (84), thus arguing that the protagonists do embody black people as they are and that these black people have internalized racist thought. The owl that Clara becomes at the end of the play (a non-speaking non-subject) is for Boucher a beautiful creature into which Clara escapes the definition of racial borders. I read the foreclosure of Kennedy’s subject in the context of the symbolic system that itself collapses when the borders of the white split subject are threatened.

Elin Diamond, in “Mimesis in Syncopated Time: Reading Adrienne Kennedy,” reads Kennedy as a text that constructs an otherness for Diamond specifically as a white female viewer / reader. The syncopation between the object and the subject of these texts allows for a superimposition of the object upon the subject. Diamond takes her use of syncopation from Stein’s observations about theater: “The thing seen and the thing felt about the thing seen were not going on at the same time” (134). Diamond sees herself as othered by Kennedy’s text because the subject of the text is an other. This would be exactly my reading of Kennedy’s texts (in sum at least) but for the fact that a black female subject would have to consider herself in the place of what (I argue) is really a white (split) subject (no Freudian Slip entailed—as Rosemary Curb points out in “(Hetero)sexual Terrors,” the bestialization of the [abject] black subject is a parody of what the societal white subject fabricates in Kennedy’s Funnyhouse and Owl [145]; however, if Curb is correct in stating that the black characters of the two plays do feel guilty for what they were constructed as even as they parody their own guilt [in effect], a black female subject as viewer would have to step into this uncertain subjectivity [if she were a viewer in Diamond’s terms]).

Jeanie Forte argues that the mulatta’s embodied position as neither / or as well as her claim to white heritage as well as African American ancestry destabilize the patriarchal gender
roles that form the categories of race. They manifest a maternal, as opposed to paternal, identity. For Forte, the visibility and violence of blood, and bodies form a scene of resistance. What concerns me about a reading like this is the emphasis on the pre-lingual violence of the drives and not how the subject not only incorporates these drives in its subjectivity but possesses subjectivity as well as drives. Bleeding on a clean movie set, for instance, certainly disrupts the scene, but I prefer the emphasis to develop from the nodal point of “I bleed” (as in Kennedy’s Lesson in Dead Language). Forte’s “bleeding body politic” collapses too easily into the extention of the “feminine” as “dirty” and applicable to the other (Kintz) (and therefore a support of the racially pure split subject rather than an undermining of it).

Mance Williams states that Adrienne Kennedy’s work extends to the individual in a hostile environment; that is, the terms of the work apply to any oppressed individual in such a world (133-4). “Funnyhouse of a Negro is a lyrical comment on the conditions of modern man: guilt, fear and disintegration. All of us feel the searing guilt because of our gross insensitivity and inhumanity to each other” (145). Williams touches on the concept that the subject of the play is the one who is truly guilty, not the character presented in the play in abject terms, but doesn’t extend this point to say that it is the colonial white split subject whose guilt the plays explore in one way or in another.

Through the use of Lacanian drive grammar (elaborated upon below), and the contexts granted by Kennedy’s opus (in regard to the meaning / role or purpose of symbols and actions), Funnyhouse can present the delusions and contradictory myths created by the ideology of whiteness, fantasies that protect the individual caught in the nightmare of a fascist ideology (that is, the paranoid other, which supports the ideology, which does not exist [Žižek], itself presents
the contradictions applied to the other that are themselves fantasies the ideology in question
needs to stay intact; the person positioned as abject, together with specular imagery that has been
used to make lynch victims abject objects, herself creates the fantasies, that should be read as
such, that support the ideology of whiteness.). Use of Kristeva’s Abjection, in particular her
definition of abject language, allows a reading of Funnyhouse that shows Sarah is not merely a
victim of racism, but rather someone who resists her impossible world until the end of her life.
Kennedy pushes the limits of the abject itself in her expose, in effect, of “normal” social
symbolic performances under a racist gaze; her project, especially for its time period, is an
extremely ambitious one—through her use of tropes and imagery, she attempts to do what
minstrels have been doing since the first Black minstrel (which is, of course, make the white
audience doubt who is really being mocked and dehumanized. The Funnyman and the Landlady
have a house of mirrors, but Kennedy has an awful lot of heads to work with, to make her white
viewers see themselves). In short, Kennedy attempts to make her audience need to abject the
(hopefully denormalized) ideological tropes they have taken for granted as part of their cultural
symbolic.

What Kennedy accomplishes in her plays is easier to understand when first viewed in a
comparatively tiny globe, as it were: everything I discuss above in regard to the abject of an
irrational / impossible symbolic is encapsulated in the themes presented in her first published
work, “Because of the King of France.” The person Kennedy’s narrator sees victimized, Sidney,
creates a fantasy that Žižek would call a sinthome in order to survive in some way the racial
circumstances of his actual life. The fact that Sidney has to do this, that he disappears somewhere
after the events that made him do so have happened, is terrifying to Kennedy’s narrator—the
very envelope sent to her by Sidney, which tells her of his sinthome, becomes a gaze object
(repulsive but compelling, in a position to “watch” Kennedy’s narrator from her ceiling [it may as well be noted that Raymond is above Sarah’s apartment, and since he controls whether the mirrors of the house are “watching,” the homology of Raymond being positioned above Sarah just as the grey envelope sent by Sidney about the King of France has been stuck to her bedroom ceiling by a college roommate is simply too “coincidental” to dismiss as happenstance]). A sinthome is a piece, a symptom, of an ideological order that doesn’t belong in the orderly perfection that the ideology in question claims to create; while all ideological orders need abject others (whose abject aspects are typically contradictory and irrational—Žižek uses the example of the contradictory attributes projected onto Jews by Fascist anti-Semitism to make this point [Sublime Object]), these ideologies cannot control these troublesome “bits” that are needed as a distraction from the fact that the ideologies in question are not creating peace on earth and goodwill toward man, or a way of unifying people against these “problems” that are preventing this ideology from working for them. “Although functioning as a support of the totalitarian order, fantasy is… at the same time the leftover of the real that enables us to “pull ourselves out,” to preserve a kind of distance from the socio-symbolic network” (Looking Awry 128). Such a signifier, permeated with idiotic enjoyment, is what Lacan, in the last stage of his teaching, called le sinthome. Isolating and exposing the sinthome’s stupidity can “dissolve totalitarianism as an effective social bond by isolating the heinous kernel of its idiotic enjoyment” (129). And this is precisely what Kennedy does throughout her plays—she isolates what the subject must abject, but does so in a way that forces everyone else affected by the ideology in question to look at what is being abjected as a “gift of shit,” as opposed to something that unifies the ideology in question. Kristeva’s terms are useful because Abjection deals with the anxiety caused when a boundary, a law that is crucial to a symbolic, is suddenly disrupted—a Kafkaesque judge who is
the embodiment of law but uses his power for obscene enjoyment only is an excellent example which meshes with Kristeva’s more personal ones (the abject appears when the impossible happens—when a friend stabs you instead of helping you; it is possible to have a physical response to the psychological confrontation with the abject); hence the example of a law that is not just is as good an example of Kristeva’s abjection as Lazarus Morrell, “the frightful redeemer who raises his slaves from the dead only to have them die more thoroughly—but not until they have been circulated, and brought a return, like currency… [He] would pick out a wretched black and offer him his freedom… if he ran away from his master, and allowed them to sell him, he would receive a portion of the money paid for him and they would this time help him escape again, this time to a free state… The runaway expected his freedom. Lazarus Morrell’s shadowy mulattoes would give out an order among themselves that was sometimes barely more than a nod of the head, and the slave would be freed from sight, hearing, touch, day, infamy, time, his benefactors, pity, the air, the hound packs, the world, hope, sweat and himself” (Powers 24-25). Kennedy’s Sidney appeals to the social mores that he believes apply to him before he has to run away to the “King of France” (an obscene embodiment of the Father figures that are abusive and deny him both love and his music because of his race); the weight of the social mores Sidney believes in before they do him no good is best felt by Fanon’s description of how historical-racial constructions overlay the assumptions of the natural physical pattern that humans take for granted; “The slow construction of myself as a body in the midst of a spatial and temporal world, this seems… to be the pattern”; but Fanon’s use of his basic senses and drives in the natural world is denied him, because he is not allowed to simply be an individual member of it (he takes up three seats on a train—he is not simply himself, but his body, his race, his lynched and defiled ancestors). “Neither my polished manner nor my literary knowledge… met with favor… I was
facing something irrational. The psychoanalysts say that nothing is more traumatic for a child
than the contact with reality. But I say that for a human being who has no weapon but his reason,
there is nothing more neurotic than an encounter with the irrational” (qtd in Jahn 22-23).

The seriousness of Sidney’s appeals to the people who beat him with words and heavy
implements and who pity him for being so confused in regard to the limitations of his status as to
“think he’s white and he’s… nothing but a poor little colored boy” (Kennedy 5)-- to believe he
could be a musician and love a white woman, is apparent in the context of Fanon and Kristeva:
after Sidney has gotten a blonde Jew with kinky hair (with whom he studied music) pregnant, her
father beats Sidney in the face with a lead pipe before Sidney’s father can reach him; but before
that, after it has come out that the white woman, Sylvia, is pregnant by Sidney, he tells his father
and the protagonist’s family, “repeating over and over, it was the whole world let me in, finally,
the whole world let me in” (Kennedy 4). When the protagonist’s father asks Sidney if he knows
the seriousness of what he has done, “Sidney only sat then looked directly into my father’s eyes,
“Did you know there’s love in the world… Did you know it? Did you know that even though
Mama’s gone, there’s love in the world”” (5). And then Sidney is dismissed from the Institute
where he studied music, and disappears for years, apparently to the Virgin Islands. The
protagonist only remembers what happened to Sidney after she gets a letter from him, the grey
envelope stuck to the ceiling by an oblivious roommate—“I clutched at the letter and suddenly
threw it across the room… I could not explain it but I did not want to open that damn thing…
Inexplicably, against my will, I began to remember things about Sidney” (Kennedy 4). The letter
contains the same content as the Fanon quote above—that is, that Fanon found he could not fill
simply one seat on the train but three: Sidney says that “everyone at the Institute knows Negroes
are people who were brought… from Africa and Africa is a black jungle where black pygmies
with rings in their noses sit banging drums and distorting their pygmy bodies”; and then Sidney repeats his dead mother’s speech in the present tense, with the addition that if he were not black his mother “would not keep saying [in regard to his love for the Caucasian Sylvia], “Sidney, baby, it’s the Lord’s will you’re black and she’s white. If he had wanted you white… he would have made it so… you can’t go against the Lord, Sidney… you can’t go against Him” (Kennedy 5-6). Sidney’s repetition could be termed abject literature that describes the horrors of the ideology that gets him beaten in the face with a pipe (the presence and significance of bloodied faces is fairly clear in *Funnyhouse*); his repetition makes his speech fit into the definition of the literature of abjection—it deals with having his boundaries / identity shattered (emphasized by the blows he takes to the face), and its repetition makes it poetry as opposed to a straight narrative, thus presenting the threat to the thin membrane between the impossible and identity (*Powers* 141). The irrational ideology that Sidney cannot escape from, but whose sinthome emerges for the protagonist, appears in terms of the contradictions in Sidney’s own speech, in the letter sent to the protagonist, and in the King of France fantasy (which both describes the nature of the world of the ideology that has ruined him as well as the obscene enjoyment of the sinthome that collapses that ideology).

The contradiction present is in his mother’s repeated admonition, which isn’t consistent with what the protagonist’s family said of his mother’s attitude toward Sidney—that she effectively made him think he was a genius and “now he thinks he’s white”; and this contradiction is compounded by the simple fact that his mother is dead and he hears her saying things she may not have said after he supposedly went to Versailles (to be with the King of France)—even if he hears her voice in his memory, it is obvious that his mother is not positioned in the court of the King of France (because he went to Versailles only after he left the Institute
after his mother, who encouraged him in his talent, was dead [and he associated her death and her love with the impossibility of loving his white girlfriend in the terms of abject literature]). And just when Sidney says, “all that was past now and I had my life at the Palace… myself and the Royal Family,” his speech is a prelude to a parallel created by the King of France that recalls the “distorted bodies” of the “pygmies” earlier in his letter (which are applied to him, regardless of his actual appearance, because he happens to be Black); Sidney’s fantasy is the sinthome that speaks to the ideology invoked by the mention of the Lord that supposedly created a distinction between the lives of Black and white people: The King of France is the embodiment of an exposed, collapsed ideology (of the racist Lord); the King’s actions underscore what is already his position in Sidney’s fantasy. The King asks Sidney to play in The Hall of Mirrors, along with “the amusing Monsieur Philipe,” whom Sidney “had never heard of before”; the fellow musician, who plays with Sidney (e.g. mirrors him in this sense of mutual action) in The Hall of Mirrors, is often talked about by the King (who “never visited” Sidney, while Sidney still produced musical pieces “for Sylvia [the white girlfriend] for even at the Palace I could not forget the sorrow,” except “that week [the King] came in often to remark about the amusing Monsieur Philipe… he was an ugly fellow, small, stunted… and spent hours in his room cursing his vile face and his stunted body. And besides, the most amusing part he was in love with the King’s daughter”[6]). Philipe obviously mirrors Sidney, while taking the position of the object of mockery that Sidney cannot tolerate any longer (which is why he went to the Palace, of course); Sidney parallels Philipe in his laments over his appearance, his association between himself with pygmies (it is emphasized that Philipe laments his short, “stunted” stature and his Corsican features; Sidney writes about how his Negro features are perceived in this nightmare [except, importantly, in every way that matters it is quite real and this ideology is only exposed by
Sidney’s fantasy—this does not stop people from suffering from it]), and, most importantly, in Philipe’s love for the King’s daughter (which the King mentions as a joke when he visits Sidney who is writing music for Sylvia—another daughter, whom the Lord has denied him). And when Philipe plays in the Hall of Mirrors, the princess turns away her eyes, but from Philipe’s “crippled” body and “ugly” fingers (and he “looks like a filthy beggar—another inconsistency in this fantasy regarding this ideology that shows it to be a fantasy [e.g. who is allowed to look like a filthy beggar while playing before the King of France in the Palace at Versailles?] “came all the longings, all the tenderness, all the loveliness that comes from dreaming alone in shuttered rooms that smell of turnips, all the fierceness that comes from being convicted to disgrace by God’s will…the rage, the annihilation, the grief of race and its unchangingness, the eternity of it all” (6). In these lines we see the rooms that the protagonist didn’t want to visit because they smelt of food (turnips, of course [4]), they were the homes of poor people, and her father was a doctor; we see the closed in room in which Sidney has been confined in his disgrace, and we see the ideology of racism laid bare because, like most ideologies, it claims to be “unchanging” and racists have claimed that racism will never change. The response to this performance by Philipe—to the tragedy of Sidney’s life—is thus: “The King of France laughed” (6). The lack of any excuse or explanation or apology is typical to the irrationality of a position that is supposed to be unchanging, that cannot be changed (because, as Fanon puts it, between himself and whites “stood a world—a white world. For they were not capable of wiping out the past”[qtd in Jahn 23]; it is dubious that Fanon means that people’s reactions to him as a Black man cannot change, but rather that this behavior has been embedded in an ideology that by definition does not change precisely because it does not exist, au fond, minus an abject [Sublime Object]; it is “an eternity” because it is a fiction, and like something that has been inscribed, it stays the way it has been
written). The obscenity of the laugh of the King, owner of this Hall of Mirrors, pounds, like a knock on a door, on all of the vulnerability so private as to make another person feel ashamed to see such exposure of another human being (hence “obscene” in Žižek’s terms). The obscenity here is on two levels, however—the way Žižek would say a regular person, his audience, would feel ashamed to see another person so emotionally exposed in the production of his sinthome, and the obscenity of the enjoyment of the evil god figure of The King of France (who really is obscene in the sense that he is a voyeur of suffering, watching it among all of his mirrors that are also watching it, watching himself watching suffering [which is indeed, in Lacan’s phrasing, the grammar of the scopic drive—the King is sexually positioning himself as a watcher; his laughter is analogous to the sound of an orgasm, since he sees himself having laughter {emissions made in public are drive performances that are sexual in content; the drives, when their affects are cathected, can appear obscenely to the public, interactive, erotic, as opposed to mere natural / instinctive emissions—which is why, in at least one case history, a man urinates in front of a woman for whom he has sexual feelings, and who in turn threatens him with castration; this threat is appropriate because this act of urination is actually an expression of desire for sex (Jaanus 128)}]).

With the preamble of “Because of the King of France” in mind, the questions of *Funnyhouse* follow—that is, whose Funnyhouse is this (the Palace, with its Hall of Mirrors belongs to The King of France), and who represents the threat, the ongoing threat (because it is rooted in historical and cultural references) of the play. This threat is embodied by the knocking on the door and the use of the lights; since Kennedy’s stage directions show that it is possible for characters to find / see each other in the dark, the use of the “unreal, ugly white light” (Kennedy 12) and who controls it (as well as the knocking, which is more often than not coincidental with
the light). While, as I have argued above, too few critics give Sarah and her selves enough credit (instead of seeing the play [and the characters’ performances for each other] as an expose of the tropes inflicted on Black people under the ideology of racism, many critics take the speeches of her selves at face value, so to speak—that is, as evidence of the psychological damage inflicted on the faceless Negro Sarah proper). As Jenny Spencer, who also finds Funnyhouse in “Because of the King of France,” helpfully notes, “Indeed, at any given moment, precisely whose nightmare, and whose anxieties are being represented onstage, the characters’ or the audiences’ remain open to question”; “Having a dead woman, whose tortured figure recalls a history of lynching, address the audience so matter-of-factly, and in such an intimate space (her bedroom), establishes a disturbing psychic complicity between character and audience that cannot be adequately explained by the operations of identification” (56). After addressing the operation of the set, the lighting, the knocking and the evident drive grammar, more light can be shed on the historical contexts and their repetition in the play as well as the intersubjective positions of the subjects in this play (and the questions evoked concerning the social subjectivization of the audience).

Silence, stillness, masks / costumes and animals / animal signs also make up the clues of how ideology (as it appears in the historical continuum of racism in America) creates abjection in Kennedy’s work, and how Kennedy’s protagonists present tropes that are supposed to mirror black abjection in racist symbolic in a Signifyin(g) way (not unlike the way Black minstrels have performed the shows attributed to Black people themselves—obviously, to signify on Western Cultural damage and the shows themselves [as demonstrated by Susan Gubar]). Racism / whiteness, in Kennedy, often takes over the position of the unknown fear produced by the phobic object, for which a language must be constructed, found or remembered (Powers 37). As
Kristeva points out, abjection is productive of culture: the loathing implied by abjection “is the symptom of an ego, that, overtaxed by a “bad object,” turns away from it, cleanses itself of it and vomits it… contrary to hysteria, which brings about, ignores or seduces the symbolic but does not produce it, the subject of abjection is eminently productive of culture. Its symptom is the rejection and reconstruction of languages” (Powers 45). Language itself screens subjects from intolerable anxiety regarding boundlessness; the phobic object, which stands in for an unnamed, unarticulated horror, is replaced by language in a way homologous to the fetish structure’s replacement of intolerable fear of whatever has been fetishized— “is not language itself our ultimate and inseparable fetish… language is based on the fetishistic denial, “I know that, but just the same,” “the sign is not the thing, but just the same”…[language] defines us in our essence as speaking beings” (37). While Kristeva, very helpfully, makes it clear that the meaning / status of the abject is subject to cultural difference and therefore selective exclusions, her explanation of the reason for rituals that create exclusions / abjections of women / m(o)thers revolve around the subject’s fear of loss of identity by sinking irretrievably into “the mother” (64); Kristeva points out that “Incest prohibition throws a veil over primary narcissism… it cuts short the temptation to return, with abjection and jouissance, to that passivity status within the symbolic function, where the subject, fluctuating between inside and outside, pleasure and pain, word and deed, would find death along with nirvana… this is precisely where we encounter rituals of defilement and their derivatives, which, based on the feeling of abjection and all converging on the maternal, attempt to symbolize the other threat to the subject: that of being swamped by the dual relationship, thereby risking the loss not of a part (castration) but of the totality of his living being” (64). Kristeva goes on to point out the disturbing parallel, created by patriarchal religions and their concepts of defilement regarding women, in which somehow the
interior of the mother is just as much a threat to the clean and proper self as leprosy (101); the ideology behind this construction of abjection appears in the list of abominations and ensuing admonitions in Leviticus (Kristeva summarizes that, in these Biblical terms, the “body must bear no trace of its debt to nature; it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic”; hence any mark that identifies the body with the mother is as “unholy” and “unclean” as leprosy [102]). While leprosy is an actual disease of the skin, an individual and ultimate boundary between the inside and outside of the body, the cultural connotations bestowed on leprosy associate it with cultural symbolic productions that need not have anything to do with the anatomy of people who happen to be female. Kristeva points out the realities and disturbing uses of abjection while describing and addressing them, and, arguably, Kennedy does the same thing, in effect—while, as discussed below, there are definitely abjections that threaten Kennedy’s protagonists (the abject of racism, primarily, and the mass attack on the ego that comes with it—etc), these abject states are produced by an oppressive culture’s definition of the abject; the threats to Kennedy’s protagonists, the way Kennedy demonstrates the deprivation of speech of different groups of characters, and the impingement of phobic objects (which contain a very real culturally produced horror, as opposed to what superficially appears to be individual psychic trauma alone—this distinction is important to both Kristeva and Kennedy) and the mutation of the images of her subjects, all demonstrate Kennedy’s use of whiteness as an ideology that can express the desire to bury her dead white (cultural) father, au fond (this physical action carries the weight of the literary precedent of Antigone, and, as Žižek points out [Sublime Object], Antigone’s function is to challenge the law itself [even while she performs a ritual that, in itself, is considered in keeping with the cultural symbolic under which she operates]), as opposed to simply enacting a debasing ritual “exalting” a white Medusa image (in Rat’s Mass). This is why images that evoke
death, whiteness, impossible stillness (as per statues, icons, idols—things made of stone, which, of course, Medusa creates out of people), and animal referents that threaten and violate the bodies and psychologies of her characters, are important symbols in Kennedy’s exposition of the symbols and tropes of her racist cultures; her use of statues and even the apparent elevation of a white symbol in *Lesson*, for example, complicate Kennedy’s argument by forcing the reader to consider that white objects and statues can be a source of contrast for their other uses (for example, in *Lesson in Dead Language*, the use of a non-racialized wearer of a white costume that represents the Other / source of signification in a room, allows Kennedy to show her audience that it has the outlines of a human face, and has a Latin book whose lessons can be applied to everyone; the blank human face of an Other [whose authority is playfully put in question by the fact that the character is called the White Dog; *Lesson* follows *Rat’s Mass*, in which a brother and sister beg a far less rational and racialized God to “stop throwing dead rat babies at us”]; since “dog” is “god” backward {a joke played out by the association of the death of the small white dog with Caesar and the sun} the White Dog of *Lesson* is linguistically denuded of real symbolic threat] and since *Lesson* arguably clarifies the dynamics of abject challenge to the subjects of *Rat’s Mass*, it appears that Kennedy’s use of threatening white imagery serves a point in her display of what is at least rational in the terms of abjection to the maintenance of the integrity of subjectivization. She also connects what appear to be easily dismissed symbolic threats to physical / psychological threats by way of contrast between the plays and among other plays—the Dr. Freudenberger of her Suzanne Alexander plays not only sets himself up for analysis on the part of Kennedy’s protagonist and her sister {who are certain they see him stalking their garden at night}, but parallels the threat of the abject images he selects for the benefit of Kennedy’s protagonist with the very real physical threat to her husband who is
traveling with Fanon, thus serving the purpose of the point that linguistic threats and scopic shock {the gaze (and potential harm—and the action of the play as it involves Suzanne is all about a ring of potential danger, albeit framed in the apparently, if not superficially, disarming context of the reading of Stoker’s Dracula) of the assassin reappears in the change in Suzanne’s husband’s coloring when next she sees him} interrelate to each other. Kennedy’s use of language in effective conjunction of the dynamics of the dangers of racial identity and the gaze demonstrate trespasses on the boundaries of the subjects in question and display the use of the drives in speech and by speakers]). Kennedy’s use of white imagery, then, in its complexity, allows for the expository denuding of what would otherwise threaten to be the invisible importance of white / colonial signifiers, particularly when they present an immediate or unceasing violent threat; the use of white signifiers in various ways allows Kennedy the discursive space to examine the various types of threat whiteness and its dis-eases cause Black subjects.

*Funnyhouse* is best understood when viewed in the context of its relationship to *The Owl Answers*, as well as in the light of Kennedy’s use of its imagery and speeches in her other plays; the historical context into which *Funnyhouse* and *Owl* were born also supports this reading of the plays (below, Baraka’s *Black Mass* is compared to Kennedy’s *Rat’s Mass*; *Black Mass* was produced the same year as *Rat’s Mass*, but *Rat’s Mass* was apparently written earlier, and while Kennedy would have been aware of the Black Arts activity on the New York theater circuit). First, I discuss how Sarah / Kennedy demonstrates the contradictions that connote the presence of an irrational ideology and the tropes used by that ideology (of whiteness) throughout *Funnyhouse*; I then point out that the scenes and lighting beg the question as to who is really a threat to Sarah’s boundaries and a cause of her anxiety, and conclude this section with a textual
comparison that shows that the Dead White Father of Owl and the racist construction of the threatening Black Father of Funnyhouse who “is dead, but keeps returning” are, in effect, the same character (constructed by an oppressive culture that would deny Sarah / Clara her identity—and a culture that Sarah and Clara both actively contradict and oppose [Sarah through representations of racist tropes {in effect, she is surrounded by the Funnyman’s mirrors, but she in her turn makes whiteness, in the embodiment of the statue of Victoria, which the Funnyman himself says “is a thing of terror, possessing the quality of nightmares, suggesting large and probable deaths” (Kennedy 14), look at itself via her placement of the statue of Victoria}; Clara resists the obscene enjoyment of her would-be and / or actual rapist with a knife, which has owl feathers stuck to it; the feathers give this implement of death for the Bastard’s Black Mother the weight and identity of what is effectively a murder weapon—that is, it is marked by a defining feature of the person responsible for at least two deaths {the owl feathers of “The Flying Bastard” who is the Dead White Father}]. As Octavia Butler states outright in Kindred, it is possible to kill another human being even if you yourself do not maneuver the instrument of death.

In Funnyhouse, stillness vs. movement (that is, the ability to escape from one’s room [unlike poor Sidney, who seems to have been shuttered in with the King of France]) is important, particularly because it is noted who goes where and why and who is suspected of going where and why. Stillness also denotes death, and statues / icons that actually “suggest large and probable deaths” (while this is stated outright in Funnyhouse, it is demonstrated in Rat’s Mass; the point made in both plays is consistent and the difference in expository method underlines the fact that while a thing may not be stated outright, it still may nonetheless be the case—which supports the argument that Funnyhouse shows everything that it also tells, although its showing,
as opposed to more direct “telling” has apparently led to many interpretations of the play that seem to validate the message that the play appears to work hard to contradict; that is, that a racist culture has turned Sarah / Kennedy into a borderline case. Such an interpretation of Sarah is particularly ironic because, as a “borderline case,” she would be an unreliable narrator of her own story, and Raymond, the abject Funnyhouse Man, makes the point of calling Sarah “a funny little liar” after she’s dead. We the audience / readers are left with Raymond’s word against a dead woman’s, and some critics are, with good intentions, effectively supporting what would be Raymond’s view of Sarah). After the curtain opens, the stage direction reads, “Two women are sitting in what appears to be a Queen’s chamber. It is set in the middle of the stage” (12); this by itself contradicts Kennedy’s direction that the “center of the stage” should be Sarah’s room, while her selves enact the scenes around her. This reading would leave Sarah with no actual room of her own, although she states outright, “I live in my room” (13). This interesting contradiction alone could be a misreading of the stage directions, were it not for the fact that there are many contradictions between what is said in the text (and by Kennedy inside and outside the demarcations as to where the play itself begins): the play itself is framed by a figure who is the Mother who is supposed to be dead and bald, but it is noted that she has hair that is “straight and black and falls to her waist”; her hair is “wild,” but there is no mention of any actual hair loss on the part of the Mother, who is supposedly bald and in the asylum because she allowed herself to be touched by a black man. The Mother, however, carries a bald head—while muttering unintelligibly just before the play, and after her death has been announced by two of Sarah’s selves, she reappears to say distinctly, “I never should have let a black man put his hands on me. The wild black beast raped me and now my skull is shining” (13). In any event, the first room we see, which “appears to be a Queen’s chamber,” has no mention of the presence of the
actual statue of Queen Victoria (which Sarah-Negro describes as a component that she constructs in her room after this opening segment), and is occupied by Sarah’s selves as Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg. It is stated that “throughout the scene, they do not move” (12), and “they look exactly alike… It is an alabaster face… great dark eyes that seem gouged out of the head… [They] must possess a hard, expressionless quality and a stillness as in the face of death” (12). The statuesque stillness of the characters, whose backs are the parts of them that we see here (which is why the stage direction finds it conveniently necessary to describe their faces thus), in the place of the white Victoria statue, and the description of them (although as yet they are apparently unseen; even though Victoria is holding a mirror, her reflection apparently is not exposed in the mirror that she is holding / controlling [this contrasts harshly with Raymond’s absolute control of the mirrors surrounding him in his {sexualized} scene with the Duchess]).

The meaning and structure of Kennedy’s description of the death-like, eye-gouged faces of Sarah’s selves, together with the similarities between the exiled Sidney of “Because of the King of France” and the exiled (and royal) states announced by Sarah’s selves, can be drawn out more via the comparison of Kennedy’s drama and Kristeva’s use of the drama of Oedipus Rex to describe a state of exile and social death—and which needs this state signifies: Oedipus is made abject by his desire to know the truth of his origins; when this abject knowledge is discovered, he leaves Thebes to avoid defiling it with his presence and to thus keep the social contract intact. But Oedipus’s blinding of himself is both “so as not to suffer the sight of the objects of his desire and murder,” as well as “a symbolic substitute intended for building the wall… blinding is an image of splitting; it marks, on the very body, the alteration of the self and clean into the defiled… in return for which the city state and knowledge can endure” (Powers 83-84). Not only are Sarah’s selves surrounded by the threat of rape and violation and head smashing, but they do
not control the Funnyhouse mirrors behind the blinds and they are blind and / or faceless. Since each of the selves is in a self-proclaimed state of exile (the madhouse and / or the impending madhouse [due to the rate at which baldness is occurring] on a crusade against Patrice Lumumba, respectively), the question as to what the payoff for this death / mutilation and exile is; the answer may be given by Jesus who believes he will gain absolution by going to Africa (e.g. a spatial remove, like Kristeva’s reading of Oedipus), and the need for absolution by some pilgrimage meant to absolve sin and / or lead other people to the accepted religion / symbolic of the respective society in terms that are demonstratively clichés of white culture precisely because of their hyperbolic demands (a Black man has to be Christ in order to somehow save his entire race; the light used here is a lamp, and the staging of the lighting in Funnyhouse has been pointed out to be itself as contradictory as the racial status of Sarah [she is a dark / light person; the lighting of the long “jungle” scene is that of a “dark brightness {as Hurley has pointed out}]; both the lighting and the racial status of Sarah are dictated by a white Other, which is, in and of itself, abject in that it is empty of content—it is what Lacan would call the Other of a barred Subject [that is, a Subject that demonstrates it is aware that its Other is empty of signification; as I point out below, the repeated speeches that would be the mantra of the abject Other are themselves hints that they have no solid signifiers—the meaning of the characters, such as Lumumba’s, may even be positive, because of the positive associations with his name, in and of itself, so by definition Lumumba’s degraded speech specifying himself as a “nigger” is a repetition of a speech whose slight variations allow it to fall under Kristeva’s definition of repetition where it emerges as a feature of the style of abjection {the signifiers that would be accepted by a racist audience are demarcated as abject in their very use}: “Consciousness of the other’s existence would demand repetition for additional clarity and thus lead to segmentation…
the speaking subject would, in short, be in two places at once: that of this own identity {where he goes straight to the information} and that of objective expression for the other {there he repeats, clarifies”} (Powers 195); since it is made very clear that the attempt to clarify racist idiocy via repetition is a meaningless endeavor, the existence of the other for which this performance is enacted is what is questioned by the use of this repetition. The function of these entire speeches is displaced by the irrationality of racism entailed by these speeches; thus these speeches are not really about that which the speaker is talking about, but rather the information pertaining to the theme of the speech ({Powers 193}; the information that can be gleaned from the hostility resident in the effectively redundant speech of Lumumba is not consistent with what a racist would prefer to understand—it rather carries meaning that is less self-reflexive than a commentary on the re-invoked symbols themselves: “It is my vile dream to live in rooms with European antiques and my statue of Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins… and to eat my meals on a white glass table”{19}. At this point of the play the point is hardly that Lumumba is unworthy of these things, but that this itemized list itself contains a pollution that is aired in its very repetition {it circles back to Sarah’s aspirations, which have caused her to expunge the facial identity she associates with her father, and so this list belongs to the faceless, a collection of items that no longer mean anything because the one who valued them would have had her distinguishable identity {her facial features} destroyed according to the codes with which these items have been imbued by the distortions of an abject racist funnyhouse}]; here the light functions as a trope, the hallowed look granted a Black woman who asks the impossible of her son while dying). Sarah says that her father’s mother told him that she “wanted him to be Christ… to be Jesus, to walk in Genesis and save the race… return to Africa, find revelation in the midst of golden savannas and… white stallions roaming under a blue sky, you must walk
with a white dove and heal the race, heal the misery, take us off the cross. She stared at him
anguished in the kerosene light” (19). The white dove is, in *The Owl Answers*, the bird of God—which speaks to question Clara’s identity and to point out to her that she has been imprisoned in the Tower of London (34-35). This bird belongs to the Reverend Passmore who is also the Dead White Father—that is, it is an extension of Clara’s father, effective imprisoner and rapist, who parallels its owner with its questions that are answered by the actions of its owner (that is, Clara is kept locked in the Tower of London by a dead man, and the bird calls Clara’s attention to her lack of legitimacy and her Dead White Father’s emphasis of this lack by her location in the Tower; in effect, God’s Dove is a parrot of “God” or rather the racist white other which, instead of getting the abject desire it requires of Clara (who is left devastated, alone either near or in the Tower of London and surrounded by ravens [which are flying around, according to the stage directions, the first time Clara’s royal selves appear in *Funnyhouse*]), makes possible the abject knowledge inherent in the articulation that obscenely exposes Clara’s suffering—her rape by the “God” who “came to (Clara) in the outhouse”; the Dead White Father’s certainty that Clara is “coming to him” finally, for this final death (which has its symbolic counterpart in his rape of her in the outhouse, when he apparently first shed her blood, thus designating her an “owl” and the blood that issued after her rape “owl blood”) is replaced with the obscenity of what could be termed a white cultural sinthome—the Dead White Father is compromised by his presence and his own demands while a “Negro Man” effectively try to rape Clara (just as he has; thus the Dead White Father is faced with, and effectively abjectly facilitates, what is obscene according to racist codes—his space to defile his daughter is usurped by a Negro man), while he holds candles while the “high altar” is changed in burning into something like Jezebel’s burning bed. The references to white culture surround the image that collapses them, which is their victim
who has given a blood sacrifice at least thrice over—through her “owl blood” (e.g. the blood she shed when she was raped in the abject zone of the outhouse etc); her actual blood sacrifice under her Dead White Father’s gaze on the hotel room bed / high altar; and her virginal blood as The Virgin Mary, whose blood / death are conflated by her Mother (the Rev. Passmore’s wife and the Bastard’s Black Mother are finally conflated into simply the character title of “Mother” in Owl [41]; since Anne Bolyn is left out of the “Mother” role in Owl, this conflation is significant—the shamed Black woman “who cooked for someone” and slept with someone she obviously did not marry, and the Reverend’s Wife who elides the loss of maidenhead and death and actually wears what she calls her “owl blood” [virginal blood] in a vial and holds onto the knife that Clara eventually uses to kill herself to keep the Reverend Passmore away from her sexually are both “part feathered,” on the high altar that also nearly serves as a scene of rape, where Clara has to threaten the Negro Man with the knife the Reverend’s Wife used to fend off rape. The Negro Man, whose attempt at pushing Clara down on the bed / altar, is, in addition to paralleling Passmore (who continually takes the place of the Dead White Father anyway) spatially and intersubjectively (that is, through his presence throughout the play, his lines consistently follow or support the Dead White Father’s and / or THEY; half a page of dialogue is devoted to Clara asking “God” [that is, the Negro Man] to call her Mary, and love her as God would love Mary, while THEY scream that Clara “is not his ancestor!” What this reveals is hardly an abjection of Clara, but a question as to why someone who simply is not the ancestor to a man who was the richest in his town and is somehow also “God” would not deserve to be loved in a way that does not involve rape; the entire function of the Dead White Father, whose gaze, along with Passmore’s, and THEY’s emphasize what would be this superegoic role is bestowed by an exposed as constructed ideology and not something eternal and invisible, like “God”]; the Negro
man, in a position like The Reverend Passmore’s [in that he has an interchangeable quality—
Clara finds Negro men, apparently, on the subway—and in that he takes the Dead White Father’s
place in a position that can turn out as a rape], creates an echo of the role the Dead White Father
has played in his daughter’s life; the superficial fact that a Negro Man has effectively performed
this role, if only in terms of his position of coming to her in a place where sex is possible, is laid
bare for analysis when Clara, while being forced down on high altar at the end of the play,
identifies the Negro Man as a “Negro!” just after the stage direction that the Dead White Father,
who is holding candles reminiscent of The Glass Menagerie [Kolin], smiles at the sight of Clara
who has apparently done as he asked and “come to him”; “coming to him” apparently involved
picking up men in a subway and / or being raped by one of them. The fact that the Negro Man is
given a pointedly generic / interchangeable name is another marker of the gaze of whiteness—
hardly a condemnation of the actual behavior of all Black men. The Dead White Father’s
impossible position [he is dead and he keeps returning] and idiotic enjoyment of the awful sight
of his daughter’s pain do put the ideology of whiteness’s collapse on exhibition. The lack of
objection and the contentment exhibited by the Dead White Father when Clara comes to him as
she would an interchangeable Negro male at once parallel the Dead White Father with a Negro
male who could be a rapist as well as identify the racial codes themselves [which the Dead White
Father effectively symbolizes—that is, his own racial symbolic law] as abject on their own terms
as well as objectively obscene [we are watching an embarrassing “special moment” created by
the racist abject; the Dead White Father is effectively left in the position of the “black rapist” of
racist myth, and enjoys his the position that his ideology has created]).

In the light of Owl, it is fairly obvious that there are at least three referents for Black men
in Kennedy’s early plays in particular—Black men who are really Black men, Black characters
who may or may not be actual men but who use their intersubjective positions to mock the stereotypes attributed to Sarah and/or Black men/people and males who are white myths of the generic “black rapist.” Kennedy’s emphasis on the constructed, untrue nature of the “self hate speeches” in Funnyhouse (which appear as a condemnation of the ideology that needs to actually believe in Black self hate, in general, apparently—after all, Sarah/Lumumba was supposed to save the entire “race” [19]; the fact that the dying mother of Sarah’s Lumumba does not specify the race that requires saving is appropriate to this reading of the play: the bizarre description of Africa as a land filled with white objects [white flowers, white stallions {pointedly opposed to “black bucks”}, and, of course, the white dove] serves as a sinthome, an idiotic fantasy support of whiteness as an ideology; and since this whiteness is what is really the issue here, perhaps it is what truly requires saving?) appears in that a Man who is Patrice Lumumba restates Sarah’s earlier lines, regarding the need for white friends and smashing her father’s head with an ebony mask, with the addition of terms that show that the lines that identify with a racist position are debased in the first place: his dreams of living among “European antiques, my statue of Queen Victoria and Roman ruins” are “vile”; in his “nigger dreams” his white friends eat their meals on his white glass table; he requires white friends “as an embankment to keep me from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am Patrice Lumumba, who haunted my mother’s conception” (again, the reasons for Oedipus’s blinding himself and his exile in Kristeva’s reading are relevant here; Kennedy even uses the term “embankment,” to denote the wall built between the self that is acceptable in the terms of his society and the self that is not. But in using this strategy, Kennedy presents a Black subject that may not even be a split subject in truth, but only in performance [Žižek has noted that it is not what people say/do {or do not say/do} that is necessarily their true action, but their “real act consists in the previous restructuring of our symbolic universe into
which our {factual, particular} act will be inscribed” {Sublime Object 245}]; and as Scanlan notes, Kennedy is in excellent control of her text; the exaggerated humiliation exhibited by Lumumba is arguably not his own by virtue of what would be obscene [as in excruciatingly vulnerable spectacle] debasement, and by virtue of its poetic, repetitious form—since this is an abject literary text, it has a crying out instead of a bearable narrative precisely because it challenges the boundaries between the white subject and his paranoid object of ideology; it exhibits, due to its poetic qualities and its violent collapse of the ideology it engages, “an intimate side that is suffering and horror [as] its public feature”[Powers 140-41]). It appears that Sarah’s Lumumba has taken a position he has chosen as he has chosen his exaggerated self-debasement that makes the point that this is horrifying; there is no place for God’s Dove here, or any other delusion of white ideology; it has collapsed into its own horror in regard to its paranoid other. This last is underscored by the drop of a “BALD HEAD”[sic] “before him” immediately after Lumumba says that if his hair “had not fallen then I would not have bludgeoned my father’s face with the ebony mask” (19). Especially in light of the contradiction of the type of violence done with ebony masks (are the father / black shadow’s hands bludgeoned, or is it his face, or is it both—this is never revealed), and the number of ebony masks available (Lumumba apparently only has one, but when ALL [sic] of Sarah’s selves speak in the exaggerated, pointed terms of apparent self-loathing just before Sarah’s suicide, her father has been reduced to “the black ugly thing… surrounded by his ebony masks”[24]; this creates a bookend frame with the Landlady’s repetition of what Sarah allegedly told her about her father: she “bludgeoned his head with an ebony skull that he carries about with him. Wherever he goes, he carries masks and heads”[16]), the spatial conflation of the bludgeoning Sarah’s father’s head (which would be his own head) with an ebony mask with the dropping of the bald head that in the beginning of the play signified
a mother whose hair had not fallen out, but who apparently believed that the representative head she carried was the result of allowing her black husband to touch her, shows that “horror is the public feature” of this abject literature—emphasis here being on the publicity of this horror and the threat it is to whiteness (the “ebony skull” is conflated with the bald heads and the ebony masks—as though the two deadly stage props have become one and the self same thing, a kernel of the real, the sinthome on display). Kristeva’s definition of abject literature, with Žižek’s observation that factual, particular actions are inscribed within the preconceived position that is the true action, allows for a conclusion that the repetition of Sarah’s speech by Lumumba, with his additions, the fact that it’s impossible to get the story involving the masks and their function straight, followed as it is by the repetition of the drop of the insane, racist mother’s representative bald head (that is pointedly not her own, which is demonstrated before the curtain even rises for the play), constitute a true action that is not the (f)actual speech or whatever happened with Sarah’s father or his mask(s), but rather one that has been premeditated in the admittedly violent abject rhetoric of the play. A small but important detail gives extra weight to this argument: Sarah, who has no places of her own (15), as is apparent already from the contradictory note from the author and the stage directions involving the first room that appears on the stage, does choose how she will position her “gigantic plaster statue of Queen Victoria”; Sarah tells us that “my room… is also Victoria’s chamber… Partly because it is consumed by a gigantic plaster statue of Queen Victoria… and partly for other reasons; three steps that I contrived out of boards lead to the statue which I have placed opposite the door as I enter the room” (13-14). The “other reasons” for why Sarah’s room is Victoria’s can be many things, but the concrete action Sarah takes is to place the statue of Victoria (which Raymond says is “a thing of terror… of astonishing whiteness”[14]) so that it not only faces the door, but has boards that lead up to it as though it
were an idol that also face the door. And in the context of the fact that this Victoria “suggests large and probable deaths,” Sarah says that Victoria “wants me to tell her of a royal world where everything and everyone is white and there are no unfortunate black ones… Even before [my mother] was raped by a wild black beast… black was evil” (14). Sarah’s performance for Victoria constitutes, in Lacanian phrasing, the grammar of the oral and scopic drives; looking at “a thing of terror… of whiteness,” Sarah feels compelled to tell the “thing of whiteness” about whiteness, and then, by extension, to tell the thing “of a royal world where everything and everyone is white” (14). Note that Victoria is not speaking to Sarah, but Sarah mirrors Victoria to herself; apparently, Victoria requires a mirror better than the one that she holds in the stage directions in the beginning of the play. The fact that Sarah provides whiteness a mirror, and positions whiteness to face anyone who enters her / Victoria’s room, gives her agency that she supposedly does not have in this Funnyhouse. Sarah acknowledges the proclivity of “white friends, like myself,” to be “anxious for death. Anyone’s death. I will mistrust them as I mistrust myself” (14). Again, we have private suffering that is still viewed by Sarah as a display, as public horror—according to Sarah’s view of white people, they are elided with “the thing of whiteness” that is capable of “large and probable deaths.” Nothing here is, in terms of true actions, complimentary to the ideology of whiteness and everything suggests that we are looking at its Caliban-like rage upon seeing its own Victoria in a glass, as it were.

On the subject of the question of race, sexual expression through drive grammar, black(outs) and blindness, it is time to call attention to the hint that Lumumba is just as blind as Victoria and The Duchess at least appear to be (according to the first stage directions after curtain rise)—apparently, Lumumba would need white friends “as an embankment” against his blackness; he apparently would need friends to define his appearance and position because he
cannot do it himself for one reason or another or both: the debased sinthome of whiteness wouldn’t be able to take his own position in a racist society; but a blind man would be able to forget his own appearance in that society, if his friends allowed him to do so. And, if this self of Sarah’s truly were taking an exaggeratedly abject position with no sense of irony at all, that would make him blind to the ideological shackles he would, in that case, be wearing. Hence, how do the characters in the play that are not Sarah’s selves see Sarah? Who controls the lighting and the knocking during the play, and how much do what the white characters (Raymond the Funnyhouse Man and the Landlady) affect what Sarah’s selves say (that is, to what extent can it be argued that the debased, violent speeches of the play echo Raymond’s intercourse with Sarah’s selves to the extent that we see this going on)? The answer to these questions includes the answer of the Owl in regard to who is really the rapist.

Erin Hurley, in her excellent article, “BLACKOUT: Utopian Technologies in Adrienne Kennedy’s Funnyhouse of a Negro,” notes the contradictory stage directions in Funnyhouse of a Negro, which ask for “a bright darkness” (how can something be bright and dark at the same time), and argues that they ask for utopic conditions that do not exist yet, but may someday. Hurley notes that the contradiction in terms infers the “yellow” state (neither bright or dark) of Sarah’s hyphenated position, which is a result of “racist dismemberment and colonial rememberment” (205). Hurley does not note that contradiction can point to anxiety and the fact that the impossible (as in Lacanian real / Kristevan state of boundlessness) reality of oppression cannot be articulated. However, her breakdown of stage directions that signal cultural demands, for its Black subjects, that amount to the impossible, demonstrates the borders that, when troubled, do signal ways in which abjection can be articulated and dealt with. The abject, is, after all the crisis of the subject “insofar as it would not yet be or would not be separated from the
object… it would be constantly menaced by its possible collapse into the object” (Kristeva qtd. in Spurr). Spurr’s way of discussing abjection focuses on the binary that describes the boundary of the subject—that which differentiates it from an undifferentiated object. Hurley notices that the impossibility demanded by the racial gaze inflicted on Sarah’s selves in *Funnyhouse* is as deeply set into the play as the set directions themselves; I argue that the impossibility (on multiple levels) imposed on signifiers of Black subjectivity emerges itself as a source of abjection which Kennedy’s protagonists fight to keep from dissolving into as undifferentiated objects.

