

MISREADING JUSTICE: THE RHETORIC OF REVENGE
IN FEMINIST TEXTS ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

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Feminist legal theories of battering homicides pose a challenge to feminist critics of American literature. Legal theorists argue that many women who are tried for killing their abusive partners should be acquitted on the grounds of self-defense. While they have had some success, stereotypes suggesting that women who kill are vengeful result in the wrongful convictions of too many female defendants. Feminist narratives that depict women who kill their abusers abound in American literature. Too often the scholarship on these narratives conflates revenge and self-defense, contributing to the problems feminist lawyers face. Looking at literature and legal scholarship from the nineteen-teens to the present, I illustrate how feminist literary critics and feminist legal theorists are sometimes at odds with one another, despite sharing the goal of creating a society that better protects and represents women.

Keeping feminist legal issues in mind, I ask why scholars have conflated self-defense and revenge in their analyses of narratives that depict battering homicides. Some scholars take their cues from feminist texts that equate violence with empowerment. Other critics recognize the way some authors and performers treat the death of male abusers as fodder for entertainment, critiquing the way society fails to take violence against women seriously. Additionally, as justice scholars point out, the criminal justice system suggests that revenge is a natural response to victimization. Revenge fantasies seem to follow “naturally” from this system.

In *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization*, Ladelle McWhorter points out that oppressive networks of power must be challenged by technologies of the self that contradict the driving interests of the network being opposed. If McWhorter is correct, then using revenge fantasies to critique violence against women will not create a society that better supports women. Recognizing this problem, I argue that feminist literary scholars and artists look for ways to transform the self that preclude violence. Texts as diverse as Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and the Dixie Chicks’ “Goodbye Earl” illustrate the way vengeful fantasies can be replaced by pleasurable activities that counter punitive networks of power and help their audiences imagine peaceful communities.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When I first heard the Dixie Chicks' "Goodbye Earl," I was seeing a therapist in an attempt to heal from a number of unhealthy relationships. I felt like everyone I knew thought I should just accept sexism in my intimate and professional relationships. The previous year I had worked at a restaurant where violence against women surfaced weekly as fodder for jokes. My family felt like I had a "feminist chip" on my shoulder and suggested that I carried too much anger around with me. My older brother did not understand why it bothered me that Hooters (not the restaurant I worked in) advertised itself as a "family restaurant." As far as he was concerned, the objectification of women *was* a family value. My therapist assured me that my desire to be in relationships that were free of sexism and abuse was reasonable, and she helped me to start re-envisioning my life. While her insights gave me the knowledge I needed to change, the Dixie Chicks helped me imagine what separating myself from abuse might feel like.

"Goodbye Earl" tells the story of Mary Ann and Wanda, two women who bond together to kill Wanda's abusive husband after he has "walked right through [a] restraining order and put her in intensive care." Inspired by the Chicks, the women feed Earl poisoned black-eyed peas, wrap his dead body in a tarp, and dump it in a river.

They move to the country and “sell Tennessee ham and strawberry jam and don’t lose any sleep at night cause Earl had to die.” As the lyrics suggest, despite the subject matter, the song is playful and fun. It is upbeat and fast, and Natalie Maines sings the lyrics with a cartoon like maniacally vengeful tone. The chorus is laced with “nah nah nah nahs,” and in the video the Dixie Chicks dance with one another and members of Wanda and Mary Ann’s community. They dance with the hospital orderlies as Mary Ann and Wanda plan Earl’s death, and they dance with everyone (including the dead Earl) in a utopian society free of abuse envisioned in the song and depicted at the end of the video.

I love the song and the video for their playful natures and for their challenge to patriarchal concepts of ownership and control, but also for the way they make me feel empowered. I appreciate the way the texts speak back to domestic violence jokes by changing the punch line. The discussion the song and video generated revealed the sexism inherent in the country music industry, and it increased its listeners’ awareness of women’s shelters and domestic abuse hotlines. (Many radio stations played advertisements for both when they played the song.) I think the video is important for the way it urges us to create a more loving society. It helps us to envision what it would look like for women to have the freedom to express themselves playfully and sexually without the threat of violence. But mainly both texts just feel good. They make me laugh, and I always want to dance when I hear and see them. And they feel rebellious; rebelling against Earl and against the sexism in country music in general feels pretty good.

Over time my relationship with the Chicks has grown more complicated. Though I still love the video and song as much as I originally did, I worry about its failure to recognize feminist institutions and methods of support to end domestic violence. I worry about what message the texts send about domestic violence as they suggest that death of the abuser may be the only way out of a violent relationship. I worry about the confusion between self-defense and that feeling of rebellion that is so often associated with revenge. But because the video is so sophisticated, because it suggests that society should and can be restructured so that abuse is only a faint memory, I am usually able to keep those worries on the back burner and can still enjoy the texts. As the National Coalition against Domestic Violence pointed out, the song and video raised so much awareness about domestic violence that their finer points outweighed the troubling ones (Farache).

Unfortunately, other contemporary texts about domestic violence lack “Goodbye Earl’s” sophistication and maintain some of its problems. Most of these texts have not generated the controversy that “Goodbye Earl” did,¹ so their fans lack the benefit of a national public discussion that considers the problems and potential of the texts informed by theories of domestic violence. These texts often suggest that rather than restructure society so that abuse ceases to easily function, individual women who are being battered should learn to outsmart the system while maintaining its structure.

¹ Some radio stations and music video channels banned “Goodbye Earl,” even though it was a very popular request. One town in California even held a town meeting to discuss the song. Some country music disc jockeys objected to the song, worrying that it advocated violence. Others said that country music was a family oriented industry, and the song had no place in it. Fans of the song and other critics pointed out that country music has a long tradition of accepting violence against women.

Outsmarting the system often entails “thinking like a man,” buying a gun, and ending domestic violence through the death of the abuser. These texts fail to recognize the problems guns cause in women’s lives and suggest that domestic violence is a problem to be handled individually, not a public offense. As Carol Clover points out, “there is some ethical relief in the idea that if women would just toughen up and take karate or buy a gun, the issue of male-on-female violence would evaporate” (143). In taking this attitude, popular texts about domestic violence affirm conservative notions of the state that suggest that women develop abilities to fend for themselves rather than relying on the government for support. But perhaps most disturbingly, these texts are sometimes celebrated and sometimes criticized for being “feminist revenge” narratives. While many of these texts contain revenge elements, they are mainly about self-defense, *not* revenge.

Critics that read texts that are about self-defense as if they are texts that are about revenge can be found in both popular and academic discourse. In her book *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape Revenge Cycle*, Jacinda Read labels *Sleeping with the Enemy* a “rape revenge” film (58). *Sleeping with the Enemy* was a popular film in the early nineties that tells the story of Laura Burney who escapes from her highly controlling and abusive husband to make a new life for herself. Her husband tracks her down and terrorizes her, but Laura kills him in self-defense. Read claims that the murder is an act of revenge; however, the film makes it clear that Laura kills her husband because she is terrified that the legal system will not be able to protect her. While I have not found many other film scholars or critics who label *Sleeping with*

the Enemy a revenge film, film critics frequently slap the label of revenge onto the film *Enough*, which has a plot very much like *Sleeping with the Enemy*. Roger Ebert criticizes *Enough* for being a “feminist revenge” film (online). A number of other film critics agree with his critique, labeling the film a “feminist revenge fantasy” and a “fem rage” film.² While most of these reviewers use the labels negatively, Ann Hornady of *The Washington Post* applauds the film and its category (online).

Other less popular texts about domestic violence that end in the murder of the husband are sometimes read in similar ways. In Linda Ben-Zvi’s collection of essays on Susan Glaspell’s plays, two out of the three critics who write about the frequently canonized play *Trifles* label it as a play of revenge when little in the play suggests such a reading.³ Ben-Zvi is one of the best known Glaspell scholars, and her essay is one of the two that conflates revenge with self-defense. Critics of both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple* rejoice in the pain inflicted on the novels’ male characters. Kathleen Davies delights in the fact that Joe’s death in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is Janie’s “triumph” (153). Henry Louis Gates notes that Celie “liberates” herself when she curses Albert, failing to point out that Celie is not really fully liberated until she learns to release her desire to control others and restores her relationship with Albert (253). While both novels contain elements of revenge, the fact that critics read their vengeful overtones as feminist victories is highly problematic.

² See, for instance, Ann Hornady, Desson Howe, Michael Atkinson, and Peter Travers.

³ Linda Ben Zvi’s “‘Murder, She Wrote’: The Genesis of Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*” and Karen Alkalay-Gut’s “Murder and Marriage: Another Look at *Trifles*.”

Part of the tendency to read texts about domestic violence as narratives of revenge may stem from the way critics read rape revenge films of the 1970s and 1980s. Carol Clover devotes a section of her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* to rape revenge films in this time period. According to Clover, rape revenge films emerged in the seventies as a reaction to the feminist critique of rape and the legal system's failure to take it seriously (146). Some of these films do reek of revenge. For instance, *Ms. 45* features a woman who kills not just her rapist but a string of men who commit a variety of sexist acts, only some of which involve violence. The plot of *I Spit on Your Grave* is also driven by revenge as the protagonist carefully plots and executes extraordinarily graphic murders of the men who raped her. Other films, however, seem to have more in common with contemporary portrayals of domestic violence films that end in murder. In *Lipstick*, for instance, a woman named Chris presses charges against her rapist only to see him acquitted. Shortly after his acquittal, he rapes Chris's younger sister. Fearing that the rapist will win another acquittal, Chris kills him. Though this murder may not be self-defense, it does not seem fair to label it "revenge." Clover also labels films such as *The Accused* and *Extremities* as "rape revenge" even though the "revenge" is sought through the court of law (115). These films may seem vengeful because they respond to the way violence against women has been ignored by the legal system and made light of by the entertainment industry. But the response of many of these films is not really about vengeance; it is about justice, and confusing the two motives is

damaging for feminists strongly invested in the latter.⁴

Reading texts that are about self-defense as if they are texts that are about revenge poses a number of problems for feminist theorists. Perhaps the most pressing concern involves real women who kill their abusers. According to a number of scholars interested in feminist legal theory, lawyers who seek to defend women who have killed their abusive partners on the grounds of self-defense have trouble achieving their goals in part because of stereotypes that suggest that women who kill are necessarily vengeful criminals. Jennifer Jones notes that when battered women do not uphold traditional feminine codes in court they are less likely to be acquitted for killing their abusers than women who fit stereotypical notions of femininity (69). Feminist legal scholar Martha Chamallas writes that “some trial judges are affected by a ‘vigilante stereotype’ in which they assume that battered women must be out for revenge unless they cry or behave in stereotypically feminine ways” (262). As Elizabeth Schneider points out, women who kill are either seen as bad or mad, and neither vision serves them in court (114). Feminist legal scholars are working to eradicate these stereotypes about women who kill; however, feminist popular culture and theories about it may make this work more difficult when scholars and critics insist on reading self-defense as revenge.

The second major problem I see with reading defense narratives as narratives of revenge has to do with the way these texts make women feel. Some of these texts

⁴ In *The Myth of Moral Justice*, Thane Rosenbaum offers a helpful distinction between revenge and justice. Unlike vengeance, justice should consist of an apology and “other human interactions and gestures that serve the purpose of healing” (212). Rosenbaum also notes that the criminal justice system does not necessarily guarantee justice but the hope of it (16).

dramatize the transformation the main character goes through to build her strength so that she can defend herself and eventually kill her abusive partner. This transformation is empowering for the character in the narrative, and it serves as an empowering narrative for its audience members. When we see these narratives as motivated by revenge, we begin to equate empowerment with revenge. Revenge fantasies can make one feel strong, and they may help people express anger about unjust events. These fantasies present real challenges, however, when we begin to unthinkingly use imaginary vengeance to transform ourselves from feelings of victimization to feelings of empowerment. When we engage in such fantasies, we run the risk of becoming complicit with a vengeful society that too often resorts to violence to solve its problems.

A third and final problem I see with equating self-defense narratives with narratives of revenge is revealed by Moira Gatens' work in *Imaginary Bodies*. In this book, Gatens points out that the ways we think about the body politic and the ways we think about human bodies reflect and presuppose one another. If we see revenge as being personally transformative for our individual bodies, then how must we envision it for the State? Gatens' thesis certainly makes sense here. One only has to look towards the media's attention to criminal court proceedings to see that themes associated with revenge are often embedded within the criminal justice system.⁵ But, as theorists on violence point out, revenge does not eradicate violence from society. This is partly

⁵ For instance, on a website devoted to discussing the Andrea Yates trial, one writer suggested that we stop ignoring our "basic human instincts" and recognize our need to commit acts of revenge, rather than being concerned with rehabilitation.

because people (and governments) who commit acts of revenge do not seek to understand the root of the crime. Rather, they focus on the individual who committed the crime, and the root of the problem that produced the act of violence never gets fully addressed or solved. As Gatens points out, in order for violence to be significantly reduced, social structures must change.

While these changes can be developed by government institutions, individual citizens can also contribute to these changes by transforming their lives. Gatens claims that in order to re-envision social structure, we need to re-envision our bodies. Antiviolence groups tend to agree with her. For instance, the national feminist organization INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence supports such a vision on their website suggesting that people “link struggles for personal transformation and healing with struggles for social justice.” Thus, the personal changes people make to improve their lives should reflect and motivate changes for society at large. Similarly, in her book *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Normalization*, Ladelle McWhorter gives us an idea of how we can begin to transform our lives and bodies as a way to begin working for social change. Using Foucault’s *The Care of the Self*, McWhorter suggests that “if we want to undermine the regimes of power and knowledge that oppress and threaten to dominate us, we have to cultivate a new way of life that stands counter to them” (190). Though McWhorter is talking mainly about “sexual regimes of power,” her suggestions work for opposing all kinds of networks of power. Revenge is embedded within a network of power that produces a society in which systems of abuse flourish. To oppose this network, we have to begin to find

ways to transform ourselves from places of victimization to places of empowerment without advocating revenge.

“Empowerment” can be a vague word with a variety of definitions. My use of it throughout the next several chapters stems from Evan Stark and Anne Flitcraft’s definitions of autonomy and empowerment. In their article “Personal Power and Institutional Victimization: Treating the Dual Trauma of Woman Battering,” Stark and Flitcraft define autonomy as “a sense of separateness, flexibility, and self-possession sufficient to define one’s self interest . . . and make significant choices” (qtd. in Herman 134). They define empowerment as “the convergence of mutual support with individual autonomy” (qtd. in Herman 134). Admittedly, this definition of autonomy reads a bit condescendingly as it suggests that a battered woman at the point of victimization is not able to define her own self interest. Scholars have critiqued this portrayal of battered women because it suggests that they are not actively trying to find ways to stop the battering. Many battered women actively strategize to protect their own self interest (not to be beaten) but they do not have the resources to leave the relationship. What I like about Stark and Flitcraft’s definition, however, is the phrase “a sense of separateness, flexibility, and self definition.” I think most scholars would agree that most battered women do not feel separate from their abuser, and they do not feel flexible. The degree to which they must manipulate their action around the abuser’s behavior attests to their lack of flexibility and separation. So, it is this feeling of freedom coupled with support from important groups or individuals that defines the word “empowered” for me. This support cannot just be emotional, but it must be

financial as well so that the survivor actually has the means to choose not to be in an abusive relationship.

In this dissertation, I will look at the above problems as they are found in popular and more “literary” texts about domestic violence. I will ask how self-defense has been and continues to be mistaken for revenge. While some of this problem rests with conservative personalities (talk show hosts, for instance) who often malign feminists, characterizing them as vengeful, angry women, I am concerned with the ways in which feminist texts have (sometimes unknowingly) conflated self-defense and feminism with revenge. I will also look at the way some feminists eschew forgiveness and peaceful methods of self transformation in favor of more vengeful ones. Finally, I will consider how peaceful methods of transformation can help us to re-envision ourselves and re-envision society so that abuse cannot function so easily. My methods have not been dreamt up by me; rather, they can be found in feminist literary texts that represent domestic violence. Some of the texts, though certainly not all of them, are the same ones that present problems for feminism.

Theories on Domestic Violence and Battered Women Who Kill

This dissertation is necessarily informed by feminist theory on domestic violence and battered women who kill. While I will bring out relevant information about domestic violence in the chapters that demand it, a brief overview here will provide a foundation. While feminists offer a variety of perspectives on the root cause of domestic violence, bell hooks articulates one of the most comprehensive theories. Hooks writes that “it is the Western philosophical notion of hierarchical rule and

coercive authority that is the root cause of violence against women, of adult violence against children, of all violence between those who dominate and those who are dominated” (464). Hierarchical rule and coercive authority may lead to violence against women in a number of ways. In *Ordinary Violence*, Mary White Stewart notes that some men and women value social codes that place men at the head of the family and give them the right to coercive control. These codes may also de-emphasize the importance of education and employment for women and insist that women do everything in their power to keep a family together. These social codes also affect the work industry in general as employers discriminate against women, paying them less and offering them fewer opportunities than their male counterparts. Feminine social codes also strongly imply that women are responsible for child care, and this belief may place them at an unfair advantage financially if they want to separate from their spouses (102). As hooks points out, hierarchies can also engender abuse as most men who work are not in positions of authority. These men may feel emasculated because of social codes that suggest they should hold positions of power. They may be abused by their employers who feel it is their right to control them as they like. Feeling emasculated and powerless, these men may then take their frustration out on their spouses and seek to exercise their power at home. Society suggests that hierarchical rule and coercive authority are natural and associated with love through a variety of acts and mediums including military action, parental authority, and popular culture’s representation of various hierarchical institutions and relationships (467-474).

While hooks' theory on hierarchies is very comprehensive, she does not pay enough attention to one other major factor of domestic violence: the primacy and privacy society gives to the family. Despite feminist theories that have pointed out the problems with this idea, some judges, lawyers, and police officers still believe that what happens in the family is a matter of private rather than public concern. Stewart suggests that domestic violence is allowed to exist because of this belief and because this belief often manifests itself in the isolation of the family from the rest of the community (101).

Just as hooks suggests that the idea that people in power have the right to control one another engenders a society in which domestic violence exists, other feminist legal theorists suggest that domestic violence has to be understood as a series of actions and threats that one partner uses to control the other. These actions and threats might include verbal abuse, the abuse of pets, the destruction of objects, and the abuse of children as well as actual physical assault. This perspective has had some success in challenging the way criminal courts view domestic violence. Without adopting this feminist perspective, courts limit their definition of domestic violence to include documented physical assaults only (Chamallas 257-8). After decades of feminist legal work, many courts allow for expert testimony on domestic violence (or battering) so that they can consider a range of actions, both physical and emotional, as domestic violence (Schneider 108).

Despite the success of some feminist legal theories, women who kill their abusive spouses face an uphill battle in court. As I noted earlier, lawyers, judges, and juries often assume that women who kill their abusers are necessarily crazy or seeking

revenge rather than acting out of self-defense. As Schneider points out in *Battered Women and Feminist Lawmaking*, self-defense claims result in acquittal when jurors accept that the defendant acted reasonably. Many people have a difficult time understanding how a woman who killed her abuser was acting reasonably. They fail to understand why a woman may have not been able to leave instead of killing her abuser. Judges may permit expert testimony on battering to help jurors better understand the defendant's position. Unfortunately, many experts, juries, and judges focus on the psychological distress of the woman who has been abused rather than her unique ability to reasonably comprehend the imminent danger she faces. Because of this focus, they fail to see how women who kill can claim self-defense. Instead, they see the woman as mentally impaired because of the abuse she has suffered, or wonder how—if she was so impaired from battering—she could have been able to assert herself to kill her abuser. Either conclusion fails to result in acquittal because the reasonableness of self-defense has not been understood by the jury, the judge, or perhaps explained well enough by the expert (116-117).

Robbin S. Ogle and Susan Jacobs contend that the failure to understand the reasonableness of self-defense is related to an over-reliance on Lenore Walker's theories on battered women who kill (5). Walker's book *Terrifying Love: Why Battered Women Kill and How Society Responds* is frequently referenced as the most authoritative book on women who kill their abusers. In this book, Walker explains why battered women who kill their abusers should be found innocent under a claim of self-defense. Women who kill their abusers have legitimate reason to believe that their

abusers may kill them, even if the abuser is not threatening death at the time. In response to the question, “why don’t women simply leave,” Walker points out that even when women do leave, their spouses may come after them and abuse them more. Additionally, she applies Martin Seligman’s theory of “learned helplessness” to battered women who kill. Using this theory, Walker points out that battered women develop strategies for survival and choose the one they think is most effective at the time. In many cases where women kill their abusers, the women have not intended to kill, but have meant to simply stop the abuse. Walker also discusses post-traumatic stress disorder as it relates to women who kill, illustrating how a sane battered woman may experience a separation of body and mind that is so severe that she sees herself killing her abuser, but does not actually feel the experience. Other women may black out mentally as their bodies carry out the violence (42-7). Although Walker emphasizes the importance of making a self-defense plea, Oggle, Jacobs, and others claim that her use of the phrase “helplessness” and her emphasis on psychological disorders leads juries, judges, and lawyers to view battered women as too sick to act on their own behalf and kill their abusers in self-defense. Oggle and Jacobs suggest that people working in the criminal justice system avoid relying on Walker’s theories and instead focus on the way that women in violent relationships reasonably assess the impending danger that they face by their spouses. Here, battering is seen as a series of events that may very likely lead to the victim’s death. Self-defense, then, may be more easily understood. Oggle and Jacobs note, however, that Schneider and other feminist legal theorists have been

making similar critiques of Walker's work since the early 1990s without seeing significant results in the courtroom (6-7).

Representations of women who kill in literature and popular culture and the discussions that surround them affect the way real women who kill their abusers are treated in court. As Margaret Thornton notes in "Law and Popular Culture: Engendering Legal Vertigo," students who enter law school are "voracious consumers of popular culture" (7). Much of their understanding of the law has been informed by popular culture's representation of it. As legal theory certainly affects their understanding, their understanding also affects legal theory as curriculums and interpretations of laws change by these same students who continue to be fans of literature in both high and low forms. Though the legal system would like to think it is immune from popular culture and literature, the messages that literary texts send affect the way the law is interpreted and practiced (Thornton 19). Because of this reality, the representation of domestic violence and battered women who kill should be a major concern for feminist theorists interested in popular culture, literature, and legal theory.

Structure of this Dissertation

I have structured this dissertation so that readers are able to see how revenge and domestic violence are played out in a number of feminist texts over several different decades. Since I am concerned with the way that the US criminal justice system approaches women who kill their abusers, the texts I am analyzing are all American. In the next chapter, I look to the late nineteen-teens and twenties to show how feminism and feminist identity formation have often been associated with violence.

Women writers and performers such as Susan Glaspell, Zora Neale Hurston, and Sophie Treadwell make this link by writing about women in abusive relationships. These female characters become violent because the state fails to protect them from domestic violence. In these texts, violence is not celebrated nor is it cast as revenge; however, contemporary critics sometimes read these texts that way. In contrast, Maurine Watkins and blues musicians Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Ella Fitzgerald use violence as an empowering force in their lives—not just to end abusive relationships but to enhance their personalities and style. As writers like Susan Glenn have pointed out, contemporary ideas about feminism began taking shape in the early twentieth-century (4). Both kinds of texts analyzed in chapter two have had a tremendous impact on the way contemporary scholars and critics read images of violent women.

In chapter three, I look at the way Zora Neale Hurston combines the two approaches to violence explored in chapter two in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In this novel, Hurston illustrates the way violence is passed down through hierarchical systems of abuse. At the same time she embraces (imaginary) violence as a means of self empowerment. After discussing this problem, I look at the ways in which Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* revises *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to replace imaginary violence with peaceful acts of transformation. Though the connection between Hurston and Walker has been commented on extensively, I have not encountered any article that focuses on this particular aspect. Interestingly, Steven Spielberg's version of *The Color Purple* downplays some of Walker's more peaceful acts of transformation and rejects Walker's forgiveness of perpetrators of abuse.

Spielberg's hesitation to reconcile Albert and Celie reflect concerns that many feminist theorists have about forgiving perpetrators of abuse. I have chosen to look at these three texts because they highlight concerns in the feminist movement to end violence that are rarely discussed in discussions of feminist legal theory. Additionally, the texts are all three widely taught in American literature classrooms, and I hope my analysis of them will influence the way instructors read and teach the texts.

In the fourth chapter of my dissertation, I look at contemporary texts about women who kill their abusive partners. In *Enough*, the female protagonist escapes from and then kills her abuser. The film suggests that the legal system is inadequate and cannot protect women from their abusive partners. However, rather than suggesting that the legal system change its shape, *Enough* argues that women need to change their shape and their responses to violence within the current system. In contrast, works such as LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker* and the Dixie Chick's "Goodbye Earl" suggest that communities be transformed so that domestic abuse, and the death of both men and women, is prevented. While these works seem to parallel the works of Glaspell, Hurston, and Treadwell, they go a step further by helping us to envision ways that individuals can change their physical relationships to one another to begin to transform society. Although they are not without their problems both *Shell Shaker* and "Goodbye Earl" underscore the importance of displacing patterns of rage in the body with patterns of joy. They suggest that these changes can affect the ways we relate to one another and help us to rebuild communities. Since the texts were all written between 1999 and 2002, they can give us a good sense of some of the latest ideas about women who kill.

For my final chapter, I look at the ways the self-defense movement and the popular yoga movement contribute to and complicate the movement to end violence. I think it is important to look at these movements because they offer ways to transform the self, something that many narratives that depict battering homicides often model. Self-defense feminists provide women with a practical way to defend themselves against domestic violence and rape, and they empower women in other ways, helping them to feel confident, strong, and courageous. Unfortunately, self-defense feminists often lapse into violent and vengeful rhetoric, making troubling associations between self-defense, feminism, and revenge. Self-defense feminists often question the efficacy of non-violent protest, and the popular yoga movement illustrates how pacifism can affect change. Additionally, yogis challenge self-defense feminists' characterizations of love and pacifism as apolitical and weak, showing how both responses take tremendous strength. Like the self-defense movement, the popular yoga movement offers women who have been victimized ways to empower themselves and feel stronger and more in control of their emotions. Unfortunately, the popular yoga movement has a tendency to essentialize women, and this tendency could pose problems for yogis who work with the movement to end domestic violence. Examining the potential and problems of both movements can help their practitioners engage with domestic violence theory and improve their contributions to the movement to end violence.

CHAPTER 2

“KNOT IT”: MURDER, MARRIAGE, AND MAYHEM IN THE 1920S

The judge said, “Listen Bessie, tell me why you killed your man.”
The judge said, “Listen Bessie, tell me why you killed your man.”
I said, “Judge, you ain’t no woman, and you can’t understand.”

from Porter Grainger and F. Johnson’s “Sing Sing Prison Blues,”
performed by Bessie Smith

The fourth verse of Bessie Smith’s “Sing Sing Prison Blues” highlights different ways female writers and performers responded to some of the sensationalized murder cases of the 1920s. These cases, involving women who killed their abusive spouses and lovers, were featured in both the white and black presses and garnered a tremendous amount of attention in the literary world and in the world of popular culture. Journalists rarely identified abuse as the source of the murders; instead, they sensationalized the murders, playing into popular misconceptions about women who kill. Female literary writers and performers responded to these murder trials, the journalistic depictions of them, and the issues embedded within the trials; they can be divided into two groups. In one group, writers such as Susan Glaspell, Zora Neale Hurston, and Sophie Treadwell seem to be focused on critiquing the structures of society that engender abuse. They point out that the legal system fails to represent and protect women, illustrate how traditional gender codes and living circumstances can threaten women’s mental health, and contest popular theories on violence against women. Though the second group of

writers and performers sometimes critique these problems, they place additional emphasis on sexualizing and stylizing the violence performed. In this group, playwright Maurine Watkins and blues singers Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ella Fitzgerald use violence to enhance their subjectivity, to shock and seduce their audiences, and to challenge traditional performances of gender. Though a division between the two groups can be fairly easily drawn, the lines between self-defense and revenge are blurred by contemporary scholars responding to both groups. In looking at the first group of writers, I point out the insightful critiques female writers made of society's treatment of domestic violence in the 1920s and illustrate how these critiques are obscured by contemporary scholars who insist on reading their texts as narratives of revenge. The analysis of the second group of writers from the 1920s illustrates the way feminist identity was often equated with violence and revenge, perhaps affecting the way scholars read the first group of writers. Taken together, the works help us to understand how revenge and self-defense are conflated in contemporary portrayals of women who kill.

Domestic Abuse in the 1920s

In order to contextualize the texts of both groups, it is necessary to understand the social atmosphere of the 1920s as it related to domestic violence. In his book *What Trouble I've Seen: A History of Violence Against Wives*, David Peterson del Mar notes that the 1920s witnessed a rise in incidents and acceptance of domestic violence for a number of reasons. For one, the consumer culture and popular psychology of the 1920s emphasized a lack of restraint. Popular psychology identified "the positive aspects of

anger” and encouraged couples to communicate their desires to one another. Sometimes this anger and communication, coupled with a lack of restraint, resulted in violence. Additionally, changing gender social codes may have contributed to a rise in domestic violence. Popular novels for men began celebrating “muscular primitivism.” Authors began depicting men as “naturally” rough and tough, and displays of their physical prowess were occasionally directed towards romantic female partners. Peterson del Mar quotes the character Jim from the popular novel *Brawny-Man* to make this point. Jim claims “that his girlfriend liked ‘that I was burly and rough, and would use my muscle to make her sit on my lap, and would pick her up in my arms and swing her around, head down, while she clawed and wiggled and has as much fun of the rough-house as I did’ . . . ‘Any real girl likes for her man to use his muscle on her”” (115). Feminine social codes also changed, encouraging women to exercise independence and voice their desires. When their desires differed from their husbands, some husbands countered with violence. Violence against women may have also been a backlash against women’s increased freedom in the social sphere. Men sometimes cited jealousy as an excuse for beating their wives; violence became a way for husbands to control their wives and keep them at home (Peterson del Mar 107-126).

Scholars interested in domestic violence report that social attitudes about it were mixed in the 1920s. Jennifer Jones asserts that domestic violence was, for the most part, accepted by society. Jones discusses Abraham Myerson’s *The Nervous Housewife* (1920) to illustrate the medical community’s acceptance of abuse. According to Jones, Myerson “reasons that a woman’s neurosis caused her to make unreasonable demands

on her husband's patience, which in turn poisoned the marriage relationship and led to the disintegration of the family" (41). These unreasonable demands included, in Myerson's words, "women rebelling against the drunkenness, unfaithfulness, neglect, and brutality 'that a former generation of wives tolerated and even expected'" (qtd. in Jones 41). As Jones points out, Myerson's disdain for women who refuse to put up with abuse indicates his acceptance of it. Offering a different perspective, Peterson del Mar writes that most people eschewed violence against women, despite the rise in the number of incidents (114). In her study of cases involving abused women in Boston in the 1920s, Linda Gordon records a variety of responses that social workers heard when asking neighbors about abuse in particular households. According to Gordon, "Some responded with shrugs, words of resignation, or homilies about female destiny and male violence; others responded with disapproval or even outrage." Some parents offered refuge for their battered daughters, but others did not. Most who did offer it gave into the batterer if he demanded that his wife return to him (278). Regardless of the community's level of acceptance, the courts and legal officials offered little recourse to battered wives.

If a woman wanted to report the abuse she suffered from her husband to legal officials, she could either go to the police or, if available where she lived, the court of domestic relations.¹ Both avenues offered slow, if any, response. According to

¹ In forty-nine percent of the cases Linda Gordon studied, women reported abuse to police (280). Women also reported abuse to mental health agencies and child protection agencies. The response from mental health agencies and child protection agencies was similar to the court of domestic relations.

Gordon, the most a police officer would do was “charge an offender with drunk and disorderly conduct” (281). In the cases Gordon studied, generally the police would remove the husbands from the home for a little while to calm them down. Sometimes the police sided with the husbands. In the worst case scenarios, the police simply ignored requests for help. As Gordon notes, one police officer from her study told a social worker that the police refused to go to one particular house because the woman called far too often ““for the slightest thing”” (281). In rural areas, police response could be very slow. Peterson del Mar describes a girl who escaped her abusive step-father, who had been threatening to rape her and had been beating her mother, to take a letter to the police explaining the dire situation and asking for their help. The police went to the house the next day. Before the police arrived, the mother and daughter fought off the batterer physically and verbally, bargaining for the batterer to respect his step-daughter’s virginity and asking him to take his sexual aggression out on his wife instead. While the two succeeded in protecting the daughter’s virginity, the batterer abused both women horribly until the police arrived (132-3).

In most major cities, women could also report abuse to the Court of Domestic Relations. Courts of Domestic Relations were established in the second decade of the twentieth century to handle family matters that legal officials thought were too delicate for police courts. Family matters such as domestic abuse and child abuse were decriminalized in these courts. Social workers and judges who worked there approached cases with the intention of keeping the family together. If a woman reported abuse she suffered from her husband to the court, social workers made an

appointment to visit her home and an appointment for her to bring in her husband so the two could be counseled following the visit to their home. When social workers visited the home, they inspected its appearance and noted the manner in which the wife catered to her husband's needs. When the couple met with the social worker again, the social worker would talk with both husband and wife to determine what caused the abuse. She often suggested that the wife improve her home making skills and appearance and sometimes gave her money to do so.² Pleck notes that most legal workers thought that “men were irresponsible when they failed to be good providers and drank to excess; women caused most other family problems” (143).

Most cases of domestic abuse appeared to be “solved” by counseling with social workers; however, if a wife was unsatisfied with the results, she could ask for divorce. Judges had strict requirements for divorce. One of the two parties had to be deemed “innocent” by the court. When abuse was the prime reason for the divorce, the wife generally had to prove that she had done nothing to merit the abuse. In *Beaten Down*, Peterson del Mar quotes from a 1921 decision of the Oregon Supreme Court: “cruelty which lays the legal foundation for a divorce must be unmerited and unprovoked, unless

² For instance, Pleck notes that a judge of New York's court of domestic relations found that a Mr. Polson beat his wife because she repeatedly made the same boring meals for her husband and because she was unattractive. Social workers solved the case by teaching Mrs. Polson how to cook, do her hair, and dress more stylishly. They gave her money for shopping and to pay for dentures. As the twenties progressed, this approach increasingly became a way to blame women for abuse. Peterson del Mar attributes this perspective to an increased interest in Freudian psychology that suggested women were naturally masochistic. Gordon notes that women blaming also naturally arose from social codes. Women were much more likely to talk to social workers about changes they could make, and they were much more likely to blame themselves for the abuse.

such treatment is unjustified by the provocation and out of proportion to the offense” (124). Additionally, Peterson del Mar notes that courts were much more likely to grant divorces if the abused wife had not responded to her husband violently. Pleck points out that the abused wife also had to adhere to other social codes for femininity. If a wife had been unfaithful to her husband, courts were unlikely to grant her a divorce. If a divorce was granted and the wife had been unfaithful, she would not receive financial support from her ex-spouse (141-2).

The few government officials and workers who thought that domestic abuse was criminal favored punishments that fit the nature of the crime. Pleck notes that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some politicians tried to bring back the whipping post for men who beat their wives. In 1882, Maryland became the first state to implement the whipping post for this purpose. Oregon and Delaware soon followed suit. While these three states were the only ones in which the whipping post was used for wife beaters, many other states seriously considered it. The newspapers of major cities such as Chicago and New York ran articles favoring this legislation. In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt argued for the whipping post in his address to Congress. Some feminists, Lucy Stone in particular, also argued for the whipping post. Politicians who supported using the whipping post did so for a variety of reasons. For one, the Ku Klux Klan and the White Caps had been showing up at the homes of notorious wife beaters and whipping them. Politicians sought to take the law out of their hands and put it back where it belonged: with government officials. Beyond that, politicians and feminists alike thought that the whipping post was a good deterrent; most men would be

humiliated if they were whipped publicly. They also both noted that the whipping post was better than imprisonment because imprisonment deprived the family of the husband's income. Pleck also notes that "[t]he image that appealed to these legislators was that of the State, as a moral father, punishing a brutish son-in-law" (111). Though proponents of whipping denied that it was vengeful, their comments favoring it suggested otherwise. For one, they referred to whipping as "punishment" and noted that it should "fit the crime." Others seemed to relish the idea of punishing these men. One politician said, "I'd have the wife whip him if I could get her to do so, I would like to stand beside her at the time" (qtd. in Pleck 118). In addition to pointing out the vengeful nature of the whipping post, opponents said that it would encourage cruelty and that wife beating was not something that could be deterred. Others thought wife beating was not serious enough to merit legal action. At any rate, between 1911 and 1917, most serious consideration of the whipping post died out. Major newspapers that had run articles in the late nineteenth century and in the first decade of the twentieth century began spending more time opposing it (Pleck). While there is no record of Oregon's use of the post, it was abolished in both Delaware and Maryland by the mid twentieth century and used on only a very limited basis until then.³ During the 1920s, then, domestic abuse was decriminalized; however, the approaches to addressing it still retained a rhetoric of punishment, rehabilitation, and to some degree, revenge.

On some level, the movement in the twenties to decriminalize abuse is laudable.

³ According to Pleck, "[i]n Delaware between 1901 and 1942, six whites and fifteen blacks were flogged for wife beating" with the largest number occurring in the early twentieth century.

Some contemporary feminists, such as Angela Y. Davis and other members of the anti-prison movement, criticize the way the legal system merely continues the cycle of abuse when abusers are convicted. Those feminists, many of whom are women of color, have critiqued the way the most popular responses to domestic violence place too much emphasis on criminalization and not enough emphasis on rehabilitation for abusers that would educate and train them to stop being abusive. While decriminalization in the 1920s may sound appealing from this perspective, the rehabilitative efforts in the 1920s only focused on what women could do to prevent their husband from beating them. The only efforts focused on getting men to stop abusing came in the form of encouraging temperance; little was done to encourage abusers to see that they did not have the right to control their wives, especially with violence.

In The Press

Sometimes abuse resulted in the murder of the abuser. According to Roger Lane, murder between intimates rose during the 1920s, reflecting an increase in murder in general. While the actual increase in the murder rate in the 1920s has been exaggerated, the newspapers of the 1920s certainly made it seem as if murder was dramatically on the rise (220). According to Ann Jones in *Women Who Kill*, newspapers particularly paid attention to women who killed, suggesting that the murders they committed were due to the increased freedom they had gained by the feminist movement (260-1). Although abuse was sometimes a factor in the murder, both the legal system and the press failed to recognize its significance. Instead, both

systems exploited women who were tried for murder, using them to educate the public about proper feminine social codes and to provide entertainment.

