

CHAPTER I

A STEPPING STONE TO VOICE: THE SHIFTING ANSWERS TO THE FORBIDDEN STORY RIDDLE IN “NO NAME WOMAN”

In the opening lines of “No Name Woman,” the first essay¹ in Maxine Hong Kingston’s memoir The Woman Warrior, the narrator’s mother issues a stern directive to her Chinese-American daughter: “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born’” (3).² Simple and succinct, these four lines play a disproportionately large role in both the essay and the memoir. For one, they establish “No Name Woman” as a text that calls attention to its frame. The essay is in part about the process of its own narration—more specifically, about the perils involved in its own narration. For another, this beginning inscribes the narrator’s conflict with her mother into the very structure of

¹ I have chosen to call “No Name Woman” an essay rather than a chapter or story. Following Kingston’s lead, I will also refer to The Woman Warrior as a memoir in spite of the considerable and widespread doubt that exists on that front (see, for instance, Wong, Quinby, Lidoff, and Nishime). Finally, though it might seem a contradiction given my choice to refer to the text as a memoir, I will call the speaker of the text “the narrator” rather than Maxine or Kingston, as so many other critics do. Nowhere in the text is it ever said that the narrator is named Maxine, which leads me to believe that Kingston may be being deliberately coy on the subject—an idea that gains traction when we consider that the first essay of the work is entitled “No Name Woman.” After all, it is never explicitly stated that this title refers to the aunt rather than the narrator.

² Much has been written about this beginning. Smith, for instance, calls it “that interdiction of female speech, uttered in the name of the father” (1060). At a later point I will discuss Cheung, who also writes about Kingston’s opening lines.

the narrative. Because, of course, after the mother forbids the narrator to retell the tale that she is about to tell, there the narrative is, in print for all of us to see. The fact that we are reading the narrative serves as testimony that the mother's words have been scorned; the essay itself is proof that her attempts to impose her will upon her daughter are in vain. Indeed, were it not for the fact that the entire text of The Woman Warrior is suffused with the narrator's sorrow at her ongoing conflicts with her family, we could read the unfolding of the mother's story at the start of the memoir as the narrator flaunting her rebellion to the dictates of the family.³

I would place Kingston's essay, which was published in 1977, in a narrow but illustrious tradition of narratives, all of them by ethnic writers at a time before Asian-American and African-American writers such as Amy Tan, Toni Morrison, and Terry McMillan had become staples on best-seller lists around the country. By beginning with a reference to a dangerous secret, these texts position the narrative to come simultaneously as a confidence and as a betrayal of trust. James Weldon Johnson's Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, which was published in 1912, Morrison's The Bluest Eye, which came out in 1970, and Alice Walker's The Color Purple, which was published in 1982, all belong to what I will refer to as the "forbidden story" tradition. A form of the riddle narrative that is both relatively rare and unusually specific, forbidden stories adhere to Barthes' formulations on the hermeneutic narrative: we read them in the

³ See also Smith, who quotes the narrator's statement that by being silent about this narrative, she colludes in her aunt's punishment—"there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have" (18). Smith then continues: "Now, however, at the moment of autobiographical writing, Kingston resists identification with mother and father by breaking the silence, returning to the story that marked her entrance into sexual difference and constituting her own interpretation of events. She comes to tell another story, seeking to name the formerly unnamed—the subjectivity of her aunt" (1061 emphasis added).

expectation—and because of our expectation—that our curiosity about this secret will be satisfied. Given that the dangerous secret of Johnson’s novel is that the narrator is passing as a white man, it may seem as if forbidden stories are not necessarily incest riddles. Yet because narratives of passing are shadowed by incest—a point which I will expand upon in chapter two—a key scene of Johnson’s novel features incest, and in a riddle form at that.

I said that forbidden stories are an unusually specific form. There are two more ways that the texts by Johnson, Walker, Morrison and Kingston resemble each other: they all feature first-person narrators from historically disenfranchised groups, and they all riddle with the theme of miscegenation as well as incest.

Forbidden Stories

In the opening of An Ex-Coloured Man, Johnson’s narrator says that “I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life, the secret which for some years I have guarded far more carefully than any of my earthly possessions....”

(3). The first line of The Bluest Eye, a narrative about incest, is “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941” (5). As Morrison explains in the afterword, the idea of secrecy is essential to this opening.

The words are conspiratorial.... It is a secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us. The conspiracy is both held and withheld, exposed and sustained. In some sense it was precisely what the act of writing the book was: the public exposure of a private confidence. In order to comprehend fully the duality of that position, one needs to be reminded of the political climate in which the writing took place, 1965-69, a time of great social upheaval in the lives of black people. The publication (as opposed to the writing) involved the exposure; the writing was the

disclosure of secrets, secrets “we” shared and those withheld from us by ourselves and by the world outside the community.

The opening of The Color Purple also holds out the promise of a dangerous secret. “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (1) is the beginning of a text which is based on diary entries that Celie, the poor, uneducated African-American girl who is raped by her “Pa,” addresses to God. One parent commanding silence and secrecy in the name of the other⁴: this opening clearly bears a striking resemblance to Kingston’s.

Morrison’s afterword is testament that there is a sense of danger that comes with revealing the secrets of a community. That these writers tell such secrets throws into relief the issue of what speech in this instance costs them and, in turn, what it gains for them; it makes us think about why, and how strongly, they feel compelled to use their voice. The issue of voice is further complicated by the kinds of characters these narrators are. As King-Kok Cheung points out, the protagonists of both The Color Purple and “No Name Woman” face enormous obstacles when it comes to writing: “Celie (an unschooled black) and Maxine (a Chinese American struggling to learn English) must overcome forbidding sexual, racial, and linguistic barriers” (163). The narrator of The Bluest Eye, a poor African American girl who is Pecola’s friend, and the protagonist of Johnson’s novel, an African American living at the start of the 20th century who is the son of a slave, face similar barriers. The openings of these narratives speak at once to the hurdles, both historic and personal, that the respective narrators face; the perils of

⁴ As Berlant says, the line is “ambiguously placed...hovering above the text proper...in italics.... The disembodied voice pronounces a death threat against Celie’s mother, and holds Celie hostage; it is never directly attributed to ‘Pa,’ but we learn through linguistic repetition that it must be his” (838).

narration for them; and their deep need to tell these forbidden patriarchal narratives—after all, they all persevere with the telling of the story despite the explicit and dire warnings they receive against it.

The racial barriers that these narrators face are also apparent in what I would describe as the intertwining of incest and miscegenation: the way the themes play off each other and, at times, merge. In The Bluest Eye, the incest theme dominates, but racial anxiety is an important subtext. Take, for instance, Pecola's fervent wish for blue eyes, a signifier for whiteness. While she does not at any point evince a sexual desire for a white person, she wants to be white with a craving which is characterized as sexual. Thus she loves the candies called Mary Janes, at least in part because of the picture of a girl that adorns their wrappers: "Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort.... To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane.... Three pennies had bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane" (50). Pecola's desire for whiteness becomes a literal hunger, the appeasement of which is rendered as sexual pleasure. Racial envy and anxiety pervade the novel in other ways as well. To give just one example, there is the figure of Maureen Peal, a mulatta girl in the school, who is described as a "high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back" (62)—the almost offhand reference to lynching attesting to the strength of the narrator's hatred and fear.

In The Color Purple, Celie finds out eventually that the man she knows as Pa is not, in fact, her biological father; at the same time she also discovers the circumstances which led to her real father's death. She hears this account from her sister, who tells her

the story in the form of an epistolary fairy tale. “Once upon a time, there was a well-to-do farmer who owned his own property near town,” writes Nettie.

And as he did so well farming and everything he turned his hand to prospered, he decided to open a store.... Then the white merchants began to get together and complain that this store was taking all the black business away from them.... And so, one night, the man’s store was burned down, his smithy destroyed, and the man and his two brothers dragged out of their homes in the middle of the night and hanged. (180-81)

Celie does not dwell for long on the way her biological father died. Still, it is clear that many of the considerable travails she has suffered in her life—her mother’s mental instability and her decision to marry the degenerate “Pa” in the wake of her loving, prosperous husband’s sudden death; Celie’s sexual abuse by Pa; the two children she gives birth to as a result of the abuse, and their subsequent disappearance—can be traced back to the lynching. That was the starting point, the origin of the misfortunes of her life. Yet instead of disturbing Celie, the information about her father’s death lifts an immense weight. The knowledge that Pa’s sexual abuse was not biological incest does not, of course, erase the brutality of the rapes that she endured, but it still seems to liberate her.

Lauren Berlant tells us that “This complex substitution of paternal tales effectively frees Celie to reclassify her early experience of sexual violence as a misunderstanding. Incest, the collapse of structural taboos that ensure the sexual and economic dissemination of the family, is also a figure for the primal illiteracy with which she has been afflicted” (840).⁵ As she also points out, lynching carries a strong element

⁵ The new information about Pa leads to Celie’s recovery from incest—a recovery that seems problematically too quick and easy to me; the fact that Nettie frames her story in a fairy tale structure seems all too fitting here. But Berlant claims that “The perversion that marked Celie’s entry into consciousness had circumscribed her understanding of the

of sexuality: “Lynching was the act of violence white men performed to racialize—to invoke the context of black inferiority and subhumanity—the victim; the aura of sexual transgression is also always produced around the lynched by the lynchers, white men guarding the turf of their racial and sexual hegemony” (841). In other words, the false paternal tale of incest has been replaced by the true paternal tale of lynching; the narrative of incest, a story about the evils of the domestic sphere, has been transformed into a narrative about racial anxiety, a story about the evils that take place in the national front.

In An Ex-Coloured Man, the theme of miscegenation holds sway for most of the narrative, with white women serving as a powerful, ultimately irresistible attraction to the racially mixed—and racially mixed-up—narrator. Yet in one arresting scene, the threat of incest becomes conflated with the possibility of miscegenation. Kenneth Warren notes “the employment of the Faust myth in tales of ‘passing’ like...Johnson’s Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man” (159), and I would suggest that passing comes at a cost because it is always predicated upon an obfuscation or denial, willful and otherwise, of origins. In the case of An Ex-Coloured Man as well as other texts, what this Faustian bargain demands in exchange for passing as a white man is the threat of unwitting incest.

In Johnson’s novel, the narrator goes one night to see, significantly, Faust. His attention soon shifts from the drama to the woman sitting beside him. As a white woman, she is socially beyond his pale, as it were, but her beauty nevertheless distracts him from

world.... Thus it is understandable that the new tale of paternal origins empowers Celie—because Pa is not pa. Having eliminated the perversion from her memory of being raped by her stepfather, the rapes themselves seem to disappear. Celie then recovers from the guilt and shame that had stood in the way of her ‘right’ to control her body and her pleasure” (840).

the music. “[S]he was so young, so fair, so ethereal, that I felt to stare at her would be a violation,” he declares; “yet I was distinctly conscious of her beauty.” But when he looks beyond her to the man sitting on her other side, the narrator undergoes a shock of recognition, followed by a shock of another kind: “Yes, there he was, unmistakably, my father! ...What a strange coincidence! ...Before I had recovered from my first surprise, there came another shock in the realization that the beautiful, tender girl at my side was my sister” (134). A beautiful, tender girl he is clearly attracted to, and one who is, as his sister and as a racial other, forbidden to him on two counts⁶: the threats of incest and miscegenation have blurred together to create one alluring albeit doubly taboo figure.

Like Walker’s, Morrison’s, and Johnson’s narratives, “No Name Woman” lures us at the start with the promise of a dangerous secret; it, too, addresses the theme of miscegenation as well as incest. Yet there is one striking difference between Kingston’s text and the other three. In the novels by Walker and the others, the answer to the narrative’s riddle is unambiguously delivered; we have no doubt about what constitutes the dangerous secret in question. In “No Name Woman,” by contrast, it is difficult to divine what the forbidden story is. From the mother’s point of view, the secret that should not be repeated concerns the aunt, who is never named, and the shame she brought upon the family with her pregnancy. Yet the narrator also tells other forbidden secrets in the course of the essay, and there is considerable ambiguity about which of them constitutes the worst betrayal of the family’s confidence: while dangerous secrets abound

⁶ Even though the narrator is saved from the threat of incest by his timely recognition of his father, this encounter signals to us the hazards of passing. The scene suggests that if the narrator only paid more attention to the cautionary tale unfolding on stage, and less to the attractive but verboten woman next to him, then he would realize that he was being punished for failing to accept his identity.

in “No Name Woman,” clear sign-posts about which of them is the most important do not. What is the forbidden story of “No Name Woman,” why is it so difficult to uncover, and what, if anything, are the implications of the ambiguity surrounding it?