The first scene after curtain rise “is set in the middle of the Stage in a strong white LIGHT, while the rest of the Stage is in unnatural BLACKNESS. The quality of the white light is unreal and ugly” (12; caps in original). The very lighting of the capitalized stage is “unreal,” both in its whiteness and blackness, but only the white light is said to be “ugly,” and the caps in the stage direction set the “light” off against “blackness,” even though it is evident later in the play that it’s possible to see in the dark: later in the play, Jesus calls to the Duchess, “gets up slowly, walks back into the darkness and there we see that she is hanging on the chandelier, her bald head suddenly drops to the floor and she falls upon Jesus. He screams” (23). There is no indication that any light illumes the darkness in which the Duchess hangs, although it is worth noting that the audience is supposed to see that her bald head and her person seem just as separate as the Mother and her token bald head at the beginning of the play before curtain rise. The Duchess can be equipped with the same type of head that the Mother is (that is, a generic copy of a bald head, just as there are supposedly a lot of undifferentiated ebony masks lying around wherever the Black father is), even though, of course, the Duchess as well as Jesus go bald. But then there is the odd question as to who is really bald and who is using baldness as a
premeditated context for an action. After all, this scene in which the Duchess and her head fall upon Jesus immediately follows the scene that ends with the statement that “Patrice Lumumba is dead”; hence follows the strange essentialism and the contradictions of Jesus’s frantic oath to become a crusader against Lumumba, following the baldness / death of the Duchess (who isn’t dead) and his declaration that “Through my raging sermons… I have tried to escape him, through God Almighty I have tried to escape being black,” in which he identifies his black father with the state of being black itself and sets off to kill a dead man (23). However, one contradiction is that Patrice Lumumba is one of Sarah’s Selves, so if he is a dead man but can somehow still be sought out and killed, where is Sarah’s father and who has been knocking? A “BLACKOUT” and then “the effect of the jungle,” in which there is even “wild black grass” (not at all the idealized Africa in which Sarah’s father was supposed to be Christ) spreads over the entire stage “unlike the other scenes”; “by lighting the desired effect would be—suddenly the jungle has overgrown the chambers and all the other places with a violence and a dark brightness, a grim yellowness” (23-24). After the “BLACKOUT” which punctuates Jesus’s declaration to kill Patrice Lumumba because Jesus’s father was black (an obvious irrationality), Jesus’s (and the other selves’) reappearance is with a “nimbus… to suggest that they are saviors” (24), now that a nightmare jungle has followed the promise of a meaningless killing on the basis of race in another country. The impossibility of “saving” an entire race is now complicated by the assumption of the role of “savior” on the part of personalities that are in the jungle (including a Patrice Lumumba) to kill a dead man, “but dead he comes knocking at my door” (24). This last repetition of what was initially the interchange between Victoria and the Duchess in the first scene after the curtain rise is repeated by ALL [sic]; and together, “they stand perfectly still” before saying in unison, “I see him… my mother comes into the room… He is in grief from that
black anguished face of his. Then at once the room will grow bright and my mother will come
toward me smiling while I stand before his face and bludgeon him with an ebony head” (25); the
stillness of “ALL” is coupled with the dual appearance of the “black ugly thing” and “my
mother,” and the weapon ALL the selves are going to use on the father is “an ebony head”
(again, a collusion of a mask and the bald head carried by the mother). The formula of a statue
like stillness, a performance under the gaze of whiteness and an envisioned death is followed by
a “BLACKOUT” and “another WALL drops” (instead of a head, a wall drops to reveal another
scene, this time Victoria / Sarah’s room in her brownstone, and it is explicitly mentioned that
Victoria’s figure “is one of astonishing repulsive whiteness,” there is no bed [though one could
be suggested, according to the set directions], the bed of the first scene is no longer a necessity,
suggesting that something has radically changed; the furniture that connotes sexuality is gone
and Sarah is “standing perfectly still, we hear the KNOCKING, the LIGHTS come on quickly as
the Father’s black figure with bludgeoned hands rushes upon her, the LIGHT GOES BLACK
and we see her hanging in the room. LIGHTS come on the laughing Landlady. And at the same
time remain on the hanging figure of the Negro” (25). This last series of light directions, in the
context of the rest of the play, demonstrates that death is associated with the “LIGHT,” whereas
the darkness is incidental (the Duchess hangs in the darkness but is not dead). Since Sarah first
appears “with a hangman’s rope around her neck and red blood on the part that would be her
face” (13), and since the Father whose figure “rushes upon her” has hands specifically ill
equipped for hanging anyone, and the Landlady states that “the poor bitch has hung herself”
(25), no actual malevolence can be attributed to the father or to the blackness; note that
“LIGHTS” come on for the “laughing Landlady,” and the fact that they “remain on the hanging
figure of the Negro” is all but an afterthought, emphasized by the reference to Sarah in death as
simply the generic “Negro,” whereas when she was alive a moment ago she was “Negro Sarah,” according to the stage directions. Sarah’s stillness before death has ended with her loss of her name along with the face we never truly see in the play.

This is not the first time the LIGHTS come on specifically for the Landlady, whereas Sarah’s selves look for dead bodies in the darkness and, when they’re allowed the narrow door of light through which to appear, when Sarah’s faceless figure first appears, the characters /herselves “come through the wall, disappearing off in various directions into the darkened night of the Stage” (15). The LIGHTS come on for the Mother in her white nightgown, equipped with head (13); the LIGHTS suggest a whole corridor (as opposed to “rooms” for Sarah who “knows no places”) for the Landlady’s entrance—and allow her to talk to someone offstage, although the Landlady “laughs like a mad character in a funnyhouse” (15). The distinction between mad and sane characters in a funnyhouse is implicitly made here, with the Landlady; hence the question as to who is really insane or simply “a funny little liar” (25). By definition, if Sarah was lying, she was not insane, just as her Mother apparently is not in the asylum, because she wanders through the funnyhouse; this conundrum suggests that the world superimposed on Sarah (and represented by the use of LIGHTS and dark wild jungle scenery and Raymond’s mirrors) is what she cannot escape, along with tormentors that cannot be escaped (Kolin, Tapley and others have willingly admitted that “Kennedy’s funnyhouse is this house of America where bigotry always draws blood”[Kolin 3], but this study is more interested in what Kennedy shows Sarah in fact doing with what has been done to her and how Kennedy dramatizes the way her protagonist is tormented and by whom). The mere fact that Sarah cannot get away from “the jungle” that Raymond will not “save her from” hardly means that the problem of this play is meant to be Sarah’s state of mind; what makes it necessary for Sarah to finally escape in the most final of all
possible ways? The KNOCKING suggests she is being continually harassed by her father, but the Landlady tells us that her father has written to her and leaves it to her to go see him in Harlem, which does not make it sound as though the father is actually the one KNOCKING at Sarah’s door(s) in the funnyhouse. Indeed, when the Duchess is with Raymond, she says that her “father is arriving” (16); if he is only in the process of getting to Sarah, then he logically cannot be the one KNOCKING; but the purposeful defying of logic in this play typically means something—particularly when the Duchess, in the same scene in which she tells Raymond that her father is arriving (just as the Duchess and Victoria, in the first scene, complain that he “keeps returning”), contradicts herself by saying that her father “is an African who has always lived in the jungle,” but that he “went” to Africa to be a missionary. The paranoia necessary for her father’s comings and goings to be always and never mirrors the paranoid other necessitated by racist ideology.

Arguably, the presence (and especially absence) of the KNOCKING is consistently meaningful in scenes that denote sexual tension and scenes in which it is impossible to escape someone who is chasing Sarah’s selves. As Kintz and Scanlan have pointed out, the context of women in a room that are anticipating the arrival of a man historically suggests women waiting to be taken sexually (willingly or not); it is significant that the bed in Victoria’s room is “dark, monumental… resembling an ebony tomb” (12). The powerlessness to effectively escape claustrophobic, racialized and sexualized circumstances is underscored in the scene between Duchess and Raymond. Raymond’s room is made up of blinds that conceal mirrors and a bed, which is the only thing the Duchess can sit on, in a position that implies physical intimacy (16). The racial abjection of the play doubles the painful significance of waiting for someone to “come through the jungle” and “enter the castle” illegally to get to her (while Sarah feels unprotected,
particularly as someone of “royal” blood; particularly as someone who, in death, is only the “Negro”) but at the same time the continual focus on the one character who is not likely to be the one knocking as the one knocking (that is, Sarah’s actual Black father) heightens the suspense in regard to the question of who is chasing her and who is KNOCKING and who is responsible for the encroachment of the jungle in what is temporally the longest scene in the play. However, granting that the lights and the superimposed jungle scene (that covers the entire stage) are not typically controlled by Sarah at all (Sarah as Duchess helplessly begs Raymond to “save me from the jungle”), and Raymond and the Landlady both emit inappropriate laughter and control the LIGHTS, Raymond is arguably one of the characters that directly influences the circumstances of Sarah’s death and is noted as “observing” her body, just as his gaze is as ubiquitous as Sarah’s selves believe her father is (Raymond blatantly controls the blinds that open and close the mirrors, in effect, although it is the blinds and not the mirrors that are effectively blinking, while the Duchess, in a sexualized pose, looks up at him [16]). Raymond’s word choices come up in the scene in which “ALL” are speaking just before Sarah’s actual death (and since “ALL” are speaking, it is impossible to tell with certainty whose voice we are truly hearing). Raymond shows his ability to influence Duchess by anticipating her fears—almost suggesting that she dwell on the things that upset her most. Raymond is the first to mention several lines that turn into Duchess’ speeches: he mentions that her father “is arriving from Africa, is he not?” He mentions Patrice Lumumba and her father’s reaction to his death before she mentions the subject; and Raymond emphasizes her father’s association with the jungle subtly, where it’s not necessary. “Your father is in the jungle dedicating his life to the erection of a Christian mission?” Raymond mocks her with a partial repetition of her speech, but chooses to repeat that her father is in the jungle; then he accuses her of cruelty while associating cruelty
with torment—as though those who are “cruel” deserve “torment.” In the end, when “ALL” the selves are speaking lines at the same time, the term “torment” is used in the mouth of what her father allegedly says, but we get this line in the Landlady’s narration of it, “Forgiveness, Sarah, I know you are a child of torment,” which is then exaggerated by Sarah’s selves who say “I know you are a nigger of torment” (25). The brutality of “nigger” is a commentary on the subtler torments of the laughing Landlady, who pretends concern for Sarah, and yet uses the introjective phrase, “child of torment.” The use of Raymond and the Landlady’s diction appears in the last lines of Sarah’s selves before her death. The idea that such subtleties are addressed by this extremely subtle author is easily supported by a glance at the way mimicry has used white tropes in order to subvert their actual meaning in ways that seem small but constitute important comments on the tropes. Susan Gubar notes that “minstrelsy stands, on the one hand, for the endurance of murderous instincts in the psyche of Western man, and on the other for an farcically improbable show stopper” possible only under a degrading minstrel song (147). Gubar remarks upon the longstanding tradition of Blacks’ use of minstrelsy: “The first Black minstrel, Juba, advertised his “Imitation Dances” by explaining he would give “correct imitation dances of all the principle Ethiopian dancers in the United States, after which [he] would give an imitation of himself” (147). The point is that minstrelsy is one of many art forms used by Black artists who had to use means like imitations instead of direct statements to affect their audiences in the ways that they could (or the ways in which they desire). For example, Gubar demonstrates the way a “Jump Jim Crow” minstrel performance took a piece of Western Culture and inserted it where it could affect a racist audience with the gaze of its Other. The lyrics are thus: “Shuffle off your mortal coil… Wheel about and turn about / And Jump Jim Crow” (qtd in Gubar 147). The Hamlet literary reference startles when wedged into the merely depressing lyric pattern and
suddenly forces its complacent audience to think of the death so many suffered under the social regimes under which any Black person could be forced to “dance Jim Crow.” (After all, the “mortal coil” is common to the angst of the human condition; the human under either the performance or the black face or the overall persecution of the historical period referenced in regard to the signifier of Jim Crow is thus a human with a dilemma [the mortal coil] that the audience is shown reflected in their own social subjectivization; and with that reflection is the question of the added weight of the “oppressor’s wrong” and the “proud man’s mockery,” that frame the “mortal coil” of Hamlet’s soliloquy [or faux-soliloquy since he is in fact not alone—Claudius is watching him just as the audience is made aware of those forced to “jump Jim Crow”], and thus the implication of the audience in all the reasons why “the mortal coil” would be so much easier to “shuffle off”; the “shuffle” of the “jump Jim Crow” is therefore flooded over the audience’s innocent (or proper) selves, no longer reassuringly contained within the safe distance of minstrelsy).

But the insane kernel of racist ideology that is perhaps the most terrifying is the mother who rejects Sarah because of who her father is; Sarah’s selves’ last thoughts involve finally getting her mother to smile at her for bludgeoning her father’s face with a head. And Sarah’s self as a large dark man adds this serious bit of horror to the nightmare of racist rhetoric: “In my sleep I had been visited by my bald crazy mother… she comes to me, her bald skull shining. Black diseases, Sarah, she says. Black diseases. I run. She follows me, her bald skull shining. That is the beginning” (18)—that is, that is the beginning of the point at which Sarah’s hair started falling out; the beginning involves the horror of being chased by an insane woman whose message is associated with her physical and mental condition; the “disease” involving “Black” comes from the diseased mind of a racially driven person. The ideology of whiteness is a disease
that will “keep knocking at [Sarah’s] door” until she has no boundaries left—until she is merely a body, a “Negro.” The fantasy produced by the ideology that supposedly created this world for Sarah has Sarah’s father constantly “return,” be the problem, the person who failed to save “the race,” who failed to be Christ, who happened to have been born with dark skin; it is this fantasy father who is the rapist, for whom the Man (as Patrice Lumumba) says with exaggerated self-horror, “I am the shadow” (which correlates with the “shadow” that “rushes” at Sarah when she dies)—for whom the term “Negro” sums up a paranoid other that threatens the Symbolic of the subject. It is this father that does not exist from whom Sarah has to escape; similarly, in Owl, Clara makes the choice of suicide when she is on the high altar and partially transformed into an owl, like “The Flying Bastard,” who has in actual fact polluted her mother and made her into “The Bastard,” until she was adopted by a man who is, under his socially coded costume, the same man who raped her.
CHAPTER II

THE ABJECTION OF RACISM:
MAINTAINING THE SYMBOLIC AS WELL AS WE CAN

Kennedy’s Lesson in Dead Language, which appeared after Rat’s Mass (which, in turn, appeared the same year as Amiri Baraka’s Black Mass), can easily read as a clarification of the project of Rat’s Mass, in that Kennedy presents, in Rat’s Mass, the struggle on the part of Black people to retain a hold on the symbolic in a racist world that insists on insanity, and in Lesson shows us an exercise in the symbolic (Lesson is a ritual, and in Kristeva’s terms, the reason Christianity, with its abject of sin / guilt, is productive even in the historical scope of its Inquisitions, is that it maintains the discourse that provides a place for the Symbolic to exist). That is, Kennedy’s protagonists attempt to create order out of a disorderly world that has no place at all for sanity / the Symbolic; arguably, the reason why no race is specified for the characters in Lesson, and Kennedy’s other plays, from Owl through Movie Star through the Suzanne Alexander plays, generally describe the protagonist who takes notes (or tries to), or otherwise acts as a framing agent / commentator, very specifically as “a pallid Negro” is because Lesson is actually a demonstration of the continual dialogue of ritual / the Symbolic. The Lesson in Dead Language is really a lesson in the operation of the signifier, so when Rat’s Mass is read within its context, it is clarified that the struggle to maintain sanity / discourse is the domain of the Black characters of Rat’s Mass (and the plays that follow)—Rat’s Mass, in this framework, makes it clear that the struggle involved is not merely for the sake of the specific “rats” (Kay and Blake, specified as Black characters), but an obvious contrast between sanity and insanity in
a society that seems to want to devolve into corpses and beasts (that is, abject images that lack
the ability to deploy discourse or any meaningful societal structure at all—the procession of holy
figures that become Nazis functions as a sort of mindless machine of death and speaks back to
the abject function of THEY in *Owl*). The context provided by the commentary of Lesson on
*Rat’s Mass* in turn provides questions concerning how *Movie Star* should be read—and makes
visible the lacuna which is arguably the insane white racist gaze (that is, the absent Elizabeth
Taylor), against which lines from *Lesson* argue for the sake of a societal hold on reality (which is
again represented by the ability to speak / hold discourse). This discussion will be expanded to
the social context in which these plays were written—the BAM and that which comes on its
heels; I contrast Baraka’s *Black Mass* with Kennedy’s *Rat’s Mass* to demonstrate that both
playwrights expose the same points, but that Kennedy may do so more effectively: while Baraka
shows whiteness as a consuming irrationality that can only tautologically demand itself and
mush into its abject content, like The Blob, anything it touches, Kennedy steps outside Baraka’s
(and the Nation of Islam’s) use of Yacub myth to invoke the same questions, but in a more direct
manner. Baraka gives us a story that demonstrates the dilemma of people faced with an out-of-
control monster that will take over the world and threatens their life and the boundaries of their
clean and proper selves; Kennedy combines stories in the process of creating her own narrative
of struggle to maintain the social fabric, and in so doing presents her audience with a question
that stings with all the power of Mark Essex’s rage, which forced white people watching on their
television to ask themselves, “Is this America?”

Kristeva’s narration of the development of the abject (from the Old Testament to the
New), and her conclusion that the development of the concept of sin / guilt, this place of
signification, is the maintenance of the Symbolic, in effect (*Powers* 130-32) parallels the
significance of Kennedy’s effective commentary on her own play. First, it is necessary to point out that it is arguable that *Lesson* is a commentary / clarification of *Rat’s Mass* by the Christian signifiers alone—the “Lesson” is all about a Latin ritual, in effect, and Rosemary Curb has remarked that the White Dog of *Lesson* looks like a nun in terms of whiteness and stiffness; and *Rat’s Mass* is replete with Christian / Catholic imagery (the altar, the act of saying mass itself)—the plays are connected in terms of signifiers in the way that Kristeva discusses the Old and New Testament as connected in terms of the development of the abject. And indeed, Kennedy’s plays are a display of the abject, racist society destroying its own borders (that is, its own ability to have an abject at all because it is losing its subjects—the Symbolic that allows for subjectivity).

Second, it is necessary to demonstrate the strange parallel between Kristeva’s tracing of the development of the abject through the Old and New Testaments and Kennedy’s demonstration of how the abject can consume the racist society that is structured around it through her *Rat’s Mass* and its “Lesson.”

Kristeva states that there are types of abjection, and uses the Old and New Testament as examples. Kristeva begins by pointing out the various levels of acceptance of the “natural” condition of loathing (that is, abjection) on the part of the historian of religions and the anthropologist, and goes on to say that she asks for a better discussion of how loathing is constructed: “Are there no subjective structurations… Types of subjectivity and society? Types that would be defined, in the last analysis, according to the subject’s position in language, that is the more or less partial use he can make of his potentialities?” (92). The types Kristeva introduces involve the definitions of pure / impure offered by the OT to the inside / outside version of the abject offered by the NT. For the pure / impure definition of the OT, strict separation between the two categories is the top concern; “the distance between man and God
will be at issue,” and while there are several categories of what constitutes abomination, “topologically speaking, such variants correspond to one’s being allowed to have access or not to a place—the holy place of the Temple. Logically, conformity to the Law is involved, the law of purity… or holiness” (93). The significance of a topological place is psychologically important: as Dana Birksted-Breen has discussed at length, a place, a distance, a separation is necessary for signification (that is, the subject itself) to exist at all. This concept is present in Kristeva, but not stated as clearly as it has been by later psychologists; but it is why the topological space / place of the Temple (and whether or not one can or cannot enter it) is important to the subject’s boundaries, which are, in OT terms, defined by the pure vs. impure. This attention paid to place (or lack thereof of place or, as Kristeva might also say, boundaries), or, as Žižek might also say, the position of the subject (Sublime Object) is important to an analysis of Kennedy’s work, particularly in the plays where she directly deals with Christian imagery and, in effect, its intersection with subjectivity (and the abject): Kennedy mercilessly demonstrates where a place for signification exists, and how the subject itself can be gnawed out of existence (along with the racist doing the gnawing). *Lesson* ends with the White Dog presenting to the audience “a blank human face,” while in her hands she holds “a great Latin book,” and the lesson apparently continues (that is, signification continues—the stage direction specifically reads that the pupil whose line closes the play speaks “very slowly, as if translating” (46); *Rat’s Mass* ends with Rosemary alone, after the shooting of Kay and Blake (who lose their “rat’s heads” by losing their heads), after her own admission that her “greatest grief” was the harmonious, socially structured life together that Brother and Sister Rat (a.k.a. Kay and Blake) enjoyed before she has effectively silenced Blake with his love for her (the inability to speak is a sign of the loss of subjectivity in psychoanalysis as well as in Kennedy—Blake and Kay’s voices “sound more and more like
“gnaws” when they repeat the ritual story of Blake’s love for Rosemary and how she told him “if you love me… you’ll never tell”[52]). Most importantly, Rosemary herself, although she remains alive (if she was ever alive, that is—she has worms in her hair, suggestive of Medusa or a corpse; this would not only suggest that the racist symbolic Rosemary partakes of in the play is itself objectively abject, but that it is abject on its own terms), implicates herself in the degeneration into rat-hood that it seems everyone in the world of the play is afflicted by (not just Brother and Sister Rat, who appear to be holdouts—after all, they’re in hiding from the Nazis, like the Jews who were among the last to be killed): Rosemary’s description of what the sin that she herself has orchestrated means to her is, “In my mind was a vision of us rats all” (51); it is after this admission that Rosemary says that her wedding with Blake is occurring, and joins that concept with the arrival of the Nazis on its second repetition (53). “Us rats all” shows an anomaly (which can be indicative of mutation or change) in normative grammar, and, more importantly, an admission that she is implicated in a world filled with a lack of blessing and speech and only with the gnawing of rats. This interpretation of Rosemary’s part is bolstered by Brother and Sister Rat’s speech that collapses grammar while describing the transposition of what should be the interior of a place of worship into the streets—into and over the world in general (that is, the inside / outside boundaries of the place of the altar / temple collapse, at the same time that the boundaries of the subject are collapsing): in the context of Rosemary’s announcement, “it is our wedding now, Blake,” the Brother and Sister say “now every time we will go outside we will walk over the grave of our dead baby Red aisle runners will be on the street when we come to the playground Rosemary will forever be atop the slide exalted with worms in her hair” (and the stage direction reads they perform the ritualistic “kneel / rise” motions as they have throughout the play [53]). Periods have disappeared from speech that has
already become more like “gnaws” (52), and the set description, which was of a house, which
“consists of a red carpet runner and candles,” is no longer confined to the interior of the house,
but is “on the street” (and not only on one street—there will apparently be multiple “runners”
that cover more ground than the simple altar setting of the house that set a clear inside / outside
boundary for the subject’s discourse / position).

This leads into the inside / outside abject allowed for by the NT, according to Kristeva—
“Abjection is no longer exterior. It is permanent and it comes from within. Threatening, it is not
cut off but reabsorbed into speech. Unacceptable, it endures through the subjection to God of a
speaking being who innerly divided and, precisely through speech, does not cease purging
himself of it”; this new formulation of abjection is not merely a debate with Judaism, “a new
arrangement of differences is being set up, an arrangement whose economy will regulate a
wholly different system of meaning, hence a wholly different speaking subject” (Powers 113).
What Kennedy demonstrates, which becomes strikingly clear via comparison to Kristeva’s
discussion of abjection in the OT through NT and beyond, is that while the boundaries of the
abject can certainly change, the importance of the speaking subject does not—speech, the use of
signification, in some distinguishable form, is still necessary for subjectivity. Rat’s Mass shows
the utter breakdown of subjectivity and the struggle on the part of Kay and Blake (Brother and
Sister Rat) to hold onto their subjectivity, even as they hide from the collapsing world around
them; the discourse (that is, the speech that is necessary to purge oneself of the abject, and is
therefore never finished) of the rats’ mass is supported for as long as possible by the specifically
Black protagonists (which presents a pattern in Kennedy’s plays—we have the Black
commentators / protagonists attempting to retain agency and subjectivity when confronted with a
threat not only to their respective positions as subjects but to subjectivity; Kennedy’s
protagonists fight not only for agency, but against the abject irrationality of racism); even the mass used here, itself, is a “Rosemary mass” specifically created by the brother and sister and with the use of Rosemary’s narrative about Italy and the Caesars. This incrementally built structure, of added and then repeated phrases that are then joined by more phrases mirrors the structure of Lesson in Dead Language; and it is worth noting here some of the more obvious links (and obvious contrasts) to Lesson in Dead Language—Rosemary is supposedly descended from the Caesars, and the brother and sister follow her in pretending that they, too, are descended from Caesar; identification with Caesar and his death is a common theme in Lesson; however, in Lesson, the repetition of the death of Caesar and the loss of virtue (it has been suggested that the lost lemons mourned in Lesson signify female purity / “the bitter taste of womanhood before [the little girls]”[qtd in Kolin 93]) signifies a standard of purity that applies to everyone present—it is not specified whether the White Dog is actually bleeding, as the students do, but the White Dog is the first one to say that she is bleeding, while leading the students in this “Lesson.” The concept that the lemons signify female burdens, especially those entailed by the games women play after they start to menstruate, is supported by the suddenly ambiguous syntax in a speech from the offstage voices of the “highly painted” holy statues, which entails ambiguity as to whether the bodies of the holy statues or the house itself “tumbled down”: first the Statues say, “It started when Jesus, Joseph, Mary, the two Wise Men and the shepherd died… One day they disappeared and I found their bodies in the yard of my house tumbled down” (45); immediately after this, one Pupil announces, “I played a game with lemons in the green grass. I bleed too, Caesar. Dear Caesar” (45). The collapsed holy bodies seem to suggest as well the collapse of a house; as though Kennedy unfailingly traces the same line of argument as Kristeva, in her discussion of the abject in the OT and NT (92-132), the pollution the OT attributes to the female
body is mentioned by a student who couples the death of Caesar with the bodies of the holy figures—it is made fairly clear that regardless of their literal OT or NT placement, the holy figures stand in for power / purity and the impurity produced by games with lemons and female menstruation is part of the group identification with the bleeding Caesar (whose blood falls at the foot of Pompey’s statue, of course—Kennedy does not fail to neglect the Shakespearean allusion, but returns to the bodies “in the grass at the Capitol,” hence maintaining the structure of “pure / impure,” a structure / house [Capitol] that seems somehow to avoid direct contamination, and the need to single out a guilty person or “the conspirators” in order for purity [a.k.a. to stop the bleeding]. In this, Kennedy and Kristeva employ the abject in the same way—the point is not so much whether the figures themselves belong in one book of the Bible or another, but rather the position the figures / people take in the structure of the abject / subjectivity. Understanding this makes what can be otherwise viewed as a dense play with multiple meanings (Kolin) interrelated with Rat’s Mass, and important to the interpretation of the chaos and the fight to maintain subjectivity in Rat’s Mass. The point is that Lesson maintains fairly stable, OT type positions concerning its abject, and, as if to include the type of abject of the NT, the Pupils even use the first person in a phrase that immediately identifies them with Caesar, “I am a pinnacle tumbled down” (46) (one of the lines of the “Lesson” is that “Calpurnia dreamed a pinnacle was tumbling down”; the pinnacle is Caesar; the people / group performing this lesson / ritual, which shares its structure with Rat’s Mass [when Rat’s Mass retains the coherency of ritual that is—Lesson allows us to recognize Kennedy’s deliberate assertion of subjectivity in ritual via its structural similarities with Rat’s Mass] thus have the subjective social stability that Kristeva would relegate to them, as she would the practitioners of the religious forms that stem from the NT—they continue in their mutually acknowledged positions and feel the need to continue the
expiatory translation (expiatory because of the comparison to a mass evoked by Lesson); Caesar is “Dear Caesar,” not a figure appropriated by Rosemary, and his very blood is aligned with the bleeding of the students. In short, in Lesson, impurity may be nightmarish, and womanhood may be the problem, but this is a group problem that entails the continuation of expiatory discourse (which is what the abject of the NT requires), not a breakdown (at least not one that we see, or one that involves more than one pupil, whereas in Rat’s Mass the world collapses into the sin induced by Rosemary). But while being “descended from” Caesar, or being “Great Caesars” themselves, walking across the Palatine of their youth, before the War and corruption, is part of Kay and Blake’s childhood, they lose this identification (which is both religious and carries the structure of the games of children—and which becomes a religion with its own discourse, which the Brother and Sister struggle to maintain; the child’s game turns deadly serious) with the intrusion of the nightmare world that blots out the discourse of expiation that they attempt to maintain (they pray for atonement from God, from Rosemary, and echo the structure of Lesson with the repeated phrases, one of which is “Rosemary atop the slide exalted”); the corruption Rosemary has induced on the slide has spread to “every sister and brother”: “Now there are rats in the church behind every face in the congregation. They have all been on the slide. Every sister bleeds and every brother has made her bleed. The Communion wine… Our father gives out the Communion wine and it turns to blood, a red aisle of blood” (49). The NT structure of the abject is eroded—what should remain outside is inside: “Within our house is a giant slide” (48).

Tracing the ritual structure in Kennedy’s plays (guided by Kristeva’s interpretative models of the types of the abject) allows us to see how Kennedy builds her plays as deliberately as one could construct a blues song. An examination of how Lesson builds its ritual structure, and how Rat’s Mass attempts the same and fails because of the assault of the “War” of racial
abjection, demonstrates that Kennedy’s plays are not really unnecessarily redundant or even really dense—read in the above terms, the forms expected of ritual expiation (whether it be a Latin or Hebrew ceremony of expiation that, in Kennedy’s version, involves translation) are present: The boundaries of the law are invoked, a search for the guilty one is established (or, rather, the need to locate a scapegoat in order to get absolution; no immediate scapegoat available, translation of the text—as in a form of penance—is substituted for a deliberate blood offering); the dire need to locate a scapegoat, or continue the penance / translation, is recalled with every mention of the fact that “like Caesar” it is possible to bleed to death from this sin. However, safety of sorts is granted (that is, containment of anxiety is granted) by the fact that Caesar effectively bleeds forever, and this penance / translation continues to go on at the end of the play, after the pupils themselves have been aligned with the pinnacle that is forever “tumbling down,” but never seems to fall and crush them (in Rat’s Mass, the rats in the rafters are endangered by their own gnawing, in effect—the rafters can collapse and their hiding place from the Nazis can be discovered—and everyone is crushed by The Procession of holy figures performing the function of Nazis at the end of the play. The difference between the plays’ respective endings and the way the ritual penance / translation is clung to for as long as possible [and very deliberately—the “rise / kneel” formations of a Catholic-type ceremony are present even when the situation is apparently hopeless] show how the structure of Lesson is a commentary on the meaning of Rat’s Mass [and with that commentary, a disclosure of the true source of the abject, which intrudes the “house” / place / space for the signifier, refuses the possibility of the movement of time and replaces it only with the death—the stoppage of time for everyone, including Rosemary, who is specifically left “alone” on the stage]).
The Lesson’s structure begins with stage directions that specify that the statues in the room are brightly painted, but does not specify the race of any of the characters—even the White Dog is wearing a costume that covers her from her waist up, and since her face, in the end, turns out to be a blank, universal human face, it is fair to assume we do not actually know even the race of the White Dog. In this setting that seems set up for the sake of the ritual itself (that is, discourse / signification itself), only misogyny is the possible abject ideology per se at work here, and even then that is in question because Caesar bleeds forever along with the little girls—since Caesar apparently dies and never dies (this ritual is performed under the gaze of [or, positioned before] the Statues of Jesus, Joseph and Mary, but the signifier of authority is shared by them with Caesar; since the Statues speak from offstage, their actual death [described in the play—their bodies were apparently found] begs the question of Caesar’s actual death. In short, the Law does not die; hence this is a ritual question—which is threatening, certainly, in its possibility, but this possibility does not seem likely to come to fruition—“Like Caesar, will I bleed away and die?”[46]), loss of innocence is what is mourned (that is, there is space between the signifier and signified—the question remains as to why this group bleeds; logical biological answers are offered along with the ritual answer, but the dialogue, the discourse of the subjects, continues in just the way that Kristeva sees value in the enactment of expiatory Christian ritual [that is, as long as the concept of sin and the need for expiation remain, this structure of the abject / signification remains]). The play begins with the assertion, on the part of the White Dog, “Lesson I bleed”; the students, in unison answer this call with what can be seen as a layer of Black Church service type signification (that is, call and response) with “I bleed”; since the students answer “slowly, dully,” it is apparent that this ritual is an expected one and has been probably been going on for some time (43). The next line in The Lesson, by the White Dog (who
is, of course, standing right there) is, “The day the white dog died, I started to bleed. Blood came out of me” (43); since the white dog has been argued to signify the loss of innocence (Kolin 94) (an interpretation which makes perfect sense), and the students answer with a version that essentially repeats the White Dog’s line but add themselves the first mention of “the lemons”: “The white dog died. I started to bleed. Where are the lemons?” (43) Since lemons signify the loss of innocence / burdens of womanhood, the logical progression is the loss of the white dog (innocence) and another sign (another line in the ritual) of lost innocence is added; however, this sign is the possible cause of the lost innocence signified by the death of the white dog (the body of the little white dog that has died acts as a signified to the White Dog’s signifier; hence there is a place / space for discussion as to why innocence has departed)—so the significance of the death of the little white dog is brought up as the next logical step. It follows when the White Dog gives the students lines to write that incorporate the students’ lemons with the death of the white dog and the reason everyone “will be punished”” (44)—no one comes forward, at the request of the White Dog, to announce herself as the guilty party (as the one who killed the white dog, “and Caesar, too, the one who killed Caesar”—the Law is intertwined with and demands and explanation for the death of innocence [44], but the addition of the demand for the scapegoat who has killed Caesar is tacked onto the request that the one who killed the white dog come forward as though it is an afterthought, always already a question that is up for negotiation); the lines the students have to write “one hundred times,” after the statement that “we will all be punished,” “who killed the white dog and why do I bleed? I killed the white dog and that is why I must bleed. And the lemons and the grass and the sun. It was at the Ides of March” (44). This historical information is in(corporated) with the collective guilt that stems from the lack of a single scapegoat; this collective guilt requires the expiatory writing after a biological explanation
for the bleeding (menstruation), is offered by one pupil (as opposed to apparent recitations of the collective); after this explanation, the collective body of pupils recites / repeats this biological explanation in the same manner they have been repeating the lines of the White Dog—this and the fact that they all “giggle tensely” afterward signifies that the lesson has been signified upon by the use of lines that do not belong in the lesson; however, it is important that these new lines (this new concept) are incorporated into the lesson after they perform the writing required by the White Dog—the concept that they bleed because they are menstruating females seems to be an appropriate part of the lesson at the end of the play, because it has an answer that apparently comes from the White Dog’s large Latin book, and the answer / translation retains the economy of the story of the symbolic (which has left room for discussion among the subjects, whose biology has been in(corporated) as part of the lesson)—“Calpurnia dreamed a pinnacle was tumbling down” (46). And, at the end of the play, the statues of the holy figures are “revealed as statues of Romans” (46)—which seems to recap the point that the authoritarian signifier is always already “tumbling down” but never quite falls (this point is underscored by the White Dog’s statement that “since we do not know the one who killed the sun, we will all be punished”[44]; the killer of “the sun” is demanded in the same way that the killer of Caesar and the white dog is required; the sun, of course, rises, just as this lesson is apparently recapped at the end of the play). This “Lesson” uses the Biblical abject (that is, the uncleanliness produced by the menstruation of women, which is listed by Kristeva in her catalog of the types of abject in the OT, which separate man from God), but also contains the boundaries of the law / Subject—while this lesson is certainly not necessarily a wholesome experience, it maintains the boundaries of a symbolic that is universal (a.k.a. since no one can find the lemons / find the killer of the white dog, “we will all be punished”). The threat of insanity from this symbolic is certainly
present, but the symbolic itself retains the boundaries of subjectivity and leaves room for the inclusion of the impure blood (which seems to turn out to be all but less punishment and more the inevitable [“everything soon bleeds away and dies”\{46\}] and a support of the purity of the law—Caesar’s blood is a reassurance to the question as to whether the blood of menstruation means death, since Caesar / the statues revealed as Romans certainly seem to be here to stay; the question and its answer create the pure / impure type of abjection [and with it, its necessary boundaries] as described by Kristeva in her analysis of the OT).

The abject threat (which becomes a part of the lesson itself) is insanity from repetition; but the repetition alters to include the additions / responses of the students themselves. The White Dog herself states, in the manner of giving the lesson, “Calpurnia dreamed. Dear Caesar, I bleed, too… Calpurnia dreamed a pinnacle was tumbling down… Calpurnia dreamed. I am bleeding, Mother. Does no one know where the lemons are? Since no one knows, we will all bleed and continue to bleed” (45). The students have added the words “Dear Caesar” and the complaint about bleeding to a Mother (probably the Virgin, since there is a clear demarcation made between an individual pupil’s mother and the addressed Mother of the lesson / White Dog’s domain), but these words are added to this lesson; hence, the structure of the lesson itself alters with its usage, both containing anxiety regarding boundaries / abjection and causing it (which, in turn, causes questions / discourse / the use of the signifier). The threat is stated by one pupil as “Teacher, my mother is sending me to the Asylum if I don’t stop talking about my white dog that died and my bleeding and Jesus and the game in the green grass. I asked her who made me bleed. The conspirators, she said” (45). The individual’s mother at once objects to the repetition of the lesson while suggesting an unidentifiable cause for the problem of bleeding that is part of the lesson; this lack of identity causes anxiety, and therefore a question—the same
pupil (whose mother threatened to send her to the asylum) asks “Why does no one know who killed the white dog? Mother, why does no one know? Why doesn’t Caesar know who the conspirators are?” (45). This demonstrates the anxiety that both threatens and maintains the structure of the lesson—the terms used by the student’s question are all used by the White Dog in the lesson, but they are personalized and continue the reason to continue this discourse. While all this dead language is certainly annoying, its symbolic justification is quite clear when read in Kristeva’s terms, and the multi-valenced religious signifiers within the structure of the lesson (there’s Black Church style call and response, as well as expiatory translation exercises demanded by someone Rosemary Curb identifies as resembling a nun, who, of course, has a big book of Latin) show a structure that everyone can add to and within which all are implicated (the universal defilement with its binary of purity, which allows for the hope of purity as the boundary that creates the symbolic). This structure is pointedly de-racialized—the very statues are described as “brightly” painted, but the race that critics such as Philip Kolin read into this specific Kennedy play is not in it; the reason the play is so starkly without racial signifiers is because it comments on the insanity of the racism of Rat’s Mass—the threat of the asylum and death and War loom large in Rat’s Mass precisely because racism is an exclusionary factor and one that is used by a girl with worms in her hair to cause sin; however, the sin of Rat’s Mass does not allow for signification—instead, it changes all the speaking characters into rats, and leaves Kay and Blake only the timelessness of childhood memories (to which they can never return in actuality), and the lack of the space / place of a future in which positive action will be possible. The structure of Lesson allows a reading of Rat’s Mass that valorizes the fight on the part of Kay and Blake to retain a symbolic (a place for signification, a position for themselves as subjects) for as long as they possibly can; this reading, in turn, allows for a comparison to Amiri
Baraka’s *Black Mass*, written in the exact same period, and full of the refusal of the silencing (a.k.a. denial of signification / social-subjective place / position) demanded of the white abject (personified by the White Thing of the Yacub myth). As I have demonstrated in *Lesson*, Kennedy finds it quite possible to create a space for signification that does not include the abjection of racism; arguably, Kennedy’s *Lesson* and *Rat’s Mass* do something that Baraka’s *Black Mass* does not—Kennedy would have been aware of the Yacub myth, and she even uses a White Dog instead of Baraka’s White Thing (created by a Black god-scientist), but her clever irreverence of the use of a White Dog (Dog is God spelt backward, of course) also shows her privileging of her characters’ use of the symbolic and keys into the agency she relegates to her characters, who attempt to maintain it. Hence, Kennedy’s plays, in the light of Kristeva’s argument as to how the Christian symbolic is useful, present a point that it seems Kennedy wanted very much to make—the contrast in the use of structure between *Lesson* and *Rat’s Mass* (and which is perhaps why *Lesson* was written after *Rat’s Mass*—as a clarification or emphasis of points that at least some members of her audience apparently did not get from *Rat’s Mass*).

First, a demonstration of how the struggle for a place for signification (a position for the subject) is held out by Kay and Blake in *Rat’s Mass*; next, I compare the historical framework of Amiri Baraka’s *Black Mass*, and what he makes of the Yacub myth / White Thing to Kennedy’s privileging of a maintenance of agency via containment of the symbolic. For Kennedy, the horror of whiteness is not something that has happened, and which must be shared as a mere warning; rather, the abjection of racism is what must be fought against, with the tools that are rightfully hers as a subject with agency. Baraka seems to emphasize what must be considered the contaminating factor; Kennedy assumes knowledge of the abjection of racism, and her plays are a step beyond Baraka’s in that not only does she not spend most of her time on one myth that
describes The White Thing, but in that she offers a personalized account that includes the
table of history (the Holocaust and the Caesars), and the use children can make of history as
children in their attempt to retain symbolic agency into adulthood. Baraka’s exquisite
dramatization of the Yacub myth is something that has happened, albeit it can also be read as a
warning against white cultural and biological contamination; Kennedy’s Rat’s Mass takes in
hand the ongoing and very personal struggle against racism (which is revealed to involve
everyone—it is not contained within the home of Kay and Blake; the War [always capitalized in
the play] is a problem for everyone; as it is written in Lesson, “we will all be punished”).
Kennedy’s failed mass (it is, after all, by its own definition a mass for people who have been
degraded to rats, although the entire play is a struggle against this loss of language / degradation;
the problem the play deals with can be viewed as written in its title) seems to parallel one of
DuBois’ explanations as to what the blackout (if you will) of racism drains from the world: “The
more I met Alexander Crummell how much I felt the world was losing that knew so little of him.
In another age, he may have sat amongst the elders of the land in a purple bordered toga… I
sorrow that he worked alone, with so little human sympathy… and herein lies the tragedy of the
age: not that men are poor,—all men know something of poverty; not that men are wicked—who
is good? Not that men are ignorant—what is Truth? Nay, but that men know so little of men”
(362). DuBois’ use of Caesar imagery seems to ring a similar call for a rational, and by
definition, available to all Subjects, symbolic for Kennedy. Dear Caesar, indeed.

The clearest difference between Lesson and Rat’s Mass is that the ritual, when it
resembles more a ritual than the answer of a paranoid, abject other, is that it appears in physical
forms while the Brother and Sister Rat (Kay and Blake) describe the collapse of their subjective-
social structure and the impossibility of returning to it. What keeps the play / mass going is
Blake’s “No”—his blatant refusal to give into the existence of the world where there will be no Capitol / Cathedral. Then, the God of Rat’s Mass creates defilement and does not allow for the clear frame of “Calpurnia dreamed” of the pinnacle that is “tumbling down,” but doesn’t fall, which infers that the lesson / world will go on (Calpurnia’s dream is a framing device since it is repeatedly invoked as part of the lesson, and, consistent with the Shakespearean allusion, precedes the death of Caesar; in the Lesson, the repetition of the dream that precedes the death prevents the arrival of death through this translation, which stands in for expiatory language [the students write lines after no one comes forward as the culprit of the death of the sun / Caesar and there is therefore no scapegoat, which means that everyone will be punished]; in Rat’s Mass, the punishment ends the entire world of the play and arrives at the end [as opposed to the play closing with the punishment being held off by the continuation of the function of translation, the use of the signifier]); the abject of Rat’s Mass ends the play with repetitions reminiscent of the Lesson’s ritual, but which are only empty structures—the ritual of the wedding Rosemary finally grants Blake is only the end of everything; Rosemary does not seem to require anything in this nihilistic world to remain for herself, although she remains (but, of course, since she has worms in her hair and is a clearly abject character—who is clearly reminiscent of the Dead White Father; death is connected with her wedding with Blake; Blake’s submission to death is the clear parallel of Clara coming to the Dead White Father).

The simultaneous speech of Kay and Blake, and the ritual rising and kneeling are physical ritual forms; the actual discourse repeated in a ritualistic way is personal and terrible—first, it concerns a refusal to engage in the ritual of confession (the play begins with the repeated act of swearing not to tell what happened on the slide at Rosemary’s request; first, Kay says that they “swore on Rosemary’s Communion book” and Blake answers, “Did you tell? Does anyone
know?"[47]; then Kay reassures him “We swore on our father’s Bible the next day in the attic”[48]). The repeated lines concern a lack of a Capitol/Cathedral and the use of the scopic drive formulation: “I see us dying,” Blake says in his first speech in the play (47). The violated interior of the social structures of these subjects is also among the repeated lines—in Blake’s first speech, he says that the worms in the attic beams “scream and say we are damned”; apparently, the worms in Rosemary’s hair have invaded the attic of Kay and Blake. The invaded interior space is mentioned before the worms in Rosemary’s hair, and is conflated with the Nazis: “The Nazis have invaded our house!” Kay and Blake speak in unison, which is one other physical way (besides the kneeling and rising) in which they appear to be performing a ritual (that is impossible to perform because there is no space for it in the course of an invasion of personal space). And yet, Kay and Blake continue the speech in unison, which seems to structure the attempted ritual of the play; when they speak in unison they use rhetoric that recalls the rhetoric of Lesson: Together, they say, “Why did the War start?” And invoke a symbolic that they have created themselves, the Rosemary Mass: “Our Rosemary Mass… Yet we weren’t safe long…Within our house is a giant slide” (48). The symbolic they have made is immediately invaded by a giant reminder of the collapse of their symbolic. When they speak together again, they both kneel in the course of the speech that invokes the safety of childhood innocence in the context of a religious ritual that at once goes bad again (the Communion wine of their father turns to blood that doesn’t stay confined to the Communion vessel but is instead “an aisle of blood); “Too, something inside the altar is listening. When we were children we lived in our house, our mother blessed us greatly and God blessed us. Now they listen from the rat beams” (49). The “sound [of] rats” is then heard and is identified as “our mother”—who has since been apparently transformed into a rat; the altar is hollow, since “something inside it” is listening. The
continued reminder of a lack of coherent / solid structure happens every time the two attempt a repetition of their Rosemary stories / mass created by themselves. “My sister and I were young before the War, and Rosemary our best friend, O Rosemary songs. Now we live in the rat’s chapel, my sister and I” (49). The invocation of their symbolic clashes with their displacement from the “Holy Chapel” to the “Rat’s Chapel” (48–49); the two speak in chorus again to say “then we must put a bullet in our heads,” after Rosemary assures them that “last spring” will never come again (51), and again to repeat the information concerning Kay’s hospitalization (which her brother earlier tells her not to speak about, and, at the same time, asks her to stop sending him sunflower petals). Like the structure of Lesson, information added by alternate characters is included in the speeches said in unison; both Kay and Blake say, “now it is our rat’s mass. She said if you love me you will. It seemed so innocent. She said it was like a wedding. Now my sister Kay sends me gnawed petals from sunflowers at the State Hospital… The winter is a place of great gnawed sunflowers. I see them in every street in every room of our house. I pick up gnawed great yellow petals and pray to be atoned” (52). Kay and Blake, speaking in unison, employing images that both have used, manage to erase Kay to someone who is speaking about herself, since the actual dialogue is from her brother’s perspective; the petals Kay sends him, true to the abject form of the play, do not stay confined to their envelope—they’re inside and outside the house for him to pick up. And their last speech in unison incorporates images that were used or suggested in Blake’s first speech, but incorporates Rosemary’s idea of a wedding and the nothingness of death—they repeat / incorporate Rosemary’s line, “We will become headless and all will cease the dark sun will be bright no more and no more sounds of soothing in the distance. It will be the end” (54). The dark sun and the screams from the worms in the attic beams (the latter of which may or may not be a signal of approaching Nazis, because there is no
clear referent for “they” in Blake’s line, “Nazis, again they scream”[47]) appear in Blake’s first speech, but find their way into Rosemary’s last speech, in which her “wedding” is conflated with being shot by The Procession of holy figures which function as Nazis. This broken up repetition and attempt at the symbolic and its function as a fallen psychic support of the clean and proper subject highlights the time when Kay and Blake retained their innocence and social subjective position and to which they would like to return; in fact, they are willing to fight to return to it, each in his / her own way. The brutal invasion of the symbolic structures of Kay and Blake by the abject world is not an evidently destroyed symbolic ritual (which is, importantly, created by everyone speaking in it, on one level or another—which invokes, as I mentioned earlier, more than one possible religious structure), which is repeatedly knocked down by an abject that annihilates boundaries as opposed to maintaining the need for them, without Lesson’s structural contrast.