In 1924 journalist and aspiring playwright Maurine Watkins wrote a series of articles about a number of women on trial for killing their boyfriends and husbands. The articles were sensationalistic, and, according to Thomas Pauly, turned some of the women into stars. Watkins made a kind of game out of her articles. She began some of them with questions like, “What counts with a jury when a woman is on trial for murder? Youth? Beauty? And if to these she adds approaching motherhood--?” She assured her readers that if certain women were acquitted, “murderess row” would “lose class” (Pauly 156). Two of the women, Beulah Annan and Belva Gaertner, provided fodder for Watkins’ hit play *Chicago*. When the play opened in its hometown, Gaertner attended, boasting to reporters that she had been the inspiration for one of the main characters (Pauly xxvi). Though New Yorkers would try to convince people otherwise, this carnival like atmosphere was not unique to Chicago. According to Buster Keaton, in the first years of the twentieth century, Willie Hammerstein bailed Ethel Conrad and Lillian Graham out of jail on the condition that they appear in his “freak attractions” at his father’s theatre, the Victoria. These women, who had been arrested for shooting the famous millionaire and hotel owner W.E.D. Stokes, were only two of a series of a female murder defendants Hammerstein featured in a series called “Shooting Stars” (68). These examples of murder defendants/celebrities are indicative of the sensationalist rhetoric employed by newspaper journalists and, to some degree, lawyers in the courts.

The most famous murder cases involving women defendants in the 1920s occurred in 1926 and 1927. In November of 1926, an unsolved murder case from four years past came back to light. According to Lane, the governor of New Jersey reopened this “Case of the Minister and the Choir Singer” in hopes of generating publicity for himself. This case involved the married Reverend Wheeler Hall and his mistress Eleanor Mills, who sang in the Reverend’s church choir while her husband and daughter watched from the congregation. The two had been found murdered in 1922. Their murderer had arranged them in an embrace and scattered the love letters they had exchanged around them. Though, as Lane points out, the new evidence was very flimsy, the press jumped at the chance to exploit the case (221). According to Jones, by the time the trial was over “more words had been written about the Hall-Mills case than about any other single topic in the history of the world—enough words to fill nine volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*” (239). Both Mrs. Hall and Charlotte Mills (Eleanor’s daughter) were accused of the crime and garnered tremendous attention by the press. Jones notes that the public doubted Mrs. Hall, an upstanding citizen of fine moral conduct, could have committed the murder. They were more inclined to believe that Charlotte Mills, a self professed flapper who bragged about her knowledge of her mother’s affair, was capable of murder even though there was more damning evidence against Mrs. Hall (240-1). In the end, neither woman was convicted; the case went unsolved by the court.

Just a few months later in the spring of 1927, the public had a new trial to follow. This time the criminals were much more evident. After hours of questioning,

both Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray confessed to conspiring to the murder of Snyder's abusive husband, Albert. While each admitted a certain degree of guilt, both Ruth and Judd claimed that the other had actually committed the murder.⁴ The press quickly became interested in the case. As Jennifer Jones reports, for the first time in court history, microphones were set up in the courtroom so that everyone in attendance (1500 in all) could hear the proceedings. Scalpers sold tickets for \$50 a piece to what was becoming one of the most famous trials of the decade (42). According to Ann Jones and Lane, the ordinariness of the couple, particularly of Ruth, both deeply interested the public and made them very anxious. To quell this anxiety and increase their audience's reading pleasure, journalists transformed Ruth from an ordinary housewife to "the blonde fiend" and linked her ability to commit adultery to her ability to murder. In contrast, journalists portrayed Judd as an exceptionally weak man who was seduced by Ruth and duped into murdering her husband. While Ruth's adultery was mentioned so often in the court that a writer from the *New York Post* mentioned that she appeared to be on trial for adultery as much as murder, Judd's own adulterous acts were accepted as natural. Playwright Willard Mack, who demonized Ruth, claimed that Judd "had never been a murderer in his heart" (qtd. in Jones 260). In the end, both Ruth and Judd were sentenced to the electric chair. Ann Jones notes that "[b]y the time it was over, all of the papers had written volumes and, incidentally, sold more newspapers than ever before" (255).

⁴ Judd was the only one who could actually claim that Ruth had committed the murder. Other witnesses claimed that Gray had bought the weapons for the murder and established an alibi for it in advance.

Though Snyder's husband abused her, the press and the court devoted little attention to it. In *Medea's Daughters*, Jennifer Jones notes that "[t]here was substantial evidence that Albert Snyder, who drank eight to ten highballs each evening, beat his wife and child on several occasions" (43). Newspaper articles from the *New York Times* reveal that on the day of the murder, and on at least one other occasion, Albert had threatened to kill Ruth, to "blow her brains out." During the trial Ruth noted that she could not get a divorce. She also claimed that "if my husband hadn't said that he would take my life we would not have thought of taking his life" ("Text of Confession"). Despite these statements, newspaper journalists claimed that Albert was "a good man" and "a model husband" (A Jones 252). According to Jennifer Jones, lawyers in the courtroom only mentioned Albert's abusive behavior to illustrate that Ruth had a motive to kill her husband and to suggest that she was an unfit mother and wife. While Ruth's attorney tried to avoid the topic of abuse, Judd's attorney asked him about it. Jones notes that Gray's comments gave the jury reason to convict Ruth. She writes, "First, [they] gave Ruth a motive for her violence, but more importantly [they] implied that Ruth was an undisciplined wife who had angered her husband" (44).

Feminist backlash resounded throughout the trial. As Ann Jones notes, before the trial began, a female social worker told the *Mirror* that "[a]ny woman who commits a man's crime should be given a man's punishment." New York Senator William Lathrop Love argued for "equal rights for Women Criminals," and playwright Willard Mack exclaimed that "ONE BED" shared between Ruth and Judd should mean "ONE CHAIR" for them. An editorial in *The New York Times* noted that "[e]qual suffrage has

put women in a new position. If they are equal with men before the law, they must pay the same penalties as men for transgressing it” (263). In addition to these comments, Jones claims that the Snyder trial was turned into a “morality play” to educate women about the codes of conduct they should abide by (255). She writes that “*The New York Times* hoped the execution . . . would have a much-needed deterrent effect” and notes that “the *Mirror* congratulated itself that the ‘impressive lesson of the Snyder case—more effective than a thousand sermons’—would save countless people from their own ‘follies’” (265). Days before her execution, Ruth Snyder was warning women to accept their husbands’ imperfections and live good “straight li[ves]” (qtd. in Jones 265).

While the major newspapers paid most of their attention to white women who killed, the black press was equally quick to report and exploit the murders involving black couples. In his essay “Domestic Violence in the Harlem Renaissance: Remaking the Record in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*,” Steve Knadler writes about the way black women who killed their romantic partners were portrayed in the black press, specifically *The Amsterdam News* and the *New York Age*. According to Knadler, these papers portrayed black women who killed their romantic partners as “naturally” jealous and unable to control their emotions. Such intense jealousy was a mark of love and a reminder that no matter how independent black women became, they would still *need* their men (101). Knadler posits that these “stories of women with knives were less threatening to male readers than reassuring, for these stories of jealous, out-of-control women reaffirmed a woman’s dependence on her man at a time when there was a loosening of traditional gender norms” (101). While the domestic violence

that led to these murders was more obviously presented in the black press than in the white press, there was still no critique of the violence that linked it to the murder. Just as in the white press, journalists writing for the black press spent time exploiting the illicitness of the romantic relationship rather than focusing on the abuse that may have played a large part in the murder.

Driven to Murder

Some women writers responded to the way these articles ignored the social circumstances that led women to murder and portrayed women killers as naturally deviant. Writers such as Glaspell and Hurston illustrated how domestic abuse could lead a woman to murder when society offered her little protection. Adding to their critiques, Treadwell insisted that traditional gender codes, a lack of options for women, and the institution of marriage were enough to lead an ordinary woman to commit murder. Taken together, these women writers make a striking critique of portrayals of female murder defendants in the 1920s while also highlighting the failure of the US government to protect and empower women. As we will see, some contemporary readings of these texts obscure the social critique these writers made by focusing on vengeful themes that have little textual support. Looking at these works can help us to see how self-defense is conflated with revenge.

Glaspell

Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* may be the most famous American play about a woman who kills her abusive husband. Originally produced on August 8, 1916 by the Provincetown Players, *Trifles* has at least become Glaspell's most famous work. A *New*

York Times reviewer in the late 1920s noted that the play had become a “staple among little theatre companies” (Papke 24). *Trifles*’ inclusion in contemporary anthologies of varying types of American literature attests to its strength and timelessness. Though reviews of the original production are not available, later reviews in the late teens and twenties reveal that critics were varied in their responses to productions of the play, though most favored it. According to Mary E. Papke, Arthur Hornblow of *Theatre Magazine* the play was “ingenious, particularly in its presentation of feminine ways of knowing” (24). Others praised *Trifles* for its suspense and applauded the subtlety of the tragedy. One critic, after seeing a production by the Washington Square Players noted that it was “the most absorbing play” the company had ever performed. Negative reviews seem to say more about the acting than the script, though at least one reviewer critiqued the “homespun” nature of the play (24).

In *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times*, Linda Ben-Zvi argues that Glaspell used *Trifles* to respond to John Hossack’s murder trial, which she covered in 1900 and 1901. John Hossack, “a well to do farmer,” was killed in his sleep on the evening of December 2, 1900 (41). Margaret Hossack, John’s wife, told authorities that someone must have broken into their home and killed him. She had heard the front door shut and had seen a light in the room next to the bedroom she shared with John. After investigating the light and the sound, she returned to the bedroom to find John murdered. Though authorities initially believed Margaret, they soon found evidence that told another story. A neighbor reported that Margaret had asked him to “get rid” of John some time ago. Others noted that there had been considerable discord in the

home. When the police heard these stories and found the murder weapon underneath the family's corn crib, they arrested Margaret (42).

According to Ben-Zvi, Glaspell covered the trial from Margaret's arrest to her conviction. Initially, Glaspell followed the trends in her day, fitting Margaret into stereotypes of women who kill. Of Margaret, Glaspell wrote, "Though past 50 years of age, she is tall and powerful and looks like she would be dangerous if aroused to a point of hatred" (43). Glaspell portrayed John Hossack in a sympathetic light, saying that his disagreements with Margaret were a surprise because everyone got along with him. Her characterizations of Margaret imply her guilt and claim that the public was against her. Ben-Zvi notes, however, that mid way through the trial, Glaspell's articles change in their portrayal of Margaret. Though her tone remained sensational until the end of the trial, she began portraying Margaret in a more sympathetic light, highlighting her more stereotypically feminine features. She pointed out her tears and reported, without irony, that Margaret wanted to return to her children. Rather than being "dangerous" and "powerful," Margaret became "'worn and emaciated,'" or in Ben-Zvi's words "frail and maternal." Ben-Zvi attributes the change in description to Glaspell's visit to the Hossack's farm; however, she notes that it is unclear what exactly about the trip triggered the change. Though two witnesses in the trial testified that John Hossack had abused Margaret to the point that she feared for her life, Glaspell did not comment on this subject in her coverage of the trial (45). Fifteen years later, however, the Hossack farm and the abuse Margaret very likely faced resurfaced in *Trifles*.

Trifles is the fictional story of Minnie Wright, who has been arrested for the murder of her husband, John. Neither John nor Minnie appear in the play; all the action that transpires takes place between the county attorney (Mr. Henderson), the sheriff (Mr. Peters), a neighbor (Mr. Hale), Mrs. Peters, and Mrs. Hale. The play opens as the five enter the Wright's home. The men are there to investigate the murder, and the women are there to collect some things for Minnie. Dialogue between Mr. Henderson, Mr. Peters, and Mr. Hale establish the facts of the murder. Mr. Henderson had gone to visit the Wright's and found Minnie rocking in her rocking chair and pleating her apron, looking "queer" (Glaspell 73). Eventually Minnie told Mr. Henderson that John was dead. Mr. Henderson found John; as Minnie reported, "[h]e died of a rope round his neck" (74).

After establishing these details, the men begin to look for clues, anything to suggest that Minnie had a motive to kill her husband. They glance around the kitchen, criticizing Minnie's housekeeping skills and dismissing women's work as "trifles" (76). Quickly deciding there's nothing useful in the kitchen, the men leave the women and head upstairs to investigate the scene of the crime. While the men are gone, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale gradually and somewhat accidentally uncover evidence suggesting that Minnie Wright committed the murder. The two discover that Minnie was "piecing a quilt" and that something caused her otherwise neat sewing to become chaotic. Mrs. Hale rips the sewing out and redoes it. The two find a mangled bird cage and then a dead bird that had been choked to death. Someone has clearly been "rough" with things around the house; a rocking chair and the stove are also broken. The women's

discoveries are interlaced with conversations about the legal system, the Wrights, and the loneliness of life on a farm. Mrs. Hale makes it clear that she suspects John forbade Minnie from participating in social activities and made life generally miserable for her. Though Mrs. Peters initially maintains an allegiance to the law, Mrs. Hale gradually convinces her to sympathize with Minnie Wright. They deduce Minnie got the bird for company and that John killed it, just as he had been choking the life out of Mrs. Wright. When the men hear bits and pieces of their conversation, they make condescending remarks about the women's concerns and observations. Though the men instructed the women to let them know about anything they found, the women hide the remaining evidence from them.

Throughout the play, Glaspell critiques popular theories on domestic abuse. Had a social worker visited the Wright household, she might have suggested that Minnie's housekeeping skills needed improving. In accordance with the popular advice of women's magazines of the time, she also may have suggested that Minnie brighten her appearance and maintain hobbies to keep her from feeling depressed. Glaspell illustrates, however, that poor housekeeping and a depressed appearance may be a result, rather than a cause, of abuse. Mrs. Hale notes that Minnie "used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir" (78). Marriage, Mrs. Hale notes, changed Minnie. After she was married, she became withdrawn. John would not let her attend social functions or be a part of clubs. Isolated and mistreated, Minnie Wright tried to find solace in sewing, but that was simply not enough to keep her sane. Her attempts to bring joy into the home were

killed by Mr. Wright. Glaspell also points out that being a good husband involved more than avoiding alcohol and providing financial support for his family. When Mrs. Peters claims that people say John “was a good man,” Mrs. Hale acknowledges that society’s ideas of a “good man” might not preclude abusive behavior. Mrs. Hale says, “Yes, good; he didn’t drink and kept his word as well as most, I guess, and paid his debts. But he was a hard man, Mrs. Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him – [Shivers] Like a raw wind that gets to the bone” (82). By assigning Mrs. Hale this line, Glaspell critiques the societal assumptions about what it means to be a good man. In doing so, she critiques the actions and theories of workers of the Court of Domestic Relations, as well as the newspaper articles that portrayed abusive husbands, like John Hossack and Albert Snyder, as “good men.”

In addition to critiquing theories on domestic abuse, Glaspell critiques the structure of society, illustrating how it engenders abuse and denies women legal representation. In 1917, when the play was first produced, women did not have the right to vote. According to the accepted political theories of the day, the body politic represented and protected men who then protected their wives and children at home. Women’s voices were to be heard in the home, which they were to turn into a haven for themselves, their children, and their husbands. But, as many critics have noted, Glaspell points out that this political theory fails women, especially when the husband denies his wife her voice in the home. However, the correlation between a husband and the State is appropriate in this case; both fail to represent and protect women. Just as

John denied Minnie a voice in her own home, the legal system denies her a voice in her own country.

Glaspell makes this critique evident by quite literally denying Minnie, the accused, representation. In “The Two Spheres in Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles* and *The Verge*,” Marta Fernandez-Morales writes that “[t]his strategy of denying the accused woman a body or a voice of her own is [. . .] Glaspell’s main preoccupation in *Trifles*: trapped in a man’s world where men define the law and the language that can be used, women cannot have a distinct identity within the prevailing discourse” (166). As Fernandez-Morales and others point out, the men form the voice of the law, which clearly does not take into consideration women’s concerns. Glaspell illustrates this point as the men dismiss the women’s conversations about quilting (a clue in the case) and relationships (another clue) as “trifles.” Though the women are supposed to have authority in the home, the men have taken over, at least on the legal level. And the women in the play know that just as the men have dismissed their concerns at the scene of the crime, men on the jury judging Minnie Wright would also dismiss the evidence necessary to acquit her. As Karen Alakalay-Gut points out, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters know that “[t]he emotional responsibility of Mr. Wright to provide for his wife’s needs was ignored by him and would be ignored by any all-male jury” (79). Elaine Hedges notes that “Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters decide that they, not the men, are Minnie’s true peers. They take the law into their own hands, appoint themselves prosecuting and defense attorneys, judge and jury, and pass their merciful sentence” (66). The play suggests that the law should change shape and begin listening to women’s voices,

giving them representation by someone other than their husbands. Glaspell seems to be saying that if the law changes to include women's concerns, society will be safer for both women and men. Both John's death and the decline in Minnie's mental health could have been avoided if the legal system took abuse more seriously and offered women greater chances for independence.

In addition to discussing Glaspell's critique of the body politic, some contemporary scholars of *Trifles* read Minnie's murder of John as "revenge." Veronica Makowsky calls the play a "modernist revenge tragedy" (51). Drawing a connection between John's death and the bird's, Alkalay-Gut says that John's murder is "symbolic retribution, a revenge strategy for the strangling of [Minnie's] canary" (74). Referring to the Hassock trial, Ben-Zvi points out that with *Trifles* Glaspell "finds the dramatic correlative for revenge. Rather than use an ax, this abused wife strangles her husband: a punishment to fit his crime" ("Murder" 35). Ben-Zvi goes further to point out that the juries "on the stage" and in "the audience" will agree with this punishment and "presume the wife's right to take violent action in the face of the violence done to her" ("Murder" 35). These descriptions of the play are troubling, revealing society's attitudes about women who kill their abusive spouses. For one thing, there is nothing in the play to suggest that Minnie was carrying out an act of revenge. An act of revenge would require cold calculation driven by rage and a desire to get even, and Glaspell's descriptions of Minnie prior to her marriage and after the murder do not suggest that Minnie was vengeful in nature. It is more likely that the reading of revenge stems from a contemporary preoccupation with revenge, one that is particularly problematic for

women who kill. As I established in the Introduction, women on trial for killing their abusive husbands are more likely to be convicted if the murders appear to be acts of revenge. A reading of *Trifles*, using contemporary legal theories on women who kill, would argue that John had trapped Minnie in a cycle of violence. Evidence of John's violent nature suggests that he could have killed her at any moment. Instead, Minnie acted on behalf of her self, defending her life from John. Some contemporary feminist scholars might also point out that Minnie was near the point of insanity when she committed the murder, while others would want to avoid labeling her "insane" and simply discuss the murder as "self-defense."⁵ Regardless, feminist legal theorist Martha Chamallas warns us that identifying murder that is "self-defense" as "revenge" makes it very difficult for women who have killed their husbands to receive fair treatment in court (262). Contemporary scholars who read *Trifles* as a "revenge tragedy" may unknowingly enhance the stereotypes surrounding women who kill.

Unfortunately, there are only a few extant reviews of *Trifles*' productions in the late teens and 1920s. If any of these reviews interpret any part of the play as "vengeful," contemporary Glaspell scholars have not noted it. In *Susan Glaspell: A Research and Production Sourcebook*, Mary E. Papke brings out important points from early reviews of *Trifles*. According to Papke, most early critics tended to applaud the

⁵ Only a psychiatrist could determine whether or not Minnie Wright was insane at the point of murder. While insanity pleas were popular in the 1970s, contemporary feminist legal theorists warn that the plea can be dangerous. As Elizabeth Schneider points out, acquittals on the grounds of insanity can result "in institutionalization for an indefinite period of time" (118). Additionally, as Schneider points out, feminist legal theorists have tried to show that women who kill their abusers are acting rationally by defending themselves (119). Depicting these women as insane can perpetuate unhelpful myths about battered women.

play for varying reasons. Many praised the subtlety of the text and its use of suspense. As noted earlier, at least one critic praised the play for valuing “women’s ways of knowing” (Papke 24). The lack of discussion about “revenge” in early reviews of the play suggests that contemporary critics read the text differently from critics in the early twentieth century; however, we do not have enough reviews from the early twentieth century to verify this probability. What is certain, however, is that both contemporary and past critics praise Glaspell’s recommendation that feminine knowledge and observations should be taken seriously, not dismissed as mere “trifles.”

Hurston

Like Glaspell, Zora Neale Hurston critiques the idea that the home is women’s place of political agency and peace. Published in *Fire!!* in 1926, Hurston’s “Sweat” uses the story of Delia and Sykes to illustrate how women may not be safe in their own homes. Delia and Sykes have been married fifteen years; Sykes “had given [Delia] the first brutal beating” just two months after their marriage (1001). In addition to beating her, Sykes gambles away their money and spends it on other women. Like many black women in rural areas in the 1920s, Delia makes more money than her spouse. She works hard six and a half days a week doing white people’s laundry at her home and has used the money she has made to make a nice home for herself and her husband. As Genevieve West points out, “With her own sweat Delia has created a bit of paradise, her own Garden of Eden” (28). Rather than respecting Delia’s paradise and her place in it, Sykes wants to displace Delia from her own home so that he can live in it with his new girlfriend, the latest woman in a long chain of infidelities. Sykes tries to get Delia to

leave by intensifying his abuse of her. Knowing that Delia is deathly afraid of snakes, Sykes brings a caged rattle snake home to terrorize her. Delia refuses to leave and begs Sykes to remove the snake, which he refuses to do. When Delia is at church the next evening, Sykes plants the snake in her laundry basket and leaves Delia with only one match to light the lamps in the house. When Delia returns from church and finds the snake, she is finally driven out of the home that she has created.

After illustrating how endangered Delia was in her own home, Hurston creates an act that scholars have labeled “poetic justice.” Sykes returns to the home and is killed by the snake. Though Delia knows that Sykes may be killed, she fails to save him. Instead she watches him die and saves herself.

Throughout the story, Hurston anticipates contemporary feminist theories on domestic abuse. Sykes tortures Delia both mentally and physically. He kicks her piles of laundry and generally makes the work she does to provide for both of them more difficult. Like Glaspell, Hurston critiques popular ideas about domestic abuse in the 1920s. Before marriage, Delia was healthy and beautiful. But, as Elijah Moseley notes in the story, “Too much knockin’ will ruin any ‘oman” (1002). Sykes “done beat huh ‘nough tuh kill three women, let ‘lone change they looks” (1002). Both Delia’s body and her home have deteriorated because of Sykes’ abuse. Just as John Wright destroys some of Minnie’s things in *Trifles*, Sykes terrorizes Delia and ruins the home she created.

Hurston also critiques stereotypes of black women in “Sweat.” As noted earlier, Stephen Knadler illustrates that articles about domestic violence in the black popular

presses of the 1920s suggested “to black women that they could not control themselves from being ‘jealously,’ murderously even, invested in their man” (101). Black women appeared to be “abnormally obsessed” with their spouses and went “out of control” with murderous rage when their husbands cheated on them, killing either their husbands or their husbands’ mistresses (101). When they killed their own husbands, they expressed a desperate remorse that suggested that the murder was done out of extreme love and jealousy. Rather than fitting Delia within this framework, Hurston provides us with another story. Instead of being jealous of his relationship with Bertha, Delia shows disappointment that she has merely come to expect. Showing Delia reflecting on Sykes’ affair with Bertha, the narrator comments, “Too late now to hope for love, even if it were not Bertha it would be someone else” (1000). Delia comforts herself with thoughts of the home she has created; she does not work herself into a rage over Sykes’ infidelity. Instead of being excited by her husband’s infidelity to the point of desperation and rage, Delia is exhausted, fed up with Sykes to that point that she no longer wants contact with him. She even changes churches so that she no longer has to see him unless it is absolutely necessary.

Hurston also challenges her contemporaries’ beliefs about domestic abuse by showing how the social and economic environment of the 1920s engendered abuse between black men and women. As Knadler writes, “While the black popular press did not employ a complicated psychological grammar, these news stories tended as well to displace the causes of domestic violence from the sociological to the psychological” (105). Hurston, however, reveals that Sykes’ abuse of Delia is very sociological in

nature. As Lillie Howard points out in *Zora Neale Hurston*, Sykes may abuse Delia because he feels emasculated. Not only is Delia the main provider, she provides for Sykes with the money she makes doing white people's laundry (West 28-9). To illustrate his disgust at the source of their income, Sykes kicks at a pile of laundry Delia is sorting, "gridin' dirt into" it and threatens Delia with a whip. He cries, "Ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks' clothes outa dis house" (1000). Though the white folks are willing to employ Delia on a regular basis, like many black men in rural areas, Sykes may only be able to find work from whites sporadically. Thus, he is unable to provide for Delia and is probably emasculated by the very group that allows his wife to take care of them. Frustrated by this system, he takes his anger out on his wife. By illustrating this cycle of deprivation and abuse, Hurston prefigures the theories of contemporary black feminist scholars while alerting her own community to the way whites' treatment of black men negatively affected black women as well.

Hurston also makes it clear that the legal system in the 1920s fails to protect women from violence in their own homes. The men in the town of "Sweat" note how unjust it is that Sykes is allowed to abuse Delia. As they sit around and discuss Delia and Sykes' relationship, they critique the legal system and illustrate the prevalence of abuse:

There oughter be a law about him," said Lindsay. "He ain't fit tuh carry guts tuh a bear." Clarke spoke for the first time. "Taint no law on earth dat kin make a man be decent if it aint in 'im. There's plenty men dat take sa wife lak dey do a joint uh sugar-cane. It's round, juicy an' sweet when dey gits it. But dey squeeze an' grind, squeeze an' grind an' wring tell dey wring every drop uh pleasure dat's in 'em out. When dey's satisfied dat dey is wrung dry, dey treates 'em jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey throws 'em away. . . . (1002).

The exchange between Lindsay and Clarke make Hurston's critique of the legal system clear. Women are treated poorly so often that Clarke can compare them to something as common as sugar cane. The legal system provides no effective law to prevent this treatment. Observing that society does not offer protection for abused women, the men agree that they should do something about Sykes' abuse of Delia. Old Man Anderson says, "We oughter take Syke an 'dat stray 'oman uh his'n down in Lake Howell swamp an' lay on de rawhide till they cain't say Lawd a' mussy" (1002). While the other men agree with Anderson, they remain passive. Hurston, then, joins Glaspell in illustrating how members of a community fail to protect one another. She also illustrates, however uncritically, the rhetoric of punishment that is associated with spousal abuse. Anderson and the others seem to think that a good beating would deter Sykes and his mistress from taking advantage of Delia. They think they should be punished, and this punishment may be as important to them as the law that would protect Delia from Sykes from the beginning.

Of course, as Elizabeth Pleck notes, in the 1920s laws did exist that could grant a divorce or legal separation to a woman who insisted upon it. Lawmakers could even issue an order of protection for a woman and punish a man if he returned to abuse her (141).⁶ However, as the men in the community make clear, no law would keep Sykes away from Delia. To further complicate matters, the white legal system (or other whites

⁶ Pleck is not clear about exactly when these laws developed; although they seem to have come with the advent of the court of domestic relations in the nineteen-teens. Lucy Stone had tried to implement such laws in the 1880s, but she had failed (Pleck 141).

taking the law into their own hands) might use Delia's complaint as an excuse to lynch Sykes. Delia knows this as she threatens Sykes that she is "goin' tuh de white folks about *you* . . . de very nex' time you lay yo' hand's on me. Mah cup is done run ovah" (1005). This final line indicates that Delia would only use the white legal system as the very last resort to protect herself from Sykes. Hurston makes it clear that though white women might be able to use the legal system to protect themselves, black women would have to use it knowing that their husbands' lives would be seriously endangered.

Hurston's nuanced critique of society's failure to protect black women from abuse would have made a striking contribution to African American literature in the 1920s. Neither *Opportunity* nor *The Crisis* featured stories of domestic abuse. As Knadler notes, the popular black press was one of the only places women and men could read about domestic violence, and the stories found there sensationalized the violence between men and women, suggesting that women who killed their spouses did so out of uncontrollable jealousy rather than out of a need for protection. In this literary environment, "Sweat" boldly calls the black community to protect women from abuse by appealing for stronger and better laws and by strengthening their own communal sense of responsibility to care for one another. Unfortunately, the disdain with which many black writers regarded *Fire!!* probably blinded a large portion of Hurston's potential audience to her insightful critique. In "African American Women's Short Stories in the Harlem Renaissance: Bridging a Tradition," Judith Musser points out that "African American editorial circles" did not respond favorably to "Sweat" or the few other stories like it, of which "Sweat" is the first. They were not interested in "stories

which picture Negro blood as a crime calling for lynching or suicide. We are quite fed up with filth and defeatism.” Musser notes that “[t]he editor’s comments suggest a concern with the presentation of male African American characters and the need to portray men as honorable” (43).

Following the rhetoric of punishment in “Sweat” and its similarities to *Trifles*, contemporary scholars often read Sykes’ death as a just act. In “The Verdict from the Porch: Zora Neale Hurston and Reparative Justice,” Philip Joseph notes that “Sweat” “ends with a punishment that makes the world legible and returns it to a condition of rectitude.” Joseph claims that this reflects Hurston’s early beliefs that “literature can create, in fiction and perhaps through fiction, a justly proportional world.” West labels Sykes’ death “poetic justice” (28). Although “punishment” and “poetic justice” sound a little nicer than “revenge,” their meanings are very similar. Both West and Joseph think that the story enacts justice because the very snake that Sykes intends to kill Delia kills him. On some level, this act may seem just. It teaches a lesson to readers, particularly men in the 1920s, warning them that their abuse of others may come back to bite them in the end. But one has to ask whether justice has really been served by Sykes’ death. If justice is about reparation, if it is about making amends for crimes committed and hurt feelings, then actual justice would require Sykes to live and to offer something to Delia in compensation for his actions. Perhaps Delia lets Sykes die because she believes that justice will never be achieved if he is allowed to live. Considering the criminal justice system in the 1920s, one cannot blame her for this belief; she is probably right. This lack of justice is Hurston’s final critique of the criminal justice

system and society in the 1920s, yet scholars who are eager to see “Sweat” as a tale of “poetic justice” miss this critique.

Through “Sweat” Hurston made an important contribution to the literature on domestic abuse and murder in the 1920s. She reiterates many of Glaspell’s critiques and further complicates them by bringing the additional injustices black women faced with the legal system. Like Glaspell, she illustrates that when the criminal justice system and society in general fail to protect women from abuse, both men and women suffer in the end. Both stories are about the failure of justice, not the enactment of it. Contemporary scholars would do well to read them this way in order to move beyond a feeling of feminist righteousness and begin to work towards actually creating justice.

Treadwell

While Hurston and Glaspell both seem to be interested in illustrating how the body politic (both before and after women get the right to vote) fails to protect women from violence in their own homes and thus engenders murder, Sophie Treadwell suggested that the social structure of society in the 1920s was enough to entrap any woman and lead her to murder her spouse, regardless of whether or not he was abusive. Treadwell begins her play by describing the story: “THE PLOT is the story of a young woman who murders her husband—an ordinary young woman, any woman” (173). According to Jennifer Jones, this line and the play in general were written in response to the press’s discussion of Ruth Snyder. While the press went to great lengths to answer questions about what separated Ruth Snyder from any other “normal” woman unhappy

in her marriage, Treadwell suggested that any woman in a patriarchal society might act as Ruth had (40).

In making this point, Treadwell critiqued a variety of patriarchal institutions and situations that entrap women. As Jerry Dickey points out, each scene in *Machinal* is set in a specific stage in a young woman's life that offers little options (73). At the beginning of the play, Helen, the ordinary young woman, faces the prospect of marrying her boss, who is revolting to her yet financially attractive. The following scene with her mother reveals the lack of communication between generations about marriage, sex, and love as Helen's mother persuades her to marry George H. Jones so that they will both be secure financially. With very little knowledge about sex and love and no attraction to Jones, Helen cowers before her rather brusque and insensitive husband on their honeymoon. Motherhood is the result of that night, or others like it, and Treadwell portrays this revered station in life with grim clarity as Helen sinks into a dark depression, wanting to reject her baby girl the doctor keeps trying to force her to nurse, despite the fact that she is not producing milk. In the next two scenes, an affair with a rogue romantic who has recently killed two men in Mexico in an attempt to free himself from their capture offers Helen a glimpse of happiness that only proves to be a trap in the end. Later, Treadwell illustrates the isolation Helen feels in her marriage. Her husband seems so intent on keeping them separated from the rest of the world that he will not even let Helen open a window or pull the curtains open in their home. He calls Helen's complaints that she feels like she is drowning and suffocating "imaginary," and the scene ends with Helen's descent into madness. In the next scene, Helen faces an

entire court of men who offer her little room to tell her story of her husband's murder. Her lover's testimony assures the court of her guilt, and the play ends with Helen's last defeated attempts to retain her dignity as she is buckled into the electric chair and awaits death.

As several critics have noticed, Treadwell harshly critiques the patriarchal institutions of marriage and motherhood. As both Ann Jones and Jennifer Jones note in their discussions of women who kill, both motherhood and marriage were esteemed rights of passage for women in the 1920s. Both Havelock Ellis and Margaret Sanger advocated marriage and motherhood for women. According to Ann Jones, Sanger argued that "marriage was merely an 'apprenticeship' to motherhood" (244). She points out that Sanger's "English counterpart" Marie Stopes "simply lost her grip" and combined religious rhetoric with motherhood advice: "From their mutual penetration into the realms of supreme joy the two lovers bring back with them a spark of that light which we call life. And unto them a child is born" (qtd. in Jones 244). Ellis was a bit more direct insisting that "every healthy woman should have . . . the exercise at least once in her life of the supreme function of maternity" (qtd. in A Jones 243). Jennifer Jones notes that women who rejected motherhood or simply did not enjoy it were labeled "neurotic" or abnormal (41).

In the midst of this atmosphere, Treadwell's play illustrates how not every woman was suited for motherhood and marriage. In doing so she points out that neurosis might not cause someone to be a bad mother or wife; instead, it might be the result of marriage or motherhood for some women. At various points in *Machinal*,

Helen feels dizzy and faint. Her breathing and chest get tight. She seems scattered and overwhelmed. As Helen Bywaters notes, the closer George Jones gets to her, the more neurotic the young woman seems. Additionally, when she is telling her mother that she is not sure whether or not she wants to marry Jones, her mother calls her “crazy” (102). Later, after she has given birth and is unable to nurse her child, the doctor calls her “neurotic” and forces her to try to breastfeed (102). Helen’s descent into depression at the end of the motherhood scene is a strong critique on the divine rhetoric that motherhood was often cast in. Here, Treadwell gives the young woman a stream of consciousness monologue that makes her depression clear. An excerpt from it shows Treadwell’s critique:

Mary had one—in a manger—the lowly manger—God’s high on a throne—far—too far—no matter—it doesn’t matter—God Mary Mary God Mary—Virgin Mary—Mary had one—the Holy Ghost—the Holy Ghost—George H. Jones—oh don’t—please don’t! Let me rest—now I can rest—the weight is gone—inside the weight is gone—it’s only outside—outside—all around—weight—I’m under it—Vixen crawled under the bed—there were eight—I’ll not submit anymore—I’ll not submit—I’ll not submit--(205)

This monologue, which lasts a page and a half, combines references to the young woman’s husband with references to religion, a dog named Vixen, pleas to be let alone and refusals to “submit.” The religious references critique the rhetoric of Marie Stopes and others like her. The combination of references makes the young woman’s confusion clear. She does not understand her unhappiness; she had done everything society has told her to do. Because Helen thrives in a few moments in the play when she is happy, Treadwell points out that she is not naturally neurotic, but her circumstances have made her so. In some circumstances, marriage and motherhood

engender depression to a point of desperation that could eventually lead a woman to murder.

According to both Ann Jones and Jennifer Jones, Ruth Snyder was on trial as much for adultery as for murder. Ann Jones writes that women's guilt or innocence is often connected to the way they present themselves in court. Promiscuous women are more likely to be seen as guilty than women who are not (241). Confronted with this attitude about women who kill, Treadwell worked to get her audience to understand why a woman might be unfaithful to her husband. Helen's lack of knowledge about sex and love clearly impede her judgment when she decides to marry George Jones. And Jones' insensitive manner in the bedroom contrasts starkly with Helen's lover, Roe. In the honeymoon scene, Helen tries to steal a minute for herself in the bathroom in preparation for their first night together while George unfeelingly harasses her to "hurry up" and literally counts the seconds until she presents herself to him. Afraid, Helen ends the scene in tears, calling out first for her mother and then for just "somebody" (200). Describing this moment, Helen Bywaters writes, "Helen's plea for 'somebody' to help her suggests the possibility of a rescue, a revolution against a tradition that requires a woman to submit to a kind of 'legalized rape'" (103).

While George makes Helen cry for help, Roe makes her feel "purified" (225). He is gentle and seductive; after she and Roe make love, Helen is relaxed for the first and only time in the play. The audiences of *Machinal* could sense Roe's appeal and sympathized with Helen's desire to be with him. The same audiences that expressed shock and disgust over Ruth Snyder's affair were able to sympathize with Helen Jones.

Jerry Dickey notes that the love scene between Helen and her lover “did not receive substantial condemnation [from theatre critics], but rather was often singled out for its lyrical beauty and subtlety” (78). By making Helen’s affair understandable, Treadwell was subtly critiquing the assumptions that people seemed to so eagerly embrace when condemning Ruth Snyder.

In addition to critiquing the way audiences were quick to judge Snyder’s infidelity, Treadwell also critiques the court system. In the trial scene in *Machinal*, Treadwell reveals what little space a courtroom structured by men leaves for women’s stories. An exchange between Helen and her attorney makes this point particularly clear:

LAWYER FOR DEFENSE. How long were you married to the late George H. Jones before his demise?

YOUNG WOMAN. Six years.

LAWYER FOR DEFENSE. Six years! And it was a happy marriage, was it not?

[YOUNG WOMAN hesitates.] Did you quarrel?

YOUNG WOMAN. No, sir.

LAWYER FOR DEFENSE. Then it was a happy marriage, wasn’t it?

YOUNG WOMAN. Yes, sir. (235).

For the defense attorney, a marriage that did not involve quarreling had to be a happy one. Later, Treadwell goes further to point out that what seems obvious to the men of the court may not seem obvious to women. The prosecuting attorney asks Helen why she washed her bloody nightgown before the police came to her home on the night of

the murder. Helen replies, “It’s what anyone would have done, wouldn’t they?” By pointing out that different things are important to men and women, Treadwell critiques the way the court system leaves very little room for a feminine perspective.