The Forbidden Secret of “No Name Woman”

Early in “No Name Woman” we learn that the narrator’s aunt, who is never named, was attacked by the people of her village for the unmistakable sign of adultery: her ballooning stomach, years after her husband had left for America to make his and his family’s fortune. The specter of incest is first invoked when the narrator, speculating on the relationship that led to the pregnancy, tells us that sibling incest was a common practice in the Chinese community of her aunt, parents, and grandparents: “Among the very poor and the wealthy, brothers married their adopted sisters, like doves” (12). Using another, though less innocent, avian metaphor, the narrator then hypothesizes that the men of the family were beset by lustful feelings towards the aunt: “Even as [my aunt’s] hair lured her imminent lover, many other men looked at her. Uncles, cousins, nephews, brothers would have looked, too, had they been home between journeys. Perhaps they had already been restraining their curiosity, and they left, fearful that their glances, like a field of nesting birds, might be startled and caught.” After acknowledging that poverty was the primary reason these men went overseas, the narrator adds a telling qualifier: “But another, final reason for leaving the crowded house was the never-said” (10).

In the narrator’s vision of China, incest is both taboo and economic necessity, both constant danger and ubiquitous temptation; the village is small and homogenous,

with nary a person of another color, culture, or even extended family around.

Commenting on her aunt's lover, the narrator writes that

He may have been somebody in her own household, but intercourse with a man outside the family would have been no less abhorrent. All the village were kinsmen, and the titles shouted in loud country voices never let kinship be forgotten. Any man within visiting distance would have been neutralized as a lover—"brother," "younger brother," "older brother"—one hundred and fifteen relationship titles. Parents researched birth charts probably not so much to assure good fortune as to circumvent incest in a population that has but one hundred surnames. Everybody has eight million relatives. How useless then sexual mannerisms, how dangerous. (11-12)

Three essential points: first, as if to bely its status as the "never-said," incest is flatly, even anticlimactically said in this passage. Second, the community is attempting to sexually neutralize the men in the community through the term "brother"—with scant success. The sexuality of these men is so strong that even a reminder, through the loud incantation of the term "brother," of the taboo that they threaten to break is not enough to rein their lust in. We have no choice but to conclude that it was an incestuous relationship that led to the aunt's pregnancy, which in turn caused her to be stoned by the village and abandoned by her family and her "brother" lover, and to feel as if—or, more precisely, to understand that—suicide and the murder of her child were the only options available to her. After all, intercourse with someone outside her household would be "no less abhorrent": he still would be kin.

The third point I would make about this passage concerns its last sentence, "How useless then sexual mannerisms, how dangerous." With its air of resignation, this phrase seems to be halfway between a shrug and a sigh, but it contains within it a remarkable progression in thought. The phrase says first that if everyone in the country is related to

each other, sexual mannerisms are useless, presumably because they will never lead anywhere; it then reverses its position to suggest that if everyone in the country is a relative, sexual mannerisms are dangerous, incest their inevitable result. That is, the narrator moves from imagining a scenario in which the incest taboo triumphs, holding all forbidden desires firmly in check, to the acknowledgment that such a scenario is a fantasy—that there is no way the taboo could withstand such pressure.

It is at this critical point—the moment at which she admits the ultimate inefficacy of the incest taboo—that the narrator transitions into a commentary on her own life as a woman of Chinese descent living in America, specifically the interracial threat that she herself faced as a schoolgirl surrounded by “Caucasian, Negro, and Japanese” boys. “As if it came from an atavism deeper than fear, I used to add ‘brother’ silently to boys’ names,” she confesses. “It hexed the boys, who would or would not ask me to dance, and made them less scary and as familiar and deserving of benevolence as girls.” Despite her use of the word “hexed,” with its connotations of cursing, the term “brother,” as she conceives it, falls squarely in the category of white magic. “But, of course, I hexed myself also—no dates. If I made myself American-pretty so that the five or six Chinese boys in the class fell in love with me, everyone else...would too” (12), she says, explaining how the incantation worked too sweepingly on her classmates. She ritualistically employs the term in order to domesticate and even emasculate these strange boys, to transform them into entities that feel known, friendly and, above all, safe to her—she is endeavoring, in short, to confer upon them the conventional attributes of family.

But if the narrator was leery of dating boys of other races, if she actually wanted to render them into reassuringly asexual beings, it seems a dubious choice to hex them with a term that has been so problematized in the preceding pages. After all, the term proved completely ineffective as a shield against the sexually dangerous family of the narrator's unfortunate aunt. Leaning on this particular title to ward off a sexual threat, investing it with what can only be described as talismanic power, seems perplexing and perhaps even deliberately self-defeating. "Sisterliness, dignified and honorable, made much more sense" (12), the narrator declares in reference to her classmates. If she wanted them to be sexually neutral beings, the story about her aunt—a tale that folds within it a covert incestuous threat—makes a thought-provokingly illogical context for such a line: what she has told us heretofore hopelessly compromises "sisterliness" as a term denoting a dignified, honorable, and above all chaste state. Sexual indifference cannot be what the narrator wanted from these boys.

Incest, a shameful pregnancy, a violent attack which the family did nothing to prevent, suicide and infanticide: which aspect of the story qualifies as the true forbidden secret; which part is being deemed the unspeakable? It seems as if the answer to this question should be incest—the references to it are frequent, and the narrator calls it the "never-said" besides. Then, too, there is the fact that the aunt's lover—her kinsman—stood by and said nothing as she was attacked by the village and as she gave birth alone, then killed herself and her child: given the extent to which The Woman Warrior is focused on the largely negative hold that a family can exert on an individual, it makes sense that the forbidden story that the narrator tells would be about how family love can become extreme, destructive, and obscene. Indeed, the narrative of incest in "No Name

Woman” could plausibly be read as a metaphor for how oppressively tight the bonds of family can be.

I will argue in the forthcoming pages that contrary to expectations, the forbidden secret that the narrator passes on to us in “No Name Woman” involves something taboo that the narrator herself experiences, and not a horror that her unknown aunt endured. More precisely, Kingston suggests through the framing of “No Name Woman” that the secret she tells is going to be incest, but then overturns the form and our expectations to tell a forbidden narrative of interracial desire.

In giving us shifting answers to the narrative’s riddle, Kingston subverts the forbidden story form to powerful effect, and a central goal in this chapter is to illuminate the different ways in which this subversion is significant. For one, the shift that Kingston effects highlights the relationship between the themes of incest and miscegenation. I will contend that it is not a coincidence that the themes are found together in “No Name Woman” and the other forbidden stories—nor that the telling of one transgression slides into the telling of the other. The two transgressions, which appear as an odd-couple coupling across different literary traditions, often collapse or blur into each other. A goal in this chapter is to investigate the relationship between the two taboos and to explore why they are so often paired together.

The way in which the secret of “No Name Woman” shifts from incest to miscegenation is also critical because it suggests a new way to read the essay and the memoir. I discussed how important the issue of voice is for the protagonists in the forbidden stories; arguably the most important theme in The Woman Warrior is the

narrator's struggle to find her voice. By beginning with the mother's injunction not to tell, Kingston suggests how the narrator must break through familial, cultural, and personal barriers in order to unleash her tongue. The violation, fraught and perilous, of strictures against speech is framed as the necessary first step to the process of narration; the telling of her own forbidden secret is the next. The path to the narrator's achievement of voice continues from there. I would emphasize that the fact that the forbidden secret at the start of the essay seems to be incest but turns out to be interracial desire speaks not just to Kingston's subversion of the forbidden story form of Walker et al: by replacing the dangerous secret that her mother tells with one of her own, Kingston's narrator is also subverting and co-opting her mother's narrative. As I will argue, just as her telling of incest enables her telling of miscegenation, so too does her co-opting of her mother's narrative enable the rest of the memoir.

The rest of this chapter will be divided into three parts. In the first I explain how the theme of miscegenation pervades "No Name Woman," infiltrating the aunt's narrative in what I would argue are unexpected ways—after all, the population of the aunt's village is so racially homogeneous that incest is by necessity the default for any relationship; the very conditions in which she lives would seem to preclude miscegenation. I will propose that it is through the infiltration of the miscegenation theme that the telling of incest slides into the telling of miscegenation. In the second part of the chapter I explore the relationship between incest and miscegenation with a view toward understanding why they are so often paired together, and why the telling of one enables the telling of the other. Finally, in a section which examines how the narration of incest can empower a

speaker, I trace the development of the narrator's voice over the course of The Woman Warrior.

Interracial Desire in "No Name Woman"

In "No Name Woman," the narrator tells us that the village her unnamed aunt lives in is in the throes of a crisis. Foremost among the litany of ills is the loss of the male population: the village's dire poverty has driven the men of the younger generations to cross the border and go to America in search of greater fortunes, and their mass exodus—allegedly temporary but potentially permanent—has thrown the community into a state of deep anxiety. In the narrator's words, "If my aunt had betrayed the family at a time of large grain yields and peace, when many boys were born, and wings were being built on many houses, perhaps she might have escaped such severe punishment. But the men—hungry, greedy, tired of planting in dry soil, cuckolded—had had to leave the village in order to send food-money home" (13). The men's journey to the west is presented as a dreary necessity in this passage, but the pull that the west exerts on the people of the village haunts the text.

The narrator's mother explains that "In 1924 just a few days after our village celebrated seventeen hurry-up weddings—to make sure that every young man who went 'out on the road' would responsibly come home—your father and his brothers and your grandfather and his brothers and your aunt's new husband sailed for America, the Gold Mountain" (3). Perhaps it seems a stretch to call this reference to America a reference to a racial other, and a racial other which will pose a sexual threat at that. But in the mother's telling of the tale, that is precisely the way the villagers view America: it is a

kind of sexual rival, its attractions necessitating precautions to ensure that the young men will come home. The villagers in fact arrange what is quite literally a counter seduction of their own: the “seventeen hurry-up weddings” are the community’s attempt to foil the sexual threat posed by the west. Whether or not this counter seduction works to bind the men to China, it does not bind the aunt to her husband. According to the narrator, “The night [my aunt] first saw him, [her husband] had sex with her. Then he left for America. She had almost forgotten what he looked like. When she tried to envision him, she only saw the black and white face in the group photograph the men had had taken before leaving” (7). The aunt’s marriage takes place because of the young man’s departure to the West, and at the same time it is effectively nullified by it.

The narrator conjectures that the difficult task of safeguarding the old ways of China fell to the women left behind, and that the aunt, as the only daughter, had to contend with particularly onerous familial expectations.

[H]er four brothers went with her father, husband, and uncles “out on the road” and for some years became western men.... [Her parents] expected her alone to keep the traditional ways, which her brothers, now among the barbarians, could fumble without detection. The heavy, deep-rooted women were to maintain the past against the flood, safe for returning. But the rare urge west had fixed upon our family, and so my aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space. (8)

The aunt was meant to be a weight, heavy and unmoving, to staunch the flood of change; instead she chose to cross a different boundary. The west is clearly being sexualized again in the last line of this passage, but I would stress that in appropriating the metaphor of national borders to describe a trespass of another ilk, the narrator equates the “rare urge west” specifically with the sexual desire that the aunt felt for the kinsman who

became her lover. This is a significant conflation, first because it reveals how the seemingly mutually exclusive attractions of interracial sex and incest can collapse together, and second because it suggests how the characters of Kingston's narrative oscillate between the two forbidden desires.