However, Kay and Blake do retain the claims of their youth and the solidity of the subjectivity of that “last spring”; with that childhood, they have the blessings and the beauty of the community that has been debased (turned into rats; this morphing into an animal state is analogous to a loss of position in the social symbolic; it is not only for themselves that Kay and Blake are willing to fight, but, in a way different from Lesson, and yet comparable, for something greater than themselves. In Lesson, everyone is punished and yet safe in a sense that their positions within the ritual that fits into their social symbolic, in the blank human outline of the White Dog’s face, that includes humanity in general; in Rat’s Mass, it is the spring of their childhood, which will never come again, but also a spring after the War—that infers a life and community after the War, in which brothers do not make their sisters bleed [and, by implication, a world in which brothers and sisters can still find a Cathedral of their own and receive their
mother’s blessing; of course, only a mother who has not been reduced to a rat can give that symbolic gift]. And it is with the background of their childhood, which logically concludes that if last spring cannot be recouped, a spring can still come after the War, in which the same freedom and purity of the Self can return. This promise enables Blake and Kay to struggle against the corruption of the abject.

“How can I ever reach last spring again, if I come with you, Rosemary?” (52) Blake asks; and later, he says, “Beyond my rat’s head there must remain a new Capitol, where Great Kay and I will sing. But no within my shot head I see the dying baby Nazis and Georgia relatives screaming girls cursing boys a dark sun and my grave. I am damned. No… when I grow up, I will swing again in white trees because beyond this dark rat run and gnawed petals there will remain a Capitol” (52). The new Capitol is, in the light of the Lesson, the undefiled structure in which inside and outside are distinguishable; “Great Kay” stands in for “Great Caesars” that he and Kay were in their youth when they followed (and created) “Rosemary” stories, and the act of singing signifies the ability to construct language. An obvious contrast exists between the “shot head” that Rosemary has suggested for him, the imagery that he has added to the description of the unpunctuated nightmare world of the abject, and his punctuated, capitalized refusal to believe that this is where it ends—“No… when I grow up… beyond this dark rat run… there will remain a Capitol.” For her part, Kay, even as she faces the asylum and sends her brother sunflower petals, sits in the garden of the house in Georgia and “hang three grey cats” (48). The cats, in this context, are animals that devour the animals that the Black community has effectively been reduced to in the terms of the racist abject; if it is the cats or her, Kay will hang them. This turnabout of lynching imagery certainly suggests struggle on her part; and it is her admonition of Blake, in terms that have become racialized (such as the “mark of Cain”), that continue the
discourse of the play—Blake has failed to be “his brother’s keeper,” Kay reminds him in the beginning of this play via her plea that he fulfill this role (48); that is, the “Cain” identity entailed by the Biblical allusion to Cain’s denial of the responsibility of being “his brother’s keeper,” is an identity that is earned, not innate; she also reminds him of “when we lived in our house with Jesus, Joseph and Mary” (49). And, incorporating her additions to the negativity of the present rat ridden surroundings with his own vision of a post-War world, Blake and Kay state together, to The Procession, “A spring can come after the War when we grow up we will hang you so that we can run again, walk in the white birch trees. Jesus, Joseph and Mary, do not leave us” (51). The unpunctuated sentence denotes violence for the sake of peace; Blake has already spoken of being a soldier, and Kay has already hung predatory animals while suffering dread of being reduced to an animal that is prey. The request that the images they lived with in their youth to remain with them is punctuated properly, and fits with ceremonial language—which, in this play, does not contain the anxiety and boundarylessness of the racist abject, since The Procession echoes Blake’s fear (stated in the beginning of the play) that the sin on the sliding board happened during Easter and is therefore somehow more damming; and regardless of when it actually happened, no room for argument remains because The Procession foreclose argument by stating that the only reality that exists is their abject reality: “We are leaving because it was Easter… In our minds, it was Easter” (51). While Rat’s Mass swallows its Subjects, it nevertheless shows the struggle on the part of the subjects to retain a linguistic agency, a social symbolic that existed once in their childhood and can therefore come again. The temporal logic of which Kay and Blake are capable remains even though they end up executed: they say before their death that death will “rid their heads” of the nightmare present, in which “rat voices in the beams say… we are lost Caesars” (53). This would conclude that even though the religious
structure collapses, the social subjectivity of Kay and Blake is not quite conquered—their society can reduce them to headless rats, but that abject has been unable to take away the “last spring,” and the only way a new Capitol is denied Kay and Blake is through tautological foreclosure (The Procession [a.k.a. Nazis] refuse any reality beyond the abject one it chooses).

Kennedy makes it clear that her Black protagonists can dissect the white gaze that destroys some (if not sometimes all) of their own. A discussion of *A Movie Star Has To Star In Black And White* (1976) is necessary at this juncture because its use of the earlier plays, which are using during scenes in Clara’s selected movies, and which, as a whole, denote literacy and agency (and / or threats to it); also, while Clara (the explicitly Black protagonist) has the movie stars “play themselves” and “lets” them star in her life, there are some vital interpretative issues that are typically overlooked—“Let” in and of itself, can be denotative of a command; and reading it in this way coincides with the fact that the “movie stars” in question have no choice but to use the terms of the reality she faces (they have to “star in black and white”); these movie stars are going to have to dramatize the fight for agency as social subjects that has been dramatized by *Rat’s Mass* and the other earlier plays. Also, while Kennedy uses the central movie stars of the three movies she selects, one very noticeable star is left out of re-presentation altogether—Elizabeth Taylor. Arguably, the nightmare faced by the Black family of *Movie Star*, on which Clara takes notes, is dramatized under the white abject gaze that is constructed in part by the blot of the missing Elizabeth Taylor.

*Movie Star* is framed by such overexposed representatives of the Hollywood gaze (the Columbia Lady and the movie stars in her selected movies [*Now Voyager, Viva Zapata* and *A Place in The Sun]*) that its frame includes a potential space for Clara’s social subjectivity; that is,
the Columbia Lady is an obvious gaze object, representative of a society that offers the foreclosure of suicide (it is in the Columbia Lady’s opening speech that the concept of suicide is brought up on Clara’s behalf (64): “Lately I’ve thought of killing myself. Eddie Jr. plays outside in the playground. I’m very lonely” (64). These sentences are filled with a clear inside / outside demarcation—the threat of suicide is inside with Clara, while her son plays outside, a child in the purity of the state of childhood (as it is understood in Rat’s Mass); throughout this play, Clara employs her signifiers (embodied by quotes from her previous plays), whose ongoing discourse creates meaning in the face of the abject of suicide suggested by the hopelessness of a racist society. While the voice that suggests suicide parallels the voice of the character of The Father in this play (a Negro rights advocate, whose accomplishments are visible and whose despair is framed by their very massiveness), the psychic threat to Clara is clearly implicated; however, what builds the presence of the abject white gaze is not the overexposed Columbia Lady alone, but the invisible motive for Shelley Winter’s drowning, which takes place at a crucial moment of Clara’s life—that is, Elizabeth Taylor’s character in A Place in the Sun, and the only major movie star in the three movies that is not present in Clara’s cherry picked movie scenes. The gaze as a picture and as a voice of sorts (an absent voice, a potent physically absent motive, which, in terms of absent threat, parallels the photos of The Mother and Father when they were young, in the room of the comatose brother, which is so overburdened with memories that it is blacked out when Shelley Winters and Montgomery Cliff appear in their fatal boat in the room next door [with Clara sitting behind Shelley Winters, taking notes, while Shelley Winters is condemned to silence]); this pattern of the use of the movie stars’ bodies while having their cries, even while drowning, explicitly silenced via stage direction, demonstrates Clara’s control over his part of the frame of her life. What threatens Clara’s agency parallels the presence of the
movie stars and speaks in the voices of despair on the part of another frame of Clara’s life—that of her family members, particularly The Husband, Eddie, whose refusal to understand the importance of Clara’s agency to her is paralleled by Clara’s brother’s immobilized state (before and after his accident which concludes in his literally comatose state); Clara’s movie stars typically say what she cannot bring herself to admit, and what she will not say but very strongly feels—that is, they are more often than not controlled extensions of Clara, as opposed to substitutions for Clara as Subject. For example, “Bette Davis” provides Clara’s point of view, which is amply underscored through parallels with her brother’s confinements later in the play when she asks Eddie, who seems unwilling to engage with Clara beyond the role of the husband who has to know when she’s due to give birth and expects her to be present as his wife when he returns from “doing something with [his] life”—in this moment of the play, that is going to class—“Do you think I’m catatonic?” (68) While Clara’s brother will end up bald and in a catatonic state (reminiscent of the nightmare figures of *Funnyhouse*), Bette Davis’s direct question to Eddie, while he tries to kiss a writing Clara who is avoiding his attempt to insert her into his preferred reality, makes Bette Davis Clara’s extension as opposed to voiding her subjectivity in favor of the movie star’s. The irritation inherent in Clara’s / Bette Davis’s question cannot be overstated, and its presence bespeaks a strong if harassed / threatened ego. The abject, invisible gaze of the play, which appropriately creates the need for Clara to locate a place for herself, a space for her to use signification (a place in the sun—recall that the sun itself has been used in *Lesson* as an interchangeable substitute for Caesar—if you will), is the racialized judgment of Clara’s ambition (Eddie calls it an obsession) to become a writer, and adheres to the basic definition of the gaze: “The gaze as object is a stain preventing me from looking at the picture from a “safe,” objective distance, from enframing it as something that is at
my grasping view’s disposal. The gaze is… a point at which the very frame (of my view) is already inscribed in the “content” of the picture viewed. And it is, of course, the same with the voice as object: this voice—the superegoic voice, for example, addressing me without being attached to any particular bearer—functions again as a stain, whose inert presence interferes like a strange body and prevents me from achieving my self identity” (Looking Awry 125-126). When Clara’s identity as a writer (the detached one who only appears to take a bit part because she retains the detachment of the writer / observer of her life and work) is threatened by her family, either in terms of her status as a childbearing woman or because she is supposed to feel limited by her race, Clara’s movie stars (as well as Clara) bring up fractions of her plays by way of answer / reaffirmation of her identity (and / or a question as to why her identity should be threatened, which at the same time identifies the content of the threat itself as abject [however practical / well meaning its bearers believe they are]). So, the body of the Columbia Lady and everything the invisible Elizabeth Taylor (as the charged, racial presence, which is quickly identified by Clara’s work as abject), create an overexposed and “enframed” picture, which Clara can use as a medium for her voice, and a threat to her use of her voice, respectively.

Kennedy very carefully picks the movie scenes—they are Paul Henreid’s encouraging courtship of Bette Davis on the deck of the ship in Now, Voyager; the “learning to read” scene between Jean Peters and Marlon Brando in Viva Zapata (as well as a reference to the scene in which Brando’s Zapata has a rope removed from his neck in the context of Clara’s father’s contemplation of suicide and failed attempt); and the rowing / drowning scene between Montgomery Cliff and Shelley Winters in A Place in the Sun. These selected frames function to contrast realities, underscore points and explain the sense of threat Clara’s subjectivity is
exposed to in the course of her writing / life. These movie stars speak lines from Clara’s plays, which seem to expand upon and explain the plays in the contexts in which these lines appear.

In the first scene, Paul Henreid and Bette Davis are at the railing of the ship while the scene plays out simultaneously; Bette Davis speaks for Clara while Henreid is as oblivious as Clara’s husband. A rebuffed / ignored Eddie tells Clara that he’s late for class, but when he gets paid he’ll “take her to Birdland. Dizzy’s coming back” (68); after having this comparatively trivial distraction dangled in front of her, Clara states in her diary a time (that is, a place, a psychic space where something has happened) and then reads from Owl, “I must get into the chapel to see him. He is my blood father. God, let me in to his burial” (68); since the only way for Clara to get into the chapel (that is, especially in this context—the ability to “do something with your life”) is suicide, Bette Davis quite appropriately picks up the framework of Clara’s life: “My father tried to commit suicide once when I was in High School. It was the afternoon he was presented an award by the Mayor of Cleveland at a banquet celebrating the completion of the New Settlement building…He was given credit for being the one without whom it couldn’t have been done… I asked him what was wrong. I want to see my dead mama and papa, he said, that’s all I really live for…I’ve been waiting to jump off the roof of the Settlement for a long time. I just had to wait until it was completed” (69). Clara’s father erects a building whose meaning is so foreclosed to him that he is going to use it as something to jump off to his death; this is in the context of Clara’s statement that she’s been writing “a lot of my play, I don’t want to show it to anyone, though. Suppose it’s no good” (68), which precedes the passage in Owl that describes the Dead White Father’s body being taken into a chapel she cannot enter, and the haunting of her Tower by the calling Owl, “The flying bastard. From my Tower I keep calling and the only answer is the Owl, God” (69). In the course of reading this passage of her play,
Clara kneels and stands, in gesture reminiscent of the religious ritual of *Rat’s Mass*; this passage is followed by Bette Davis’ description of the suicidal actual father figure who doesn’t actually commit suicide (“he tried to jump off the roof but had fallen on a scaffold”—her father is kept alive by a tool whose use was to lynch people). This description of the creation of a building (and a play) is framed by movie music and Clara herself says, “I loved the wedding night scene from *Viva Zapata* and the scene where the peasants met Zapata on the road and forced the soldiers to take the rope from his neck… when they shot Zapata in the end, I cried” (69). The removal of a rope from the neck of a revolutionary voice, in the context of a desperate Black leader of his people and his daughter’s fear that her own structure (that is, her play) is “no good,” is symbolically loaded but is also a response to desperation that is hopeful; it includes not only the mention of the “teach me to read scene” (which is explicitly identified with *Lesson* by Jean Peters), but a community that refuses to allow a lynching to occur. Clara’s deployment of her chosen movie scene is a response to the psychological threat that she experiences through the frame of her father’s depression; her “kneel / rise” behavior during her reading of the *Owl* passage is not left without significance: The staring behavior of the White Dog of *Lesson* (while waiting for the translation / expiatory writing of the pupils) and the designation of Blake of *Rat’s Mass* as a soldier against the Nazis is also recapitulated. After Clara describes her favorite scenes from *Viva Zapata*, she goes into the room where her brother lies comatose, and says to him “Once I asked you romantically…how do you like Europe, Wally? You were silent. Finally you said, I get into a lot of fights with Germans. You stared at me” (69). Clara’s memory of her brother has her brother behave like the waiting Teacher of *Lesson*, who stares at pupils, waiting for their answer, their translation, the continuance of their religious discourse, as well as a fully activated fighter of Nazis; the “kneel / rise” behavior of *Rat’s Mass* has its corresponding
characters here (a sister and a brother who fights the Nazis); and this memory is a dark reality in response to a “romantic” question (after staring at her, he “went… to the dark sideboard and got a drink”; the need for a drink and the fact that the sideboard / setting itself is “dark” underscore the seriousness of the situation), but the “romantic” frame with which Clara surrounds the desperation and fear of her father and herself is still one that includes positive action (her brother fought the Nazis; he stared at her to dismiss the flippant question about how much he likes Europe, to insist on the reality of the situation, but in this frame he still has freedom of movement and ability to redefine the terms in which his experience as a soldier is described).

The frame Clara creates with her movie stars and with her explicit choice of movie scenes, then, functions to bring together several plays in a way that grants agency to their protagonists—not to mention the fact that these allusions to her earlier plays include recreating their situations and imagery aloud (which undercuts her fear of showing her work to others in the case that it isn’t any good). Considering that the passage from Owl (that expresses the inability to enter the chapel) reappears in the context of a scene in which anxiety is created by Eddie’s question, “Are you sure you want to go through with this… obsession of yours… this obsession to be a writer?” (Jean Peters, who has already spoken the lines that are referents to the bleeding of Lesson and the continually changing bloody sheets, which demonstrate a literacy / substitution of signifiers, responds, defensively, forcing Eddie to give Clara’s writing behavior the dignity of the categorization of writing, “This?” [75]), it may be concluded that the combined use of Clara’s plays with her deployment of her movie star characters often acts as an empowering device. This argument is bolstered by the movie scene chosen for the second scene of this play—the “teach me to read” scene from Viva Zapata; Jean Peters provides symbols of signification in apparent support of Clara’s dilemmas. First, she and Brando change the black bed sheets after Jean Peters
relates Clara’s the story of Clara’s miscarriage and the fact that she is pregnant again after this; then, when Clara is confronted by mother who says, “I don’t know what I did to make my children so unhappy” (71), the stage direction reads, “Jean Peters gets book for Brando” (so they can perform the “teach me to read scene” while Clara tells her mother she’s happy, that she just won an award and she just wants to be a writer (72). Then, before Clara states that “It bothers me that Eddie had to give me money to come home. I don’t have any money of my own: the option from my play is gone and I don’t know I will be able to work and take care of Eddie Jr. Maybe Eddie and I should go back together” (72), Jean Peters states that (after facing her brother’s coma) she’s “Very depressed… I try to write a page a day on another play. It’s going to be called a Lesson In Dead Language. The main image is a girl in a white organdy dress covered with menstrual blood (72); clearly, the state of being a woman (e.g. Clara doesn’t know how she can work and take care of Eddie Jr., and feels pressured to go back to Eddie because of financial situation) is discussed at least as much as a social symbolic problem as a physical one—the depression Clara and Peters speak of seems caused both by Clara’s brother’s coma and Clara’s inability to earn money; however, one small detail that appears is that one of Clara’s plays has been optioned (which means she’s shown her work to someone—and apparently, it was good). Peters’ lines invoke the Lesson and tend to recall the continuous discourse (bleeding continues without killing, just as, in Lesson, the pinnacle is tumbling down, but always apparently in the process of tumbling), as well as Clara’s monetary impasse (that is, her lack of symbolic currency; the bleeding related to her pregnancy has already been simultaneously “translated” by the action of changing black sheets—and apparently, there is no end of sheets). Even when Clara is confined to her bed (“the doctors say I have to stay in bed when I’m not at the hospital,” states Jean Peters’ character), the changing of sheets goes on “continuously” (73). Clara’s biological
dilemma seems to be re-presented as a symbolic action—as troubling as it is, it still recalls the ongoing bleeding of *Lesson* that never ends in death; similarly, the news of Wally’s coma is recounted in the most positive possible way by Jean Peters’ character: “My brother Wally’s still alive” (71). When the play takes a turn toward the racial abject, Jean Peters’ character states the implicit contradiction of the rules governing Eddie’s return from Korea when Clara had the miscarriage; after Clara is confined to her bed by doctors, Jean Peters says, “This reminds me of when Eddie was in Korea and I had the miscarriage. For days there was blood on the sheets. Eddie’s letters from Korea were about a green hill… The Red Cross, the letter said, says I cannot call you and I cannot come. For a soldier to come home there has to be a death in the family” (73). The green hill is reminiscent, of course, of the green grass the menstruating girls played games regarding their lemons in, in *Lesson*; the emphasis of Jean Peters’ speech is the bitter implicit contradiction of the denial that Clara’s miscarriage constituted a death in the family. Again, the blood is a problem, but it is framed in such a way that the rational issues concerning the blood are emphasized. Then the father and mother bring up race and the South. The mother says, “I never wanted to go back to the south to live. I hate it. I suffered nothing but humiliation and why should I have gone back there [to return to her husband]” (73); the father says, “You’re a yellow bastard. That’s why you didn’t want to go back,” to which the mother responds, “You black nigger.” Jean Peters reads from a different play, now, *Owl*—which is the same play she read from, and from which she selects particularly abject lines, when the mother says, “The doctor said he doesn’t see how Wally has much of a chance of surviving: his brain is damaged” (72). When Wally’s comatose condition was mentioned, before the parents’ racially textured spat, the lines from *Owl* are particularly debased ones; framing the racially toned insults is a passage from *Owl* that accompanies the abject character of the passage paralleling the comatose
condition, which is “He came to me in the outhouse… I call God and the Owl answers. It haunts my tower, calling”; this passage “I call God and the Owl answers, it haunts my tower, calling” is taken up after the racial spat. But the mention of the outhouse (that is, the rape in the outhouse, the ultimate abject) accompanies the mother’s declaration of Wally’s brain damage—the inability to be a speaking subject is cause for Jean Peters to say she’s writing Owl instead of Lesson, even though she has just announced that she has been working on Lesson, and for her to use the abject site of the outhouse; the damage of racism is implicitly compared to Wally’s inability to be a speaking subject (his brain damage) by Jean Peters’ recap the same passage after the racial spat—she repeats the lines that follow the mention of the rape in the outhouse after the racial spat leaves off. Again, the framing mechanism Jean Peters’ character deploys is one of logic—the idiocy of racism is implicitly compared to brain damage.

This rational tone on the part of Clara’s movie star extension is replaced by a contrasting, irrational one in the third scene, in which the choice of movie scene is from A Place in the Sun and the scene is Montgomery Cliff rowing Shelley Winters in the rowboat—the scene in which she is going to drown. The opposition to Clara’s writing, as well as a sense of moving without finding a site or place, is what this scene frames. Clara and Jean Peters present the determination to be a writer, and the fact that Wally was unable to negotiate his world before the brain injury and was locked in a stockade; this contrasts with Clara and Shelley Winters, the murder victim, in the sudden sense of travel or rather, movement without a place / space for signification. Clara speaks directly from the boat, though it seems she addresses an audience beyond Eddie, since she mentions him in the third person in her speech (she sits behind Shelley Winters writing in her notebook—again, Clara provides a detached site with her writing itself, even though she’s in close proximity to a murder victim [just as she’s been in close proximity to the brain damaged,
and continued writing]: “Ever since I was twelve I have secretly dreamed of being a writer. Everyone says it’s unrealistic for a Negro to want to write. Eddie says I’ve become shy and secretive… that my diaries consume me… and make me a spectator watching my life like a black and white movie” (75); Jean Peters has, before Clara’s speech, already affirmed to Eddie that she is sure of her ambition to be a writer, after questioning Eddie’s statement that her writing is an obsession by asking, “Obsession?” after Eddie terms Clara’s writing an obsession. Eddie’s criticism of Clara’s writing is paralleled by Shelley Winters’ account of Clara’s mother’s hysterical reaction to Wally’s condition: “My father came by the house last night… and my mother started laughing. She just kept saying see I can laugh ha ha nothing can hurt me anymore… no one can hurt me since my baby is lying out there in that Hospital and no one knows whether he’s going to live or die…she said ha ha and started walking in circles in her white shoes. My father said how goddamn crazy she was” (75-76). The parallelism of these speeches is important—after Eddie suggests that Clara simply take up her role with him as he would have it and calls her writing “an obsession,” Clara’s mother is described as having a hysterical reaction upon the prospect of losing what is most precious to her, her child. This parallelism is repeated when the father tells Clara that her mother always thought she was better than he was because she was “raised like a white girl,” and Shelley Winters “reads from notebook” the lines from Owl, “he came to me in the outhouse” (75).

With the frame of the murder scene from A Place in the Sun comes a sense of losing a site for signification even in writing: Clara tells her diary that she told her mother that she is coming to Cleveland; the fact that she told her mother that she is going to Cleveland suggests that this is something her mother needs to know because she is already there, but her mother’s answer is “I’m coming up there.” After this, Clara at first seems to begin to reiterate criticism of
“they” regarding her writing / literacy (comprised apparently of Eddie and others, but reminiscent of the THEY of Owl, and sure enough, the passage turns out to be from Owl, but without the place references other than London itself. Clara is making this part of her play, but it is a part that startlingly lacks too many specific places, which stands out in a play that has been very specific regarding shared spaces and absented and abjected spaces; and this passage parallels [indeed, immediately follows] Clara’s diary mention of her mother’s use of a taxi to meet Clara, in which her mother is under extreme duress [“When she got out of the taxi I will never forget the expression on her face… I’d never seen her look so sad”]: “They said: I had lost my mind, read so much, buried myself in my books. They said I should stay and teach summer school. But I went. All the way to London. Out there in the black taxi my cold hands were colder than ever. No sooner had I left the taxi and passed down a gray walk through a dark gate and into a garden where there were black ravens on the grass, when I broke down. Oow… oww” (76). “Out there” gives a disorientated sense of having no place to go, and indeed, in this play, this passage is not about the Tower of London, but a journey in a black taxi, “a” dark gate, “a” garden and breaking down in pain. The parallel ride in the taxi, taken by Clara in her play and her mother in the record of Clara’s diary, emphasizes a lack of space for signification and ends with a breakdown of pain (her mother has never looked so sad; Clara exclaims “Oow… oww.”).

When the lights shift back to Peters and Brando, Peters explains, in effect, that Wally has been in the position of failure for a long time and has been involved in an unnamed crime in Germany and now has been imprisoned in the stockade. He has a shaven head, and has been unable to function in any of the universities he has attended. “I’m a failure, he said. I can’t make it in those schools. I’m tired. He suddenly joined the army. After Wally left the army he worked nights as an orderly in hospitals; he liked the mental wards” (77). Peters’ speech relates Wally’s
fight for a place of his own in the sun, so to speak (that is, a place / space in which he has the space for signification), and the impasses he has faced before this ultimate state of stagnation (brain damage). After this, Shelley Winters and Clara speak in chorus, “We really don’t know his condition. All we know is that is brain is possibly badly damaged. He doesn’t speak or move” (77); and “the lights suddenly dim on Marlon Brando and Jean Peters” while Shelley Winters drowns in silence while Clara states, solo, that “The doctor said today that my brother will live; he will be brain damaged and paralyzed” (77). The significance of the lights “suddenly” diming on the two framing movie characters that have been consistently associated with literacy, places for signification and substitution, in the stage direction, in the context of Jean Peters’ speech that grants a Kafkaesque perspective to Wally’s life, and Shelley Winters’ “quite sudden” fall into the water and silent drowning, emphasizes both the use of Clara’s movie stars as well as the awful immobility that Clara’s brother is in—which mirrors the immobility that Clara herself is faced with (a.k.a. the easily confused “they” of her family / Eddie and THEY of Owl, who accuse her of “an obsession” because of her ambition of wanting to be a writer, and of losing her mind, being “buried” in her books—whereas her brother is trapped within his own body, literally paralyzed). The play ends with Clara’s mother sobbing in her arms “outside” the hospital, on the hospital steps, “And she shook so that I thought that both of us were going to fall headlong down the steps,” Clara states; the last image of the play is “a brief dazzling image of the Columbia Pictures Lady” (who suggested Clara’s suicidal feelings at the beginning of the play when she is inside, watching her child play in the role of mother / housewife). While Clara and her mother shake without actually falling outside the edifice, Shelley Winters simultaneously drowns; the brief glimpse of the Columbia Pictures Lady creates the blot of the gaze, a reminder of uncontrollable events that have clamped down on Clara’s brother’s life and which threaten Clara.
Jean Peters’ speech just before the end specifies that Clara’s brother is the one who is attracted to the mental wards, and has been in the stockade, “bald” (reminiscent, of course, of *Funnyhouse*), and it has been made clear that Clara, so unfairly, is facing being barred from the literate life at which she is quite adept (whereas her brother has apparently failed in various universities). But the fates of this brother and sister, which seem to draw toward the same sinister conclusion (death / abject living death), and the repeated use of the abject line that the “flying bastard” rapist of Owl “came to me in the outhouse,” allow for the conclusion that Clara is afraid of being subjected to an abject state and we have watched the rationality of her struggle against it. The obvious framing devices of the movie stars, who answer Eddie’s attempts to put Clara in her “place” as it were, are themselves overwritten by the gaze object of the body of the Columbia Pictures Lady and the unspecified crime that has landed Clara’s brother in the stockade (the two are interwoven because the appearance of these speeches and images parallel each other as the other obviously interrelated speeches have—the brother’s fate is announced while the lights simultaneously go down on Montgomery Cliff watching Shelley Winters drowning; the fact that whatever landed him the stockade is unspecified is consistent with the unspecific location of the gaze—since the movie context makes it clear that love of Elizabeth Taylor’s character is what caused Montgomery Cliff’s character’s crime, and Elizabeth Taylor is absent [qualifies as a gaze voice object]. The context of the other Kennedy plays that appear in *Movie Star*, either by allusion or explicitly by name, makes it equally clear that Blake, the brother rat of *Rat’s Mass*, was supposed to fight the Nazis, but committed a crime that has taken over the entire world; and, by the same gesture, Clara’s brother has committed a crime and now his entire world is an abject one [the limited, paralyzed world of the brain damaged]).
The political and social context for the production of Rat’s Mass can allow for a reading of the play that transcends critical insistence that Kennedy’s work, with few exceptions, is personal, not openly political, and at the same time transcends individual and political contexts to comment on the human condition as a whole (Werner Sollors and Mance Williams have both used descriptions that tie Kennedy’s work into DuBois type of comment when he writes in this vein [an example of which I provide above—the tragedy is not merely racism but that mankind loses out on some of the best within itself because of racism], while focusing on her interest in family dynamics and humans under psychic stress). This context is provided by the historical framework of Baraka’s Black Mass, which followed hard on the heels of the death of Malcom X in 1965. “The death of Malcolm X stirred him to sever all ties with his downtown Manhattan life and to solidify his total commitment to black cultural nationalism” (Nelson 144). Very soon after the assassination, Baraka took up residence in Harlem where he and other African American artists formed the Black Arts Repertory Theater / School. “At BARTS, Baraka collaborated with other artists,” such as Sun Ra, “on cultural nationalist projects to entertain and mobilize the local black community” (144), and A Black Mass was first staged in 1966 at the RKO Proctor’s theater in Newark. Kennedy’s Rat’s Mass was written before Baraka’s Black Mass (in 1963), but performed by the Boston Theater Company in 1966; the simultaneity of Kennedy and Baraka’s performance work and its social parallels beg to be examined. As I have noted above, Baraka’s Black Mass focuses on the Yacub myth, which had figured in the Nation of Islam’s belief system since the Great Migration and was deployed to explain the predicament of Blacks within the societal hierarchy; indeed, described as “the central myth of the Black Muslim movement” (qtd in Nelson 140), the Yakub myth concerns a god-scientist raised within an all Black utopian society who decided to create a race that would be such an opposite to Black people that they
would be “attracted to this opposite race and would thus be blinded to the “tricknology” used to rule over them”; whatever Yakub’s intentions regarding the domination of his own people, his bleaching process was not complete when he died (that is, the race he wished to create was not in whatever shape he had intended it to take), and the group of white people created by Yakub via genetic engineering (and banished with Yakub to a distant island, away from the mainland, because “alarmed authorities were fearful of Yakub’s dangerous ideas and his hubris”[141]) migrated back to the mainland. “Because they did not possess the inherent righteousness of the original black man, the white race became immoral, corrupt and atavistic—more animal-like, covered with body hair, and impervious to frigid climes. This devolution was accompanied by a master plan to oppress and eliminate black people” (141). The Yakub myth did not always go by this specific name, but Black folk history has been observed to be redolent with its themes. “Lawrence Levine has observed that during slavery oral legends circulated which were based on the assumption that blacks were the initial creator-beings and allowed blacks to stand the white creation myths on their heads… In one witty story, Uncle Remus tells of a time when all of humanity was black until a pond was discovered that turned black people that were submerged in it white” (140). Hence, themes and imagery common to the Yakub myth circulated during slavery and were concentrated in the Yakub myth itself as early as 1930, with the establishment of the Nation of Islam (Nelson). It is easy to locate a layer of Yakub type imagery in Kennedy’s *Rat’s Mass*—Kay and Blake wish to migrate with Rosemary (who is a morally degraded figure, as well as physically abject one [she has worms in her hair]; however, true to Yakub’s premise, she is beautiful and alluring to the Black brother and sister and the source of their corruption) to Italy, and to associate themselves with the alternate ancestry that she claims for herself (she claims to have descended from the Caesars; Kay and Blake believe they can take the part of “lost
Caesars” and thus fit into Rosemary’s symbolic organization. This, of course, is a trap that subjugates them to the status of devolved figures who lose their humanity [they become rats], and this devolution is contagious—it affects their family [specifically their mother, whom they can hear scratching and gnawing as a rat, in the beams of their attic], and it spreads over their world in a pattern simultaneous with the Nazis [a.k.a. denizens of a Northern clime whose white skin is considered by them to be a mark of privilege and “natural” right—and who do not possess the humanity and idyllic, goodly intentions of Kay and Blake. When the Nazis arrive, Kay and Blake will be shot—that is, if Rosemary cannot induce them to kill themselves, since they have devolved under her malevolent influence. Rosemary’s purposely evil motives are openly disclosed her “greatest grief” was Kay and Blake’s “life together,” in which they lived harmoniously and wandered through “white birch trees” instead of being lynched in them]). Finally, Mance Williams, who insists that Kennedy’s work does not carry directly political motivations, describes Kennedy’s “Sun: A Poem For Malcolm X Inspired By His Death” as a “somewhat oblique contribution to the Black Theater Movement,” and the inspiration for “choreopoetry” such as Ntozake Shange’s For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow is Enuf (148), even while he describes Kennedy’s reaction to Malcolm’s death in terms similar to Baraka’s use of music and poetry in his own performance work (Williams does not connect Kennedy’s “Sun” to Baraka’s Black Mass, but his description of the similarities between Kennedy’s use of lights, sound effects and poetry and Baraka’s in his own Ba-Ra-Ka can easily be applied to the lighting, movement patterns and sound effects in Baraka’s Black Mass): Kennedy and Baraka’s work “combines poetry and body movement to create dramatic intensity through the coordination of auditory and kinesthetic imagery”; it usually calls for sound effects that are frequently, but not always, musical (148). Williams does not compare
the similarity of the imagery in Kennedy’s direct reaction to Malcom’s death to imagery that has appeared throughout Lesson and Rat’s Mass—“Sun” begins with a passage that includes, in the context of a “kneeling man” associated with “a Madonna and child” and a “kneeling angel,” “landscapes flowers and water views of the coast of Italy cloudbursts lilies / a mountain of lilies” (55); in Rat’s Mass, Kay and Blake rise and kneel and wish to return to Italy (which is figured, with “their Palatine”) as a place in which they can regain the timelessness of “last spring” (which includes an articulate mother’s blessing, and a mass ritual in which they rise and kneel). “The Man,” who is the performer of “Sun” loses his head, and the sun itself darkens and “turns black” (61) (reminiscent of the “dark sun” with which Kay and Blake are afflicted); just as Kay and Blake lose The Procession and their identification as “the holiest children,” along with their heads, which are transformed first into a devolved condition, The Man finds himself afflicted with “the head of a bear… heads of monsters… Now where is my head / the head of Christ the head of / an apostle head of St. Anne… of the infant Jesus?” The religious imagery is reminiscent of the Statues of Lesson and the Procession of Rat’s Mass, and, of course, Kay and Blake consider that at least death will relieve them of “rat’s heads.” And like Kay and Blake’s misfortune, the head of The Man is “distorted” and “dismembered” (57) and finally “slowly blood comes over his own face and he becomes blotted out by it” (59). That is, The Man, while still dreaming of “Tuscany” (etc) loses the boundaries that establish his interior from his exterior along with his collapsing world. Kennedy’s horror and sorrow concerning the degradation of the death of a “man” who was identified with holy figures and the beauty of Italy (which has stood in for the land of reclaimed subjectivization in Rat’s Mass, and is referenced via Latin signifiers and references to Caesar [who in turn is associated with the sun itself and the holy figures] in Lesson) aligns her mourning of the death of Malcolm with the horror of children faced with a
world polluted with the abjection of racism / Nazis. The parallel, connective imagery of Kennedy’s works show her angst regarding the corruption of the human spirit; but her works are multi-valenced enough to include their own political, social context as well.

Given the above argument, Kennedy’s Rat’s Mass can be seen as a response and / or a call to Baraka’s Black Mass (that is, she is not as abstracted from her societal realities as many critics would have her appear). If this is the case, Baraka’s description of the devolution of humanity under the touch of “the White Beast” can be compared in terms of symbols and terms to Kennedy’s use of what Kristeva would term abjection. “The broad critique of a “Western” mode of thinking presented in A Black Mass made it an iconic piece of Black Arts Movement ideology. The play characterized scientific and medical experimentation as the epitome of the Western “aesthetic impulse gone astray,” in Larry Neal’s words, against which BAM advocates defined their craft”; A Black Mass “harked back to African American communities’ historically based anxieties about biomedical malpractice,” and is in keeping with “a rich mythology that encoded blacks’ lived experiences of medical maltreatment into folklore and oral tradition” (Nelson 147). From the “night doctors” that served as a threat on the part of southern whites to discourage Blacks from escaping to the North (that is, medical students and physicians who stole bodies—living and dead—for purposes of research, were terrifying, abject images used to threaten escaping Black people), to the hospitals that refused to give standard treatment to injured Black people on the basis of racist ideologies, to experiments like the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, the “astray” white appropriation and / or labeling of Black bodies as fodder for white use is easily read as abject. Even the return or refusal to accept injured Black bodies on the part of white controlled hospitals makes those hospitals justifiably zones of literally white and cold exclusion of people who were dying or already rendered dead. Baraka’s use of the Yakub myth
has his “Jacoub” create a white beast, whose touch turns any other human being white and takes the power of speech from the diseased victims; all the white beast (and its diseased victims), which “Jacoub” believes, at first, that he can teach, is capable of saying is “White!” A one word example of the nonsensical, tautological self-importance of racist ideology. Jacoub’s fellow scientist reprimands him for “Asking God’s questions and giving animal answers” (146)—and the white beast, in and of itself, is an animal answer to an attempt to assume the role of a creator-god. Baraka and Kennedy both use animal imagery to denote a devolution of humanity that occurs on contact with racist ideology, in effect. But Kennedy, in Rat’s Mass and Movie Star, arguably examines the ravages of racist ideology in a way that shows its range and consequences to be farther reaching (and thus more terrifying) than Baraka’s focus on the encapsulation of the racist mentality as demonstrated by biomedical research: Kennedy’s “white beasts” can contaminate via socialization—through their mere gaze and discourse, as well as through their categorization (which ties into Baraka’s use of biomedical categorization in that categorization itself is a colonial trope meant to exclude given people from the obligations of humane treatment for reasons religious, sexual, national and racial). First, in Rat’s Mass, Rosemary’s mere interaction with Kay and Blake, and the “crime” that Blake commits with his sister on the slide on the playground (under the direction and order of Rosemary’s gaze), is enough to have Nazis invade homes and cause the devolution of apparently all the people of Kay and Blake’s reality; by parallel, the use of Rat’s Mass imagery in Movie Star is extended so that the effect of the abject white gaze voice is more thoroughly highlighted. Movie Star is a Kennedy play fraught with allusions to her previous work: there is a brother named Wally (an echo from Funnyhouse), who goes overseas to fight the Germans (which is what Blake intends to do), and this brother ends up returned to his family as a brain damaged and paralyzed body (which fits well into
Baraka’s use of biomedical exploitation to describe the abject, white dis-ease). But, within the frame of Montgomery Cliff’s sense that he has no alternative but to cause the death of Shelley Winters in order to obtain Elizabeth Taylor (whose missing presence from the play begs the question as to Montgomery Cliff’s deadly, driven purpose; the gaze as voice [within Montgomery Cliff’s character’s head or outside it] has issued a command, just like Rosemary, and he rows all but continually under it; since the audience knows why he is rowing and what will happen, the requirements of the white thing [a.k.a. Elizabeth Taylor’s character] in this case are impressed upon it as well), is a crime that is committed by the social ideology of Wally’s society against a brother in arms that has fought for his country. Since the question of brotherhood is repeatedly mentioned in Rat’s Mass (Kay says early on, “Be my brother’s keeper, Blake”[48]; then, later, Kay reminds Blake that he did not visit her in the hospital, in which she is interned because of Rosemary’s social influence / gaze, and adds, “Blake, I thought you were my brother’s keeper”[53]), and is obviously extended to entail the primal sin of a “brother’s” (or sibling’s) murder (and, of course, the mark of Cain who has failed to be “his brother’s keeper”), Kennedy arguably employs the point of contaminated socialization to encompass some of the earliest of human failings, a Biblical flaw, that creates an abject category / mark; but, as Movie Star makes clear through framing, contrast and outright narration, it is not Wally’s fault that he has not been treated as a brother by his society—Wally’s “crime” is deliberately not stated; what is emphasized is his imprisonment in the stockade after he has fought the Nazis in Germany, along with his attempts to belong within an unforgiving, rejecting academic and social world. It takes Shelley Winters quite a long time to finally drown, and she makes no noise while doing so—she is deprived of her voice under the gaze, just as Wally is deprived of his even before he is physically paralyzed; the length of Shelley Winters’ death parallels the long struggle, and the
multiple social crimes of exclusion against, Wally, the brother of Clara. The spectacle of Wally’s comatose body throughout *Movie Star*, then, is the return of the body from which life and hope has been taken by a racist society, in the context of the hospital room in which he lies—which seems to speak to the reasons for Black distrust of the medical system, which encapsulates the mentality of the white dis-ease in Baraka’s *Black Mass*, but also to expand this context to the world of racists that has made a living corpse out of a man. The insane behavior of Clara’s mother in *Movie Star* is not caused by the mere racial appearance of Clara’s father, but rather what has been done to Wally—which appears to elaborate the cause for madness in *Funnyhouse*. *Funnyhouse* is evoked by the racialized insults that Clara’s mother and father hurl at each other in *Movie Star*, and seems to be given the added detail as to what causes the insanity of The Mother figure (her “baby” is in the hospital and he may never leave it). It follows, in regard to *Funnyhouse*, that the black apparition that comes to claim Sarah at the end of the play, at her death, is not her actual father but rather the thing that has been thrown up, dis-eased, returned in its Lacanian real form, by an abject white society (equipped with a racial system whose social behaviors mirror that of the slave societies, in which every affected relationship was contaminated in some way by the structure of slavery; as it is elaborated in the Owl’s effective answer, it is a system headed by the Dead White Father, whose abject body, which keeps returning, encapsulates in itself the horror and the cause for other people’s reduction to mere bodies and / or receptacles of pain [it has been noted many times that the Owl’s “ow” is an expression of pain, and this interpretation is borne out through the use of “oww” in *Owl* and *Movie Star*]).

The interpretative frame of Kennedy’s other plays, which re-present the world she knows complete with the boundaries created by her anxieties, which denote what she abjects,
accommodates the sort of reading that has already been hinted at (but not, to my knowledge, discussed in terms of the abject) of *An Evening With Dead Essex*; this play displays both Kennedy’s acknowledgment of the concerns of humanity and her specific concerns regarding how her society excuses itself for what it has made of a Black soldier. Essex is very direct concerning the dilemma of placelessness (that is, an inability to employ social signification because the abject nature of the society at hand leaves no Other, simply what Lacan would term a barred Subject), but the very problem is countered in the literal displaying of it. The Black gaze and agency of the director, actors and actress of this play asserts itself—even down to the control over the single white member of the cast (the stage directions read that there can be only one white member of the cast, and he has to wear dark colors [while the remainder of the cast is explicitly instructed to dress in light colors] and be a nonspeaking / unheard character—that is, the projectionist [118]; this arguably demonstrates that while the projectionist takes orders from the director, still present is the acknowledgment of the abject intrusion of the projector equipment, which brings the photos the director requests, which in turn display the Black gaze [and with it the Black interpretation of Mark Essex], as well as the empty signifiers of Essex’s childhood and experience as a solider [empty because they become meaningless, devoid of what they are supposed to signify]; the stage direction reads that “the projector is slightly larger than reality and very black”[124] when it exposes empty signifiers of childhood innocence and peace and belief in the “Midwestern faces”[125] with which Essex grew up). Even while the white projectionist is effectively mute, the intrusive projector brings “inside” the church, where this play is supposed to be performed, a lying Kissinger (again and again), and the body of “Essex slain” (not to mention all the “innocent” appearing “white Kansas faces”)—that is the abject of the white media gaze voice, which is later controlled in that its content is selected and framed via
mimicry by the director and assistant director, but nevertheless still exists and wears down these dedicated performers who are attempting, throughout the scenes, to “get there,” to this place in which they are “with” Essex (132). It is important to notice that while the play itself is to be performed in a church, what we see as the play is the rehearsal of the play—they are going to do this again, after they get “there,” but spatially they still have time to get “there”—there is still dialectical movement along a rational timeline (as opposed to being frozen in the past, or only having the past as a site that provides a return to sanity [to contrast Blake and Kay’s problem in Rat’s Mass]), in the future, that is physical as well as psychological. The symbolic that is bordered by its corresponding corrupt social abject is the work of these performers, and it is maintained by their continuation of their discourse until they reach the place of signification that is embodied by a Biblical text, which contains, within its lines, their observations concerning Essex’s inability to tolerate lies. Mark Essex, the man who is killed as a terrorist by hordes of white militia, and obscenely represented by a white media, is psychologically located in the place in which the terms of the abject are defined—the Bible (according to Kristeva, and, apparently, Kennedy, whose use of boundaries [and by implication, position] coincides with Kristeva’s definitions of abjection and the maintenance of the symbolic). The language of the play, in the way that is weighted and yet appears happenstance, ends up in the Biblical verse that closes the play with what the members of the cast need—a signifier that permits the social subjectivization of Essex, his fellow G.I.s, and themselves (it just so happens that one of the actors “in a very subtle way can resemble Mark Essex”[120]).

The first scene of An Evening With Dead Essex presents the problem of the societal abject—there seems to be nowhere to live and no place to hide for the G.I.s who have been arrested for meeting to talk about being “killed off by society” after the revolutionary gesture and
the death of Mark Essex. This sense of placelessness and the face of white innocence as a lie is framed by the director’s direct point that this is the case, and through the director’s observations regarding Essex (as well as through his physical guiding of the cast, to help them “get there”). The first scene and the discussion of the problems faced by G.I.s forced to fight in Viet Nam is performed under the literal gaze of Essex’s mother’s eyes—the director tells the projectionist to leave the face of Essex’s mother on the screen and “the photo is finally focused on Essex’s mother’s eyes” (118). And this scene is effectively about Black experience of abject American consumption, racial paranoia and violence. The director asks one of the two actors to put himself effectively in Essex’s position before reading the newspaper headline description of Essex’s death (along with its reassurance to whites that Essex “acted alone,” in his revolutionary call to arms); since the other actor and actress haven’t returned from lunch yet, the director tells the actor, “While we’re waiting, I want you to do the ex-serviceman again… it’s not enough—remember that you’ve been in a war and you’re back on the streets, broke without a job” (119).

The ability of the other actors to have lunch is sharply juxtaposed with the hunger of the ex-servicemen they represent; this particularly oral juxtaposition reoccurs when the actress, guided by the director, tells the director that to imagine Essex’s very real disillusionment (one must have illusions in order to be disillusioned), she puts herself in the position of being “nine. I’m in Sunday School Class… After…we’re going home to have a big fried chicken dinner” (123); in this context the actress employs the 23rd Psalm as “a very young and very happy” Essex; the director tells her to “close your eyes,” and the director orders, “Flash Essex Slain… open your eyes look at it and go on, and think of him riddled with all those bullets, think of him in Sunday school” (123-24). The direction to the actress to close her eyes while evoking Essex’s innocence, and to open them on the sight / site of his mangled body functions in the same way as the
framing gaze of Essex’s mother’s eyes, and of Essex himself, as a young boy—the awful shock confronting newly aware (a.k.a. “open”) eyes is the position in which Essex found himself, and this is what is re-experienced and re-presented by its performance. The plentitude of childhood and the multiple slides of Midwestern faces (the director is concerned that there are “enough” Midwestern faces to reinforce this point, which is underscored by the actor who says, “They seem open enough,” while the other actor says, “I don’t know about trust, but he didn’t distrust those faces—it’s that open American look—I guess innocence is the word—for Essex’s vision”[124-25]) employ literal, oral hunger to make interchangeable innocence and satiety (as opposed to the loss of innocence and hunger). This use of the oral drive to cathect the affects inextricably connected to the historical and personal experience of racism provides a sense of not only lacking something to eat, but having what one had devoured by the abject of one’s world: It is not incidental that Richard Wright’s title for Black Boy was “American Hunger,” and this point relates (or rather, provides a larger context along the historical spectrum of African American history) to the hunger experienced here within the loss of innocence (Wright’s novel is full of physical hunger, coupled with the demand for Black bodies for lynchers to effectively consume, and the disillusionment that occurs when his protagonist’s attempt to work in the American North ends up being a slower consumption of his body through the mindless labor to which he is subjected). Consider that immediately after the actor has identified the trust / innocence and plentitude of the Midwestern faces, the director says, “I think there should be the reading about the war in Viet Nam and then… about Essex being ripped apart… because they continue into each other” (125; ellipses in original); America requires a lot of bodies to contain its anxieties and / or need for consumption (which complements the historical reality of the mentality of American expansionism), just as the white
police required a lot of bullets to insure that one Black man is “really” dead. The stylistic pauses / ellipses of the director’s speech provide the effect of “the violence of poetry and silence” (Kennedy’s stage directions require long silences between slides and speeches in this play) that characterize Kristeva’s description of the literature of the abject (that is, ellipses of this nature convey an intonation, suspension of meaning, which leaves the possibilities of meaning open, floating, unsettled—unbounded, in this sense, and creators of anxiety as to what could be meant as well as “avoiding signification,” a “token” in the place of a “sign,” which bears both “affect and subjective position”[Powers 200]); this suspension of meaning (and / or its multiple terrible possibilities) appears in the director’s carefully weighted use of silence recalls the fact that the symbolic is well defined against the abjection that threatened Essex—that threatens his fellow soldiers (and fellow Black Americans). That is, the distinction between what happens inside this studio and what has been happening outside of it is maintained while it is purposely challenged by the art of the director and cast; Kristeva makes it clear that a boundary is only acknowledged when something impinges upon it, and this play is meant to thrust the American racial abject into any sense of safety and comfort / faith in the order of the American social contract that its audience might have. Within this framework, the director reads from the newspaper clippings that have been selected to bleed into each other: “Here are the items. 1972—B-52 bombers made their biggest raid on the Vietnam War demilitarized zone to date dropping nearly 200 tons of bombs. 1973—at 9:25 p.m. the helicopter lumbered past again. // When the sharpshooters opened fire, a slight figure… trapped in a withering crossfire… Jimmy Essex was literally ripped apart by at least a hundred bullets. The police kept firing even after he went down” (125). Note that the director’s selection of clippings provide a timeline that seems sequential, if not consequential—the war in Viet Nam, which is said to have deeply disturbed Essex, is one feature
of abject destruction of a space (of which Essex would have been aware), while the set up of the
crossfire, the oppressive “lumbering” of the helicopter, take up another zone of abject death-
space (of Essex himself).