Also in the trial scene Treadwell points out that whatever story does surface in the courtroom does not necessarily make it to the press. Two reporters record the action of the trial scene. As they do so, occasionally they voice what they write. Each time the reporters speak, they sensationalize what actually happened in the courtroom, often contradicting one another. Writing about the exchange between the prosecuting attorney and Helen Jones, one reporter writes, “Under the heavy artillery fire of the State’s attorney’s brilliant cross-questioning, the accused woman’s defense was badly riddled. Pale and trembling she--” (245). Offering a completely different story, the second reporter writes, “Undaunted by the Prosecution’s machine-gun attack, the defendant was able to maintain her position of innocence. . . Flushed but calm she--” (245). By offering these two different versions of the trial, Treadwell suggests that the public should not trust reporters if they are to understand a trial. Furthermore, by ending both quotations with a long dash, Treadwell implies that the whole story is never reported by the press.

Despite its feminist critique of several patriarchal institutions, *Machinal* received more attention and was more successful than either *Trifles* or “Sweat.” In “Sophie Treadwell’s Play *Machinal*: Strategies of Reception and Interpretation,” Kornelia Tancheva attributes the play’s success to four factors. First of all, most reviewers focused on the physical aspects of the production. A great deal of praise went

to the actors, the director (Arthur Hopkins), and the scene designer (Robert E. Jones). Secondly, when the reviewers commented on the writing, they largely focused on the style in which the play was written, complimenting Treadwell for the play's rhythm and pace. Thirdly, when the reviewers did focus on the content of the play, they mainly engaged in a debate over the mechanization of society. These critics saw the machine of the title not as the machine of patriarchy but as an industrial machine that affected both men and women equally. They read the Young Woman's descent into madness as a result of being forced to live in a fast paced, increasingly industrialized society. The few critics of the play who focused on its similarities to the Ruth Snyder trial failed to see the play as an indictment of patriarchy because they only saw its relevance to one particular woman (103-104). Regardless, *Machinal* enjoyed a successful run on Broadway, and few critics, if any, read the play as if it were a critique of the limited options women had in society.

Contemporary critics, however, mainly discuss the play's critique of patriarchal institutions and social codes. Unlike some of the critics of "Sweat" and *Trifles*, critics of *Machinal* do not generally read it as a revenge tragedy or as a story of "poetic justice." This tendency may be due to the fact that Treadwell does not portray Jones as overtly physically abusive. Additionally, because the young woman is killed at the end of the play, justice can hardly have been served. Treadwell illustrates that the limited social choices for women negatively affect everyone; no one emerges as a winner in the end.

Feminism and Revenge

Treadwell, Hurston, and Glaspell strongly critiqued the social structures that failed to protect women from abuse and engendered murder. In doing so, they countered newspaper portrayals of women who kill. While newspapers suggested that independent women were often violent women, the above women writers pointed out that, for women, violence was sometimes a last resort to achieve independence from abuse. Unfortunately, “Sweat” and *Trifles* had small audiences, and theatre critics failed to see the feminist critique in *Machinal*, choosing instead to focus on its critique of industrialization. It is also interesting to note that because freedom, even in very depressive forms, is only won for these women through violence, violence then becomes associated with feminist action. The fact that contemporary critics make this connection more often than critics did in the twenties testifies to the disturbing growing association between the two. That connection may be related to the popularity of the works of the second group of writers and performers that I will examine. Maurine Watkins, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ella Fitzgerald touched upon the critiques that Glaspell, Hurston, and Treadwell offered. They critique the way society in the 1920s failed to take the abuse of women seriously; however, their methods of critique tended to uphold popular ideas about domestic abuse and affirm the suggestion that independent women were necessarily violent women.

Chicago

Just like Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal*, Maurine Watkins’ *Chicago* (1926) illustrates the way the press and the legal system are manipulated to serve particular

perspectives. Unlike *Machinal*, however, *Chicago* suggests that attractive women, if they play their cards right and are financially able, may be key players in both these systems. Rather than suggest that violence erupts from a society that restricts women's rights and fails to protect them from domestic abuse, *Chicago* taps into the fears that so many newspaper stories promoted: the more freedom women have, the more violence they will commit. *Chicago* opened to an extremely successful run in New York City on December 30, 1926, about one month before Ruth Snyder was arrested. Disturbingly, in response to *Chicago's* success, *The Daily Telegraph* hired Watkins to work as a reporter on the Snyder murder trial (Pauly xxviii).

Watkins based *Chicago* on two murder cases she covered for newspapers in Chicago. In these particular cases, the women were acquitted, and the cases seem to have had little to do with domestic abuse. According to Thomas Pauly, Watkins saw an opportunity to create a name for herself in the daily police reports. She took two cases that would have been back page news and stylized them to attract front page attention. Belva Gaertner and Beulah Annan were arrested within one month of each other for very similar crimes. Gaertner, a cabaret singer, was charged with killing her boyfriend, Walter Law, who had been found dead in her car. Annan, a housewife with a movie star's face, was arrested for the murder of her boyfriend. Gaertner never confessed to the crime; Annan did but later changed her story. Watkins played up both cases and won considerable attention for them. With Watkins' encouragement, Gaertner made jokes, claiming, "[N]o woman can love a man enough to kill him" (xv). Watkins labeled Annan the "prettiest murderess" and, according to Pauly, "elevated [her] to

celebrity status” (xviii). Both women made references to alcohol and jazz, and Watkins turned the stories into entertainment pieces that made a game of their imprisonment, trials, and acquittals.

Watkins used Annan, Gaertner and others she met while she was writing articles on their cases as inspiration for writing *Chicago*. In *Chicago*, Roxie Hart kills her lover because he is leaving her. Though initially she lies about the murder, the truth eventually comes out, and she is arrested. In jail, she learns quickly how to manipulate the press and the court by adopting stereotypically feminine gestures, facial expressions, and stories. Fearing that she was losing public attention due to other women who were also arrested for killing men, she invents a pregnancy in hopes of getting a swifter trial. After being counseled and trained extensively by her lawyer, she changes the story of the murder, saying that she killed her lover in self-defense. He had attacked her after she ended the affair, and she killed him--not to save her life, of course, but to save the one of her unborn child. The play ends with Roxie’s acquittal and departure for Vaudeville. Throughout, the play’s tone is fairly sarcastic, suggesting that the court system and its major players were corrupt.

Chicago affirms suspicions about women who kill. As is evident from the summary, the play suggests that women lie about their motives for killing men. In the face of Roxie’s claim that “we both grabbed for the gun,” self-defense becomes a joke. In addition to Roxie, at least three other women in Cook County jail have lied about their boyfriends’ or husbands’ deaths. When Roxie asks Velma, another inmate awaiting trial, who was responsible for her husband’s death, she replies, “I’m sure I

don't know. I was drunk, my dear, dead drunk. Passed out completely and remember nothing from the time we left the café till the officers found me washing the blood from my hands. But I'm sure I didn't do it. . . . Why I've the tenderest heart in the world" (26). Another woman claims she is insane, though clearly she is not. Even the jail's matron killed her husband, "Suicide it was" (27). Although *Chicago* was based on two highly unusual murder cases, the number of women lying about their mates' deaths in the play implies that a rash of women were killing their husbands, and not infrequently getting away with it. Prefiguring Jones's observations in *Women Who Kill*, *Chicago* suggests that these women's behavior results from an increase in their rights and freedoms. When the cops catch Roxie in her lie about the man she killed, they ask her how she met him. When she says she met him at work, the police sergeant says, "See? That's what happens when a woman leaves the home" (11). Roxie's favorite journalist and her lawyer both link the murder she's committed with a life filled with promiscuity and jazz, connecting a free lifestyle with the ability to murder. Even though they are made in a joking manner, these remarks affirm popular suspicions about "bad women," suggesting that only women who live racy lifestyles could be capable of murder.

Chicago also suggests that women can and do play on feminine stereotypes to win acquittal. Roxie is clearly not the lady she pretends to be for the papers or the court. One minute she swears about her "no good" husband, and in the next she hangs her head in contrition, swearing that she never meant to hurt him. Though Watkins plays with this theme throughout the play, she portrays it most overtly at the beginning of Act III. Just before Roxie goes to trial, her lawyer (Flynn) coaches her through the

defense. Their exchange reveals Roxie's "true" character and the one she will play for the jury:

FLYNN. Throw your head back—*nobly!* [*She does.*] That's right!—[. . .] seek the eyes of your husband. He'll be over here

ROXIE. "He's divorced me, cast me off," –I've got that all right!—"but still the father of my child!"

FLYNN. [*with deep emotion*] And the man you really love! [. . . .]

ROXIE. All right, where do we go from here: . . . "my innocent unborn babe . . .?"

FLYNN. Then the cross-examination—

ROXIE. He'd better watch his step, that Harrison! If he calls me names—like he did yesterday—

FLYNN. You cry.

ROXIE. I'll crown him!

FLYNN. No, you *won't*. God if that jury ever saw you in action--! Remember: no matter what he says or how mad he gets, you shrink—and cower—[illustrates, she imitates]—and cry [. . . .] And if he says they didn't use physical violence to get those confessions—

ROXIE. [*with alacrity*] I'll hold out my arm for you to see the marks! [*Does so.*] (80-81).

The ease with which Roxie switches between her true character and the one she plays strongly suggests that women are easily able to tap into feminine role playing. Though Roxie seems to drop her character at times, she is clearly able to play the role. Even Flynn earnestly praises her "beautiful work" at the end of the scene. Roxie responds knowingly, "Technique: I got it" (81). When she and Flynn win their acquittal at the end of the play, they tap into cultural anxieties about women who kill and detract us

from the most frequent factor: abuse.^{7 8} Rather than suggest that women need more freedom and rights to be safe, they suggest that the more freedom women have, the more likely they are to become corrupt.

Even as *Chicago* seems to work against writers who wanted to draw attention to the real problems of domestic abuse, it also critiques a society that treats the abuse of women lightly by treating the abuse (and death) of men in the same way. Roxie treats all of the men in her life as if they are expendable. She cares for them only to the extent that they serve her. She is only nice to her husband when her case in court depends on it, she uses her lawyer just as he uses her, and she kills her lover because he “said he was leavin’” and taking the money with him. The Matron of Cook County Jail seems to echo all of the women prisoner’s thoughts when she says, “I never hear of a man’s bein’ killed but I know he got *just* what was comin’ to him” (26). Most of the women in prison (and all of those who are portrayed as strong and resilient) express no regret over the death of their “loved” ones, and they breezily joke about their defenses. The matron treats her husband’s death as carelessly as she would her wardrobe or a frivolous party. She says, ““I went in debt, but I had all the trimmin’s. . . . Never skimp on a funeral or a Trial - especially a murder trial” (27). After joking about how she was unconscious

⁷ The assumption that women can play up their femininity to win an acquittal would be tested to a degree in Snyder’s trial and, as the Introduction points out, is still assumed as a feminine ploy in contemporary trials. As Jennifer Jones points out in *Medea’s Daughters*, during Snyder’s trial, her lawyer tried to appeal to the juries’ assumed sympathies for mothers. At at least one point when he did this, the audience at the trial reacted negatively.

⁸ Through one character, *Chicago* also suggests that women who cannot easily adopt feminine guises and who are without money lose in court. This observation is helpful because it illustrates how much money and appearance factor into juries’ decisions. However, the moments are so small—just a few lines in the play—that they pale in the face of the suggestion that many more women are wrongfully acquitted because they are able to play into feminine stereotypes.

during her husband's murder, Velma says, "But I'm sure I didn't do it. . . . Why I've the tenderest heart in the world, *haven't* I, Mrs. Morton?" (26). Velma's attitude matches Matron Morton's with its casual, airy tone. Their attitudes speak to a long history of the government's careless attitude towards domestic abuse, which was even more careless in the 1920s than it had been in the past and would continue to increase in its carelessness for a number of decades.

Additionally, *Chicago* critiques the theatre industry's exploitation of women by treating men in a similar fashion. In the nineteen-twenties, this critique would have been exceptionally poignant. The theatre of the nineteen-teens and twenties was hardly feminist in tone; "Poultry" numbers,⁹ chorus lines, and plays advocating marriage for women often took center stage. At their worst, these shows portrayed women as objects, entirely produced for men's consumption. Susan Glenn writes about this tendency in her book *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*. As she points out, "[I]n revues like the *Follies*, the girls themselves were often indistinguishable from goods on display" (165). The chorus "girls" were seen as objects, products of the producers; Ziegfield's girls, despite the fact that women contributed to their creation both as actors and costume designers, belonged to Ziegfield. They were his creation. Additionally, Glenn notes that "[t]he outlandish

⁹ "Poultry" or "Rotisserie" numbers showcased women dressed as chickens to be broiled on a spit. Chicken, like today's Chick, was a popular name for women in the teens and 20s. Susan Glenn provides a striking analysis of the term and the numbers that sprang from it in *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*. She notes that in 1925 the Shubert revue *Artists and Models* featured a "Rotisserie" number with "[a] giant rotisserie, complete with a revolving spit upon which four trussed chorus girl 'chickens' could be roasted at one time" at center stage (193).

nature of some of the costumes in these spectacles all but erased the distinction between women and material objects they represented, suggesting the absence of independent female identity” (168).

In contrast, *Chicago* appeared to be almost entirely composed of women who manipulated their own appearances as objects to their own advantage. Though Roxie is coached by Billy Flynn, she learns just as much about playing femininity from her fellow inmates. She learns to play ball so well that she exceeds Flynn’s expectations and is able to manipulate him because of it. Faking the pregnancy is Roxie’s idea, and it assures her a much speedier trial. It also changes Flynn’s vacations plans; his plans to be overseas while Roxie waited for trial have to be cancelled. Left uncancelled, too much time would allow everyone to see that Roxie was not really pregnant; as a result, both she and Flynn would be unveiled as imposters. Thus Roxie, using Flynn’s tools, creates her own destiny. In doing so, she also uses the press to gain public sympathy for her trial and to launch her own career on the Vaudeville circuit. *Chicago*’s portrayal of a woman with so much control and influence on the world around her responded to the theatre’s exploitation and manipulation of female bodies and selves. It also may have appealed to feminists who were interested in individualism and self development.¹⁰

Women would have been interested in *Chicago* not just for its emphasis on independence or self development; some would also be attracted to its emphasis on

¹⁰ For more information on the feminist interest in individualism and self development, see Nancy F. Cott’s *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, 1987), also referenced in Glenn’s work.

feminine fashion. According to Glenn, some suffragists in the nineteen-teens embraced fashion and consumerism to attract attention to their cause and to “combat the long history of anti-woman suffrage representation in popular culture” (133). In particular, young suffragists were inclined to combine their politics with their interest in fashion. Suffragist Lydia Commander noted, “‘Women are no longer to be considered little tootsey wootseys who have nothing to do but look pretty’ [. . .] ‘They are determined to take an active part in the community and look pretty too’” (qtd. in Glenn 134). Confirming Commander’s quote, both young and old suffragists bought “suffrage parade outfits and accessories” at Macy’s. Those who wanted to march in the parades were encouraged “to attend classes that would instruct them in ‘the art of walking’” (146). Additionally, women who would never label themselves feminists embraced high society and all its attractions. Illustrating the way theatrical portrayals of femininity influenced women, Glenn comments on the similarities between the costumes of the Ziegfield Chorus girls and those of its female audience members. Decked out in low cut gowns and jewelry, the women in the audience rivaled the women on stage (164). *Chicago* also may have appealed to a group scornful of fashion. While *Chicago* embraced fashion, it also satirized it, just as the Ziegfield follies had done. Offering a challenge to the portrayal of women as mere objects or the machine like portrayals of the chorus girls, yet also fitting into a degree with what audiences were comfortable consuming, *Chicago* was sure to be a huge success.

While the female characters in *Chicago* appeared to have control and independence and were thus appealing to a wide range of women, the play

unfortunately linked independence and the style that accompanied it with violence. All the independent, stylish female characters in *Chicago* are violent. Roxie was a stenographer before she became a murderer; as mentioned earlier, the police sergeant links her affair and subsequent murder with the fact that she worked outside the home. The matron is also financially independent, though she probably got some of her money from her husband's insurance when she killed him. Throughout the play, Watkins connects references to fashion with both independence and violence. Roxie proves her independence to Flynn when she manipulates her trial date and subtly threatens to get confused during the trial and drag things out even further if Flynn won't buy her a specific dress that she wants to wear when she leaves court (83). But Watkins did not have to go to extraordinary lengths in *Chicago* to make this connection between independence, violence, and fashion; she and other newspaper journalists in the 1920s had already made the connection covering the likes of Gaertner, Annan, Hall, and Snyder.

Because of its emphasis on female power and its portrayal of emasculated men, *Chicago* also tapped into fears about masculine loss of control that surfaced after women won the right to vote in 1920s. According to Glenn, these fears often manifested themselves in misogynistic portrayals of women in Broadway plays (191). As Ann Jones notes, they also materialized in the portrayals of women murderers and played into the anxiety that helped assure Ruth Snyder's sentence to the electric chair (263). Though whether or not people connected *Chicago* with Snyder is unknown, the proximity between *Chicago*'s success and Snyder's execution is troubling.

Some critics might point out that there is some truth to *Chicago*'s portrayal of women who kill. Femininity can be played, and it has proven to be a factor in whether or not women who kill their abusers have been acquitted. But rather than inviting us to look at our tendency to judge someone on their appearance instead of the evidence presented to the court, *Chicago* seems to incite anxiety, to suggest that women are really out there in droves—playing up their femininity to get away with murder.

Perhaps because of the popularity of the play's later musical version, the 1920s version of *Chicago* receives little scholarly attention. Thomas Pauly celebrates the play for its insightful critique of the way the media turns murder trials into entertainment. Most of the reviews of the contemporary film version follow his lead. But *Chicago* does rear her lovely head in discussions about women who kill. On his internet site, Ray Peterson jokes that Andrea Yates and Clara Harris,¹¹ very different murder defendants who seem to have little more than their sex in common, are producing *Chicago* in their jail cells (online). As an online article entitled "Jurors Send Clara Harris to Prison" shows, Mia Magness, the prosecuting attorney, relied on the stereotypes that *Chicago* taps into when suggesting that women tend to get softer sentences because of sympathetic attitudes (online). While the Clara Harris trial might have gained attention at any time, the fact that it occupied our television screens while *Chicago* played in our movie theatres reminds us of a need to be critical of the play's

¹¹ Andrea Yates was convicted of killing her children in 2002. Her case was retried in 2006, and she was acquitted by reason of insanity and sentenced to a mental health facility. Shortly after Clara Harris discovered that her husband was having an affair, she killed him by running him over in her SUV. In 2003, she was sentenced to twenty years in prison, the maximum number of years for a crime of passion.

images—no matter how much we may enjoy them.

Blues Women

Just like Maurine Watkins had done in *Chicago*, the female blues singers who performed songs about violence against men responded to a society that failed to take violence against women seriously. Blues music was no exception to this social tendency. The lyrics of “A to Z” blues, recorded by Josie Miles and Billy Higgins in 1924, makes the acceptance of violence against women horrifyingly clear. The characters Higgins and Miles play in this song live together as romantic partners. One night, Josie, tired of all of the fighting with Billy, stays out all night and lets a man escort her to her door. When Josie says she’s through with Billy, Billy responds with a graphic threat:

I'm gonna cut A B C D
In the top of your head
That's gonna be treatin' you nice
And you ain't gonna be dead
I'm gonna cut E F G
Right across your face
H I J K
That where the runnin' takes place
I'm gonna cut L M N
'Cross both of your arms
You gonna sell shoestrings and pencils
Your whole life long
I'm gonna cut O P Q
That means trouble to you
I'm gonna grab you too and turn you
Ev'ry way but loose
I'm gonna cut R S T
Just to hear you cry
That's the last time tears
Are gonna run from both of your eyes
I'm gonna cut U V W

On the bottom of your feet
And that's the last time you'll walk down
Thirty-fifth Street
I'm gonna mark you 'cross your bosom
With X Y Z
When I get through with alphabet
You'll stop messin' with me (online).

Billy sings the song casually, as if his threat to carve the alphabet into Josie's body is commonplace, nothing to get too worked up about. Though Josie does not respond to Billy's tirade in this song, throughout their work, blues women in general responded to the violence they faced from several different sources. The depictions of violence I am concerned with here are between romantic partners. Most of the songs I consider indicate that the violence the women commit is in response to the violence they have experienced from their partners. Though blues songs about domestic violence often involve a critique of the social structure, the manner in which they embrace and stylize violence often stays within the confines of that structure, reinforcing it while appealing to a wide audience.

Depictions of violent women in the blues tradition may have been empowering to women in the 1920s for a number of reasons. In her book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Y. Davis observes that prior to feminism's second wave, blues music was one of the rare discourses in which women spoke about battering. The blues woman recognized and sometimes spoke out against the harm that battering caused, empowering her by naming and responding to a crime so few took seriously. As Adam Gussow notes in *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*, violence expressed in blues songs was also a way of portraying a kind of "rough justice

in a world where the criminal justice system refused to take black-on-black crime seriously” (209). Sometimes this “justice” responded to violent threats and acts; other times it responded to betrayal. Whatever the case, as Gussow points out, violence was often a manifestation of power in blues songs and culture (202).

Perhaps the most common feminist analysis of blues songs points out what seems to be a disturbing acceptance of domestic violence in them. In response to these critiques, Davis has shown that Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith sometimes sang these kinds of songs with such sarcasm and irony that they actually critique the violence in the songs. Davis admits, though, that not all of these songs provide a critique discernible by many (26). Smith’s “Tain’t Nobody’s Bizness” (1923) and Rainey’s “Sweet Rough Man” (1928) may be two of the most disturbing of such blues songs. In “Sweet Rough Man,” Rainey cheerfully and without irony sings about her man who beats her “with five feet of copper coil,” “keeps [her] lips split, [and her] eyes as black as jet,” but loves her so well that “[she] soon forget[s].” “Tain’t Nobody’s Bizness,” not quite as horrifying, is a bit more complex. In this song, Smith asserts her independence, singing that she is going to do as she pleases despite what people might say about her. She devotes the last verse of the song to domestic violence. Here she claims that “[she’d] rather [her] man would hit [her] than to jump right up and quit [her].” Davis notes that the feeling evoked here was not uncommon to women in the 1920s and claims that in voicing this attitude, Smith is at least acknowledging it and offering it up for others to critique (31). While this is undoubtedly the case, both of

these songs run much closer to affirming rather than critiquing social attitudes towards domestic violence.

“Cell Bound Blues” (1925), written and sung by Ma Rainey, critiques the failure of the legal system to consider murder as self-defense and counters the portrayals of violent black women in the press. Rainey explains that when “her man” began to fight her, she grabbed a gun and told their friends, “Hold him, folks, I don’t wanta kill my man.” Her man responded by hitting her, and she shot him dead. Despite the fact that their fight might have meant her life or his, she ended up in jail with the “cell bound blues.” Rainey sings the song defending herself, asking the jailer, “What have I done?” She presents the facts of the case in a very straightforward manner, countering the popular newspaper images of hysterical black women who kill their philandering and abusive spouses. Rainey’s character did not want to kill her man; she did not kill him out of jealousy, but out of self-defense. The song’s title, “Cell Bound Blues,” suggests that many black women felt that prison was inevitable for either themselves or their partners. Davis calls the possibility of imprisonment an “omnipresent fact of life” in the black community in the 1920s (102).

Sometimes intimate murder in blues songs went even further in critiquing the social structures that engender abuse. In “Sing Sing Prison Blues,” (1924) Bessie Smith sings the sad tale of a woman who awaits her punishment for killing her man. As she sings this song, she critiques the social structures that entrapped black women, including the way whites exploited blacks for labor and entertainment. The second, third, and fourth verse of the song are particularly noteworthy:

I wrote and asked the warden why they call the jail the Sing Sing
I wrote and asked the warden why they call the jail the Sing Sing
He said stand here by this rock pile and listen to them hammers ring

Big doin' in the courthouse, paper sellin' for fifty cents
Big doin' in the courthouse, paper sellin' for fifty cents
All the judge tryin' to tell me, my lawyer pleadin' self-defense

The judge said, "Listen, Bessie, tell me why you killed your man."
The judge said, "Listen, Bessie, tell me why you killed your man."
I said, "Judge, you ain't no woman, and you can't understand" (Davis 336).

Smith sings the song in a depressed, even-keeled tone that contradicts the bright piano playing in the background and the almost comically melancholy, whiney jazz of the oboe. In the second verse, her mood comments on the way the white run prison system uses black workers for their labor. In the third, she critiques the press that exploited the violence that erupted between couples to sell papers. Like Rainey, her portrayal of a violent woman counters the ones found in the newspapers. Smith's even-keeled tone and her refusal to explain the murder do not fit the stereotype of jealous woman gone mad. Rather, she seems calm and in control as she goes on in the fourth verse to critique the patriarchal white justice system that cannot possibly comprehend the murder she has committed. If the song's protagonist has killed her lover in self-defense, she realizes that his abuse of her has been passed down from the white social structure that has abused black men and women for centuries. As a white man, the judge cannot understand this legacy of pain that infiltrates her body and affects her way of being in the world. He cannot understand the pain or the love shared between her and her partner, and what difficulties she would have faced reporting any abuse, an act that

could have ended with the whipping or lynching of her partner. Smith ends the song, telling the judge, “I killed my man and I don’t need no bail.” Her acceptance of her punishment may be seen as a refusal to live in a world that systematically abuses and exploits both black men and black women.

Not all songs that featured violence between romantic partners critiqued the social structure so clearly. In some songs, violence against men arises out of a sense of jealousy and betrayal. These songs tend to affirm portrayals of women who kill as raving, vengeful women. In “Hateful Blues,” (1924) Smith expresses her sadness and then her hatred for her lover who has just left her. At first, she cries because her lover has “packed his clothes upon his back and gone,” but she promises the listener that “nothin’ ever worries [her] long.” After she cries herself to sleep two nights in a row, she rejects her victimization and begins to stand up for herself. She sings, “If he can stand to leave me, I can stand to see him go, I said go.” While this independent gesture is refreshing, it quickly transforms into joyful rage. Her promises to her lover in the last four verses of the song are not unlike those found in “A to Z Blues”:

If I see him I’m gon’ beat him, gon’ kick and bite him, too
Gonna take my weddin’ butcher, gonna cut him two in two

The ambulance is waitin’, the undertaker, too
A suit in doctor’s office, all kinds of money for you

Ain’t gonna sell him, gon’ keep him for myself
Gonna cut on him until a piece this big is left

‘Cause my love has been abused
Now I got the hateful blues (Davis 286-7).

Just as Billy Higgins promised to “cut on” his woman when she left him in “A to Z Blues,” Smith threatens to “cut” her lover for leaving her. Davis claims that the reference to the “weddin’ butcher” “is undoubtedly the most disturbing reference to marriage in Bessie Smith’s work.” She also points out that the protagonist in this song is rejecting and critiquing the social institution of marriage that was idealized in many popular white songs in the twenties (17).

While the critique of marriage is important, the song’s easy transformation from despair to independence to rage is troubling and not uncharacteristic of Smith’s work. Davis notes that “the most frequent stance assumed by the women in [Smith’s] songs is independence and assertiveness—indeed defiance—bordering on and sometimes erupting into violence” (21). This transformation from independence to violence is not accidental. Gussow comments on the way that blues singers used violent references in their songs as a way of exercising independence and creating identity. He explains that white men in power exercised their power over black people through violence, so a violent black woman (or man) could feel powerful and independent, in control of a part of her life “that was none of the white man’s business” (209). Additionally, referencing Elaine Scarry, Gussow notes that blues artists may have been tapping into the power one feels in using a weapon on another’s body. Gussow quotes Scarry: “A person using a weapon or tool . . . objectifies his presence in the world through the alterability of his world” (209). Violence seems a way for a person to control, sometimes permanently, something in her life. That control made her feel independent and powerful—if only for a short period of time.

While independence and identity formation intrigued the white community during the twenties, the black community had an even greater interest in it. As Davis notes, blues music was the first form of African American music that emphasized the individual over the community. The experience of individual freedom that allowed blacks to choose their romantic partners, something that slavery had forbidden many of them from doing, found its expression in blues music. Blues validated the importance of individual emotions through the presence of the blues star singing her song. This presence was often charged with sexual overtones that enhanced the singers' popularity and offered their audiences an important example of a woman's right to sexual autonomy and expression (4-10).

While the independence, assertiveness, and sensuality of blues female singers offered female blues fans an important and original model of womanhood in the 1920s, their conflation with violence may have affirmed popular misconceptions that independent women and violent women were cut from the same cloth. This portrayal would have a lasting effect in popular culture, as blues music heavily influenced the jazz and popular musical worlds for future decades. In 1927, the same year that saw *Chicago, Machinal*, and the execution of Ruth Snyder, blues woman Ella Fitzgerald sang "To Keep My Love Alive" in Rodgers and Hart's musical *Connecticut Yankee*. The song is worth quoting at length:

I've been married, and married, and often I've sighed
"I'm never a bridesmaid, I'm always a bride"

I never divorced them, I hadn't the heart
Yet remember these sweet words, "till death do us part"

I married many men, a ton of them
Because I was untrue to none of them
Because I bumped off every one of them
To keep my love alive

Sir Paul was frail, he looked a wreck to me
At night he was a horse's neck to me
So I performed an appendectomy
To keep my love alive

Sir Thomas had insomnia, he couldn't sleep at night
I bought a little arsenic, he's sleeping now all right

Sir Philip played the harp, I cussed the thing
I crowned him with his harp to bust the thing
And now he plays where harps are just the thing
To keep my love alive
To keep my love alive
(bridge)

I thought Sir George had possibilities
But his flirtations made me ill at ease
And when I'm ill at ease, I kill at ease
To keep my love alive

Sir Charles came from a sanitorium
And yelled for drinks in my emporium
I mixed one drink, he's in memorium
To keep my love alive

Sir Francis was a singing bird, a nightingale, that's why
I tossed him off my balcony, to see if he, could fly
Sir Atherton indulged in fratricide,
He killed his dad and that was patricide
One night I stabbed him by my mattress-side
To keep my love alive
To keep my love alive
To keep my love alive (online).

Fitzgerald sings the song in a jovial tone that matches the light and lively piano playing in the background. Note what happens when the violent blues woman is commodified

for a Broadway musical audience. The violence is trivialized; no longer graphically cutting men with knives, Fitzgerald's character sings of poisoning, performing surgery, "toss[ing]," and "stabb[ing]." While the easy indifference Fitzgerald expresses is funny, especially considering how little outrage men's abuse of women incited, the last laugh, as women such as Ruth Snyder knew all too well, was reserved for the state.¹²

Blues music as a whole was much more complex than my focus captures here. It is important to remember that while blues singers were projecting independent images that may have been conflated with violent images, they were also projecting loving and nurturing images. Unlike the characters in *Chicago*, female blues singers acknowledged a deep love for the men and women in their lives. Davis claims that Smith's songs "encouraged black women to be as strong and independent as they were loving and caring" (143). While blues music as a whole was a very complex musical genre in the 1920s, its combination of violence and independence contributed to their conflation in popular culture.

Conclusion

Portrayals of violent women in the 1920s have much to offer scholars who are concerned with the conflation of feminism and revenge. The first group of writers discussed in this chapter critiques the idea that women resort to violence because they are naturally deviant by illustrating that domestic violence and other social problems in the 1920s could lead women to murder. As they make this point, they inadvertently

¹² In the end, this song mocks Ruth Snyder who claimed that she couldn't get a divorce. And, interestingly, the young woman's character in *Machinal* claimed that she didn't have the heart to divorce her husband, just as Fitzgerald jokingly sings in this song.

link independence with violence for the only way the women are able to break free of their abusive marriages is through the act of murder. The second group of writers tends to affirm popular ideas about women who kill, linking their “naturally” vengeful natures more overtly with their independence. Yet even this group responds to a history of violence against women in strikingly complex ways as these writers and singers turn the tables on the way people treated violence against women so casually by treating violence against men in the same way. Contemporary inclinations to celebrate any of these works as narratives of revenge fail to honor their complexity. Additionally, they contribute to popular misconceptions about women who kill and make it difficult for real women in court to receive fair trials. Though they are disturbing, as we shall see in the following chapter, these readings have a complex feminist history that stem from a variety of understandable fears and desires.

CHAPTER 3

REAPING AND SEWING: A LESSON IN TRANSFORMATION

As Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes in *The Signifying Monkey*, both Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are "text(s) of becoming" (245). In *Their Eyes*, Janie shapes herself through verbal discourse as she tells Phoebe her life story. In contrast, *The Color Purple*'s Celie "writes herself into being" through her letters to God and then her sister, Nettie (243). Agreeing with Gates and adding to his observations, many scholars have commented on the similarities the central characters of these novels share as they transform themselves from places of victimization to places of empowerment. Scholars also look at the characters' transformations and the novels in general as critiques of domestic violence. As the characters grow, so the story goes, they are better able to resist abuse in their lives and develop the tools necessary to live independently. Because the characters in both novels share their stories of transformation with their communities, scholars assume and hope that Celie and Janie will educate the rest of their communities and help them eliminate violence. While I agree that both novels critique domestic violence and feature female characters that undergo transformations that empower them in certain ways, only *The Color Purple* provides us with a character that is able to

transform herself in a way that overtly challenges the social structures that engender abuse. Unlike Celie who transforms herself through peaceful activities, Janie partly transforms herself through revenge fantasies and the vengeful acts that result from them. These transformations make Janie complicit in the abusive community that the novel critiques. Although Walker's love for *Their Eyes* is well known, I suggest that *The Color Purple* revises the vengeful elements of the *Their Eyes* and offers, instead, ways to transform the self without becoming complicit in an abusive society. As the novel makes this offering, it engages with women of color who have critiqued feminist legal theory and the criminal justice system for emphasizing criminalization over community building and rehabilitation. The transformation of self that Celie undergoes helps her to work towards building a non-violent society.

Unfortunately, when Steven Spielberg created his own vision of *The Color Purple* in film form, he omitted a great deal of the novel's emphasis on rehabilitation and ended up with a text that upholds many of the problems of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Although some feminist film scholars have critiqued Spielberg's interpretation, his omissions reflect concerns that other feminist scholars have about forgiving and working with perpetrators of domestic violence. Analyzing all three texts in the context of the movement to end domestic violence encourages scholars to reflect on the role revenge fantasies play in feminist identity formation and gives us a much broader look at the challenges we face in creating a non-violent society.

Before looking at the texts specifically, it is first necessary to consider what it would take to create a non-violent society. Feminists working to end domestic violence

disagree about the best approach to eradicate domestic violence from our lives. Attempting to force the body politic to take violence against women seriously, protect women, and hold violent persons accountable for the violence they commit, feminist legal theorists have fought for a number of changes in the way the criminal justice system responds to domestic violence. Although police and legal responses to domestic violence still need to be improved drastically, feminist legal theorists have succeeded in implementing a number of laws and procedures intended to protect women against perpetrators of abuse. Mandatory arrest laws, protective orders, and harsher sentencing are just some of the changes that have resulted from feminist lawmaking (Schneider 181). While these changes do suggest that the State is taking violence against women more seriously, feminists interested in or involved with the anti-prison movement question the efficacy of these changes. For instance, the feminist organization INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence and the anti-prison organization Critical Resistance point out that while the changes feminist legal theorists have implemented often protect (at least initially) white upper and middle class women, they can further endanger women of color and their communities (223). As Andrea Ritchie points out, mandatory arrest laws sometimes result in the arrest of the victim of violence. In the worst case scenarios, police officers responding to domestic violence calls have further harassed, beaten, raped, and even killed the women who called them for help (140). Further complicating the issue, Critical Resistance argues that prisons punish rather than rehabilitate and punishment fails to keep our communities safe. In fact, Critical Resistance claims that punishment and prison create more violence and crime (online),

making the movement to stop domestic violence even more difficult. Feminists on this side of the debate urge communities to look for ways to handle domestic violence that do not involve the criminal justice system. Batterer rehabilitation programs, anti-violence education, and neighborhood safety organizations are just a few of the alternative possibilities communities can seek.

The role the criminal justice system plays in creating a violent culture can be illuminated further by the work of Michel Foucault. As Foucault points out, networks of power shape human subjectivity and the criminal justice system is tightly embedded within this network. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault suggests that the fear of punishment shapes human bodies into obedient bodies. While Foucault mainly focuses on the production of these “normalized” bodies, one can also see that a notion of punishment infiltrates our bodies and becomes part of our “normal” response to victimization. When U.S. citizens are hurt in a physical or monetary way, they often look to the criminal justice system to punish their assailants. Punishment seems to follow “naturally” from victimization, allowing victims of crimes to feel justified in their efforts to punish those who victimized them.

While some literary scholars may question the use of the word “punishment,” perhaps preferring the words “rehabilitation” or “consequences” to describe methods employed by the criminal justice system, legal scholars tend to agree that punishment is one of the criminal justice system’s goals. In *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice*, Howard Zehr points out that sentencing is intended to hold offenders “accountable for their actions,” punish them, protect society from them, rehabilitate

them, and deter them and other potential offenders from committing crimes. The criminal justice system suggests that punishment will transform offenders and be a part of their rehabilitation (17).

The problem with this theory is that punishment often does not rehabilitate the perpetrator, nor does it deter him or others from committing crimes. As Zehr points out, the social networks within prison walls often teach their inhabitants “that conflict is normal, that violence is the great problem solver, that one must be violent in order to survive, [and] that one responds to frustration with violence” (35). Rather than deterring crime, Zehr argues that the criminal justice system teaches us that those who hurt us deserve to be punished. He writes, “Many crimes are committed by people ‘punishing’ their family, their neighbors, [and] their acquaintances” (77).

Thane Rosenbaum supports Zehr’s points and goes further to illustrate that the court system provides a poor model for conflict resolution. Rosenbaum writes, “The dispensation and delivery of justice is retributive, not restorative. We resolve our problems by declaring one side the winner and punishing the loser, without regard to whether both sides—or society, for that matter—are made better by the resolution” (212). Rosenbaum argues that the legal system should move its focus from punishing to “mending” all parties involved, including addressing the problems in society that engender criminal activity. Unfortunately, as Rosenbaum points out, US citizens rarely want to spend the time and effort it might take to heal. Instead, many of us want quick solutions to our problems; we are told to let our problems go and get on with our lives. The American emphasis on autonomy distracts many US citizens from recognizing the

importance of community and the good that can come from restoring relationships (even those that have caused tremendous pain). Punishment seems to be a much faster fix that requires the individual to do all his own healing (regardless of what side of the prison wall he is on) (213-4).