The men cross a physical and also racial border, "for some years [becoming] western men" in order to avoid incest; the aunt, frustrated in her longing to go westward, crosses another line altogether. Which is to say that the male relatives and the aunt end up taking different routes, yet the choices they are faced with are one and the same. The narrator's story about her aunt is, indeed, infused with a consciousness of borders—and the portrayal of these borders is fascinatingly ambivalent. Despite the hope they offer to the poverty-stricken village, their allure seems too compelling, and the people of the community feel sexually threatened by them as a result. In this context it is essential to remember that the narrator writes with the wisdom of hindsight. She knows that her father, who settled in America without ever returning to China, completely gave himself up to the siren call of the borders.

The threat of miscegenation lies outside the aunt's small insular community, drawing the men away; also in evidence are hints suggesting that the homogeneity and isolation of her Chinese village are under attack. Enumerating the hardships that beset the aunt's village, the narrator says, "There were ghost plagues, bandit plagues, wars with the Japanese, floods" (13). An earlier passage gives a more concrete form to the threat of the Japanese: "There were stories that my grandfather was different from other people, 'crazy ever since the little Jap bayoneted him in the head.' He used to put his naked penis on the dinner table, laughing" (10-11). The correspondence that this passage

establishes between the possibility of racial colonization and both violence and sexuality is remarkable. In placing his penis on the dinner table, the narrator's grandfather is aggressively, frighteningly, and quite literally thrusting his sexuality into the domestic setting—an act which inevitably calls up thoughts of incest. Once again we see how incest and an anxiety about race appear in tandem. The narrator continues the passage with another example of the grandfather's odd behavior: "And one day he brought home a baby girl.... He had traded one of his sons, probably my father, the youngest, for her. My grandmother made him trade back. When he finally got a daughter of his own, he doted on her" (11).⁷ His desire for a baby girl is packaged for us as part of the same craziness that makes him put his penis on the table. Since this craziness is a consequence of his run-in with the "little Jap," his relationship with the daughter he finally gets—who is, of course, the unnamed aunt—seems simultaneously shadowed by the racial encounter and tainted with incestuous desire.

Another way in which the theme of interracial desire finds its way into the aunt's storyline involves the baby she bears. In the scene of childbirth that the narrator imagines, the exact nature of the child at first seems oddly hard to pinpoint. "[My aunt] reached down to touch the hot, wet, moving mass," the narrator says, "surely smaller than anything human, and could feel that it was human after all—fingers, toes, nails, nose"

⁷ In *China Men*, her second memoir, Kingston returns to this narrative and expands upon it: "[My grandfather] began taking his penis out at the dinner table, worrying it, wondering at it, asking why it had given him four sons and no daughter, chastising it, asking it whether it were yet capable of producing the daughter of his dreams. He shook his head and clucked his tongue at it. When he saw what a disturbance it caused, he laughed, laughed in [his wife] Ah Po's irked face, whacked his naked penis on the table, and joked, 'Take a look at this sausage'" (21). That he is chastising his penis here is funny, of course, but disturbing, too, not least because it makes his desire for "the daughter of his dreams" seem sexual.

(14-15). With its description of a “mass” which “surely” cannot be human but then, lo and behold, turns out to be so after all, this passage seems innocently moving when read in one light: we could say that its movement from unidentifiable mass to recognizably human offspring, complete with all of its appendages, concisely reenacts the stages of a birth, and so succeeds in capturing a sense of the miracle of it.

Yet even after this line, the narrator continues to refer to the baby as “it.” She comments that “It turned its head this way and that until it found her nipple. There, it made little snuffling noises. She clenched her teeth at its preciousness, lovely as a young calf, a piglet, a little dog” (15). The use of this pronoun, the reference to snuffling noises, and comparisons to no fewer than three different animals: Kingston is going to great lengths to make sure we do not miss the implications of this portrayal. This characterization is revelatory when we consider what being figured as part animal and part human betokens in Kingston’s syntax. In “Shaman,” the third essay of The Woman Warrior, we hear about what the narrator describes as “a fantastic creature, half man and half ape, that a traveller to the west had captured and brought back to China in a cage” (84). Escaped from its cage, the ape-man, as it is called, is considered a danger to human beings. It runs wild in the forest, where it encounters the narrator’s mother. It is the same size as a human being, with “long orange hair and beard” (84); its buttocks are “tailless and hairless under the shirt.” As the narrator explains, “If her father had not brought Third Wife, who was not Chinese, back from his travels, my mother might have thought this orange creature with the great nose was a barbarian from the west. But my grandfather’s Third Wife was black with hair so soft that it would not hang, instead blowing up into a great brown puffball” (85).

Hard on the heels of this scene of racial and animal confusion comes a telling episode of a birth midwifed by the narrator's mother. In the narrator's words, "One boy appeared perfect, so round in the cool opal dawn. But when my mother examined him indoors, he opened up blue eyes at her. Perhaps he had looked without protection at the sky, and it had filled him. His mother said that a ghost had entered him, but my mother said the baby looked pretty" (85-6). The ambiguity of "ghost"—a term used for specters and foreigners alike—is evocative in this context. When the baby's mother says that a ghost had entered him, it is difficult to tell whether she is calling him a specter or a foreigner. In the end, the answer to this question is immaterial, since either way, he is not human: in the baby's mother's view, being born with blue eyes like a Caucasian rules humanity out. A third example of the narrator's representation of the racial other as animal involves the Japanese. The narrator observes that "[an] ancestor of the Japanese is said to be an ape that raped a Chinese princess, who then fled to the eastern islands to have the first Japanese child" (93)—a line which reinforces the link, first established in "No Name Woman," between the Japanese and brutal or, in this case, quite literally brute sexuality.

In "No Name Woman," the fact that the narrator is using the narrative of the aunt to tell a story of interracial desire is potently expressed in the representation of the aunt's baby. As if it were the product of an interracial coupling, it is being compared to an animal. If the narrator were to fail to heed her mother's dire warning, the stern message undergirding the cautionary tale about the aunt—"Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you" (5)—and if she took one of her non-Chinese classmates as her lover, the baby she would give birth to would similarly be

characterized as animal rather than human. The narrator asserts to us that she dreads this scenario; with her use of the ineffective term “brother” to hex her classmates into staying away and, most importantly, the references to the threat of miscegenation that she scatters through the narrative about her aunt, she suggests she is tantalized by it, too.

Miscegenation is a doughty presence in “No Name Woman” because Kingston’s narrator is using her aunt’s story as a way to tell her own. The aunt, who seems, as an unnamed woman, the subject of the essay, is in fact just a surrogate for the (also unnamed) narrator; Kingston’s focus is life in America rather than in China. A number of critics have suggested that in The Woman Warrior, Kingston is trying to come to terms with the “Chinese” part of herself. Hence we have Michiko Kakutani’s description of The Woman Warrior and China Men: “Mixing myth and family legends, facts and fantasies, [Kingston] made us understand what it is to live within two cultures—Chinese and American—and to belong to neither” (30). Kingston had never been to China when she wrote these two books, and in her essay “Cultural Mis-readings,” she rails against the racism of critics who believe that she is divided, her sense of self irreparably compromised, by the conflicting pulls of China and America. When Kakutani assumes that Kingston is actually writing about life within Chinese culture, she is misreading the memoir⁸: the narrator is, in fact, only speculating upon what could have happened to an aunt who may or may not have existed.

⁸ That this mistake has been made more than once becomes overwhelmingly clear in even the most casual perusal of Kingston scholarship. The criticism, leveled by Jeffery Chan among others, that Kingston is disseminating a false portrait of China has been met by a number of articles; Smith, Wong, Shostak, Furth, Ling and Quinby all incisively emphasize that Kingston is not reporting on China, but rather on a particular Chinese-

In China Men, her second memoir, Kingston describes China as “a country [she] made up” (87). “No Name Woman” is a narrative about a woman attempting to come to terms with a story bequeathed to her by her mother, and with a set of assumptions about China that she has inherited from the culture in which she lives. It is a narrative, finally, about a woman who is dealing with both this legacy and the conflicts in her life by riffing on her mother’s story about an unknown relative—it is imperative that we keep in mind that her aunt and her aunt’s village are creations of the narrator’s imagination. At one point the narrator declares that “Unless I see [my aunt’s] life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help” (8), and it is a measure of the extent to which their lives branch together that the aunt becomes the avatar of the narrator’s deepest desires—and, too, of her fears.⁹

In the essay’s beginning, the narrator clearly foregrounds the fact that she is trying to sift through her mother’s story in order to distinguish what is Chinese from what are merely cultural constructs. “Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things

American perspective on it. As Islas, Loke, and Iwata tell us, Kingston herself has made this point many times. Also suggesting that Kingston has constructed her own China are many of the articles on the issue of genre in Kingston’s work (Homsher, Nishime, Lightfoot, Melchior, Blinde, Neubauer, Juhasz, Rose, TuSmith); if Kingston is offering her own version of Chinese history and myths, as she herself has averred in interviews with Thompson and, in particular, Skandera-Trombley, characterizing her work as autobiography becomes problematic. The very fact that so many critics found a need to comment on this issue, as well as the insistence with which they have done so, speaks eloquently to how often Kingston’s work has been misread.

⁹ Griffiths remarks on the narrator’s sexual anxieties. She quotes the narrator imagining that she has inherited a physical scar from an ancestor who was hurt in a sexually traumatic situation: “I wanted to ask again why the women in our family have a split nail on our left little toe.... I made up that we are descended from an ancestress who stubbed her toe and fell running from a rapist. I wanted to ask my mother if I had guessed right” (198). As Griffiths observes, “Maxine suspects that she has inherited a propensity for sexual violation.... The split nail marks her body, making visible the vulnerability she feels beneath her skin” (358).

in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese?" she asks. "What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (6). These lines are tantamount to an announcement that her endeavor to recover the lives of her ancestors is limited. These lines inform us that she in fact cannot ever fully tease apart "what is peculiar to...one family" from "what is Chinese": she is inevitably compelled to read the narrative of her Chinese relatives through the prism of her life as a Chinese American.

The narrator's own situation directs the course of her meditation on her aunt. This story of family love gone wrong is the medium through which she conveys not only her ambivalence about family, but also the interracial desire that she is not supposed to feel, let alone discuss, and her own anxiety about that desire. As a result of this mediation, the "China" of the essay is at once a country which is purportedly so homogenous that incest is unavoidable, and a space that is pervaded by the suggestion of an interracial threat. Kingston is using the narrative of one forbidden subject—incest—as a vehicle to tell the story of another transgression; the theme of incest is but a means to say the real unsayable topic, interracial desire.

An Odd-Couple Coupling: The Telling of Incest and Miscegenation

I have said that incest and miscegenation are paired together in "No Name woman" and other forbidden stories. The pairing is not limited to this tradition: texts focusing on incest proliferate in contemporary African-American literature, with writers such as Ralph Ellison, Maya Angelou, Gayle Jones, Carolivia Herron and, of course,

Morrison and Walker spinning stories that center on this transgression. What is the connection between incest and race? I will discuss first the answers that Hortense Spillers and Elizabeth Wilson offer to this question and then the etymological roots of incest and miscegenation, and I will conclude by presenting my own formulations on the subject.

Spillers explains the preoccupation with incest in African-American literature by turning to history, arguing that because of slavery, the “romance” of the African-American family involves the finding and reclaiming of lost children. An African-American child was not allowed to take her father’s name under the laws of slavery, and as a result, Spillers claims, “the African father is figuratively banished; fatherhood, at best a cultural courtesy, since only mother knows for sure, is not a social fiction into which he enters” (130). Slavery once sundered the figure of the African-American father from his family, and the theme of incest reflects this loss: “If ‘family,’ on this historic occasion, describes, for all intents and purposes, a site of interdiction and denial, we could go so far as to say that the mark of incestuous desire and enactment—a concentrated carnality—speaks for its losses, confusions, and, above all else, its imposed abeyance of order and degree” (149).