The placenessness (a no man’s land of lies and transit that complements the purposed
description of more than one no man’s land of death) experienced by G.I.s like Essex and Essex
himself is represented by the director’s demand for the “Peace Is At Hand Speech”; the director
gets the repeated performance of Kissinger’s smile in transit in and out of peace talks instead: An
actor states, “Can’t find the Peace Is At Hand speech but we do have that picture of Kissinger
entering the peace talks again and again. Smiling” (126). The stage direction before this states
that the actors are now working as a group and the momentum has picked up (125); off of this,
the director says, “I want the repetition of the coming of peace, the come of peace, peace coming
of peace. In all that repetition is deception—and Essex was a man sensitive to deception…peace
he was delivering unto himself and unto us” (125). And after the mention of the repeated
“smiling” performance of Kissinger, the actress wonders where Essex was during all this
repeated deception (“which would have appeared” this way to him [126]); the director answers,
“I don’t know where he was… I’d say many places—he too was entering and leaving many
places” (126). Kissinger’s placelessness is what the director wants to represent (“Yes, we want
that picture over and over entering and leaving, entering and leaving the peace talkings with
peace at hand—smiling—all this happening around Essex”[126])—the liar is constantly in
transit, while the observer of this abject display was also in transit; it is made very clear that
Essex cannot be contained in the police photographs of the little shack with the anti-racist graffiti
on the walls, which the actress puts on the slide herself along with her question as to where
Essex was during all the Kissinger talks. That is, while there is a lack of stable social fabric that
appeared this way to Essex, Essex himself was exerting agency through his own entrances and departures and subjective affiliations; when faced with the abject threat to his personhood as a soldier and American, Essex maintained his own hold on his symbolic (he cannot be reduced to a maniac contained within the police photo of the graffiti ridden shack; the place in which the white media gaze would have been comfortable with is not where Essex “is” in all this). Of course, the social lies told regarding peace were a threat to Essex’s boundaries—fighting in the Viet Nam War would have weighed on him morally, the cast observes: “Each soldier should talk about how brutally used he felt to fight a darker brother for a country that despises him even more than his Viet Nam enemy…I do believe Essex was so deeply religious that he was torn to bits in spirit by having to serve alongside his white enemy” (120); the photo / gaze of Essex’s mother remains present during these speeches, the stage direction explicitly dictates at this point in the text (120). Since Essex told his minister (who observed that he returned a quite different person from the boy who went away to war) that Christianity is a white man’s religion (a point that the director chooses to highlight as an example of “the deception again—he had been deceived…as a boy in Sunday School”[127; ellipses present in original]), the source of Essex’s religion is outside the empty signifiers offered by the deception of his home town and his childhood religion. Essex’s symbolic boundaries (and those of the cast who seeks to reach the psychological position Essex attained) are dictated by the gaze of the Black culture, and, correspondingly, the religious valences of Malcolm X; the physically darker people he was forced to fight were “his brother(s),” and Essex apparently felt that by fighting them he failed in being “his brother’s keeper” (as Blake as admonished in Rat’s Mass). If Essex has been marked (like Cain in the Biblical allusion), it was by a white abject, embodied by a noxious white President and the diplomats, and military and media that function as intrusions / extensions of
this abject influence in this context; Essex is believed to have been “torn to bits” by having to fight “alongside his white enemy”—the forced affiliation with this enemy is a good part of what has threatened Essex’s psychological boundaries. He has literally been forced to mark within the ranks of the great white beast, as Amiri Baraka may have termed it.

Scene II takes up the contrast between the deception that surrounded Essex and the reality faced by him that also surrounded him. The obscenity of the media’s choice of focus (in the midst of the deaths occurring on and off American soil) is dramatized by the assistant director and the director, who project Essex’s feelings about these things while framing them appropriately. The assistant director reads off two lists of clippings and items, with items in common, repeated in a kind of refrain for emphasis, in between the director and his own use of media clippings of an obscene Nixon and “cheerful newscasters” whose tone in the context of what they report is indeed obscene. First, the assistant director, surrounded by the visual context of the pile of blown up posters that he brings in himself, the “top one” of which is “a B-52” (the type of bomb carrier that has already been described as creating massive destruction in Viet Nam), “checks off “a list of items and photographs, which include Essex’s hometown, war headlines, “unbalanced drug addicts” (who are the returning G.I.s), “all the peace is at hand speeches,” “the tranquility,” “more church songs”; this first series is followed by a list of deaths—those of President Kennedy, Malcolm, Martin Luther King, Kent State killings (128). “To himself,” the assistant director, going over his projects, says, “War dead photos…Nixon’s speeches without conviction” (129). “Reading to the director,” the assistant director underscores the contrast created by the abject result of Nixon’s presence as an empty signifier, in effect, as the leader of the armed forces, and the photos of the war dead (as well as “interviews with G.I.s,” both black and white who have become “unbalanced drug addicts”), by stating to the director,
“This is what surrounded him”—and supplies a list, which, in terms of content, is effectively a repetition of the first list. This emphasis via repetition contrasts with the repetition of the lies that the director wants exposed as repetition—a valid symbolic in contrast to the barred subject resulting from a failed, and abjectly vacantly smilingly Other. After the reading of this repeated list, the content of the other posters the assistant director has brought is revealed as the director himself hangs them around the room (thus again creating the gaze objects himself): “Poster 1—B-52; Poster 2—Vietnamese children; Poster 3—bombs.” The assistant director and director then complete each other’s thoughts as to how Essex felt under the gaze they have re-presented: “…surrounded by war and killing…. he saw his battlefield” (130; ellipses in original); the assistant director observes the “war and killing,” and the director concludes that these surroundings present to Essex as his true “battlefield.” Then, within the frame of this “battlefield,” the voice of the “cheerful newscaster” is mimicked by the assistant director, first in his reading of a clipping on the alarming increase of drug use among the armed forces and then of a so trite as to register as nonsensical “birthday hope” speech by Nixon. The impression of excessive triteness, coming from the source of Nixon, as a kernel of the Lacanian real, is cemented by the following contrast between Nixon and Kissinger’s obscene “peace effort” of sorts in a (given the gravity of the war) nonsensical context and a clipping describing what is happening in the war that immediately follows this “peace effort”: “President Nixon has announced that he is supporting the Washington Redskins in their battle with the Miami Dolphins in the Super Bowl January 14. He is sending Henry Kissinger to Miami to negotiate with Coach Don Shula of the Dolphins an honorable settlement to the hostilities”; the director goes on with “more cheerful news”[sic]: “SAIGON—air raid sirens scream night and day. The earth trembles with the violence of an earthquake and whole sections of the city crumble in a
roar of flames and jagged steel. For the first time in the war the people seem afraid” (131). The negotiations on Nixon’s part, which are going on in this context, are over what amounts to idiotic nonsense, while, under the gaze objects of the posters of the Vietnamese children and the bombs, is a description of the crumbling walls of a city, afflicted with violence equated with an earthquake, and the frightened people of this city. The stage direction emphasizes that the description of what is happening in Saigon is read in a mimic of the cheerful voice used to report the carnage (in the same tone in which it reported “negotiations” over the Super Bowl). The assistant director’s repeated sequences of sources of deception, followed by an itemized list of deaths and tragedies, are paralleled to the mainstream American media’s treatment of the Viet Nam war; the trivialization of what is going on in Saigon via the apparently contextual report on the Super Bowl can easily evoke a sense of desperation and rage over the deception and the reality of death in the repeated lists. Essex’s rage is effectively explained, illustrated, in a way that employs the mainstream American media as well as sources closer to him, such as his revisited hometown, and which melds what could otherwise be viewed as matters detached from each other into a swirling and repetitive mess of deception that is elevated to the level of horror. After these readings of lists and clippings, “the projectionist flashes [Essex] slain photo—moves to close up of Essex’s face”; the gaze object of Essex’s face in death, as if in agreement with the explanation of the context of his rage and protest, is displayed, and underscored by the fact that when it is flashed, both the assistant director and director “look up” at it, as though in acknowledgment and agreement with Essex. The stage direction calls for a silence—a space created for the consideration of the symbolic values undermined by the horror of American mainstream triviality—before the director orders the projectionist to “show him as a boy again,” just as the scene ends (131-32). Again, Essex’s real innocence and what it was confronted with is
represented. The first thing the director says, when the lights come back up for Scene III, is
“O.K. this is it. We’re there now. With him” (132).

But it’s still not quite enough—the projectionist’s screen is blank (which is appropriate
considering what follows—an example of the sort of grotesque media reportage of Essex’s
death; first we have seen the obscenity of trite subjects run in a cheerful voice by the mainstream
media in the context of the horror created by American bombs, and now we see that same
triteness applied to Essex himself—the projectionist’s blank screen can present abject silence; no
image is needed to augment with its gaze the violence done to Essex’s person [both in terms of
description of the real violence of his death and in terms of the reduction of his death in the terms
of the media]); the specified blank screen can serve as a window of the abject blankness that is
the media reportage of Essex’s death and last hours. The director’s next reading, before affirming
“We’re there with him now!” (note exclamation point), is not identified as a clipping but reads as
such; the tone of the piece is set in that it seems to employ every reductionist racist signifier that
the mainstream American press would. After this reading, which requires a culturally and self-
conscious enough audience to not require that it be announced specifically as a clipping, comes
the usual stage direction identifying as a clipping another newspaper report piece that is itself set
up in what read as abject terms.

The piece that is an unidentified source (which is identifiable if we the audience have
learned to acknowledge the symbolic of the play and its world) begins in the middle, between
two sets of ellipses from the director: “…to New Orleans to see a Navy buddy and he stayed to
find his destiny in welling black rage… his mother in Emporia was standing up in St. James
Baptist Church, asking the congregation to pray for her son Jimmy who “doesn’t want to go
along with the Lord.” After Essex died, investigators visited his cheap rented shack in the black
slums… They found a cheap waterbed, some clothing—and four walls scribbled over with anti-white graffiti.” (132; first two sets of ellipses in original). The obvious racist signifiers, which identify this as a piece from the same type of reductive source that is read from next, appear in the dramatization of the phrase “welling black rage” (which infers an unfocused drive as opposed to the very real need to take action in a desperate situation; the writing on his walls included the “shoot to kill” policy of the New Orleans police regarding Black people, and is referenced more than once by the characters in the play, as is the specifically anti-racist [as opposed to a blanket anti-white] graffiti, so we know that this piece is constructed to make Essex out as merely an irrational Black man); the usage of Essex’s mother’s prayer regarding Essex’s not wanting “to go along with the Lord” begs the question of which Lord and which religion with which Essex is willing to go along—Essex has already been described as deeply religious and therefore unable to tolerate the killing of his darker skinned brothers and the hypocrisy of his racist society, in which those killings were reduced by the media to one more news report, along with updates on quibbling over the Super Bowl. Finally, the piece whose source is identifiable only by its racial stereotypes and assumptions (which present only a disorderly terrorist with no more focused aim than a madman who has scribbled “anti-white” graffiti all over his “shack”), is structured to emphasize the “anti-white” graffiti along with Essex’s possessions, an apparent piece of evidence of his status as a mere terrorist whose bloody actions were without any sort of symbolic or godly meaning. After reading this piece, the director seems to have no need to elaborate upon why we’re most certainly “there with him now!”

The clipping the director reads next underscores the abject content of what could be a typical white media portrayal of Essex’s death and his last hours. The title of this piece is set off as the title in block letters: “GUTS AND POTATO SALAD” (133). Since this clipping is set off
by the bloody overkill of Essex (even after his obvious death “at intervals, an angry, cursing, frustrated policeman would fire another burst at the body”), the use of “GUTS” with a source of food (which was apparently part of Essex’s last supper) suggests the contamination of Essex’s food with his blood—a pollution of his body, which was desecrated by the oh-so-frustrated policeman who needed to unload on it one last time. This clipping shows the contradictions present within media accounts of Essex’s life and death in that while the description of the graffiti on the walls the “flat” (as opposed to “shack”), subscribes to that of a disordered individual (its “walls were covered with black and red painted slogans”), the slogans refer to “racist pigs” as opposed to general “anti-white” ravings. The clipping does, however, state that “The body was identified as that of “Jimmy” Essex, a quiet black youth from a middle class family in Emporia, Kan., who was said to have developed a hatred for whites while serving in the Navy” (133); it would be typical of white media sources to state that Essex had a hatred for whites without any explanation or elaboration, as though none is warranted, since such hatred would, according to Essex’s irrational America, be meaningless in the face of the deceptive American “innocence” already noted by the cast of the play.

After the reading of this clipping, the stage direction repeats that the “screen [is] empty,” even though there is no need for this repetition other than to reinforce the unreal blankness of racist representations of the news; repetition here recalls Kristeva’s description of how repetition functions in the literature of the abject—since the screen is empty, whatever picture is going to be called up is called into question; the identity / function of the addressed subject is in suspense; repetition is needed because what the other can say (particularly in this scene, via the comforting boundaries of being read by the directors, but still an assault on the sensibilities), is not self evident (or rather, cannot be self evident, although it is, in all of its
nightmarish, unreal “cheerfulness”); “consciousness of the other’s existence would demand repetition for the purpose of additional clarity”; the speaking subject “would, in short, be in two places: that of his own identity, that of objective expression, for the other” (which requires the subject to go back, repeat, clarify) (*Powers* 195); hence the multiple “cheerful” news articles, which have similar abject connotations, function as a form of repetition, underscored by the blank, empty screen and the insistence in Kennedy’s stage directions that we notice its emptiness. The speaking subjects in this scene are finally “there” with Essex, in the full blow of the impossible, abject other of Essex’s racist cultural voices, which are clarified precisely for the subjects to experience their empty, grinning horror as themselves (recall that Kennedy requires the entire cast to use their own names [which will necessarily change in each production, and perhaps even in various performances of the same production–hence the mere titles, “actors,” “directors” and “actress” and “projectionist” used to refer to the characters of this play {which, itself, does not have a certain title, according to the director—at least at that moment}]. Kennedy uses the positions / roles of the cast itself as a form of literary suspense, mirroring the anxiety of the structure she creates in a manner so like Kristeva’s description of the creation of abject literature {the style of which is, in effect, remarkable in Kennedy’s descriptions of the abject within her society}]; also, this is a rehearsal of the real play—the play itself has not been performed, although it is, in the reality of its cast and audience, already being performed; these rehearsals are social performances that also require the cast to be “there” with “Essex,” to get to the psychological location of Essex as subject as well as the empty content [the frequently noted lies and deception of Essex’s abject social other] which Essex and everyone in the same boat with him must face). The multiple repetitions, then, show the subjects clarifying both Essex as subject and the dearth of rational meaning in the respective abject social structures through this
repetition in this rehearsal (for which the play itself, when it is performed “formally” in a church, will have been, in effect, a repetition). Then, another set of parallels of contrasting signifiers is brought into focus—patriotic songs are sung in the presence of the flag that the director has chosen in the first act of the play, with the explicit instructions that it be “a beautiful old flag, as through the eyes of a second-grade boy who believes the world is good…like the kind of flag that years ago was used in classroom for public schools…We want a flag that’s been in that classroom for years” (121). The patriotic songs in the presence of a flag that presents Essex’s vision as an innocent child makes the meaning of these patriotic songs all the more ironic (throughout the play the audience and cast have been subjected to material that makes it clear that G.I.s, Black and white, in particular the ones overseas, are breaking down and descending to drug use; also, the meaning of these patriotic songs would obviously be different when sung after a news article describing the dismemberment of a soldier and the abject trivialization of his death [aside from the point of its title, the clipping spends more time describing what Essex ate as a last big meal than on any sort of elaboration as to what happened to him in the Navy that caused his shoot out and death on the roof of the Howard Johnson motel]); most importantly, since the “innocence” that Essex believed in and which, in a sense, destroyed him, has been shown to be a deception, this flag, which is supposed to represent a vision from the point of view of that innocence, becomes a gaze object with unstable meanings. A symbol of the law, of country, for children in classrooms once upon a time, this flag is now a symbol of one little boy in a classroom who believed the world was good; it has been changed from a blanket symbol of the American State into a question, a Black gaze object.

The hymns that are selected to follow the patriotic songs also have meanings that both complement and enlarge upon earlier descriptions of the cast’s feelings for Essex, but which
explicitly align Essex’s role in history as that of a man who sacrificed his life in a desperate outcry on the part of oppressed people. The irony of the patriotic songs gives way to the hymns that retain their symbolic content while granting Essex an honored place within the songs of the Black Church. “The Garden” carries an allusion to the Garden of Gethsemane (particularly because it is listed in the context of “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord”), and it is a place in song in which the singer is joined by an understanding God in this garden. The linkage between Essex as a Christ figure and the actress who sings of walking in this Garden with her God is solidified by the actress who says, after the director’s affirmation “We’re there now” (with Essex), “I’m there now. I’m going to do “In The Garden.” Her “preparation” for singing this song is to state, in the first person, the experience of Essex with his gun (its purchase and its location near his fallen body): “The first indication that something was going to happen came last spring when I purchased a .44 Magnum hunting rifle—that gun was found next to my body when I was shot that Sunday from a Marine helicopter” (134). After this comes a “long silence,” while the stage direction states twice that the body of the “Slain Essex” is on the projectionist’s screen, in between repeated directions for a silence.

And then a Biblical verse with which to close the play is brought forth with the agreement of the entire cast: Luke 3-6. Within the verse is language that has been applied to Essex throughout the play, so it appears to sum up Essex as a figure meant to inspire the repentance of sin, free those in bondage, and heal the broken hearted (like himself); this use of the Biblical verse at once sets up a spatial signifier (preceded and framed by the place of the Garden) in which social subjectivity is possible, and is made new in the sense that it is made to encompass everyone Essex’s story and experience represents (not just a “white” religion), since its language turns out to echo the language that has been used to describe Essex. These Biblical
verses would fulfill the reason Christian discourse (with its abject) is worthwhile according to Kristeva (and their use would make it appear that Kennedy uses them in this way—they not only serve to offer new meaning via their context as used by individual people in their respective circumstances, but the verses themselves are given new meaning by their users): The social subjectivization created by the discussion of the distance between man and God, signifier and its usefulness; that is, the existence of an Other whose boundaries establish a symbolic against an abject whose challenge to the borders of the symbolic results in the need for the reestablishment of those borders, to allow for the continuation of discourse involving the expurgation of the problems within the social symbolic. The importance of the Biblical verse, and the site of discourse it represents, is highlighted by the search for a title for this play (the title, especially in this context of this play, effectively tells the audience “where” it is—in this case we are spending an “evening with Essex”; but, in the first scene, when placelessness that confronts the G.I.s. is being illustrated, the director says he hasn’t decided as to the title of this play); the actress reads a list of titles, in the midst of which she uses language that reappears within the Biblical verse that is decided upon at the end of the play. The actress list of titles includes, “From Luke: The Crooked Shall Be Made Straight,” and “Essex’s Dream of the Beginning: When God Created Man” (123); she adds that “I feel [Essex] felt he was setting things straight.” The actress’s use of titles employs both the Biblical passage from Luke as well as Essex’s need for a Signifier that is not empty, of a beginning that includes everyone, with the assumption that everyone is equally worthy as people under the eyes of the same God. The actress’s emphasis of Essex as the one who “felt he was setting things straight” identifies him as the voice in the wilderness (“The Wilderness: The Howard Johnson Motel” is her first titular suggestion), who cries out to “Prepare ye the way of the Lord make his paths straight” (qtd. in Kennedy 135). The first scene
of the play focuses on the ex-servicemen who feel that they are being killed off by society; the passage derived from Luke at the end of the play states, “you know the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor he hath sent me to heal the broken hearted—to preach deliverance to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind to set at liberty them that are bruised” (135). Below is a discussion of the historical circumstances out of which the ex-servicemen speak—which were what inspired Essex’s action; but it should be noted here that the repetition of the line “to heal the broken hearted,” which precedes a “flash” of “Essex—American sailor—large” on the projectionist screen, infers that Essex as a fellow American serviceman recognizes the broken hearted (a.k.a. the “unbalanced” drug users among G.I.s. mentioned several times in the play) through his own initial hopes and position that have left him broken hearted by racism. The broken hearted appear within the re-presentation of the truly innocent about to be dashed to pieces—that is, “bruised” (Luke); the question as to “have we finally found the right Biblical passage,” in the first scene of the play, is closely followed by the director and cast’s observation that Essex was in “many places… searching for peace” (126). The actress’ direct use of Luke in her title involving “the crooked that shall be made straight” invites the rendition of what “being made straight” entails—“every mountain and hill shall be brought low and the crooked place shall be made straight and the rough place shall be made smooth and all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (135); this is a description of peace and equality, which parallels the director’s emphasis on the repetition of peace talks that are lies, which Essex would have seen as such, and the fact that the director agrees with the actress’s summation of the purpose of Essex’s movement among the placelessness represented by the crooked and powerful, such as Kissinger’s “entering and leaving all those talkings about peace and smiling” (126): the director doesn’t “know where Essex was,” during all this, and the actress
responds, that he was “searching for peace” (126). This interpretation is easily borne out in the remainder of the section of Luke invoked by Kennedy—making the topography of the land even is symbolic of a place in which the captives can be delivered, and the bruised can be set at liberty (Kennedy’s cast in this play state they will use Luke 3-6, but they actually read onstage the section involving making crooked ways straight and rough ways smooth, which is immediately followed by what this entails (via the spirit of the Lord that requires this topographical / spatial change)—the delivering of the captive and the healing of the broken hearted.

White paranoia invoked by Essex’s action, Essex’s reason for his action and who Essex was (he is represented at the end as an “American sailor”[135]), is reflected by the treatment of the Black G.I.s. that are to talk about their feelings concerning Essex in the beginning of the play (119-120) and the director says it is important to include a “recounting of what people said about Essex” (127). The historical background, media coverage (made up of both Black people attempting to prevent whites from having an excuse to indiscriminately kill young Black men, ‘]and white coverage that urges the danger posed by Black people), Black critical coverage and what people actually said about him, according to Essex’s biographers easily merges with the project within Kennedy’s play. The G.I.s. in Kennedy’s play state that

About a year ago five of us G.I.s were arrested. We used to meet in the cellar of one of our homes. It was in Cleveland—they said we had a plot to kill... all white people. We didn’t. But we did meet in that cellar every day and talk, just talk. We wished we had a plot to kill white people we had a lot to say to each other—about our confusion about the deep racial significance of the war between the U.S. and Viet Nam, white against non white—about our joblessness—we did want to kill but we had no plot—we had a lot to say and we still have a lot to say—about
Mark Essex—to us he is a hero—we believe he was carrying a banner—we believe he was trying to save us—we believe he saw himself as a soldier of mercy—we have a lot to say about dead Essex. (119-20).

The director clarifies these points by telling the actors, “I want the two of you to work out a meeting where you’re talking about your feelings about being out of the service, about feeling killed off by society—the frustration” (120). And real danger of being killed by their world is a matter of fact in historical records.

First, the historical context as to what the Black G.I.s. of Kennedy’s play are talking about: Essex’s disillusionment with the Navy was a reflection of nearly every Black seaman’s outward or internal rebellion. Hernon notes that “Clearly Mark Essex was a casualty of history. He was a product of the Navy’s long, unsightly record of discrimination… which had permitted over one hundred thousand Blacks to enlist during World War One but then allowed them only to work as stewards or mess attendants, a story repeated during World War Two (the rare exceptions were segregated crews)… By the time Essex enlisted, barely five percent of all Navy personnel were Black; Black officers numbered five hundred, less than one-half of one percent of an eighty-thousand man officer corps.

The explosion finally struck during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Black sailors, reflecting the militant mood of the black community, began to rebel. Fights swept the U.S. military bases and naval stations. In Vietnam, Black GIs drafted to fight in a war in which they didn’t believe were accused of blowing up—fragging—white officers. Morale disintegrated. Resistance organized and groups with names like “Black Liberation Front of the Armed Forces” were established. Sabotage
increased… The revolt of Seaman Essex was the revolt of every Black in uniform. (Hernon 53).

Attempts to ameliorate the situation in the Navy came far too late to help Essex, but not too late to explain what made him angry. Probes and reports in 1972 documented severe racial tensions in the armed forces, including signs of the existence of the Ku Klux Klan at one Naval Training Center. Essex made attempts to “organize Blacks to form a coalition to insist on equal treatment, but failed” (Tobias 85); but a year after Essex departed from the Navy, in November of 1972, the Navy promised to find new jobs for 123 Blacks who refused duty aboard the Constellation. “The strife aboard the aircraft carrier Constellation came to a head when about 80 sailors staged a sit-down strike during offshore maneuvers Nov. 3. They complained of racial discrimination in job assignments, performance ratings and administrative discharges” (Griggs 1). Tony Griggs suggests that Essex shared the fate of an “overwhelming number of cases, especially with Black veterans” where the less than honorable discharges (which Essex was given) were given unjustly. “Cleon Bennett, director for Chicago’s Concerned Veterans from Viet Nam said figures released from the Pentagon show that since 1962 some 12,500 men are released from the service with less than honorable discharges every year.” Bennett notes that a less than honorable discharge could have been slapped on for “a refusal to salute an officer or being caught with your hands in your pockets. Bennett pointed to the Department of the Navy as having the worst racial strife and said he believed Essex was an example of the results of such tension” (Griggs 1).

The impact that Essex had on his generation can be seen in the way his name was used in this context: Nixon cut many poverty programs established by President Johnson, and the whites began their migration to the suburbs, leaving blacks a continually decaying city area to dwell in.
The Black Caucus, after finally getting an audience with President Nixon, argued about a way to appeal to him not to cut poverty programs that would deeply hurt blacks. “Freshman Congressman Andrew Young, D-GA, who was Martin Luther King’s right hand man, thinks, however, that something might be accomplished if a small delegation with a small agenda were received in the oval room. “I don’t think we should go down with any demands or rhetoric,” Says Young… “I think we should just point out… the consequences of what [Nixon] is doing…I think we just ought to tell him what the cutback of these programs will mean to the poor and especially to blacks… We should talk to him about the veterans. A lot of them will be coming home with the feelings of Mark Essex… These veterans are coming home with no jobs. And there are 20,000 blacks with less than honorable discharges. What about them?” (Mary McCrory D1).

Indeed, at a memorial dinner for Martin Luther King, Mayor Richard Hatcher noted that “Everything that Dr. King did was aimed at avoiding and preventing what happened to Mark Jimmie Essex. Essex is the product of a system that continues to insist on the inferiority of its citizens, which denies opportunities to its people and refuses to face justice… We must address ourselves to these matters, or this will happen again,” and Hatcher warned of guerilla warfare impinging on American cities. “Mark Jimmie Essex turned this message on New Orleans and paid with his life.” Hatcher characterized the Black priority in America at the time as survival; he pointed out that they were no longer economically viable for exploitation and were set to be phased out just as the American Indians had been eliminated, and reminded his audience of the record of white American society when it came to the placing of ethnic groups in internment (concentration) camps. “Hatcher emphasized this was all characteristic of white society’s quest for superiority over the colored peoples of the world,” and went on to note that “an incredible
report” was submitted to President Johnson after Dr. King’s assassination suggesting a plan as to exactly how Black people could be isolated and destroyed via the use of the National Guard and internment camps. Of course the President rejected the suggestion, but the fact that someone felt free to offer the suggestion to the President, Hatcher said, “tells me something.” Hatcher said the “blame for the death of Essex and the oppression of America’s black people rests on society and the government’s mispriority of funds to defense, the space mission and other endeavors which fail to deal with social problems” (Sigale). In this article, it is evident that Essex’s death is representative of the problem of American racism, of everything that Martin Luther King, Jr. was unable to do for American society, everything that American society failed to do for itself. Essex offered his life to bring this message before the eyes of a callous world.

Essex’s act, as it appears in the larger historical bracket of white violence and black response, however, exposes in the newspaper reels excuses for police terrorism of the black community that were, in fact, all too typical. The events that precipitated Essex’s last stand by his own account (the deaths of the “two innocent brothers” that were shot down by police at Southern University at a student demonstration) were given some media spotlight by that last stand; that stand was intended to send a message that there should be some retribution for the brutality of the American system. Viewed in the context of history, this brutality is all too common and an understanding of it helps to contextualize Essex’s anger and his action in the terms of the Black people who saw Essex as a Brother and as a hero.

One of the incidents that pushed Essex to act was the formation of Giarrusso’s Felony Action Squad, and order he gave to them, in the case that they felt their lives were threatened (“shoot to kill”) (Hernon 90). In any event, the outcry from the Black community was shrill, because they heard Giarrusso’s order as meaning, “shoot to kill Black people”: “State
representative Louis Charbonnet among others denounced Giarrusso’s statement saying, “Every policeman on an ego trip will shoot someone” (Hernon 90). Another specific incident that pushed Essex to act is described in Stokely Carmichael’s commentary on the Essex affair, as recorded by the *Daily Defender*, was that it was “a clear retaliation for the two students killed at Southern.” Adrienne Kennedy, likewise, includes in her itemized list of deaths that surrounded Mark Essex the “Death at Southern University” (128). Carmichael’s analysis here was supported by Essex’s letter sent to WWL-TV, where Essex spelled out his intentions before his last stand. The letter said: “Africa greets you… on Dec. 31, 1972 the Downtown New Orleans Police Dept will be under attack… Reason—many. But the deaths of two innocent brothers will be avenged. And many others…” (qtd in Hernon 92). When “Essex climbed up to the hotel roof, Carmichael said, “he knew he wasn’t coming down.” Carmichael commended Essex for using “scientific thought to guide his emotions” (*Daily* Jan. 30). Some of the “scientific thought” Carmichael probably meant was, among the writings of sociologists and psychologists read by Essex, the volume titled *Black Rage*, written by two psychiatrists, which was found in Essex’s room. “The book sounded a grim prediction for the white race—eliminate the cause of the black man’s swelling rage or face a cataclysm. “They have had all they can stand. They will be harried no more. Turning from their tormentors, they are filled with rage… if blacks are often frightened, consider what frightens them and consider what happens when they feel cornered, when there is no further lie one can believe, when one sees that he is permanently cast as the victim, and when finally the sleeping giant wakes and turns upon his tormentors.”… The book ended with the authors wondering aloud what “grotesque atrocity” it would take to galvanize the black masses into battle” (Hernon 70-71).
Adrienne Kennedy’s play about Essex, and dedicated to him and to his family, rings true to the same notes as those of The Rev. Curtis E. Burrell, Jr., writes, in *The Daily Defender*, that “The Essex affair… was like some superior being from outer space dropping in and then leaving, appearing to deliver a message to a particular social situation at a particular time in its history…This was a Word which comes saying that if certain conditions are not met in the moral sources which are impregnable by any policing agency, if America does not REPENT—the judgment of Sodom and Gomorah shall be it[s] lot.” Indeed, Kennedy’s Essex play ends with a Biblical passage that embodies Essex as one who prepares the way of the Lord and makes his ways straight; her emphasis on the need for racist repentance for societal deception and racism carries much of the same sentiment as Burrell’s. Burrell sums up what the Black news articles hint at in undertones and overtones: the incompetence of the police [and reinforcements from the U.S. armed forces]: “For 18 hours the New Orleans police and the U.S. had fought an imaginary enemy, killing and wounding each other in the process.” And Burrell sums up the matter in regard to Jimmy Essex: “While in the Navy at the San Diego Naval Base, “Jimmy,” in his high-level of sensitivity about justice and racial exploitations, came to be adamantly confronted by acts of open, unrestrained and unredressed racism. The message of his act says: “We will all learn to live together as brothers or we shall die together as fools.”

And Burrell also strikes home at a problem that would be addressed years later by Ronald W. Walters in *White Nationalism / Black Interests*: the institution of the death penalty for offenses that Blacks are often pegged for committing. This “solution” was suggested, as Burrell notes, by James O. Eastland, D-Mississippi, who proposed “a bill for making the death penalty possible for attacks on police and firemen” after the Mark Essex incident. Again, events
surrounding the treatment given the Mark Essex case key into larger issues involving the Black community, especially the poor, urban Black communities.

Black newspaper writers explain the harassment by federal authorities and a hostile police department headed by a paranoid Clarence Giarrusso. Bobby Gillard for the Herald-Dispatch, in an article titled “Conspiracy Witch Hunt Plagues New Orleans,” notes that “Things are far from being over here for Black people in general and for Black organizations in particular as the FBI and other agencies have responded to last month’s two-day gun battle with New Orleans police by flooding the Black community with investigative teams.” Gillard points out Giarrusso’s irresponsible theorizing to the press, and the press’s irresponsible publication of his theories: “New Orleans Police Chief Clarence Giarrusso has attempted to pin the actions of the 23-year-old Essex to the New Orleans Urban Guerrilla Group and the Deacons for Defense and Justice. The theory was echoed nationwide in a column by Jack Anderson which quoted law enforcement files.”

William Earl Berry similarly points up the “verbal gun battle” waged against the Black community on the part of police and other elected officials, who claimed that the “sniper(s) were part of a “conspiracy” that was bent on killing either policemen or whites… Louisiana Atty. Gen. William J. Guste Jr., even before the crisis was over, said he wanted the federal government to investigate the incident and other disturbances in New Orleans’ recent past, including a shooting between police and Black Panthers two years ago… Guste said that the underground suicide group he believes is behind the shooting was intended to “cause the people to be dissatisfied, to bring race against race, Black against white… to cause internal chaos” (14). Berry cites Louisiana NAACP Field Director Harvey Britton’s statement that “It has become the tendency of the authorities of the state and city to feel that every time a Black person is involved in some
type of activity which costs lives or in other words disrupts the community, that they’re engaged in a conspiracy” (14). Berry closes his article with the observation that

> For whatever reasons, throughout the lengthy Howard Johnson’s Motor Lodge encounter, the police and public alike were all too ready to believe widely-exaggerated talks of violence—for example, the allegation that snipers were in other parts of New Orleans.

> At best, reckless and uncontrolled information can only fan white fears of armed Black revolution and Black fears of white repression and contribute to a hardening of attitudes. (15)

What concrete fears lay behind these attitudes? These were articulated by Bill Rouselle, a Black and former deputy director of New Orleans’ Human Relations Committee: “I’m concerned with indiscriminate retaliation—individual policemen who are going to overreact.” Just a few days prior to Rouselle’s statement, during the shooting, a Black man attempting to get through the police barricades had the ill luck to reach into his pocket at the wrong time and was shot (“New Race Tension Feared” 5).

The state of Essex’s fellow G.I.s. feelings (of helplessness—there have been arrests merely for meeting in small groups--and of the sense that a racist society was going to kill them) as reflected in Kennedy’s play are analyzed in Robert Sengstacke, in “A Leaderless Revolution,” in which he points out that out of the Black Power movement, a militant and revolutionary spirit has been born among the young people of the day, even though great numbers failed to join the parties associated with the movements; common features of the generation of the young people of Mark Essex’s generation are a revolutionary spirit and a lot of hostility for authority.
Sengstacke notices a gradation in the way the thought of the young has moved: “The direction traveled first from nonviolence, to talking out against racist oppression and then to doing what the latter talked about.” The reason why the Panthers could not gain a constituency was that the young people saw that wearing a uniform of some party was a good way to attract the attention of the police. “So today we have people like Mark Essex and groups like De Mau Mau, the Wethermen and the current Black Liberation Army, all of whom have been operating secretly without fanfare and publicity from the media—until they are caught, that is… As long as our government refuses to recognize the legitimate complaints of all Americans, we can expect an increase in the revolutionary and destructive spirit among people in America and throughout the world” (8). To very much the same point, Troy Duster points out that Blacks might respond to the white system on an individual level, like Mark Essex, when they feel that they cannot change the system by legitimate collective protest (Graham 2). Nikki Giovanni also theorizes, a war has been going on. The Panthers were wiped out. Those were nice young men, by any standard. Mark Clark and Fred Hampton were in bed when the police came in to shoot them… They were just young men trying to respond to a problem. They can infiltrate the Panthers and they did, because they were organized, they put on their berets and their jackets, they said we are the Panthers and this is our program. ... There is really no such thing as a Black Liberation Army. There are people they have trained to be their killers who are now back to kill them. (13-16)

Giovanni is, of course, talking of Essex—who made a decision as an individual in his society “to fight back,” in Giovanni’s terms. These terms are not simple, but very complex: “I could
never believe that having an organization was going to cause a revolution,” Giovanni goes on to say. “America is known for absorbing and infiltrating. One thing the papers keep saying about this so called Black Liberation Army is that the Establishment can’t infiltrate it and, you know, they can’t infiltrate it because it does not exist.” Essex in his single, individual decision defeated the entire machine of FBI, in effect—an individual decision cannot be infiltrated and dismantled. And that individual decision to fight back was perhaps the most threatening to the Establishment.

It should be emphasized that, as opposed to “all whites,” Essex’s very location for his last stand was selected with a view of firing at a concrete representative of the Establishment: The top of the Howard Johnson hotel, directly across from Duncan Plaza in New Orleans. Ronald Tobias observes that it is easy to see why Essex chose this place for his final showdown: “Directly across Duncan Plaza is the state office building; next to it is the state supreme court building; and behind it, still within the line of fire from the Howard Johnson’s, is city hall. More than any other place in the state, this area represents the seat of local and state power. In choosing the Howard Johnson’s, Essex had targeted the… system he felt was responsible for his repression” (116).

An additional point that should be brought to the fore is the contrast between the image of Essex’s mother as represented in the obscene clipping read by the directors in Kennedy’s play, and the voice of Essex’s mother is in concordance with Nikki Giovanni’s after the death of her son. Giovanni states that Essex’s action exemplifies the statement being made by her generation to white society “that if you want to play Nazi, we will not play Jew… And our young men are at the forefront of this battle… I know that if you stand in here beating the living shit out of me that the only way I can stop you is to beat you back. Frederick Douglass said it much more eloquently—even if I lose, I have hurt you. Even if I lose, you will think twice” (13-17). Essex, by implication, has given white society pause to think twice. Nellie Essex, Essex’s mother, said
after his death, “If this terrible thing will awaken white America to the injustices that blacks suffer, some good will come of it” (8-A). In short, Essex’s mother’s attitude and image was far more consistent with Giovanni’s mentality than that of the woman who prayed that her son had strayed from the way of the Lord in a too-conveniently timed coincidence with Essex’s actions against the Establishment (which was not the Lord, but an image indicative of racist injustice). In Nikki Giovanni’s discussion with Margaret Walker about Mark Essex, Giovanni says that she respects Essex because he was enough of a person to make a decision and to act on his decision for himself. “I can’t believe that Mark Essex climbed on top of that Howard Johnson’s because he hated. I cannot believe that and his mother won’t say that. She said, “My son was tired--” “Of all the trouble,” Walker responded. “My son will be a man.”” Giovanni is referring to Nellie Essex’s statement that her son did not hate the white man, but hated what the white man stood for, “the white system” (“Sniper’s Mother” 8-A). Roy Wilkins also states that “His mother said [Essex] wanted “justice” and “somebody” to pay attention to us. She also said, “Young people like Mark won’t accept the treatment that our generation accepted” (14).

The abject idiocy of the tone of the clipping that pretty much represents the sort of presentation of Essex’s last hours and actions that could have been chosen by a placating conservative writer or, more likely a white journalist, conforming to the perspective of the white mainstream, is made apparent by the dismissal and the contradictory paranoia from pieces from the mainstream papers and from the perspective of mainstream biographers of Essex’s last stand (that is, on one hand, Essex is dismissed as a personal failure who acted alone out of frustrations that were unique to his inability to function in society, and on the other is a rise of paranoia that Essex was representative of a wide-scale Black uprising against the brutality of racist society, particularly that of racist law enforcement [the contradiction is that if the cool assumption that
Essex acted alone is the official narrative, there would be no need for such paranoia in regard to the fear that he did not act alone].

The extent to which many newspapers (as well as one of Essex’s biographers, Leyton) go to in order to peg Essex as a dullard is truly reminiscent of the treatment given Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas by the media and the court witnesses at Bigger’s trial—Bigger is constantly called a dullard when he is not being demonized; similarly, a quote from a clergyman is used many times by the press in which Essex’s picking off of policemen who were coming at him is hailed as “demonic” (The Birmingham News) while several newspapers note that Essex was a “college dropout” and one editorial states that Essex’s shifting from one college to another somehow demonstrates that his personality is unstable and therefore the Navy should not be blamed for his suicidal last stand. Ernest Cuneo, for instance, complains that the nation’s leading journals charge that Essex was “A-O.K. until he enlisted in the U.S. Navy. The clear innuendo is that his experience in the U.S. Navy turned Mark Essex into a man killer, with the usual overtone that the U.S. Navy, therefore, bears a considerable burden of the guilt… It is utter nonsense. The fact is that the Navy detected what Emporia should have detected long before… There were some clues to the “character and behavior disorders” for which Essex was discharged from the service long before he entered it. He was a drop-out at three Kansas institutions of higher learning… True to form, he went AWOL in the Navy.” Cuneo fails to explain, of course, why there was no change in Essex’s behavior at the point when he entered and left the Kansas colleges and there was a severe change in behavior by the time he left the Navy (he was the same cheerful person his mother had always known when he entered the Navy, after he had left the last Kansas institution of higher learning, and by the time he left the Navy he was moody, withdrawn and hated White people).
The words of New Orleans Superintendent of Police Clarence Giarrusso perhaps most explicitly embody the condemnation of conservative white society in the case of Mark Essex: “Essex’s footnote in history should state clearly that he murdered… without justifiable cause or purpose; that society did not fail him, but that he failed society; that if society inflicted any indignities upon him, such indignities were miniscule by comparison; that he sacrificed human beings to his god of revenge” (qtd in Hernon 282). To a similar point, at least one article in the New Orleans paper the *Times-Picayune* emphasizes Essex’s supposed lack of cause, including an article showcasing Essex’s former girlfriend (Lydia Willis, nicknamed “Pokey”), which ends with her statement (nudged into her mouth by the author of the article) “*But the thoughts of many are expressed best*” by “Pokey” when she said sadly: “I’m still trying to figure out why, why did he do it… but I guess I’ll be trying to figure that out for the rest of my life” (Davis 5; italics mine). The implication that Essex’s action was without justification can be as subtle as the title given to an article with information rehearsed through many newspapers: “Parents pin responsibility for sniper-son on society” (*Salina Journal*). The information in the article contains the same statements from Essex’s family that are in all the papers that contain the information from their interviews: that he was harassed in the Navy until he was fed up; that “he returned home to think about the injustices a black man receives in the service… “It was just these little things one on top of the other that made Jimmy do what he did,” Mrs Essex said” (12). However, the editor of this particular paper chose a title for this article that casts a particular interpretative aspersion on this article: “pin responsibility” infers that responsibility is being relegated by Essex’s parents, rather than being justly bestowed on its allegedly rightful place.

The delay in settling the verdict as to how many snipers were in the Howard Johnson (Giarrusso would go to the press with statements to the point that it would be impossible to ever
really know whether or not Essex had assistance from at least one other person on his death mission for months after the event) “encourages white apprehensions that one or two other black revolutionary triggermen are still at large, it is believed that Mayor Landrieu himself wants the conspiracy theory spiked by the authorities. But those authorities, while keeping public silence, still credit contrary reports by some of their men that Essex was not alone” (4). On the subject of public unrest, Black leaders in New Orleans “fumed” over the failure of the police and civic authorities to rule out the existence of any sort of conspiracy on the part of Blacks to harm Whites once and for all in the wake of the Essex affair (Evans and Novak 4). And, outrageously, Giarrusso’s account seems to have been the one that has been harkened to by Essex’s biographers: Peter Hernon and Elliott Leyton both seem to believe that the Republic of New Africa (RNA), Black Panthers and Deacons for Defense and Justice were veritable threats. Bobby Gillard points out that Giarrusso’s information was outdated at best at the time that he spewed it to the papers: “Neither of the [Urban Guerrilla Group or the Deacons for Defense and Justice have been] active in years, their presence having all but vanished in the local Black community. The Urban Guerrilla Group is said to have been stockpiling weapons, yet its Jackson Ave. headquarters has been closed for months. The Deacons… have been virtually disbanded. They came to prominence during the years of the violent civil rights demonstrations, when they reserved the right to armed self-defense to protect unarmed demonstrators from the violent onslaughts of angry white racists… Organized activity of any militant sort has been virtually nonexistent in the New Orleans Black community. The only local observer who could detect any evidence would have to have been working from outdated and exaggerated espionage reports.”

An example of the use of subtlety, appropriate in tone to the paranoid whispers among racist whites in this social mess, along with the basic information typically contained in the
official story—that is, what was usually included by most of the associated press stories on the part of the minor newspapers—occurs, this time in The San Antonio Light’s treatment of the story of Mark Essex’s death. The basic information of Essex’s departure from the Navy on the grounds of “unsuitability” and his death on the roof of the Howard Johnson Motel appears in the article, but the fact that Essex told his pastor that “Christianity was the white man’s religion” is emphasized by inclusion in the second paragraph of the story and the erroneous inference that Essex was involved in a Black militant group is hinted at in the title, “Sniper Was Black Militant.” There is a reason why Roy Wilkins emphasizes that “No one has been able, as yet, to make out a case for conspiracy to kill whites or policemen. And for good reason: There is no conspiracy and never has been even at the height of the hard core Black Panther party. The Panthers now stress ballots instead of bullets” (14). The inference made by the editor of the San Antonio Light is left as an inference, but is a dangerous one, as demonstrated by the fact that similar fears of a Black militant cult out to kill whites sprung up in the context of the Zebra killings in San Francisco, a year after Mark Essex’s death. A dangerous one, because the belief that a Black militant cult was behind the Zebra killings led to tactics Blacks contested as “unconstitutional and immoral” (Brown 2) on the part of the San Francisco Police Department on its manhunt for the Zebra sniper. Protest of these tactics only led State Atty. Gen. Evelle Younger to state that the tactics were “reasonable under the circumstances” even though it was admitted that “the confidence of the people has been undermined” and that this “provides criminals with an excuse” (“Younger OKs Tactics” 2).

The same newspaper (Salina Journal) adds to potential hysteria concerning additional snipers on the loose by making a report that would feed this mindset: the owner of a store Essex patronized observed that that he had a cut on his hand when he bought a razor before he made his
fatal run for the Howard Johnson; according to the reporter of the article and, apparently, the chief of pathology at Charity Hospital, Dr. Monroe Samuels, “The bullets chopped [Essex] up so much that [Dr. Samuels] had a difficult time checking the body for recent cuts,” and were therefore “unable to find anything that would go along with the theory of a healing cut from a week before.” If it wasn’t Essex who was gashed at the warehouse, who was it?” (15). While the Salina Journal was not based in New Orleans, its catering to the popular hysterical frenzy was still no little matter—its voice echoed in a milieu in which there were rumors of a national conspiracy of suicidal Black people bent on killing Whites and law officials on such scale that Roy Wilkins attempted to lay them to rest: “As social conditions worsened, indeed there were snipers and all kinds of other attacks on police officers. But there is no evidence at all of any national conspiracy, unless you mean the conspiracy of all blacks to fight racism” (Delaney 19).