The criminal justice system informs the way some people administer punishment in their own lives. In “Feminist Movement to End Violence,” bell hooks argues that when parents physically punish their children and tell them they are doing so because they love them, they are making it difficult for their children to distinguish between abuse and love. In accordance with Rosenbaum’s observations about the American interest in speedy resolutions, hooks notes that parents often teach their children that physical punishment is the fastest, most accepted, and therefore best, way to solve conflicts. As children accept this idea, they become more susceptible to engaging in abusive relationships as either the victim or the perpetrator of abuse (468). Men who abuse their wives may do so in an effort to put them in their place, remind them who is boss, or “punish” them for any number of “wrongs.” Children who grow up with these ideas may turn into adults who view punishment as a natural response to victimization, something that will benefit people who commit crimes or hurt other people in various ways.

As Leo Zaibert points out in *Punishment and Retribution*, punishment is embedded with vengeful overtones. Although some legal scholars attempt to differentiate between revenge and punishment, Zaibert convincingly argues that little distinguishes them. To illustrate his point, Zaibert references political philosopher

Robert Nozick who has had tremendous influence establishing the difference between the two. Nozick claims that revenge is emotional, personal, particular, unrestrained, and may be committed in response to something that is not really wrong. In contrast, punishment is administered in an unemotional and impersonal way, treats all defendants the same, and addresses a specific crime within required boundaries of restraint. Zaibert points out, however, that the criminal justice system sometimes invokes punishments that fit the list Nozick uses to describe revenge (68-80). Judges have been known to let their emotions affect their decisions, and victimized parties sometimes describe court proceedings with vengeful rhetoric. Additionally, forms of punishment may be characterized as “unrestrained,” and feminist journalists and legal scholars alike have pointed out the way the legal system favors some defendants over others, regardless of the similarities of the crimes committed.

Other scholars agree with Zaibert, supporting the connection he sees between punishment and revenge. Zehr notes that differentiations between them, such as the ones Nozick makes, are simply a way of masking vengeance, relieving everyone in the criminal justice system of a certain amount of guilt. He writes that we must admit that the beliefs that “[o]ffenders must get what is coming to them” and “justice must settle the score ‘tit for tat’” are vengeful in nature and at least partly shape the criminal justice system (74-5). Charles K.B. Barton also notes that “revenge is personal retribution, and in calling for justice victims typically want the fair but nevertheless retributive punishment of those who unjustly harm them” (xv). While some scholars would question just how “fair” retributive punishment is, his point nevertheless corroborates

Zehr and Zaibert's. Punishment and revenge are not too distinct from one another. The close association between them may affect individuals who have been victimized or wronged in some way. Just as the criminal justice system encourages citizens to punish those who have wronged them, it may also encourage them to seek revenge, making it seem like a "natural" response to victimization.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman notes that some survivors of domestic violence resist mourning by fantasizing about revenge. Survivors may imagine a traumatic episode from their past but cast themselves in the offensive role. Herman writes that "[i]n her humiliated fury, the victim imagines that revenge is the only way to restore her own sense of power" (189). Although Herman does not discuss this idea, these fantasies should not be seen as the sole property of victims of violent crimes. Revenge fantasies can be seen as another result of the criminal justice system's emphasis on punishment and revenge, and anyone who has been wronged may indulge in them. Doing so, however, makes one complicit in the creation of a violent society. Herman notes that survivors must release these fantasies in order to complete the mourning process (189). The same may be said of all people who wish to create a non-violent society.

Since revenge and punishment are embedded within the criminal justice system, attempts to use it to solve domestic violence can be problematic. Working within a system that sometimes adopts vengeful motives and rhetoric to end violence seems a bit self-defeating. While anti-prison activists suggest that the government should replace prisons with more rehabilitative institutions, other activists argue that rather than

abandoning the prison system altogether, changes should be made that make the existing system more rehabilitative and less punitive. Wherever one falls along this critique continuum, reforming the social structure, including the criminal justice system, seems absolutely necessary in order to eliminate (or even seriously diminish) domestic violence from society. In addition to supporting changes in the social structure, it is important to ask what citizens can do individually to support these changes. In her book *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization*, Ladelles McWhorter argues that in order to oppose oppressive social forces, “we have to cultivate a new way of life that stands counter to them and eventually that is just other to them” (190). Following Foucault, McWhorter suggests that people must “cultivate [this] new way of life” through finding new pleasurable activities (190). Just as Foucault points out that bodies are developmental, McWhorter points out that pleasures are developmental (179). Following this logic, any pleasure we currently place in fantasies about punishment and revenge can be replaced, or at least supplemented, with exercises, or technologies of the self as Foucault might say, that counter punitive networks and help us create a non-violent society. This work will not just be mental; rather, as McWhorter points out, the cultivation of new pleasure is physical as well.

Of course, as scholars and teachers of feminist literature and theory, we play a role in cultivating pleasure and in generating resistance to an abusive society as we read, discuss, and teach feminist texts about domestic violence. Because of this role, we must look at the ways we read these texts and analyze the implications our readings have for the movement to end domestic violence. As we engage in this exercise, we

may find that we will need to transform our own pleasure, or at least begin to question its construction.

Their Eyes Were Watching God

The scholarship on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a testament to the love many literary critics, including myself, feel towards it. As Mary Helen Washington points out, when feminist scholars first uncovered *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in the late sixties, they were delighted to find an African American female character who was independent, courageous, and resilient. Janie provided such a contrast to the tragic mulatto frequently found in African American literature at the time (xi). Her quest for self discovery undoubtedly resonated with women involved in the burgeoning second wave of feminism. The love story between Tea Cake and Janie also delighted many of the novel's readers. Washington remembers Toni Cade Bambara, the keynote speaker at a conference in 1969, asking her audience members if "the sisters [t]here were ready for Tea Cake" (xi). While Sherley Anne Williams noted that, in Washington's words, "even Tea Cake has his flaws," the readings of the novel were largely enthusiastic and "protective" of any negative critique (xi, xvi).

Following the battered women's movement, scholars began reading the novel as a critique of domestic violence. Early on, scholars delighted in Janie's response to Joe's abuse of her as she cursed his manhood and facilitated his death. While many scholars originally read Tea Cake as the ideal mate, critiques of his abuse of Janie have gradually come into focus. Kathleen Davies and others argue that Janie's murder of Tea Cake, generally thought of as self-defense, is a way for Hurston, Janie, or both to punish Tea

Cake for his abuse of Janie. As I will illustrate later, this reading underscores the way the novel is unable to entirely abandon structures of abuse. Before addressing the way many of these readings make Hurston and her critics, to the degree they take pleasure in them, complicit with a punitive society that engenders abuse, I want to point out two scenes in the novel that are extraordinary in their ability to predict both problems in and theories of the movement to end domestic violence. If teaching and writing about feminist literature are two ways scholars can help to create a nonviolent society, I think it is important to recognize both the important points *Their Eyes* makes as well as the problems that we need to re-evaluate.

The courtroom scene in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is one of the most debated scenes in the novel, and it illustrates a number of problems that face the domestic violence movement. At its most obvious, the courtroom scene points out what little representation the criminal justice system offers women who kill their partners in self-defense. Although Hurston has been criticized for “failing” to let Janie tell her own story in this scene, anyone familiar with feminist legal theory can see how this “failure” is not Hurston’s, but the legal system’s that Hurston was critiquing. As I discussed in chapter one, when women kill their abusive partners, the legal system generally reads them as either extraordinarily passive (too passive in fact to have acted sanely) or as vengeful. Hurston depicts and predicts this problem as the judge instructs the “[g]entlemen of the jury . . . to decide whether [Janie] has committed a cold blooded murder or whether she is a poor broken creature, a devoted wife trapped by unfortunate circumstances who really in firing a rifle bullet into the heart of her late husband did a

great act of mercy” (188). The court forces the jury to label Janie either a “wanton killer” or a victim of circumstances. Further illustrating what little representation the court of law offers women in these circumstances, Hurston denies Janie her voice and paraphrases her response instead.¹ Depicting and predicting another problem in the domestic violence movement, the only other group to which Hurston gives dialogue in this scene is that of Tea Cake’s friends. These men voice disgust at Janie’s acquittal, claiming that as long as a black woman does not kill a white man, “she kin kill jus’ as many niggers as she please” (189). They also note that “‘uh white man and uh nigger woman is de freest thing on earth’” (189). These comments reflect (and predict) a defensiveness that some black men use to attack black feminist critiques of domestic violence. Black feminist activists and scholars such as Kimberle Crenshaw have pointed out that discussions about domestic violence in the black community are often silenced in the name of racial solidarity (288).

Interestingly, both Hurston and Walker faced such defensiveness when *Their Eyes* and *The Color Purple* were published. Hurston probably knew that her critique of the abuse of black women by black men would elicit criticism, and the men in the court scene speak to that knowledge. Countering these voices, Hurston illustrates that black women’s critiques of domestic violence are not only denied by the criminal justice system, but they are also denied by some black men. Analyzing a third problem in the movement, Hurston also indicts white women in this scene. Although the white women

¹ It is also possible to read the novel itself as Janie’s testimony.

are not given a voice during the trial, they are given a significant stance after it. Throughout the trial, they look disapprovingly at the black crowd that has gathered there. After Janie is acquitted, they form “a protecting wall” between her and the black community. This paternalistic wall not only mirrors the race relations between black women and white women in the 1930s; it also predicts a tension between black activists and white activists in the battered women’s movement today.

Black feminist activists and scholars have critiqued the way white feminists have glossed over and suppressed the way race complicates the movement to end domestic violence. This gloss can be easily seen when white feminists assert that battering does not happen in only working class homes, as is stereotypically thought, but also affects middle and upper (more predominantly white) classes of women. Crenshaw points out that although this claim may be well intended, it generally “seems less concerned with exploring domestic abuse within ‘stereotyped’ communities than with removing the stereotype as an obstacle to exposing battering within white middle- and upper-class communities” (290). This problem can certainly be seen in the creation of domestic violence laws. As I discussed earlier, women of color have pointed out that while mandatory arrest laws may protect white women who conform to traditional codes of femininity, they may place other women who do not fit these codes because of their race, class, or sexual preferences at risk of violence. And many women of color are hesitant to subject the men in their communities to further violence in prison. While the anti-prison movement is composed of women from different racial backgrounds

(including white), women of color have certainly led the way in their critique of feminist legal theory's failure to protect all women against domestic violence.

Hurston's critique in the courtroom scene speaks to her ability to identify persistent problems in the movement to end domestic violence. Interestingly, the novel is also able to predict theories on violence that surfaced decades after her death. As I discussed in chapter one, bell hooks argues that domestic violence springs from hierarchical societies that uphold the rights for those in power to dominate, punish, and control those without it. Hooks connects the violence that erupts between romantic partners to a web of violence in the United States that includes slavery, militarism, and corporate abuse. Hooks also includes the abuse of children in this web, critiquing the way the combination of love and abuse can condition children to accept abuse in their adult lives.

While it is unclear just how conscious she is of making this same critique, Hurston provides her contemporary readers with a strikingly similar theory of abuse in a famous scene between Nanny and Janie. After seeing Janie and Johnny Taylor kissing over the fence, Nanny decides to marry Janie off to Logan Killicks in the hopes that he will give her a good life and protect her from the violence both she and Janie's mother endured. In an attempt to justify her decision and explain what she wants to protect Janie from, Nanny tells Janie the story of their family tree that is embedded with slavery, rape, and other forms of violence. Nanny implies to Janie that she was repeatedly raped by the man who owned her, and she lets Janie know that her mother was born out of that violence. In addition to being raped and being forced to carry a

child that was a product of that rape, Nanny suffered abuse at the hands of her owner's wife. When Nanny's owner leaves to fight in the war, his wife hits Nanny repeatedly and threatens to have the overseer "take [her] to de whippin' post and tie [her] down on [her] knees and cut de hide off a [her] yaller back." She also threatens to sell her child (18). This violence in Janie's family does not stop with Nanny, nor does it stop when slavery is abolished. Though Nanny hoped that her daughter, Janie's mother, could escape the violence of white men in the post slavery era and become a school teacher, her daughter is raped at the age of seventeen by her own school teacher. Unable to cope with her rape and the baby who was born as a result of it, Janie's mother began to drink heavily and eventually left both Nanny and Janie. With the story of the Crawford family tree, Hurston makes connections between several different kinds of violence: militarism, slavery, and rape (both during and after the slavery era).

Although both Nanny and her daughter are raped by white men, Nanny knows that black men are also capable of violating and abusing black women. In fact, she argues that the oppression white men inflict on black men teaches them how to dominate black women. Hurston makes this lineage of violence clear in one of Nanny's frequently quoted speeches from the novel:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able to find out. Maybe it's some place off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nuthin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it to be different wid you. (14)

With this speech, Hurston makes the connection between the way white men oppress men of color to the way black men oppress black women.

What is particularly interesting about Nanny's ability to trace this lineage of abuse is her failure to recognize her own complicity in it. Just before Nanny delivers this speech, she slaps Janie "violently" for kissing Johnny Taylor and acting disgusted with her when she insists that Janie marry Logan Killicks. After slapping Janie, she comforts her, telling her she would never "harm a hair uh [her] head" (14). This combination of love and abuse confuses Janie throughout the novel. The combination seems natural to Nanny, however, and she justifies it by acting as though her coercive acts, the slap and the arranged marriage, are evidence of her love for Janie. She tells Janie that she wants to protect her and insists that marriage to Killicks will fulfill that function (15). Nanny's actions and beliefs illustrate hooks' theory about children confusing violence with love. Although it is unclear how much she actually critiques it, Hurston illustrates this problem throughout the rest of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Confused about love and its connection with violence, Janie enters into three romantic relationships fraught with varying degrees of abuse.

Unfortunately, her ability to predict and provide an outline of domestic violence theories does not prevent Hurston from becoming complicit in a violent society. Like many, she is too firmly enmeshed in punitive powers to escape them. Her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* attests to her disdain for abuse that she is not able to separate from her desire to punish. As Kathleen Davies observes, in *Dust Tracks* Hurston tells her readers that she wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in an effort to

“embalm” an ex-lover who simultaneously abused and affirmed her. Davies points out that death is a prerequisite for embalment. In order to embalm her ex-lover, Hurston would have to kill him first (148). The desire to kill and embalm makes *Their Eyes* a revenge fantasy of sorts. Responding to the way her own lover abuses (and perhaps symbolically kills a part of) her, Hurston uses *Their Eyes* to both imagine her partner’s own death and remember the loving moments she shared with him.

While Davies recognizes Tea Cake as Hurston’s substitute for her own lover (148), the first overt critique of domestic violence and corresponding revenge fantasy begin with Joe. Hurston’s portrayal of Janie and Joe’s relationship is complicated. In some respects, it shows how difficult it can be for women to leave abusive relationships. As is the case with many abusive men, Joe limits Janie’s social activities. He refuses to let her socialize with the commoners in town, telling her that as the mayor’s wife, she must resist such activities. Any one with whom she is able to become acquaintances fears Joe and would not dare to cross him. Janie is isolated; she seems to have no community of support. Her situation is like that of other women in abusive relationships. Many theorists of domestic violence and practitioners in the anti-violence movement note that one way that men are able to abuse is by restricting their wives’ participation in the public sphere. This situation, coupled with economic disempowerment and a lack of education, which Janie also experiences, makes it very difficult for women to leave violent relationships.

Unable to leave Joe, Janie fights back against his emotional, verbal, and physical abuse however she can. She gets “moufy” with Joe and other men in

Eatonville who boast about beating their wives (75). Her “moufiness” facilitates Joe’s death. When Joe insults Janie’s “old” appearance in front of his store’s customers, Janie replies, “‘Humph! Talkin’ bout me lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life’” (79). This remark sends Joe to his bedroom where he stays until his death. Joe suspects that his sickness is Janie’s fault; he believes she has ‘fixed’ him (82), and scholars agree with him. Kathleen Davies notes that Joe’s suspicion that “Janie has ‘fixed’ him,” is an allusion to Hoodoo (153). Janie works her Hoodoo magic on Joe, stopping him from abusing her any longer. Joe’s death, Davies suggests, is Janie’s “triumph” (153). While Davies may be going a bit too far in this assertion as Janie does show pity for Joe while he is dying, one has to admit that Janie feels free and renewed after Joe’s death.

As is the case with many of the texts discussed in chapter two, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* presents us with a murder that seems to be the only way the protagonist can get out of an abusive relationship. Yet the murder is not presented simply as the only way out; it is presented in the context of revenge. Janie does not “fix” Joe in the middle of the night when no one is watching. She insults him in front of his friends, just as he has done to her. After he dies, she shows little indication that she misses him; although “[s]he sen[ds] her face to Joe’s funeral,” she goes “rollicking with the springtime across the world” (88). As readers, many of us delight in her response, not only in her newfound freedom but in the delightful wickedness of her “triumph.” Because we have been trained to see retaliation and punishment as natural responses to victimization, we imagine that a man who has abused a woman for years deserves to be

emasculated in front of his friends. That his death is the result—well, that just seems convenient for Janie. As we will see, however, Joe’s death is the first symptom of a world view that is punitive in nature, a world view that ultimately makes it very difficult for Hurston to escape the abuse she critiques.

Many scholars reason that Tea Cake helps Janie to recreate herself so that she can live independently and reject further abuse in her life. These scholars contend that Tea Cake teaches Janie how to love herself. Alice Fannin writes that Tea Cake “treats [Janie] as an equal, and expects that they will join in any endeavor—playing and working, cooking, and hunting” (51). She notes that Tea Cake encourages Janie to make friends and express herself. She writes, “Loving Tea Cake is the catalyst that helps transform Janie from the dead to the living” (51). Emma J. Waters Dawson agrees, noting that “Janie’s adventures with Tea Cake help complete here re-creation of self because, for the first time in her life, she refuses to conform to the dictates of others” (76).

What Fannin, Dawson, and others who take a similar view fail to see is that, as Tom McGlamery points out, in some ways Tea Cake is “a better-looking, wilder version of Joe Starks” as he “takes liberties with Janie’s money and takes pride in having been able to mark her with his fists” (106). Although Hurston dismisses Tea Cake’s physical abuse as “no brutal beating at all,” Davies claims that this characterization was meant to make Tea Cake appear non abusive in order to avoid playing into lynching myths by suggesting that all black men were violent in nature (148). I should also add that, despite the dismissal, Tea Cake beats Janie so badly that

“[u]h person can see every place [he] hit her” and then brags that this beating indicates his “possession” of Janie (147). Carla Kaplan has also suggested that Tea Cake’s abuse of Janie is much worse than it seems. She cites several passages from the book that suggest that Tea Cake smothers Janie physically and emotionally. One particularly interesting passage illustrates Tea Cake’s controlling behavior: “‘Janie awoke next morning by feeling Tea Cake almost kissing her breath away. Holding her and caressing her as if he feared she might escape his grasp’” (qtd. in Kaplan 117). It is also interesting to note that, challenging Dawson’s reading, Janie alters her behavior and appearance according to Tea Cake’s likes and dislikes. Kaplan points out that although Janie wants to cook Tea Cake breakfast one morning, he will not allow her to do so. Although she wants to get out of bed, she stays in place until long after Tea Cake leaves (117). Additionally, as Hurston tells us, Janie wears blue because Tea Cake likes her in blue (113). In light of Kaplan and Davies’ readings, one wonders just how blue Janie really is.

Despite Tea Cake’s abuse of Janie, he does help her to develop skills to live independently and defend herself against abuse—at least initially. He teaches her how to be financially independent and shows her how to compete in a man’s world, which are important lessons for her to learn, lessons that would have enabled her to leave Joe without killing him. Before teaching her how to make money, however, Tea Cake teaches her how to compete. This lesson in competition plays out as Tea Cake encourages Janie in a game of checkers. Peter Kerry Powers points out that when Tea Cake teaches Janie how to play checkers, he coaches her in “a ritual of masculine

dominance from which the men have carefully excluded Janie” (242). This lesson in dominance will both save her life and make it very difficult for her to alter it.

For Foucault, however, Tea Cake would have to teach Janie how to develop skills that oppose abusive networks of power in order to create a life that is largely free of abuse. Because of his own investment in this network, Tea Cake fails in this endeavor. If anything, Tea Cake teaches Janie how to better survive within this network. He teaches her how to dominate others and defend herself. Because he manipulates her, he also teaches her to stay on her toes and perhaps even increases her distrust of others, casting a less than joyful reading on Janie’s instructions to Pheoby to “find out about livin’ for” herself (192). While Tea Cake may increase Janie’s experiences of and opportunities for pleasure, as Kaplan shows, he also makes her obedient to him. This contradiction follows Foucault’s observations about the way disciplinary regimes condition people to be both more productive and more obedient. As McWhorter points out, Foucault makes this point with his illustration of the way the military trains its soldiers. By teaching soldiers intricate skills, the military makes them more productive, but the military also wants to make sure that the skills they teach their soldiers will be used to serve the military and obey their commands (180). The same may be said of Tea Cake. To have the “fun,” physical relationship he wants with Janie, he encourages her to play but, through beating and controlling her, continues to show her who is boss. If she leaves Tea Cake for another man, as he is afraid she might do, her skills in pleasure will be useless to him. In fact, they may hurt him. So, like anyone

playing a role in a disciplinary regime, Tea Cake conditions Janie to be more productive and to be more obedient.

Although their relationship is abusive, Janie and Tea Cake share a genuine love for one another. Unlike Joe, Tea Cake encourages Janie to play with him and other friends. As Davies and other point out, this combination of love and abuse parallels Hurston's relationship with her own lover. Writing *Their Eyes* at least partly to mourn this relationship, Hurston uses the hurricane to punish Tea Cake (and her own lover) for his arrogance and abuse. Davies backs up this argument by pointing out that the hurricane that ultimately kills Tea Cake is foreshadowed when Tea Cake brags about beating Janie to Sop-de-Bottom. Responding jealously to Tea Cake's behavior, Sop notes, "Mah woman would spread her lungs all over Palm Beach County [if I beat her] She got ninety-nine rows uh jaw teeth and git her good and mad, she'll wade through solid rock up to her hip pockets'" (qtd. in Davies 154). Davies also notes that "[a]s Tea Cake's rabies [from the dog bite in the hurricane] develop, he is transformed into a 'mad dog' himself, a condition that reflects the anger that precipitated" his abuse of Janie (155). When Tea Cake goes mad from rabies, he begins talking jealously about Mrs. Turner's brother, feelings that originally made him beat Janie earlier in the novel. When Janie kills Tea Cake, she is defending herself, but she is also allowing Hurston to symbolically punish (and kill) her own lover for his abuse of her. Interestingly, this punishment also allows Hurston to forgive her lover for his abuse of her and to remember him fondly as Janie lovingly mourns the loss of Tea Cake and recognizes that he will be with her always, giving him new life at the end of the novel (155).

Davies points out that the hurricane is an act of God² meant to punish Tea Cake for his arrogance and his abuse of Janie, and this point highlights the punitive theology in the novel for which there is further evidence. Hurston notes that Mrs. Turner worships Janie and puts up with her criticism because “[a]ll gods who receive homage are cruel” (145). Hurston goes on to write that “[h]alf gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood” (145).

This punitive type of god parallels other observations about Hurston’s spirituality that make her a problematic figure for the feminist movement to end violence. Referring to Hurston’s comments on religion in *Dust Tracks on the Road*, Powers illustrates that Hurston’s ideal God is not the forgiving, loving one captured by the sentimental novels of the nineteenth century. Instead, he is a God that gets down to business and fights battles, punishing the wicked with murder in life and then, taking secondary importance, fire and damnation in the afterlife (234). This concept of a punishing God poses real problems for people interested in creating societies that do not engender violence. For one, societies have often suggested that a husband’s “right” to punish his wife stems from God. A God who punishes abusers might recognize that abuse is wrong; however, He still reinforces the idea that those in charge have a right to inflict pain, in this case death, on those under the subject of rule. Clearly, this validation of abusive hierarchies is part of what bell hooks and others feminist activists working to end domestic violence critique. In addition to being complicit with systems

² Some might argue that a hurricane is an act of nature; however, Davies claims that “As a Hoodoo priestess, Hurston perceived the force of Nature as intimately linked to the ultimate force of God” (150).

of domination, this punitive theology complicates the recovery process for victims of domestic violence. As Traci C. West observes in her book *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics*, a view of a punitive God often makes recovering from domestic violence more difficult for Christian battered women who may think that their abuse was a punishment from God or feel estranged from God, wondering why He did not protect them from abuse (61).

When one considers McWhorter's argument that in order to resist oppression, we have to develop ways of resistance that contradict it, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* fails to offer a strong way out of a punitive, abusive society. Both Joe and Tea Cake's deaths incorporate elements of the punitive world from which the men learned to abuse Janie. The joyful revenge with which Janie emasculates (and kills) Joe and the punitive god that facilitates the end of Tea Cake's life allow her to temporarily break free from abusive relationships; however, they do not develop tools to help her resist abuse non-violently in the future.

Ultimately, then, *Their Eyes'* punitive worldview poses real challenges for feminists invested in the movement to end violence. Although Janie responds rebelliously to abusive behavior, she is complicit in the very lineage of violence that she critiques. She has been taught that retaliation answers victimization and has responded to the abuse she has encountered according to that lesson. While scholars of literature may enjoy her response, we must also be willing to consider whether or not our enjoyment of it places us in Janie's footsteps, critiquing abuse but making little progress in altering society. Since scholars often read Janie as a woman searching for (and

achieving) fulfillment, we need to ask ourselves how much our concept of feminist identity formation is formed by fantasies of revenge. For, like Pheoby, we often find we have “growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’” to Janie (192). How much of this growth comes at the expense of others? How much of it stops with the self and fails to alter our communities because it merely reinforces the oppressive structures already in place?

Janie’s tale to Phoebe parallels Hurston’s own writing act. Just as Janie constructs a tale for Phoebe that indulges in revenge fantasies, Hurston used *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to write out her own. According to Davies and others, Hurston imagines her own abusive lover’s death through Tea Cake’s (148). One might ask why it is necessary to imagine the death, especially a violent, vengeful one, of a lover in order to mourn the loss of a relationship. How do we mourn our loss of self and the loss of loved ones without resorting to imaginary violence?

Janie may consider this question herself as she settles into her home, “pull[s] in her horizon like a great fish-net” and “call[s] in her soul to come and see” (Hurston 193). This passage indicates that Janie plans to spend some time reflecting on her time with Tea Cake and her life in general. Hurston does not indicate, however, where any of Janie’s reflections will lead her. And although Janie seems to find peace in her solitude, therapists and other scholars emphasize the important role that community plays in recovering from trauma and abuse. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman writes that “[r]ecovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (133). Victoria L. Banyard, Linda Williams, Jane Seigel, and

Carolyn M. West also point out that when survivors of abuse have loving relationships with their mothers, they decrease “the risk that they themselves [will] engage in violence” (53). Though Baynard et al. specifically name “mothers” instead of women, the African American emphasis on “other-mothers” suggests that this role may be assumed by other women as well.

Just before Janie settles into self reflection, she gives Pheoby her philosophy on life. She tells her, “Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theyselves” (192). While scholars frequently applaud this line, it is not without troubling implications. If Janie’s God is a punitive, dominating God, then he offers Janie’s community little help in creating a non-violent society. While Janie’s suggestion that people discover on their own what shapes they want their lives to take may stress the importance of individuality and self reflection, it does not do much in the way of resisting abuse if one has not seen how to rid one’s own impulses towards it. Additionally, if scholars read Janie’s journey as a successful one, and they generally do, they may suggest that people need little help from society in order to recreate themselves. This suggestion has little to offer survivors of abuse and the people who abuse them. Sensing, perhaps, the trouble with this suggestion, Alice Walker offers us the opportunities to develop new pleasures outside of punitive networks with *The Color Purple*.

The Color Purple

While it is uncertain what will happen in Janie’s community of Eatonville, *The Color Purple* gives us a vision of a community that revises the punitive world view

Their Eyes leaves us. This community begins very much like the one in *Their Eyes*. Its inhabitants and their ancestors have experienced a lineage of violence that threatens to perpetuate itself indefinitely. Unlike Janie, however, Celie is able to end the lineage of violence and, with the help of others, begin to transform the community. Her transformations first begin with herself as Walker replaces Janie's vengeful actions with Celie's more peaceful and productive acts of transformation. While Janie learns activities that keep her in competition with others and jealously guards Tea Cake, Celie learns activities that help her accept others, relinquish jealousy and possessiveness, and abandon a drive to permanently kill what was never hers to kill in the first place. The novel also speaks to some of the feminist scholarship on violence by both black and white feminists, making specific some of their generalities and drawing our attention to the gaps that exist within them.

Unlike Janie and Nanny, Celie recognizes her own complicity in a lineage of violence and brings it to an end. Like the women in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Celie experiences the effects of a long line of violence. Raped repeatedly by her step-father, whom she believes is her biological father, Celie also suffers verbal and emotional abuse from her mother, who is jealous of her. Experiencing no love from authority figures at home, Celie is not surprised to find herself in a similar situation with Albert, the man her step-father forces her to marry. Raped and beaten by Albert, Celie "make[s] [herself] a tree" to resist the pain. It is not until late in the novel that Celie discovers that her real father was also a victim of violence. Like Hurston, Walker connects the violence that white men enact on black men to the violence black men

enact on black women as she reveals that Celie's real father was lynched by white men angry about his economic prosperity.

As Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Laura Gillman point out, Celie perpetuates this line of violence through her relationship with Sofia. When Harpo asks Celie what to do to make Sofia mind him, Celie encourages him to beat her (35). Walker, unlike Hurston with Nanny and Janie, provides her readers with a passage in which Celie recognizes how wrong it is for her to participate in a lineage of abuse. After Celie advises Harpo to beat Sofia, she does not sleep well “[f]or over a month” (37). When Celie asks herself why she cannot sleep, “[a] little voice say, Something you done wrong. Somebody spirit you sin against” (37). Celie soon recognizes that she has “sin[ned] against Sofia’s spirit” (37). Through Celie’s own recognition, Walker overtly critiques her complicity in creating a violent culture.

The Color Purple then shows the important role that community can play in ending violence. Unlike Janie, who has to “find out about livin’” for herself, Celie has women friends and family members who are strong, insightful, and loving enough to set her straight. Upset by Celie’s betrayal, Sofia takes down the curtains Celie made for her and Harpo. She returns them to Celie and asks her why she betrayed her. When Celie admits that jealousy motivated the betrayal, Sofia offers her support. She tells her that she too has suffered abuse by male relatives, but she refuses to stand for it anymore. She also points out how important her sisters have been to her, saying, “all the girls stick together” (39). She then offers Celie a chance to participate in such a community and helps her to regain a sense of self she has lost in the face of Albert’s abuse. As she

does, she recognizes the importance that imaginary rebellion can play in helping a person heal. When Celie says that she thinks about heaven instead of getting mad at Albert, Sofia jokes with her, saying, “You ought to bash Mr. ___ head open. . . Think about heaven later” (40). Guessing that Celie could never do such a thing and delighted by the idea of rebellion, the women “laugh so hard [they] flop down on the step” (40). Although readers might wonder how this image of Albert is different from Hurston’s revenge fantasies, *The Color Purple* later makes it clear that this kind of joking about something that seems ludicrous to Celie is very different from an actual revenge fantasy that she will later experience. This imaginary rebellion joins Sofia and Celie together and gives Celie the first idea that she might one day be able to resist Albert’s abuse with a strong enough force to end it. Walker reinforces this friendship through the act of sewing. As Martha J. Cutter points out, Sofia and Celie mend their relationship as they make a quilt using pieces from the destroyed curtains (172). The friendship between Sofia and Celie is the first glimmer readers see of the importance of female bonding and community and the way peaceful actions, like sewing and laughter, can stop abuse from flourishing.

While the bond between Celie and Sofia is strong, Celie’s relationship with Shug also provides her with the strength necessary to stop the lineage of abuse and to heal herself; this relationship also revises *Their Eyes Were Watching God’s* emphasis on revenge fantasies. After Celie discovers that Albert has been hiding Nettie’s letters from her, she feels numb and literally wants to kill him. When Shug cautions her against killing him, Celie still insists she’ll “feel better if [she] kill[s] him” (139). Just

as many survivors of abuse, Celie thinks that killing Albert will help move her out of her numb state. Shug points out, “Nobody feel better for killing nothing. They feel *something* is all” (139). Sensing the danger of Celie’s threats, Shug encourages her to shift her attention from killing to sewing. The two women plan to “read Nettie’s letters and sew” every day; Celie knows the emphasis on sewing is supposed to give her something non-violent but active to do. She writes, “A needle and not a razor in my hand” (142). Sewing gives Celie something creative to do with her hands so that she no longer seeks destruction. Through this conversation between Shug and Celie, *The Color Purple* suggests that revenge fantasies may be replaced by other transformative actions that are actually more empowering.

This suggestion not only revises the desire for revenge evident in *Their Eyes*; it contributes to scholarship on revenge fantasies in a number of ways. While many scholars might equate Celie’s desire to kill Albert to the abuse she has suffered from him, I think it is important to consider that her desire is in response to being wronged, like any of us might be wronged. Revenge fantasies are not the sole property of people in abusive relationships; the criminal justice system (along with other systems of power—such as popular culture and literature) encourages us to see vengeance as an understandable response to victimization. When therapists discuss revenge fantasies, they tend to relate them solely to abusive episodes and do not ask why the fantasies might arise in response to the abuse. Failing to ask this question limits the scope of their audience and makes revenge fantasies a problem of the “sick,” not simply a problem many people encounter. As *The Color Purple* identifies Nettie’s letters as the

source of the revenge fantasy and not the physical abuse, it suggests that Celie's response to victimization may be one other people who do not think of themselves as abuse victims can relate to.

The Color Purple also speaks to the scholarship on revenge fantasies as it emphasizes the importance of replacing them with physical, and not just verbal, actions. Judith Herman suggests that talking through revenge fantasies with a therapist can help move the survivor from a feeling of helpless rage, expressed through the revenge fantasy, to a feeling of "righteous indignation," which decreases her feeling of helplessness and empowers her to hold the perpetrator accountable for his actions (189). Unlike many middle and upper class white women, however, Celie does not have the privilege of working with a therapist; instead, she talks with Shug, who also gives her something creative to do with her body. As Celie talks with Shug, she replaces her physical urge to destroy with the physical act of sewing, changing her response to Albert from a panicked one that will endanger both of them to a calm one that begins to empower her mentally, physically, and economically. While Herman also notes the important roles that physical actions can play in helping survivors of abuse recover, her suggestions rely on economic resources that not all women have (198). By giving Celie the action of sewing, Walker opens up the possibility for people to consider other physical actions besides ones traditionally discussed, like self-defense classes and retreats, that can be quite expensive and may not even be desirable for all survivors.

Walker further illustrates how important it is for survivors to replace their physical urges for revenge with other creative urges in the body by pointing out that

Celie can make clothes for herself that she will feel good wearing. What Celie creates will empower her further as it will also eventually aid her in feeling joyously connected to her body. Shug encourages Celie to make a pair of pants for herself. When Celie asks, “What I need pants for? . . . I ain’t no man,” Shug points out that pants will be so much more comfortable for her. She says, “It’s a scandless, the way you look out there plowing in a dress. How you keep from falling over it or getting the plow caught in it is beyond me” (141). She also tells her, “[Y]ou don’t have a dress do nothing for you. You not made like no dress pattern, neither” (141). Shug knows that pants will help Celie feel good because they will allow for a wider range of movement than a dress and because she will look good wearing them. Like sewing, pants will help Celie to experience pleasure in her body again.

The pleasure Celie experiences as she begins making pants (and wearing them) can also be seen as a form of resistance that will allow her to recreate herself and affect a change in her community. In *Bodies and Pleasures*, McWhorter asks her readers to consider how the development of pleasure can resist “regimes of power.” A punitive society encourages us to think that the punishment of those who have wronged us alleviates our pain, thereby increasing our pleasure. Celie’s revenge fantasy is a product of this society, and it gives her pleasure. Shug, however, recognizes the danger of that pleasure and encourages Celie to develop new forms of pleasure that oppose fantasies of punishment and revenge. The pleasure Celie derives from sewing with Shug and from wearing pants that allow her to experience freedom (of movement)

replaces the pleasure she feels in imagining revenge. This pleasure not only helps her on a personal level, it will help her affect a change in her community as well.

Making pants further empowers Celie as this skill provides her with a means to provide for herself and it strengthens her relationships with her community. Eventually, Celie uses her talents for sewing, and more specifically for pant making, to support herself financially. This talent assures Celie that she possesses a skill that allows her to live on her own and gives her the power to leave her abusive marriage. But Celie does not just help herself by honing her sewing skills. She is also able to provide clothes for others, which connects her to her community and continues her healing process. Mary Ann Wilson points out that Celie heals not just by sewing but by carefully considering the personalities of those she sews for. Wilson writes that Celie's "gratitude to Shug emerges in the beauty of the cloth she chooses for her pants. Her love and respect for Odessa's husband, Jack, lives in the soft, strong camel-colored pants she creates for him" (65). The pants that Celie creates for others give her something new to fantasize about, something that has nothing to do with revenge. As she makes a pair of pants with one purple leg and one red leg for Sofia, she writes "I dream Sofia wearing these pants, one day she was jumping over the moon" (214). This vision of Sofia expresses Celie's gratitude for her; Sofia was the first to help Celie envision her own jump over the moon. These expressions of gratitude strengthen Celie's support group, inform her imagination, and nurture her as she nurtures others.

By giving Celie a supportive community of women, Walker is able to revise many of the problems in Hurston's text. Unlike Janie, Celie has the friendship of

women who help her to transform her vengeful fantasies into more productive actions. By giving her this gift, Walker makes it clear that Baynard et al.'s claim that survivors with good relationships with their mothers are less likely to continue the lineage of violence includes other mothers as well. Shug and Sofia help Celie stop the lineage of violence and work with her to begin to transform their community. While Tea Cake taught Janie how to compete in a man's world, Shug helps Celie to envision a business that will create roles for others. When Celie opens Folkpants, Unlimited, she employs other men and women to help her.

Some scholars have critiqued the role that Folkpants Unlimited plays in *The Color Purple*, suggesting that Celie runs the risk of oppressing others as the owner of a small business. Bell hooks, for instance, claims that “[n]o attention is accorded aspects of this enterprise that might reinforce domination” and criticizes Walker for implying that women are “innately less inclined to oppress and dominate than men” (59). Although this is a significant point, another look at the text reveals that Walker may be aware of the potential for abuse and subtly critiques it. As she does, her novel illustrates McWhorter's theories once more. While McWhorter advocates the use of pleasure to oppose networks of domination, she also encourages us to be wary of creating forms of pleasure that limit our freedom (or the freedom of others) and can make us complicit in the very networks we seek to overturn (181). Shug illustrates the danger of this possibility as she encourages Celie to use the “diningroom for [her] factory and git [her] some more women . . . to cut and sew while [she] sit[s] back and design[s]” (211-212). If Celie were to fulfill Shug's vision, she might indeed become

complicit in creating a punitive society. Without commenting directly on Shug's remark about factories, Celie informs Nettie that she is sewing something for her. She writes, "Nettie, I am making some pants for you to beat the heat in Africa. Soft, white, thin. Drawstring waist. You won't ever have to feel hot and overdress again. I plan to make them by hand. Every stitch I sew will be a kiss" (212). The care Celie shows in describing and planning these pants indicates that she is aware of the possibilities of exploitation and suggests that she will be a worker in her own company, not merely an overseer.