That Spillers considers a literary fascination with incest to be one of the consequences of slavery is thought-provoking, particularly in view of a novel that came out after Spillers’ essay—Herron’s Thereafter Johnnie, which connects the sexual relationship between a black father and daughter to another relationship in their family’s past, one between a white slave owner and his black daughter, his slave. In suggesting a link between a contemporary case of incest and the past practice of raping black slaves,

Herron's novel seems to confirm Spillers' idea that the African-American perspective on the family has been ineluctably shaped by a history of oppression.¹⁰ Spillers' argument is compelling, but it falls short as a comprehensive theory of the relationship between race and incest, primarily because it does not take into account that incest flourishes as a theme not only in the fiction of African-American writers, but also in the works of their white Southern counterparts: incest looms large in the works of William Faulkner, while Cormac McCarthy and Dorothy Allison also tangle with the subject.¹¹ A preoccupation with incest in fact characterizes a startling number of texts permeated with an anxiety about interracial sex¹²; as a result the relationship between race and incest cannot be confined only to the historical pressures exerted on the African-American family.

Sander Gilman and Elizabeth Wilson also postulate a relationship between race and incest, but their theories, which involve the notion that the connection is both symptom of and support for the prejudices of a society, do not apply only to the African race. Gilman discusses the eroticization of the racial other in Victorian England, invoking the medical discourse and the literary metaphors of that period to suggest how blacks were associated with genitalia and Jews with incest.¹³ In an inquiry that focuses on a more contemporary period, Wilson brings class in to the discussion. She contends that incest has been marginalized to a particular race and class as part of a racist agenda:

¹⁰ See also Jones' Corregidora.

¹¹ There is Allison's Bastard Out of Carolina, Skin, and the story "Don't Tell Me You Don't Know"; McCarthy's Outer Dark, and Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury as well as Absalom, Absalom!.

¹² As Sollors points out: see in particular chapter 10, "Incest and Miscegenation."

¹³ See in particular chapters 3 and 4, respectively entitled "The Hottentot and the Prostitute" and "Black Sexuality and Modern Consciousness," in Difference and Pathology.

it has been portrayed as a narrative of the lower classes and of the racial other in order to shore up the hegemony of the white middle class.

According to Wilson, the public's attitudes towards the incest recovery movement have undergone a radical shift. Whereas the first women who stepped forward to claim that they had remembered a hitherto forgotten incest trauma in their past were met with support and sympathy, the women who do so now are met largely with skepticism.¹⁴ Wilson argues that the public's suspicions about the validity of these cries of incest abuse arise from the widespread conception that incest is an act that members of the dominant race and class do not engage in: "it is a vice of class and racial others who lack the rationality necessary to control their impulses" (38). Because the women who have claimed a recovery of memories of incest abuse are mostly middle-class and white, a significant portion of the population balk at accepting their claims; to believe them would involve relinquishing the moral and, consequently, social and political upper hand.

As evidence of the ghettoization of incest, a concept which she designates as "not in this house," Wilson describes a scene from Roman Polanski's Chinatown, a movie in which Mrs. Mulwray, played by Faye Dunaway, is concealing from Jake Gittes the fact that she had a child by her own father.

When Gittes and Mrs. Mulwray are lying in bed, she asks why it bothers him to talk...about the time he worked in Chinatown. "To me it was just bad luck," he replies, "You can't always tell what's going on." Turning to her, he adds, "Like with you." Then occurs a remarkable shot. Dunaway turns on her back, lowers her eyes, and stares off-camera, left-center. Her hair disappears behind her head, her eyes narrow to slits, and the otherness that she embodies takes a physical form. Lighting her so as to

¹⁴ For the psychiatric perspective on this issue, see Loftus.

accentuate her cheekbones and give her skin a yellow tone,
Polanski momentarily transforms her into a “Chinaman.”

The fact that Mrs. Mulwray has a racial cast in this shot serves as a necessary transition to the revelation that she and her father were in an incestuous relationship; without an association with a racial other, the occurrence of incest in the white, upper-class Mulwray family is not credible. In Wilson’s words, “Even though the film explodes the dominant ideology of ‘not in this house’ by representing an incestuous upper-middle class relationship, it cannot do so without distancing incest and attaching it to those long suspected of unnatural practices.... The inscrutability of the Chinese becomes the perfect metaphor for the secret of incest” (39).¹⁵

Wilson’s analysis of this scene from the movie is trenchant; her argument that there is a kind of cultural trope uniting incest with race, persuasive. Yet her formulations are limited: she does not attend to the possibility that incest and race share a connection outside the minds of the white middle class; her theory does not account for the disproportionately high number of incest texts in the African-American tradition.

Purity and Pollution: At the Roots of “Incest” and “Miscegenation”

¹⁵ As support to this reading, I would bring in the film’s ending. In the final scene, which is set in Chinatown, Evelyn tries to escape but is killed by the policemen who are on her father’s payroll. Her father, who has been trying to get his hands on his and Evelyn’s daughter Katherine, leads Katherine away from the crime scene, presumably in order to molest her. “Forget it,” says Jake’s partner as he leads Jake away. Then, as if to reassure him, he adds, “It’s Chinatown”: a peculiar comment, because even if that is where they are, what does Chinatown have to do with anything that just happened? What Jake’s partner seems to be suggesting is that all of the violent, sordid, and tragic events that have occurred in the past few days (most of them in places far removed) are because of Chinatown; what happened was not Jake’s fault, and it will not follow him out of this place of the racial other. As if to confirm these words, in the final image of the film Asian people fill in the space vacated by the crime scene, and quickly take over the screen.

For an explanation of the connection between incest and miscegenation, we can turn to the words' etymological roots. As Gilman points out, "incest" is rooted in the concepts of purity and pollution: "Incest in the German legal and forensic discourse of the fin de siècle is Blutschande, the violation of the blood" (Sigmund Freud 182). Giving the German as well as the Danish, Swedish, Czech and Hungarian versions of the term for incest, James Twitchell echoes Gilman with his observation that a variety of non-Romance languages "name corruption as an ineluctable result of an illicit act, and...locate that corruption literally in the blood."¹⁶

Werner Sollors' examination of the word's etymology demonstrates that the English term can be traced back to the idea of impurity of race—a concept that is clearly a close cousin to the notion of corrupt blood. In Sollors' words: "'Incest' derives from Latin incestus (in+castus), or 'impure, unchaste'.... The feminine form of Latin castus also became the Portuguese word casta, or 'caste,' a synonym for race and lineage...." (287). For evidence that the idea of incest as contamination has play beyond the perhaps esoteric province of etymology, we only need turn to the law. The legal scholar Leigh B. Bienen writes that the traditional statutes on incest

resemble pollution rules that strictly set out punishment and the social consequences for prohibited behavior, and then specify what needs to be done to purify the community and maintain the social order.... Purification rituals expiate the sin, guard against the wrath of the gods, and prevent the gods from taking revenge when they discover the forbidden has occurred. Punishment is not to reform or educate the offender. It is to appease the gods. (Defining Incest 1531)

¹⁶ For more etymologies, see W. Arens, who examines the nuances of the word incest in Chinese and Indonesian as well as English and German, with a view towards showing how the concept is "culture bound" (5).

Cleansing as well as punitive, these statutes speak to the idea that incest is both societal pollutant and criminal offense, a kind of filth that has to be ritualistically exorcised from the community.

Notably similar motifs appear in the etymology of the word miscegenation. Sollors explains that the term was first defined in opposition to racial purity, which in its most extreme form is incest; the word originated as part of a political ploy to stir up fear about the possibility of sex between blacks and whites: “[t]he word ‘miscegenation’ was made up in 1863 (out of Latin miscere, ‘to mix,’ and genus, ‘race’) by George Wakeman and David Goodman Croly in a political pamphlet published as part of a Democratic dirty trick in the Lincoln reelection campaign.” In the same passage Sollors refers to incest and miscegenation as “disparate” themes (287), but the fact that he invokes the notions of impurity and race in his definitions of both terms suggests that the two transgressions are actually not that disparate at all. Even at the time of the coinage of the word “miscegenation,” there may have been a sense that that transgression bore a resemblance to incest: according to Bienen, in the 19th century incest “was placed in a chapter or section with laws prohibiting miscegenation” (1534)—the implication being, as she says, that the offenses were considered alike.

The legal connections between the discourses of incest and miscegenation have a very strong basis in logic. After all, as their etymologies reveal, both transgressions are intrinsically concerned with the purity of blood. Indeed, in German the definitions of the two words blurred together at one point in a way that tellingly testifies to the similarities between them. Gilman traces the way in which the term changed during the course of the 19th century as follows:

The origin of [the concept of Blutschande] is that there is a real “pollution” of the blood by the sexual contact between relatives.... In the course of the nineteenth century this concept moves from signifying incestuous behavior to meaning the violation of the purity of the race. It is no longer the violation of the taboos created within the narrower definition of the social unity (such as the family); rather, it becomes a definition of the boundaries of the wider unity, such as the race. Commit Blutschande and you violate the newly biologically defined taboos inherent in the purity of the racial stock. (182-83)

In other words, since incest, like miscegenation, was thought to result in a contamination of blood, the evolution of the term for incest into the word for miscegenation only makes sense.

A Theory of the Intertwining of Incest and Miscegenation

An anxiety about interracial sex is inextricably linked to a propensity toward incest. A text displaying a fear of interracial sex is necessarily, albeit often elliptically, going to tell incest as well. This fact may well be the most important explanation for the prevalence of the incest theme in the literature of a region or culture, such as the American South, which has been historically troubled by fears of miscegenation. On a fundamental level, the way in which Southern texts oscillate between the poles of exogamy and endogamy makes sense. In a formulation that owes much to Douglas and her insights on purity and danger, I would argue that in such a tradition, it is the characters’ obsession with racial purity, their preoccupation with policing racial borders, and their eagerness to avoid contamination by alien bloodlines that propel them toward incest. Thus a man might marry a cousin rather than risk “tainting” his children with mixed blood, incest in this case an attempt to preempt miscegenation. Ironically, this

preemptive act can produce a pollution of another kind. So the corollary of this argument is that an anxiety about incest can provoke a romance with miscegenation, characters undertaking a search for the racial other in an effort to remove themselves from the attraction of the familiar, or the familial.¹⁷

According to this line of logic, the taboos of incest and interracial sex are mutually exclusive, with each transgression precluding the occurrence of the other.¹⁸ Yet as we have seen in Kingston's work and as we will see in Willa Cather's Sapphira and the Slave Girl in chapter two, these two seemingly opposite impulses can become paradoxically conflated. At one point, after quoting Hitler in Mein Kampf—"Blood sin and desecration of the race are the original sin in this world and the end of a humanity which surrenders to it" (emphasis Hitler's)—Gilman states that "Incest and racial pollution through crossbreeding are parallel sins for Hitler and for the time" (177-78). I would revise this idea of "parallel sins" by offering another metaphor: the themes of incest and interracial sex are two sides of the same coin, with the currency in question being an anxiety about the purity of blood.

Saying the Unsayable: The Development of Voice in The Woman Warrior

I have argued that the way in which incest and miscegenation blur together allow Kingston's narrator to use incest as a means to speak of miscegenation. The fact that

¹⁷ This concept carries a particular resonance vis-à-vis Faulkner, whose characters view whiteness as something to be prized and defended. See Sundquist and Sollors.

¹⁸ As my discussion of Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders below will suggest, my theories on the correlation between racial anxiety and incest translate smoothly into a discussion of class anxiety and incest. Whigham, in a superb reading of John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi, reaches similar conclusions to my own regarding the way a preoccupation with class distinctions surfaces as incestuous desire.

miscegenation rather than incest is the real forbidden secret in the essay is unexpected, given incest's status as taboo subject as well as taboo act—indeed, I would argue that in contemporary American culture, incest is the quintessential taboo subject. To quote an incest survivor on the subject of the transgression of speaking about incest vs. the transgression of committing it, “[In talking about incest], some may feel that I have breached an even greater taboo, crossed a bigger boundary...than incest” (qtd. in Janice Doane and Devon Hodges: 32). What does it mean to breach this taboo and say the unsayable? A number of theorists and literary critics suggest that speaking out about incest can result in gain. In Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire,¹⁹ Doane and Hodges argue that victims empower themselves and even their communities by testifying to their abuse; drawing on Judith Herman's work in

¹⁹ Despite the similarity of our titles, their book has little in common with this dissertation. The approach that Doane and Hodges take to incest narratives is sociological and psychological, which makes sense given their stated goal: “we hope to offer strategies for thinking about the multiple ways in which women have told incest stories and gained a hearing” (9). It is the work that psychotherapists such as Judith Herman have done and not literary theories which propel their ideas. That the conclusions they reach is principally about the psychological state of the victim and the public's attitudes toward the transgression can be seen in their taxonomy of incest narratives: “the ‘feminist incest story,’ the ‘recovery story,’ the ‘false-memory’ story, the ‘incest survivor memoir’” (2).