It is in this social context that the Daily Defender engages with the effective dynamic on the part of whites whenever any Black person is unable to take racist humiliation (or rather, in effect, with white fears that Black people will stop accepting racist humiliations). On the subject of conspiracy (and at the same time in an apparent attempt to soothe white hysteria—while cleverly pointing out its cause [that is, the actions of those with racist mentalities]), a Daily Defender editorial stated, “The sniper incident in New Orleans, which everyone deplores, has revived rumors that a nation-wide conspiracy with a network of underground connections is unfolding… Essex’s experience in the Navy so embittered him that he developed a psychotic compulsion that led to his uncontrollable hostility against American society.” The editorial, while stating that Essex’s need for social change led to his action, even grants the possibility that his frustration led to his tragic end (thus engaging with the official narrative along with an attempt at a contextual correction for it). Its conclusion, while begging the important question as to why there haven’t
been more Essex type incidents, uses the characterization of how Essex’s experience in the Navy affected him, as it is typically characterized by the mainstream / official narrative, along with some language that whites would approve of (apparently to coat the bitter pill of the simple truth that whites are paranoid—and their own racist behavior often justifies that paranoia):

With segregation, discrimination and poverty making a dreadful impact on the soul of the black man, it is a wonder that more black men don’t lose their sanity. Every time a demented black man goes berserk, his behavior is interpreted in some white circles as a dark conspiracy against white folk coming to the surface. It is a phobic fear that reveals the depth of the sickness in the society in which we dwell. (“The sniper killing”)

This historical context and conflicting narratives regarding Essex allow Adrienne Kennedy’s treatment of the subject to be fully understood—from the need for the ex-servicemen to fear arrest for meeting in small groups, to the dangerous idiocy of the mainstream white media (the abject bulk of which is arguably characterized by the “larger than life” projector, intruding into the studio space of the rehearsal—and which is appropriate in terms of size to characterize the amount of repetition of the official story produced by the mainstream media; while the projectionist does not speak, the remainder of the cast of the play speak against this official account repeatedly; this view of this official account and its repeatedly produced hysteria is a way to explain the structure and the need of Kennedy’s cast in this play to create their account, both of Essex and of how he has been hacked up by guns and words), to the pain of the everyday grind faced by Black people attempting to live in a racist society. The recap (via Stokeley Carmichael above, in particular) as to the rationality of Essex’s actions and what triggered them
explains the play’s determination to humanely and fairly explain the meaning of Essex’s actions and demonstrate how the world should understand of their cause. The contemporary voices that support Kennedy’s interpretation of Essex (Burrell’s demand for repentance and his interpretation of Essex’s message, for example) complement Kennedy’s use of the Biblical passage in regard to Essex and her description of Essex’s goals and situational contexts within the terms of Luke 3-6. The insistence of the play (both in terms of its description and physical representation of the 23 year old Black man who died on the roof of the New Orleans Howard Johnson motel) is explicable in the face of the masses of misinformation on the part of writers who describe Essex in accordance with the official media’s dismissal of him. Kennedy seems to state that her characters, herself, are with Essex, in terms of signification and understanding; her complex and masterful use of signifiers employed as the deception Essex faced every day present Essex’s abject, nullified Other, the white racist’s empty, obscenely smiling Other, so that her audience is also aware of the intrusive presence of the projector, which, while its slides can be manipulated in terms of angles, still present the gaze Kennedy wants to project, regardless as to whether it makes some of her audiences very uncomfortable in the presence of what they themselves may feel forced to reject as having anything to do with their own clean and proper selves. While Kennedy is said to primarily speak to a human experience instead of a specific contemporary political background, it is hard to believe that argument can retain its somewhat simplistic integrity, as it sits, in the light of a close reading of Kennedy’s work; while the humanity of the New Orleans police that were allowed to “shoot to kill” (Heron) (a line mentioned in the items of the play that are read off by the directors [126], in the manner of the itemized Death at Southern, Death of Martin Luther King Jr., whose weighty explanation appears in the light of its historical context) certainly is a concern in regard as to what we can expect
from our fellow humans, that concern is hardly exclusive of the fact that Kennedy simultaneously questions what man can expect from his fellow man and portrays what Essex did expect and what he did in his attempt to “set things straight.”

It seems appropriate to close this section with words from Essex’s mother (whose gaze Kennedy’s audience is confronted with in the beginning of her play); and a comparative statement from his sister (which, in terms of Kennedy’s work, has a weight that extends through and beyond Kennedy—certainly this brother has opted to be his brother’s keeper). Essex’s mother stated, “Jimmy wanted to be a man. This was his philosophy—he wanted to be a man.” Asked to comment on reports that some young blacks are now considering her son a martyr she said, “Jimmy wasn’t doing this to be a martyr. He didn’t want to be a hero. He just wanted to change things.” To a similar point, Jimmy’s sister, Penny Fox, noted that “When Jimmy went into the Navy he really saw what life, the world, was all about… He saw that white people control the world and that blacks were being oppressed by the white man. He didn’t like society the way it is. He wanted to change things. The Navy was Jimmy’s own private hell” (qtd. in Hernon 274). A news story, which seems to act as a frame that demonstrates what Essex’s world (and/or that of his brothers and sisters) could be like outside the Navy, provided by the Daily Defender’s description of Essex, is worth mentioning in the context of Kennedy’s use of brotherhood and degrading circumstances. The Black Daily Defender ran the story regarding Essex on the same page as a story about “3 children bitten by rats”: apparently the children, residents of Chicago’s Westside ghetto, were attacked in their sleep by these rats (recall Kennedy’s inspiration for Rat’s Mass was a dream in which she saw bloody rats). The landlord refused to fix their deplorable living conditions. Pictures of the children frame the picture of the map of New Orleans, on which is situated “the snipers in the burning hotel.” Kennedy’s use of
animal imagery, in her descriptions of racial abjection, can, in the context of the Black media’s use of the Essex story, be viewed as more concrete than merely abstract images of nightmare—that is, the poverty faced by Black people and the abject disregard for their poverty (and the abject evidence of it) may demonstrate that other Black people, too, felt that their society was consuming and/or killing them (just as Kennedy’s G.I.s. do); the beastliness created by racism (and the never-ending feeling of hopelessness such poverty and racist indifference to it can create) crops up in news stories in the form of actual beasts that have orally assaulted children (on the same news page on which Essex’s attempt to “set things straight” is represented). The point is that Kennedy’s use of beastly images to display racist categorization (and ensuing exclusion and death) may certainly not be unique to her lexicon, in her addition to the picture that Black voices created in 1973.
SECTION II: THE SPACE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE RACIAL ABJECT AND ITS INTRUSIONS
CHAPTER III
AFTER KENNEDY’S RAT’S MASS AND ESSEX’S AMERICA:
THE ABJECION OF THE COLONIAL OTHER

Kennedy uses animal imagery to show the infectious nature and socio-behavioral horrors that occur when one group of people find a fantasy to justify the devouring of the other. Hence, it is easy to extend this argument to include imagery used by Kennedy that is less diametrically subhuman superficially, but perhaps more frightening and more threatening to the boundaries of the targeted than the perhaps more obvious horrors of reduction to a corpse (in actuality or in terms of anonymity) or to a less than human creature without hope of redemption after being induced to require absolution of a crime by the very person who denies him ritualized forgiveness. Degeneration under the white societal gaze can appear in ways that are figurative and yet visualized according to colonial tropes applied to subjects under colonial regimes, and which appear in synchrony with the cathexion of drive affects (which are embodied by the images often employed by colonial tropes for the purpose of bestializing the would be subjected under [internal or external] colonial regimes—such as myths concerning the abject and irrational behavior of would be victims, who have been imagined by colonials to possess behavioral features of vampires and / or appear as cannibals). The organization of the drive affects, in Kennedy’s work, works to demonstrate that the use of the scopic drive (which often emerges in vampire imagery), as well as the irruption of the oral drive (which can be associated with bizarre acts of cannibalism), works in the abject of Kennedy’s literature to demonstrate the reason for and actual designation of the vampire / cannibal imagery. The colonial figures, under the influence of their own fantasies and drives (under, ultimately, of course, the demand of their own
colonial Other), often end up as the very monsters whose images their respective ideological systems teach them to project onto what they believe is their colonial other; in reality, the erotic need to exploit, and see themselves as exploiting / dominating (in very personal and intimate ways—takers of the bodies of the exploited) appears in the formulation of their respective drives: Kennedy presents the physical spectacle of colonial subjects in the eroticized grip of the aim of their drives, directed at objects (which to them are object a) with an intensity that often results in their submergence in the death drive (or, at best, a position which is for them a state of death—social death, for example). In The Ohio State Murders and Dramatic Circle, the physical symptoms of pollution by images indicative of a racial abject (supportive of the white social symbolic) do not appear until the audience has anticipated (along with the respective protagonists) that something is very wrong for some time before the racist behavior manifests in an action. Since colonial literature (including Fanon’s) is rife with the concepts of the vampire and cannibalism (on the parts of the symbolic of everyone involved, but moreso from the perspective of the people being used as flesh-food [as opposed to the people who may even feel they have devoured their own lives with their victims in order to profit off of the spectacle that they create, yet are still compelled to use others in such debased ways]), these themes fit nicely into a discussion of the later Kennedy plays, when examined to view through them the colonial abject from a psychoanalytic perspective. And since Kennedy and Parks use similar thematic allusions while employing the tactics of literature of the abject, they provide a contrast as to how each generation writes its boundaries as well as a comparison of tactics that resist colonial essentialism (or what Bhabha and his critics may term “fixity”). The anxiety created by the impingement of the colonial system on the boundaries of those who become the unfortunate objects of the aim of the drives of the colonialists will also be examined (since the presence of
the abject is visible when it intrudes on a given subject’s boundaries); I provide an analysis of vampire / cannibal imagery in Kennedy and Parks’ work, first, to show how these authors demonstrate these drives and their aim, as well as the contrasting realities of the subjects that have been made the objects of these drives (from the perspective of the colonialists). Also, I show the operation of partial drives that function in the temporary or partial idealization that these colonialists make of their colonial objects, before degrading them into corpses for dissection (like the Venus, for example): Kristeva demonstrates, in effect, that “the genital fear aroused by women” (162) (this formulation also works for the fear / debasement projected onto objectified colonial subjects) can be assuaged temporarily by “the unleashing of partial drives [voyeurist-exhibitionist, oral-anal]”[162]). As per my above example, the fantasies that direct the aim of the Docteur’s drives, of which the Venus is his object, are part of his colonial Other and, in a contradictory, fragmented sense, his object a; his drive aims are divided between the demands of his colonial society and his object a as a complex subject whose position, like the one he temporarily bestows on Venus, can invent a style that makes it possible for the Venus to be a potential “charming wife” with “charming hands” (which he ends up dissecting with the rest of her, in the end). Even while contemplating dissecting her, he references “her charming hands,” and says, even as he abandons her to her fate, “She would have made a charming wife” (to which his sidekick, speaking as the voice of his colonial Other as it were, answers, “She’ll make a charming corpse!”). The Docteur’s eroticized, and voyeurist, exhibition of the Venus to his students and his positioning of himself as the husband of a charming wife with charming hands are, rather frighteningly for both the Venus and the audience, the Docteur’s suspension of his colonial Other’s horror of the Venus’s Otherness (e.g. earlier in the play, when the Venus is displayed with the chained dispossessed as a circus exhibit, an old man collapses and dies upon
receiving a feather from the hand of this debased, caged female from whom he cannot look away) and his stylization of her as a figure that could desirably (if abstractly—the Docteur, after all, presents her in the frame of an exhibit for his students) function as an object whose stylized features are what he “really” wants, as opposed to the colonial prestige of being the one to dissect her. As Kristeva would put it, the Venus, at least for a while, gets the position of being a “pure form” for the sensualist voyeur Docteur, “a beauty that lets itself be conquered only by the gaze, one made up of lines and muscles, rhythm and health” (166); the Venus is quite conscious, it seems, of both positions she holds for the Docteur—an object for display, for the gaze, and something that can be consumed instead of kissed. Parks gives the Venus a knowledge of these positions that floats, in a meta-textual way, above any comment on her part about her ending, in Venus’s monologues: The Venus shows off to herself a future in which she can “dust her buttocks with gold,” and performs a monologue concerning “a brief history of chocolate” (she has been eating a form of chocolate that has, for her, a sinister connotation—the nipples of Venus; considering the colonial consumption of her body, her monologue can suggest a knowledge that something of this sort is possible for people as consumable as chocolate in the colonial world). The Venus’ perspective as to her potentially positive fate, however, parallels the split drive aim of the Docteur—who can see himself positioned with a charming wife, who is a perfect specimen to show off (much in the sense of the show of Celine’s ballerinas; the writer of the abject Kristeva has selected has drive aims that mirror the Docteur’s, in that he can admire the female body when it is an instrument of style and find it non-threatening in the role of wife—the voyeurist-exhibitionist Celine puts his horror of the maternal aside to venerate a wife figure, whom, “whenever she may care to…share my bread and butter and my furtive destiny. If she is no longer beautiful… the more’s the pity, we’ll manage somehow, I’ve kept so much of her
beauty with me still, so warm, so much alive, that I’ve enough for both of us” (qtd. in Kristeva 163). The similarity between the positions and drives of Celine and the Baron Docteur demonstrates a commonality between their respective significance of their type and function—they describe two people with drive organizations that are governed by aims that fit their varying views of their positions within social Others that, while pernicious and, at least on Celine’s end, acknowledged as abject and empty (while the Baron Docteur appears at times to believe, by inference, he can find some way in which the Venus Hottentot can be accepted by his Other as his wife as opposed to his object for dissection), are displayed as such in the eyes of both Kristeva and Parks. Parks (and, of course, as I demonstrate below, Kennedy) only also shows the perspective of the person who stands to be an object or a wife, thus denuding the whimsicality of the drive aim of the Docteur (that is, he apparently does not have to consume the Venus, in effect); like Kennedy, Parks demonstrates both the empty, abject social Other of the racist / colonial subject in the light of the awful gaze of his intended victim, and, accordingly, in the light of that intended victim’s struggle—on whatever terms or by whatever means—to retain the power of signification / the ability to live as a subject (who, unwilling to be merely a victim but someone who may be able to exert her agency to the point at which she can “dust her buttocks with gold” is all the more humane and sympathetic in her struggle against the stranglehold of the abjection colonialism creates [in quite physical demonstrations in both Kennedy and Parks—in Kennedy, the voice of the abject racist results in people turned into rats and the bloody bodies of what were children; in Parks, the result of the colonial ideology appears as the dissected body of the Venus, whose last plea is for her jailer and betrayer not to watch her die {that is, she has been aware of her role as object on display and asks that she at least have privacy in the act of dying}}).
Laura Wright, in her study of the meaning of the vampire imagery in Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Venus* and Adrienne Kennedy’s *Dramatic Circle*, misses some important points that can be gleaned through a discussion of the vampire in these plays with insights supplied by Homi K. Bhabha and Samira Kawash in mind. My objections to Wright’s analysis (and my choice of her analysis for this framing purpose) are on the grounds that, by focusing on the effect of the colonial regime, she describes this effect precisely as having the effect that the figures that represent aspects of the colonial regime in the plays can attempt (but fail to achieve). A result of the fact that she does not consider that the processes through which a colonial regime asserts itself are unstable is that she discusses what can be, at best, the superficial results accomplished by that regime, and not the use of these surfaces by Parks and Kennedy to discuss their very construction. In other words, Parks and Kennedy show not simply what colonials do, but what they attempt and fail to do in a permanent fashion. Laura Wright’s article’s failings are employed as an example precisely because of the inclination on the part of too many critics to merely demonstrate the way abject regimes are deconstructed in their recognition by the authors in question and it is too commonplace to go from sympathizing with the harm done to colonial subjects to reducing them to mere victims, on the part of too many critics, as I have argued with Kennedy’s work as a case in point.

The colonial regime is unstable because its assertion requires, according to Bhabha, a transparent universality under which the specific attributes of the colonial regime pose themselves as representative of the many instead of the few. The instability of the colonial system lies in within its assertion: for example, its tools, such as the English Book, can be separated from the transparent meanings that they are supposed to represent, and exposed as precisely the tools used to enforce these meanings. Once the qualifiers attached to the concept of
a universal that is really English are removed from these signs (e.g. the English Book), the book can be used as the native sees fit; the doubling, or the multiplication of the image the colonial regime uses to represent itself with, is required by the colonial regime, and is, simultaneously, its source of instability: to follow this example, the many copies of the Book that are demanded can be used in ways divorced from the meaning the Book was intended to have (“Signs Taken For Wonders”). Thus, by stating that the function of the vampire (which has come to represent, according to Wright, the colonialist), is to transform its victim into its double, Wright dismisses the ways that the double itself does not stay where it was placed. This allows Wright to make statements such as “Suzanne mirrors both Kennedy and Lucy, representing the colonized person” (77); as I point out below, Suzanne is placed in the role of Lucy by Dr. Freudenberger, but this placement does not entail her acceptance of that role. On the contrary, Kennedy can show that the action of doubling oneself in vampirical fashion can bring about a result similar to those Bhabha describes for hybridity: it can question the modifiers that identify the entity that attempted to double itself in the first place by taking on a sign (or one of the aspects of the signs) of the double, while altering the meanings this double possessed when it served as a representative symbol (just as the English Book bore the representation of the English as civilized and enlightened and was transformed, in Bhabha’s account, to simply a book that was given to the natives by someone else). To a similar effect, Kawash points out that the humanity of the ruling class of a colonial system is defined by the non-humannity of its colonized victims; however, like Bhabha, Kawash resists reducing this dynamic to a war between cultures: rather the violence of decolonization breaks through the reality as the system of the colonizers knows it (while it is necessary “that there be some reality it is not necessary that it be this reality”[Kawash 245]); the threat of this decolonization (or “terrorism” in the sense that the terrorist resists the
system and not what the system represents itself as: the transparent good and orderly world) exists precisely because Western hegemony defines itself against the continual “non-humanity” of its victims--quite simply, the “‘terrorist’ who confronts Western hegemony with the threat of total destruction that--because it has been produced in Western hegemony--can never be contained or controlled” (Kawash 240). The instability of this system emerges from precisely the world that the system wishes to present as the true state of affairs--when the “native” repeats the question that is necessitated by a system that assumes his / her non-humanity, the “native” presents the reality of this system with an unsupportable challenge: When faced with “a systematic negation of… all attributes of [the native’s] humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: “In reality, who am I?” (Fanon qtd in Kawash 246). This question, “who am I,” begged by the system but posed to the system, is necessarily a contradiction of what the system wishes to be assumed as reality--how can a “non-human” pose questions of human identity? Kawash’s analysis, then, compliments Bhabha’s: the terms of the colonial system are contested precisely within the world that the terms presuppose (not between two cultures, primarily--hybridity challenges the colonial system, which relies on it). This brings me to another oversight on the part of Laura Wright: by taking the “vampiric copy” as actually successfully formed as such, Wright slips into the error that what Kawash is saying, in Kawash’s example of the use of the vampire in Fanon, is that the “new humanity” that will emerge from decolonization “is a simulacrum instead of a vampiric copy” (Wright 77). Kawash addresses vampiric copies as simulacra when she discusses the instance of a vampire in Fanon. A patient’s dream (that his mother was killed by a French soldier, and that he killed a settler woman that was the wife of a colonialist, but that a woman who Fanon thought was his mother, the settler woman, comes in multiple bodies to ask for his blood; his mother’s blood is
irretrievably lost [Kawash 248]) amounts to blood being passed as “a currency to which continual claims of ownership are being made; and yet, as currency, the blood must continually circulate between the solider, the settlers and the soldier’s mother. This promiscuous flow of blood stages a collapse of proper corporeal boundaries, threatening the solidity of the body with blood that will not stay in place” (Kawash 249). The commodification demanded of the colonialized subject (s/he takes part in the amorphous landscape, that is then exploited by the colonialist [or, in other words, made into currency]) is in itself a simulacrum--a copy with no original. Reading this example of the vampire in Fanon precisely as a simulacrum and not a “vampiric copy” disconcerts the notion that the colonialist system can literally, copy itself: it can employ natives in a manner that resembles the use of currency, but the recognition that it does this is akin to Bhabha’s discussion of the separation of the sign from the symbol. The colonialist world can project an image of itself, but its actions (and tools, such as the book) can be separated from that image; the use of the native as a form of capital does not mean that the colonialist world is reality (as opposed to the colonialist’s reality), that this is what the native, in fact, is.

In two plays by Adrienne Kennedy, *Dramatic Circle* and *Ohio State Murders*, and Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Venus*, I discuss the use of vampire imagery in tandem with the process of un-fixing of the contradictory reality of the colonialist world. In Parks’ *Red Letter Plays*, I discuss colonial consumption in an abject world that runs according to signifiers easily identifiable as colonial and / or rooted in class difference (as well as those employed during slavery period up through Jim Crow through the Civil Rights Movement—that is, legalized lynching and the use of Black bodies as consumable commodities). What is interesting is that these works fall within a discussion similar to one that has emerged from criticism on Stoker’s *Dracula* itself. This critical discussion fits nicely into Bhabha and Kawash’s terms (and in terms of the abject and the
grotesque, Kristeva’s terms): it can be rephrased as the attempt on the part of a colonialist society to replicate itself; and in the process of this contradictory mission, it can be said to discover the instability of its image, when the terms that compose it can be separated from the “transparent” qualities that informed these terms. Both current criticism of the historical circumstances that Stoker’s Dracula can describe and psychoanalytic criticism of Dracula can add information on the projections of imperialist England, and the means by which the male subject is formed (then and now) in Dracula. The information added by these critics, in turn, can shed light on what actually are allusions to vampires and the social processes similar to those that informed the creation of Dracula in the plays of Kennedy and Parks. This is not to say that that allusions to vampires that Laura Wright refers to in Kennedy and Venus are not, in fact, allusions to vampires; my point is rather that the function of the vampire in the workings of the colonial system shows the boundaries of the colonialist system in its very act of constructing boundaries. Wright’s idea of what constitutes a vampire allusion can be complicated through an examination of how Kennedy and Parks explore the use of the vampire in the colonial world: Kawash notes that “although the vampire threatens contagion, such that to be bitten by a vampire is to become a vampire, the colonized does not unequivocably take up the position of the vampire. In sum, one cannot simply identify the figure of the vampire with either the colonizer or colonized… the threat of the vampire is… identified more properly with the entire scene of colonial non-existence” (249). Since “colonial non-existence” is required for colonialist existence, this is consistent with Kawash’s earlier point that the only way to destroy the threat of the vampire is to destroy the system “that conjured it” (247). In recent criticism on Dracula, what are essentially discussions that relate to the maintenance of the colonial world by colonialists whose roles are
fixed within the maintenance of their inherently unstable reality (in Kawash’s sense) can be found.

The agency to inscribe the abject—the ability retain boundaries and to refuse the status dumped on one by someone who feels it necessary to reaffirm the solidity of his boundaries--can be said to function and to relate to the concept of vampirism in the colonialist world--according to prison socio-cultural practices that Reid-Pharr explores, what would otherwise be considered abject by various cultural groups is an alternate life-style that is unthinkable in the terms of the opposites of the current life-style. This can relate to Kawash’s description of decolonization, which is essentially a break in the reality that is recognized by the colonialists--outside of the reality they know, another reality is unthinkable; hence the narrative that positions terrorism as something adverse to the functioning of an order of society. Kawash, of course, notes that in Fanon’s use of decolonization can be found the sense that this break in “reality” will destroy the reality that insists on the use of terrorism to begin with for its cohesion. This connects to the construction of reality, and the narratives that are created with this reality in mind: outside what is not thinkable as a conclusion, is the “abyss,” which is haunted by lesbians (see Freud’s story about Dora [discussed below]), vampires and vampiricised expressions of the trials of the maintenance of masculinity and status in the Victorian Era. The simulacrum that Kawash finds in Fanon’s vampire case (where the blood flow between people disrupts corporeal integrity and creates a sense of commodification) is the result of the non-human and hence boundaryless status of the native; in Dracula, the non-human, or imaginary, is used to define what for Bhabha would be the transparent: Mina’s story, having no evidence, is supposed to be understood by the transparent value of Mina when felt by her son. This entire dynamic involving the abject /
vampire can in part explain the vampire imagery in Kennedy’s Dramatic Circle and discover
vampire-like relations in Ohio State Murders. The vampire images here discovered can be
examined in terms of the use of mimicry and doubling (in Bhabha’s senses), in an examination
that presents the hybridity of the colonized and their tactics.

Critical findings about the historical-cultural context and assumptions involving Stoker’s
*Dracula* both highlight the ways that the vampire theme itself invites a Fanonian analysis as well
as the ways this appearance of vampires as produced by the analysis can point up the existence
and use of vampires in Parks’ *Venus* and Adrienne Kennedy’s plays (the point regarding
boundaries required because of vampires / the poor [or those who are suspected of shamelessly
“living off” their societies, like the impoverished mother of Parks’ In The Blood {the use of the
term “living off” metonymically suggests the removal of sustenance on the part of an animal /
leech, and could just as easily be applied to the rhetoric used regarding vampires or the poor
associated with them} is also made in Parks’ In the Blood]) that relate to Fanon’s zones and
Croley’s analysis of Dracula. Laura Sagolla Croley points out that “transgressing spatial
boundaries could be identified as a controlling metaphor of *Dracula*” (94). The historical data
Croley finds would fit beautifully into Fanon’s theory of zones: Not only are borders invoked
precisely because their violation is noted (Fanon notes that the two zones, the clean zone of the
colonialists and the dirty one of the colonized could not exist if one were missing [*Wretched*]),
but the very use of these borders (which can essentially be called zones [although Croley does
not do so]) infers attributes concerning the inhabitants of these zones. Croley observes that “the
disease of vampirism” associates “physical and moral contagion” (87); this physical and moral
contagion is associated with the poor, according to Croley, who are, in turn, associated with
Dracula. The environs of the poor and their associations with dirt and smells are associated with
Dracula’s appearance in mist (the London slums possess “poisonous and malodorous gases”[qtd in Croley 87]), and smells related to the vampire invade the zones of the “Crew of Light” (composed of male vampire slayers, sometimes inclusive of Mina). Just as the native is said to have merged with his vegetative background (Fanon), the poor are associated with beastliness and animality because their living conditions are not fit for people, but are rather described as “lairs and dens” (87): “the claim that the poor live like animals or among animals quickly degenerates to the claim that the poor are animals” (88). This mentality is displayed by Parks in an incident in Venus, in which the mere sight of the Venus’ buttocks, and the fact that she gives a feather to the affected observer, causes the observer’s death—that is, Parks’ Venus demonstrates the mentality of her “cultured” observers in that they believe they can die through contact with a human being who is being treated like an animal. The widow of the recipient of Venus’ gift of the feather says she’s “thrown the feather away,” as though the mere talisman from the person being treated like an animal will somehow cause ruin / death. The same dynamic appears in Parks’ Red Letter Plays (discussed in more detail below): When Hester, in In The Blood, appears with her newest illegitimate child, the surrounding crowd choruses the sentiment “MOVE ASIDE / WHAT SHE GOTS CATCHY…DON'T GET CLOSE / YOU DON'T WANT TO LOOK LIKE YOU KNOW HER” (7). Hester’s society sees Hester as a contaminant on two levels—as Croley observes, a “physical and moral” contaminant—like Venus, she is thrust out of the accepted range of what her peers consider civilized (The Venus has an actual cage that separates her from the society to which she has been transported; Hester has a society that makes a circle around her, in the place of a literal cage—the point is the same); whatever she “has” that allows her to shamelessly create offspring that do not have an adult with a steady income to support them is apparently some sort of dis-ease that’s “catchy”; at the same time, association
with Hester (“you don’t want to look like you know her”) carries a sense of the contagion of what is socially damnable—without behaving like Hester, members of this crowd can still somehow be contaminated by the fact that they can be identified as someone who associates with her (and, of course, this crowd joins together at the end of the play to express relief that, like an animal, Hester has had her reproductive parts removed, to stop her from continuing to reproduce this “contagion,” and literally refers to her as an “animal” and, just before this point, “prison bars come down around her”[107-109]). This physical pestilence is associated with moral ills and the lack of masculinity—the women who become vampires exhibit prostitute like appearance and do not concern themselves with what “good” women concern themselves with, and the lumpenproletariat males are ineffectual in the business that distinguishes males—support of a family (Croley). Dracula, Croley points out, is allied with different groups of the poor and ethnic categories, and Jonathan Harker would rather “die like a man” than fall into the category of Dracula; the poor males were considered emasculate because of their “laziness” and “condition” (Croley). Significantly, Croley notes that “journalists throughout the century used the language of race to talk about the very poor” (88); in fact, the language of race is used to position the poor as a category removed from the English, waiting just off shore for an opportunity to invade (Croley). The fact that the data on the poor was discovered by men of good will who ventured into the “virgin territory” of the London slums (Croley) positions the poor / vampire as dangerously close as well as creating an “abyss” on the very outskirts of the walls of decent society—of course, no member of the “Circle of Light” could imagine living in this manner (Harker would choose death); and, of course, this abyss defines precisely what the social conditions of the “Circle of Light” are not (to go back to Kawash). (Croley points out the vampire is associated with the poor because of smells and because of dirt—Dracula sleeps in a
box of dirt, and the poor lived in cramped environs that could be reminiscent of a claustral coffin). Similarly, prostitutes were thought capable of corrupting good women merely by being visible to them--and represented an alternative life-style to the world of the good woman. Dracula performs as a “terrorist” in the sense that his presence represents an alternate reality to that of “reality” and because he can be said to be in disguise, as well--no one knows when a terrorist will threaten society because they come in disguise. While the Count appears to be an aristocrat, Croley demonstrates how he falls closely along the lines of “the vagrant disguised as an aristocrat” (88). All of this relates to the discourse that involves Parks’ Red Letter Plays, Venus and Kennedy’s Ohio State Murders: in Fucking A, Hester’s brand, which sets her apart as an abortionist (who, like the prostitute, performs a “disreputable but most necessary service” (121), at once stinks and relegates her to the lowest zone of her society; the Venus is compelled to wait offshore in a very smelly boat because she isn’t permitted to enter the country; Suzanne attempts unsuccessfully to invade the English Department and gets a job as a packer at night (in Dracula, information about Dracula can be had to those who load and unload boats at the wharves and which are considered a low class of people). Suzanne’s actual class is also denied by those who investigate the murder of her child--her aunt complains that they think all black girls are alike, involved in some sinister affair and sinister people. I return to this later in a discussion of the context of the overall play, which concerns how Parks and Kennedy subvert images that are attributed to vampires and poor people, pointing up the fact that they are attributed--attention is granted to the floating signifier of the smell in Venus (is it really the Venus’? Or is it related to the stinks created by colonialism?); Suzanne is expelled from the girls’ dormitory because she disregards boundaries (as the matron of the dormitory shows)--she
identifies her plight with Tess’ and superimposes the lines of Tess’ geographical situation on her own. As Fanon has shown, it is the defense of boundaries that illustrates their existence.

This defense of boundaries is complicated by the point that Kawash makes, that it is the colonialist system that produces the dynamic with which she associates the vampire: the reproduction of a system in which the colonialized are defined as non-human and define the colonist as human. As Stephen Arata demonstrates, there was no better candidate to show how this system produced and negotiated based on its racial (which could mean ethnic) and class (which also involved ethnic) boundaries than Stoker himself. Arata’s analysis of the boundaries and transversal of boundaries in Dracula easily lends itself as evidence for how the colonialist system operates in terms of boundaries—whether pointed up by fear of invasion from across the seas or the “pollution” of a foreign race (associated for Arata with Dracula). Both pollution in the sense of physical and moral translate to the black woman—as Toni Morrison notes in Playing in the Dark, darker skin is used to heighten sex appeal; Phyllis Roth notes that “the facile and stereotypical dichotomy between the dark woman and the fair, the fallen and the idealized, is obvious in Dracula” (113). Roth states in this context that “female vampires are equivalent to the fallen women of eighteenth and nineteenth century fiction” (Fry qtd in Roth 113). Since the “good” woman of Stoker’s day (and Phyllis Roth points out that hostility toward women’s sexuality is still in evidence today) used her sexual capacities solely for reproduction, the sexuality relegated to the black woman by while male society positions her as a deviant in much the same way as a vampire. Parks can show this and subvert it in Venus, when she shows the Bride-to-Be as dressing up as the Hottentot in order to be attractive to her would be spouse, who wants to “love something wild.” Parks points up the fact that it is sometimes “good” women who need not be “polluted” by the proximity of prostitutes who employ the strategies relegated to
prostitutes to interest men. What this young white male would be spouse projects onto his disguised bride shows the constituted animality relegated to black women--“something wild” is reminiscent of an animal; in this context, his Uncle is admonished to “make sure she’s clean.”

Arata observes that blood is equated with race in Dracula, but that it can also be “contaminated” by class--the blood of the servant women is “suspicious” to Van Helsing, whereas the blood of Arthur, being that of an English Lord, is enough to purify Lucy’s contaminated blood after Dracula’s first kiss (Arata uses “kiss”). While Arata’s point is that “women serve identical purposes for both Dracula and the Western characters” (e.g. the reproduction of race; Stoker, of course, was Irish and the Irish were spoken of in terms much like those applied to the London poor and Dracula), Arata’s work can call to attention Kawash’s point that neither the colonialist or the colonialized can be identified outright with the vampire--it is the system that produces what can be called the “abyss” or the non-human alternative lifestyle / category. Arata’s drawing of a correlation between the invasions and threat of counter-invasion of the colonialist English can present a painting of people that is colored by vampirism overall (just as Kawash notes that the image of vampirism is inherent to the colonialist system). This argument, which Dracula fits very nicely into, as Arata’s work demonstrates, can explain and describe the use of much of the Gothic / vampire-like plot and imagery in Adrienne Kennedy’s plays, Dramatic Circle and Ohio State. I will argue that Dramatic and Ohio State can show a single play that has been split in thematic halves to show the narrative constructed in a Freudian, colonialist system (which derives its identity from its “abyss”--the story of Dora is Freud’s story because he excludes Dora’s; Freud’s reason for excluding Dora’s story [which entails much of his male identity, which comes out in his so called objective role as analyst] is its “abyss” or
lesbian content), and the violence associated with race, fictional narratives and their boundaries
and uses by whites and blacks, respectively.

Roth contextualizes, within a framework in which everything is okay because it
represents a justifiable fantasy of “the triumph of good over evil, mere man over super-human
forces and the rational West over the mysterious East” (116), the desire to kill a rejecting love
object, which is the equivalent of committing matricide (Lucy is a mother figure who has
rejected two of her “sons” / suitors [116-117]). Other psychoanalytic critics have argued that the
coffin of Dracula is the object of the womb (the borderline personality would like to return there)
and that the earth Dracula sleeps in is a sign of mother earth (this is appropriate, considering the
(m)othering of the female vampires and the fact that the killing of Lucy has been said to be the
plot of Dracula, which culminates in the killing of Dracula, in miniature). Still other critics have
pointed out the emasculating power of the female vampire--once sexualized, these women want
what mortal men cannot give them; the vampirization of Lucy, who has already rejected Seward,
gives him a chance to “distract himself from the pain of rejection… with a good, unselfish
cause” (Roth 116). This “cause” turns out to be the need to destroy Lucy. What Roth and other
psychoanalytic critics can describe is a system that requests to be “instinctively” (Bhabha)
accepted on the basis of felt attributes: “There is something in your mien that men would fain
call master” (qtd in Bhabha); Van Helsing, at the end of the novel, states that the only proof for
this story that will be required is that Mina’s son will see that she is a “pure and gallant woman.”
The “transparent” (Bhabha) qualities (Mina is loved because she is pure and gallant as anyone
can transparently see) of these spiritualized relationships (Roth) is set against the sexualization of
women once they become “dark” (Lucy is described as “a dark haired woman” after her
vampirization [Roth 117]). The historical-cultural framework of Dracula already describes the
animalization of the poor and racially othered; if the colonialist is human, his colonized must be non-human. That humanity is tied into masculinity in Dracula and both are linked to this othering is evident in Harker’s decision to “die a man” rather than become a vampire / other (which has been noted to be similar to falling into the abyss of the poor, who are effeminized); the “bad mother” / bad woman who rejects or effeminizes (as vampire women do by virtue of being sexual beings) thus sets off the need for good women for men to feel masculine. Mina’s being “pure and gallant” is linked to the fact that she has valuated her men by being in a position that necessitated that they rescue her; hence the transparency of Mina’s goodness is linked to the transparency of the male ego. The destruction of the “bad mother” / sexualized woman (who does not fulfill her role as mother--Lucy throws the child she has been holding away), then, is part of the stabilization of the social reality. The importance of darkness and animality as aspects of the abyss have already been discussed; Roth links “morbid dread” (a quality found in the Gothic novel and which Freud notes can show sexual repression [114]) with the act of dismembering Lucy and the anticipation of doing so, which can only be described as a sexual act (there is “lustful anticipation” of the dripping of “the candle’s sperm which “dropped in white patches on Lucy’s coffin as Van Helsing opened it for the first time”[114]; then only the betrothed of Lucy is allowed to dismember her; finally, Arthur [Lord Godalming] must not know that other men have given Lucy blood--an act that Roth notes is the simple reverse of the sexual taking of it by Dracula). Hence, the dynamic of vampirism in the colonialist world cannot be seen to be related merely to one group of people even in Dracula: the sexualized roles are used to define the spiritualized roles, but are taken in order to define male and female (and class) roles (the men give blood; Arthur must not know Lucy has taken other men’s fluids). A comparison: Parks’ Baron Docteur spends much of the play anticipating the occasion of the Venus’
dismemberment; also, when he dissects the Venus, he points out that her hymen is not intact.

This observation might seem odd, considering the life that the Venus has led; however, it
parallels the pleasure taken at opening Lucy’s coffin “for the first time” (qtd in Roth 114). The
maintenance of a class system is highlighted as well in Parks: It is important that the Docteur is
the only character in the play that consistently holds a title (when he is not the Baron, he is The
Man, which speaks for itself). All of this is to the point that vampirism is not associated with
only one person or group, but instead bespeaks a structuring dynamic necessary for the
functioning of the colonialist’s reality. This dynamic of the use of the vampire and the sexualized
female in the definition of the male colonialist appears also in *Dramatic Circle* (and with it is
accompanied the mimicry that destabilizes it): Suzanne’s pregnancy positions her as a mother
figure. Suzanne feels a sort of threat from Dr. Freudenberger (is he our friend?). The role that
Freudenberger *selects* for Suzanne to play in the reading of *Dracula* is the role of Lucy; Roth
points out that the killing of Lucy is the same story as that of *Dracula*, which is told twice over:
Lucy is simply the mother who is “more desirable, more sexual, more threatening and must be
destroyed” (Roth 117). The need to play out the same story, essentially, again, in *Dracula* stems
from the fact that “the story had to be told again to assuage the anxiety occasioned by matricide”
(117). The passages that Freudenberger selects to read involve first an assault on Lucy, and then,
later, a child that Lucy has made an assault upon. Freudenberger essentially repeats, spatially, the
story that the assassin of Fanon plays out: “I followed you along the road,” Freudenberger tells
Suzanne; the assassin of Fanon followed her and her husband through the villages. However,
Suzanne does not accept this relegated role of dangerous mother; instead, she returns the gaze to
the “eye of power” (Bhabha): right after the reading in which she has been assigned the role of
Lucy, she tells Alice, her sister-in-law, that “I feel like I’ve seen Sebastian [Dr. Freudenberger]
somewhere before” (189); this is what Harker says of the blonde female vampire, who can recall Lucy’s appearance. In effect, Suzanne can change the gender and textual roles that have been pressed on her by Freudenberger’s gaze: Suzanne positions Freudenberger in the role that he relegated to her, which highlights the abject and “(m)othered” nature of this position. Immediately after this, on the same page, Freudenberger appears in Suzanne’s garden with a changed appearance (recalling the mutation of identity and spatial violation that Dracula is capable of). Laura Wright notices the vampire allusion in Freudenberger’s presence in Suzanne’s garden, but assumes that Suzanne accepts the role of the bad mother that Freudenberger gives her in the textual narrative of the play. Suzanne, however, expressly does not accept this role: when she has a fit of hysteria and thinks she is at a dramatic reading at Freudenberger’s “dramatic circle,” she recites a passage in which she feels surrounded by wolves; in the “Film Club,” a monologue by Suzanne Alexander, Suzanne recounts the happenings that appear in Dramatic Circle, with several pointed differences (which I shall address anon). She mentions sequences from the plot of Dracula that “Freudenberger loves”: two instances set together show the bad mother with an ineffective mother. “Dracula… returns with a / child for the three / vampire women… / the bereft mother is killed / by wolves” (178). On the opposite page (179), Suzanne recalls that, walking in a garden with Alice and Freudenberger, she “thought we were at one of our readings and began to cry the words of Stoker”: it is a passage about being surrounded by wolves. Laura Wright associates Suzanne’s pregnancy with the act of Ouroboros, or the African vampire myth of self-ingestion, which can describe the colonialized psychological predicament (Wright); to bolster this argument, Wright notes that Kennedy felt unfulfilled when she was pregnant (she is listing pregnancies that do not seem very happy or lead to a productive conclusion). However, in her People that Led to My Plays (28), Kennedy also makes much of the
mutation of identity under the gaze of power: a poignant passage is when she recalls an alarm tower being constructed close by her house, to watch for raids from Hitler; she was afraid of being taken away to be made “a Hitler child.” The oppressive presence of the tower suits with the presence of her fear. It is probably not necessary to remind the reader of the relationship between racist ideology, THEY and ALL in Funnyhouse and The Owl Answers, and Clara’s confinement to the Tower of London—the site of her breakdown—which, I reiterate, is emphasized whereas the fact that a bunch of the papers she carries about and cannot hold onto are communications to get her father a decent burial in St. Paul’s Cathedral, and which she takes out both because they should interest her guards and because they are in fact worthless under the blank gaze of members of a symbolic that refuse her an exit from the nightmare of the Tower (homologous, of course, to a room where one has to live, and which one may not “leave for months,” after a trauma such as the one had by Suzanne at Ohio State University); the first long stage direction in Owl mentions that the walls of the set are like the Tower of London—in other words, there is no escape for Clara except the way her mother shows her. However, the oppressive presence threatened Kennedy’s actual identity while failing to change it (dying is becoming a corpse, au fond); a similar theme occurs in Dramatic Circle: the entire circle reads the passage about the “living ring of terror”—the wolves that surround both the mother bereft of her child and the scene which she recalls when having an attack of hysteria. Suzanne obviously feels threatened in multiple ways; however, none of them alter her identity. Only the person who relegates the role of the vampire Lucy to Suzanne appears to alter his identity.

Parks also points out the identity needs of the colonialist figures in a system defined against a non-human alternative reality, but with a twist: the Baron Docteur takes over the role of “guardian” of the Venus from a character who very literally is a bad mother (“The Mother-
Showman”), thus exposing a link of necessity—if the Docteur requires this colonialist reality, what he needs for his self definition (within his system’s terms of definition) is observed as being included in his identity by the playwright. While the Docteur treats the Venus the way Lucy is treated (with similar sexual connotations), what he would, as a colonialist, ordinarily use to define the possibilities of his narrative is included in his actions in the play—whether he wishes to acknowledge this or not. Parks thus presents this system and its use of vampire imagery in a way that exposes the system’s use of boundaries and implicates its players in their actual transgression of them (Docteur takes a literal role that would be abject according to even his symbolic in any other context—he takes over the job of a bad mother, who is a member of social rabble, presenting freaks; by assuming the colonial “guardian” position, the Docteur steps onto ground that is far shakier than he realizes—both in terms of how it threatens his social and emotional boundaries. In order to make his career as the dissector of the Venus, the doctor thinks of the body and its parts, which he cuts up and displays—this after he has displayed the Venus to other students of anatomy, but this time alive and looking “gorgeous.” Even while being urged to allow the Venus to be charged by rabble and carried off to die of syphilis, he says regretfully, “She would have made a charming wife”; his ideological sidekick responds, “She’ll make a charming corpse!” Suddenly, the Docteur is a potential husband who has made a potential wife into a corpse [a variation of abjection comparable to Kristeva’s example of “a friend who stabs you”{Powers 4}]. The comfortable colonial euphemism of “guardian,” which allows Docteur to be merely the position replacement of the Mother-Showman, is suddenly no longer a suitable shield, every time Docteur remembers some part of the Venus, such as “her charming hands…” There is, arguably, a similar lack of boundary markers, supporting the reality with the abyss in “Dramatic Circle”: the madman, Renfield lets Dracula in and behaves in a courtly manner that
annoys Seward precisely because it does not suit with his caste (Croley); while Freudenberger’s Dramatic Circle is composed of his patients, Freudenberger himself takes the role (not in the reading, in actuality) that, in Dracula serves as a link between the mother figure and the vampire, in that he violates the boundaries of Suzanne’s garden with a change in age: Renfield thinks he will be young through behaving as a vampire; Freudenberger thinks he assumes the image of Suzanne’s husband, evidently a desirable one in its associations, in his alteration of his appearance. Renfield lets Dracula in so he can get to Mina; Freudenberger has no crazy intermediary, which also creates an ambiguity in Dracula’s associations (is Dracula noble? He is associated with the lumpen [Croley]), relating him to the figure of the terrorist in the usual reading of the terrorist--a disguised thread to law and order. Also, the very name of the play highlights what can be Kennedy’s point about the constructedness of social narratives / realities and the very human, real people wounded in them: the group of men that go to kill Dracula are called “The Circle of Light”; they define their humanity against the non-humans that they kill. This “Circle” of Kennedy’s play is simply performative, or “Dramatic.”

Robin Appleby, in a discussion comparing the unacknowledgeable content of the sexual fantasies concerning vampires (in Dracula) and Freud’s inability to acknowledge Dora’s actual story (what can have been her lesbianism) over his own story, points up the reversal of Freud’s role of (objective) analyst: he ends with the inability to write in the close of Dora’s story because of her departure from treatment. This is interesting because of the attempts of two narratives to contain what should be the case, against what can not be the case (the anxiety producing abject). I will argue that Kennedy shows the construction of a narrative that simply does not involve Suzanne (in “Dramatic Circle”) any more than it physically involves her (in moments such as those when “Freudenberger sat staring at Suzanne”)--it takes place in the mind of the person who
constructs it. Suzanne both shows a reality that can be beyond the limits of Freudenberger’s and which mimics Freudenberger’s attempt at narrative imperialism. While treating Dora as a hysteric, Freud’s footnotes and footnotes of his footnotes bespeak a sort of hysteria: the inability to narrate one’s own story (Appleby). While Mina is excluded from the group because of her dubious (sexualized when bitten by Dracula) identity, Dora refuses to continue treatment. Appleby explains that “un-dead, Mina would outlive the text and exist beyond the limitations of a male dominated society” (26); Freud’s explanation for Dora’s leaving treatment and what is essentially Freud’s story about Dora (association of Freud with Herr K.) is that Dora because of “the unknown quantity in me which reminded Dora of Herr K., she took her revenge on me as she wanted to take her revenge on him, and deserted me as she believed herself to have been deceived and deserted by him” (qtd in Appleby 27). Both the reasons for the exclusion of Mina and Freud’s insistence on his version of the story (admittances of the possibility of Dora’s lesbianism are relegated to the margins of the text, the footnotes) can be the defense of “reality” against the abyss, which defines the plausible options of reality. It is important that Freud, by “an unknown quantity” identifies himself with Herr K; “It is not Dora who makes this transference” (27); hence, Freud creates a narrative that does not involve Dora’s narrative, but Freud’s, who “insists on a link between homosexual attraction and revenge,” and later inferred that it was not his fault but Dora’s that he was not able to produce “a neatly conclusive narrative” (34). Similarly, according to Appleby, Van Helsing uses narrative to “diagnose and treat the plot and thus control Mina’s narrative” (31); also, Mina’s relations with Dracula are framed in a language of revenge, just as Freud attributes Dora’s actions to revenge. Appleby notes “an inversion of responsibility in the doctor patient relationship”: he says he “promised to forgive her for having deprived me of the satisfaction of affording her a far more radical cure for her troubles” (qtd in
Appleby 34). To the same effect, Freudenberger, who takes the role of Van Helsing to ask whether “love is subjective or objective” (note Freud’s pretense of objectivity as an analyst and the contrast to this in the question of objectivity on the part of an analyst), attempts to create a narrative that Suzanne does not contribute to (the attempt to associate himself with her husband in her mind, whereas the only association between him and David Alexander is in Freudenberger’s mind). Also, Freudenberger’s relationship with Suzanne is set against the defining possibility of Suzanne’s falling “the victim of an unfair, tragic plot”—just as Mina was not to blame for her association with a vampire, so Suzanne, as a pure woman and a mother image, would not be to blame. This purity attributed to Suzanne is set against the violence that Freudenberger directs at Lucy, whose part that he has Suzanne play and which has already been discussed.