In the following chapter, we encounter an exchange between Celie and Darlene, one of Celie's employees. The power structure in their relationship is interesting; Darlene tries to teach Celie "how to talk" (213). Celie reads some of the materials that Darlene brings her and carefully considers them, even though the idea seems strange to her. Although she ultimately rejects "talk[ing] in a way that feel peculiar to [her] mind," she "let[s] Darlene worry on" and notes that "she sweet and she sew good and us need something to haggle over while us work" (214). The exchange between Darlene and Celie suggests that Celie will consider anything her employees have to offer her. Walker also points out, for the second time in two pages, that Celie will be working with her employees instead of merely supervising them. This arrangement differs strikingly from the one Shug imagines. Rather than "sit[ting] back," Celie works actively and chats with her employees. As long as she continues in this practice, she may keep Shug's factory at a distance. Although owning her own business may open

her up to the possibilities of exploitation, it also gives her the ability to experiment with new forms of pleasure and to provide this opportunity for others as well.

Before Celie opens up Folkpants Unlimited, she confronts and then leaves Albert. As Herman notes, holding the perpetrator accountable for the abuse is a necessary part of the healing process for survivors (200). Recognizing the important role that community plays in helping women to end relationships, Walker stages Celie's first confrontation with Albert at a family dinner where both Shug and Sofia are present. With the support of her friends behind her, Celie tells Albert that she is leaving him because he has been "a lowdown dirty dog" and "[i]t's time to leave [him] and enter into the Creation" (195). In addition to recognizing the importance that this confrontation will play in Celie's recovery, Walker's novel makes a distinction between self-defense and revenge fantasies. Hearing that Celie is planning to leave him, he threatens that she will only do so "[o]ver [his] dead body" (195). Both Shug and Celie respond coolly that they are willing to go to any length they have to for Celie to leave. Celie calmly replies, "your dead body just the welcome mat I need" (195). While Celie will not kill Albert out of revenge, if he tries to keep her with him against her will, she will do what she has to do to leave him. This response differs strikingly from the way Janie responds to both Joe and Tea Cake.

Walker, however, does draw a connection between Janie's departure from Joe and Celie's departure from Albert. Just as Janie places a hex on Joe, Celie curses Albert. Right before Celie leaves (but after the family dinner), she tells Albert, "I curse you [. . .] Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble [. . .] Until you

do right by me [. . .] everything you even dream about will fail [. . .] Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice [. . .] The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot” (204). Just like Hurston, Walker implies that Albert will be punished for his abuse of Celie. And, just as Hurston implies that Tea Cake and Joe’s punishment comes from God, Celie claims that her curse comes from God. When Albert interrupts Celie, she tells him, “You better stop talking because all I’m telling you ain’t coming just from me. Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape the words” (204). She also notes that her curse “seem to come to [her] from the trees” (204). Like Hurston, Walker uses nature to signify God, and she uses God to curse a man who has abused her. At least one crucial difference exists, however, between Celie and Janie’s curse. Celie’s curse is conditional. Note Walker’s emphasis on the word “until.” She writes, “*Until* you do right by me. . .” twice, suggesting that her curse is conditional and offers Albert a chance at redemption. This redemptive possibility differs from Hurston’s definitive curses.

Unlike Janie’s curse, Celie’s curse does not kill Albert. As Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Laura Gillman point out, because Celie does not kill Albert, she gives him the opportunity to heal and abandons the lineage of violence (553). Still some scholars have argued that at this point in the novel Celie is still complicit with a lineage of violence. Cutter writes that “Celie must learn that language can be used to understand, rather than destroy, another’ subjectivity” (171).

Through Celie’s curse, the novel both underscores the important roles spirituality plays in helping black women end abusive relationships and runs the risk of

reinforcing the notion of a punitive God. In their article “Grounding our Feet and Hearts: Black Women’s Coping Strategies in Psychologically Abusive Relationships,” April L. Few and Patricia Bell Scott discuss their findings from working with groups of black women who were recovering from violent relationships. The women Few and Scott worked with claimed that their spiritual practices helped them to feel at peace, loved, and reminded them what non-abusive relationships felt like. They said their spirituality empowered them to leave their abusive partners (71-2). Walker illustrates this role that spirituality plays as Celie gets the strength to leave and curse Albert from God. The curse, however, seems to make this novel, like Hurston’s, complicit with a punitive spirituality. In *Black Sexual Politics*, Patricia Hill Collins points out that the concept of a controlling punishing God has furthered shame for a variety of supposed sins in Africa American communities, making education about them difficult. Quoting from James Baldwin, Collins offers a view of God that is more helpful for those who want to create non-abusive societies. Baldwin writes, “I conceive of God, in fact, as a means of liberation and not as a means to control others” (qtd. in Collins 295). Through Celie’s curse, *The Color Purple* seems to use God both as a means of liberation and as a means of control.

The novel sidesteps this problem, however, by suggesting that Albert’s suffering is self imposed, and, despite Celie’s curse, others give him the support he needs to change his behavior. Albert creates his own jail by failing to take care of his land and his home. Since he has always exploited Celie rather than working with her, his failure to take care of his own things comes out of habit. Like Celie’s healing, Albert’s is

physical. He must learn how to take care of himself and not rely on his exploitation of others. Harpo and Sofia clearly help Albert to recover. When his father really begins to deteriorate, Harpo intervenes. He cleans the house, buys food, and gives Albert a bath. Sofia even finds them sleeping in each other's arms. Harpo teaches Albert to abandon violence. He makes Albert send Celie the rest of Nettie's letters; this act, "do[ing] right by" Celie, and the support from Harpo begin Albert's healing process. Additionally, his relationship with Sofia's daughter Henrietta gives him the opportunity to learn how to unselfishly support someone else. All of these acts help to restore Albert's health, which deteriorated due to lack of care after Celie left, and begin him on a path of recovery, a path of learning how to be non-violent.

Through the depiction of Albert's healing process, Walker's novel engages with women in the anti-prison movement who imagine ways of using the community rather than the criminal justice system to help men stop being abusive. Albert's self imposed prison and rehabilitation program differ strikingly from the one Sofia is forced to endure when she refuses to be the mayor's wife's maid and strikes the mayor after he strikes her. By portraying Sofia's incarceration along with Albert's healing process, Walker contributes to the anti-prison discussion, pointing out prison's abusive tendencies. While Albert heals and becomes a more thoughtful, loving, and productive person in his self imposed prison, Sofia deteriorates in the traditional state imposed prison. When the state moves her from its prison to work as the mayor's full time maid, she recovers her physical health, but her mental health is in question. While working for the mayor, she "all time think bout killing somebody" (95). Like anti-prison

advocates, *The Color Purple* draws a connection between imprisonment and slavery through Sofia's comments about her incarceration and those who hold her in captivity. The mayor and his wife "think slavery fell through because of us, say Sofia" (97). When her son asks her not to refer to her time under the mayor's imprisonment as slavery, Sofia responds in a way that draws associations to the way anti-prison advocates discuss prison:

They got me in a little storeroom up under the house, hardly bigger than Odessa's porch, and just about as warm in the winter time. I'm at they beck and call all day and night. They won't let me see my children. They won't let me see no mens. Well, after five years they let me see you once a year. I'm a slave. [. . .] What would you call it? (98)

In making this comparison between slavery and imprisonment, the novel contributes to the literature of the anti-prison movement. Albert's imprisonment is both more humane and more productive in its efforts to heal.

As the novel depicts Albert's healing process, it draws attention to the possibility that batterers can learn to be non-violent. This possibility is an important one in the movement to end domestic violence. In "A Community Activist Response to Intimate Violence," Hamish Sinclair recognizes two myths that deter people from working to stop domestic violence. The first myth is that "the violence will not stop;" the second is that "batterers are incorrigible and untreatable" (5-48). These myths proliferate not just in popular culture but in the movement to end violence. Therapists, social workers, and others who work in women's shelters sometimes report that violent

men cannot un-learn violent behavior.³ Countering this myth, as Sinclair and others point out, programs devoted to working with batterers have proven to be effective (5-51). Unfortunately, most of the funding for such programs goes to organizations that adopt counseling methodologies and work from the perspective that batterers are mentally ill. These approaches are far less effective than ones by organizations that claim that battering is a learned behavior and work with their clients to retrain themselves physically, mentally and emotionally so that they can stop battering (Sinclair 5-50).

The Color Purple's suggestion that Albert's healing is accomplished through the support of others and through physical, not just mental, work, parallels exercises that successful men's groups support. Sinclair reports that men in battery recovery programs "are heartened to discover the simple truth that we were trained to be violent and we did it well and now we can train ourselves to be intimate and do it just as well" (5-32). Men who lead recovery programs for batterers educate them on how violence is learned through a number of ways, and they illustrate the way dominance is often linked with masculinity. They also lead men through physical exercises that help them to recognize their emotions, sensations, and thoughts in a way that many of them have long forgotten (5-41). Though *The Color Purple* does not show us that Albert learns how he was trained to be violent, that lesson can easily be learned from feminist

³ I was taught this very idea in a training program to become an anti-violence educator at a women's shelter in Texas. "Batterers cannot change" was one of the refrains we learned and were supposed to pass on to high school students. While this information was meant to encourage adolescent girls to stay out of or leave abusive relationships for good, it also deters the drive to support programs that teach batterers how to be non-violent.

theories on violence. What the novel does show us is that Albert is able to learn how to be intimate. Harpo teaches him this lesson and shows him how to put his life back together. The novel further emphasizes the important role that physical exercises play in helping someone to heal when Albert and Celie begin sewing together. As they do this, Albert expresses ideas he has long forgotten and begins to reclaim a sense of self that does not equate his masculinity with dominance. Cutter points out that when Albert proves to Celie that he can communicate in a non-violent way, she “no longer denies his voice” (171). As Celie and Albert mend their relationship, *The Color Purple* turns a punitive world view into one that suggests that people can make their communities non violent without resorting to their own acts of violence.

Of course, it is important to note that Albert and Celie are only able to co-exist once Albert has proven that his abusive behavior has stopped. As their relationship is portrayed in this light, *The Color Purple* emphasizes the importance of keeping women safe from abusive men. Just as some women might reside in a women’s shelter or with a group of protective friends, Celie stays with Shug, away from Albert. She only begins to communicate with him again after he has proven that he has changed his ways. As Celie’s safety is a priority in *The Color Purple*, the novel reminds her readers that communal responses to violence should not be undertaken at the risk of the survivor’s safety. This reminder is important when one considers that, as the organizations INCITE! and Critical Resistance have pointed out, the anti-prison movement had not paid enough attention to survivor’s safety (224).

Just as *The Color Purple* emphasizes the importance of survivor safety, it also illustrates that survivors must continue to work on their responses to loss after they leave their abusive relationship. When Celie first moves in with Shug, their household seems like a feminist utopia. Shug dismantles this utopia when she decides to leave Celie for a young man. Although Celie is hurt and falls into a depression, she never resorts to revenge fantasies to help her release the relationship. Gradually, she comes to realize that she does not have the right to control another human being's actions, and she learns to be content on her own—without romance in her life. Several months after Shug has left, Celie writes to Nettie explaining her feelings for Shug. She writes, “Sometimes I feel mad at her. Feel like I could scratch her hair right off her head. But then I think, Shug got a right to live too. She got a right to look over the world in whatever company she choose. Just cause I love her don't take away none of her rights” (267). Celie's recognition that Shug has a right to live differs significantly from abuse victims' desires to imaginatively kill the people who have hurt them. It also differs from Celie's response to Albert, illustrating how she has re-conditioned her response to victimization. Rather than imagining Shug's death, Celie recognizes her right to live. It is important to note that when Shug leaves, Celie continues the transformative activities she learned from Shug and Sofia earlier. She sews, this time with Albert, and writes to Nettie; both activities offer her pleasure that reduces her desire for revenge. A little while later, when Shug writes that she's coming home, Celie writes, to Nettie, “*I be so calm*. If she come, I be happy. If she don't, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn” (284). Through this plot line,

The Color Purple teaches its readers how to cope with loss without resorting to imaginary violence.

The Color Purple's revision of revenge fantasies parallels its revision of a punitive view of God. Just as many women who have been abused, Celie feels isolated from God. Before Celie leaves Albert, she tells Shug that she has rejected Him. To Celie's surprise, Shug encourages her to respect God. She asks Celie what God looks like to her, and Celie describes an isolated (and isolating) white man who never listens to black people and punishes them for challenging authority figures. In contrast, Shug encourages Celie to see God as a giving and nurturing presence in life that is not modeled after a male (or female) authority figure. Shug sees everything connected to God and everyone connected to one another. She even shows that abusing nature (and God) is like abusing yourself. She tells Celie, "one day when I was . . . feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed" (191). She says if this God gets "pissed off," "it make something else" beautiful (191). Unlike Janie in *Their Eyes*, who is separated from the rest of the community and is subject to a god that reinforces that separation, Shug teaches Celie to see God within everyone and everything.

Celie does not immediately understand this vision of God; she struggles with it. *The Color Purple* suggests that Celie is struggling with the punitive version of God presented in *Their Eyes*. As Celie tries to replace her image of God with the one Shug advocates, she writes about how difficult it is to block this image of God out of her

head. Evoking the hurricane in *Their Eyes*, Celie states, “He been there so long, he don’t want to budge. He threaten lightening, floods, and earthquakes” (192). By the end of the novel, however, Celie (and Janie’s) vengeful, disconnected God is transformed into Shug’s vision of it. Instead of writing “Dear God” or “Dear Nettie,” she writes, “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (286). She understands that her life is an affirmation (and an action) of her belief in a loving God, not a request for something or a need of absolution.

Walker ends *The Color Purple* reinforcing many of the novels’ themes that differ from those in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The importance of community is among the most striking of them. Unlike the porch sitters who balk at Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the porch sitters in *The Color Purple* respect and affirm one another. Unlike Janie, Celie is surrounded by a community of friends who have transformed themselves and one another in favor of creating a less violent world. Once again, Walker illustrates how creating peaceful individuals and communities must take place through changing physical habits, not talk alone. As Shug, Albert, and Celie sit on the porch, they sew, talk, and rock in their chairs. Celie comments, “So much in the habit of sewing something I stitch up a bunch of scraps, try to see what I can make” (286). This habit of sewing that Celie, Albert, and Shug all share strongly contrasts with the habits that divided them earlier in the novel. Ending the novel with an image of Shug, Albert, and Celie together, Walker reminds her readers of the possibility of replacing a violent society that punishes and condemns with a peaceful one that forgives

and rehabilitates. Offering the community she has created as a prayer for creating this world, she ends her novel with the simple word “Amen.”

While *The Color Purple* ends on this utopian note, McWhorter’s work reminds her readers of the importance of remaining open to change. Some scholars have commented on the transcendent quality of *The Color Purple*. Bell hooks criticizes Walker for suggesting that Celie is “happy” with all of her “desire[s] fulfilled” at the end of the novel (227). She writes, “Happiness is not subject to re-vision, radicalization” and expresses concern that the novel is apolitical (227). While I clearly do not agree that the novel is apolitical, I do recognize that there is cause for concern. Ending a novel about political change on a spiritual note comes dangerously close to promising transcendence for those who transform themselves spiritually without doing the work it takes to transform society as well. In writing about her efforts to develop an ethics that enhances her sexual freedom without making herself or others “obedient” to a “transcendental code” that is equally oppressive, McWhorter asks, “Will I be able to develop an ethics that affirms itself as a practice of freedom and that does not hide behind illusions of stasis or transcendentalism?” (198).

This question is an important one for readers to ask of the characters at the ending of *The Color Purple*. Walker does not provide her audience with a definite “yes” to this question; however, she does create an opportunity for her readers to realize that non-violent communities must continue to adapt, question, and even revise their structures in order to offer membership to outsiders. At the novel’s end, Nettie returns from Africa with her husband Samuel and Celie’s children, Adam and Olivia. Although

Walker minimizes the differences between the two groups, they clearly exist. As Celie, Shug, and Albert integrate Nettie and her family into their lives, they must be open to change if they are to resist the desire to become the oppressors, punishing or silencing what is foreign to them and difficult to understand. The novel only hints at this need for adaptation, leaving readers and critics to apply McWhorter's question to the novel and their own lives as they work to create less violent societies.

Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple*

When Steven Spielberg made *The Color Purple* into a film, he achieved a box office success but received major criticism for his vision of the novel. As Spielberg recognizes, a great deal of criticism came from people who loved the book and thought that he had "beautified the novel and softened it and made it into candy as opposed to making it into salt pork." The most well known criticism of the film, however, came from black men who were angered by the film's representation of black male characters. Scholars and other commentators criticized the book along these lines as well; however, most of this criticism did not appear until after the film. Walker and members of the cast and production team responded to that critique in a variety of ways. Walker created an entire book reflecting on the process of making the film and the criticism both the novel and the film had received. In it, she writes about how deeply that criticism hurt her and points out how few of the film's critics who were upset about the portrayal of black men expressed regret for the way black women have sometimes suffered abuse from black men (*River* 38). According to Jacqueline Bobo, Whoopi Goldberg (Celie) pointed out that while black men were vocal about the portrayal of

black men in *The Color Purple*, they had been silent about the way black women had been portrayed in popular culture (93).⁴

What disturbs me most about the film is its failure to recognize the importance that female community and non violent physical acts of transformation play for Celie's recovery from abuse. As discussed above, the novel illustrates how important it is for women to have a strong community of support if they are to end abusive relationships; both Sofia and Shug provide Celie with this community of support and help her to transform by sewing, laughing, and in Shug's case, making love with her. In the film, Shug seems to be the only character to provide Celie with support, and her support is much weaker in the film than it is in the novel. The relationship between the two is de-sexualized, and Spielberg omits the way Shug encourages Celie in her sewing. Although the film does show that Celie begins to make money for herself by selling the pants she makes, it never illustrates that sewing with Shug helps her to channel her destructive rage and desire to kill Albert into a productive activity that empowers her mentally, physically, and financially. The crucial scene in the novel in which Sofia and Celie sew together in an effort to mend their relationship after Celie has betrayed her is also missing from the film. This scene makes an important point about revenge fantasies. Here, Celie and Sofia laugh about the thought of "bashing Mr.'s head in." This thought is only funny at the time because neither Celie nor Sofia really think that Celie could commit such a crime. Most importantly, however, is the way Sofia forgives

⁴ Goldberg specifically referenced Prince's portrayal of "black women [. . .] dumped in garbage cans" in his film *Purple Rain* (Bobo 93).

Celie and then helps her to heal by talking and sewing with her. Without this scene and the aforementioned ones with Shug, the film fails to recognize the importance of female community and the physical acts of transformation that Celie goes through in order to heal herself from her own abuse and her desire to kill Albert.

When Sofia and Celie sew together in the novel, we are given a standard by which to measure Celie's relationship with Albert as the two later sew and mend their own relationship with one another. Celie and Sofia are able to quickly heal their relationship. Although Celie's betrayal of Sofia was great, it was only one instance, and Celie admits that she was wrong. Sofia knows that if she shows Celie love, Celie will feel more supported and be less likely to hurt others. Additionally, she knows that their relationship will strengthen and nurture both of them. In contrast, Celie's forgiveness of Albert takes time. Albert must heal on his own first. He has to learn how to take care of things on his farm and in his house by himself. He has to learn how to listen to people and how to love them, something that the novel implies Sofia and Harpo help him to do. He learns how to take care of Henrietta, Sofia's daughter. Eventually, Albert and Celie begin to heal their relationship. At first, they only see each other where other people are present. Then, when Celie begins to respect him and sees that he respects her, they begin to sew and smoke together.

As Spielberg omits this sequence from the film, he denies his audience at least two ideas from the novel. First, he deprives them of a chance to see an example of black masculinity that is not associated with dominance. As Collins notes, "[t]he combination of physicality over intellectual ability, a lack of restraint associated with

incomplete socialization, and a predilection for violence has long been associated with African American men” (152). She also emphasizes the importance of “developing new definitions of masculinity that uncouple strength from its close ties to male dominance” (200). When Albert begins spending time with Celie in the novel, readers see him grow intellectually and emotionally. He tells Celie that he is “satisfied this the first time [he] ever lived on Earth as a natural man” (259). While some critics may question whether any state is “natural,” at least Walker reverses the stereotypical image of “natural” black men from violent to thoughtful, creative, and capable of change. In denying his audience these moments between Albert and Celie, Spielberg also denies his audience a chance to understand how (at least some) men who have been abusive can heal and mend their relationships. Spielberg notes that he filmed a six minute sewing, smoking, and forgiving scene between Albert and Celie. He cut it, however, because he felt like Albert’s efforts to heal their relationship were “too little, too late.” Additionally he claims that because the film is a “woman’s story,” closure for Albert was not necessary. This remark ignores the fact that if batterers can learn to be non-violent people, they can help to transform society into a safer place for women and men alike. Although Spielberg fails to recognize it, many women’s stories about domestic violence work towards that end.

The film also compromises social transformation by eliminating the novel’s vision of spirituality and replacing it with a religion that is punitive and shameful. Instead of encouraging Celie to reject her vision of a white haired God as she does in the novel, Shug surrenders to her “father’s” religion. This father, who is literally a

minister in the film but perhaps symbolically God Almighty, forgives Shug for her sexual “sins,” which include promiscuity and a very veiled bisexuality. Bobo observes that in the novel these traits are not only less veiled but are presented as healthy and normal (71). The film’s portrayal is especially troubling when one considers the harassment lesbians sometimes face from the criminal justice system. As Andrea J. Ritchie points out, police officers answering domestic violence calls tend to follow traditional social codes, sometimes “punishing” those who reject them (142). In the film, the father replaces the police, first punishing Shug and then giving her absolution. While the moral judgement on Shug is certainly harmful, it is only one part of the problem of the film’s revision of the novel’s vision of spirituality. The main problem is, of course, the same one that Hurston sets up in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. By accepting and endorsing her father’s religion, Shug is upholding a spiritual worldview that legitimates hierarchies, punishment, and domination. This spiritual worldview cannot support a successful drive to end domestic violence.

Before I discuss Spielberg’s hesitation to forgive Albert, I want to briefly address his almost complete erasure of Shug and Celie’s lesbianism. In *Black Sexual Politics*, Collins points out how harmful homophobia is for the African American community. The recent rise in HIV contraction in African American women, the amount of shame surrounding homosexuality, and the lack of education and resources that address these issues in the African American community makes Spielberg’s attempt to closet Shug and Celie’s relationship problematic. Collins notes that black churches often suggest that as long as LGBT members keep their sexual preferences relatively

quiet, people will accept them (114). Spielberg's film responds in much the same way. Shug can be forgiven for her promiscuity, and her lesbianism will be fine as long as it goes unnoticed. This paternalistic homophobic portrayal is made possible by Spielberg's revision of Walker's take on religion and spirituality.

Speilberg's Hesitancy to Forgive

Although troubling, Spielberg's refusal to enact Celie's forgiveness of Albert can surely be understood by feminist theorists writing about domestic violence and abuse. In *Betrayal of Innocence: Incest and its Devastation*, Susan Forward explains her own struggle with forgiveness. Forward's work with survivors of incest demanded that she help her patients acknowledge their outrage, which is the "first essential stage of their treatment" (31). In hopes of gaining a better understanding of perpetrators of abuse, Forward began extending her practice to include both survivors and perpetrators. As she worked with the perpetrators, her anger towards them began to wane. Her clients that had been victims of abuse began noticing a change in her, and one finally asked her "how [she] could expect [them] to get to their outrage . . . if [she] was losing [hers]" (31). Forward realized that she could not work with both groups and she went back to working solely with survivors. She found that she had to feel outrage towards the perpetrators if she was going to help her clients heal.

Other feminist scholars and therapists share Forward's concerns about the difficulties of forgiveness and make Spielberg's omission of this part of the novel understandable, however unfortunate. Herman writes that some survivors of abuse will try to forgive too quickly and can fail to heal themselves. Forgiveness, according to

Herman, is not a necessary part of the healing process and can only come when “the perpetrator has sought and earned it through confession, repentance, and restitution” (190). She notes that this process by the perpetrator is a “rare miracle” (190). Both Forward and Herman’s comments about forgiving perpetrators reflect a genuine feminist concern that can be understood when one considers the way our patriarchal culture often sidesteps the interests of women in favor of supporting men. Spielberg may have been taking them into consideration when he translated the novel into a film.

While both Forward and Herman’s points are well taken, they are somewhat shortsighted. Forward’s experience working with perpetrators of abuse illustrates how important the expression of anger is in the healing process, but it also reveals something about the way we have been conditioned to direct our anger. Why, in listening to perpetrators tell their stories, did Forward simply start to lose her anger? Why did her anger not shift focus from the perpetrators of abuse to the social structures and attitudes that enabled them to abuse? Our focus on individual culpability, rather than society’s responsibility, allows our anger to disappear once forgiveness of the single perpetrator has been achieved. This problem surfaces in our criminal justice system as well. Once a person has been sentenced to prison or given a fine, the criminal justice system suggests that the crime has been solved; the case has been closed. Of course, recidivism rates illustrate that time spent in prison is not necessarily rehabilitative. Herman’s note that perpetrator “confession, repentance, and restitution” is a “rare miracle” seems to suggest that this process is a practically hopeless possibility for batterers. Perhaps this process would be less miraculous if society paid more attention to social institutions and

community programs that focus on helping batterers end their patterns of violence. The organization Manalive⁵ in San Francisco has had tremendous success in this effort. From one of their programs working with batterers in a county jail, they report “a 79 percent reduction in recidivism [. . .] for similar violent crimes” (5-51). Unfortunately, discussions about this kind of success are fairly weak in our culture. The novel *The Color Purple* provides an opportunity for discussion about batterer treatment to develop. As a feminist text that stresses the importance of survivor safety and transformation, it also reminds us that these matters must not be lost in the quest to heal batterers. Both efforts must be part of an overall approach to restructure society so that it no longer engenders violence. While some of Spielberg’s revisions can be easily understood, it is important to recognize that his failure to represent these important contributions foreclosed an important discussion about domestic violence.

Interestingly, many of Spielberg’s revisions of *The Color Purple* end up creating some of the very same problems Hurston encounters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Both texts focus on the story of an individual who survives and then recovers from interpersonal violence. Although Celie’s recovery in the film version of *The Color Purple* is not as vengeful as Janie’s in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, both texts forsake community transformation at the expense of individual healing. Both texts

⁵ It is important to note that Manalive approaches battering as if it is a result of beliefs that some men hold about their superiority over women and their supposed right to control them. Manalive educates men about how pervasive this belief is in society and helps them to redevelop a sense of self that is not connected to this belief. The program does not suggest that batterers are psychologically ill; rather, it suggests that they have been socialized to be violent. Programs that approach battering as an illness have been significantly less successful (Sinclair 5-50).

are grounded in a spiritual worldview that is hierarchical, coercive, and punitive. As such, they complicate feminist efforts to eradicate violence from their communities.

Conclusion

As instructors of feminist literature, I think it is important for us to ask ourselves how we contribute to the movement to end violence. Part of this work includes being critical about the pleasure we get from feminist texts that are complicit with punitive worldviews that make social transformation extraordinarily difficult. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is one of my favorite feminist texts in American literature. It has played a tremendous role in my own feminist and personal development; however, as this chapter has shown, its emphasis on revenge fantasies makes it a very troubling text for contemporary feminists. Thankfully *The Color Purple* reminds us of the importance of both personal and communal development; Walker's revisions of Hurston's text draw their readers' attention to important debates within feminist theories on domestic violence. Her point about revenge fantasies and her emphasis on physical transformative healing makes an important contribution to these theories. Although Spielberg's film erases much of Walker's contributions, his work highlights concerns that feminist theorists have about the forgiveness of perpetrators that need to be addressed. While the hesitancy to forgive batterers is understandable, if we are to create a less violent society, like Celie, we must be willing to ask ourselves how much our pleasure depends on withholding forgiveness and issuing punishment to those who victimize us. We must consider how much better our community would be if we supported efforts to heal both the victims and the perpetrators of abuse. These efforts

require forgiveness, security, and both personal and communal transformation. As instructors and scholars of feminist literature, we can contribute to these efforts as we continue to rethink and re-teach feminist texts about domestic violence.

CHAPTER 4

THE SHAPE OF THINGS: WHAT JLO, THE DIXIE CHICKS, AND SHELL SHAKERS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THE BODY POLITIC

As I discussed in chapters one and two, feminist legal theorists point out that the body politic and its legal system were created to serve and protect the interests of men. Responding to feminist critiques of this problem, the body politic has adapted its shape from time to time to provide better representation for women's voices. Although some of these adaptations have addressed the issue of domestic violence, they have not succeeded in eliminating domestic violence from women's lives. In some cases, these adaptations have created more problems for certain groups of women (especially women who do not fulfill mainstream feminine gender codes). Feminist legal theorists, such as Moira Gatens, argue that the body politic must be completely reshaped (rather than simply adapted) to better represent women (and men) who do not fit the supposedly neutral citizen the State has constructed its laws around.

The challenges that battered women who kill their abusers face in court illustrate that the current body politic fails to represent and protect women adequately. As feminist legal theorists Robbin S. Ogle and Susan Jacobs point out, self-defense laws have been constructed with a male body in mind. The legal conception of self-defense "focuses on a single violent encounter where the combatants, knowing little about each other, evaluate the imminence of the situation and respond reasonably with

the only force necessary to protect themselves from death or serious bodily harm in the moment” (4). When women who kill their batterers are defended on the basis of self-defense, juries often convict them because they do not believe that the woman acted reasonably or that the danger she faced was imminent. Feminist legal theorists argue that self-defense laws and courtroom procedures must be rewritten to allow for greater understanding of the contexts in which battering homicides occur (Ogle and Jacobs 4-6).

Pointing out that the way we envision the body politic reflects and determines the way we envision human bodies, Gatens suggests that we begin to rethink our conceptions of human bodies in order to help us re-imagine a state that would better represent them (43). Feminist texts that depict battering homicides are interesting to look at with Gatens’ theories in mind because they critique the legal system from a feminist perspective, envision what life might be like without the threat of violence, and depict self and/or communal transformation that is sometimes very physical. In this chapter, I will analyze three contemporary texts: Columbia Pictures’ *Enough*, the Dixie Chicks’ “Goodbye Earl,” and Le Anne Howe’s *Shell Shaker* to see how they contribute to popular conceptions of the State and the bodies the State represents. Staying firmly within the tradition of feminist revenge films, *Enough* confirms conservative ideas about the State that suggest women can and should adapt themselves to the current legal structure rather than asking the State to change its shape to provide better protection and representation for women. Although, they are not without their problems, both “Goodbye Earl” and *Shell Shaker* can help us to envision a more inclusive body politic.

Looking at the three texts together, we can see the problems and possibilities different kinds of texts pose for representing domestic violence that ends in the death of the abuser.

While there is a wide range of texts to choose from, I have chosen these three for very specific reasons. First, they were all produced within three years of one another; “Goodbye Earl” was released in 2000, *Shell Shaker* was published in 2001, and *Enough* opened in movie theaters in 2002. The dialogue between them is important, especially between “Goodbye Earl” and *Enough* because they were both extraordinarily popular. Secondly, each work represents a different literary form; thus, they can help us to see if there are particular genres that are more able to help us imagine a better State for women. As we will see, the way we imagine bodies is partly determined by the kinds of texts from which we imagine them. Finally, each text emphasizes either communal or personal transformation with striking images that can contribute to the scholarship on feminist individual and/or communal transformation.

As with the other texts discussed in this dissertation, all of the texts discussed in this chapter contain elements of revenge. As I have pointed out in previous chapters, vengeful overtones in feminist texts about battering homicides can be problematic for real women tried for killing their abusive partners. Assumptions that women who kill are necessarily vengeful persist in the legal system of the United States and make it difficult for female murder defendants who do not fit traditional gender codes to win acquittal in court. *Enough*, “Goodbye Earl,” and *Shell Shaker* contribute to this discussion on revenge in interesting ways.

The Body Politic

Before looking at the texts specifically, it is first necessary to outline the current shape of the State to see what kinds of changes need to be made and what myths help to keep those changes from occurring. As I pointed out earlier, the neutral body the State is said to represent and protect is not neutral at all, but is in fact a masculine body. Gatens points out that when marginalized bodies argue for better inclusion and representation, State officials attempt to silence them in various ways, labeling them with inflammatory titles. Gatens writes that historically, “[t]he justification for the often harsh measures used to keep women out of the body politic were commonly put in terms of protecting the health of the social body from invasion, corruption, or infection” (54). She goes on to claim that the State still persists with these measures, sometimes suggesting that women who critique the body politic are “hysterical” beings who do not have legitimate arguments. The State argues that although women may not fit the neutral body the State represents as easily as men do, without much effort, women can make the changes necessary to adapt their lives so that they are more like the neutral body. But, as Gatens points out, the price of inclusion is not always appealing. How many women, she asks, want to be “cured of hysteria by ‘hysterectomy’?” (25).

The use of inflammatory labels to silence women’s critiques of the body politic illustrates that sexism is a major hurdle that needs to be overcome in order for domestic violence to be eradicated from society. In *Gender, Violence, and the Social Order*, Jayne Mooney illustrates how sexism contributes to domestic violence. She argues that women are “dehumanized” through perspectives that objectify them and value them

only for their supportive roles to men. As Mooney points out, “the ability to act violently towards another commonly involves denying their full humanity” (223). Eliminating sexism is a hefty task because of the prevalence and acceptance of it. Popular feminist texts that critique the body politic participate in a culture where the objectification of women is seen as every day fare. Their critiques of sexism (or lack thereof) should be a major part of our analyses of them.

The economic subordination of women, a material consequence of sexist thinking, also makes it difficult to eradicate violence from women’s lives. While domestic violence does occur across class lines, women from economically depressed groups are much more likely to stay in abusive relationships than women from higher income groups. As Mooney writes, “Factors such as women’s lack of work opportunities, low pay and resulting economic dependence on men are likely to influence their decision to leave or return to violent partners, particularly if they have children” (217). The movement to stop domestic violence must also support better employment opportunities for women, better access to health and child care, and better pay for existing work. Affordable public transportation is also important. Without making these structural changes, efforts to stop domestic violence may do little more than bandage the problem (Mooney 222).

Unsurprisingly, as I have mentioned in previous chapters, the movement to end domestic violence also has to be willing to consider the way racial and ethnic differences affect responses to domestic violence. As Kimberle Crenshaw points out, the suggestion that women of all races are affected by domestic violence is often used to

draw attention to the abuse of white women instead of drawing attention to the problems in communities of color (290). The problems facing communities of color are extensive. Police often either ignore violence in communities of color or further abuse the victims of violence when they arrive on the scene of a crime. Women of color who want to report abuse may fear the police or fear betraying their communities that have been stereotyped as violent. Women living on Indian reservations face additional problems. Since the federal government has jurisdiction over all violent crimes that occur on Indian reservations, domestic violence on Indian reservations is often ignored. Additionally, non English speaking communities have to approach police, women's shelter employees, and other government officials that they may not be able to communicate with. Racial sensitivity and diversity must be encouraged not just throughout government institutions but throughout the entire community.

Both the workers in and the residents of women's shelters are guilty of prejudices associated with race, class, and gender. Yvette Richardson, one of my students and an employee of Safe Haven, the women's shelter in Fort Worth, Texas, reports that women staying in domestic violence shelters sometimes return to live with their ex-partners who abused them because they do not want to live with women who do not fulfill mainstream gender codes or women from racial and ethnic backgrounds different from their own. In her article "Disloyal to Feminism," Emi Koyama notes that some shelter workers are also guilty of discrimination and abuse. Some shelters have guidelines for admittance that exclude women for any number of "problems," including homelessness, mental illness, drug abuse, language differences, and physical

disabilities. Koyama claims that shelters need to create survivor advocacy programs that keep these problems from occurring (208-18). Whatever the approach, changes clearly need to be made to the shelter system to maximize the protection they can offer women regardless of race, class, sexual preference, or physical and mental disabilities.

Battered women need to feel safer outside of the shelter's walls as well. Laws too innumerable to list here need to be reevaluated in terms of their effectiveness protecting and representing battered women. Feminist legal theorists like Ogle and Jacobs argue that self-defense laws need to be reconceived to allow for different contexts, including domestic violence. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the problems that mandatory arrest laws pose indicate that states need to reevaluate their efficacy. Additionally, laws restricting gun ownership need to be better implemented. While some feminists advocate handgun ownership, suggesting that women who do not own guns put their own lives at risk in the public sphere, most gun violence women encounter is in the home. Mooney reports that women who are attacked are most frequently attacked by intimate male partners, second most frequently attacked by male acquaintances, and third most frequently attacked by male strangers (209). Additionally, Amnesty International reports that in the U.S. a woman's chances of being killed by her partner is increased five times if the partner has access to a gun (11). Other laws that seem to be less directly related to domestic violence but that provide support for women, like welfare laws, need to be reevaluated as well.

If battered women are to be better protected, both they and the men who abuse them must have better services available to them to help them rebuild their lives without

violence. Extensive batterer recovery programs can be very effective. Programs like MANALIVE in San Francisco help men who have been arrested for battering become non violent people; they also educate the community about the way it perpetuates violence (Sinclair 5-7). Women could benefit from similar kinds of programs. Even after they separate from men who originally abused them, women may get involved in other abusive relationships or become abusive themselves. While women's shelters provide programs to help prevent such problems, in reference to battering homicides, the State assumes that cases are over when the guilt or innocence of the defendant has been decided. This assumption can be detrimental for many women and their families.

Structural changes are clearly needed to address problems associated with domestic violence. In order for changes to be implemented, State officials will need to begin (or continue if they have already begun) imagining different kinds of bodies. Gatens argues that the recognition of different kinds of bodies helps us to see that the "universal citizen" is a myth (43). If State officials begin to recognize that no one body can represent all bodies, they may be more willing to create laws that allow for greater flexibility. For instance, instead of conjuring up images of masculine bodies responding to an attack or threat "reasonably" with a relatively equal measure of force, self-defense laws should allow room for the way different kinds of bodies respond to different kinds of violence. While State officials cannot be given a set list of bodies to begin imagining, popular and literary cultures have the power to affect the ways State officials (and the voters who support them) envision their communities and the bodies that compose them. A recognition of this power can be seen in popular culture. Television

shows in particular have begun portraying more diverse communities with members of a variety of racial and economic backgrounds. However, the differences that race and class make are often erased. Images that critique the state's failure to represent women and protect them from domestic violence will have to keep racial and other kinds of differences in mind.