Although I would echo Doane and Hodges' statement that we are indebted to the work of Herman and others for an understanding of the importance of telling trauma, it is my sense that to repeat and reaffirm the psychologists' formulations using literary texts, while of course of considerable value in itself, underplays how intriguing incest narratives can be from a literary and theoretical perspective. But Doane and Hodges are, after all, interested in texts primarily in terms of the influence they wield over the social sphere—as proof of the frequency with which incest occurs, and as evidence of how and why it is difficult to speak out about it as well as how and why it is important to do so. Given the political emphasis they place on speaking out about incest, perhaps it is not all that surprising that their project overlooks the impact that incest can have on a text when it is said only as a way to tell an even more taboo narrative, as in “No Name Woman,” or even when—as in the case of the subject of the second chapter of this project, Sapphira and the Slave Girl—it remains the unsaid, not emerging even once in the narrative.

Trauma and Recovery, they suggest how important the narrativization of incest—in their words, “the individual’s belated reconstruction of the traumatic event” (63)—is to healing and recovery. Doane and Hodges also examine narratives that, in their words, “appropriate elements of the canonical American story about a beset individual’s (here an abused woman’s) heroic resistance to a constrictive social order that leads to the creation of a newly redeemed community” (6-7); they aver that in texts such as The Color Purple, characters cleanse and renew their communities by exposing and so putting an end to incest.

Houston Baker, in his reading of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, also suggests that narrating incest can result in gain—albeit of a different kind. As he notes, when the black sharecropper Trueblood brags to Mr. Norton, a rich white man, about how he slept with his daughter, he reaps material rewards:

Food, drink, tobacco, and audience time are commodities the sharecropper receives in barter for the commodity he delivers—his story. The narrative of incest, after its first telling, accrued an ever-spiraling exchange value. The Truebloods receive all the items enumerated earlier, as well as a hundred-dollar bill from Mr. Norton’s Moroccan leather wallet. (192)

Michael Awkward critiques this reading from a feminist vantage point, faulting Baker for failing to call adequate attention to the position occupied by the marginalized, silenced female characters, Trueblood’s wife and daughter, in this scene (84). Yet the disempowerment of the women in this passage only highlights that there is, in fact, much to be gained from talking about incest. It is because Trueblood’s wife and daughter are never given the opportunity to present their point of view that they fail to reap the benefits of speaking about incest.

The benefits of narrating incest are not only material; they also encompass the authority and attention that Trueblood gains as a result of his story. After learning that Trueblood's daughter and wife are pregnant by him, Mr. Norton rushes over to meet him, as though "compelled," says the narrator, "by some pressing urgency which I could not understand" (50). Mr. Norton then begs Trueblood, stammering with eagerness, for his story: "I, I...I must talk with you!" (52). Trueblood basks in the rapt attention of his audience. Spillers proposes that Trueblood is "in a stunning repetition crisis; in a riveting narrative obsession that resembles in every way the awful perambulatory nightmare of Coleridge's ancient mariner. Trueblood tells his story because he cannot help himself" (133-34). There is, in fact, every sign in the narrative that Trueblood enjoys telling the story, and none to suggest that he is driven out of compulsion. As Ellison tells us, once Trueblood settles into the story, "He talked willingly...with a kind of satisfaction and no trace of hesitancy or shame." He revels in his mastery of the art of storytelling: "He cleared his throat, his eyes gleaming and his voice taking on a deep, incantatory quality, as though he had told the story many, many times" (53). The pleasure he takes in speaking of incest is obvious. Indeed, I would suggest that for Trueblood, talking about incest, an act which includes the unburdening and "dissemination" of a secret as well as a sensation of relief, could be figured as a metaphorically sexual act in itself.

In "No Name Woman," telling incest does not seem to provide Kingston's narrator with material rewards or pleasure, nor is it important for the health of her psyche or her community. Still, the gains are significant. I will focus in this chapter on how Kingston's narrator's incest telling fuels and enables the narration of the entire text of

The Woman Warrior. It is by violating the parental injunction against speech that Kingston's narrator takes the first step toward gaining mastery of her voice, and it is by wresting the forbidden story form away from her mother and turning it into a story of her own, a story in which her own forbidden secret trumps her mother's, that she takes the second. The contest of wills between mother and daughter—a contest in which the stakes are the power to speak—does not end with these two steps: it is not until the very last words of The Woman Warrior that the conflict between them is resolved. Given how the narrator's telling of incest resonates through the memoir, it seems clear that if we are to understand the full impact of Kingston's incest narrative, we have to analyze the struggle for narrative authority that manifests itself as an intricate interplay—part battle, part music—of voices not only in “No Name Woman” but also in the other essays of The Woman Warrior. To this end, I will now turn to a discussion of voice in the memoir.

In “No Name Woman,” the story that the mother passes on to her daughter is a cautionary tale about a skeleton in the familial closet, and it is told in appropriately bare-bones form—although the mother, in what is clearly an effort to frighten the narrator into embracing chastity, takes care not to skim on the gory details of the aunt's punishment. As she tells her daughter, the villagers, “probably men and women we knew well” but attired in white masks, at first

threw mud and rocks at the house. Then they threw eggs and began slaughtering our stock. We could hear the animals scream their deaths.... Some of the faces stopped to peer at us, their eyes rushing like searchlights. The hands flattened against the panes, framed heads, and left red prints....

Their knives dripped with the blood of our animals. They smeared blood on the doors and walls. One woman swung a chicken, whose throat she had slit, splatting blood in red arcs about her. (4)

As if in competition with her mother's storytelling, the narrator takes this story—a story which is, of course, historically unverified and, given the mother's agenda, almost certainly embroidered—and fleshes it out step by step, trying out a series of alternative identities and lives for her aunt.

She begins by musing that her aunt probably had no choice but to partake in the relationship which led to her pregnancy: “Women in the old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil.” As the narrator speculates, her aunt was passive and helpless in the face of this man's command: “His demand must have surprised, then terrified her. She obeyed him; she always did as she was told” (6). Then, apparently discarding that version of events, the narrator moves on to a portrait of her aunt as a dreamer, tragic in her benighted pursuit of the ephemeral charms of romance: “For warm eyes or a soft voice or a slow walk—that's all—a few hairs, a line, a brightness, a sound, a pace, she gave up family.” She wonders briefly if her aunt was “a wild woman, [keeping] rollicking company,” but promptly dismisses that idea, proclaiming that “I don't know any women like that, or men either” (8).

From there, the narrator rewrites her mother's narrative further to build on the idea of her aunt in love, deciding that she must have made the decision to keep his name a secret, even after the villagers turned on her: “She kept the man's name to herself throughout her labor and dying; she did not accuse him that he be punished with her. To save her inseminator's name she gave silent birth” (11). The narrator stays with this image of the aunt as tragic but strong in her love and loyalty as she describes the scene in which her unknown ancestor gives birth and then kills herself and her child. In the morning, the narrator writes, her aunt carried her baby to the well. “Carrying the baby to

the well shows loving,” she tells us. “Otherwise abandon it. Turn its face into the mud. Mothers who love their children take them along” (15). Having presented us with a victim, a coquette, and a loving, loyal woman, the narrator tries out one last possible incarnation for her aunt at the end of the essay. For loving and loyal though she might have been in life, her aunt could also be malicious as a ghost: “I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute” (16). The narrator has revised her mother’s cautionary tale for her own purposes; she has turned this parental narrative into a sympathetic but still sharp-toothed reimagining of a woman hemmed in by a paucity of options—a loving, sexual, courageous but also angry woman.

The narrator thus retells her mother’s story twice: first as it is told to her, and second as she reimagines it. Either way, she is enacting her struggles with her mother; their generational, cultural, and personal clash is reflected in the clash between their narratives and their voices. The structure of this essay suggests that they are fighting over who has the right to speak about this long-gone female relative, a nameless woman who, I would emphasize, is never given voice herself: not once does she ever speak. In this context it is essential to keep in mind that the essay begins with the mother’s words, properly set off by quotation marks, but that by the bottom of the third page, the narrator has taken over the narration; to borrow a phrase from the end of The Woman Warrior, the beginning is her mother’s, the ending, hers. Furthermore, the narrator tells us that “The emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curses.... They must try to confuse their

offspring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways—always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable” (5). These words, as well as the competing narratives in this essay, demonstrate that the way in which the mother and daughter tell stories—which is, as know from narrative theorists, the way in which they make sense of their world²⁰—is fundamentally in conflict. Add that to the fact that Kingston’s narrator co-opts the mother’s forbidden story to tell her own secret, and it is clear that “No Name Woman” presents us with a daughter and mother engaged in a bitter contest of words and wills, a contest which is far from resolved by the end of the essay.

The essays that follow The Woman Warrior have moments which suggest that a family can be tender and nurturing, but for the most part they, like “No Name Woman,” are filled with hints, ranging from subtle to glaring, about how oppressive, crippling, and even fatally damaging families can be. In the second essay, “White Tigers,” the narrator casts herself as the heroine in the legend of Fa Mulan, the woman warrior. In this role she fights and vanquishes her community’s magical enemies; when she goes home, her fond and proud parents kill and steam a chicken “as if they were welcoming home a son” (34). The last portion of the essay, which begins with the effectively flat line “My American life has been such a disappointment” (45), chronicles the injustices—her sexist family and racist bosses—the narrator has witnessed and endured in her actual life. As this brief synopsis shows, in the first part of this essay, as in the second part of “No Name Woman,” the narrator gives her own spin on the story of another woman.

²⁰ As White proclaims, “Arising, as Barthes says, between our experience of the world and our efforts to describe that experience in language, narrative ‘ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted’” (2).

In “White Tigers,” the narrator focuses not just on the act of narration, but also on its close relative, the act of writing. To describe the setting in one scene of the Mulan story, she alludes to ideographs, which in turn calls attention to the fact that she is creating an image through words. She writes that “The call would come from a bird that flew over our roof. In the brush drawings it looks like the ideograph for ‘human,’ two black wings. The bird would cross the sun and lift into the mountains (which look like the ideograph ‘mountain’)” (20). Then, too, in a graphic passage later in the text, the narrator’s parents literally carve revenge onto her back before she goes into battle.

According to the narrator,

My father first brushed the words in ink, and they fluttered down my back row after row. Then he began cutting; to make fine lines and points he used thin blades, for the stems, large blades.

My mother caught the blood and wiped the cuts with a cold towel soaked in wine. It hurt terribly—the cuts sharp; the air burning; the alcohol cold, then hot—pain so various.... The list of grievances went on and on. If an enemy should flay me, the light would shine through my skin like lace. (34-35)

These words are a weapon in itself—she describes the writing later as “red and black files, like an army, like my army” (35)—presumably meant to help her effect political change and conquer the family’s enemies. The idea is that her body is the means by which her parents spread their message; she is a mouthpiece for them. I would emphasize that in this regard what happens in this essay replicates what happens in “No Name Woman”: as the narrator transmitted her mother’s story to us in that text, so too does she, as Fa Mulan, carry her parents’ writing to the world in “White Tigers.” The only significant difference between the narrator’s dissemination of her parents’ words in

these two works is that rather than forbidding her to tell their story, the fantasy parents of the second essay welcome and support her doing battle with their writing.