Suzanne’s response to this narrative is to speak in her sleep. Appleby notes that hypnosis (Mina speaks in hypnosis, which is comparable to speaking in a state of sleep) is like hysteria in that the hypnotized cannot control his or her own narrative. As if to capitalize on this sleepwalking of Suzanne’s, which Alice tells him about, Freudenberger at the next reading has Suzanne read a sequence of plot events which include, “Lucy sleepwalks… Lucy dies.” What Suzanne mentions in her sleepwalking state, however, is interesting in the way it compares to the same subject with a different meaning in her waking state. She carries around journals of David concerning slave ships; in her sleep, she recites a letter that states, “Wars have always colored my existence”; this finds a parallel in her earlier sleepwalking episode, where she says, in Josephine’s person, “My husband’s fleet of ships of war was spectacular.” While these speeches echo the signs of imperialism, they invoke a personal vein that dislocates the actions of imperialism. David’s existence has been colored by war against imperialism, which can
conceivably entail the sort of violence that would decolonize the world. The speech about “my husband’s fleet” can parallel the speech of David’s “we have Africa with us”--both sentences invoke a spectacular vision; the vision of “my husband’s fleet” is removed from French imperialism while using its very language and historical allusion--it is associated rather with the imprisonment during the French Revolution, in the speech uttered by Suzanne the next time she sleepwalks in the play. Just as the natives in Bhabha’s account remove the ideas that would legitimatize the English right to conquer from the meaning of the sign of the Book, Suzanne can invoke images of the storming of the Bastille to mean a new day and a new Revolution that can belong to Africa. It is interesting that the same language of the French Revolution is in her sleepwalking speech after the meetings of the dramatic circle--to invoke the rush of a crowd set on Revolution rather than the “mass assault on one’s humanity” described by Kawash as the colonialist effect on the psyche of the colonized. Thus, what can be the response to the attempt at narrative enclosure by Freudenberger can show a duplication of French rule in her dream, a sort of doubling, which is at the same time an assertion of the French / imperialist inability to assert power over Suzanne and her husband.

Ohio State Murders can invoke the role of the vampire in the text and the gaze of the narrative itself, to show the inability of any particular group to be the vampire in its entirety: images associated with the vampire appear in the play, but they appear when Robert himself is under the gaze of his reality. The acts that can be associated with the vampire, then, are more attributable to the way the reality is defined in relation to the abyss, which forces his bloody actions for motives similar to those that spark the actions of the “Circle of Light” in relation to the abyss.
Dracula is associated with fog and mist; Robert steals one of the daughters he murders in snow that conceals him as fog would, thus creating the visual impression of a child-stealer coming in the fog. The second daughter he kills with a knife from the kitchen sink—which can show an assault on the source of his abysmal fears with a Dracula like weapon. The homely image of the kitchen sink can infer an assault on the mother, which is a theme in Dracula as well. Dracula is associated in the literature with the poor and the contagion (moral and physical) that was associated with them. Kennedy can conflate the image of Arthur (recall Arthur, Lord Godalming in Dracula), the image of Arthur the legendary king who is a cultural symbol and the image of Dracula, in Robert, who attempts to erase from existence the objects that cause him paranoia concerning discovery and ruin (the poor, black children from his union with Suzanne).

Also, Kennedy conflates the image of narrowness that can involve surroundings that involve Dracula with Robert the Professor of English literature. The images of what can constitute a “mass assault on identity” that stem from the colonialist world are also the images that cause Robert to overstep the boundaries of his symbolic universe precisely because he feels he must act within it: if Suzanne is exiled from the symbolic geography of the city and confronted with the invasive images of the Battleship Potemkin on the same page of the play, Robert is caught simultaneously in his abyss and his Arthurian field of battle. If Freudenberger attempts to create a narrative that Suzanne does not have to take “her” part in, Robert is confronted by Suzanne’s doubling / mimicry of a narrative that he recites (in a still manner [only his eyes show emotion], almost like a vehicle for recitation) but which is not under his control. Robert’s reality is defined against what cannot be an alternative reality for him, and which claims him nevertheless precisely because of the gaze of his world. Kennedy displays the torture of a white man by the symbolic of whiteness by showing Robert’s impossible position (“it’s not possible” for him to
have fathered a child with a Black woman, but his symbolic is anxious to kill [as the white friends of Sarah are described; obviously, Sarah’s friends are obscenities of whiteness {that is, they show an enjoyment permitted by their ideology that feels shameful to witness} and not representative of whites in general. At least, the latter is what Kennedy seems to hope when she has the mourners of Mark Essex sadly shake their heads over the fact that “he believed in those white Kansas faces,” and this was a reason he finally made no differentiation between individuals, strangers to himself who may have even been from Kansas {but at the point when he enters the motel he will never leave, he no longer cares where these interchangeable whites are from precisely because the symbolic of whiteness makes no distinctions between generic lynched “Negroes” (at least this is Essex for the people who believe Essex, “was trying to save us. Amen”)}]. Robert believes “it’s a shame” that Suzanne should not be allowed to take the courses of her choice without hassles because of her skin color, enjoys Suzanne’s ability to use the language of poets and sound like the author whose work she writes about, and yet Robert is compelled to position himself as a dead man by cutting off his legacy because of Suzanne’s skin color. This awful contradiction and its effect on Robert are felt at his reading “on King Arthur’s Death,” which Suzanne sees after not seeing Robert in some time; Robert is between deaths—mourning the symbolic death of an idealized, white son figure (Gawain) and drawing himself into the impossible bent of stealing and killing his own children. And this anxiety is expressed in images that recall bloody consumption: the passage Robert reads is titled “Arthur Vows Revenge,” and begins with the lines, “Till blood bespattered his stately beard / As if he had been battering beasts to death / Had not… other great lords come up, / His brave heart would have burst in bitter woe. / “Stop!” these stern men said, “You are bloodying yourself!”” (qtd in Kennedy 164). After my emphasis on Kennedy’s notice of beasts in conjunction with a racist
symbolic, it is not necessary to belabor this point; but the Lacanian drive grammar present in this acting out bears comment. Arthur is angry at the death of a child, while his reader is vowing the death of his own children; the blood on Arthur’s beard is his own blood, just as the blood of Robert’s children is his own blood. This is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s Richard III’s self-interrogation before his last battle: “Is there a murderer here? Why yes, I am. Then fly!... Least I revenge... myself upon myself... Alack, I love myself... I hate myself for hateful deeds committed by myself.” However, Robert differs from Richard in that his reading (that involves bloodying himself with what Richard might call a “familiar way of gain”) has the Althusserian advantage of the “other great lords” who command him to “Stop!” bloodying himself—with Western Cultural textual symbolic blood, at least. Robert goes on to shed his own bloodline and his own blood “with a knife he had taken from the kitchen sink” (Kennedy 172), which is, of course, reminiscent of the knife used by the Reverend’s Wife and the Bastard’s Black Mother who cooked for the Dead White Father; Kennedy switches Robert’s position in death to the ultimate abject position for Robert (that is, Robert uses a kitchen implement, something associated with a woman’s normative household role, to end his life along with his racially othered child; not only is Robert’s identity changed into that of a corpse, the context and therefore the meaning of his action have presented his identity as debased within his racist symbolic).

Suzanne’s use of texts in Ohio State Murders wonderfully sketches possibilities for mimicry in the colonialist narrative: she effectively removes the qualifier “English” from Tess, using Tess’s experience as her own. When Robert asks her, in relation to her paper on Tess, “what reference books did you use?” Suzanne answers, “I used no reference books. I wrote this
paper late one night” (156). The fact that Suzanne creates a paper that seems “an extension of Hardy’s own language” (157) without the help of the context supplied to the paper by the culture can provide an instance of destabilization of the cultural narrative--the paper can double “Hardy’s language,” but without the assistance of the interpreters of that language. Suzanne wrests interpretation to herself. Robert’s attempt to re-establish the reality in which he places Hardy can be apparent in that he discusses “the paper,” never “her paper.” Even when he says, “it’s brilliant,” the third person pronoun removes the paper from its author. Even though Robert is in a position of esteem and authority, his office is colored by images of colorlessness and closeness--the office is “grayish” and he is “crouched over his desk” (155). Robert’s crouching can impute a narrowness to the scene, granting a window into Robert’s space within his reality--his posture rather than the relative size of his office is mentioned. Similarly, the denial of housing outside the dorm to Suzanne is contextualized within a symbolic universe that can bespeak an assault on her identity; Suzanne, in repeating the lines from a description of Battleship Potemkin that involve a mutiny and a massacre can double the “mass attack” of the symbolic in its definition of her within that world; but the repetition of the lines that show a disruption of order in themselves can create a space for Suzanne--a mass attack decontextualized can be a mass attack on anything. The repeated line, “The dismemberment of the Tsar’s statue” can cue in to exactly what--a structure that is a symbol of edifice, authority.

Robert’s discussion of the dual meaning of depth and inferiority of the abyss is contextualized in the play by the sexual meanings that Suzanne has presented in her person and her seclusion in a dark dormitory room, confined by secrets apparently whispered by the other (white) girls in the dormitory. Darkness and silence are relegated by people Suzanne thinks could have murdered her child: in a way, this is appropriate--she is positioned as someone who could
not, by definition, have possessed the attributes of “good women” in her society; Robert’s murder of his children with her is a result of fear of association that seems to border on a fear of contagion, moral and social: Suzanne notes that to those who knew her, she had almost been “a cliché of the ultimate virgin”; however, this designation as a “good woman” is not granted by Robert—when she informs him that she is pregnant, his answer is, “you must have other relationships.” Robert’s murder of the last child is contextualized by poverty (David is doing interviews among Negroes about the depression years). This reference to poverty and the close surroundings involving the crime (the cellar where he locks the aunt, a reference to underground) is associated with the social gaze he feels on him in regard to his relationship to black people: “he said that one day he knew that [Suzanne] would reveal this, that he would be investigated, there would be tests and his whole career would fail” (172). The position of Suzanne as Robert’s ideological paranoid other here is all too obvious. The “attraction of the abyss” according to Robert is that “these two aspects [depth and inferiority] are inextricably linked together” (169).

The relegation of an inferior status to Suzanne is coupled with her status as someone outside the human relations of the white society (as Kristeva would immediately notice, the clinic attendant tries to examine her without touching her hair or scalp; Suzanne has, in her state of anxiety, been putting her curlers in too tightly, but the threat of her very bodily artifacts to the symbolic of the clinic attendant is still another reason for her bleeding scalp / anxiety), hence definitional of that society; life with her was not a viable alternative option for racists. And, as Kennedy demonstrates, life with this sort of threat to her boundaries is a lesson that makes Suzanne bleed; the clinic attendant may have, effectively, dug her curlers in himself (someone who is excluded from social codes is also unprotected by them—which is why, perhaps, the brutal imagery of bloody consumption is so popular among colonial literatures [and, as Octavia Butler
demonstrates, the literature of slavery; Tess, a fellow slave {in Kindred}, is “passed around like a jug at a husking”—that is, a thing to be used, that has no feelings, as Tess herself notices and bitterly bewails. Butler’s image of consumption and stripping in a sexualized context is concise: the ritual of passing the jug around in the companionable circle of slaves given a little labor that is less painful than the usual thing {that is, corn husking as opposed to field labor} is, when denormalized when Butler’s narrator has to look at what can be done to slaves / flesh-food, obscene with deadly potentialities if not promises.).

The fact that the “abyss” is used to define the boundaries of society is made evident in the later Kennedy plays I discuss here, with a focus on flesh food / use and consumption of humans—each person who attempts to place Suzanne in his world (Freudenberger and Robert, respectively) has a different society in mind. The intersection of Dracula and Dora (which appears in Dramatic Circle in Freudenberger’s attempt to place a “hysteric” within the narrative that he creates as a product of counter transference, which “Dora” never transferred in the first place) in Dramatic Circle is important because, as Appleby shows, both Dracula and Dora describe narratives that are disrupted (and the abysses in them defined) by people who impose their interpretation of what should be “real” on the narrative (Van Helsing interprets Mina and Freud Dora). What is left in the footnotes, as it were, as a possibility too horrifying for the text itself (Appleby; Mina can of course become a vampire, just as Freud admits the possibility of Dora’s lesbianism), can show an unviable alternative that is effectively left out of reality: if Mina became a vampire, she would no longer be Mina; she would be outside the reality that concerns Van Helsing’s Mina. So, I posit, the ending of “Dramatic” is positive and non-violent precisely because it contains variables that allow Freudenberger to project his narrative onto reality: what Freudenberger (and Freud) is concerned with is the husband--both arrange narratives in which
they take the place of what they project as the desired male object. When David comes home in a manner that fulfills Freudenberger’s narrative, Suzanne is within a “plot” that Freudenberger understands (such as Dora is in the negative--she goes on, as Freud predicted, to be very unhappy; the fact that her unhappiness can stem from unrecognized and disallowed lesbianism and precisely Freud’s narrative that excludes a lesbian as “just a lesbian”[Appleby]). The point that Suzanne wants to be reunited with her husband is a little beside the point, as far as Freudenberger’s narrative is concerned--he has concerned himself and the husband, and he has projected the possibility of a vampire woman / bad mother onto Suzanne; when the husband and his narrative come to a good round conclusion, Suzanne is no longer a “danger” or a projected bad woman--she has the means for being a good wife (note the temptation that Suzanne causes--Freudenberger is married, to a good woman, Heike, who makes tea, like Mina, for her “Circle”). Hence, Freudenberger’s description of Lucy’s predicament at the end of Dramatic Circle is different than his projection of her onto Suzanne earlier in the play: in his projection, Lucy, the bad woman / mother, is someone to react to violently and is a danger to children (this is reflected in the passages he reads and he relegates the role of Lucy to Suzanne). At the end of Dramatic Circle, Freudenberger explains that “I was struck by Suzanne’s fragile beauty…I had a premonition that David, like Jonathan Harker, was going through bad times, and she, like Lucy, would become the victim of an unfair, tragic plot” (196). Here, Suzanne and Lucy are contextualized in a situation with their husbands; in this context, they are removed from what appears to be a reading of Dracula that is consistent with the ways critics describe the meaning of Dracula to its contemporaries--rife with threats from the abyss to society. When in a category with her husband, Suzanne is a member of the society who requires projection from the abyss, from the plots of the vampire / poor / outlaw. The danger to children, then, that Suzanne / Lucy
would pose by definition if she were a bad woman / vampire, is left in the part of the narrative that would concern Suzanne if she were, in the end, a fit object for a projection of Lucy’s attributes. Since she is not (she is a “good” woman), the danger to the child that comes from “bad” women / mothers remains in the text.

However, as Appleby notes, Freud tells his story regarding Dora’s story; something of Dora is in Dora’s story, that is really Freud’s story. This can be reflected in “Dramatic” in the fact that Suzanne is seen as a legitimate love object for David, a candidate for a good mother. While this would be Freudenberger’s concern, what is evident of Suzanne’s story is the textual and psychological space that she shares with her husband: at one point, David’s voice is heard reading a letter to Josephine with Suzanne. It is striking that in *Ohio State Murders*, Robert always does the reading, and he does it as a professional--Suzanne as a person is left to the margins of the audience or the reading of a “scrap” of paper that describes a subversive social action (the description of the scene from *Battleship Potemkin*). What this can figure, which differentiates *Ohio State Murders* from *Dramatic Circle* in terms of plot / narrative, is Suzanne’s identification with the vampire figure on the part of the creator of a narrative about Suzanne: Suzanne is *never* detached from the poor / abysmal figure by Robert, so the resolution of the narrative that goes on for Robert is the death of the children. Robert cannot forget Suzanne’s existence and therefore he cannot forget the existence of the children (172). This goes to show that the threat to the children is a projection of a bad female role onto Suzanne by someone else in both *Dramatic Circle* and *Ohio State Murders*. Suzanne sums up Robert’s problem when she is in the library after the murder, “sorting the definitions of words”: the words that Suzanne had listed were “Abyss… cureless… alien host, battle groups fated to fall on the field of battle” (172). These words describe the contagion and threat that Dracula and the poor and racial /
ethnic other associated with him posed for his contemporaries. Suzanne’s description of Robert’s dilemma is a description of his definition of words / reality and its abject impoverishment: Robert has been drawn to his own abyss and fallen in, in effect, armed with a knife from her kitchen sink. After this experience with Robert, Suzanne’s attraction to what language even means is understandable in Kristeva’s terms: the structure of language, in that it is made of symbols for things, is homologous to the structure of a fetish (e.g. “I know the symbol is not the thing, but even so it is the veil I throw over my phobia of absorption by the unnamable object). Robert’s behavior has positioned him as something without a symbolic for Suzanne, in much the same way that the letters regarding what is seen in Stoker’s Dracula cannot name or quantify the otherness of the vampire. Kennedy demonstrates her slight of hand by showing us Suzanne’s observing of Robert from the margins of his world, and in reality mastering what is useful and lovely in his world (which makes Robert’s anti-social action and its apparent preconception before the action took place all the more horrifying because it implicates what is worthy of respect in Robert’s literary canon, which Suzanne masters and loves so well [Cathi {the first of the twins that Robert murders} is drowned, and after Cathi’s drowning, Robert writes his crime into his Arthurian narrative involving Arthur’s ability to forever return in some way by the grace of the hand that emerges with his thrown away sword from the waters; that is, he throws his daughter away but a phallic signifier that defines his position in his symbolic remains]). This visibility of Robert’s personal narrative, which maintains his symbolic even when threatened by his own actions, is in the context of incomprehensible hostility that takes the place of silence and because it causes anxiety (because it has no actual logic to it, only ideology), Suzanne associates it with the actual murder of her child: Suzanne says in retrospect, “Why I thought they were capable of murder, I don’t know but sometimes I suspected a group of girls who lived at the end
of the corridor in the dorm”; the funnyhouse’s Landlady’s appearance in LIGHT that makes a corridor for her on her home space spatially correlates with where the girls Suzanne suspects (because, in effect, they are hostile to her without a cause) live relative to Suzanne—they are too close and she can hear them laughing (167). It is doubtful that anyone forgets the laughter of the Landlady of the funnyhouse, which is typically irrational and inappropriate, an emergence of enjoyment in the fantasy of the ideology of whiteness; the excess of weight on the part of the girl who heads the group of girls that accuse Suzanne and her Black friend of stealing from the lavatory (again, a projection of guilt revolving around a place to take a shit, just like Clara is “the Bastard,” guilty because she has been fathered by a rapist who “came to [her] in the outhouse”), along with the mysterious (to the rational Suzanne) hostility of the girl (“Bunny”) is an example of the emergence of a sinthome in the midst of the ideological fantasy (that is, these white girls, as the racial myths would go, are not good and neat because they are white and female [Gilmore on Southern women—that is, women in a racist society—and the myths concerning them]; they revolve around a leader with too much physical substance who draws Suzanne into a dispute involving an abject zone).

This is not to say that Laura Wright’s use of the African vampire myth of the Ouroboros, which she terms “The Ouroboros effect” for purposes of her analysis, is not an indicator of vampire imagery in the plays that she discusses, is not an indicator of vampire imagery in Venus and “Dramatic.” I only question what this vampire imagery is supposed to mean (as I have already done in “Dramatic”) in terms of who or what the vampire is associated with. This “Ouroboros effect” appears in a pregnancy that never produces any life and in self-silencing, self-consumption that relates to Laura Wright’s picture of the colonialized subject in Venus (Wright’s point here is that the Venus’ consumption of “the nipples of venus” indicates a self
silencing, self-consumption). I posit that, in Parks’ *Venus*, this Ouroboros effect that Wright describes exists, but can show the fetishizing of the racial other, and the production of stasis (a.k.a. action of the death drive) for the victim and the victimizer that necessarily follows fetishism. The actual behavior that Wright categorizes as the “Ouroboros effect,” the consumption of the “nipples of venus” by the Venus, can actually be a form of mimicry that signifies on what the fixing of the meaning of specific attributes of the Venus (reducing the humanity of the Venus to an association with a socially abysmal category that is created by this fetishizing move), and hence the dehumanization of the other does for the colonialist system.

In an article about Cox and Harris’ *The Venus Hottentot 2000*, Priscilla Netto describes fetishism of the Hottentot in terms of the colonialist “dependence on the concept of fixity… as a sign of cultural / historical / racial difference” (Bhabha qtd in Netto 151). Fixity “denotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition” (151). The terms “disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition” can describe the signs attributed to Dracula and those historically associated with him; for Bhabha, this practice of fixity reduces the other to specific, essentialized and stereotyped characteristics. As Gilman has noted, the Hottentot was associated both with lesbian love and with “deviant and polluting sexuality” in general, as seen in the association of the Hottentot with the “supposed licentiousness of the prostitute” (152). The use of fixity, then, can reduce and essentialize the “non-human” to the sum of a few attributes (in the Hottentot’s case, her sexual parts; she was then made to stand in for a racial other), producing a non-human that supports the colonialist definition of human. The effect of this fixity can be viewed as an Ouroboros effect. The disavowal that fetishism allows permits the colonialist’s symbolic structure to be supported--his identity is assured by stereotype of the other and the substitution of the fetishized object for the actual other that is fetishized prohibits
the contact whose absence is the distance between colonial zones. It can be deduced from Bhabha’s description of stereotype and the fetish as “informed statements” that “function to reassure the colonial subject when he confronts difference” (qtd in Netto 152) that the support of the system is its isolation from contact with what might discover a lack (put another way, the humanity of the colonialist is defined by virtue of differentiation from the “non-human”; since the system of colonialism is contradicted by the question begged of the “non-humans” [an essentially human question--who am I? (Kawash)], the stereotype and fetish can function to protect the colonialist from this contradiction: something that has been reduced to a part and blended into the vegetation of a colonialist world is not something that can pose a lack or a question). This isolation from contact can be played out in Venus in the form of sterile masturbation--the colonialist does not, in essence, touch the non-human that he fetishizes; he touches what the thinks he touches. In reality, it can be said he touches himself. The Venus’ selection from the box of chocolates can double (on the Baron Docteur’s orders) what he is doing, and at the same time, return the gaze (as she has before in the play): as he jerks off, she selects duplicates of her own private parts to consume. The Baron’s order is that she “eat her chocolates” as he masturbates; the Venus selects which chocolates to eat.

In this, Park’s Venus can engage in what is done in postcolonial aesthetic practice to expose the regime of representational power: “The principle counter strategy has been to bring to the surface--into representation--that which has sustained the regimes or representation unacknowledged: to subvert the structures of othering in language and representation, image, sound and discourse, and thus to turn the mechanism of fixed, racial signification against themselves” (qtd in Netto 159). According to Bhabha, the fetish serves to reassure the colonialist who encounters difference “and is consequently threatened with the possibility of a lack and the
possibility of an instability of his own identity”; racial fetishism, as Gilman points out, is the reduction of the other to a part and hence the “naturalization” of the other’s race and sexual difference within the colonial world (Netto 152). The static or fixed nature of a fetish or someone used as a fetish, then, relates to the security of the colonialist identity.

The vampire that Kawash finds in Fanon informs both the attack on the ego of the colonized by the colonialist society and the contradiction that faces the colonialist society that is expressed by the question, “‘Who am I,’ a question that expresses the disjunction between a reality that demands non-existence and a corporeal and psychical presence that exists, even if only in the negative mode of non-existence” (Kawash 246). The vampire is indicative of this “mass attack” (which presumes the non-existence of the colonized, making them “yet another element of the landscape”[Kawash on Fanon 246]): “in the patient’s fantasy, a mass attack on the ego has become a mass attack on the body” (247). The context of this mass attack, is, of course the system that commodifies the native along with his landscape. The reduction of the Venus to a commodity and to a fetish can describe this “mass attack.” Laura Wright has identified the Baron Docteur as a vampire, who punctures the Venus with his phallic, disease spreading fang. While I think this vampire image exists, the meaning of it is more complicated and related to the functioning of the system as a whole: the Baron Docteur is associated with scenes in which the Venus is threatened with a physical mass attack; these scenes show the Venus as being treated as a fetish object and / or a commodity. The Docteur, who plays the role of the vampire in this “mass attack” and actual phallic puncture, can attribute vampire-like qualities to the Venus--the room they are in when they are “lovers” is dark and “spooky.” However, he is shown as possessing what he attributes to the Venus--he mentions it is dark, and “spooky” and then tells the Venus to “look away” while he masturbates (106); his pretense of wanting to see precisely
what is there only partly covers his “naturalized” colonialist behavior with his fetishes. At the same time, Parks dislocates the specific localities associated with the features normally associated with a vampire / other: the areas where the Venus is kept by colonialists are dark; the Docteur will not let the Venus out in society, hence keeping her “in the closet,” as it were. While the Chum refers to the supposed contagion of the Venus smell, it must be remembered that the dark places where she has been kept by exploiters have been smelly--the ship in which she is brought to England stinks and is dark. This taken into consideration, it can be said that Parks raises the question of the smell associated with the other (and with Dracula): whose smell is it really? Rather than permitting the Venus to be reduced to a stink and large buttocks surrounding a hole that, according to at least one critic, we are always made aware of in the play, Parks arguably questions exactly who the smell really belongs to. This question, along with the hole in question, can point up a colonialist lack, which drove colonialists to reduce the Venus to a sum of essentialized attributes (her sexuality / buttocks) in the first place.

While the Docteur is specifically to blame for the Venus’ abortions, it must be remembered that the consent for the abortions themselves occur in circumstances reminiscent of physical mass attacks (or threatened attacks) on the Venus. The Docteur’s express reason for the abortions is that he has “a reputation to protect”: the Venus, is by (colonialist) definition, “a bad woman.” However, the Docteur, in the context of the “mass attack” on the Venus’ ego, is himself associated with a bad mother--the Mother-Showman. The othering of the Venus is, earlier in the play, associated with a physical mass rape--she can’t leave the Mother-Showman because “they don’t let your kind run loose in the streets / much less set up their own shops” (56); the prevention of the Venus from independence and free association with society contextualized within the threat of a mass assault--if the Venus does not stop demanding to be let out from the
“protection” of the Mother-Showman, she might just “invite” the drunken men that fill a smoky pub next door “in to fuck [the Venus’] brains out” (56). The segregation of the Venus’ “kind” from society is bracketed by the knowledge that “society” has full access to the Venus’ “kind.” Parks unpacks the image of the bad mother / bad woman that was associated with the vampire in Stoker: the Venus is refused a “good” social role by an exploiter who has access to the colonialist society, where the Venus does not. Parks shows the Venus as separated from her “good” female roles by those who would display her as a fetish, hence pointing up the need of the colonialist society to distance itself from its lacks and its perversions. The bad mother is not simply a bad woman, who demasculinizes males, but a woman whose roles have been limited by males who fear their own lacks. On a similar note the “good” woman, the Bride-to-Be, dresses up as the Hottentot in order to secure the affections of her would-be spouse. Rather than contaminating the good women by her gaze, as the propaganda associated with prostitutes had it, the fetishization of the Hottentot is the construction of the colonialist gaze. The surface of the abyss is essentially laid bare in the scene described in court: upon gazing on the Hottentot, chaos ensued: “a fight ensued. 3 men died. Uh little boy went mad. Uh woman lost her child” (69). The themes of fear of the enclosing mother (the little boy went mad) and the loss of a child from horror portray the unimaginable in the confines of reality. On this site of apparent abyss, however, appears the need of the white man to create a fetish: a man, after having been sympathetic, “totally forgetting his compassion, shouted loud: “Good God, what butts!” / Thuh shock of her killed him, I think, / cause 2 days later he was dead” (69). The need to fetishize is linked to the role of performance as a “civilized” or “compassionate” man; this underwrites the naturalization inferred in the taking for granted of a fetish / stereotype. The process of the construction of a colonialist reality is shown in the same terms used to portray what is outside the
line of thought that can describe reality--loss of children from horror and chaos. The lack of boundaries that grant integrity to the body, which is seen in Fanon’s example of a vampire fantasy, is enacted for both for the colonialist and colonialized: Parks shows that the “mass attack” can occur in the same scene and in the same actions as the construction of the abyss. For what is done in this scene is a mass attack on the Venus’ ego as well.

The above-mentioned scene of mass attack threatened by the Mother-Showman is repeated when the Venus is bought by the Baron Docteur. The Baron Docteur’s offer to the Venus, which includes treatment of her as a sexualized possession (included in the terms, “you’ll sleep with me”), is followed by the Mother-Showman’s apparent belief that the Docteur changed his mind and wants his money back. Even in her apparently improved state of affairs, the Venus doesn’t get the lock on her door (which she requests from the Mother-Showman). She informs the Venus of still another crowd of inebriated men, whose stink is second only to hers. The Venus says “yes” to the Docteur’s proposal while the Mother-Showman is still ranting on. Similarly, the Docteur receives the same “yeses” from the Venus when he presses her into having an abortion. Finally, when the Venus is abandoned by the Docteur, a “Crowd of Spectators” rush into her room. The actual mass attack on the Venus consists of the Docteur’s decision to allow her to be “a splendid corpse.” Parks is careful to highlight the ambiguity of the concept of the vampire in this scene. Wright has noted that vampires show contagion and the Docteur has penetrated the Venus with it. What she does not notice is that the Docteur says, “it makes my work with her indecent, somehow.” The Chum answers that they can lock her up for indecency. Whatever more humane concept can have been behind the Docteur’s initial statement, the attribution to the other / vampire of moral (“indecency”) and physical contagion is brought out and applied to the Venus by The Chum. The shadow of the vampire falls over the scene, as
the fear of the vampire / terrorist is what makes colonialist society adhere and the only way to rid it of the vampire is to get rid of the colonialist reality (Kawash).

The contradiction posed to the colonialist society can appear in parallels between the Venus’ consciousness and the Docteur’s lack thereof of the lack of bodily integrity associated with the vampire and the process of fetishism and naturalization: if the Venus is conscious of her humanity, it poses that contradiction mentioned by Kawash of the native asking a reality that denies him his humanity, “who am I?” The sense of lack resident in the need to hide his masturbation from what should have only been a fetishized object forces the Docteur to ask the Venus not to look; the Venus asks her keeper not to look at her while she dies and while the crowd clamours to get in (again invoking the sense of a mass attack). The Venus’ conception of her body integrity allows her to mirror or double the actual use the court makes of her in reality:

As I note above, The Chum uses “indecency” in the context of the suspicion of physical and moral contagion that is associated with the vampire / other; when the court asks the Venus whether she has been “indecent,” the Venus answers, “I am just me” (76). The Venus not only asserts an irreducibility that does not coincide with the reduced fetish image or the abyssal figure that the charge of “indecency” can invoke, she answers the court by doubling its actual purpose in her case: the creation of her as a reduced image or an abyssal support of reality. After the Venus claims a human status, the court asks, “What’s that supposed to mean?” The court has no words for the Venus as a human in their society. The Venus then asks the court, “Would you like to see?” (the Venus’ “shame”). The sentence has almost the same weight as “would you like a feel,” and can strike at the very reductiveness inherent in the court’s refusal to accept “just me” as an answer to its question. It can accept the Venus’ sex organs as an essentialized and naturalized assessment of her identity in its reality, but hardly “just me.” Through enunciating
the naturalized language of the court in a way that doubles the intention of that language, the Venus exposes the language as not indicative of anything natural at all.

The Venus, in her “A Brief History of Chocolate,” likewise doubles the explanatory form of the court procedure--the list of historical documents, the most amusing of which is the Habeas Corpus, with which her body is ordered to come to the stand--and the Docteur’s list of her parts. In this doubling, the Venus points up the ambiguities of the history of chocolate, which signify on the ambiguities of love and morality in society. This contrasts with the slippery nature of the reality of court records and historical documents, which show nothing or prove nothing (interestingly, very much like the large heap of material that is assembled in Dracula, which contains not a shred of actual proof of the truth of the story); it contrasts as well with the fact that the parallel scene in which the Docteur reads the information gained from his dissection shows not that the Docteur has discovered anything at all, but rather disremembered the identity of the Venus as a human being by focusing, fetishizing, on her body parts.

The documents of the court show nothing about the reality of the case: a Baptismal certificate is mustered up by the Mother-Showman “as proof I take good care of her” (66-7); another exhibit is “a feather from the head of the so-called Venus” with a list of things it is supposed to do (such as cure infertility). Not surprisingly, the feather has only the value that is attributed to it--the Docteur wears it around his neck but he and his wife are childless. When the actual body of the Venus is presented to the court, she has the irreducible answer, “I am just me.” The continual use of the bestowal of values (which mean nothing) appears in the reading of the Bride-to-Be of the poem that runs, “My love for you, My Love, was artificial / Fabricated much like this epistle” whose function parallels the Docteur’s reading of his findings concerning the muscles, tendons and the possible relationship between a particular muscle as found in humans
as opposed to the chimpanzee. Only in the last few lines of the scene does the Docteur show a contrast between the meaning of the contents of the notebook that has a record of the results of the dissection and the meaning of a relationship with a human being: “Her charming hands… where was I?” (98). The Venus, by contrast, lists a narration of events that concern the meaning of chocolate in its history. While pseudoscience can deny her humanity and question relationships between her muscles and a chimpanzee’s, and while court records can show nothing of the important issues in a case in and of themselves, the Venus explains what was actually done concerning the possession of chocolate, and lists several colonial conquests and excursions. She notes that the meaning of chocolate has changed--it was once thought to be “tainted by the character of its heathen inventors.” While the issues brought up by the court and by the anatomist show the mentality of that court and the symbols, fetishes and reductions of its reality, the Venus’ speech on chocolate lists a serious of ludicrous suspicions related to chocolate. Considering that the Venus has been accused of indecency, which contains implications of moral and physical contagion, the suspicions of chocolate and related heathen associations can mimic the surface of the reality of the court and anatomist. Considering that the Docteur has told her to eat her chocolates while using her body as a fetish object to masturbate over (the ego invasion of this act is made even more apparent when the group of anatomists do the same), there is much that is poignant in the Venus’ relation of a history of chocolate. If she has been reduced in the gaze of The Man to something comparable to the landscape (as colonialized peoples according to Fanon [Kawash]), her relegating a history, contradictions and meaning to chocolate can point up the gaze that has denied her what she can relegate to the objects eaten in mimicry of the act of masturbation itself--the nipples of Venus.
David Spurr, in his discussion of colonial tropes, points out that the rationale of colonial regimes is often to justify their rule by arguing that without it, the “natives” would lose whatever social graces and cultural achievements that belong to them by the grace of their colonial oppressors. Spurr points out that the use of this trope, in reality, demonstrates that the continual need for affirmation of the colonial view of their oppressed peoples reveals a threatened psychological boundary on the part of the society with this need. For instance, the French colonial administrator, Albert Saurraut, states, “without us, without our intervention…these indigenous populations would still be abandoned to misery and abjection; epidemics, massive endemic diseases…their minds would still be degraded by the practice of base superstition and barbarous custom” (qtd. in Spurr 77). The implicit excuse for the exploitation of these “indigenous populations” is (as Spurr demonstrates) based on the abject circumstances and debased customs attributed to these populations. The emphasis on the diseases that these populations have carried (and by implication, may still transmit) is accompanied by the “base superstition and barbarous custom” of which these peoples stand accused. The link colonialist discourse makes between physical and social disease appears in Spurr’s use of Kristeva (with which he describes the colonial fear of “going native” through the abject influence of these disease carriers and their culture—implicitly associated, in terms of its potential apparent contagion, with a disease, since it can apparently dissolve the colonial subject in the manner of disease): the constant threat colonial subjects perceived to their established social order appears in “the obsessive repudiation of the Other” (79); Kristeva has demonstrated that a threatened established order feels the need to expurgate itself with the mechanism of the scapegoat, and, whether it is meant to take away the threat of the maternal, the female, or the savage, the scapegoat is an object onto which is projected the desire for a decline back into a threatening
state of undifferentiated passivity (attributed by colonials to their enslaved peoples), in which the subject “fluctuating between inside and outside, pleasure and pain, would find death along with nirvana” (Kristeva qtd. in Spurr 79). The internal desires and fears of boundarylessness, on the part of the colonial subjects, merge their constructions of the indigenous populations as diseased hordes with what can happen if the colonial subject becomes too much like the native (that is, the possibility for contagion is within socialization and, with that, the exchange of cultural values, just as the threat of literal diseases is attributed to the indigenous populace in question). The desires of the colonial subject, however, when they relate to the space created between the consumer and consumed, are often quite out in the open, as Deborah Geis notes concerning the colonial type exploitation of Hester in Parks’ In The Blood. Even people ostensibly dedicated to charitable purposes are quite particular about the type of poor that serve as food for their scopic consumption. Geis notes that the Reverend D. isn’t interested in the poor unless they have already been turned into products of colonialism through exoticization. “I want my poor looking good. I want my poor to know it was me who bought them such and such. I want my poor on tv….local poor don’t look good. Gimme foreign poor. Poverty exotica” (qtd in Geis 130). As Geis also notes, most of the characters in the play, who take part in the condemnatory circle about Hester, take part in a voyeuristic / sexual exploitation of Hester. This dynamic is enacted, along with the tropes employed by colonial regimes, in Parks’s Red Letter Plays. Reverend D., in his “confession,” states that “suffering is an enormous turn on” and that Hester, who is someone he implicitly admits to hurting (before her, while he was lying in “the gutter of the world,” he does not believe he has hurt anyone, until he encountered Hester): “She was one of the multitude. She did not stand out. The intercourse was not memorable” (78-79). The Reverend sees a spatial difference between himself and those stranded in the “gutter of
the world”; cathected are his voyeuristic-oral partial drives; the Reverend D’s look back at the space between the “gutter” he once lay in from his current, privileged point of view allows him a glimpse of himself in that gutter (and his fear of returning to it). So, while he has exploited Hester, he is afraid that his contact with this gutter-dweller is dragging him by the tails of the Symbolic he feels has taken him out of the gutter (e.g. his God) back into it; and, by implication, those who eat the helpless know what it is for the helpless to get consumed. “In all my days in the gutter I never hurt anyone / I never held hate for anyone … now the hate I have for her / and her hunger / and the hate I have for her hunger… God pulled me up / Now God, through her, wants to drag me down and sit me at the table / at the head of her fatherless house” (79). The hate the Reverend has, of course, is a sign of his fear that he will be dragged “down” to the gutter he sees Hester as dwelling in; the emphasized fear of her hunger and the table seat designed for him in the gutter demonstrate his fear of having to see himself in the position of the consumable after he has already been a consumer, driven by his need to use an interchangeable gutter dweller (“the intercourse was not memorable. She did not stand out”). This orality is underscored that Hester’s initial appear to him was her suffering, but her suffering is a result of “four fatherless children four fatherless mouths to feed // fatherless mouths fatherless mouths” (78); the Reverend’s characterization of Hester’s suffering with her children is in terms of “mouths to feed” that could be “fed” with a “father figure,” which is the position that threatens his boundary between himself and “the never ending gutter of the street of the world / You can crawl along it forever and never crawl out” (79). The Reverend’s fear of the threatening abject position in the hypothetical gutter is at the head of Hester’s fatherless table, which would be lined of course by the “fatherless mouths” that it would then be incumbent upon him to feed. Since he does have hindsight of the zone from which he has risen (“the gutter”), he sees himself in a feeding /
nurturing position that would be required by the gutter in which her “fatherless table” resides; this contrasts with the grotesque attraction that let him use Hester as a commodity—she was attractive not only because she was hungry, but because she had for “fatherless mouths,” and also because she had “a look in her eye that invites liaisons / eyes that say red spandex” (78). Hester, in Reverend D’s mind, was as specimen that could be used as a treat, a holiday of sorts, along with occasions for “red spandex,” and was that much more attractive because of her suffering, unfed state. Now that the Reverend D is confronted with a reentry to the “gutter,” through Hester, in effect, it is more apparent that what was attractive about her to begin with was the boundary that she herself represented for him—the “hate” that he feels for the hunger that he has experienced, and of which she is also now the maternal, threatening embodiment. The Reverend fears a kind of colonial self-consumption, produced by association with / enjoyment of an inhabitant of the zone in which he no longer views himself; the risk of her attraction (that is, the way that Hester’s family’s hunger, specifically, for him, tweaked his fears and at the same time assured him that he was in no position to descend to the state he fears) was a grotesque reaffirmation of his own boundaries, which are now in a very real state of threat—after all, it is “God” who, “through her” wants to “drag [him] down / and sit [him] at the table of her fatherless house” (79). The position of “father” contrasts with his safe title of Reverend; a symbolic father to his church, he has acquired a distance from actually taking the place of a “father” when “father” effectively means “source of food,” to him. The fragility of the colonial mentality (to enjoy suffering of undifferentiated masses from the unbridgeable distance of their strength) appears when the signifiers that create colonialist power sources threaten to change—while the Reverend, at one time, believed that he could enjoy suffering and hunger, these things still
invoke great terror in him; he could end up literally “at the table,” a commodity just as consumable as Hester’s undifferentiated “mouths.”

Hester is used as an object for consumption in the terms of consumption by a character named Welfare—who, like the Reverend, is very self-conscious regarding the social distance that Welfare sees between herself and Hester. “The balance of the system depends on a well drawn boundary line” between “our kind and their kind” (60-1). Of course, Hester is one of “their kind.” Welfare spends a good deal of her confession recounting what she believes she has “never” done and what she “never sees” before getting around to rationalizing, in oral terms, the reason she and her husband effectively have Hester with their tea. Welfare starts her speech, titled thus, by telling us that she “Walks the Line”; that is, she is a liminal figure, whose job, which apparently enables her to be a member of “our kind,” necessitates a certain amount of contact with Hester’s societal zoning. After airing her clean laundry in public, which is a way of reaffirming her subjectivization in the social gaze (that is the quality of life she and her “dear husband” share—by the grace of the “dear husband”) to a suspicious degree, she adds, “My dear husband he needed / a little spice… We both needed spice” (61). But the body they are seeking out for this purpose belonged to “spice” that apparently required something in return—that is, “Hookers. Neurotics. Gold Diggers” (61). Amiga Gringa notes the irony that Hester walks the “straight and narrow” regardless of the way in which her society views her (71), and apparently is resistant to Amiga Gringa’s lucrative sex schemes and does not want to behave like a hooker (and, unlike a “gold digger” does not even tell Welfare where the fathers of her offspring can be found); and there are a lot more people from whence Hester comes—Welfare’s husband suggests that she “bring one of those gals home from work” (61).
Hester is treated, in the context of Welfare’s request for sex and after it, as one of the undifferentiated multitude—she could have been any one of the “gals from work,” and Welfare repeats after some more colonial tropes that “I should emphasize that she is a low-class person… we have absolutely nothing in common… as her caseworker I realize that maintenance of the system depends on a well drawn boundary line… And I am, after all, a married woman” (62). Welfare invokes the same boundary that Reverend D does (the class boundaries) but adds the one factor that makes her a step removed from Heather in the eyes of the law (she emphasizes her own status as a “married woman,” whereas Hester is the unmarried mother who keeps having children with fathers unknown to the law). Welfare’s boundaries are threatened in that she “crossed the line” (even while being “so afraid [she’d] catch something” from having a threesome involving Hester) when Hester allowed her to “slap her across the face” during sex. Whereas the Reverend sees himself as threatened by the zone Hester represents for him (”the gutter”), Welfare is threatened by her own sexual feelings for Heather, even in the context (or perhaps because of this context) of viewing Hester as someone who could have some sort of communicable disease; Welfare’s sexual drive is what gives her something in common with Hester, regardless of the labels their society has put on them, and Welfare defends against the affects cathected by this drive by protesting that “it was my first three some / and it won’t happen again” (62).

The “line” Welfare is so afraid of crossing is reinforced by the social props she uses in the context of having Hester with her tea: “We had tea / From my mother’s china… marzipan on matching china plates” (61). The sexuality that causes Welfare to “cross the line” is shuffled off onto her husband, who is apparently sufficiently sure of his social subjectivization to casually ask his wife to bring home an undifferentiated “gal” from her agency—while Welfare is
establishing conduct boundaries with her tea set, she notices that her “Hubby” was “hard as Gibraltar. He told us what he wanted and we did it. / We were his little puppets” (61). Welfare’s reduction of herself in this position to the level of a puppet (in the course of which she makes a slip and makes herself a “we” with Heather) provides a carnivalesque space for enjoyment in which she can share the same space with Heather for the purpose of this show; the difference between their bodies, which Welfare notices, emphasizes that while the show continues, the safety of the fact that this is a show for her husband, in effect, Welfare can take the position of a “puppet” or just another body, which can be compared with Hester’s body (“Her body is better than mine. / Not a stretchmark on her. Im a looker, too don’t get me wrong just in a different way and / Hubby liked the contrast”). Welfare’s observations as to what “Hubby” likes provide the distance between viewer and show for Welfare, through the space provided by her husband’s placement as voyeur. Before Welfare realizes that she “crossed the line,” she recounts her fear of contagion from Hester, and then verbally positions her husband between herself and Hester while recounting her physical reactions to sex with Hester: “She stuck her tongue down my throat / and Hubby doing his thing on top / my skin shivered” (62); Welfare’s husband, by virtue of his sexual activity, is a psychological barrier even in this recounting of Welfare’s sense that she has disturbed her own boundaries—Welfare has no need to repeat the information that her husband joins the “puppets” for sex, but she verbally interposes his body (that is, what he was doing, “his thing on top”) between herself and her own shivering skin in contact with Hester’s.