The Body of Scholarship

While a body of scholarship on literature that represents battering homicides has not fully taken shape, a couple of crucial points by film theorists are worth noting. Film is the only genre that has developed a substantial dialogue on the portrayal of battering homicides. In *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-revenge Cycle*, Jacinda Read places popular films that depict battering homicides within the rape-revenge tradition (58). According to Carol Clover, rape revenge films depict a woman who, after being raped, undergoes some kind of transformation and kills (or almost kills) her rapist. Sometimes the murder is premeditated; other times it occurs in the heat of the moment. Sometimes the murder is motivated by revenge; other times it appears to be born out of self-defense (138). Despite the differences in the portrayals, critics have categorized them with the label "revenge." This revenge is generally associated with the film's critique of the State's failure to represent and protect women who are raped and abused. Feminist scholars, such as Read and Clover, generally view this critique as progressive from a feminist legal perspective; however, as my discussion of the feminist revenge film *Enough* will show, feminist revenge films can affirm conservative ideas about the State.

Film critics featured in newspapers and magazines complicate the way film scholars read “rape revenge” films. Roger Ebert’s comments about *Enough* are especially telling because they illustrate how the genre affects the way the film is read. Ebert writes that *Enough* “is a step or two above ‘I Spit On Your Grave,’ but uses the same structure, in which a man victimizes a woman for the first half of the film, and then the woman turns the tables in an extended sequence of graphic violence” (online).¹ The phrase “turns the tables” is especially interesting because it speaks to the way rape revenge films respond to the film industry’s casual acceptance of rape and domestic violence. Feminist revenge films in the 1970s² were essentially turning the tables on films that graphically depicted the murders and rapes of women as if the acts were generally acceptable. Their critique of mainstream films, their table turning, is read as “revenge,” casting a reading on a film that may not even accurately reflect the story of the film.

This problem begs a couple of questions. One, is it possible to read feminist criticism that turns the tables in an art form as anything but revenge? And two, can the “table turning” be presented in a way that does not uphold vengeance as a feminist virtue? These questions, the goals outlined above that feminists need to accomplish as they work to change the state, and ideas about how a text’s genre allows for or restricts

¹ *I Spit on Your Grave* (1977) is perhaps the most famous, most graphic, and most vengeful rape-revenge film.

² For an in-depth analysis of rape-revenge films in the 1970s, see chapter three of Carol Clover’s *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*.

critiques of the State will inform my discussion of *Enough*, “Goodbye Earl,” and *Shell Shaker*.

Enough

Although Columbia Pictures produced *Enough* after “Goodbye Earl” and *Shell Shaker*, I want to discuss it first because it is more representative of the popular discourse on battering homicides. It fits within the tradition of rape revenge, so the discussion can show us problems with the tradition that “Goodbye Earl” and *Shell Shaker* respond to. Of course, because of their chronology, *Enough* can be seen as responding to “Goodbye Earl” and *Shell Shaker*. As *Enough* is the most conservative text of the three and offers less possibilities for imagining a State that better protects and represents women, its chronological position as the last text of the three certainly presents problems for feminism, and I will address these problems later in the chapter.

The plot of *Enough* is very familiar. Slim (Jennifer Lopez), a plucky working class waitress with an equal measure of street smarts and femininity, is swept off her feet by Mitch (Bill Campbell), a wealthy, industrious patron in the restaurant where Slim works. They fall in love, get married, and have a baby. Once their child Gracie is born, Mitch starts showing signs of possessiveness and a lack of concern for Slim’s feelings. When Gracie is four or five years old, Slim discovers that Mitch is having an affair. She confronts him, and he tells her that she’ll simply have to accept his infidelities. Then, when Slim threatens to leave, Mitch slaps her and then punches her hard enough to make her fall down, telling her, “I make the money; I make the rules.”

Mitch makes it clear that he will make it very difficult for Slim to leave him. He's more connected and powerful than she is (he has friends in the police force and legal system), and she'll surely lose custody of their daughter if she seeks a divorce (he threatens to plant drugs in her car). His abuse of her continues, and, with the help of her friends, she escapes one night with Gracie. She moves to two different states, changes her identity twice, and relies on the help of distant friends. Mitch eventually finds her, and she and Gracie only narrowly escape. Slim convinces her estranged father that she needs money, and he helps her hire a trainer who instructs her in self-defense. Slim sneaks into Mitch's new home, plants evidence that will make her look innocent and him guilty, confronts him, and eventually, after a long drawn out fight that she almost loses, kills him. The last shot of the film features Slim, Gracie, and Slim's new love interest (an ex-boyfriend she never should have let get away) sailing off into the sunset.

When *Enough* was released in movie theaters, it was a commercial success that elicited very little excitement or debate. Some critics, like Ann Hornaday and Kimberley Jones, embraced it for its feminist nature, which they partly associated with what they saw as its vengeful quality. Hornaday, one of the critics who enjoyed the film, did, at the end of her very positive review, question the success of feminist revenge films. She asks, "even while you're cheering as J. Lo out brutalizes the brute, you have to wonder: If turnabout is fair play, is this necessarily progress?" Other critics, like Ebert, denounced it, not pointing out the problem with the association of feminism and revenge, but criticizing the film for its adherence to the rape revenge structure. At least two critics briefly pointed out political problems with the film's

suggestion that murder was the way to end domestic violence (Stuart, Howe). In contrast, Mick LaSalle pointed out what he saw as the social significance of the film, writing, “Mitches are everywhere.” Other critics, like Peter Travers and James Berardinelli, were bored by the film. Travers even called it a “recycled date movie from hell.” Audiences seemed to disagree with negative or bored views of the film; *Enough* was fairly successful commercially. And, if award shows are any indication, teenagers enjoyed the film. Jennifer Lopez was nominated for “Best Actress” by the Teen Choice Awards (*Internet Movie Database*).

While I generally agree with Stuart and Howe’s critiques of the film, in some ways, *Enough* does challenge cultural myths about domestic violence. Slim is not a pathetic victim. She is clearly both victim and agent. While she does not initially fight Mitch physically, she resists his abuse by speaking to him about it and by investigating various avenues of escape. When she does engage in physical combat with Mitch, she is both reasonable and violent. Through this portrayal, Slim’s character challenges the assumptions many people have about domestic violence victims. As Elizabeth Schneider points out, judges, lawyers, and juries have a difficult time understanding how a woman could be abused and still be reasonable enough to defend herself against her abuser. The assumption is that a woman who stays in an abusive relationship must be so beaten down that she is not reasonable and does not have the capability to act autonomously and resist her abuser. If she has been violent in response to her partner’s abuse, judges, juries, and lawyers often assume that her actions have been motivated by revenge, and not by a logical desire to defend herself (120). *Enough* challenges this

assumption to a degree, illustrating how a capable, strong woman could both be a victim of abuse and able to defend herself. Unfortunately, as we will see, audiences may only read Slim as reasonable because she becomes the “neutral” citizen of the state. In her more feminine body, she is generally portrayed as hysterical.

Additionally, the film illustrates how difficult it can be for a woman to leave an abusive spouse. Before Slim leaves Mitch, she asks a police officer what her options are (she says a friend is having trouble with her husband). He tells her that after the batterer is arrested, if he’s arrested, he’ll be able to post bail. The battered woman can get a protection order against him, but that may not really be enough to protect her. When Slim does leave Mitch, he freezes their bank account and cancels all her credit cards. Without any account in her own name, he basically strips her of all her major financial resources. In the “information age,” Mitch can track her down easily, so she has to be careful not to leave any trace of her identity behind.

Unfortunately, while the film shows many of the institutional difficulties women face when leaving their abusers, it sidesteps and refuses to answer or promote meaningful dialogue about the emotional difficulties women can face when thinking about leaving their abusers. Most of Slim’s challenges are related to the legal system; few of them are personal. Slim never seems to consider staying with her spouse or returning to him. She doesn’t worry about depriving her daughter of her father’s affection or about being able to provide for her financially, though she will clearly not be able to come even close to giving Gracie the kind of financial support to which she is accustomed. Though she mishandles some of the legal challenges she faces, in many

ways she fits what feminist psychologists call the model of “the authentic victim.” Traci West writes about this model, describing the “authentic victim” as a victim of violence who does everything society tells her she is supposed to do in response to abuse all the while upholding traditional gender codes. When other women fail to fit their ideas of the “authentic victim,” they sometimes think that they deserve the abuse or have failed as women in some way (73). *Enough* runs the risk of affirming this idea by portraying Slim as the “authentic victim” who does (almost) everything that she can do to resist domestic violence.

Slim also confirms popular misconceptions about how racial differences factor into the obstacles women in violent relationships face. While Lopez plays Slim, the film suggests that her ethnic identity does not matter. Audiences do not know how to place Slim in an ethnic category. We do not know her last name. Fred Ward, who, according to *Internet Movie Database*, is part Scottish and part Cherokee, and is generally read as white, plays her father, and her mother makes no appearance. Slim’s hairstyle and dress fit within the gender norms of femininity largely set by upper-middle class white women. By casting a well known Latina actress in a role that could be read as either white or Latina, Columbia Pictures suggests that Slim’s ethnic identity does not matter; she is “every woman.” Some of the film’s fans might applaud *Enough* for making this suggestion, claiming that this portrayal challenges ideas that domestic violence is only a problem for certain ethnic groups. But as I discussed earlier, Kimberle Crenshaw points out that when feminists argue that any woman could be

battered, they ignore the way that domestic violence laws and policies privilege white women and sometimes endanger women of color (290).

In addition to the problems *Enough* perpetuates in its portrayal of a battered woman, it reinforces popular misconceptions about abusive men. In her article “Documenting Domestic Violence in American Films,” Phyllis Frus lists eight myths about domestic violence. Myth Number 2 suggests that “batterers are not like us,” and Number 6 claims that “ordinary men don’t batter” (230, 235). *Enough* perpetuates both myths through Mitch’s monster like qualities. Roger Ebert captures Mitch’s character particularly well, writing that he is “such an unlikely caricature of hard-breathing sadistic testosterone [. . .] he cannot possibly be a real human being.” Mitch is unbelievably controlling, unbelievably manipulative, and unbelievably well connected. It’s as if he’s a god like creature with eyes and ears all over the United States. The entire legal system and police force are in cahoots with him, and no one will ever believe he is a liar—despite the fact that all of Slim’s friends, including Mitch’s mother, know he is a batterer. This portrayal assures the film’s audience that men who abuse are sociopaths, ignoring the fact that patriarchal societies teach men how to be abusive. *Enough* does not offer any theories to help its audience understand why Mitch is abusive.

Perhaps more troubling than the film’s affirmation of various myths is the way it mocks the avenues feminism has created to help alleviate domestic violence. Fairly shortly after Slim leaves Mitch, Ginny suggests that she and Gracie go to a women’s shelter. Slim replies “No, no shelters. [Gracie] hasn’t been tainted by anything so far,

and I want to keep it that way.” While the film does not suggest how a women’s shelter might taint Gracie, it does show us the path that is supposed to taint her less. After rejecting the possibility of a shelter, Slim narrowly escapes her abusive husband for the second time in the film, with Gracie in hand. She moves to two different states, changes her and Gracie’s identities two times, narrowly escapes a violent car chase while Gracie cringes in the backseat, accidentally gives Gracie the phone when Mitch is yelling threats and swearing at her, and suffers an attack from Mitch while Gracie watches. Obviously, the counseling, protection, and legal guidance a women’s shelter could offer would be far more traumatic for Gracie than running from her violent father and his buddies all over the country. Throughout all of these incidents, Slim never considers going to a shelter, and no one besides her friend Ginny ever makes the suggestion. Even a lawyer Slim sees late in the film who tells her she’s “screwed” herself by not reporting the abuse to the police fails to reprimand her for not going to a shelter. Shelters and other feminist institutional methods of survival are simply unthinkable to most of the characters in *Enough*.

It is also important to note that the film depicts Ginny, the friend who recommends the Shelter, as Slim’s “bad girl” friend. Ginny is a single mother who is playful, rebellious, and promiscuous; while none of these qualities mark her as “bad” in any essential way, conservative audiences might view them as such, making Slim’s dismissal of her suggestion to go to a shelter more complicated. Some women have difficulty living in shelters because they cannot accept the diversity within the shelter’s walls. They do not want to live with women of different races, women with drug

dependencies, or women who have made their living as sex workers. The film accepts this resistance as “natural,” “normal,” the markings of a “real woman.”

Marking feminist institutions as undesirable and female friendships as ultimately unhelpful from a legal perspective, *Enough* affirms the patriarchal structure of the United States government in a number of ways. While *Enough* opens up the possibility that traditional familial structures can endanger women by encouraging them to be economically dependent on men, it ultimately upholds the way these structures place the father as the head of the household. (And here, I think we would do well to remember that the body politic was at one time envisioned as a father who represented the other fathers of the state who were at home taking care of their wives and children, supposedly eliminating the need for domestic violence laws). In the end, Slim is able to succeed only because her estranged father gives her the money and the advice she needs to do so. Although Jupiter, her father, is initially portrayed as a jerk, when he realizes the threat Slim faces is real, he jumps in to save the day, assuring audiences that the family, rather than the State, can and should be relied upon to handle domestic violence problems.

Secondly, and keeping with the laws of the father, the film suggests that “women’s ways of knowing” do not really constitute knowledge at all. When Slim tells her dad that her trainer has prepared her to fight, he asks her, “Did he teach you to think?” Slim nods in agreement, failing to point out the obvious: she’s always been able to think. Her trainer simply taught her to think like a “man.” While *Enough* recognizes that the legal system is, in fact, deaf to many women’s pleas, it also suggests

that that problem cannot be altered. If women want to be heard, they will have to learn how to speak, think, and fight like men.

Following this suggestion, the film argues that the State does not need to be restructured to better protect or represent women. Women can easily become the “neutral” citizen the laws have been written around. Slim’s self-defense training happens so quickly and easily that it makes it look like any battered woman could do it. Ignoring the fact that self-defense classes can be as emotionally challenging as they are affirming, *Enough* suggests that women pull themselves up by their bootstraps, buy a gun and defend themselves. As Carol Clover points out in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, “there is some ethical relief in the idea that if women would just toughen up and take karate or buy a gun, the issues of male-on-female violence would evaporate” (143). This attitude, which *Enough* perpetuates, poses real challenges for feminist activists interested in creating a less violent and more supportive state for women.

The training part of the film casts Slim’s expectations of the legal system to protect and provide for her in the first part of the film as needlessly chaotic and unreasonable. In comparison to the calm, controlled, militaristic body that Slim becomes as she learns to think like a man and is trained to kill her husband, her earlier frantic self, frustrated by the lack of institutional support, appears to have been the figure of womanhood that the body politics’ founding fathers worried about, the raving hysteric, pounding at the State’s exclusive, firmly masculine walls.³ Better that

³ After leaving Mitch, Slim goes to retrieve money from an ATM machine. When she discovers that there is no money in it, she pounds on the machine in frustration.

she make the choice to adapt to this system and join the fraternity than to ask the fraternity to open its doors to all and totally alter its requirements for membership. This suggestion clearly upholds the conservative ideas about the body politic that Gatens critiques. Because Slim is depicted throughout the film as “every woman,” Enough argues that if she can make the changes necessary to become the “neutral” citizen the state represents, any woman can.

And, unlike Gatens suggests, *Enough* argues women can become this neutral citizen without undergoing a hysterectomy. As soon as Slim wishes, she is able to cast off her militaristic body in exchange for one that is stereotypically feminine. As the masculine figure, she could be seen as a threat to a body politic that depends on women to do work coded as feminine without recognizing the importance of these contributions. The end of the film, however, assures us that just as women are able to change themselves to fit the neutral citizen, they can change back to their physical feminine selves. After Slim has taken care of her domestic violence problem, she waits for her daughter and Ginny at the airport. Red and white stripes, reminding us of the US flag, frame Slim who has styled her hair in a very feminine manner and is dressed in a pink top and a matching skirt with a giant pink floral border. The film’s message is clear: a woman will fight the fight when she has to, but will return to the home to do the work of mothering and nurturing as soon as she can. This message also assures us that a woman can become the neutral citizen without risking the loss of any qualities that might be coded as feminine.

Despite *Enough*'s critique of the State's failure to protect women from domestic violence, the film ultimately upholds the State's current shape. Had Slim been trained for self-defense to begin with, had she been more able to think and fight like a man, she might not have had such difficulty leaving Mitch in the first place. This suggestion fails to challenge popular conceptions of self-defense laws. Additionally, Slim's dependence on her father for support confirms ideas that domestic violence is a private matter that families are more equipped to handle than the State. And, of course, battering is not seen as pattern of behavior that men learn from patriarchal societies; it is instead the behavior of a sick individual who will be stopped by nothing short of murder.

Some of *Enough*'s problem are related to its genre. As Carol Clover points out, some feminist revenge films assume the shape of horror films (5). Mitch can certainly be seen as the monster of the movie; without his monster like qualities, audiences would have a much more difficult time cheering for Slim as she trains herself to kill him.⁴ While feminist scholars like Clover and Reed have applauded feminist revenge films for their critique of the body politic, *Enough* shows us that the tradition can fail to help audiences to imagine a more protective and more inclusive State for women.

⁴ In her review of the film, Hornaday remarks that Jennifer Lopez "possesses that mysterious appeal that makes her someone the audience will stick with through even the most harrowing sequences (of which there are several in "Enough") (online).

“Goodbye Earl”

In some ways, *Enough* can be seen as a conservative response to a much more radical text that debuted two years before its premiere. In 2000, song writer Dennis Linde, music video director JoAnn Thrailkill, and the Dixie Chicks created two of the most controversial fictional texts about battering homicides to surface since the *The Burning Bed*⁵ aired on public television in the early 1980s. The song “Goodbye Earl” and its accompanying music video tell the story of Mary Ann and Wanda, two women who come together to kill Wanda’s abusive husband. The lyrics illustrate the difficulty women who leave abusive situations face; the legal measures Wanda at first pursues to protect her from her husband Earl fail. After experiencing such failure, the women poison Earl’s black eyed peas, wrap him in a tarp, and dump him in the river. The “law” loses interest in recovering him, and the girls buy “some land and a roadside stand / Out on highway 109” where “[t]hey sell Tennessee ham and strawberry jam / And they don’t lose any sleep at night / ‘Cause Earl had to die.” The song is upbeat and fast, and Maines sings the lyrics with a vengeful and somewhat ironic tone.

When “Good-bye Earl” was first released it created an enormous controversy within the country music industry. According to *E! Online News* writer Emily Farache, upon the release of the song, “about 20 of 149 country [radio] stations” tracked by the radio trade publication *Radio and Records* banned the song. Sony, the Chicks’ record

⁵ In “Totaled Women: The Battered Wife Defense,” Jennifer Jones provides a wonderful analysis of *The Burning Bed*, the made for TV movie based on the trial of Francine Hughes. In 1977, Hughes was tried and acquitted by reason of insanity for killing her abusive husband.

producers, acknowledged that the song was controversial and claimed that they had been hesitant to include it because country music is a “family oriented” industry (Farache). According to Larry Birkhead of *USA Today*, radio program directors had a variety of reasons for refusing to play the song. Scott St. John of WKIX in Raleigh, North Carolina, said, “I love the Dixie Chicks, but I don’t want to be in the position of putting murder in someone’s face.” John Pellegrini of WGTY in York, Pennsylvania asked, “If a record company came out with a song [promoting] high school shooting, would the radio stations play it?” Radio station KRTY in San Jose, California even held a town meeting to discuss it (Birkhead).

Some music critics attributed all of this anxiety to the genre of country music, claiming, like Sony, that country music was a fairly conservative industry. In response a few other critics pointed out that domestic abuse and murder were not new topics to the country music genre. Garth Brooks’ “Papa Loved Mama” provides a perfect counterpoint to “Good-bye Earl” as its lyrics comically point out, “Papa loved Mama / Mama loved men / Mama’s in the graveyard / Papa’s in the pen.” But Papa never received this much attention for running over and killing Mama with his car. Central to the opposition to “Goodbye Earl” is the fact that it is women who are gleefully singing about a man’s death instead of the other way around.

Despite the controversy over the song, or perhaps because of it, “Good-bye Earl” was a huge success that generated a great deal of discussion about domestic violence and country music’s tolerance of songs with women as their objects of violence. According to Farache, many radio stations that played the song did so along

with an announcement about domestic violence, encouraging those who were victims of it to seek refuge and legal counsel. Hot line numbers for domestic abuse were also given out by disc jockeys over the air. The National Coalition against Domestic Violence endorsed the song, complimenting the Chicks for bringing the issue of domestic violence from the private sphere to the very public sphere of radio and television (Farache). In the end, both the song and its video garnered a tremendous amount of attention and won a variety of awards, including two awards for Best Country Music Video of the Year.

Part of the popularity behind the song is part of what makes it problematic from a feminist legal perspective: its vengeful tone. While one could argue that the song is really about self-defense because the legal system fails to protect Wanda, it would be a mistake to suggest that the song is not vengeful at all. Its tone is very rebellious, and Maines does not sing the song as if Wanda is simply defending herself. Maines, Robison, and Maguire delight in Earl's murder, marking it with a vengeful quality. As I have pointed out, the portrayal of violent women as necessarily vengeful creates problems for real women in court. Additionally, revenge is closely associated with the punitive framework of the US criminal justice system. This system creates many problems as punishing individuals rarely addresses the structural problems in society that engender crimes. Advocating revenge as some kind of feminist virtue can contribute to these problems.

Other problems that "Goodbye Earl" encounters are some of the same ones that can be found in *Enough*. Earl is a stereotypical abuser. He is defined by his abuse of

Wanda; listeners know nothing else about him. Unlike Mitch in *Enough*, Earl is completely inept, creating a different set of problems by suggesting that batterers are not really a serious threat. Along the same lines, the video marks the lawyer Wanda gets a restraining order from as an inept sleaze. The police who investigate Wanda's murder are gentlemanly, polite, and a bit dim. They look for Earl behind pictures hanging on the wall and underneath the furniture in Wanda's house. From one perspective, these depictions mock the serious problems women face as they look to the criminal justice system for protection from abuse.

The styles in which the song and video are written, however, makes these problems less severe than they would be in a realistic text. The song and video are written and produced in a cartoon-like fashion. The Chicks are gleeful about Earl's death. The chorus is laced with nah-nah-nah-nahs and a hearty goodbye to Earl. In the video, the Chicks make maniacally threatening gestures towards the camera with facial expressions to match. When Mary Ann visits Wanda in the hospital, patients jump out of their beds to sing and dance to the chorus. Doctors and nurses join in as well. Earl's death is clearly not to be read as realistic. His eyes roll up and close just before he hits the floor. The cartoon-like nature of all these depictions suggests that the song is not meant to advocate murder or revenge.

While some might argue that the song fails to take domestic violence seriously, its style is used to critique a number of the State's problems. When Wanda goes to see a lawyer to get a restraining order to protect her from Earl, the video reveals how ill equipped many lawyers are to handle domestic violence cases. Behind the lawyer's

desk is a giant poster that positions a picture of him between two hyper-sexualized nurses and promises that he will visit his clients in the hospital. A swimsuit calendar hangs in front of his desk, making it clear that he is not interested in creating a safe, respectful space for his female clients. The dancing in the hospital highlights that abuse is a public problem that deserves support from a number of people and institutions, and the inept policemen underscore the police force's failure to respond consistently well to domestic violence calls. In this light, some of the song and video's problems read more like a critique of the ridiculous shape of the State and some of the myths that keep its shape in place. The stereotype of Earl seems less like reality and more like a problematic depiction of abusers that allows the State to maintain its shape.

Perhaps most interestingly, the hysterical women the State is so concerned about are validated in "Goodbye Earl." Who wouldn't be hysterical, the Chicks seem to ask, in a State that objectifies women and reduces them to man's helpmate? How ridiculous is it, they ask, that women are not better protected by the State? The nah-nah-nah-nah-nahs of the song not only help the women ask these questions, but they also critique the State's inability or refusal to listen to marginalized voices. The fact that the hospital patients, many of whom are elderly men and women, join in with the dancing illustrates how important it is for all marginalized people to join together to fight for better representation.

It is also important to note that it is only the Chicks, the storytellers, who appear to be hysterical during any of the video. Mary Ann and Wanda appear to be sane throughout, countering any stereotypes that suggest women who kill are necessarily

crazy or vengeful. The video's portrayal of the Chicks as the only vengeful actors highlights that revenge is a theme that gets played out in the storytelling of tales of battering homicides. This portrayal allows for a vengeful tone that grabs its audiences' attention without implying that women who kill are necessarily vengeful. While the subtlety of this argument is likely lost on many audience members, it is a point worth noting.

The patriarchal community that fails to represent and listen to women in the first half of the song is transformed into a more supportive, welcoming community during the song's second half. This part of the video and song takes us to the land Mary Ann and Wanda buy after Earl's death. While the song hints at the utopian nature of the space, the video makes it clearer. This part of the video opens with a young boy stomping on a milk carton with Earl's picture on it, pointing out that the community being portrayed does not tolerate abuse. Mary Ann and Wanda sell "Tennessee ham" and "strawberry jam" to delighted men and women. Wanda flirts with at least one of the customers, and as the Chicks sing "ham," they look over their shoulders at the camera and playfully smack their behinds. These images are important as they affirm women's rights to pleasure and work that they enjoy. Everyone, including the hospital patients and employees, police officers, the lawyer, and the dead Earl, plus a few other people dance with one another in this utopian space. The video seems to suggest that changing the shape of the State to allow for the validation of different voices and pleasures will change the way people relate to one another, creating a more accepting

and loving community. The video ends with the entire group on their knees, gesturing out to its video audience and welcoming them into this new community.

While this community appears to be utopian, two elements keep it from being that way. The first seems to be a brilliant move by JoAnn Thrailkill, the video's director. The dead Earl's presence in this utopian space makes it clear that communities will not have an easy time ridding themselves of abuse. While Earl's presence might seem haunting, Thrailkill keeps it from being that way as the Chicks dance with Earl, gradually and cartoonishly squashing him to the ground. Earl gradually rears back up, and they attend to his presence. These movements make it clear that people will always have to work to eradicate violence from their lives. Even if the State makes changes, nothing guarantees that the changes will stay in place or allow for the flexibility to represent and protect all different kinds of voices.

The second element is less brilliant and more troubling. While the dancers in the video illustrate the importance of including different kinds of bodies (old and young, men and women, all of various shapes and sizes) in our communities, a critic attending to difference cannot help but notice that the make up of the community is entirely white. The practically utopian almost abuse free community presented to its county music audience is not a community that includes people of color. The white cast reflects the lack of diversity in country music's imagined audience and in its performers as well as country music's troubled history with racism, making one wonder if Mary Ann and Wanda's almost utopian community is a racist one. Incorporating non white actors and dancers, however, would not have been without its problems. Since race is not a factor

in the story, including people of color in the video might mask the real racial tension that exists in this country and suggest that as soon as sexism is taken care of, all of our problems with violence will dissolve.

Both elements remind us of the dangers of envisioning feminist utopian spaces. In her discussion about the problems women's shelters face (and create) today, Emi Koyama claims that white feminists have been blinded by romantic visions of themselves. Assuming that domestic violence was an experience that all women shared, white middle and upper class women created women's shelters with their values in mind, ignoring the fact that they were suppressing differences related to race and class. By suppressing racial and economic differences, white feminists helped to create a system that excludes many women of color. Koyama writes, "[I]t would be helpful to acknowledge that there are many power imbalances among women that are very difficult to eliminate than to hastily move to make them disappear" (216). "Goodbye Earl's" white community can alert feminists to this problem.

The issue of racial representation exposes one of the challenges of critiquing the State in a short musical art form, particularly one that tells a story with a white woman at its center. The Chicks, Linde, and Thrailkill clearly do not have time to tell a story that speaks to all of the problems that the State needs to address. A more thorough critique will have to be made by longer works. "Goodbye Earl" also illustrates how difficult it is for a popular musical genre to attend to racial difference; the divisions of popular music fall along racial lines. Country music artists are almost always white, rap music features few white artists (although the numbers of white artists are growing

here), and “pop” music tends to be a fairly white industry (although the numbers of artists of color are growing here).

Other problems the Chicks and Co. encounter in their critique of the State may be related to form as well. The stereotypical portrayal of a batterer is appealing because it is a character type many audience members can identify. Additionally, the idea that the song is about revenge and not about self-defense is somewhat related to the fact that the song was responding to the sexism within country music by giving the men of the genre a taste of their own medicine. Even if the song had eliminated some of its vengeful tone, country music fans still might have interpreted the song’s subject matter as “revenge” and not self-defense. Eliminating the vengeful tone would have also decreased the song’s popularity and the discussion that resulted from it.

At the same time that popular music may present its problems for critiquing the State, it also has some real benefits. The most obvious is its ability to attract a great deal of attention and generate important conversations about domestic violence. Country music, in particular, served “Goodbye Earl” well. A song about the murder of an abusive husband in a less conservative and more female friendly genre of music would not have provoked the kind of public outrage (and resulting discussion) that “Goodbye Earl” did.

Another benefit to using a song for critiquing the State is that it allows for the kind of overt parody from which “Goodbye” Earl benefits. The parody combined with the short length give audiences a fast dose of comedy about a disturbing subject, provoking them to ask questions. These questions are more likely to be provoked

because popular music is so accessible. People who heard “Goodbye Earl” on the radio were likely to hear it there again or could play it for themselves again on a CD. The music video also enhances the parodic nature of the song and emphasizes some of the song’s themes that are more subtle. The critique of the legal system is much stronger in the video for “Goodbye Earl” than in the song itself. Additionally, the fact that video is visual by nature makes it an important tool for affecting the way audiences imagine human bodies, contesting the idea of a universal subject. While the Chicks fail to challenge the whiteness of the universal subject, they do challenge its maleness, its age, and its agility.

Shell Shaker

One year after “Goodbye Earl” rocked the country music scene, LeAnne Howe’s novel *Shell Shaker* appeared on the literary scene. This novel is quite a bit different from the previous texts considered; the murder that is committed is partly in response to marital rape, rather than domestic violence that is not sexual in nature as is the case with the other two texts. Additionally, unlike the other texts, *Shell Shaker* is not specifically about domestic or sexual violence; rape appears to be one act of violence that is related to many other forms of violence and corruption. *Shell Shaker* also complicates the matters discussed thus far because the rape and murder take place on an Indian Reservation, and the murder is tried by a tribal court. Finally, *Shell Shaker* differs from other texts because it does not belong to the world of popular culture. These differences, however, help us to see how novels can represent battering homicides in a

way that other literary forms cannot and what problems continue to persist despite literary form and audience.

American Indian women experience a high rate of sexual violence. According to Sara Deer, “over one-third of American Indian and Alaskan Native women will be victimized by sexual violence in their lifetimes.” (34) As Andrea Smith notes, despite this high rate, American Indian women who are raped face tremendous challenges “when they seek healing and justice” (32) The US federal government has jurisdiction over crimes on tribal land, and they tend to ignore the rapes of American Indian women by white men. Additionally, according to Smith, rapes committed by Indian men are more frequently ignored by some tribal members who, because of stereotypes whites have perpetuated about Indians, may have come to view rape as “traditional” (32). As Smith points out, rape is not an American Indian tradition. Prior to colonization, rates of sexual and domestic violence in American Indian tribes were extraordinarily low. American Indians who do recognize this history still may attempt to silence rape survivors in fear of further perpetuating stereotypes about Indians or creating more divisions among tribal members. In response to this attempt to silence rape survivors, American Indian women who speak out against it argue that rape is “an act of colonialism and genocide” (32).

For Smith and others, rape is an act of sexual oppression that Indian men have learned from white men who have colonized Indians and attempted to eliminate them from the State in various ways. As Smith argues, whites have frequently portrayed American Indian women as “more rapable” than white women (37). Additionally, as

Paula Gunn Allen points out, whites have portrayed American Indian men as violent, sexist, abusive savages, influencing the way American Indian men view themselves (43). Smith points out that rape can be seen as an act of colonialism and genocide as it causes internal divisions within tribal nations, chipping away at tribal sovereignty. She makes connections between non-sexual acts of colonization, such as government funded missionary schools for Indians, and rape (43).

Before I discuss how *Shell Shaker* contributes to this discussion, I need to briefly summarize the novel.⁶ In *Shell Shaker*, Howe tells a number of connected stories involving four different centuries. The novel's most immediate story, and the one I am most concerned with here, involves Auda Billy and Red McAlester in the early 1990s. Early in the novel, readers discover that Red, the Choctaw chief, has been killed, and Auda, Red's business partner and lover, has been arrested for the crime. As the novel unfolds, Howe reveals that Auda does not remember the murder, but she does remember going to Red's office with the intention of killing him. Red had raped her earlier in the day; in shock but seeming to be thinking fairly clearly, Auda returned to kill him, to stop him from committing any more violent acts. Red's rape of Auda was the climactic act of a series of destructive actions toward both Auda and the tribe.

Although at one time Red and Auda had dreamed of honorably leading the Choctaw nation, the dream began to deteriorate when Red involved the Mafia in the

⁶ *Shell Shaker* has a number of complex layers to it, and I will not be giving a detailed plot summary that reflects all of those layers. Ken McCullough provides a very thorough plot analysis in "If You See Buddha at the Stomp Dance, Kill Him!: The Bicameral World of LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker*."

Community's casinos and began using Choctaw money to support the Irish Republican Army. These acts deprived the Choctaw community of much needed financial resources, put lives of its members and leaders at risk, and weakened community customs and personal relationships. When Red faced opposition to his actions at tribal meetings, he changed tribal policies to silence it. Tired and intimidated, the communities failed to act against him, and the tribe suffered for it. Auda suffered individually as well; she was depressed both by the corruption within the tribe and by the way her relationship with Red had been deteriorating. As he became more corrupt, he became more abusive toward her.

Howe makes the connection to the argument American Indian sexual violence advocates make about rape in a couple of ways. First, Howe makes it clear that Red's corruption has been influenced by his involvement with the Mafia. Auda describes Red prior to his connection with the Mafia, as "a hummingbird, a necessity of nature, impeccably beautiful, devouring all that is sweet in life to stay alive" (93). Hoping that the IRA will use his money to help bomb the British, Red is also driven by a quest for revenge against the British who colonized the Choctaws centuries ago. Making the connection between colonization and rape even clearer, Howe tells another story that parallels Auda and Red's centuries earlier. In the eighteenth century, Red Shoes, an earlier version of Red McAlester's spirit, was to unite the Choctaws and Chickasaws to fight against the English and the French. However, he became caught up in the desire to dominate others and yearned to be a leader of the Choctaws. He married a Choctaw woman partly because "he wanted her family's influence among the eastern Choctaws

who controlled the rich bottom lands” (72). He also murdered two Chickasaw men to sell “their scalps to a French officer” (72). Just as the French and English encouraged Red Shoes to betray his own people, an act that facilitated their colonization, the Mafia encouraged Red McAlester to betray his tribe. Auda’s lawyer affirms this point by describing Red’s involvement with the Mafia as “the new Indian wars” (114). As I will show, Red’s rape of Auda is directly connected to these new wars.

Secondly, Howe tells a number of different stories of colonization and attempts at genocide in the more recent past. Perhaps the most striking of these, and the one that resonates most clearly with American Indian feminist theories of rape, involves Susan Billy, Auda’s mother, and Susan’s brother Isaac. Isaac is haunted by memories of his childhood spent in government boarding schools who “hir[ed] sadists” disguised as “strict disciplinarians. Or preachers” (55). He remembers a time when Susan fought for him, yelling at one of the white teachers in Choctaw. As punishment, the teacher separated Susan and Isaac for a week and shaved Susan’s head “too closely” with a “barber’s straight razor” (56). Howe weaves stories like these between the past and the present, emphasizing the connection between different kinds of violence, many of which can be seen as acts of colonialism and attempts at genocide.

Some feminists⁷ point out that web theories of violence, like the one Howe and American Indian sexual violence advocates make, can distract us from the ways gender

⁷ For instance, see Josephine Hendlin’s comments in *Heartbreakers: Women and Violence in Contemporary culture*.

factors into acts of sexual violence. Howe avoids this problem through her contextualization of the rape. Some time after Red is killed, a white woman who is dating Tonica, Red's assistant, attempts to kill Auda who ends up in a coma. In this state, Auda enters a realm where she is able to speak with Red about what happened. Red tells her that the D'Amato brothers, his Mafia connection, wanted to kill Auda because they found out that she was stealing copies of financial documents. In order to prevent her death, Red assured the brothers that he would "handle" Auda, and he could prove his ability to do so by making her wear an Italian red dress he had bought for her to work. As Red tells Auda, "If you wore the Italian dress to work, it would mean I was in control, and Hector [D'Amato] had to leave you alone. If not. . ." (191). Auda, of course, does not wear the dress, and Red flies into a rage. Eventually, he rapes her to prove his power, his sense of control over her, which the Mafia requires of him. Red's need for power over Auda may not just be a business concern but could also be connected to sexist stereotypes about gender relations. Typically the Mafia has been portrayed in popular culture as a sexist organization with members who commit sexist acts of violence.⁸ Howe taps into this portrayal with the scene between Auda and Red, illustrating how sexist notions about gender, power, and control factor into larger webs of violence.

⁸ For instance, HBO's award winning series *The Soprano's* is about a group of men in the Mafia. The men are tied up in a number of sexist, violent activities. Episodes occasionally feature rape and the murder of women, some of whom work for the men at their nightclub.

The portrayal of a batterer/rapist is much less stereotypical than in the other texts considered in this chapter; however, it still has significant problems. Red McAlester is clearly a product of a corrupt community; he is not a stereotypically monstrous batterer. Although his recent actions are deplorable, at one time, the Choctaws had hoped he would be “the greatest giver.” While Howe makes it clear that white society has corrupted Red, he is also not portrayed as a total victim. While Auda’s lawyer, Gore, sympathizes with Red, he also holds him accountable for his crimes against the Choctaws. As Kenneth Roemer points out, “The sheer variety of the violence undermines attempts to make simplistic statements about victims and victimizers” (10). Despite this balanced depiction of an abusive man, *Shell Shaker* also implies, to a certain degree, that Red McAlester could not have been rehabilitated. Throughout the novel, Howe implies that McAlester’s death was necessary. His spirit is seen as essentially greedy. Divine Sarah, a trickster figure who intervenes on Auda’s behalf during her trial, calls Red’s earlier self, Red Shoes, a “bloodsucker;” she also notes that “it’s his job” “to continue consuming” (72-3). The suggestion that Red’s spirit has a “job” to be corrupt implies that nothing could rehabilitate him. While these comments could be seen as a critique of stereotypes of abusive men, trustworthy healers in the novel even think that he has to be buried with the things that he craved in life so that he will not return to haunt the living.