Still, grateful though the narrator seems to be at her parents' support, what does her filial obedience cost her? Katherine Hyunmi Lee observes that "Fa Mu Lan's body becomes doubly significant as a record of and tool against patriarchal oppression, and her tattoos are literal representations of the ways in which dominant culture historically has attempted to control women's bodies" (Lee 29). Patriarchal oppression is undoubtedly a part of what the narrator is fighting. Yet while the narrator fights for women's rights in the outer world both as a warrior and as her actual self, it is her parents who, in writing on her back, cause her such pain: the oppression that she is struggling against extends to her family as well. At the end of the essay, the narrator returns to the image of writing on her back to make a connection between the two identities that she gives herself. "The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar," she states. "What we have in common are the words at our backs.... The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words—'chink' words and 'gook' words too—that they do not fit on my skin" (53). This passage is rich in its ambiguity and, as Lee suggests, in its ambivalence as well.²¹ The narrator may be claiming that she, as a writer, is a warrior as much as Fa Mulan is—the wordswoman as swordswoman—but at

²¹ Lee discusses how Sidonie Smith reads this passage as being a fairly straightforward resolution to the rift between the narrator's fantasy warrior identity and her actual one: "Smith views this final connection as a resolution to the previous incompatibility between Maxine and Fa Mu Lan. She argues that Maxine conquers the confusion legend has wrought by substituting a pen for a sword." Lee's reading of the end of the essay is a far more equivocal one: "I interpret Maxine's observation as expressing ambivalence rather than (or perhaps alongside) triumph. While she draws a connection between herself and Fa Mu Lan, she also makes an important distinction: by claiming that she has 'so many words,' Maxine describes not just the power of the words that she wields but the power that words wield over her" (29).

the same time, to whom the vengeance is directed is not clear-cut. After all, the words in question include “chink” and “gook”; there is more than a hint about the toll that this writing exacts upon the narrator.

In “White Tigers,” then, in contrast to “No Name Woman,” the narrator is in control of the narration throughout, neither her mother nor anyone else competing with her to speak. But in that the narrator is talking about her duty to deliver to the world her parents’ words, words which were carved upon her and which caused immense pain, the narrative that she tells speaks once again to the conflict that she feels between her and her parents; clearly the struggle between the narrator and her parents over her voice and the stories that she tells is ongoing. The third essay in The Woman Warrior, “Shaman,” is about the mother as a younger woman living in China. In the beginning, this text is told from the narrator’s viewpoint with a few passages, marked by quotation marks, from her mother thrown in; the narrator seems a mouthpiece once more, relaying her mother’s story to us. Then, about six pages in, the narrator takes over the narration to tell a story about her mother and ghosts. Discussing how her mother hid from her classmates to study, she muses, “Maybe my mother’s secret place was the room in the dormitory which was haunted” (64), the qualifier that begins the sentence heralding the start of her contribution to the narrative.

Yet whereas the shift between the mother’s story and the narrator’s is signposted by quotation marks in “No Name Woman,” and in “White Tigers” by the shift between the conditional and the indicative tense,²² the line between the different narrative

²² The Mulan story begins with the conditional tense—“The call would come from a bird that flew over our roof” (20)—but eventually shifts to the indicative: “The door opened, and an old man and an old woman came out carrying bowls of rice and soup....” (21).

viewpoints is more blurred in the ghost story of “Shaman”; it is more difficult to tell whose version of the story we are hearing.²³ What is certain is that in “Shaman” the story is largely the mother’s, as if the narrator has ceded narrative control to her. The narrator does make an appearance, but only a brief one, at the very end of the essay, in a scene that apparently took place in the recent past; the narrator, an aging woman, is visiting her mother at home. In this passage the mother complains about her life and how her children do not come to visit often enough, the narrator gnashes her teeth with frustration—and then, almost at the very end, the mother calls her daughter “Little Dog” (108), an endearment which lifts a weight from the narrator and lightens the mood. Thus the essay ends on a scene of reconciliation, revealing to the narrator as well as to us that she and her mother are not as much at odds as she has been thinking that they are; as if reflecting their newfound harmony, they are given equal voice through the dialogue in the scene.

The fourth essay of The Woman Warrior, “At the Western Palace,” is even more solidly grounded in the mother’s narrative viewpoint than “Shaman” is. Even when the narrator disappears as a character for long stretches, the other three essays are in the first-person voice by virtue of such titles as “my aunt” and “my mother”: the possessive pronoun “my” not only serving to keep the narrator present in the text, but also defining

The last paragraph of the Mulan part of the essay moves back into the conditional tense—“From the words on my back, and how they were fulfilled, the villagers would make a legend about my perfect filiality” (45)—so that when she moves into the indicative tense for the American section, the difference between what is imagined and what is actual is clear.

²³ At the end of the ghost story, the narrator tells us that “When the smoke cleared, I think my mother said that under the foot of the bed the students found a piece of wood dripping with blood. They burned it. . . .” (75), the phrase “I think” suggesting that the narrator herself is unsure whose story version she tells.

the mother in relation to the narrator, as someone belonging to her. In “At the Western Palace,” by contrast, the narrative voice is omniscient, and the mother is referred to by her name, Brave Orchid. The narrator seems to have receded as a presence and a voice, as if yielding even more control to her mother; where we were constantly privy to the narrator’s reflections in the last three essays, in this work she is so elided as a character that we can only identify with the mother when she wonders “Who knew what [her children] were thinking?” (117). Not only is the story Brave Orchid’s; the narrator’s perspective does not even matter in the text. The contest of voices between them seems over, the story and narrative control belonging solely to the mother—or so, at least, it seems within the confines of the essay.

For as we learn in “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” the fifth and last essay of The Woman Warrior, the narrative that we read in “At the Western Palace” was not necessarily correct. The subject of the fourth essay, like that of the first, is the travails undergone by an aunt of the narrator’s. This aunt, though, has a name, Moon Orchid, and the story that is being told about her, unlike the one about the titular character of “No Name Woman,” does not seem to be more imagination than fact as we read. But at the start of the fifth essay, we learn that the narrator had far more of a hand in creating the narrative than we realized. “A Song” begins with these startling words: “What my brother actually said was, ‘I drove Mom and Second Aunt to Los Angeles to see Aunt’s husband who’s got the other wife’”—a statement which all too coolly lets us know that except for the fact that the mother and aunt did go to Los Angeles to confront the aunt’s husband, everything we heard in the last essay was a fiction. Dialogue consisting of voluble questions and unhelpful answers follows this startling announcement—for

instance, “Did she hit him? What did she say? What did he say?” is answered by “Nothing much. Mom did all the talking”—and then the narrator informs us that this dialogue, too, is a fiction. “In fact,” she says, her tone calm and matter-of-fact, “it wasn’t me my brother told about going to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he’d told her” (163). The account we hear in “At the Western Palace” is, then, a narrative made up by the narrator based on snippets she heard from her sister, who in turn had heard snippets from their brother: the “I” has returned to the narration, and with a vengeance, marking its territory by claiming credit for the story that we just read.

The beginning of “A Song” heralds that the theme of voice, which has waxed and waned throughout the book without ever either becoming the focus or disappearing long enough to be forgotten, is the main subject of this essay. As the narrator tells us, her mother cut off her tongue when she was young so she would not be tongue-tied, but not enough was cut off because she still has “a terrible time talking” (165). Then, after discussing how she and the other Chinese-American children were not able to talk outside of Chinese school, she hones in on one girl in particular, who would never talk at all. The silence of this girl, another no name female character, is an irritant to the narrator, who corners her in the bathroom one day and, in a disturbing scene, pulls her hair, pinches her cheek, and verbally goads her to talk. Still, vicious though she is to the girl, she cannot stop crying herself in the scene. As she writes, “Sniffling and snorting, I couldn’t stop crying and talking at the same time.... It seemed as if I had spent my life in that basement, doing the worst thing I had yet done to another person. ‘I’m doing this for your own good,’ I said. ‘Don’t you dare tell anyone I’ve been bad to you. Talk. Please talk.’” The last three sentences of this passage are intriguing. The first injunction the

narrator levies seems equivocal, given that it is apparently countermanded by what follows: the narrator warns the girl not to tell anyone about what she is doing, but at the same time tells her to talk. She is reproducing her mother's behavior—the first injunction reprises the command that her mother issues at the beginning of The Woman Warrior, “You must never tell anyone what I am about to tell you.” And as we know from the passage about the frenum, her mother also and perhaps contradictorily demands that the narrator talk, and talk well. So what do we make of this echo of the narrator's mother's words?

That the narrator replicates her mother's words in such a clearly abusive situation is thought-provoking. Were it not for the lines that follow, it might seem she is making a comment about how destructive her mother's behavior is. “I was getting dizzy from the air I was gulping,” the narrator continues. “Her sobs and my sobs were bouncing wildly off the tile, sometimes together, sometimes alternating” (181). The phrase that the narrator uses to describe the sound of the sobs of the two girls, “sometimes together, sometimes alternating,” is important; what the phrase invokes is the idea of music—more specifically, of a duet. And as the title of the essay, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” informs us, song—as an art form that relies on voice, a clear stand-in for writing—plays a vital part in this text. At the end of the essay, the narrator discusses the legend of a Chinese poetess, Ts'ai Yen, who was kidnapped and kept by a barbarian chieftain for twelve years. With him Ts'ai Yen gave birth to two children, who at first imitated her and laughed when she spoke in Chinese to them, but eventually began to listen and sing with her. The story of Ts'ai Yen is about children learning to respect and appreciate their

mother's songs, even when they do not understand all that is being said—a story, I would submit, much like The Woman Warrior itself.

It is also a story about the unlikely partnerships that produce art, and the unlikely partnerships that art can produce. The narrator explains that Ts'ai Yen's songs were based in part on the barbarians' flute music: "the barbarians heard a woman's voice singing...a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering." When Ts'ai Yen is finally released by her kidnappers and allowed to return home, she brings her songs back with her and, as the narrator tells us in the last lines of the memoir, one is "a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well" (209). The idea of music being created out of a contentious relationship is invoked again and again in The Woman Warrior. Just as Ts'ai Yen creates songs unlike any other by drawing on what she learns from the barbarians, her captors and enemies, so too does the narrator and the girl she torments create a duet out of the interplay of their sobs, and so too does the narrator create music in tandem with the mother with whom she often bitterly fights. As if more reinforcement of this theme were needed, the account of Ts'ai Yen is itself a mother and daughter production. Introducing it, the narrator explains that "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also am a story-talker. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine." If her mother told this story knowing that the narrator was a "story-talker," she must have known that the story would be retold; it is with the tacit permission of its original source that this story is being retold. When it

comes to her relationship with her mother, the distance that the narrator has traversed since the beginning of the memoir is manifest.

As critics point out, The Woman Warrior is about the development of the narrator's voice.²⁴ It is, more precisely, about how the narrator becomes comfortable with the fact that her voice is an amalgam of others—her mother's, her aunts', her siblings'. When she speaks, she is always drawing on their stories as well as her own. The Woman Warrior begins with an essay in which the narrator and her mother compete over the right to tell a story of incest and family violence, the story of a nameless, voiceless aunt who becomes pregnant by a “brother” and is attacked by her community as her family stands by, and it ends with a story, told by the narrator along with her mother, about a woman who composes music that her children, cut off though they are from her by language, learn to sing with her. Through both form and content, the text underscores the movement from familial conflict to reconciliation; we see how the narrator begins by attempting to undermine the interplay of voices that characterizes every story that she tells, and ends by accepting and finally celebrating the richness of this interplay. By using the framework of the mother's forbidden story to tell another secret altogether, Kingston not only subverts the standard incest model and takes over her mother's narrative, she also suggests what the telling of interracial desire via incest—two forbidden topics—can gain for the speaker: the achievement of an authoritative voice that she can claim with confidence as her own.

²⁴ See, for example, Kim: “The Woman Warrior is about a Chinese American's attempt to come to terms with the paradoxes that shape and often enrich her life and to find a uniquely Chinese American voice to serve as a weapon for her life” (207).