Suzan-Lori Parks’ point in regard to the scopic drive that revolves around Hester, as it just happens to be Hester (it could have been one of the girls Welfare sees at work every day) is hammered in by the “show” Hester’s associate, Amiga Gringa, wants to put on with Hester; The
usual colonial tropes of degradation are there, but the entire scene begs the question as to who is using the tropes—who is in fact setting this “show,” which involves Hester, whereas it is Hester’s lines that have been crossed because she will no longer do the same “show” with Amiga Gringa. The show, of course, is Amiga Gringa’s—her speech / confession regarding Hester begins with “In my head, I got it going on” (71); the show involves using Hester albeit “with a little conjolining to get her to do it with me / for an invited audience… she let me touch her however I wanted. I let her ride my knees. She made sounds like an animal. One day, one of the guys took advantage” (71). This scene easily recalls the Venus and the person who uses her to show her off for profit—the Venus’ professed animality is what supposedly draws one of her gawkers to death through its sheer force (from the perspective of the gawker; all she does is give him a feather and he has a heart attack; similarly, Hester, in a bad situation (which shows since she won’t do the show that Amiga has “going on” in what is explicitly her head, not Hester’s), finds herself treated like an animal—that is, animal sounds and attributes are projected onto her by Amiga—and tries to survive. There is a curious question as to whose sounds came from whom, however—Amiga Gringa says Hester put “her hand between my legs”; considering that Amiga is the one who “has it going on” in her head, it is not hard to deduce that Amiga has lines that she will cross but that Hester will not—a clear differentiation between Hester, Amiga, Reverend D. and Welfare. Amiga even admits, Hester’s struggle to survive entails more effort than her own: “Funny how a woman like Hester / driving her live all over the road / most often chooses to walk the straight and narrow”(71)—Amiga plans on selling her progeny, whereas Hester, after losing her child to the built up fury her world has unjustly given her, only hands two bloody hands that come from losing a child. However, Hester’s return from this is to wish that she had instead had many more children than she had—“[She places her hand in the pool made
of Jabber’s {her son’s blood}, and says, “I shoulda had a hundred… I shoulda had a hundred thousand. A hundred-thousand, a whole army shoulda! I shoulda. / one right after the other, spitting em out with no years between. Spitting ‘em out! One after another: / Tail to head: / Spitting ‘em out: / Bad mannered, Bad mouthed Bad Bad Bastards! An whole army full I shoulda”(107). The prison bars come down, according to the stage direction, while Hester does admit an inchoate moan—the “mmmm” of regret for not living in the position her society demanded of her in terms of blood; it is not coincidental that in the companion Red Letter Play, Hester returns as an abortionist—the blood she sheds is her own child’s, and his own, and therefore hers; but she has already been caught between two wounds, two lacks of the world—the abject lack of her socio-symbolic other, and the awful lack in the Evil God type other that insists that it speaks with the voice of the ideology of the day, which can whimsically curtail the rights of others, under the impression that the other “really” likes whatever torment is being performed (Žižek). Hence, the contexts of the two plays are so interconnected, the connection by virtue of pure drive (se faire) between Hester and the First Lady (who was, when she was a child, the “spoiled little rich girl” who refuses to keep a secret when another child [Hester’s son] steals food because he is hungry; Hester and First Lady are separated by their respective classes, but not by their respective biology—First Lady has to give her delusional husband, who believes he is the mayor of a country, as opposed to a small town, an offspring, and he seems to be the problem with that particular dilemma; First Lady, in a moment of desperation (she’s afraid being replaced with Hester’s friend, Canary, on the grounds that she has failed to produce an offspring) also hopes that her child will end up being “the enemy in his army”(191). First Lady goes on to dispose the abject nature of her life: “When yr up against a wall / Yll take a poke from some poor slob / The child Im growing will be my salvation / Who knows? He may grow up to govern the
nation” (191). In Lacanian / Kristevan psychoanalysis, the symptom (that is, wanting to have a child) is context, but what is relevant is the drive that creates the symptom (Brirksted-Breen); what creates the drive on the part of both Hester and First Lady to have a child (Hester at the end of the first play, First Lady in the second—and of course Hester’s sense of superiority, of finally winning over the hostility of the society she sees the First Lady as battenin off of (and she is, indeed the cause of her son’s insane imprisonment—this is a world where children are sent to jail and turned into literally “Monsters” [which is what the Hunters call Hester’s son, when they search for him before Hester recognizes her scar matches her own; the dual scars of course recall the dual cut of an obscene law, and the sense of the ability to touch, through the very comparison of this cut; the way Hester has bitten her son is a seal, a bond, a mark that shows a claim; her acceptance of Monster’s scar as his claim is her acceptance of her son; she allowed herself to be branded as an abortionist to get her son out of his unjust jail sentence [which the bureaucracy both can and cannot keep straight—when Hester gets the picnic that she has paid for at least twice, with the son she hasn’t seen in years, she’s told that he’s the man who killed her son; however, the Hunters are out looking for him while she is passively raped by the man she believes to be her son’s killer]). Hester’s drive, as well as the First Lady’s, is to live; the irony is that the extension of both their bloodlines is killed in the course of what the world has made of Hester, so that she bleeds when someone else needs the help of an abortionist; the fact that Hester goes back to her job at the end of the play merely shows that she has no way out of this world, but she has still acted and triumphed over her enemy by taking the one thing that can never be replaced: her child. The second time Hester cuts her son, it is to prevent him from being tortured to death—another form of abject physical distortion that she can prevent; she can’t prevent his years in prison, and they are both marked with the same scar from her mouth from all
those years this prison has eaten—but in the end she can only kill him with the mercy she has shown (according to Canary and other women she has helped).

Kristeva argues that abjection can be “reabsorbed in the grotesque, a way of living it from inside” (165); this is in the context of her discussion of the view of women’s bodies as shapes, abstracted from maternal sexuality if only while the relegated shape holds its consistency for its projecting subject. This is also in the context of her point that the atmosphere of Carnival allows for the grotesque to hold an occupiable space, a boundary created of its very unreality, which allows the subject who fears the defilement of maternity (and/or the subjected populace) to enjoy what would otherwise be considered abject, while the so-called real abject teases the edges of these limits (and, ultimately, reasserts itself, transforming the delightful abstract female danders—denuded of sexuality—back into females that carry their sexual threat).

Kristeva’s theory of Abjection (in particularly the way it works to demonstrate the threat of the female sex to the subject implicated in his abjection) works well here to provide a defining boundary between what should be excluded from the “clean and proper self,” and what is, in reality, what is not either clean nor proper. Kristeva’s comparison of Celine’s women (the ballet dancers and the whores with obscene gorges in their bodies) provides a split in the Celine whose gaze returns always to himself; in short, my point is that Kristeva’s work demonstrates that when the sexist/colonialist/racist subject looks at his “other,” he is looking what is missing in himself—an intolerable, impossible boundary, that even requires a head injury to explain the extent of its need for the internalization of an ideal ego (that is, Kristeva notes, that the extent of the influence of Celine’s head injury on his writing his never been fully explained). This split in Celine’s behavior is a perfect classist/sexist match to the split that the colonial/classist society that Chilli (one of Hester’s lovers in The Red Letter Plays), feels the need to fit
into in order to maintain his own boundaries; the obvious structural similarity between Chilli’s split and Celine’s demonstrates Lori-Park’s critique of colonialist / classist / sexist / racist oppression—not merely in negative terms, but in the contrast that Hester’s positive terms (in spite of truly intolerable, abject conditions, in spite of being literally branded by the end of the second play, both in terms of her attempt to love the children that her abject world (presented by a standard mass attack on the ego in the very frame of the play; the redundant accusations of this group ego that condemns her for having still another “bastard” show that this frame is frozen in the wastes of racism / classism that will not seem to relinquish its “big hand coming down” on Hester’s world. Hester’s motility in this world, which was, as is literally spelt out from the first, was written about her “by someone to make us feel bad”—that is the graffiti that says “slut!” marked on the wall of the bridge she has been driven to live under with her children because, at least in part, of her refusal to tell Welfare who their respective fathers are; that is, just because she doesn’t have a wide range of choices within the terms of her world, she refuses to be frozen within its abject social frame, which either ends the first Red Letter Play with the “big hand coming down” out of the sky to take away Hester’s sight (from looking at the eclipse of the sun). In other words, the colonial abject deprives its victims of sight (Helene Cixious has already pointed out that colonialists have gone through the captive countries with “the eyes of their souls cut out”); sensory deprivation is not only a blocking of the erogenous zones that allow us to make ourselves (the Lacanian formula for the drive is “se faire,” to make oneself [Lacan, Brousse]). The insecurity of the colonial world is not only demonstrates by Hester’s lovers splits as symptoms of what it does to its victims; the insecurity is begun by the eruption of Hester’s refusal to give away what is precious to her, and to triumphantly redefine the terms of her own story. Even in the end of the last play, when Hester has triumphed, quite bloodily, over the
woman she has held as an enemy and whose child was the illegitimate offspring of Hester’s son (whom Hester aborts, against her enemy’s will, as an act of vengeance—this society that has branded Hester as an abortionist has, in Hester’s belief, taken her son from her in prison as well; the person she blames is the “rich girl” who becomes “First Lady” of a town apparently in the middle of nowhere (the nonlocality of the town and the major’s strange, if not psychotic, belief that he will someday make an army of the town and therefore requires soldiers of his own ilk to fight in it; First Lady decides to remain pregnant with (whom she does not know is) Hester’s child in order to be an eruption in the army planned by her husband: Her illegitimate son could be “The enemy in his army.”) The true tragedy of the play is that two women (not even counting Canary, and all the women who need Hester’s help in the middle of the night, since she doesn’t charge what other abortionists do, and is known for her discreteness; that is, two women whose abject world and their respective places in it were made for them by the social-symbolic of that world) end by killing each other, au fond, in the dark, because of personal issues inculcated by a world that created them. A sad story indeed—but the point is what is left alive before the end, the triumph of flesh over the montage of fixtures of a frozen social symbolic law; Hester’s bloody abortive act is a reenactment of the rape she suffers in prison, when she believes her Boy is dead and the prison wardens have sent a murderer to her for the big picnic that she’s saving for (“Cos freedom ain’t free,” as Hester is continually reminded by the character who acts as “Freedom Fund,” an association supposedly created to allow loved ones to buy each other out of prison; this is, of course, another fixture in the play, another obscene emergence of bureaucracy (the amount “owed” for the promised “picnic” always changes—and Hester is expected to accept the “new” price; this sort of whimsical bureaucracy that never changes in that it always changes for its own abject ends (it’s the freedom fund that literally is not free—much like Kristeva’s use of
the story of the slave owner who tells slaves he buys them to give them freedom, but his intention is only to sell them again; quite literally, according to one of Kristeva’s formulations of abjection, the friend who stabs you).

“If Celine is fond of women on occasion, he is so as sensualist-voyeur of pure form, a beauty that only lets itself be conquered by the gaze, one made up of lines, muscle, rhythm and health. A ballerina is the most perfect example of that, preferably a foreigner—the opposite of the mother language, without language if need be, all sensitivity and acrobatics… And [Celine] is a pagan on account of [his] absolute adoration of physical beauty. [he] is in love, madly in love, with a four year old girl at the height of her blonde gracefulness and beauty and health!” (Powers 166) The Celine who swoons without being a rapist, merely a voyeur, has a very different take on unhealthiness; this unhealthiness is associated with his own mental view of it—an extatic enunciation of destruction of a debased female body; while he is merely the “adorer” of the elevated, completely innocent (at four years old) and untouchable female body. “It is with prostitutes and nymphomaniacs that we are presented with a wild, obscene and threatening femininity. Their abject power is no less kept in the background owing to a shift in the narrator’s vision which simultaneously gives of that power an image of downfall, abject poverty and senseless masochism…. The pinnacle of this compound of abomination and fascination, sex and murder, attraction and repulsion… is the prostitute… with the bleeding sore of her loving body reduced to a wound in the ass” (168). The Celine who is threatened with the femininity of women who assert it in some way (that is, the nymphomaniacs and prostitutes); their “abject power” over him is “no less kept in the background owing to a shift in the narrator’s vision”—that is, Kristeva’s overview of Celine’s narrator is that the shift we see between women is the
shift we see in the narrator’s vision, which comments upon the narrator, not upon whomever he has chosen as an object for his adoration or attraction-repulsion routine. Celine’s literature of the abject presents the boundaries entailed by the split subject of sexism. Note how Suzan-Lori Parks creates both a fantasy space (that is, in psychoanalytic terms, a space without time—where the “now” does not move forward because the fantasy space controls the patient’s sense of time [Birkstead-Breen]), which draws attention to the frozen, redundant nature of the split classist / racist subject, which frames both Red Letter Plays: What we / the audience and what Hester sees is one version of Chilli—her old lover and father of one of her children—but the version of Chilli presented at first is the Chilli who is trapped in the timelessness of his own memory, in which Hester is waiting for him, virginal, chaste and forlorn, without any motility because in his fantasy nothing changes, with his sole child on her hip; it is this Chilli, of his fantasy, that shows up to marry Hester. Unfortunately, her other children, by other men, with whom she’s been involved, in the movement of her life, since Chilli, show up. Chilli literally shows up with a costume for his fantasy and takes it back the second Hester is not someone he wishes to attach to the fantasy of his “clean and proper self.” He throws a premade wedding dress on her “right over her old clothes” (90)—until her children enter; then Chilli shares the frozen space that he has not released, and which no longer exists: “I carried around this picture of you, sad and lonely, with our child on yr hip. Struggling to make do. Struggling against all odds, bit triumphant. Triumphant against everything. Like—hell, like Jesus and Mary… My dear Hester. Or so I thought”; and with that he takes away the (adjustable) engagement ring, pulls the wedding dress off her and leaves her there. It is appropriate that Chilli’s monologue regarding Hester focuses around not having a real car to drive, driving a pretend car in a junkyard, while Hester made it real by pretending there was a breeze and saying she can feel it; again, Chilli, so bound by
customs and fantasies, is unable to appreciate Hester’s life, and movement—her ability to bring wind to a car that isn’t moving (96-97). Again, it is not Hester’s misconduct, but rather her life that is resented—a resentment made clear by the group effectively synonymous with Kennedy’s concept of THEY, at the beginning and end of the first Red Letter Play, “In The Blood.” Instead of THEY, the voice of the Evil Being, social-symbolic, here, is ALL: “THERE SHE IS! WHO DOES SHE THINK SHE IS? THE NERVE SOME PEOPLE HAVE. SHOULDN’T HAVE IT IF YOU CAN’T AFFORD IT. AND YOU KNOW SHE CANT. AIN’T GOT NO SKILLS. CEPT ONE…WHOS THE DADDY? SHE WONT TELL. WONT TELL BECAUSE SHE DOESNT KNOW. WHEN YOU’VE HAD SO MUCH ACTION, YOU LOSE A FRACTION OF YOUR GOOD SENSE… JUST PLAIN STUPID IF YOU ASK ME AIN’T NO SMART WOMEN GOT 5 BASTARDS AND NOT A PENNY TO HER NAME… IT WONT END WELL FOR HER. HOW DO YOU KNOW? I GOT EYES, DON’T I? BAD NEWS IS IN HER BLOOD, PLAIN AS DAY” (7); This entire group of people makes a self-fulfilling prophecy about a new mother—who comes out, in the face of this mass hostility, with “My treasure, my joy.” The way the hostile sentences run together create the effect of movement, cohesiveness within this abject fall of voices whose hostility is the “hand” that crushes Hester at the end, when she has literally lost her “woman parts” against her will. This surgical rape is what ends a play that began about life beginning with the exultation of it being “my treasure, my joy.” The people responsible for this do come forward—with self justifications that display their guilt about the Hester they have consumed. This last, or at least most obvious, attack on the ego, is in very much the same language as how the play began—it signifies the people who have identified themselves throughout the play as using the abject system to use Hester; it allows them to show expressions of sympathy for what they all could have prevented themselves, were it not for the object for
consumption that they feel they must absorb in order not to be themselves consumed. For instance, Welfare, after Hester has been denuded of her “woman’s parts” against her will, says, “Is she in any pain?” And then she relapses into her usual costume as the married woman who is somehow differentiated from Hester—“No more mistakes,” she concludes, in her usual role. And then they look at the letter that has now been written on the wall in blood—the wall that was used to shame her before her children—and everyone only sees the letter “A”—“That’s as far as she got,” Welfare concludes (108–9). Hester, however, has another meaning for that sign—it is a sign that translates as, “it was far as you let me go until you crushed me”; it is for that she holds up her bloody hands immediately after Welfare’s comment on how far she managed to master the alphabet. “Hester holds up her hands. They’re covered with blood. She looks up with outstretched arms” (109), and what she has to answer the gaze of Welfare and the remainder of the ALL that has consumed her in one way or another, while she herself is groaning with hunger pangs throughout the play—she has literally given her body for her children, and the people who have effectively used her in their own parts of either not helping (and using Hester instead) or of literally refusing to take responsibility for the children they have fathered. It is appropriate that Chilli is the one who asks what the bloody “A” on the wall truly means—he has been an extension of the frozen fantasy of this society that is satisfied when no more life and movement can begin. It is also abjectly appropriate that he leaves Hester alone and bloody—he clicks his clock and goes on with his timely affairs, another apparition of the insanely bureaucratic abject, another agent of the finger of the “big hand coming down” (110) for Hester at the end of the first play.
The cannibalistic notions associated by Fanon’s vampire metaphor (Kawash) with colonial regimes, appear in the too-loud denials of the Hunters, in regard to “their song,” which reminds whomever hears it, and themselves, that they specifically do not “eat what we catch,” because “that’d be a bit much, dontcha think?”; this denial, and the Hunters’ overall bloodthirsty behavior (they are looking at the same knife catalogue that Butcher uses to order instruments for cutting meat, and discussing who should have gotten which parts of their last victim [that is, the last demonized so-called criminal they have physically destroyed]), speaks louder than a confession. Meanwhile, Hester’s choices, in the second Red Letter Play, were limited in her world’s eyes to being branded and having a chance to get her son—aka sign of agency—the ability to “buy” her son “back”; the cost of the choice that gets her what appears the fruits of her agency is the consumption of her life, which must be spent performing the unseemly but necessary business of “the working woman,” or the abortionist, if she is to have the mobility and means to get her son out of prison. The deviousness with which Hester is led on to believe that she can get her “Boy” back, by a corrupt bureaucracy, is structurally identical to the dynamic of the way Kristeva describes Borges’ Lazarus Morell’s exploitation of slaves (slaves are lured away with the expectation of freedom, only to be used and die; Morell is the friend / benefactor that is their user / killer—an example of the abject or abject part) (Powers 24); Morell’s behavior, if this “machine” is “transformed into a social institution,” conforms to the structure of fascism (Powers 25)—hence the abjection of fascism itself is in the bureaucratic machine that has ruined Hester and her Boy (who has been made a “Monster” because of what the people around him did).

Throughout the play, the absurdity of the charges that can permanently condemn a person to prison is underscored (while the desires of those willing to hurt others are achieved or are
likely to bear fruit, to reference Amiga Gringa’s grotesque decision to have a child only to literally sell it, and her emphasis that she will get a good price because it will be “white” [whereas Hester repeatedly makes the point she never tells Welfare who the fathers of her children are; even though they should support their respective children, Hester will not betray a trust she has taken on herself in good faith; this contrasts with the extent to which the fellow members of her society do not act in good faith]). For example, Butcher explains some of the charges brought against his daughter to Hester: She has committed such “crimes” as “unlawful reproduction… claiming to have multiple orgasms… making love at gunpoint… looking into the eyes of her arresting authority”—etc (“Fucking A” 160). The huge amount of nonsense charges beg a serious question—Butcher’s daughter, Lulu (who may or may not be an allusion to Amirir Baraka’s Dutchman), has also been charged with what appear to be valid crimes, such as embezzlement and highway robbery (160); since the majority of the “crimes” with which Lulu has been charged are obvious nonsense, it must be asked whether the charges that seem legitimate are the product of legal lynching and are equally senseless; considering the arbitrary horror of the world of the play, that question might be answered unfortunately.

The consumption that Hester faces by not wearing a bloody apron can be argued to have been imprinted In The Blood, and Fucking A is an effective answer to first Red Letter Play—if she is already marked (by the hand coming down on her, the aspersions of her society), and if the only mark she can have is a sort of symbolic death [she’s shooed out of establishments because of her abortionist brand, her A’s smell], then she is between deaths / marks as it were, because she leaves her own mark on her son so she’ll know him; her last mark that she leaves on the man she knows as her son is a slit throat, a clean death—precisely to save him from the abject fate that awaits him at the hands of the Hunters; she then interferes after his last moment of life, to
ironically take her revenge on what would have been his son, who would have belonged to a woman who wants to see an enemy in her husband’s army. The earlier play creates a context in which Hester has apparently transformed into someone who has been treated like an animal to someone who tries to stop other women from getting into the same sort of “trouble” she herself has suffered—the bonding moment between Hester and the Butcher, in which he tells her that “there’s no shame in a bloody apron”; Butcher, Hester’s suitor in the second Red Letter Play, allows for a firm cut between killing people through various means (the Hunters who deny too consistently that they do not eat what they catch for anyone’s comfort, have various ideas in regard to what to do to Monster, for instance), and killing an animal painlessly—humanely. Although Hester’s violence against First Lady is the best vengeance she can surmise, what she does after this violence is go back to her work—not because her son is alive and will come home to her again, but because it is her work in this world. She has located her position in its stinking mess (e.g. one of the only literate people in town, whom Hester uses to write her letters to her son, is a drunken imbecile called Scribe), does not deceive herself with the illusion that the abject state of her position is a “necessary service,” a back door, if you will, into the lack of the lack of the Evil Big Other, whose own lack appears in the abjection it inflicts on the people it would choose to victimize. But what should be the final point of the last Red Letter Play is that Hester’s action of going back to work, after Butcher and Canary and First Lady have left, after Hester has had her inevitably problematic revenge, is that Hester’s reentry into her work with the big other is a mirror of two cuts—one to mark herself and her son, and one to kill him; one to terminate her son forever, for the sake of giving him and herself a kind of justice, in a system that has none.
And here we are back in cannibalism—the ultimate consumption of humans used as flesh food; the people after Hester’s escaped convict son, whom she doesn’t know about until he reaches her and compares scars as well, are all about dividing the pieces of their captured—very much like the slave hunters and night riders of more historicized times (DuBois, Litwack etc); the lack of historical grounding, the very lack of reality of this town that is supposedly some sort of nation, but is at the same time a small town, all but a protrusion of a lack of a lack in the Evil Big Other of racism that essentially controls the town; the lack of any specific historical context in the second Red Letter Play allows a decentered effect and asks the important question as to whether, due to classism / racism, people like Hester and her son are subjected to abject positions (they are necessarily both marked, identified and therefore socially positioned by their respective scars—the abortionist’s brand and the scar Hester gave her son in order to remember him (the reminder of which, throughout the play, of course, highlights the irony of the end of the play—the only genetic trace left of her son was aborted in an act of vengeance. The refrain of the Hunters, set out for the reward for catching the escapee who has, in the racist tradition of mug shots and demonization (Smith on Dubois), been termed “Monster,” by them, is, “We Hunt / But we do / Not / Eat what we catch. / Thad be a bit much /Dontcha think?”(143). Considering that this song is the Hunters’ repeated refrain (and considering the group dimension their presence recalls from the beginning of the first Red Letter Play [the simultaneous chorus]), it is important that a single line of this song is set apart for emphasis: The word “Not”; considering the repeated use of this song and this explicit, set apart denial, along with the need for an explanation for the denial, “Thatd be a bit much / Dontcha think?” it is easy to make the obvious connection to some sort of feeding going on of which the Hunters are aware. The scene before their first song is made up of the scopic satisfaction they possess at seeing their human prey suffer, and a direct
connection between this scopic satisfaction and oral satisfaction. The connection between the
scopic power of the Hunters’ abject delight in torture and Kristeva’s abjection is easy to make:
the first time the Hunters appear in the play for a long talk, the conversation involves admiring
knives (for an obvious use, on their part), and bickering over who deserved the most prestigious
body part of their last victim—because the one who turned him into a target, to be bloodied by
themselves and their dogs, was the one who made the dogs charge by saying “There he is!”(140);
the hypocrisy of their demonization of their would be victims is underscored—they read a flier
of “Monster’s” supposed crimes, while laughing about other tortures they have committed and
reading a knife catalogue (140-143). Of course, this echoes centuries of lynching; the ahistorical
nature of Lori Parks’ writing here points to the continuing acts of violence without neat,
historical cut offs (for example, what took place during Jim Crow was not quite out of the
ordinary long after the period “should” have ended).

At this point, it is necessary to take a note of both Kristeva’s and Lori-Parks’ use of the
virgule: Kristeva notes that “melody alone reveals the intimacy of emotional depths… in the
end, however, the slippage of emotion toward music and dance actually opens into the
void”(191); this void appears: it is the vocabulary of slang, “especially because of its emotion, its
very violence, and especially because the reader does not understand it, it is of course a radical
instrument of separation, of rejection, and at the limit, of hatred”(191); this melody, this slang,
comes out in Celine’s rhythm, of course, as well as his punctuation: Celine’s way of remodeling
normative syntax, is by focusing on the logic of its enunciation, privileged above the message
itself. Hence, when there is perversion (such as Celine’s image of the birds in the Spring—who
are effectively trapped in the toilets—he sees them trapped and defiled and is in the same
position as defiler himself by virtue of the shared gaze; but what predominates is something far
more subtle—“At every virgule, there is a slight tremolo, less than a punctuation, less than a simple linking, and it gives Celine’s writing a very particular thrill, that connotes what is musical or intimate—in short, what is sexually desirable” (Powers 195). However, the split between Celine’s sometimes pre-objectal intonations, and his hold on reality, becomes apparent in analysis—“Consciousness of the other’s existence would demand repetition for the purpose of additional clarity and thus lead to segmentation. In that type of sentence, the speaking subject would be in two places: his own identity (where he goes straight for the information, the rheme), and that of objective expression for the other, in which he goes back, repeats, clarifies” (195). The rheme, of course, presents information about the theme, but does not necessarily show the ability to substitute the themes (that is, negotiate the terms of the registers of the subject’s existence).

This incoherence typifies the Kafkaesque court, Kristeva’s abjection and clarifies one thing that Lori-Parks consistently does to set up the “truth” of what is really going on—except that Lori-Parks, unlike Celine, uses the place of history that never stops, along with the oral and scopic drives that it has served some people far too well. The Hunter’s song happens after a long discussion between hunters—over who should get which body part of their latest victim; the hunters have a dispute—over who should have had the prize of the victim’s balls. When the first hunter makes this claim, it is overruled by the second hunter, who dismisses it on the basis that “you weren’t the first to eye him”(141); a clear connection exists between desire to possess human body parts and deserving to do so on the basis of sight—the partial scopic and oral drives are clearly connected here; it also should be remembered that Hester spends the first Red Letter Play going blind—even Hester’s lapses demonstrate the insanity of her world; the hunters use
their eyes for their prey; Hester is giving her body to old lovers, while going blind, in order to
feed her children.

But Kristeva’s demonstration of Celine’s use of his melodies and punctuations, and what
they would mean to a speaking subject allows us a peek into Lori-Parks’ formulaic strategy—
what she calls her “Spell,” which is defined as “An elongated and heightened rest. Denoted by
repetition of figures names with no dialogue. Has a sort of architectural look” (in “Author’s
Elements of Style”); what this functions as is very much the truth of what is going on—a
nonverbal communication in which the features of the body and its somatic interactions, and gets
to the theme the two in the “line up,” as it were, have to speak about. A good example, that is
preceded by literally the same conflicting concepts as Celine’s example, given by Kristeva
above, is when Hester meets First Lady on the street. When Hester happens upon this
unfortunate encounter, she and the first lady silently face each other before Hester’s honest
“Bitch,” and First Lady’s attempt to deny blame or even recognition with her “Excuse
me?” (148). The hostility, which Hester feels necessary to verbalize in the “speech” that
permeates the play (effectively, it is a special language whose melodies communicate the
meaning of the subject in a way that ordinary language would require a cover for a hole in its
necessary lacks) is already expressed by the silence of that confrontational, silent look in this
place, together with Hester’s honest emotion and First Lady’s dodge; the “Excuse me” itself is a
sign of dismissal of what has passed in the silent “architecture” these two women have built.
Hester is in this midst of remembering her last letter she had written to her son, when she
encounters First Lady: “Darling son, its spring again and I’m outside scrubbing the marble walk.
The same walk way we scrubbed every spring since we went to work for them… No shame in
telling a lie. “I still work for the Rich People.” Ha! Better to lie than to have him be ashamed
because his mother is a baby killer. “Darling Son!” It says, “It’s spring again and so Im..”(148).
And then Hester meets First Lady—and both the language of “talk” and the language of the body of both women collide—Hester’s entire harangue is about “You and your slack, dried up prissy pussy,” how First Lady, in her curse may never conceive, and, before the “talk” she mentions Canary’s secret that the mayor is planning to leave First Lady; but her “talk” is less about a secret language (which isn’t so secret—even one of the Hunters knows “a little” of it), and more of a way of making terms sound the way they feel. “Supkah nekkie frostkrisp Chung-Chung!
Noonka Blech tryola die!”(150). The words actually mean a curse of First Lady’s nonproductive anatomy. The important thing is that they also sound that way—the “frost” in the “frostkrisp” easily describes a frigid state, which is what Hester believes First Lady is possessed; “tryola die” is pretty evident, but the sound of its meaning makes it real in a sense that the phrases “excuse me” or “drop dead” would not have. Similarly, the “Chung-Chung” gives the onomatopoeiac impression, although caps may be needed, to signify the orifice that has been cursed; the heavy, thick and worthless sound of “chung chung” communicates Hester’s message to First Lady in a way that is both personal and understood. Hester, unlike Celine, does not require a split to see an other—she has been othered herself enough to know who the others around her are and what they have meant to her life; hence, Lori-Parks’ Hester would not require the same sort of analysis that Celine would, precisely because Hester does not require splitting in order to deal with others (for instance, she “handles” the Butcher well enough to make him [unknowingly] participate in her revenge against First lady—she is aware of his ego, and its demands; she knows he won’t like smuggling “Monster” away from danger because he’s “so law abiding,” but he’ll do it, she decides).
Žižek makes much of the impossibility of a narrative that is intruded by the real of pornography—it is by definition an intrusion, not part of a story that makes sense; hence the senselessness of Kafka’s The Trial’s bureaucracy makes sense in that it follows the formula for abjection—an inappropriate scream, from a surprising sexual partner, in the courtroom for which Joseph K. has been summoned for nothing at all that he apparently knows about; “the Court’s theatrical preservation of itself as a mechanism of its power which K. finds both attractive and repulsive, cannot be kept away from his seeming, orderly, respectable world. As the flogger episode shows, it infiltrates even the bastion of K.’s security, his bank. … In a junkroom near his office, K. discovers three men engaged in gruesome rituals among discarded old documents and empty ink bottles, which are, again, signs of the Court’s archaic, unreadable textuality… the court’s sexual perversity turns K. into a voyeur in spite of himself”(51)—that is, in Žižek’s terms, K. is forced by the court to take the same position as the gaze of the Evil Being who controls everything in this universe where every boundary is up for negotiation, but not necessarily with great options for motility. The very confining space of a room used to literally store junk—notably depleted junk; the ink bottles are specifically empty—and which is being used to punish a man for stealing K.’s underwear—conflates who can arbitrarily be made into a piece of junk out of an obscene need to punish an offender for stealing someone else’s personal item; both the person item and the scene of the flogging create the message that K. can and probably will be flogged as arbitrarily for literal nonsense—an obscenity that he is forced to share in, since it is his underwear for which this man his being obscenely flogged, when K. complained about having it stolen.

The abjection of stealing other people’s private things, and of being stripped naked in a heap of junk, in order to be grotesquely beaten while the person who supposedly caused this
watches, can be as much of a precursor of K.’s “dog’s death,” as anything else in the novel—
everyone is degraded to animalistic forms because that’s “really” what the objects of the Evil
Being wish. The arbitrariness of the punishment and K.’s conviction, his complaints, etc, are a
signal that all of these things were merely “by the way” (Introduction) as Žižek would put it, and
not the aim of the drive itself; the Evil Big Other is what has to be dealt with in that area,
according to the Lacanian / Kristevan psychoanalytic traditions. The same structure resides in
Lori-Parks’ second Red Letter Play—Hester is forced to take up an obscene position (the lowest
ranking member of her socio-symbolic, the abortionist), for no other but the arbitrary reason that
hungry children are punished (out of all proportionate or rational order) for stealing food;
Hester’s attempt to save her son’s life—literally his identity, his face [she bites him when he’s
arrested so she can remember his face—quite a contrast to cannibalistic consumption, this is a
love bite, that she inflicts on herself as well so that her scars match those of her son]). Hester’s
obscene position is finally used the way her society uses it—when women are getting into
trouble a night, as Hester herself terms it, they need her help; in this way, she functions as her
position in her society dictates—even her body responds to the emergence of the abject, intrusive
real—her branded “A” bleeds whenever someone is on her way for an abortion; the fact that
Hester’s “A,” a mark she took to have a chance to get her son back (she is literally buying him
back, which necessarily recalls shades of the traditional slave narrative—as Linda Brent tells her
grandmother happily, though, sadly, with too much confidence, “he who is willing to be a slave,
let him be a slave”—someone has supposedly been released from bondage through their efforts).
However, the distinction that Parks makes between the Evil Big Other and Hester’s fully
knowledge of its lacks (and grabs any chance for agency within its stranglehold) is quite literally
“In The Blood”—the hostile society she lives in confirms she has “bad blood”; her earlier
response is that she should have produced more of it (that is, “Bad mouthed Bastards… Shoulda had an army of ‘em”); the bloody brand for which Hester has indeed paid for her son is supposed to be an image of abjection to continually remind her of her place; Hester uses her position for her vengeance, instead. Within the Evil Being Other of the play, Hester finds room to negotiate her own agency; the tragic irony of the play is that the Evil Other of her universe has a nasty surprise for her—she killed her son knowingly, for mercy, so he wouldn’t be literally skewered on a stake; she did not know she killed her grandchild. This “by the way” happenstance of the effect of Hester’s drive to show that she’s “a true mother,” is the objet a that is left a pile of goop. The fact that we do not see whether Hester ever finds out what she has done underscores that in this abject goop, it does not matter—all she can do is go back to her work, because that is the awful, bleeding scar that creates her position in her social-symbolic. However, she chooses to go back to her position in society—she has created the lack in the person she has typified as The Evil Being, the Other, the Rich Girl who not only has the symbolic power of classism, but the power of her mouth; her oral drive is suspiciously doubled by the Hunters’, when she says, half-drugged, “I snitched” (on the man whose baby with which she is pregnant): a combination of partial drives, together with the imago of having been a snitch as a child (when all this started over some food); that is, her sexual drive is conflated with her partial oral drive—the act of power can be an act of sex; so is the act of snitching. Needless to say, the redundant use of the oral drives in relation to actions Hester’s society demands of her (or refuses to help her live, after she has simply committed the crime of living) demonstrates the consumption of colonialism and the colonial split subject—if Hester is the object who will not cause any more “trouble” by the natural act of producing children, then the threat posed by the lack in the Evil Big Other of this universe is nullified—there will be no enemy army at all. That is, they ALL hope.
CHAPTER IV

THE IMAGISTIC AND SOCIO-SYMBOLIC CREATION

OF THE ABJECT SLAVE SUBJECT

Many discussions of Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* support the goals of the Oankali almost uncritically, while often not taking Butler’s complicated use of rhetorical situations in the manner in which (I argue) they are meant. Butler is considered to be a “problem child” by some feminists because, read simply, she does not promote a constructionist feminist viewpoint. Critics tend to valorize the ideological advances offered by Butler’s alien species, the Oankali (apparent breakdown of dualism, challenge of gender systems by virtue of adding another gender and changing apparent gender roles), without noting that Butler (arguably) uses them as a rhetorical subject to critique gender and cultural assumptions in our world today.

Erin M. Ackerman aligns the progress toward tolerance for other humans that Butler describes in a speech given at the United Nations conference on the subject with the continual advances and evolution of the Oankali, arguing that human individual, molar, identity is shown as unappealing and unsatisfactory when contrasted with Oankali communal, molecular identity. Sexuality is the vehicle through which humans in Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy go from molar to molecular identities, since sexuality “is never stable but always in a state of flux” (5): humans enjoy eroticism and change and are changed by it. The Oankali threat to human identity turns out to be only a threat to the fantasy of an individual, molar identity.

Theodora Goss and John Paul Riquelme emphasize the achievement of *Xenogenesis* in terms of its revamping of the Gothic and technological transformation genres over the fact that
(as I argue) the Oankali are themselves given to binary tendencies. Goss and Riquelme point up a favorable contrast in *Xenogenesis* to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in terms of how Butler deals with transformation of species and their acceptance of other species: the scientific narrative of *Frankenstein* is replaced with an unframed narrative of the other by the end of *Xenogenesis* (439). With much the same focus as Goss and Riquelme, Allison Walker argues that, in *Xenogenesis*, scientific hierarchies give way to an affective space that is governed by erotic pleasure rather than by scientific models. In their analysis of *Kindred*, critics have widely discussed the relationships promoted by slavery and the physical connection between history and its victims (both in terms of their past and in terms of history’s erasure of their presence in it), but to date there is no detailed critical study of how the state of being a slave forms an abject category that complicates and consumes many characters in Butler’s novel.

Eric White uses Kristeva’s theory of abjection (and creation) to show how the theory and language of evolution can evoke both horror and affirmation in fiction, and how Butler’s *Xenogenesis* promotes affirmation rather than horror. The theory of evolution profanes the sacred (Man) by making it contingent to what would otherwise be abject (the Thing, “lower” life forms). Artistic activity takes place on this border, where man does not exist or barely exists, according to Kristeva. In Butler’s *Xenogenesis*, the Thing (the creative Oankali) becomes the hero of the tale, by the end of the novel (402). White believes that the alien Oankali abolish the dualism between the self and the other, and argues that the Oankali are not hierarchical, not trying to make mankind better but “different” (404). I argue the opposite: the Oankali are implicated in their own species of hierarchy, and the options eventually provided in the Oankali’s structurally dualistic earth (human settlements vs. Oankali) mirror a hope for man via a revised Christ story that includes a black and female Christ / “Father” God.
Nancy Jesser argues (in her analysis of *Kindred* and *Dawn*) that while Butler destabilizes the category of race (as socially and historically constructed), she baffles the argument of constructivist feminists with her alignment of traditionally feminine behavior with women. Jesser argues that Butler perhaps allows for an opening out of the impasse of the body for feminism, however, in that Butler demonstrates that while genes / anatomy may provide impetus for potential behavior, the bearers of these genes (and bodies) still have a choice in regard to the behavior that they choose. While Jesser hedges that it is “impossible to say” whether Butler’s use of gendered behavior is rhetorical or not, I argue that there is evidence in both novels that it is indeed rhetorical.

Diana R. Paulin draws the conclusion that *Kindred* destabilizes the black / white binary in terms of historical relationships (where class, sexuality and race intersect) (167). Racialized desire is complicated by Butler’s defusing of the sexualized aspect of it in Kevin and Dana’s interracial relationship: Butler makes them “kindred spirits,” with an intellectual relationship, and denies their sexuality (Paulin 179). Characters have multiple purposes in the novel, and multiple roles in a multi-racial community, contradicting essentialist notions of race. Race is also complicated by class / educational differences between Dana and the Weylins. Although Dana is superior to her oppressors in terms of education, she is still forced into a system where her superiority is a threat to whites in the terms of their time period. This denaturalizes Rufus Weylin’s use of power in the place of love relationships, and Dana’s need to save her own identity by killing him before he can exert power over her in the form of rape. Paulin’s point is that the relationship between whites and blacks is “mutually interactive,” while whites maintain an advantage due to their white skin (Kevin is less scarred than Dana by the ordeal with history) (189).
In his excellent article, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy notes that Butler takes the discourse of the memory by fiction writers to a new level by making memory a form of communication, union, record of history and agency. While historical accounts of Dana’s history do not exist, the history is inscribed on Dana’s body and within the discourse of her relationship with Kevin. Dana’s history is inscribed on her body through experience, while her sense of relatedness moves from recognized blood relations to identification with a community (147). Rushdy, unlike most other critics on the subject, notes the extent to which Kevin is implicated (by way of his ingrained beliefs and assumptions) in a patriarchal system that allows the ownership of an(other) human being. While Rushdy describes the physicality of what is otherwise an academic subject (history) for Dana in *Kindred*, he does not discuss the subject in terms of abjectness.

While the issue of the abject and colonialism in the novel has been discussed in effect, it has not, to my knowledge, been discussed in psychoanalytic terms as such; nor has it been extended beyond the treatment of the maternal figure in and of itself. While the treatment of the maternal figure is important in Kristeva, it is important to recall that everyone suffers the need to abject the maternal body, not simply women; I argue that Butler and Morrison and Walker problematize the figure of the maternal rather than essentializing it, as Mara Dukats does, in effect (she argues that issues revolving around the maternal define the type of women’s resistance to oppression in Conde’s novel, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*).

So far, much has been said about what the oppression of racism has done to Black female characters, but Octavia Butler’s work was revolutionary since she assumed what a racist society would not have normally let her take for granted: Her Black female characters are simply there, the way white characters also exist; this point is borne out in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, in that it does not matter who “the white girl” who gets murdered on the first page is; below is a
discussion of how racism creates melancholia and fantasy space. Butler has her share of frozen notes, plagued by an inability to write by the CA system (of course it would be hard to forget that slave women were also forbidden to learn how to write—one of Dana’s associates at Rufus’s plantation is missing fingers from a hand because she was caught writing), and the gap of time in which Olamina has no records currently written (although she is determined that Earthseed will know what Earthseed has survived) echo the gap of fantasy space occupied by the inexplicable blankness of the insane ideology of racism in *Kindred*.

Before discussing how fantasy space functions in Butler and other Black women authors, it is prudent to provide a clear definition of it. Žižek’s definition of fantasy space is the “place in which desire may be articulated (*Looking Awry* 12); the real is what is felt when boundaries are threatened—either the boundaries of the subject, or the boundaries of the subject’s fantasy space, the subject’s choice as to where to spend his / her timeless time. The structural similarity between the real and the abject explains why the two concepts work well in explaining the creation of reality and the fact that it is an ideological / tautological lie: “The real erupts from a boundary point. When the barrier that separates the reality “inside” from the reality “outside” is threatened, the positions and definitions of reality is also threatened (whether it is in regard to their reality itself, or in regard to the identity of the people / characters in question)” (14). Žižek adds that “the formula for fantasy is irreducible to the dimension of universality,” since the surplus enjoyment of objet petit a has a barred subject in relation to it, in terms of Lacanian formula—that is, “in respect to objet a, the subject is confronted by an impossible surplus” (*Looking Awry* 167). This surplus of enjoyment, on the part of the abject Evil Big Other of slavery, turns up a lot of broken bodies (which are broken, like Alice’s, because of what Rufus, as the voice of the slave ideology, wants to enjoy from Alice), together with the symptoms of
symbolic and literal removal of the ability to hear (the slavers cut off Isaac’s ears); the dog marks left on Alice’s body are the animalistic brand of what it is to be a slave—she explicitly cannot run from Rufus, instead of being summoned to his bed, because “they find you and the set dogs on you. Oh lord, the dogs.” When Dana feels threatened in regard to her own ability to live free or die, she sees her own failure to escape in Alice; both of their inabilities to escape are haunted by abject animal imagery (which is all the more abject because signs of it are represented, but not so much the things in themselves—Alice’s worst wounds are dog bites; Dana warns her later on that she should think, the next time she contemplates an escape plan, of what would happen if the dogs were to “pull you down and get the baby.” The horror of animals devouring humans is the frame of slavery is the part of the slave mythos that Dana refuses to fear overmuch; when Sarah tells her about the people they bring back to the plantation, who have been bitten by dogs and slashed with whips and starved and chased for days like animals, Dana’s own experience with a dog, when she’s on the run from Rufus, is quite different—there is only one, and one blow from a branch she is carrying is enough to send it away. The fantasy frame of slavery’s horror and threat dissolves under Dana’s testing of her own ability to take care of herself.

The eruption of the real of slavery, and the abjection of the world that it entails, literally begins with a hole—the hole that is what is left of Dana’s arm, after she has been found by her husband “growing” either into or out of the wall of the new house in 1976. The fantasy space of slavery asserts itself immediately after Kevin does not know what to tell the police in regard to Dana’s condition—the novel itself begins with those outside the fantasy frame, and who get pulled into its void, and ends with Dana’s need to know that the fantasy was true, that the others she encountered in this inexplicable adventure existed; in the end, in the Epilogue, she finds more than a clue—a newspaper article that documents that the Weylin house burned down and
many of its occupants were sold as chattel. The space of history and the present are temporal regions that Dana places a lot of trust in, especially in the beginning of the novel—she explains that the hatred her aunt and uncle have for whites comes from a different time period (she explains to Kevin, “I told you they were old”); the eruption of the real is the reality of racism when it threatens to converge time periods in terms of insane bits of ideology—for instance, while in the time frame of 1976, people called the police on Dana’s relative, who happened to have car trouble in a wealthy area (she was quite a menace at just over five feet); while Dana tries to excuse this as something that happened years ago, Kevin discovers that his sister married a man who lives in the neighborhood in which Dana’s relative was harassed years ago, and who quotes “clichéd bigotry” at him for wanting to marry Dana. In short, racism erupts as abject (Kevin does not recognize his sister from her behavior—she who had a Black friend throughout her early career days, who was not only close to her but to her family: “Most of the time we didn’t know whether the girl lived with us or my sister lived with the girl’s family,” Kevin explains wonderingly upon the racism that has taken over his sister’s personality and position in her social-symbolic (110). Kevin’s lack of recognition of his sister on the basis of her personality, as opposed to appearance, demonstrates Butler’s use of the eruption of lack through the interposition of ideology); these eruptions of the real form an uncanny link when the real intrudes from both Rufus and Dana’s time periods: the intrusion of the tv in 1976 summons a memory for both Kevin and Dana; a simple program about birthing reminds Kevin of how a pregnant woman was beaten until her child fell out of her; this is the time period in which Dana slits her wrists in order to get from Rufus’ world back to her own, so the physical reminder of having been tied by her wrists and beaten connects Dana on a physical and psychological and historical level to the woman of Kevin’s story. The abject death suffered by someone under
slavery is Dana’s reason for almost killing herself in order to return to her own time—after failing to escape from slavery, after the beating inflicted on her for the attempt, Dana doesn’t know how many sleeping pills she might be tempted to take. The abjection of suicide and slavery combine with the image of violated motherhood to fuse Dana’s time periods in terms of the abject.

The first spatial intrusion of the real, which contains the frozen fantasy space of history, chronologically begins with the chapter titled “The River.” It is the first time that Dana saves Rufus, nearly gets shot by his father on his behalf, and, important in terms of the threat of the real, appears before her husband drenched and muddy (17). Rufus’s ability to see Dana before she appears to save his life necessarily has scopic drive implications—he found himself drowning and saw a lot of books (Dana’s and Kevin’s), and this made it necessary for one of the people in the room with the books to rescue him (23). What is of interest is that Rufus’ first identification of Dana’s initial position in both her world and his (that is, the life of an intellectual writer, who naturally has her library) is one of literary valence; and when he falls and breaks his leg, he appreciates her tone as a reader as well; when he tries to read himself, “You can’t even tell it’s the same book when I read it,” he said in disgust (88). What Rufus tells Dana he sees involving her is a key to the degeneration of Rufus’ attitude involving Dana.

 Appropriately, Dana gets her first taste of seeing people used as flesh food when the second eruption of Rufus’ world disturbs her dinner. This time she has to stop his curtains from burning, which he set on fire himself in order to avenge himself upon his father. And this time Dana sees that the child has his society’s unlikable marks, but has perhaps been also marked by his father’s whip. Dana’s commitment to keeping Rufus humane in this abject society is split between what that society may mean for her—her way of getting home in this particular
intrusion of Rufus’ time is by fighting a patroller who has, with his buddies, tortured a Black man who married a free Black woman (Alice’s mother); Dana apparently resembles Alice’s mother so much that the patroller who comes back for her is more than willing to assault Dana instead. Since historicized racial issues are necessarily obvious here, it is worth noting that Dana ends by taking her ancestress’ position and is actually “relieved” when she gets another chance to do as much damage to him as he would do to her; Dana is already positioned in a history that requires her to fight for her life (much as Butler’s protagonists generally do, such as Lauren Olamina, in Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents, as well as the Black fighters of the earlier novels—Emma, for instance, of the Seed to Tree collection of novelettes, is known for her physical strength as well as her longevity).

The ruptures in time and their ensuing threat (as Rufus gets older) become bloodier as they progress; the abject conditions that Rufus is willing to inflict on the person who has saved his life show Rufus the slaveholder, who looks like his slaveholder “goat” of a father when he is particularly angry or frightened because of his own anger or guilt motivated by fear. Tellingly, the rupture in time and space titled “The Fall” comes before “The Fight,” in which Rufus appears to Dana as someone whose face has been bloodied from a well-earned beating (due to his rape of Alice); “The Fall” details how little Rufus’ father seems to care for his son’s leg injury, as well as how he treats his human property; Rufus gives Dana serious counsel as to how not to get into trouble with the racist society she finds herself in (after he decides to believe that she is truly a drop in from another century). But another sort of fall happens before the bloody fight that demarcates Rufus (and decents him) as a signifier of white power. This is a fall of virtue, albeit it is a ruse, its sense of debasement is real even if the actual circumstances are not what Weylin’s perverse gaze would believe. Dana, who spends her days and nights in Kevin’s room (while,
during this chapter, Rufus recovers from his fall off a tree) is at first concerned regarding what people who can treat human beings as inanimate objects may find “immoral.” Then, early one morning, she encounters Weylin on his way upstairs. And he comes as close to smiling as he ever does at Dana’s ruse of “happily playing whore” for her master; “and somehow, this disturbed me. I felt almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner. I went away vaguely ashamed” (97). This specular interpolation of shame is followed in its sequential chapter by a face so covered with blood that it is blind (at least, Rufus is blind in a way other than the obvious); While Rufus has done something that shows his blind obsession and his guilt, Dana is merely positioned in such a way as to give her actions a particular interpretation; the culturally accepted dismissal of both their real or alleged actions (no one cares if Rufus rapes Alice, except Isaac, her husband, who beats him to a pulp, just as no one cares if a Black woman sleeps with her alleged owner) is precisely disturbing because of the presence of the abject blood that identifies Rufus’s face at the beginning of the chapter, “The Fight.” Of course, it should be recalled that every chapter signifies a transport of Dana across the space of history to an ideological fantasy land filled with others among whom she finds enough of herself in her own time (1976) and Rufus’ time (1819)—for “happenstance” incursions of the abject real recall the precariousness of the ideological signifier which, instead of obeying a master signifier, takes the position of the hysteric and addresses who it will from whatever position it may choose at the time. That is, Dana is pushed into the unenviable position of being Rufus’s objet a—she does her best to maintain what Lacan would term the discourse of the analyst, whose knowledge of the analysand and the analysand’s knowledge in regard to how to cope with his / her unconscious, make the once elusive psychoanalyst the gift of shit, which is objet a; and, unfortunately, this is literally the position in which Dana effectively finds herself:
when she is caught, by Weylin, teaching a slave boy how to read, the old slave owner is furious, and declares that he treated Dana well, and his recompense is her “stealing my books! Reading!” (106-7). Dana ends up abandoning Kevin in the slave period because she is certain Weylin is going to kill her with his whip while her mouth is full of dirt. Again, signs of choked orality contrast continually with the pointedly better food made for the consumption of the whites; not only Dana’s mouth is literally full of dirt / vomit from contortions she suffers at the end of a whip, but her framing introduction to the slave past (and Sarah’s kitchen) focuses about the better food that is being prepared for the whites—which becomes a matter of urgent import when Sarah is called upon to help her mute daughter give birth. Carrie’s muteness and inability to read are the signs of the absolutely silenced—in a more rational society, Dana notes, literacy would be a great help to Carrie (who communicates through a system of signs that her own mother has doubts concerning its respective symbolic meanings). The abject image of being choked mentally and physically supplies the formulas for the oral-scopic drive—Dana is afraid she will die while in the position of a Black woman being beaten by a white man; her mental picture of what her position apropos to his is, of course, what she believes it to be.