Other “criminals” in the novel are portrayed much more stereotypically than Red. Roemer points out that the Mafia characters, Victor and Hector D’Amato, are “one-dimensional” (15). Additionally, there are a couple of stereotypical references

about angry women that are particularly unhelpful considering the stereotypes of women who kill. For instance, in describing Anoleta, Red Shoes' Choctaw wife, Howe writes, "Once enraged, women are the fieriest killers of all, cutting out beating hearts, skinning the heads of wounded enemies, leaving them to die slowly" (187). As with the other writers considered in this chapter, Howe does not seem able to completely abandon stereotypes about "criminals" of any gender.

Despite this problem, Howe does manage to present one of the most complex portrayals of a woman who has been abused. Auda exhibits many of the traits of women who kill their abusers, and Howe portrays her in such a way that she challenges many of the stereotypes that are the products of distortions of those traits. In many ways, Auda seems to exhibit traits of "battered women's syndrome;"⁹ she seemed unable to leave Red, and her lawyer notes that Red "reduced [her] to desperation" (114). Although her mother saw her as complicit in Red's corruption of the tribe, Auda tried to stop his involvement with the Mafia. Her efforts to do so can be seen as a battered woman's attempt to negotiate with her abusive partner, contesting stereotypical ideas that suggest women who are battered are completely helpless or completely vengeful.

Howe also complicates stereotypical portrayals of women who kill in a number of ways. For one, like many women who have been raped or abused in other ways, Auda experiences posttraumatic stress syndrome after Red rapes her. According to the

⁹ Other than the rape, McAlester does not seem to have battered Auda; however, their relationship does seem to have become emotionally abusive, which could assume a cycle of abuse similar to the ones experienced by women who are physically abused.

US Department of Health and Human Services, women who experience posttraumatic stress may suffer periods of amnesia and even enter states of consciousness in which their understanding of right and wrong is altered (10). Auda is in such a state after Red's murder. She does not remember what happened; although she does remember that she intended to kill him. She tells her sisters, "'I really don't know what happened then. I went there intending to shoot him, but. . . I can't see it'" (92). With this portrayal, Howe challenges other stereotypical representations of posttraumatic stress syndrome, ones that depict it as a fictional excuse women use to "get away with murder."¹⁰ Additionally, after his death, Auda "wish[es she] was dead too" (93) and realizes that it will be hard for people to "empathize with what she's done: killed the man she once loved" (114). Many women who kill express these same feelings, and juries often claim to have been confused by these expressions. Howe offers understanding through her realistic and complicated portrayal of Auda.

While Auda is tried for Red's murder, *Shell Shaker* suggests that she may not be the only one responsible for his death. Divine Sarah claims that Hector D'Amato killed Red. While the novel never clearly illustrates who is actually responsible for the murder, Hector's association with it recognizes that, at least in some ways, Red's involvement with the Mafia played a role in his death. More importantly, Isaac

¹⁰ Consider, for instance, the way Velma Kelly is depicted in both the screen and play versions of *Chicago*. Kelly catches her husband having an affair with her sister. She kills them and mockingly defends herself by joking, "I was in such a state of shock; I completely blacked out. It wasn't until later when I was washing the blood off my hands [that] I even knew they were dead."

recognizes that he played a role not only in Red's death but in the tribe's deterioration. He considers how he and the other elders should have "peacefully removed [McAlester] from office" instead of "shirking [their] dut[ies]" (59). This observation corresponds with American Indian critiques of the US criminal justice system. Citing Elizabeth Barker, Andrea Smith notes that "the problem with the criminal justice system is that it diverts accountability from the community to players in the criminal justice system" (45). *Shell Shaker* rectifies this problem. Not only does Isaac recognize his own complicity, but Auda too sees that, as a leader of the tribe, she had allowed the corruption to go too far. And, as shown earlier, the British, French, and US governments are held accountable for their colonization of American Indians. Red is clearly not the only one who is guilty of the tribe's deterioration. Additionally, his abuse of Auda has been enabled by other people and institutions. This portrayal strongly suggests that abuse is a public matter for which everyone is accountable.

Healing from abuse is more important in this work than in any other text explored in this chapter. While the Chicks recognize that community must be transformed, they do not recognize any need for personal healing. *Shell Shaker* combines the two. *Shell Shaker* emphasizes that healing can reverse the genocidal tendency that rape has. Andrea Smith writes about the important roles that culture and spirituality play for American Indian women recovering from abuse:

Native counselors generally agree that a strong cultural and spiritual identity is essential if Native people are to heal from abuse. This is because Native women's healing entails healing, not only from any personal abuse she has suffered, but also from the patterned history of abuse against her family, her nation, and the environment in which she lives. (41)

Shell Shaker recognizes the important role that community and spirituality play in helping a person recover from abuse. It also recognizes that the entire community must be healed. To set this healing in motion, Auda plans to tell the tribe “what happened to [her], to Red, and to the tribal government” (115). Her sisters, Aunts, and mother also emphasize how important healing is for Auda and the tribe. In many ways, Auda’s mother, Susan, helps Auda take her first step towards healing. Although Susan and Auda have fought for years because of Auda’s involvement with Red, Susan jumps to her defense when Auda is accused of the murder. Her forgiveness of Auda is clear. Later, Susan brings several members of the tribe together and declares Auda’s innocence. Although these acts do not directly address the rape that Auda has suffered, they do offer her the support she needs to rebuild.

Many of the healing rituals that the novel depicts or discusses focus on healing the tribe, rather than the individual. Auda’s aunt Delores specializes in singing Choctaw songs at funerals, and she uses Red’s death as an opportunity to heal the fragmented Choctaw tribe. Inspired by a vision she has, Delores directs the tribal members from Oklahoma to Mississippi to bury Red McAlester in a mound near the Nanih Way. She explains the importance of this trip to the other family members: “The whole Nanih Way area represents the cradle of the Choctaw civilization. A long time ago people came from all directions to settle there. It takes a sacred place like that to heal a troubled spirit” (161). While Delores is talking about healing Red’s spirit, his funeral illustrates that the ceremony helps to heal the tribe as well. Once in Mississippi,

the Oklahoma Choctaws are joined by the Mississippi Choctaws; together, they honor Red's spirit and unite their tribe. Howe portrays this moment as a resurrection of Choctaw life that Delores initiates by honoring Red's death with songs:

Delores slows her breathing as she's done a hundred times before in preparation for singing the songs for the dead. But her gaze shifts and she sees the afternoon sunlight dancing around them, as if birthing new life. She exhales, pushing all herself out of her body and, in this moment, she feels a miraculous beginning as she and the other Chahta women of the Southeast join hands and sing. (197)

By honoring the dead with traditional Choctaw songs, Delores initiates healing for a tribe fragmented by violence, corruption, and abuse.

Although Red's burial is the most significant ceremony in the novel's present day story, the benefits of other ceremonies are discussed. Connecting readers with the novel's title, Auda's sister Tema explains that during the shell shaking ceremony, "[w]e shake shells to reconnect with all living things" (152). From an American Indian perspective, disease and suffering result from disconnections or an imbalance within the community. Shell shaking is just one of the many rituals the women of the tribe undertake to enact healing and reconnect members of a fragmented community.

While much of the healing in *Shell Shaker* is specifically American Indian in nature, Howe recognizes that American Indian ideas about healing and community connect with the ideas of other communities as well. When Tema mentions the shell shaking tradition, she explains to her aunts that "sometimes foreign ideas are closer to Choctaw ways than you think" (151-2). Tema goes on to explain that the Sufis emphasize that "survival of the collective is what is important" (152). While Howe does not make any other strong connections between the healing in *Shell Shaker* and the

healing other communities advocate, anyone familiar with critiques of domestic violence, rape, and the US criminal justice system can find them. The strong community that the women in the novel form speaks to the role feminists argue strong female communities play, either in the form of women's shelters or other networks, in recovery from abuse. Auda's sisters, mother, and aunts unite to help her and the tribe heal from a web of violence that has been gaining momentum for centuries.

While the emphasis on communal survival and healing is a strong point of the novel, it does have a tendency to place the individual healing Auda must undergo in the backseat. Although *Shell Shaker* does not recognize this problem, the potential for it can be seen in Tema's reference to Sufism. Tema learned about the Sufis when she performed in *The Conference of the Birds*. She says, "The poetry we spoke in the play was about destroying the self, and the importance of experiencing overwhelming love for the collective" (152). Unfortunately, a similar line of thinking can be found in the effort to silence American Indian rape survivors. Andrea Smith points out that American Indian women sometimes have a difficult time healing in their communities because other tribal members fear that recognizing rape will lead to further divisions within the tribe. Although Howe does recognize that Auda must heal from her rape, she places much more emphasis on the importance of communal healing. Since Auda's rape is critiqued, Howe certainly reverses the silencing tendency; however, she does run the risk of suggesting that the survivor's healing is second in importance to the healing of the tribe.

Another problem that compromises the novel's emphasis on healing is its problematic portrayal of revenge. In some ways, revenge is critiqued in the novel. Red's use of tribal funds to support the IRA in hopes of getting revenge upon the British for their colonization of American Indians is clearly critiqued. Additionally, Howe critiques revenge as a form of violence embedded with other forms of violence as Auda reflects on all the horrible events of the novel. Howe writes, "The tribe split, land all burned up, her body violated like the land, his shot clean through. And who could forget the blood revenge that began in 1747?" (192). Despite this clear critique, *Shell Shaker* seems to uphold vengeance to a certain degree and even conflates it with justice. In the past story that parallels Auda and Red McAlester's, Red Shoes is married to Anoleta and a Red Fox woman. On the Red Fox woman's behalf, four other women from the Red Fox clan chase down Anoleta, cut her hair, drive her into a swamp and away from the community. The next day, the Red Fox community finds Red's Red Fox wife murdered. Shakbatina, Anoleta's mother and one of the novel's spiritual guides, says that "[a]t the time, I thought [the murder] was "delicious justice" (9). Not only does Shakbatina seem to be advocating revenge, she savors it, making the novel's emphasis on healing and complex portrayal of a female murderer less effective.

While the phrase "at the time" suggests that Shakbatina may have changed her opinion as centuries have passed, the novel's ending also gestures towards a vengeful reading. After Auda is acquitted of Red's murder, which I will discuss further in the next paragraph, Shakbatina shares the truth about the murder with *Shell Shaker's* readers. She says, "Now I must tell you what really happened [. . .] Auda did hold the

gun in her hands, gently, as if it were inlaid with jewels. It was then that I slipped my hands in front of her hands, and together we struck a pose. The day was hers, but it was my day too” (222). Shakbatina wanted Red McAlester dead for his deeds as Red Shoes, deeds that she sacrificed her life for. By suggesting that “the day” belonged to Shakbatina and Auda, Howe implies that Red’s death was justice for Shakbatina and Auda. Finding justice in the death of the abuser, rather than in his rehabilitation, poses problems for feminists who want to revise the State and make it more supportive and less punitive.

While feminist legal theorists do not argue that batterers be put to death, many have had a tendency to emphasize punishment for batterers instead of rehabilitation. Wanting the State to take violence against women more seriously, feminist legal theorists have argued for harsher sentences for batterers and rapists. But the anti-prison movement points out that harsher sentences are not necessarily effective in all cases. Batter rehabilitation can be extremely effective either in conjunction with or in place of prison sentences. However, the US legal system conditions its citizens to seek punishment for victimization. While feminists want to create a more supportive and less violent state, the desire for punishment and the fear of losing feminist ground (returning to a State that fails to take women’s concerns seriously) have driven much of feminist legislation about domestic violence.

Despite her troubling portrayal of the drive for revenge, Howe makes a really interesting contribution to the conversation feminist legal theorists have about the poor possibilities for defense that are offered for battered women who kill. Prior to her trial

Auda considers her options for defense. Howe writes, “At this moment, there are several things she could ask her lawyer to do. Beg the court for mercy, plead insanity – not a far cry from the truth – or plead guilty” (95). While Howe does not specifically address the issue that Ogle and Jacobs write about in reference to self defense laws, she does illustrate that the State offers women very few promising legal options for representation. None of the choices Auda faces adequately represent her situation, pointing out that new possibilities for representation need to be created.

Despite protests by her lawyer and her sisters, who do not see the point in “continu[ing] the agony,” Auda insists on pleading guilty (95). Auda’s plea is curious because she does not remember killing Red; however, she does feel guilty for her complicity in his crimes. Many women who are battered or raped feel guilty; traditional gender codes encourage them to see themselves as women who have failed in some way and deserve punishment. The combination of their depression, their lack of information about legal options, and the reality that the available options fail to adequately represent women can be seen in Auda’s plea of guilty.

Auda is saved, however, by Divine Sarah’s appearance at the trial. Divine Sarah, a trickster figure who first appears in the novel as a porcupine that Red Shoes kills, appears before the court as an elderly switchboard operator. She claims she was working the day of the murder. After hearing gunshots, she ran down to Red’s office and saw Hector D’Amato standing over Red and an unconscious Auda. The judge believes Sarah’s testimony and agrees to drop the charges against Auda (214-17).

While some scholars might argue that Divine Sarah's intervention is a cheap trick that fails to honor the difficult situation women who kill their abusive partners face, I think her intervention recognizes the impossibility of Auda's situation. Howe seems to imply that the actual situation women who kill face in court is no more ridiculous than the possibility that a porcupine from the 18th century could intervene to guarantee a woman's acquittal. Divine Sarah's intervention also recognizes that lawyers have to engage in a kind of trickery to adapt the law to better represent women. Since most women do not have trickster figures at their disposal, Divine Sarah's appearance suggests that the legal system and the body politic need to be restructured to better protect and represent women.

The appearances of a variety of bodies throughout the novel greatly expand its readers' ideas of human bodies, also enhancing the way we imagine the body politic. The novel helps its readers to revise their ideas about the human subject in at least two ways. The first way I will discuss is fantastic, and the second way is realistic. Both challenge the idea of the universal subject. From a fantastic perspective, *Shell Shaker* presents its readers with a world in which people are not necessarily as they seem. Divine Sarah and Shakbatina are two examples that I have discussed. Additionally, the novel features a panther with the spirit of Auda's dead father, an alligator who sacrifices his life to nourish a warrior, and a rabbit who leads Auda underneath her house and into a world unlike any we know. The spirits of the past are among the humans in the present. The presentation of all these different kinds of bodies illustrates the importance

of honoring all kinds of life and recognizing the fact that people are not always what we might imagine them to be.

On a less fantastic plane, the novel helps its Indian readers envision themselves as central actors in the literature of the United States, and it alerts many of its non-Indian readers to the presence of sovereign nations living within the US. Both accomplishments can inform the movement to end domestic violence. Howe's presentation of Choctaws coming together to strengthen the tribe after years of deterioration challenges the damaging assumption that Andrea Smith critiques—that Indians are inevitably vanishing. Additionally, although I have not discussed this element thus far, many of the male Indian characters in *Shell Shaker* are strong nurturers. Isaac, Auda's uncle, works quietly and lovingly behind the scenes, finding evidence to help Auda in her case. Auda's lawyer is also encouraging and respectful. A number of other male characters (including Auda's nephew and his friends) challenge stereotypical portrayals of Indian men as abusive and naturally violent.

Shell Shaker also alerts its non-Indian readers to the paternalistic way the US government approaches Indian tribes. While Howe does not go into great detail about the current US legal structure and its relationship with tribal legal structures, the division between the two is clear in the novel. Non-Indian feminists re-envisioning the body politic are reminded of the importance of re-envisioning the State's relationship with tribal nations. In "Federal Indian Law and Violent Crime," Sarah Deer claims that because the federal government largely controls tribal legal systems, most tribes will wait for the federal government to respond to a violent crime before offering their own

response. Despite the high rate of domestic violence on tribal land, the federal government frequently dismisses domestic violence cases involving Indian victims. Cases that are addressed issue prison sentences which generally do not involve batterer rehabilitation. Even if they were to address rehabilitation, the methods employed would not necessarily honor Indian beliefs. Deer argues that the federal government must return the jurisdiction of domestic violence cases from federal to tribal justice systems (41). Although *Shell Shaker* does not make this point overtly, its recognition of the division between the federal justice system and tribal justice systems points its readers in the right direction.

Even though Auda's acquittal by the tribal court is a happy one, Howe is careful to avoid suggesting that her acquittal means that the problems of violence on the reservation have been solved. She avoids this throughout the novel by illustrating the many different forms of violence that contribute to domestic violence; moreover, she reinforces this point at the end of the novel through the portrayal of Isaac and Delores's deaths. After McAlester was buried properly, everyone but Isaac and Delores left the burial site. Unfortunately, the two are murdered there, and the FBI suspect that Vico D'Amato is to blame. The murder is especially sad because Isaac and Delores had recently married after decades that they needlessly spent apart. The sadness reminds us that people will have to continue working to end violence, in and out of the courts, until trickster figures are no longer needed to solve murder cases and heal wounds that are hundreds of years old.

Shell Shaker makes a really important contribution to the portrayal of battered women who kill, critiquing the State in a number of useful ways. It makes ethnicity an important category of analysis in feminist critiques of the State, and it draws its reading audience's attention towards American Indian women, a group that is frequently overlooked in discussions of domestic violence. It shows how rape is related to other acts of violence without losing the gendered nature of the crime. Its portrayal of a battered woman who kills challenges many stereotypes and engages with critiques about legal representation that many battered women who kill make. In these ways, *Shell Shaker* manages to use a battering homicide to critique the way the State fails to protect and represent women in a more nuanced way than any other work discussed in this chapter, and perhaps even in this entire dissertation. Much of its ability to do so is related to the fact that it is a *novel* that tells the story of an American Indian woman.

As I have noted, however, *Shell Shaker* is not without its problems. While American Indian theories about the connection between different types of violence, past and present emphasize the importance of healing not only Auda but the entire tribe, Auda's healing slightly takes a backseat to the tribe's healing. This problem would not be so troubling if it were not for the fact that, as Smith points out, American Indians sometimes attempt to silence rape survivors in the interest of protecting the community. Additionally *Shell Shaker's* suggestion that a batterer cannot change, that he even "has a job" to be violent, upholds stereotypes about batterers that contribute to a violent State. Finally, the vengeful tone of the last page of the novel, the delight in that vengeance,

and the confusion between vengeance and justice compromise the novel's critique of a violent and unjust legal system.

The Dialogue Between the Works

As I mentioned at the beginning of my discussion on *Enough*, the chronology of the texts deserves some attention. Of all the texts, "Goodbye Earl" provoked the most outrage. The reaction it elicited was largely due to its form as a country music song; however, some of the song's ideas about domestic violence are quite radical, independent of form. The Chicks' validation of "hysterical" bodies and their suggestion that women who kill are sanely defending themselves while the State ignores the violence they have experienced strongly challenges the way the State attempts to silence feminist criticism and imagines women who kill. Additionally, the Chicks' recognition of the public nature of abuse and their critique of the inadequacy of the way both lawyers and police approach domestic violence alert their audiences to the problems and sexism inherent in legal institutions. Finally, the Chicks' warning that we will always have to attend to the possibilities of violence even as the State changes its shape recognizes the importance of maintaining dialogue on domestic violence that is open to the possibilities of difference and change.

Shell Shaker affirms many of "Goodbye Earl's" implications and fills in some of its gaps. Both texts affirm the need for feminist communities; however, *Shell Shaker* illustrates the healing that will have to take place both communally and individually for these communities to be built. Responding to some of the Chicks' other omissions, *Shell Shaker* draws attention to the way feminists need to include ethnicity as a category

of analysis when they argue for new legislation about domestic violence. Additionally, *Shell Shaker*'s imaginative world composed of bodies from the material and spiritual world contests the model of the "universal" citizen. *Shell Shaker* is also the only text considered in this chapter that illustrates the way society produces batterers, although the significance of the critique is weakened by Divine Sarah's suggestion that Red's spirit has a "job" to do.

As the final text of the three, *Enough* withdraws the issue of domestic violence from the public sphere and moves the emphasis *Shell Shaker* and "Goodbye Earl" had placed on the community back to the individual. The feminist communities portrayed in *Shell Shaker* and "Goodbye Earl" are criticized in *Enough* and replaced by paternal support. The recognition *Shell Shaker* makes that ethnicity plays a factor in the way women experience domestic violence is glossed over, suggesting that ethnicity does not matter. Perhaps most troubling in terms of the legal struggle battered women who kill face, *Enough* affirms the idea of "universal" citizen whose form women can learn to assume without seriously altering their adherence to traditional gender codes. As the most conservative text of the three, *Enough*'s position as the final text reminds us of the important work feminist scholars and artists have to do to help us re-imagine and transform the State so that women are both better protected from domestic violence and better represented when they find themselves on trial for defending their lives.

Conclusion

Thankfully, today's media market allows us to revisit any of the above texts whenever we choose. While *Enough* does affirm conservative ideas about domestic

violence and the State, “Goodbye Earl” and *Shell Shaker* illustrate that strong feminist critiques of the “universal subject” and the laws that represent him are present within popular and literary imaginations. Hopefully, these critiques can play a role in helping people re-imagine the State and the bodies the State is supposed to represent and protect.

As this chapter shows, however, more critiques are needed to draw the public’s attention to the problems associated with domestic violence and battering homicides. While *Shell Shaker* and “Goodbye Earl” challenge ideas about the universal subject and argue that society is transformed to better protect and represent women, they both have a tendency to lapse into stereotypes about men who batter and to rather uncritically celebrate revenge as a kind of feminist justice. While “Goodbye Earl’s” problems are related to the text’s genre, *Shell Shaker’s* seem to reflect a conflation of justice and revenge that needs to be critiqued by more literature and more scholarship on domestic violence, battering homicides, and feminist legal theory.

CHAPTER 5

TRANSFORM YOURSELF AND TRANSFORM THE WORLD: QUESTIONING FEMINIST BODIES

Popular exercise programs for women promise to transform their bodies and minds and even imagine communal transformation. Two exercise programs that make such promises stem from the yoga movement and the self-defense movement. Both movements have also made connections to the feminist movement to end violence. Some feminist self-defense practitioners and theorists assert that the feminist movement to end violence focuses too much attention on healing and recovering from violence and not enough on prevention. While this is not an entirely fair argument, considering the emphasis many women's shelters and feminist grass-root organizations place on antiviolenence education, the self-defense movement does offer women a practical way to defend themselves if they should encounter abuse in a way that the movement to end violence has never really done. Coming from a different perspective, some therapists and yogis recommend yoga as a kind of physical therapy for people who have been in abusive relationships or who have been violently assaulted by a stranger. Yoga practices also promote loving relationships and nonviolence as a kind of preventive strategy. Both the yoga and self-defense movements claim that they can make the world a safer place, although their methods for achieving this goal are remarkably different.

The movements' promises to change community as they change individual bodies seem a bit dramatic; however, they correspond with Moira Gatens' theory that the way we discuss human bodies reflects and presupposes the way we discuss the body politic. As I have discussed in previous chapters, if individuals are changing their bodies and the ways they think about them, they may begin to envision the State differently. In this chapter, I will analyze how both movements encourage their practitioners to envision their own bodies and their bodies' relationships with the State. My analysis will be guided by feminist theories that outline institutional changes that would make the world less violent, allowing me to point out the problems and potential both movements offer the feminist movement to end violence.

As I will show, both movements may be successful in offering ways for self transformation; however, for the most part, their methods for creating a less violent culture are fairly weak. While the feminist self-defense movement does a remarkable job of illustrating the way women can physically change their bodies, thereby complicating gender stereotypes, they fail to challenge the structures that support violence and become complicit with a violent culture in their delight in both violence and revenge. Although the popular yoga movement is clearly anti-revenge, it does tend to essentialize women, reinforcing the popular imagination's ideas about women's bodies. At times, however, this essentialism is challenged in remarkably fresh ways, complicating assumptions about passivity and nonviolent resistance.

Self and Communal Transformation

Before examining either movement, we must consider what the possibilities are for self and communal transformation as they are related to creating a less violent culture. As I have discussed in previous chapters, major structural changes are needed to transform our current culture into a less violent one. Poverty, racism, and sexism need to be seriously diminished through a number of institutions. Moreover, increased support is needed for antiviolence education, women's shelters, and batterer recovery programs. Changes must also be made in the criminal justice system; self-defense and domestic violence laws need to be reconceived, police forces need to receive better training, and the prison system needs to be restructured.

In addition to these changes, theories I have not discussed thus far bear mentioning. In *Imaginary Bodies*, Moira Gatens draws her readers' attention to some of Spinoza's theories about creating effective, non-violent societies. According to Spinoza, an effective society expands the capabilities of its citizens, rather than oppressing or exploiting them. Gatens points out that the creation of laws and social institutions should be guided by this rule, taking special care to decide whether or not the capabilities of citizens who do not fit the model of the universal citizen are expanded. Further, Spinoza argues that citizens are much more likely to obey laws if they understand and believe that the laws have been created for the preservation of the society of which they are a part. Societies that suggest their citizens obey their laws out of fear of punishment produce much less effective and more violent societies (Gatens 114-116). These ideas are similar to ones I have discussed in previous chapters;

however, Spinoza's discussion of fear is original. Spinoza's points about fear and the expansion of citizens' capabilities will be considered at various points in this chapter. While changing the United States government in the direction that Spinoza and Gatens advocate is certainly possible, it would involve changes on a number of institutional levels.

Just as structural changes will be possible but difficult to achieve, individual transformations may also not be accomplished quite so easily. As postmodernists have pointed out, human beings are constructed animals; our values and habits have been shaped by the dominant culture. While people who do not fit the "universal citizen" offered by the body politic may be less likely to hold the values and embody the habits of the dominant group in society, they have still been affected by its social codes. As social constructionists have convincingly argued, traditional gender codes affect many women, regardless of their political affiliation. Girls learn at very early ages to take up less physical space than men. As the ideal girl is quiet, passive, and gentle, parents rarely encourage their female children to play as boldly or run as freely as boys.¹ Girls are often more hesitant to speak up in class or to resist something that they do not like because they are taught to be polite and let others have their way. Many women retain these tendencies and physical habits in adulthood. Although they are not natural, they often feel that way because of our social conditioning. The intensity of this

¹ Since sports have become more accessible and acceptable for girls, these parental tendencies are becoming less commonplace; however, the social codes still exist and continue to affect girls and women.

conditioning runs deep, making physical, emotional, and intellectual changes challenging. As Gatens points out, “Whether we like it or not, in so far as our values and our ‘ways of being’ are embodied they cannot be wished away or dismissed by a pure act of will” (105).

Despite this point, a number of theorists convinced by social constructionism still assert that individual change is possible, however restricted, and that it can help to create social change. As I discussed in chapter three, Ladelle McWhorter uses Foucault’s theories about the care of the self to argue that marginalized people can cultivate new pleasures and styles that oppose the networks of power that seek to oppress them. Additionally, Judith Butler argues that “[t]he body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pregiven cultural relations” (410). Butler and others argue that Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological theories be used to illustrate the way gender is constituted through a stylized repetition of acts that a person can disrupt (although not entirely) with acts that challenge what many observers would assume to be the “natural” gender of the person doing the disrupting (401-2). Butler argues that every day performances that unveil the unnaturalness of gender can help to create a culture that does not penalize those who diverge from traditional gender norms (414). As Butler makes clear, however, individual performances cannot accomplish much without restructuring the institutions that produce the gender norms to begin with (409).

Complicating these ideas further, Dana Becker argues that contemporary popular feminist psychology equates personal change with political empowerment.

Women are taught to relieve their stress in a number of ways, including taking popular exercise classes. These and other stress relievers help women manage their worlds while doing very little to change them. Becker writes about the ways that popular feminist psychology today reduces political problems to personal “issues.” Institutional structures that produce a racist, sexist, and classist society are erased with a discussion of their effects: stress. In popular and feminist psychological discourse, stress becomes something that everyone has to deal with, obscuring the fact that institutional structures could be changed to alleviate what causes it in the first place (136-40).

Self-Defense

Self-defense is a broad category that can include a number of different kinds of classes, including martial arts, padded attacker courses, and armed weapon courses. The focus of my study on self-defense involves a very small group of scholars and practitioners working within the larger self-defense movement. In particular, I am mainly concerned with feminist theories of self-defense. The major texts I am considering are Martha McCaughey’s groundbreaking work *Real Knockouts: The Physical Feminism of Self-Defense*, Ellen Snortland’s *Beauty Bites Beast: Awakening the Warrior Within Women and Girls*, and Mary Zeiss Stange and Carol K. Oyster’s *Gun Women*. McCaughey’s work is, to my knowledge, the first book to connect a wide range of self-defense classes with feminist theory and popular feminist films. Snortland’s work is targeted towards a non-academic audience, although she is a lawyer and teaches in the Communications department at California State University, Los Angeles. Stange and Oyster’s work represents the pro-gun side of feminist self-defense

theory; their book is intended for both academic and non-academic audiences. While McCaughey and Snortland cover a range of self-defense classes, they mainly focus on padded attacker courses, most specifically those offered by Model Mugging, the most famous (and probably most expensive) self-defense program for women available today.

McCaughey and Snortland argue that self-defense can help women unlearn embodied habits that make them easy targets for assault. Hours of practicing kicking, punching, and screaming provide women with the muscle memory necessary to defend themselves. This process is not a simple one, and self-defense courses recommend that students repeat their courses in order to assure that their muscles retain the memory of self-defense. The most famous self-defense courses are fairly expensive; however, free courses are available through some police departments, women's shelters, and other institutions.

McCaughey, Snortland, Stange, and Oyster all argue that the feminist movement is not doing enough to end domestic violence and rape. Self-defense is their answer to the problem. Women learn to defend themselves, and as men learn that women have the potential to fight back and defeat their assailants, they will become less likely to assault women. While this argument is the one on which self-defense feminists spend the most time, they also argue that the government should fund self-defense programs as part of the movement to end domestic violence and largely support a conservative approach to the criminal justice system. While feminist self-defense scholars tend to agree about these issues, they disagree about whether or not self-

defense training should include guns. Of the works I considered, only Snortland is opposed to using guns for self-defense. Additionally, self-defense feminists tend to be weary of the pacifism advocated by many feminists in the movement to end violence. McCaughey goes so far to remark that “[b]eing recognized as morally superior for one’s pacifism and kindness [. . .] grants no real social power” (21).

Before elaborating upon these arguments or discussing the problems within them, I want to discuss the benefits that result from self-defense training. Of course, the most obvious benefit is that women learn to defend themselves, a feat that cannot be underestimated. Because of the way many women have embodied traditional codes of femininity, they have a difficult time asserting themselves even when threatened. Writing about her experiences both participating in and observing self-defense classes, McCaughey notes that at the beginning of courses women often laugh and apologize as they practice their defense moves. Some women have to be encouraged to strike and kick with force. Others “freeze [. . .] cry, or feel faint” (62).

Despite these obstacles, women eventually learn to defend themselves with force and feel good about it. Both McCaughey and Snortland report that women feel stronger and less afraid after taking self-defense classes. Women also feel a stronger right to assert themselves, to say “no” to “everyday harassment” and to defend themselves against assault. A woman told McCaughey that she learned to defend herself with as much force as she would defend her child, recognizing how patriarchal culture had taught her to value her own life less (97). One of the women Snortland interviewed told her that, “I have self-safety now. For the first time in my life, I know

I'm not going to be raped, that I'm safe" (22). Many women say that taking self-defense classes makes them feel confident to go anywhere they want. They are much less likely to turn down a pleasurable vacation, outing, or job that they might have been hesitant to take before because of fears of traveling alone, being in a bad neighborhood, or working late at night (Snortland 20).

Women who have been assaulted report feeling empowered after self-defense classes. The classes are a part of their healing process. One woman who had ended a three-year abusive relationship reported that the course made her feel confident that she would not stay in another abusive relationship (McCaughey 124-5). Model Mugging courses give women who have been assaulted the opportunity to re-enact their assaults with a different outcome: they fight back and defeat their assailants. Snortland writes about a woman named Katherine who re-enacted an abusive incident she had with her father when she was a child. They were washing dishes together. When she shook water from her hands, suds landed on her father. He hit her hard and then continued their conversation as if nothing had happened. When she re-enacted the scenario in her self-defense class, she hit him back and kept fighting him until she knocked him out. Katherine told the class that "she would not really beat up her father if the same thing happened again." But the re-enactment "transformed the helpless child she had been into a competent woman capable of defending herself"(29). McCaughey reports that one woman told her that re-enacting her assault helped her realize that she did not deserve it (125). As presented in McCaughey and Snortland's books, women who have

been abused and assaulted generally report that self-defense classes are emotionally and physically taxing but well worth it.

Women also benefit from the classes in less predictable ways. McCaughey notes that women feel more comfortable making eye contact with people, men in particular. Some women change the way they dress. While some students feel more comfortable wearing revealing attire, others gravitate towards more conservative clothing. In general, students often develop a more pleasurable connection with their bodies and dress accordingly (120-1). One woman told Snortland that after taking the course, she experienced a number of changes she had not anticipated. She said, “Taking a walk, I notice all my senses are more detailed, more vivid. I procrastinate less and I’ve been giving myself more permission to do what I want, whether it’s needlepoint or reading poetry. I’m much less approval driven” (28). Snortland believes this change results from feeling more confident and less afraid. If women are less paranoid about being attacked, they can relax and experience their surroundings more. Additionally she notes that after taking self-defense courses many women “suddenly feel they deserve to spend more time on themselves with less guilt and fewer excuses” (28).

In learning to defend themselves, women also unlearn traditional gender codes that make them “easy” victims. As they learn to kick, punch, and scream, they become aware of how society has conditioned them to suffer attacks rather than fight against them. They learn that gender is a construct and that they can physically retrain their bodies to at least partly reject embodied femininity that makes it difficult for them to

defend themselves (McCaughey 103-105). These experiences not only help women to transform their bodies to make them more capable of resisting abuse, they also unveil the constructed nature of gender, illustrating to groups of women who may not consider themselves feminist that there is nothing natural about femininity. McCaughey discusses the way self-defense classes accomplish this task:

When women perform a decidedly unfeminine script, as in self-defense classes, they are challenging gender reality. When women learn to get mean, they realize that feminine niceness is a historical effect, not a natural given of womanhood. Feminists have long been contesting the idea that gender differences are natural. What is revealed so clearly in self-defense classes is the level at which gender is incorporated into the body. (132)

After taking self-defense classes, women report that what at first felt so unnatural to them (kicking, punching, yelling), now feels like a natural response to violence (McCaughey 104-5).

The benefits that women experience from taking self-defense courses go beyond the physical. Self-defense courses raise awareness about violence against women and its effects. Many self-defense courses begin with a discussion about why students are taking the course. The reasons include a fear of stranger rape, rehabilitation from rape or domestic violence, and a desire to improve self-defense techniques. Women who have been assaulted sometimes share their stories. A woman Snortland interviewed points out that before taking a Model Mugging course, she “used to believe that everyone saw things the way [she does]. Listening to the other 15 women talking about the same things changed” her mind (21). She realized that not all women react to violence in the same way. Another woman said that as she listened to other women

discuss their experiences with assault in the D.C. Basic Impact course she took, she realized that women were not responsible for the violence they suffered, something she had always believed before taking the course (Snortland 23).

The benefits women receive from self-defense classes may make them more productive citizens. As Gatens and Spinoza point out, citizens who feel safe and supported tend to function better in society than those who do not. Additionally, as women learn that not everyone reacts to violence in the same way and learn that gender is a construct and not a given, they may begin to rethink the model of the universal citizen. With this knowledge, feminist self-defense practitioners have the potential to affect change in legal theory, challenging self-defense laws that are based on traditionally masculine approaches to self-defense.

Vengeful Rhetoric

Not all women who take self-defense courses are as enthusiastic about them as the ones I discussed above. A woman named Rachel who Snortland interviewed reported that she found a Model Mugging course she took profoundly disturbing. The level of violence bothered her, and she felt distant from her classmates who all appeared to be enthusiastic about the course. She did, however, note that she thought the course was worth taking and decided that her aversion to the course was personal, not a reaction to anything that was wrong with the course (30). While reactions like Rachel's are not the norm as it is presented in feminist self-defense books, I had a similar reaction when I took a self-defense course. The course I took was free and lasted only two days. I also did not think that the instructors were doing anything "wrong," but the

level of enthusiasm for what seemed less like self-defense and more like “kicking ass” disturbed me. While I recognize that some of my feeling may be attributed to ingrained ideas about femininity that I have not shed, I also think that my reaction was influenced by the vengeful rhetoric I have found within the self-defense movement.

While no self-defense practitioner I have encountered advocates revenge, vengeful rhetoric can still be found within the discourse of the movement. In “Living with Guns, Playing with Fire,” Ann Jones criticizes what she sees as “a certain off-the-record vein of vengefulness” in women’s reactions to fictional and non-fictional portrayals of women assaulting men (42). Although McCaughey, Stange, and Oyster are all very critical of many points in Jones’ article, particularly her anti-gun stance, they do not address her points about revenge. Their failures to address this critique suggest that they either do not have a problem with the association between revenge and self-defense or they do not think that it is a problem worth discussing. Stange and Oyster also critique Letty Cottin Pogrebin’s article “Neither Pink nor Cute: Pistols for Women in America,” pointing out that Pogrebin’s argument against using guns for self-defense reveals her assumptions that women are too weak and immature to handle them. While Stange and Oyster make a good point here, they do not address Pogrebin’s criticism of the association between self-defense and revenge, which they include in their quotation from her article (34-6). Such silences suggest that self-defense feminists do not seem to be willing to address the problem of the vengeful rhetoric in the self-defense movement.

While McCaughey avoids the topic of revenge in her work, occasionally she does seem to relish violent imagery, a problem she shares with some other feminist self-defense advocates. McCaughey quotes from Pamela R. Fletcher's article "Whose Body Is It Anyway? Transforming Ourselves to Change a Rape Culture." Fletcher writes about two women who were raped, Rachel and Brenda, and asks her readers to "imagine" what would happen if they had held the rapists accountable. Mocking Fletcher, McCaughey writes, "What would happen if Rachel had broken some knees on that football field? What if Brenda had ruptured Danny's testicles? [. . .] Just imagine" (14). Clearly McCaughey uses this phrasing to point out that Fletcher's article does not help women prevent assault, but her choice of imagery is a little suspicious. The imagery becomes even more suspicious as "broken knees" and "ruptured testicles" surface at other points in her book. For instance, McCaughey is distressed to find that a rape prevention flyer she found on a college campus did not "instruct women to twist the attacker's testicles, kick his kneecaps, or gouge out his eyes" (181).