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CHAPTER II

THE REVELATION OF NO REVELATION: THE UNANSWERED INCEST RIDDLE IN SAPPHIRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL¹

Willa Cather spent the first years of her life in the South, but her fame as a writer has, of course, been durably linked with the desolate, windswept plains of Nebraska and the dusty, red-earthed terrain of the Southwest, try though other regionalist critics have to lay competing claims upon her.² Sapphira and the Slave Girl is in fact the only one of Cather's novels to be set in the South, and the fact that this sole Southern novel is also the last that she wrote is not a coincidence. Edith Lewis, her long-time companion and, later, her biographer, testifies that Cather had long thought about writing a novel about Virginia, but had shied away from doing so: "She had often been urged to write a Virginia novel; but for a long time some sort of inhibition—a reluctance, perhaps, to break through to those old memories that seemed to belong to another life—had deterred her" (182).

Still, even though Cather produced only one Southern novel, we know from the work of Ann Romines and Anne Goodwyn Jones, among others, that traces of the South can be found in many of Cather's works. We could say, indeed, that Cather was engaged with the landscape of her childhood all along—that it is with only variable success that

¹ Part of this chapter is based on my article, "'A Kind of Family Feeling about Nancy': Race and the Hidden Threat of Incest in Sapphira and the Slave Girl."

² Romines' introduction gives a good accounting of the ways in which Cather criticism has been traditionally regionalist in nature.

she tried to smother the presence of the South in her fiction. Nebraska may have laid claim to her heart, and New Mexico³ to her imagination; New York may have been her preferred state of residence. But Virginia, I would suggest, had control of the deepest parts of Cather's psyche⁴; her relationship to the region is a complicated one, and as a result it could not be easily left behind. As Janice P. Stout notes, "It is probably easy for us to see that Virginia, the South, would represent for Cather a place of nostalgia, the good place lost. It is perhaps more difficult for us to see that it also represents for her, both historically and personally, through its association with her mother, the place of enslavement or personal restriction, the place to be escaped" (191-92).

Lending credence to the idea that Cather feels ambivalence toward the South is her portrayal of its inhabitants. In Sapphira, the African-American characters appear to be hapless, almost simple-minded innocents, but empty-headed or not, they are depicted as a danger to their masters; Cather presents them as a very real threat to both the lives and the morality of the white people amongst whom they live.⁵ The white characters do

³ For proof of how the Southwest intoxicated her imagination, see The Professor's House.

⁴ Fetterley makes a similar argument: "[An unofficial Cather story] might focus on Cather's Virginia roots, and might suggest that Cather was far more southern in her 'sympathies' than she was either Western or Eastern, that she had more affinity with southern culture than has previously been acknowledged, indeed that her attitudes toward race and gender and even human nature and history derives from this context" (13). Yet while I am arguing that Cather was influenced by the South in a way she could not control, try though she might, Fetterley suggests that Cather played down her Southern writing for marketing reasons—because the difficulty of texts such as Sapphira rendered her unsympathetic.

⁵ In Morrison's groundbreaking Playing in the Dark, the portrayal of black characters in Sapphira is analyzed and criticized early in the first essay, and at some length; in the wake of this investigation, the precise nature of Cather's attitudes about race has been the focus of much discussion and controversy. Her depiction of Native Americans and Jews has also productively come under scrutiny (Ammons, Reynolds, Wasserman). For a

not fare any better; they are portrayed as heavily dependent upon their slaves, fascinated by at least one of them and at the same time completely obtuse to their needs. Cather also paints a complicated picture of the institution responsible for the black characters' presence in the South: published in 1940, long after abolition, Sapphira could be called an attempt to indict slavery.

In Sapphira Cather suggests that slavery can damage and even ruin those who experience it, no matter where on the master-slave continuum they fall. Not only does slavery brutally dehumanize the slaves in the novel, it also raises a host of deeply troubling moral, ethical, and religious dilemmas for the masters, ultimately corrupting some of them beyond redemption. Still, even as the text serves as a meditation on the evils of slavery, it is at the same time a paean to a lost paradise, a world which is lush, gracious and lovely; in Sapphira Cather casts a nostalgic look back at the Southern setting of her childhood, a place that owed its very foundation and structure to slavery. She is, in short, at once indignant in her condemnation of slavery and helpless in her thrall to the beauty and ease of the lifestyle that the system creates for its masters. In this light, Merrill Maguire Skaggs' proposal to classify the book as "guilt-without-sin fiction" makes sense: as she says, "ex-Southerner Cather seems guiltlessly to reject the slave system and the economy it supports, while also guiltlessly loving the land that developed both" (World 167).⁶

nanced exploration of the development of an American cultural identity in light of Cather's representation of Jews and Native Americans in The Professor's House, see Michaels.

⁶ Discussing the centrality of slavery in Sapphira, Newman notes that "Cather starts history in the moment of 1856, her multiple references to time fixing the story at the zero point before the chaos of the Civil War.... The country is in a holding pattern.... The year is equivocal...implying that the aberration of slavery will be duly corrected,

I would not disagree with the notion that Sapphira ultimately fails as a critique of the racist practices of the antebellum South. Yet I would also suggest Cather tries to offer a real condemnation of the institution of slavery in Sapphira, and that it is through the threat of incest—submerged, unheralded, but nevertheless present—that she does so.

All of the main characters of Sapphira are obsessed in some way with the body of Nancy, a beautiful mulatta and the slave girl of the title. Henry Colbert and his ne'er-do-well nephew, Martin, lust after it; Sapphira, who is old, crippled, and married to Henry, is violently jealous of it and schemes to destroy it⁷; Rachel, Sapphira and Henry's daughter, is determined to keep it safe and chaste. Nancy is the daughter of Till by an unidentified white man, and very early on, even before we learn who Till is, the story confronts us with the possibility that Nancy is kin to the Colberts. Making a catty jab at her husband for his affection for Nancy, Sapphira tells Henry that "[the people hereabouts] surely talked when black Till bore a yellow child, after two of your brothers had ben hanging around here so much. Some fixed it on Jacob, and some on Guy. Perhaps you have a kind of family feeling about Nancy?" (8-9). Henry quickly refutes this suggestion: "You know well enough, Sapphira, it was that painter from Baltimore" (9). Yet rumors of a biological connection between the Colberts and Nancy never quite vanish from the text, surfacing uneasily in different contexts, and so leaving open the possibility that Nancy, the slave, is related to the Colberts, with their white blood flowing through her. And this

returning the nation to its original state of grace, but also suggesting that the 'solutions' of the post-Civil War era have proven hugely inadequate" (57). For a good discussion of Cather's ambivalence toward slavery, see Morgenstern.

⁷ Marcus astutely points out that in Sapphira, "Cather rewrites the master-slave rape story, documented historically and dramatized so frequently in slave narratives, by reinscribing the menacing master as a sadistic and powerful mistress" (101).

leads in turn to another possibility: that Henry and Martin Colbert, in desiring the mulatta Nancy, are respectively and incestuously lusting after a niece and a half-sister. Thus innocent, good-hearted, and not overly bright Nancy is a double threat to the white people she serves and loves, embodying the dangers of incest as well as miscegenation. As set-ups to the standard incest model go, this is textbook. The riddle—why are the Colberts so obsessed with Nancy?—has been asked; the clues leading up to the revelation of incest are in place.

Nancy's embodiment of the threat of incest suggests a critique of slavery: Cather seems to be arguing that an unintended but very real consequence of it is incest. As if to reinforce this point, at the end of the novel, Cather's narrator, in an abrupt shift to first person, plants herself on the scene as a girl witnessing the triumphant return of the former slave Nancy, and it has been documented that this final scene is based on a much-cherished memory from Cather's childhood (Woodress 26).⁸ By inserting herself into the text, Cather highlights her own family's complicity in the story—an emphasis with telling implications. Not only has she concocted a scenario in which her great-grandfather lusts after a slave girl who may be his niece, she has written in the possibility that the black slave girl is kin to her; she has left the door open for the reader to wonder

⁸ Pollard believes that we should not read this autobiographically, offering as one piece of evidence the fact that the narrator "Willa" admits that she does not know how to spell the name of Mr. Pertleball: appended to the end of the novel is a note from Cather, in which she states that "In this story I have called several of the characters by Frederick County surnames.... My father and mother...often talked about acquaintances whom they had met. For some reason I found the name of Mr. Pertleball especially delightful, though I never saw the man who bore it, and to this day I don't know how to spell it" (295). Pollard claims that "The many signs of an unreliable narrator, the uncertainty of her spelling, and her distance from the past seem to preclude a strict autobiographical reading of the novel" (48). The fact that Cather admits to not knowing how to spell a name she overheard her parents talking about seems only natural to me, and it certainly does not seem to disprove that the story of the Colberts is based on her family.

whether she and Nancy have the same blood flowing through their veins. The explosive potential of this idea is startling; that Cather is being subversive about the slavery system should, we think, be clear—yet the converse is true.

In William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!, the threat of both incest and interracial sex is contained in the figure of Bon, the erstwhile fiancé of Judith Sutpen; the story unfolds to reveal that he is at once her half-brother and a man of racially mixed heritage. Bon, like Nancy, is at once racially other and familially familiar—both a black man and a relative to the white woman he wishes to court. Merrill Maguire Skaggs argues that “at the end of her life Cather engaged Faulkner in a significant literary conversation” (“Thefts” 115). She invokes “Before Breakfast,” one of Cather’s last short stories, but I would broach the possibility that this conversation extends to Sapphira as well; that both Faulkner’s mulatto and Cather’s mulatta pose the threat of both incest and miscegenation invites and even cries out for speculation about an intertextual connection between the two works. I would underscore, however, that I only broach the possibility of such a conversation, for in Cather’s novel, in stark contrast to Faulkner’s, the threat of incest remains wholly unrecognized. Cather’s characters do not at any point display an anxiety about, or even an awareness of, the fact that the disaster they only narrowly avert—the rape of Nancy by Martin—may involve no less than the violation of the taboo of incest. Even more strikingly, incest never takes on a concrete form. It remains the never said; Cather withholds the word from the text.

The suppression of the incest theme in Sapphira calls into question the idea that Cather is using incest for subversive ends. Does her failure to capitalize on the explosive

potential of the incest threat through a dramatic revelation suggest a failure of nerve on her part; by scattering hints about incest but not answering the riddle, is she backing off from a full indictment of slavery? Paradoxical as it may seem, I would argue that Cather's refusal to include a dramatic announcement of incest is as subversive a gesture as her inclusion of the incest threat in the first place. To explain this argument, I will first discuss the broad implications of not saying incest.

Not Saying Incest

I spoke in the preface about how many incest narratives initially obfuscate the presence of incest, revealing it suddenly in the form of the answer to a riddle. To find out what happens when the riddle remains unsolved and incest is left unsaid, we need to understand what happens when the riddle plot is satisfactorily resolved. For one, incest usually ends: the exposure of the act is followed by its banning; the solving of the riddle leads to a reassertion of the law forbidding incest. In Oedipus, the recognition of incest is accompanied by not only the termination of the act, but also two public (and very dramatic) acknowledgements of wrongdoing—Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus' self-blinding. Even if the confession of incest does not lead to its termination, as in A. S. Byatt's Angels and Insects,⁹ its revelation still reaffirms the law, since the recipient of the confession almost always responds with horror and outrage,¹⁰ reinforcing our sense of incest as the ultimate transgression.

⁹ William flees his marriage after his discovery, but without exposing his wife's affair with her brother; because it remains publicly unspoken, incest can continue.

¹⁰ As I will discuss in chapter four, in Lone Star the revelation receives a very different response.

In asking what happens when incest remains unspoken, I should clarify that in some texts, characters solve the riddle of incest but refuse to name it,¹¹ a gesture that speaks to how charged the act of telling the transgression is. It is helpful to parse what the consequences are of not speaking incest in such a situation, although I would emphasize that what happens in Sapphira is something else altogether. A notable example of incest being solved but not spoken is in Joan Riley's The Unbelonging. The novel's protagonist, Hyacinth, repeatedly invokes a line: "Incest flourished where the roads were bad." This line comes from a book, Cider with Rosie, which was left behind by one of Hyacinth's cousins. The book is described as being "not particularly enlightening" (49), but in it the line referring to incest is circled. Not articulated, not narrated, and not even written out, this testimony from Hyacinth's unknown cousin, a mere ring in black ink, serves as the elliptical confession par excellence.