The next fantasy space that pulls Dana within its frame is the chapter titled “The Fight”—which is, of course, about Rufus’ obsession with Alice, his attempt to rape her and his well-deserved beating at the hands of her husband. What makes the frame of Dana’s 1976 uncanny is that Rufus all but admits his attempt to rape Alice revolved around his need to control her (“She just kept saying no,” he explains to Dana, as though this were a rational explanation for rape), but the chapter itself starts with a fight between Kevin and Dana (109)—Kevin wants Dana to perform chores for him, such as typing his stories and books, and Dana simply refuses; Kevin tells her if she can’t do a small thing like this for him she can leave his home; she does. When
she returns the next day, he asks her if she will “type those pages for me now,” apparently under the illusion that Dana has decided to submit to his request; Dana still refuses—and Kevin ends up asking her to marry him. This apparently small eruption of power dynamics in Dana and Kevin’s relationship is followed by Rufus’s attempt to assert overt sexual power over his desired object. Alice’s absolute helpless condition after being torn by dogs and whipped by their owners reduces her to a very young child again, incontinent (153), and Dana helps her mentally “grow into” the reality she must eventually face. Dana’s perspective contrasts with Rufus’, who wants Alice to remain in a child-like condition because in this condition she hasn’t hated him (154). Rufus preference for Alice’s development as his object shows the extent of the fantasy space that Rufus is willing to inhabit, as long as he feels he is in possession of Alice—when Weylin watches Alice being fed, his look says she is a hopeless case; however, for Rufus, this time is a time during which “she hasn’t hated me.” Weylin’s refusal to take a part in Rufus’ fantasy romance with Alice erupts in his brutal statement, “Kindest thing that you could do for her would be to shoot her” (153). Later, Weylin articulates the dynamic that shows the primacy of power to actual sexual desire—“You’re going to have to whip her sick again to get what you want from her”(161). This apparently trivial incident of a normal argument of a couple as contrasted with the sort of humiliation and destruction that can be served to women who will not obey their so-called “good masters” shows the drive for self-creation, for power that extends beyond the partial scopic drive to the oral partial drive—Kevin wishes Dana to use her eyes to type for him; Rufus allows others to inflict so much trauma upon Alice that, when he brings her back to the Weylin home in a wagon, her eyes have an unseeing look, “a look of pain and confusion” such as they have had when Rufus returned from the town with what was left of Alice (158).
Merely because Rufus has the symptom of the need to control the object of his affection, it does not follow that Rufus’ drives do not dictate that he control that which he considers necessary for him to have a fulfilling existence. Dana realizes, when Rufus sticks his gun into Kevin’s attempt to rescue her from the Weylin house, that it is possible to push Rufus too far by rejecting him (188); when Kevin will not help Rufus take Dana back into the Weylin home, Rufus threatens to shoot him: “He was going to shoot. I had pushed him too far. I was Alice all over, rejecting him… Suddenly I saw the gun, blurred, but seemingly just inches from my head… Something landed heavily on my back and I screamed again, this time in pain. Everything went dark” (188). It is perhaps appropriate that Rufus as an adult meets Dana on the literal terms on which he first met her, when she was a child—she notes that she once looked down a gun like the one Rufus levels at Kevin for Rufus’ sake. This circularity that pulls the reader’s attention to the contrast between the comparatively innocent kid named Rufus and the hardened rapist and slave owner is highlighted by the next chapter, in which Dana has to look for Rufus in the mud, and trips over him—where he is lying face down (“The Storm”); the first time Dana met Rufus included her being covered in mud, whereas the adult, drunken Rufus is the one who has to come out of his literal wallow of mud and vomit (obviously aspects of abjection). Dana’s frame is lived, since she is the one living in the frozen past, which she would do anything to change (she wants, for example, to save the slave children who play at fieldwork before it takes over their entire lives, and bitterly tells Kevin, “It’s not their game”); as a result, she grows closer to the point in her psyche where she has to decide that Rufus has gone too far and end this dilemma with her ancestor; to Kevin, Rufus is still “the boy,” even when he sees him as a threatening, abject slave owner; to Dana, Rufus degenerates from a relatively nice kid into the man who arranges for her to spend eight months sleeping on his mother’s floor (in case she
wanted something during the night), as well as half a day in the fields being beaten into unconsciousness (when Dana isn’t able to save Rufus’ father’s life).

Finally, in the penultimate chapter, “The Rope” (which is Alice’s way out; and when Dana sees that nothing has changed since she last visited Rufus’ time [247], it is an indication that the fantasy world that has constructed Rufus’ ego has stood still as long as Rufus’ Alice object has been gone, in effect. In the prior chapters, the person who required rescue was Rufus, and in this last chapter before the Epilogue, the person that could not be rescued from Rufus is beyond Dana’s ability to save her life again), Rufus is drawn to his own death in his Alice-less world. When queried as to why he didn’t bring back her children (Alice ran with them after Dana’s last visit), he states he wanted to show her what could happen if she ran from him again (251). Dana disgustedly tells Rufus that he may have killed Alice himself, with the rope she used, when he failed to bring back the children that had not been sold and were living in Baltimore, when Alice started to get sick (Sarah says that when she believed that Rufus sold her children, Alice got sick and Sarah, remembering what the experience of having one’s children sold away from her, has to nurse her [248]). Again, the oral partial drive emerges—the victims of the slave system notably get two “parties” (which include decent qualities of food, as opposed to the herring and cornmeal the field hands see far too much of), and a clear split emerges between the racist subject who gets to eat whatever he wishes, and the literally underfed people whose labor has been appropriated by the racist subject. Much attention is made of the amount of food presented at Alice’s funeral—large meals after funerals is a ritual that Dana did not know went so far back—and this food is conjoined with “the melancholy words of Job” (252), uttered by a big, literate Black preacher; the amount of food presented in the honor of someone who cannot eat is, structurally speaking, a signal of anxiety (Birkstead-Breen). The conflation between the
nightmare that the funeral is supposed to serve as a fantasy to cover the hole in the coffin with Alice and the hellish circumstances that Alice has escaped through her death are all but articulated by some people at the funeral: “She gone to hell! Don’t you know folks kill themselves go to hell?” “Watch your mouth, Marse Rufe’ll make you think you’re down there with her” (252). The subtle phrase, “watch your mouth” has been used and signified upon too much, and supports the point that the partial oral drive is left without sustenance, or rather the ego associated with the oral drive has been depleted of one of its signifiers. The phrase is used by Dana, when she senses that Rufus sees her as a sexual object: “Watch your mouth,” she tells Rufus in the context of her query as to what Rufus would do if Dana had in fact found a slave for whom she may have feelings (230-31), and Rufus responds that he would “sell him.” Rufus, afraid of losing face in front of anyone (like Alice, who overhears this conversation), first tells Dana to “watch your mouth,” and Dana returns the admonition. Later, Dana tells an Alice involved with plans for flight, “If you want my help, Alice, you watch your mouth!” (235), and Alice responds with, “watch yours”—Dana stares at her in astonishment, knowing exactly what she has overheard. “If I talked to him the way you do, he’d have me hangin’ in the barn,” Alice concludes—and confronts Dana with the moral split that has plagued her throughout a novel full of mutilation and disease: “You’ll care, and you’ll help me. Else, you’d have to see yourself for the white nigger you are, and you couldn’t stand that” (235). The scopic-oral-partial drive revolves around the abject, uncertain boundaries that the slave system has set for Alice and Dana—“watch your mouth” does evoke two erogenous zones (the eyes and the mouth) in the context of demonstrating that Dana will be “running the whole house when the old man dies,” a symbol of her trustworthiness in the eyes of the whites; in short, the sense of being watched, particularly when it comes to what is said, complements the Evil Big Other of slavery. Indeed,
the obscene silences among slaves that exclude Dana because she sounds “too white, like some kind of traitor, I guess,” as Rufus says at the end of the novel, tap into Dana’s personal wonder that she does not answer back to the people who exclude her as suspicious or too easy to please the whites—Dana runs up against her own worn down ability to use her psychological defenses and uses submissiveness and evasiveness as defenses; but her psychic problems in regard to being submissive (when did Dana stop defending herself?) revolve around the erogenous zones of the human face (to be exact, the skin of the human face): when Carrie refuses to allow Dana to feel as though she does not belong in the Black community of the plantation, she cannot speak, so she rubs her hand over Dana’s face, mime-checks it to see if any color comes off, and, finally, frustrated, takes her to Nigel, her husband, who explains to Dana, “She says it doesn’t come off, the Black… she means the hell with anyone who says you’re anything but what you are.” Since the issues of Dana’s submissive attitude to suspicious field hands conflate with the issue of Dana’s own fears of losing her agency to the maw of Rufus’ time, this apparent exoneration on Carrie’s part makes the state of having a particular skin color a sort of brand of togetherness that positions “what you are” in their socio-symbolic. That is, Black means that one is apparently innocent of being allied with oppressors—“what” Dana is goes beyond the social position of a slave and extends to a position of her own assumption; with a mentality similar to those of some slave narratives (whose protagonists would rather be far darker in complexion than far lighter), Dana listens to what amount to the positions Rufus offers her before trying to rape her at the end of the novel, and goes upstairs to reopen the cuts in her wrists she made to get home after Rufus sold a Black man away from his family in a fit of jealousy.

“You keep doing things that make it impossible for me to trust you. You know it has to work both ways (255), Dana admonishes Rufus, who responds that she confuses everyone by
combining signifiers that the denizens of this abject historical site of slavery associate with whiteness (her education and her accent, for example), so that no one knows how to treat her. Except, “My mother says if she closes her eyes while you and her are talking, she can forget you’re Black without even trying” (256). The lure of being accepted in this strange, audible way into what racists believe to be subjectivity makes the state of being Black, and the assertion of that fact, a moral ground that Dana feels necessary to assert in terms of her identity. “I’m Black,” says Dana, “And when you sell a black man away from his family, just because he talked to me, you can’t expect me to have any good feelings for you” (256). The opaque intrusions of the real of slavery (such as with violated boundaries, coupled with the anxiety that comes with the boundaries set by the abject, whimsicality of slavery when Alice nearly falls over when Rufus buys her after she is captured in a first escape attempt [that is, Rufus’ grip reaches her and takes her back to his home, after she has destroyed herself attempting to escape from it]) also present the lacks present in the drive that pushes Rufus toward his mortal obsession with Alice—one of the last things Rufus tells Dana before he follows her up to the attic with the intension of raping her is that “I’m so lonely,” and this basic human lack that they share allows Dana to sit with Rufus a few moments too long, while he begs her to take the place of the dead (that is, Alice). The loneliness of the racist subject forms a split between Rufus’ enjoyment of Dana’s personality and difference and his attempt to make her “know her place” as well as “a wild animal.”

The abject situation of Alice’s death (that has her, literally, hanging in the barn), and the plantation site that has caused it continues to carry with it an obscene orality—Sarah discovers the bad news in her kitchen, while she is slicing meat with terrifying dexterity; Dana teases her that she always looks as though she will cut off a finger, whereas she still has all ten. But Sarah’s extensions, her children, have been sold as flesh food as well (which is why it is hard for Sarah
to see Alice in the same condition she herself was in when she lost her own children to slavery). The funeral, which includes a huge meal (as Sarah oddly predicts upon hearing about the death of a friend—“he’ll give her a big funeral” [250]), is recognized by Dana as a Black custom that has come down through her family; she did not know it extends back into slavery times. But it is the actual spatial placement of the houses and times themselves, together with the need to keep Dana trapped in Rufus’ time, on Rufus’ part, that creates an impression that these structures, many of which are reduced to dust by the end of the novel, carry with them both the drive to consume their human property more than to contain it; the paranoia noted by historians such as Aptheker, in his American Negro Slave Revolts, about slaves using fire as a weapon against their oppressors is actually borne out by Nigel, who covers the fact that Rufus has been killed with a knife by setting a fire, and gets his mother out of the house alive. Rufus’ attempted rape of Dana ends not only in the blaze that leaves his estate a ruin, but this ruined estate, which has been compared a little too defensively to the house that Kevin has just bought in 1976, has an inexplicable connection to what Dana does in Rufus’ house when he tries to rape her—that is, her arm grows out of the wall of the new house, and her personal boundaries are shot with “impossible pain.”

For Kristeva, and for psychoanalysts who follow the Lacanian traditions, tone and body language communicate as much as the actual drive; a current field of study of a pre-objectal symbolic (whereas, of course, Melanie Klein is one of the parents of object relations theory). Hence the inability to speak within a space that is necessarily meant to keep its abject secrets (that is, Carrie is mute), while in the pain of birth, frames Alice’s recognition of slavery and her position in it, as well as the destruction it has already caused the person she loved most in the world, her husband. Alice’s infantile state, after she has been brutalized, gains mental maturity
until she can walk downstairs to the kitchen and discover what has been done to her; the symbolic state of Alice’s position in the abjection of slavery parallels Alice’s and Dana’s reaction to having to live as a slave—that is, the psychic and the physical elements that constitute these subjects are deliberately placed in the novel to show that the social-symbolic left by slavery is at best consistent with Žižek’s description of Sadean enjoyment: Sade adds to the “rights of man” the right to enjoyment, which necessarily impinges upon the others who end up being the objects for this jouissance; “The respective domains of fantasy and symbolic are radically incommensurable. That is to say it is in the very nature of fantasy to resist universalization: fantasy is the particular way in which everyone structures his or her relationship to the traumatic Thing… it is the way every one of us, by means of an imaginary scenario, dissolves and / or conceals the fundamental impasse of the inconsistent Big Other” (167). Since the subject in the structure of the Big Other will always have the objet petit a, the object-cause of desire supplying surplus enjoyment, it is this continual surplus enjoyment that “escapes the network of universal exchange, which is why the formula for fantasy is as irreducible to the dimension of universality (that is, it’s barred Subject in relation to the drive / object a), the subject confronted with “impossible” surplus” (167). Throughout Kindred, Dana grows closer to Alice and the symbolic state of subjugation, which is all Dana will tolerate (“If [she has] to accept limits on [her] freedom for Rufus’ sake,” he has to do the same for her—which includes not having all of Dana as a consumable commodity), contrasts brutally with the physical state of degradation that Alice as rape victim suffers; Dana’s standing rule in dealing with the adult Rufus is in showing him she can even accept him as a kind of brother, but certainly not as a master or a lover; “he had understood that, once.” The fact that Rufus was at one point in close enough contact with reality to understand Dana’s symbolic boundaries—whereas, in the end of the novel, all Rufus’ death
drive can do is pull his descendant into what began the process of turning Alice into someone who cannot live with herself (because she stopped hating Rufus)—“I wonder how long it will take you… to stop hating,” Rufus tells Dana, poised to rape her; at this moment of the novel the symbolic boundaries normalized by kinship bonds are impinged upon by an Evil Big Other, whose mantra of “stop hating” eerily suggests pacification while he is engaged in an act of abject outrage (rape). The act of violence and power on the part of the slaveholder is treated by that slaveholder as normal processes that eventually happen merely because he will either have what he wants or he will die / allow one of his victims to kill him (“When you first sent Alice to me, and I saw how much she hated me,” Rufus tells Dana, relating the concept that whether Alice killed him with a knife from the kitchen or a candlestick, because “if I lived, I would have her.”); Rufus’ assumption that Dana will “stop hating” the way Alice did is another pointer to the fantasy organization that has infested Rufus’ head; unchanging, as fantasy is, Rufus expects Dana to “come to him as she is” and he will be an old man; considering that the very time gaps in Kindred that denote the frozen time of fantasy, and that Dana says that regardless of what the calendar in 1976 says (time hardly passes in the world familiar to Dana, while the time in the fantasy spaces that contain the abjection of slavery moves whimsically—there is no standard time between trips to the slave past; and when Dana is called after Alice’s death, there seems to have been no change in time at all [Nigel’s children are the same and the same size as when she saw them last]); Rufus’ expectation, that mirrors his father’s attitude that all Rufus (or Weylin) want is a woman, that he can actually have interchangeable women who are somehow also the same woman (“you were the same woman. Both two halves to a whole.”)—in any sense, it seems Rufus has not only failed to become a better man than his father, but has upped the ante on the creation of the abject spaces of the Weylin plantation; he is willing to punch Dana while
raping her, after he has neglected to send for Alice’s children before she commits suicide when she believes them lost; (after following her up to the attic, the white man’s figure / gaze object constitute a trope that meant the reality of rape to too many people). It is probably not an accident that Rufus trips over Dana when Dana returns to find that no time has passed at all in Rufus’ time and that Alice is dead; but Dana appears on a hill of ants; considering Rufus called Dana through some unconscious desire to refrain from shooting himself after finding Alice dead, the swarm of bugs that have the effect of a sort of dislocated return of the real—Rufus has become one more insect in the abject of slavery after he loses Alice (and attempts to replace her with a duplicate, just as his father or one of the patrollers that appear early in the novel would have), and the mass of meaningless insects that Dana lands on in response to Rufus’ call to prevent his own suicide are, in the gaze of Rufus as other, as interchangeable as the humans that have been treated like lower animals. Rufus’ newfound ability to take the part of the slave-owner who thinks nothing of raping Dana follows on the heels of the ant hill, which is where Dana is drawn into Rufus’ fantasy space).

Octavia Butler’s examination of a normal subject’s corruption by the “unlikeable marks” his society has left on him opens a space for a discussion of what it is to be a slaveholder or a slave; while Mary, in Patternmaster, is “Mind of My Mind” (that is, all the “children” of Doro have finally come into their psychic own and don’t need him any longer—because of a pattern that is interwoven telepathically throughout the collective pattern; this pattern belongs to Mary), anything can be done to a slave—she can be handed about like a “whiskey jug at a husking,” Dana speaks this as a state of absolute abjection (that is, being reduced to a mere thing, an object to be passed around; “I’m not a horse Kevin… of course I love you, but when I’m back there it’s the most important reason. If I have to accept limits on my freedom for Rufus’s sake,” then he
will have to make allowances for her to prefer to live rather than kill and die; Dana’s continual return, upon Rufus’s threatened survival, allow her to enter a space whose confluence undermines her own reality to the point at which, in terms of racism, Butler has successfully blurred the lines between which time is, effectively, a fantasy space; fantasy is about immovability, in effect; and neither Dana or Keven can write a thing after they make it back from the Weylin slave house. And yet, it is the site that somehow means “home” for both of them, in spite of what it means to them.).

The oppression of the fantasy space of the other begins nearly at the beginning of *Kindred*, precisely when Kevin and Dana meet—in the head of the demented supervisor, the two are going to “write some poor-nography together” (54). This obscene gaze is turned off, quite literally, by Dana’s lack of details in regard to her first coupling with Kevin (after Kevin’s first date idea, which involve tickets to a show, Dana takes Kevin home with her and the night is “even better” (57) than the show to which he has treated her). “Even better” creates not only a proudly opaque assertion of privacy, but demonstrate an outright refusal to expose Dana and Kevin’s personal lives.

And, of course, their personal lives are disrupted by the incursions of the abject of slavery; the mode of time travel Dana and Rufus use is never explained in terms of its dynamics; it is a series of blanks, in which Rufus becomes more and more the monster that his social-symbolic makes of him. From the first encounter between Dana and the slave period of 1819, Rufus embodies the drive around which revolve what “happens” under the system of slavery; since the Lacanian formula for the drive itself is “se faire,” or I have made myself, it is Rufus’ unconscious (which entails an abject pull) that summons Dana from her future to save him in his frozen past. The uncanny moments of the novel are where 1976 and 1819 intercept in Dana’s
consciousness—as a “drop in from another century,” she at first feels she is playing a part, along with Kevin (the willing whore for the slave owner); but the anxiety this “part” causes her shows her own split subjectivity and subjectivization in the face of the abjection of slavery: after she ends up stranded in Rufus’ time without the protection of Kevin’s “ownership,” she realizes that she automatically crouches down to avoid a random white man’s stupid questions, such as “who’s your master” and “where do you belong?” Even though she can easily answer these questions, she feels shaky enough in regard to her own boundaries to not want to have to answer the interpolative question that aligns her with a position that she deceived herself into the belief that it was only an act; of course, this is a case of double deception, as Žižek would say, since the random white men’s authority to put any questions to Dana at all is based on the fantasy space of slavery, the creation of the other as a space that defines the boundaries of the white “clean and proper self.”

What fantasy space essentially covers, Žižek points out, is the hole of the real, which is in this case the abjection that Kevin’s eyes are screened from, but Dana’s are not (ex. Dana is dragged out with the remainder of the slaves to see at least one whipping [for the dreadful crime of answering back; Rufus as a child has already informed Dana that anything said in return to Weylin is considered “answering back,” and therefore he himself speaks as little as possible to his father]). Similarly, when Kevin and Dana see little children play a game of being sold as property, Dana tells Kevin, “This place is diseased.” The abjection of disease and physical violation of the boundaries of the very skin is what essentially controls the slave system: Sarah, the cook, tells Dana that she has to see the people they bring back, bitten by dogs and half dead, for making the effort to escape—she has to see them (to know that there’s apparently no way out of this; the very factoid that Black people have written books already in the North is nonsense to
Sarah, since all the information to which she has access is screened by the fantasy space of slavery—she knows little beyond the plantation and the albeit somewhat dubious freedom offered by the North is as real to her as the hereafter; this use of fantasy narrative (that is, Black people writing books) on Sarah’s part contrasts with the fact that Alice believes she can get to freedom on her own. The motility that Alice assumes she can deploy contrasts with the frightened Sarah, who has lost everything she could lose and cannot suffer any more losses. The space of trauma, with its structure that entails that the traumatic event is not felt until it is mentally relieved (e.g. relieved in memory, which is a form of fantasy space [Birkstead-Breen]), plays its role in fantasy space, both to demonstrate the utter self-consciousness on the part of the Blacks (who resent the patronizing / racist implication that exposure to a Northern, literate Black woman is going to “put ideas” in their heads—like they don’t know what it is to be free), and to show the indigestible, killing hole that sucks bodies down along with its rice swamps of the dreaded South (that is, the fantasy space created by the abjection of slavery). Alice suffers through her trauma—her memory of being hunted and the death of her husband, Isaac, together with the awful knowledge that she will have to submit to being raped by Rufus, sooner or later; by contrast, Margaret Weylin, Rufus’ mother, is reduced to simply screaming at the mere sight of her husband, after she has been weakened by the birth of twins that do not survive. Margaret’s very existence in the novel prolongs and helps to construct fantasy space—she is a symptom of time passing, and the drawing toward the end of slavery per se; she disappears from the novel to reappear as an almost all but unrecognizable personality—she goes from being someone very proud, and particularly proud of her appearance, to one who is sweetness and light and who gives candy to the sons of people she has every intention of selling. The obvious morph of Margaret’s personality is a frame that presents the opportunity to see what the slave system does to even its
most privileged members—Margaret is “sick and crazy,” after having her husband’s babies; likewise, other people are sick because of Weylin’s sexual drive—Dana helps a slave named Tess with her laundry load because “Weylin had begun taking her casually to bed and had hurt her.” Considering the physical degeneration on Rufus’ part (every time Dana is drawn back to his time, he is sicker and / or disfigured), the parallel of physical degeneration (coupled with the representative of the slave hierarchy—Weylin, after whose death Margaret wants to come home) suffered by Margaret is a sign of the breaking down the boundaries of the very body under the duration of the abject of slavery; this is fairly evident when Dana explains why she is afraid of Weylin and less afraid of Margaret—when she watches Weylin beat a man for the crime of answering back, his face shows no pleasure but is rather the expression of a man who is doing his duty and chopping wood (or some other utterly mundane task). The use of people as objects that are interchangeable with disposable objects is all but embodied by Weylin—even the cane he uses at the end of his life, with which he threatens Dana with “a good beating,” is like an “extension” of his forefinger (just as an overseer he hires uses his whip as what is effectively an extension of his arm). That is, the act of recreating people as objects because this is how people in this society behave (Dana observes that Weylin is not a monster—just an ordinary man who does what his society says is right and proper), returns in abject form as physical extensions of what functions as what Žižek would term a phallic anamorphosis—the thing that “sticks out,” that doesn’t belong, that is the signifier that defines the discourses that revolve around it. Weylin is reduced to the phallus of his power at the end of his life, signified by the shaking stick he points at Dana when she tells him that she will continue to help Rufus if she is not beaten again; to much the same point, the overseer, who is expected to contain the emotions of fear and hatred so that the “master” can retain his aura of paternalistic authority, has an arm that is, by extension,
part whip—his very function (of intimidation) has become part of his very body. The phallic objects in this fantasy formula stick out so that they demonstrate that Kindred is, in fact, a historical narrative, as well as a representation of fantasy space of abject, racist ideology—Rufus’ continual use of power over Dana (he tells her he has sent letters from her to Kevin, when his true intention was to let the letters “get lost” and keep her with him) is also framed by signifiers that invoke a phallic anamorphosis: Rufus’ “waste of ink” of Dana’s self-refilling modern pens is never explained; Rufus, through his use of his position of power, can literally absorb without a rational answer the fluid from which flows Dana’s Symbolic (she took the pens back with her in order to attempt to write; Rufus prefers to have Dana write for him—both before and after his father’s death). Since it is clear that Rufus would not have used the missing ink from Dana’s pens by using them to create a symbolic meaning, the fact that Rufus has Dana write letters to his father’s creditors for him underscores Rufus’ use of what should have been a master signifier only as Kafkaesque waste; this use of Dana’s pens contrasts with how Dana sees the use of her pens—to teach other people to write their own passes to freedom and that she can do the same (she attempts to escape after she discovers that Rufus has not sent her letters to Kevin at all; Dana only has an awry, offhanded view of Rufus’ cruelty that he wishes to appear as kindness so that he gets his way. In the telling relationship with his mother, when Rufus stops getting what he wants from Margaret gently, he becomes brutal. “Why not? She always forgave him,” Dana speculates (218)—while comparing Rufus’ dynamic between himself and his mother [which is, of course a frozen one, in which Rufus takes one position and Margaret his (m)other, his other—when Dana is finishing reading to Rufus, Margaret is bringing Rufus a slice of cake with “fine white icing” (103). This was the lure Margaret poses to Rufus to get him to ignore Dana’s reading, and instead he “looks like his father” when he shows “real disrespect,” by telling
his mother to “get away” from him; Margaret merely continues the action of serving her son, even though her attempt to control his behavior was unsuccessful. The fact that the emphasis in the shade of icing on the cake should not be overlooked—white, according to Kristeva, is the color of melancholia [Anne Marie Smith]—and it bespeaks Margaret’s melancholia (Dana notices that Margaret is crying, when Rufus orders her out of his room so he can listen to Dana read; Rufus responds, “She always cries. Read, Dana.”). The borderline melancholic state is necessarily an abject one—the frozen racial demands of the abjection of slavery match structurally the physical covering with snow indicative of melancholia (the inability to release or escape—hence Margaret is reduced to screaming at her husband whenever he comes near her, with apparently no other option but her scream [before she flees from Weylin for the second, and last, time; the first time, of course, was when Weylin beats Rufus with a horsewhip, which he also uses on his slaves]).

On the note of being treated as an object (such as being passed around like a whiskey jug at a husking—Dana’s metaphor for a debased sexual object and its interexchanged and interchangeable usage), *Kindred* has a harsher lesson for the Oankali, a group of aliens who create a “gene trade” out of the races they choose, regardless of that race’s consent; the blatant dismissal of free will among humans under the Oankali, on the basis that the Oankali “know better” (and they seem to maintain this power within their own ranks as closely as possible; for some reason, it is all right for Lilith and other humans who have decided to cooperate with the captive breeding program to be able to reprogram the walls of the ship and its many “shuttle” extensions, but somehow the Oankali simply cannot give their “human crop” the freedom to communicate based on the Oankali codes, transmitted through the living entity that is part of the
ship that is part of them. The Oankali’s proximity to nature and trade make them seem harmless and gentle, as one girl who does not yet know that if she becomes biochemically bound to an ooloi (the third sex of the Oankali, which creates a three-fold union) via pheromones, she may, like Lilith “stretch the cord until it almost strangled her.”

Octavia Butler spells out the racially based psychic (and physical) torture of people who are kept from doing what they do best merely because they are used as throwaways or at least people of “lesser” psychic power (Patternmaster). However, this is not Butler’s coda, but rather her beginning—her set of early novels are filled with sets of people who are literally used for food by Doro, a supernatural being who can switch bodies at will, pushing out the body’s original possessor (Seed To Tree); this theme of the use of other people’s bodies and somatic (vs. socio-cultural) responses carries throughout Butler’s opus—very subtly, as it does in Xenogenesis. And, in the last publications she wrote, Butler continues this theme, with a definite split subject down the middle—in the dystopian universe of The Parable of the Talents, there comes to power an insane man whose religion, The Church of Christian America (CA), encourages its followers to torture anyone who does not belong to the “right” church; this violation of the body extends to sexual incursions—the people unlucky enough to be imprisoned by CA are often raped while they are being worked to death. Again, the theme of spilling of blood is prominent—except that when Lauren Olamina chooses to kill, she quite literally, in psychic terms, kills herself; this gives her a sort of moral and empathic sensitivity, but she also “means to survive” (Parable of the Sower), regardless of the number of people she must kill in self-defense or bitter necessity. When the Church of Christian America (CA) comes to power, in effect, because their leader has come to power (Parable of the Talents), it has nothing to do with survival, but with the superimposition of this abject socio-symbolic other, whose stooges truly
believe that they are doing their Christian American duty, as men of this church, by stealing children from their mothers and raping their captives routinely—and who also use a device called a “collar” (which is bitterly yet verbally countered by the women who have to live in what was once Acorn, the community that Olamina built out of ashes, with the use of their corresponding term “dog dishes,” out of which they are supposed to eat as well as drink; they are the only bright thing in the prison room—“bright, cheerful lies”; the connection between a collar [that is, something worn by a dog] and the use of “dog dishes” on the part of the prisoners demonstrates not merely their comprehension of what their captors want to reduce them to, but their disgusted commentary, in which their insistence on calling lies by their proper names [a.k.a. the “dog dishes” are “bright cheerful lies”] shows their complete understanding of what their oppressors would like to do to them psychologically, as well as their disgust for the hypocrisy of their captors; as Olamina puts it, “How can they do what they do, if they believe what they say?” This disgust itself provides a boundary—one of a personal nature, which has been severely challenged by the abject created by CA); this collar comes in many forms—not merely the ones that are used to control human cargo or religious victims; they can deliver cheap shocks of pleasure, and it is this pleasure and need to avoid pain that causes a suicide rate among people enslaved this way—“they could not tolerate the depths to which they found themselves descending.” This psychological dilemma, posed by the method of collaring in *Parable of The Talents*, necessarily comments on Butler’s earlier *Xenogenesis* and its Oankali—who deliver both “cheap shocks of pleasure,” which are addictive, and offer those who cannot live so degraded a horrifying alternative (that is, the slow torture of watching their race, the Human race, become extinct, while they are helpless to prevent this obliteration of what they are “in themselves,” minus any “contributions” from the Oankali). The lure that the CA workers use on
Olamina’s Earthseed group is that they will get “kitchen duty,” if they are “good”; similarly, Humans who cooperate with the Oankali get better food. This kitchen duty generally entails a chance to clean up and a chance to get raped; the juxtaposition of the desire of the victim to clean shit off herself and the desire of the enslaver to rape her need not be belabored—the preference for cleanliness on the part of Earthseed contrasts with the Kafkaesque, bureaucratic filth that circulates in its nonsensicality. For example, the whiny men who work as guards for CA recall in their very whining during the act of rape, that their wives are ungrateful or frigid and they’re good CA men who “deserve some pleasure” in their lives; but when it is over, the rapist asks the rape victim to forgive him—even though she has been told that fornication is “all right” because these are “holy men,” who are only doing the work of their god; this contrast between a split subject of guilt and thwarted sexuality (which is projected onto the women who are “temptresses” who “seduce” innocent men to the point of rape) is again a contradiction that shows us the boundaries of reality have been threatened for both the colonial subject and his other.

The lure of the pleasures some collars offer in *Parable of the Talents* echoes the pleasure the Oankali can give on a neurosensory level—which greatly assists them in keeping their “human crop” in line; hence, the Oankali addict humans to their own neurochemistry, without even thinking to tell them that “if you stay with me now, you’ll never leave,” until several generations have passed. Butler’s point extends from Dana’s statement from *Kindred*: “You don’t have to beat people to treat them brutally” (100). Butler’s exploration of different forms of slavery is also her demonstration of the abjection of slavery—the Oankali are associated, continually, with slime, with reabsorption, with anxiety that comes of violated human social boundaries; while they have kept Humanity alive, in a comatose-like form, preserved within
what were once carnivorous plants who gave a very long death (since they would consume the “unnecessary” organs of their victims first, such as sensory organs; this method of preservation of their “human crop” can bear some scrutiny, precisely because of the fuss the Oankali make about the supposedly inferior nature of Human sensory organs and the extent to which the aliens go to protect their own; this devaluation of how Humans feel, together with Lilith’s ironic association of the Oankali’s growth of food with the Humans they have forced into their system in the hopes they will get a good “crop” from them, after they have accepted this system) for several centuries while their Earth heals from its nuclear war, they have not done so lightly and are “committed to the trade,” as Lilith is told many times. The Oankali that have a problem with treating humans as though they were “not people” (the same phrase used in Patternmaster by the Clayarks, the enemies of the Pattern people, whose telepathy does not work on them) are considered in danger by the same sex parent that is to be the Oankali in question’s mentor, if the ooloi in question fails to get his subject / object to trust it. This immediately visible contradiction between treating humans as though they are “not people” and at the same time relying on the basic human need to trust in others, shows a split between Oankali morals and their commitment to their concept that humans are genetically flawed and “just happen” to require an ooloi in order to remove the “flaw” through future generations. The Oankali collective is afraid of the decision that they know, on some level, that the young, human born boy, the first one born to Lilith, his human mother, whom they allow kidnappers to keep (the kidnappers are resisters trying to find a child that looks human enough to trade, even though “the worms,” which are what the Oankali are continually called by resisters, never let anyone keep the children they steal, since they can’t have any themselves, because of the intrusions of the Oankali). The fact that the stolen infant, Lilith’s only son, comes across a museum (while he’s being held by the resisters), which is filled
the pieced together narrative of this religious fantasy—foreshadows the fact that Lilith’s child is the one to make it a reality in a sense (Akin, Lilith’s son, does save humanity—he demands, “let them live in themselves!”) shows Lilith and her only son both positioned in a narrative that is their own, not the Oankali’s—the narrative of the god who gives of himself in order to save the human race, au fond. While the resisters tear up her gardens and demonize her, Lilith Iyapo wants to give them something from her garden: “I was always happy when they took whole plants; something to eat now and something for later.” Lilith’s need to feed and encourage the resisters is an orality that is needed but can also be as easily rejected—she is “breasts full of milk... he wondered how he had resisted her earlier,” wonders her second human mate; but the breasts come with the touch of the oooloi called Nika, whose shock of pleasure is what wins Tino, the second human mate, over completely—not simply Lilith’s attractiveness. Nika uses the adult oooloi threefold bond, with which the oooloi seduce and genetically weave together their would be trading partners or mates. Lilith calls this bond physical addiction to another person, and the second scene in which the reader is invited to watch Lilith watch as a future mate of hers is seduced by an oooloi is an easy example of what Žižek terms perversion—that is, Lilith takes the same gaze position as the alien race that has trapped her in a biochemical dilemma when she observes the seduction of another human; the first time Lilith does this is when Nika seduces her first “mate,” Joseph—and believes at the time that she may not have another chance at having the agency to both control her own stimuli reaction but also to see how she herself may look when she is in the same seduced and pacified position in which she finds her Joseph. Lilith’s orality (which is that of a nurturer’s attention to Human need, as opposed to that of a predatory desire to continue at the expense of other sentient beings), coupled with the self-sacrifice implicit in the Human Christ with images of Christ—on the cross, knocking at a door;
narrative Akin follows, in effect—unable to save Humanity in any other way, Lilith allows the resisters to keep her only begotten son on the chance that what he learns from them will allow Humanity to live, not perish. Literally, Lilith’s position is in the place of the god who “so loved the world he gave his only begotten son, and he who believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” It is made very clear that when Lilith wants to make a forage into the jungle to save a child, any child, from potentially irrational people, she does, regardless of risks or warnings—but she lets Akin, her only human-born son, stay with the resisters to learn about them, in the hope that the Oankali will eventually have to understand what Akin has to tell them (since he is apparently without the “flaw” of the “human contradiction”—he “had been assembled in the body of an ooloi”): That “Humanity must live.”

Butler calls attention to the extent of the powerlessness in which the humans are kept and the extent to which at least one ooloi will go in order to keep its humans biochemically bound—this plays out when Jodahs, the first human-born ooloi, does not tell his mates how they have become bound to him until they are; and he is rebuked by one of his Oankali parents, who tells him that he should have told them how these two very young, fertile humans should have been given enough agency to be able to leave Jodahs’ proximity without discomfort.

The inappropriate display of the fact that anyone who can make bodies interchangeable, with the people in question belonging to a certain interchangeable physical description (e.g. slave owners often raped their own daughters because one black woman could interchanged with any other--objects are interchangeable; Dana makes a mental note of this when she sees Rufus take an interest in his Black son by Alice, since Rufus has grown up throughout the novel watching his father sell his own children, who look more like Weylin than Rufus at times), is abjection in its purest degree (not only is the psychic and physical space of the body violated, the Evil Other
demands that these respective bodies in effect no longer have their psychic and physical space—if another is interchangeable with any other, at least in the frozen zone of racism, discussed below, that other is by definition interchangeable in terms of features and identificatory marks; since the Oankali tend to treat humans as interchangeable, (they accept violent humans from Earth, against their prior promise to Lilith that the murderer of her partner will never see Earth again), merely because they require the flesh food necessary to make a good “trade”—gene trade, that is.

Looked at from the perspective of the drive, the Oankali “need” to go forth and infect other species with their organelles is a critique of colonial power; after all, what they find worth “trading for” in their biological traffic with other species is that which gives them something they consider worth having—such as the ability to change their shapes (which will serve invaluably in seducing other would be gene partners); that is, as Žižek puts it in his discussion of drives, the objet a can never be taken hold of directly; it must always be something that happens “by the way,” or “by accident” (for example, a woman, who very much wants a baby, and is given one by her own crazy mother who steals another woman’s baby for her, feels that she has had the “responsibility” of taking care of this “happenstance” occurring baby “pushed upon her” in a situation that was surprising to her); and it is not a mistake that the repeated reference to the dead earth, after the Oankali have used it up to create more space vessels for their driven gene trade, which they believe they “must” do, or die out as a species, will have material for mining, but will not be able to support life; the earth itself will be stripped, like an orange, of all life, because the Oankali happened upon it during a nuclear holocaust. In short, the Oankali’s need to trade selectively and then discard what they themselves cannot use (without telling the local inhabitants any of these plans) is a symptom of the desire to improve upon themselves as a
people; the drive governing that symptom, however, is more colonial in its nature than merely the harmless, acquisitiveness often attributed to the Oankali—once they find their “beauty and horror in rare fascination,” in Humanity, or rather, simply its body—literally, human bodies—which they do state they value for their respective cultures (after having destroyed the remains and ruins left by the nuclear war of those cultures; if Lilith, in Dawn, terrified that the Oankali can and will carry out their pacific plans regarding breeding humans with Oankali, wishes to catch an Oankali in a lie, so she can feel hope that perhaps this gene mix fate will not happen, and feels she cannot do so, she may have looked instead for the contradictions in which the Oankali involve themselves), but in reality focus on the literal organs and inner workings of humans, literally feeding off of them on multiple levels, both somatic and psychic. “They don’t have to know what we’re doing,” usually accompanies the justification that “we keep them in good health and given them that which they value most—youth and long life.”

Butler’s discussion of slavery in the terms of the trivialization inflicted on Humanity, and its absorption by an alien power, which is combated by the figures and images of the symbolic law that existed before the nuclear holocaust or the sterility imposed upon resisting humans by the Oankali, and its relationship to the same “Evil God” (who is, in this instance, literally called “the worms” by the people who live under its abject demands of its others), is dealt with in the second half of this section and both examines the logic of slavery as well as its de facto (and literal) consumption of human beings (not merely in terms of their bodies, but the absorption of humans into the new gene mix in terms of culture—as the humans who stay with the Oankali, in order to have children, are told, they have chosen to act as parents, whereas the resisters have unwillingly donated their genes to this “trade” anyway, but have chosen to run away from their mixed progeny; the cultural differences inflicted on the humans who stay with the Oankali
entirely revolve around Oankali culture, with a few concessions thrown in for humans; the process of sexual development and metamorphosis, for example, becomes governed by Oankali norms). The parallels between the abject of slavery and the bloody pools Dana keeps waking in, in the late age of 1976, are frightening—and even more so because of the very structure of *Xenogenesis*; the fantasy spaces the Oankali project onto their human objects and every bit of DNA the ooloi discuss before “mixing” the “next generation,” are created in the Oankali future; and, as in *Kindred*, the absorption of the would be victims into a slave system, which begins with the seduction of the leading female character (Lilith, who happens to be Black) by an appealing child (like Rufus, when he is young and appealing for being a child, just like Nika, in spite of the “unlikeable marks” his time has left on him), for whose respective sakes both Lilith and Dana are willing to risk their lives, and loyalties (certainly in Lilith’s case and repeatedly in Dana’s). Finally, the abject parallel of race-mixing, formed by *Kindred* and *Xenogenesis*, will be discussed and compared—not merely in terms of xenophobia, but rather in terms of an insistence of an erosion of identity of the “other,” on the part of colonial powers, which seems to be what the Oankali want at least as much as the mere biological cooperation of their “human crop.” An entire chapter could be written on the comparative role of slime in both *Xenogenesis* and *Kindred*—in *Xenogenesis*, the presence of slime on one’s sensory organs (a.k.a. hands) means agency to get about the world of the Oankali; the slime leaves kin signature scents, which serve as unseen organizational and topological landmarks. It also means that one has been healed by an Oankali—Gabe, one of the humans who survives the nuclear holocaust, accuses Akin, of smearing him with “goddamn slimy shit,” which happens to be “cooked flesh,” in Akin’s words. This “cooked flesh” is the result of the burning town, built with such care by people who merely wanted to retain their culture without interference by the Oankali, and who are now
“unsalvageable” due to the centuries of the trauma of believing in their own extinction as a race. The slime dealt with in *Kindred* generally refers to disease associated with Dana’s forced return to Rufus’ fantasy slave space (“he threw up on himself and me,” Dana notes grimly when she’s transported back across the blank, timeless space to Rufus for the chapter titled “The Storm”: “No one ought to die the way [Rufus] would have, lying in a ditch, drowning in mud and whiskey and his own vomit” [201]). Dana’s speech to Weylin is uttered without fear because she is certain he wants his son to live, regardless of how he talks about him; it is one of the only points in the novel when Weylin, the embodiment of the white man who happened to also be a slaveowner, owns the fact that he is afraid of Dana—a big change from the earlier time period when Dana had good reason to fear Weylin’s punishing whip (Weylin’s fear of Dana is also remarked upon by one of Dana’s associates, who comes to welcome her “back” to the time in which there is no freedom). The parallels between the slave society of *Kindred* and the abjection inflicted on the humans in *Xenogenesis* demonstrate the Oankali complacency with being at the top of the food chain, as it were; and, just as Alice accuses Dana of making a power grab so she’ll “be running the whole house when the old man dies,” and just as Sarah was “sensible” and “tried” to convince her prior owner to free her “while she was still pretty enough to listen to,” Lilith is forced to live through the “mammy” position, which is what her role among the Oankali in regard to other humans would easily compare to—she is expected to socialize new humans into the framework the Oankali have constructed and to get them to accept Oankali mates and the entire Oankali way of life (112). And just as the Oankali’s contradictions show that they are not as superior as they prefer Humans to believe, their rationalization offers a clear commentary on the justifications of slavery (that is, racial oppression) in *Kindred*—that is, the racist dismissal of what is done to people in what is considered a good situation (in comparison to dying in a rice
swamp, as Rufus suggests), is put in terms of what it would be like for all humans to suffer such
a savage curtailment of their basic social and human rights.

The emergence from mud and its variances has already been discussed; the use of bodily
fluids and illness that causes a lack of physical control in *Kindred* coincides with the lack of
physical control constructed for humans by the Oankali (humans can have their memories
altered, but not their fingers, so they can have the same freedom to send messages to each other
that the Oankali have—one of the many contradictions in which the Oankali involve themselves;
similarly, with all their talk of “trade,” and its importance, Di, Lilith’s male Oankali mate, tells
Akin that “we never trade away our ability to work with the shuttles,” which begs the question of
what other fabulous technologies that are denied the human “trade” partners of the Oankali
merely upon a whim). The loss of physical control is a symptom endemic to the constitution of
the human subjects that the Oankali attempt to seduce—a touch of neurosensory command, and
the ego-sensitive male former cop will for some reason forget he has been made to fall to his
knees in front of women and the rest of the group because his ooloi believed he was becoming
agitated. This sort of humbling is remembered by the people on whom it has been inflicted, and
the phrase “inject something” is used by Nika himself to refer to the neurosensory power he
wields when he uses his own neurochemical signals on “his” humans; the heavily sexualized
inflection on “inject” in this context demonstrates the kind of rape the Oankali inflict on their
“human crop”; the humans are, in their own rather telling phrase, “taken like a woman,” and they
say the Oankali have used all of mankind as their “whore.” That is, the Oankali, not the humans,
decide when the Humans’ bodies say “yes,” while their minds, which make them who they are
(according to humans and Oankali alike—much is made of this point when Lilith is afraid of the
“absolute solitude” with which she will be inflicted, should the Oankali damage her brain by
making “changes” they won’t explain to her until she discovers them for herself), say “No!”

Butler at once demonstrates the abjection inflicted with soft, peaceful voices (they’re the only voice the Oankali have managed to develop for this “trade,” and Lilith repeatedly notes that Nika offers her horrific “alternatives” in such a soft, nice voice), which include rapes inflicted and then implicitly denied on the basis of the argument that humans are contradictory and it’s hard to figure out their true intent. Lilith describes Oankali rationalization as the mentality of “have your fun and then invent some great sounding reason why it was the right thing to do.”

And this point extends easily to the situation of (Black) women of Butler’s day when she first wrote the *Xenogenesis* trilogy—the abject does not have to appear with outright brutality; as Dana attempts to make Kevin understand, “You don’t have to beat people to treat them brutally!”

And Butler goes on to demonstrate the various types of slavery and enlightenment (engaged in by more people than are condemned or given credit), and the abject reaction to slavery on the part of the subject that would be a subject.
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