Self-defense instructors emphasize that they teach women to defend themselves and get away, to avoid inflicting more harm than is necessary. Women often stop assaults by yelling and scaring off their assailants. While self-defense instructors emphasize these points, self-defense feminists sometimes seem to advocate violence that goes beyond self-defense. Stange and Oyster applaud Naomi Wolf for the following comment: "As violence against women reached epidemic proportions, women were not just sitting around. Quickly, carefully, with thorough training, and in unprecedented numbers, while they looked after their families and tended their

marriages, they were also teaching themselves to *blow away* potential assailants” (qtd. in Stange and Oyster 33 emphasis added). If the point of self-defense is indeed to protect one’s self from assault, one has to ask why it is necessary to use dramatic, violent, and vengeful rhetoric. Stange and Oyster also delight in a self-defense button that reads “So Many Men, So Little Ammunition,” asking “isn’t this just what feminism is supposed to be about?” (44).

As I have recognized in previous chapters, vengeful rhetoric and violent images can feel very empowering, and they critique the acceptance of violence against women. However, considering the vengeful stereotypes that women who kill their abusive spouses are often labeled with and sentenced for, self-defense feminists need to be willing to analyze the potential problems of the vengeful rhetoric they sometimes employ. Also, since many women who attend self-defense courses do not consider themselves feminists, self-defense feminists who delight in vengeful and violent rhetoric run the risk of affirming conservative critiques of feminism that stereotype it as vengeful and man-hating. Since self-defense courses often challenge assumptions about violence against women and increase awareness of it, they have the potential to alert women to the importance of feminist legal issues. This potential may be weakened if non-feminists find conservative stereotypes of feminists affirmed in feminist self-defense theory. Additionally, self-defense feminists may find that they are much more successful getting government funding for their programs if they are willing to drop their vengeful rhetoric.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the vengeful rhetoric that can be found within the feminist self-defense movement is the idea that what is learned in the courses is embodied. If women who take self-defense courses are embodying not only defensive moves but vengeful attitudes, they risk going beyond the moves required for self-defense. Additionally, if they do severe damage to an assailant and have to call the police, their attitudes will be noted by the police officers who arrive at the scene of the crime. Considering the fact that women are more likely to be convicted of violent crimes if they display vengeful attitudes, self-defense feminists may be endangering fellow self-defense practitioners when they delight in vengeful rhetoric and images.

The Threat of Violence

Self-defense feminists may think that vengeful rhetoric enhances the movement's ability to transform society. McCaughey, Snortland, Stange and Oyster all contend that the self-defense movement will scare men into becoming less violent. McCaughey writes that as women become better able to protect themselves, "men may actually become too afraid to pounce" (179). Hoping that women might be feared as much as pit bulls are, Snortland writes, "if enough of us 'bite,' and 'bite' hard enough to get media attention, we'll have less occasion to have to" (154). Stange and Oyster go further by quoting D.A. Clarke's "astute" suggestion that "[i]f more women killed husbands and boyfriends who abused them or their children, perhaps there would be less abuse" (45). These assumptions reflect a lack of knowledge about the history of the domestic violence movement. As I discussed in chapter two, when women became more physical, more stereotypically masculine and more assertive of their rights in the

1920s, domestic violence increased and social attitudes towards it softened. Since women were seen as more capable of violence, popular culture reasoned that women enjoyed rough-housing. As David Peterson del Mar points out, many men were threatened with women's increase in rights and power and responded by beating women back down into their "place" (107).

Theories about violence, fear, and community also conflict with the assumption that as women become more physically threatening, men will fear them and become less violent. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the anti-prison organization Critical Resistance contends that the threat of punishment does not deter violence. People are not likely to abandon violent crime until they have their basic needs (shelter, food, education) satisfied. Support, not the threat of violence, will deter people from being violent. This theory is similar to Spinoza's theory that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter. According to Spinoza, societies that control their citizens through fear produce less effective citizens than ones that increase their citizen's capabilities (Gatens 116). If Spinoza is correct, then increasing the threat that men face if they act violently will not make men more effective citizens. Of course, the self-defense movement does not promise to make men more effective citizens, but as Critical Resistance points out, if men are more engaged in their societies, they will be less likely to resort to violence.

While the self-defense movement may not make men less violent (or more capable), the discussions McCaughey and Snortland have had with women who have taken self-defense courses indicate that the movement has increased women's

capabilities to defend themselves and makes them feel safer. Supporting Spinoza's point, as women feel safer, they are more likely to do things that they enjoy, take jobs that they want, and pay more attention to what they are doing. Considering these points, government support of the feminist self-defense movement makes tremendous sense. If self-defense classes will make women feel safer, be less likely to accept abuse in their relationships, and help them be more productive citizens, the movement to end domestic violence would clearly be bolstered by government supported self-defense classes. These gains, however, are threatened, not enhanced, by violent, vengeful rhetoric that attempts to scare men.

Armed for Defense

Another element of the self-defense movement that is begging to be discussed is its suggestion that guns make women safer. To a degree, one has to admit that gun ownership and training protects some women. Self-defense feminist and NRA spokeswoman Paxton Quigley says that she was against guns until one of her friends was raped one night by a man who had broken into her apartment. The police did not arrive until after the rapist had escaped. Another woman Quigley knows held a man who had broken into her home at gunpoint until the police arrived, which happened to be much faster than the incident in which the woman was raped. This woman may have prevented the burglar from raping her or harming her in any other way by threatening him with a gun. Other women want to learn how to use guns because their husbands have them at home. They want to know how to be able to use one if they need to. If a

gun is already in your home, knowing how to use one makes tremendous sense (McCaughey 74).

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, however, guns hurt more women than they help. According to Amnesty International, a woman is five times more likely to be killed by her partner if he has access to a gun (11). Also, consider “that nearly three thousand domestic abusers bought firearms between 1998 and 2001, despite laws designed to prevent such purchases, because the FBI could not complete criminal background checks before the sales went through” (Kelly 281). Neither of these statistics makes me feel safer, and I imagine that many other women feel the same way. Nor do I feel safer when I go to my local Barnes and Noble and notice that there are significantly more magazines on guns in the male “sports” section than on any other sport.² While I have to admit that I wonder whether or not I would feel safer if I knew how to use a gun, another part of me wants nothing to do with a “sport” that allows people who have been convicted of domestic violence to participate in it.

Self-defense feminists who advocate gun use have not done enough to respond to the problems that result from gun violence. McCaughey suggests that if women learned how to use guns, then they would have a better chance defending themselves in abusive relationships. Essentially, they would level the playing field of gun violence (142). Stange and Oyster dismiss concerns about the availability of guns, saying,

² Admittedly, I live in Arlington, TX where guns are extraordinarily popular. In another state, gun magazines might make up a significantly smaller portion of the male sports section.

“firearms-related deaths [. . .] occur overwhelmingly in households where violence is the norm. The ‘friends and relatives’ who get caught in the crossfire are generally either partners in criminal activity or adversaries in drug deals gone sour” (67). Stange and Oyster’s implication that the deaths of people in certain kinds of households do not matter is especially telling. Unlike feminists in groups like Critical Resistance, Stange and Oyster seem to suggest that “criminals” do not matter. They fail to consider that gun culture may actually contribute to the creation of “criminals” in the first place. While guns may allow women to defend themselves in certain situations, self-defense feminists who are pro-gun need to do a better job addressing the problems that result from gun violence and culture.

Restructuring Society

While the possibility of female self-defense (with or without guns) may make some men think twice about rape or domestic violence, feminist self-defense on its own cannot restructure society so that racist and classist institutions quit producing violent, abusive bodies. The self-defense feminists I examine in this chapter spend very little time (if any) discussing the way economic inequalities, racism, military culture, and other abusive hierarchies produce violent men. Stange and Oyster do not devote any significant portion of their book to the causes of violence against women. McCaughey identifies the belief in women’s vulnerability as a major cause (179). Snortland mainly identifies “gender roles,” an association between masculinity and violence and femininity and passivity as the major cause (31-42). These opinions oversimplify the causes of violence, ignoring the arguments of antiviolence groups who illustrate the

connection between poverty and crime, violent and otherwise. Jamilah Clark, who works with New York teenagers who have been imprisoned, reports that most of the teenagers she works with are from low income neighborhoods. She says, “These neighborhoods have the highest unemployment rates, the lowest-performing schools, often dilapidated housing, and consequently high crime rates” (qtd. in Kelly 275). Self-defense feminists fail to consider these problems or offer ways to alleviate them.

Disturbingly, the feminist self-defense books I have analyzed encourage conservative approaches to the prison system. McCaughey, Snortland, Stange and Oyster all advocate more prisons and longer sentences for violent crimes. They do not consider the ways the criminal justice system engenders violent crime, nor do they consider the importance of batterer rehabilitation. They do not consider that, as Marie Gottschalk points out, the funding of prisons takes away programs from education, welfare, and health care (243). As Clark notes, programs that support education, welfare, and health care deter crime; prison produces it (Kelly 275). By supporting the prison system without considering the problems it creates, self-defense feminists unconsciously support an institution that engenders violence.

Unintended Effects

Since self-defense feminists support harsher sentencing for violent offenders, it is not surprising to learn that police and military officers often serve as instructors in self-defense courses. An effect of this association is the adoption of certain aspects of military culture. Interestingly, similarities can be drawn between the feminist self-defense movement and commodities related to military culture. Discussing the

connection between US military culture and Hummers, Joanne Clarke Dillman points out that these “sport” utility vehicles reflect a “lack of faith in our institutions that has only been exacerbated by recent natural disasters such as Hurricane Rita and Katrina” (73). The Hummer is attractive because it assures individuals that they can take care of themselves and protect them from disaster should it strike. Dillman writes, “Hummer projects aggression, an illusion of protection, an illusion of power, and an illusion of strength” (66). While the self-defense movement offers power and strength that are not as illusive as those offered by the Hummer, it does suggest that women are strong enough to support themselves and that they do not need to rely on government institutions for their support. In fact, the self-defense movement’s alignment with police and military officers suggests that citizens have the duty to arm themselves for defense.

Not surprisingly, self-defense feminists and other self-defense students employ militaristic terms as they discuss their training. On Model Mugging’s website, an ex-student notes that “[her] body is a weapon.” McCaughey, Snortland, Stange and Oyster all refer to their self-defense training as “combat.” McCaughey favorably compares female “self-defense trainees” to military soldiers:

Much as military soldiers learn their moves precisely because high-stress training conditions force them to suffer a physical consequence for a mistake, self-defense trainees undergo a series of intense, often terrifying, bodily experiences that force them to respond to simulated crises. In padded attacker courses, for instance, students who fail to deliver a knockout blow, or fail to check to be sure they knocked out their attacker, are inevitably assaulted again. Such a training regime forces women into a new set of abilities. (107)

While self-defense may be a form of combat, these comparisons between self-defense trainees and military soldiers, between bodies and weapons, need further investigation. What, for instance, are the limits of the violent acts that women in self-defense courses learn, and can one be sure that the limits will not be transgressed?

Some self-defense feminists might argue that a warning directed towards female self-defense practitioners is a reflection of the tendency to essentialize women as passive, non-violent people. McCaughey spends a great deal of time in her book pointing out that cultural feminists who suggest women are essentially nonviolent have made it difficult for women to embrace the self-defense movement (145-8). She and others might point out that scholars are only becoming anxious about self-defense classes because women are the ones acting violently, not men. I would argue, however, that all people need to be aware that the violent physical practices they undertake might have violent effects that they have not intended. Self-defense feminist Bat-Ami Bar On urges other self-defense feminists to be critical about this point:

A feminist cannot merely celebrate the transgressive excess that she creates through the production of her own or other violent women bodies. She must concern herself with quite complex questions about the possibility that, as women's bodies become habituated to violent action, they may act in ways that 'inhumanely' and 'destructively' transgress the boundaries that are specified by an ethico-political justification for the action that they are undertaking. (71)

Bar On recognizes that, like men, women have also willingly participated in violent and abusive events. Since popular self-defense scholars like McCaughey recognize the physical transformative nature of self-defense courses, they would do well to discuss the points Bar On raises. The fact that some military men beat (and kill) their

wives after they have been released from military duty when they were not abusive before serving in the military alerts us to the fact that men's transformed bodies can "'inhumanely' and 'destructively' transgress the boundaries" of their training.³ Women should not assume that the transformations their bodies undergo are all that different.

Gatens' argument that the way we think about human bodies reflects and presupposes the way we think about the State is affirmed by self-defense feminists. Just as they view their bodies as an extension of the police, as protective, yet vengeful bodies that scare others into acting less violently, they argue for tighter law enforcement and harsher prison systems. As such, they help to create a culture of fear that will not, if we are to believe Gatens and Spinoza, produce productive, conscientious, peaceful male citizens. Yet the feminist self-defense movement does benefit its female practitioners as it increases their capabilities, helping them to feel stronger and safer, and giving them the tools to defend themselves. It also raises awareness about violence against women and contests both the idea of a universal citizen and an essential femininity.

These benefits will be much further reaching if self-defense feminist theorists become more engaged with the larger movement to stop domestic violence. Feminist groups like Incite! and Critical Resistance focus on the institutions that produce crime

³ For more information on the increase in the number of spousal homicides on military bases since the current war in Iraq, see Andrea Smith's "Looking to the Future: Domestic Violence, Women of Color, the State, and Social Change."

in our society. They illustrate the connections between domestic violence, military culture, and the prison system. Yet they do not include information on self-defense that would be beneficial to women. Engagement between these two groups of feminists critiquing the movement to end violence could be a radical step in the right direction. It is an alliance, however, that would require the self-defense movement to re-evaluate its vision of a safer society, forcing them to come up with a more comprehensive, realistic, and peaceful approach.

Yoga

Feminist scholars have not connected the popular yoga movement to domestic violence and rape in the same way as feminist academics have done with self-defense. However, feminist therapists do often recommend yoga as a means of healing from domestic violence. Additionally, yogis claim that meditation can create cultures of love and nonviolence. They advocate yoga not just as a rehabilitative prescription for healing individuals but as an exercise that can prevent violence.

Yoga, a spiritual and physical practice thought to have developed in India more than 5,000 years ago, was first taught in the United States by Swami Vivekananda in the late nineteenth-century. Vivekananda came to the US to represent Hinduism at the World's Parliament of Religions; he was so well received that he was paid to lecture throughout the United States. Eventually, he established the Vedanta Society of America in New York and then later opened centers in California. The practice Vivekananda taught was more philosophical than physical, and one of its major goals was creating tolerance for different religions. It was not until the mid 1970s, however,

that yoga was widely practiced in the West. At this time, the focus was less on philosophy and more on physical yoga postures made popular by B.K.S. Iyengar (Lau 100-102). As David S. Shannahoff-Khalsa points out, although yoga was at one time “a comprehensive, highly integrated system” that combined physical movements, postures, breathing exercises, and meditation, “many today who believe they have a working knowledge of yoga, unfortunately misconceive of it as only an ancient system of postures with but a handful of meditation techniques” (308). Kimberly J. Lau confirms this perspective and even goes a step further writing, “In general, when people talk about yoga [. . .] today, they are referring to weekly, possibly semiweekly exercise classes presented with only a lasting trace of the philosophies at the heart of [it]” (111). This concept of yoga is what I refer to as the “popular yoga movement.”

Despite the complexity of yoga, becoming a yoga teacher in the West does not require a tremendous amount of time or study. One difficulty that arises in educating a large number of people about a complex practice is that the practice gets watered down. Additionally, the consumer culture in which we live depends on buzz words and easily graspable theories to sell its products. And while yoga in the West is certainly a spiritual, physical, and emotional practice for many people, it is also a product that is sold through fitness and yoga magazines, yoga studios, gyms, and other corporations.

Before exploring these problems and others associated with yoga’s relationship to the movement to end violence, I want to look at the ways it benefits the feminist movement. First of all, yoga offers an excellent model of the way nonviolent activism can be productive, countering arguments that nonviolent resistance is ineffectual. In a

recent article of the magazine *Yoga+*, Kristin Barendsen writes about activist yogi Julia Butterfly Hill who famously sat in a tree for 738 days, protesting Pacific Lumber's destruction of the old-growth redwood forests. In the end, Hill saved the tree she sat in and a "three-acre zone around it" (52). While the forest around that land continues to be destroyed, Hill has gone on to help "raise about \$3 million for dozens of environmental organizations" (52).

Talking with Barendsen about her tree-sit, Hill challenged assumptions about the limits of pacifism and the power of anger. Hill claims while she was sitting in the tree, her "rage and anger were consuming [her]" (52). In response to her prayers for strength and success, she came to understand that she should "simply love" (52). While some self-defense feminists balk at loving resistance, characterizing it as weak and ineffectual, Hill portrays love in a different light. She says, "Love is not a fluffy thing. It's got edges and teeth [. . .] Love refuses to play small or sell out" (52). Hill points out that she stayed in the tree because of her love for it and claims that she "would have come down out of that tree if [she] had stayed angry" (52). She also notes that forgiveness was a big part of her act of love.

Barendsen also writes about yogi activist Seane Corn who makes points similar to Hill's. Corn talked to Barendsen about how much strength is required to offer love to people in desperate circumstances. Reflecting on her experience teaching yoga to sex workers and children with AIDS in Mumbai, Corn says that she would "cry and rage in the privacy of [her] hotel room and then go out [. . .] and offer love and compassion wherever [she] could" (88). This comment is important because it illustrates that anger

and love do not preclude one another. While Corn supported those who needed her help with love, she still was angry about the position they were in.

As Corn and Hill make clear, yogis are starting to see community service as a part of their yoga practice. Kaitlin Quistgaard, editor-in-chief of *Yoga Journal* notes that “social activism is becoming more and more a part of mainstream American yoga. People are realizing it’s almost a requirement to give back” (Zezima online). Much of the service work that yogis do complements the goals of the feminist movement to end violence. For instance, some yogis teach at domestic violence shelters. Yoga teachers from YogaHOPE, a non-profit organization started by Sue Jones in May 2006, teach yoga to women in domestic violence shelters, alcohol and drug rehabilitation centers, and homeless shelters. After they have left their rehabilitative institutions, students of YogaHope have the opportunity to apply for scholarships for teacher training certification through the organization (online). The Niroga Institute, another non-profit organization, sends yoga teachers into a number of institutions that both help people recover from violent and abusive relationships and lifestyles and help them prevent them. Mainly, Niroga’s yoga teachers work with adolescents who have either been labeled as “at risk” or who are already serving time in juvenile detention centers (online). The work that Niroga teachers do corresponds with the feminist movement’s emphasis on batterer rehabilitation and antiviolence education.

The benefits of the services that organizations like Niroga and YogaHOPE provide are well documented. A video of women who take classes from YogaHOPE teachers reveals that the students find the classes “emotionally stabilizing.” One

woman states that yoga “gives [her] self control.” Another woman states that yoga “changes your frame of mind, frame of thinking.” YogaHOPE’s clients emphasize how important it is for them to develop tools to handle the stress of every day life, stresses that may be more challenging for them to handle than for the average person because of the trauma they experienced in abusive relationships and/or addictive lifestyles. The Niroga Institute has recently evaluated the success of their program working with adolescents at the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center (ACJJC). Bidyut Bose, Niroga’s director, reports that adolescents who attended ten or more sessions significantly improved their ability to handle stressful situations in calm ways. One student said that yoga classes “taught me how to relax and how to breathe; [. . .] instead of banging and kicking [when angered], I breathe.” Impressed by the changes they have witnessed in the adolescents, staff members at ACJJC have requested classes for their own benefit. One staff member said, “My goal is to get more staff to use the ‘Yoga’ language throughout the day and evening. I’m noticing so many opportunities to redirect kids by having them come back to their breath. If more staff use this, it will be better for all of us.” These comments emphasize how yoga can enhance one’s ability to act and speak calmly and nonviolently, two skills that are crucial for people who want to live nonviolent, productive lives.

Like the skills learned in self-defense classes, these skills are not easy to learn, and change does not happen over night. Shannahoff-Khalsa writes that “[w]hile we are habit forming creatures by nature, the habits that we tend to develop are very difficult to change, and all too often not favorable toward health” (308). He also notes that most

people are “ruled” by their emotions and desires and do not really understand the “impact of [their] actions” (308). Still, he does claim that yoga postures and meditation can help people change, “altering and restructuring mental patterns and elevating one’s awareness” (308). Yoga teachers are very aware that people have to practice yoga regularly in order to receive its benefits. As Bose emphasizes to Niroga’s young students, “life skills and personal transformation require frequent and regular practice.”

In *The Myth of Empowerment: Women and the Therapeutic Culture in America*, Dana Becker argues that feminist therapy and practices such as yoga only help people handle the stress in their lives; they do not help them to alter their positions in life, and as such, are much less radical than one would like to believe (139). While I agree with Becker when I think about yoga classes for middle and upper class women who are not recovering from abuse, I think that Becker underestimates the value of yoga and other practices for people who have been in abusive relationships. Learning how to handle the emotional turmoil while recovering from an abusive relationship can be a radical process for many people. While it may not help them to alter their station in life dramatically, it can affect their relationships with other people and help them become more capable citizens.

Consider, for instance, the case of Francine Hughes, the woman whose court case inspired the famous television movie *The Burning Bed*. In 1977, Hughes was acquitted by reason of temporary insanity for the murder of her abusive husband. Years later, *People* magazine interviewed her and her other family members for a story they published about the same time that the movie aired. As Jennifer Jones points out, the

story was not a happy one. After her acquittal, Hughes married another abusive man who allegedly beat and sexually abused her children. Hughes acknowledged the beatings and said that the reports of sexual abuse were probably true as well. Her husband claimed that Hughes also beat the children, and no one disputed this claim. One of the children had two black eyes at the time of the interview (70).

When Hughes was acquitted, she was not given any substantial tools to reject abusive relationships or to rebuild her life. Of course, the tools she needed extend far beyond yoga and meditation she classes. But had Hughes been given the opportunity to take classes in prison for the nine months when she was on trial, had she been given the chance to handle her post-traumatic stress in and outside of prison better, she might have had a better chance resisting a future abusive relationship. And while that would not have magically solved all her problems, it might have helped her cope with them nonviolently. And that could have made a radical difference in her and her children's lives.

Additionally, as the Niroga Institute illustrates, yoga's stress relieving techniques produce changes not just in individuals but in institutions as well. Consider the aforementioned report by the staff at the juvenile justice center where Niroga sends its teachers. The fact that the staff is beginning to use language they learn from yoga classes, language that makes them more effective communicators, suggests that exercises to eliminate "stress" may have a strong impact on institutions that benefit economically disadvantaged, abused, and violent people. Still, despite these very

positive benefits, one has to admit that teaching yoga in these spaces does not dramatically alter the world that creates these institutions to begin with.

The popular yoga movement, however, is waking up to the way certain government structures create violent communities. The Global Peace Initiative of Women, an organization that advertises in *Yoga+*, has two main goals: “to bring alternative resources, be they spiritual, economic or educational, to aid in healing conflict; and to relieve the social and economic stresses that lead to violence” (15). Similarly, Shannahoff-Khalsa argues that more prisons cannot solve the problems of the increasingly violent culture in which we live. Violence prevention, for Shannahoff-Khalsa, comes in the form of antiviolence education and providing better healthcare services for all people. The popular yoga movement’s suggestion that society has to be restructured to become less violent strongly contrasts the self-defense movement’s answer about ways to eliminate violence.

Magical Thinking

Unfortunately, a great deal of popular yoga culture ignores the fact that society needs to be restructured so that it no longer engenders violence. In fact, as Kimberly Lau points out, yoga classes and magazines often make their practitioners think they are doing something politically effective, even though their efforts are extraordinarily limited. For instance, a woman’s yoga class discussed in *Vogue* magazine “ends[s . . .] by chanting for world peace” (126). Lau points out that these kinds of activities, when not coupled with discussions about structural change, encourage yoga practitioners to think they are doing “their part” to create changes in the world by simply showing up

for their yoga classes (126). This assumption is aggravated by popular new age media that make similar suggestions. At one of the yoga studios where I take classes, a number of instructors are enamored with and heavily promote the best-selling book *The Secret*. *The Secret* argues that our thoughts create our realities. It suggests that “as you focus on the negative thoughts of the world, you not only add to them, but you bring more negative things into your life at the same time” (144). Instead of working to solve problems, *The Secret* suggests that people focus on love and peace. If buying or watching the news upsets you, *The Secret* argues that you should simply stop reading and watching it (145). The problems in the world will simply dissolve, *The Secret* claims, if you just think happy thoughts and trust that there is enough goodness in the world for everyone.

While the yoga studio I attend is certainly not representative of all yoga studios in the United States, other texts that are specific to the yoga movement offer theories that are similar to *The Secret*. Steve Ross’s popular book *Happy Yoga: 7 Reasons Why There’s Nothing to Worry About* makes similar claims. To work “toward[s] world peace,” Ross advises that you “[f]ind out who you really are. Be the change you want to see” (174). He is also extraordinarily weary of “intellectualizing” and says that “[i]f you’re serious about inner peace, it’s advisable to take a break from over-intellectualizing—or intellectualizing at all” (180). While people can certainly benefit from self reflection and taking a break from “over intellectualizing,” Ross’s suggestion that these activities that help you “[f]ind out who you really are” are among the most important things a person can do to help create peaceful communities is extraordinarily

problematic. Imagine telling a woman in an abusive relationship that she should “be the change [she] want[s] to see” in her husband. This kind of rhetoric implies that personal changes are enough to solve political problems, erasing the fact that institutional changes are necessary to work towards peace.

Not surprisingly, a rhetoric of choice often surfaces in this new-age self-transformative theory. Tellingly, Ross offers little about how you can “[b]e the change you want to see.” What advice he does offer includes gems like “face [negativity] head-on with love, [and] you will disarm it” (175). Meditation is, of course, his major recommendation for achieving change. Overall, though, he suggests that one can simply choose to reject negative thoughts and fears, never really discussing how difficult it may be to make such a choice.

Another example of this rhetoric of choice as it is connected to personal transformation can be found in a *Yoga Journal* article advertised with the title “Change Yourself, Change the World.” In this article, Mary Billard describes “five yogis whose practice has inspired their activism” (99). Her description of Samantha Broder’s work is especially telling. Broder is a nutrition educator, and she offers classes at a halfway house for adolescent mothers in Brooklyn. Billard points out how Broder recognized that unhealthy eating habits were causing an “imbalance” in her life. In response to this problem, Broder became a vegetarian and started to feel better. She decided she wanted to help other people become healthier as well. Writing about the classes Broder teaches at the halfway house, Billard writes that Broder “took the girls shopping at local markets to show them how to make more conscious food choices, and then she cooked

meals with them” (101). While Broder’s work is certainly admirable, Billard suggests that simply teaching these girls how to “make more conscious food choices” is a radical step in helping them to change their lives. Neither she nor Broder make any comments about how healthy foods tend to be expensive or even unavailable in lower income neighborhoods, suggesting instead that the working class can empower themselves by simply making better choices.

And while yoga classes like the ones offered by Niroga and YogaHOPE can radically affect people’s lives by helping them to cope with post-traumatic stress and teaching them to handle problems nonviolently, Becker’s argument that feminist therapy, including yoga culture, does very little to affect substantial change in many women’s lives can be affirmed by a number of popular yoga magazines. The February 2008 edition of *Yoga Journal* provides an excellent example of this problem. In a cover article entitled “Create a Life You Love,” Nora Isaacs describes ten ways for people to transform their lives. Each of the possibilities offers ways for people to better handle the stress in their lives. Tellingly, many of the possibilities are expensive, and none of them address the possibility that institutional problems might have contributed to their stress. The possibilities listed include seeing a “life coach,” going on a detox diet, changing up your yoga practice, going on a yoga retreat, and volunteering (77-81). Many of them suggest that happiness can be bought and problems can be eradicated through diet and exercise.

Sexist Transformations

As Lau points out, popular yoga magazines and videos promise “self transformation” within a sexist and racist framework. The bodies performing yoga in magazines and videos are mainly white and thin and uphold other traditional codes of femininity. Videos feature famous actresses and fitness gurus such as Jane Fonda, Dixie Carter, Denise Austin, and Kathy Smith, all thin white women that fit and define mainstream models of femininity. Fitness and women’s magazines promise that yoga will transform a woman’s mind, spirituality, and most importantly, looks, connecting all three. An article Lau quotes from *Mademoiselle* magazine promises yoga will “give you lean, sexy legs and a shot of serenity, too. Om, sweet, Om!” Magazines as well as yoga classes suggest that yoga is “good for inner peace, relaxation, stress reduction, and the shape of a woman’s body, all of which are said to contribute to better self-esteem, better relationships, and thus a better society and better world” (Lau 126).

Just as magazines and videos uphold traditional standards of femininity, they also have a strong tendency to essentialize women. This tendency filters into yoga classrooms as well. Some yogis emphasize that compassion for others can be found when we recognize that all people are virtually the same. This emphasis can be found in Barendsen’s article about Seane Corn and Julia Butterfly Hill. Corn told Barendsen about an experience she had teaching yoga to girls at Children of the Night, a shelter in Van Nuys for adolescents who used to be prostitutes. When Corn first tried to teach the girls, she felt defeated because they “ripped [her] to shreds with their negative attitude and clear disinterest” (53). While she was crying in her car, Corn realized that she

“couldn’t stand them because *they were [her]*” (53). This realization led her to tell the girls her own story about how she did drugs as a teenager to avoid dealing with her emotions. This story and Corn’s new attitude did win the girls over; however her implication that her experiences doing drugs as a seventeen year old in New York City with financially supportive parents in New Jersey are the same kinds of experiences that adolescent prostitutes in Van Nuys have had is a troubling simplification of their similarities.

Other less famous yogis make these same kinds of statements, suggesting that all human beings are the same. The power of this idea and the potential problems associated with it can be seen on YogaHOPE’s website in at least two places. First, on a teacher’s blog, one woman remarks that she has been struck by how different the women are at the various places she has worked. The women in recovery from drugs appear to be quite different from the women in domestic violence shelters (online). While the teacher’s recognition is important, what goes unsaid is just as disturbing. By saying that the women vary from place to place, she implies that the women are fairly similar within each institution. The fact that she is struck by the differences place to place suggests that ideas about difference are glossed over in the popular yoga movement.

The YogaHOPE video that illustrates the otherwise impressive work the organization is doing suggests that YogaHOPE’s clients also gloss over their differences. On the video, one of YogaHOPE’s clients claims that “[w]e’re not really that different when it comes down to it. We all, as women, have similar experiences.”

While this statement and the ones like it made by popular yogis suggest that as human beings, we should recognize our common connections and treat one another with kindness, an overemphasis on similarities erases important differences that affect law making and the shape of institutions. As I have pointed out in previous chapters, the feminist movement's erasure of differences has created domestic violence laws and shelters that privilege middle class white women and punish working class white women and women of color. Yoga teachers enamored with the idea that "we are all the same" who work in domestic violence shelters and other rehabilitative centers may unknowingly contribute to these problems.

Future Possibilities

The popular yoga movement's emphasis on service and nonviolence often complements the feminist movement to end violence. Teaching women and men who have been victims and perpetrators of violence how to handle their problems nonviolently is a radical tool with potentially long lasting benefits. These benefits are likely to increase if more yoga studios and organizations offer cheap (or even free—as is the case with YogaHOPE) classes. Additionally, as some organizations associated with the popular yoga movement recognize that larger social structures must be changed in order to create nonviolent communities, they may influence parts of the yoga movement that de-emphasize the importance of structural change in favor of easier self-transformation. Unfortunately, the popular yoga movement's suggestion that we are all the same increases the likelihood that the differences that need to be recognized as larger structural changes are made will be ignored or erased. This suggestion is

complicated through the racist and classist commodification of yoga in various magazines, videos, and studios.

Conclusion

Looking at the two movements together suggests that they are in opposition to one another, but there is nothing to prevent people from participating in both the self-defense and yoga movements. Though rarely discussed together, the popular yoga movement and the self-defense movement have a great deal to offer one another in their shared goal of creating nonviolent communities. The self-defense movement's emphasis on difference largely discovered through class discussions could certainly benefit the yogic tendency to erase difference in favor of uncritically celebrating unity. In turn, the commitment that yogis make to nonviolent communication provides a model of peaceful activism that the self-defense movement could stand to adopt. While both movements help people make individual changes and increase their abilities to be productive citizens, each needs to re-evaluate their promises to transform the world. As they do so, they should turn to feminist theories of domestic violence that emphasize the importance of institutional changes and unveil the significant problems associated with essentialist rhetoric.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Normalization*, Ladelle McWhorter argues that in order to oppose oppressive societies, it is necessary to “cultivate a new way of life that stands counter to them” (190). If McWhorter is right, critiquing domestic violence by depicting battering homicides that result in the death of the abuser can be problematic for the feminist movement to end violence. This is especially true of texts that embrace revenge or, at the very least, contain vengeful overtones. How can one critique domestic violence while embracing, however seriously, other forms of violence?

The problems that can arise from such depictions have been well documented in the previous chapters. As feminist legal theorists, such as Elizabeth Schneider, have pointed out, when women kill their abusive husbands, they are more likely to be convicted if judges, juries, or lawyers suspect that they have acted vengefully. These suspicions may not just arise from the facts of the case being judged; literature and popular culture that suggest that women who kill are necessarily vengeful may be present in the minds of citizens serving in the court system, informing the way they view female defendants. Feminist literature that depicts battering homicides also poses

problems for male batterers as batterers are often portrayed as monstrous individuals who have little chance of rehabilitation. As groups such as MANALIVE have shown, batterers can be rehabilitated and contribute to the movement to end violence by teaching other violent men how to unlearn their violent impulses.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that literary texts that depict battering homicides do nothing but cause problems for women and men in the legal system. A number of the texts I have examined critique problems that are related to domestic violence. Texts such as the Dixie Chicks' "Goodbye Earl" and LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker* emphasize how important it is to rebuild our communities so that violence no longer flourishes within them. They envision communities where a number of different kinds of voices and bodies are validated, radically challenging ideas about the universal citizen that the State supposedly represents and protects. But instead of simply celebrating their feminist rebellion, we need to be careful about how we read these texts, keeping feminist theories about domestic violence and legal theory in mind.

While the tendency to celebrate vengeful overtones is problematic, it is also understandable. To some degree, feminist identity formation and empowerment have been associated with violence and rebellion, which is often read as revenge. Fun texts such as Maurine Watkins' *Chicago* depict violent and independent female characters that delight us for the way they treat men as expendable as women are so often treated in popular culture. Other more serious texts such as Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat" and Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* connect independence with violence as they critique abusive relationships without any avenue of escape to freedom except the one found through

murder. In different ways, these texts connect violence with feminism, allowing for an association between them that scholars need to be critical about.

Other texts and institutions also teach us that revenge and punishment are empowering and transformative. As I discussed in chapter three, the criminal justice system suggests that victimization should be answered with punishment, which often contains vengeful overtones. Additionally, revenge is a theme played out in a number of popular texts. As Carol Clover notes, “vengeance may very well be the mainspring of American popular culture, from westerns and *Dirty Harry* to teen comedies and courtroom dramas” (115). The environment created by these texts and institutions encourages us to imagine vengeance against those who hurt us. It may be part of the reason why women in recovery from domestic violence go through a period in which they fantasize about avenging themselves by killing or harming the people who abused them. As Judith Herman notes, a victim of violence often “imagines that revenge is the only way to restore her sense of power” (189). While revenge fantasies may initially feel empowering, eventually they often “exacerbate the victim’s feelings of horror and degrade her image of herself” (Herman 189). Because of this problem (and others related to revenge fantasies), victims of domestic violence need to look for other ways to empower themselves.

A number of the texts and movements considered in this dissertation offer ways to transform the self that preclude revenge. *The Color Purple* makes this offering more clearly than any other text I consider. The novel not only shows us that impulses towards revenge can be replaced with physical, creative acts like sewing, it also shows

us that we must continually work against our impulses towards revenge. The desire Celie has to kill Albert is not entirely different from the initial desire she has to “scratch [the hair] right off [Shug’s] head” when Shug leaves her for a young man. But the novel encourages us to abandon these kinds of urges as Celie replaces her fantasies of revenge with sewing and companionship with people who offer her empowering love. While *The Color Purple* illustrates the way revenge fantasies can be replaced with creative actions better than any other text discussed in the previous chapters, both “Goodbye Earl” and *Shell Shaker* also offer non-violent ways to transform the self. The video for “Goodbye Earl” illustrates how dancing, enjoyable employment, and laughter can help a person recover from abuse. *Shell Shaker* shows how it is crucial for American Indian women to reconnect with their spiritual heritage as they recover from abuse. Traditions such as shell shaking, singing, and even cooking offer transformative potential. While these texts enact their own revenge fantasies, they perform transformative acts that incorporate forgiveness instead of revenge.

The popular yoga and self-defense movements also provide ways for women to physically and emotionally transform themselves from feeling victimized to feeling empowered. Yoga classes teach survivors of violence how to control their emotions, how to tap into their breath when they are angry rather than resorting to violence. Through sharing different womens’ experiences of violence, self-defense classes challenge the model of the universal citizen that is so damaging to women in and out of court. Both movements also have their problems. The yoga movement sometimes lapses into essentialism, suggesting that all women (indeed all people) are the same, and

self-defense feminists occasionally embrace violent imagery and rhetoric without considering the way vengeance complicates (and can endanger one's plea of) self-defense. If either movement considers these problems and addresses them, they will increase their transformative potential and further help the movement to stop domestic violence.

Just as Ladelle McWhorter encourages us to develop experiences of pleasure that stand counter to the networks of power we wish to oppose, she warns us to be wary of lapsing into transcendentalism. She asks, "Will I be able to develop an ethics that affirms itself as a practice of freedom and that does not hide behind illusions of stasis or transcendentalism?" (198). This question can serve as a warning to texts like *The Color Purple* or those found within the popular yoga movement. An ethics that opposes a violent world cannot ever be complete and should not assume an inflexible form. As the video for "Goodbye Earl" warns us, violence will continue to work its way into society even after today's critiques of it have been validated and society has been reshaped in response.

The lessons these texts leave us challenge teachers and scholars of American feminist literature to be critical of our own impulses towards revenge and, just as importantly, to our own conclusions about how to respond to violence. While imaginary vengeance may delight us, I think it is important for us to ask ourselves how much that pleasure makes us complicit with a violent and vengeful society. As we encourage our students to engage in the same reflection, we would do well to consider how this critique extends beyond the classroom and how much the movement to end

violence depends upon it. Revising social institutions and belief systems so that they no longer engender violence is a hefty task that will have to be undertaken by many. The critique of vengeance in feminist forms can play a small but crucial role in their revision.

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