As a communicative strategy the ring of black ink works to a certain extent, as we can surmise from it that Hyacinth's cousin has experienced sexual abuse from her uncle, Hyacinth's father. Moreover, this line speaks eloquently to the way in which incest thrives in isolation, in an atmosphere characterized by a lack of community and poor lines of communication—in short, a place in which incest remains unnamed and untold. Yet in spite of Hyacinth's considerable academic prowess, and in spite of the fact that she worries over the line in a way that suggests that she guesses deep down what it means, this almost mute message from her cousin remains unintelligible to her for the duration of

¹¹ This happens in Chinatown. Not only is Evelyn Mulwray unable to name her relationship with her father in any clear terms, she is also incapable of saying the word "father" without stammering. In one scene, she revealingly covers her naked body with her arms when she hears a reference to him. Yet another film that provocatively highlights the division between the sight of incest and the silence around it is Sister My Sister.

the novel. By making the link between incest and isolation, the line provides a clue on how to stop her father's incestuous advances, but Hyacinth fails to heed its advice: the only "telling" of incest that occurs throughout the course of the novel comes in the form of the black-ink ring that circles the phrase.

Although the threat of incest lies both geographically and chronologically far behind her by the end of the novel, Hyacinth remains haunted by it. In suggesting that her refusal to tell incest is tantamount to a refusal to exorcise its trauma, the novel seems to invite a psychoanalytic reading, but I would reject such a reading as too facile. It is far more interesting to consider how Riley's incest narrative is not predicated on the riddle plot, and the implications of this alternative format. Because we hear about Hyacinth's father's threats as they take place, our suspense takes a different form than it would with a standard riddle model. In The Unbelonging, we try to determine whether Hyacinth's father will or will not succeed in raping his daughter, whereas in a riddle plot, we try to figure out the missing factor that unlocks the psychology of the character and, by extension, the logic of the narrative, and then suddenly discover that it is incest.¹²

In Riley's novel, there is no climactic, cathartic moment of resolution attending the solution of the riddle, the testimony of incest. That incest is not named has other, even more resonant implications. As Barthes tells us, the end of suspense in a hermeneutic narrative "implies a return to order, for expectation is a disorder...truth is what completes, what closes" (76). In an incest narrative, the "disorder" before the revelation of incest is nothing less than a violation of the natural order. Not only does the

¹² In Allison's Bastard Out of Carolina, the incest also unfolds in the narrative as it happens, but there is a cathartic moment of (re)resolution when the rest of the family discovers that Bone is being raped, and incest gets "told."

occurrence of incest mean that the law forbidding it has been transgressed, it also scrambles family roles and, in a related point, suggests an ignorance of origins and identity. We have only to consider Oedipus' confused ravings at the discovery of incest—"she brought forth husband by her husband, children by her own child" (66)—to realize that incest can turn son into husband and daughter into sister. Indeed, Oedipus' paradoxical, seemingly mad but actually accurate recounting of his family's web of relationships is a trope in incest narratives, found usually just before or just after the revelation of incest. In its most famous scene, Chinatown compellingly enacts this same confusion: "She's my sister," says Mrs. Mulwray (Faye Dunaway), at which Gittes (Jack Nicholson) slaps her. "She's my daughter," she then says, and he slaps her again. "She's my sister," she says again, and this pattern of testimony and slapping repeats until she finally blurts out, "She's my sister and my daughter.... My father and I—understand? Or is it too tough for you?" Conversely, when the protagonist of Alice Walker's The Color Purple finds out that the man she thought of as her father is only a stepfather, and that she is therefore not a victim of biological incest, the family roles unscramble and reorder themselves in her mind. "All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me," she writes. "My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa" (183).

By confusing the individual's place in the family, that most basic of all social units, incest undermines the individual's deepest sense of self. This concept points us to another way in which incest violates the natural order. In chapter one, I argued in a reading of James Weldon Johnson's Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man that because narratives of passing entail a denial of origins, they often feature incest. A key issue that

has been latent in my formulations thus far is the importance of recognition, particularly self-recognition, in the resolution of many incest narratives. W. Daniel Wilson observes that “the taboo [of incest] plays...a central role in competing interpretations of man—psychoanalytic, anthropological, and sociobiological” (250), and in literature, too, the revelation of incest is strongly linked to an understanding of who or what we are. In a tradition that begins with Oedipus¹³ and includes such disparate works as A Winter’s Tale, Tom Jones and Song of Solomon, a character’s understanding or acknowledgement of who he or she is arrives simultaneously with the realization of incest; these narratives are inevitably, inherently structured on a climactic moment of self-recognition that is inseparable from the solving of the riddle. In Johnson’s novel, the fact that the ex-coloured man uses his racial illegibility to mask his origins puts him at risk for incest—that he desires a woman who turns out to be his half sister is a kind of built-in punishment for the fact that he is hiding and denying who he is.¹⁴

¹³ As I discussed in the preface, Oedipus, legendary solver of a riddle that turns on the ability to recognize man or, more specifically, oneself, struggles to solve within the play a conundrum that turns on his own identity.

¹⁴ In Alan Parker’s film Angel Heart, a similar situation arises. Harry Angel, two-bit P.I., is given a job by a strange client, Louis Cyphre, to find the formerly famous singer, Johnny Favorite. Harry embarks on a quest that takes him from Harlem to New Orleans, followed by a mysterious trail of dead bodies. As we eventually discover, Harry himself is Johnny, who long ago had agreed to a Faustian bargain of his soul in exchange for fame and success, and then had reneged on his part of the bargain and escaped the Devil (“Lou Cyphre” himself) by trading his body for that of a young soldier named Harry Angel. Before realizing his own identity, Harry sleeps with the daughter of Johnny Favorite, who is, significantly, half-black—that is, he sleeps with his own racially mixed daughter. Though Harry’s passing is of the spiritual variety than the racial one, and takes place unbeknownst to himself, this film is in fact a quintessential passing narrative—incest serving once again as one of the penalties of this attempt to flee the terms of this Faustian passing.

Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! is another text in which incest is the result of passing. And in Oedipus, our hero’s lack of knowledge about his origins, his unwitting

The act of naming and telling incest—the narration of it by one character to another—constitutes a return to law and due order, with familial roles unscrambling, characters properly naming and identifying themselves, and incest itself being terminated, appropriate penance meted out and exacted. Conversely, when the possibility of incest is suppressed in Sapphira, so too is the possibility that Nancy is part of the Colbert clan; the origins of characters are still obscure, and family roles remain undefined and confused. Which brings us back to the question of what the lack of a climactic revelation of incest signifies in Sapphira. I would submit that just as the unmistakable hints that Nancy might be a Colbert and an incestuous threat to her masters suggest an indictment of the slavery system, so too does the fact that incest is never publicly exposed and denounced critique the racist society in which these characters live. The omission of the revelation of incest is strategic and subversive: what it suggests is that the white characters of Sapphira are so implicated in the racist ideals of the South that they are, in effect, blinded by them; they are unable to see and acknowledge the possibility that they are related to Nancy. This myopia is what puts them at risk of incest.

Lending support to the idea that the lack of an incest revelation in Sapphira is strategic is the fact that Cather excels at the art of omission; indeed, it is one of her

“passing” as the son of someone else other than the king and queen of Thebes, leads inevitably to his slaying of his father and his laying with his mother.

The possibility of incest is confronted and averted in the case of Johnson’s narrator, but the eponymous heroine of Defoe’s Moll Flanders, who engages in another kind of passing, is not so lucky. In attempting to pass as a member of the middle class, Moll occludes the fact that she was born in prison to a criminal. Her masquerade is successful, and a wealthy man marries her and takes her into his home. Many years and some children later, she realizes that her mother-in-law is in fact her mother, and that her happy marriage is a sham, for her husband is her half-brother. She has inadvertently been committing incest throughout her long and happy marriage, incest serving as the punishment even when the passing in question involves class rather than race.

signature techniques.¹⁵ Furthermore, Lewis observes that “[Cather] could have written two or three Sapphiras out of her material; and in fact she did write, in her first draft, twice as much as she used. She always said it was what she left out that counted” (183). I would venture that the revelation of incest is part of what Cather ended up discarding; after all, Lewis also tells us that when writing a novel, “[Cather] always left out its real theme, the secret theme at its heart, the thing that gave it its reason for being” (155).

Artful though Cather is, her strategy backfires in Sapphira. The idea that the white characters are incapable of understanding that they may be related to a slave is thought-provoking, but Cather makes this point so quietly—literally quietly, by leaving the possibility of incest shrouded in silence—that it is lost upon her readers. The incest threat is unacknowledged not only by Sapphira’s characters but also by its critics¹⁶; to

¹⁵ Urgo refers to “the artful omissions and gaps in [Cather’s] narrative” (73).

¹⁶ Deborah Carlin’s reading of Sapphira highlights the text’s ambivalence toward miscegenation, which she describes as “both the fact and the fear that animates Sapphira’s plot against Nancy, and...also what forces Nancy to flee against her will. Indeed, the curious contradiction within this text is its focus on the very thing that rips apart the society it also wants so fondly to remember and to re-create in its narrative” (165). However, in concentrating on the depiction of this one taboo, Carlin overlooks the more submerged presence of incest, a force which has the power to rip apart the family unit and, as a taboo, a crucial element in the foundation and smooth functioning of society.

While Patrick W. Shaw remarks in passing on the portrayal of incestuous desire in the novel, he alludes only to Sapphira’s attraction to Martin, who is her nephew by marriage: “Sapphira sees Nancy’s imminent seduction as an extension of her own frustrated eroticism, which here is cast in relatively conventional heterosexual modes but which (because Martin is her nephew) is tinged with the same incest we note in earlier Cather novels” (181). Shaw completely elides the possibility of a biological connection between Nancy and the Colberts with a categorical statement about her paternity: “Nancy, whose father was a white ‘painter from Baltimore’....” (179). And Morrison, who is one of our great chroniclers of incestuous desire (The Bluest Eye deals with incest explicitly; Song of Solomon, Sula, and Beloved with incestuous desire and anxiety), never mentions incest in her reading of Sapphira, locating the eroticism and sexual deviancy of the novel only in its racial power dynamics: “What becomes titillating in this wicked pursuit of innocence—what makes it something other than an American variant

my knowledge no other critic has explored the possibility that Nancy is a Colbert, and the ramifications of the threat of incest that lurks in the text as a result. As a result, the force of Cather's critique of slavery is lost, and it becomes all too easy to dismiss the novel—and indeed, Sapphira, scorned for its uninteresting story as well as its poor writing and sentimentality, is seldom read, and is usually considered an embarrassment among Cather scholars. By contending that Sapphira demonstrates what a subversion of the incest riddle plot can accomplish, I want in part to recuperate the novel.

In the next section of this chapter I will explore why the figure of the mulatta is often associated with incest. Then, in a reading of Sapphira, I will illustrate how the white characters' perspective on the African-American female characters makes the suppression of the incest theme not just possible but also inevitable; how the Colberts' attraction to Nancy is grounded in their sense of her as a blank character; and how the white characters' racial attitudes render them blind to the threat of incest that they face. I will then discuss Nancy's great-grandmother, the former cannibal Jezebel, whose story is told in a self-contained narrative in the middle of the novel; I will suggest that the Jezebel section also can be read as an overly subtle critique of the institution of slavery. An examination of incestuous desire among the white members of the Colbert clan will follow, and I will conclude by addressing the impact that not saying incest has had on the novel's critical reception.

of Clarissa—is the racial component. The nephew is not even required to court or flatter Nancy. After an unsuccessful reach for her from the branches of a cherry tree, he can, and plans to, simply arrive wherever she is sleeping” (Playing 24).

Incest and the Mulatta

The fact that both the character of Nancy in Sapphira (a light-skinned black woman) and the character of Bon in Absalom, Absalom! (a man so light he can pass as white) are shadowed by incest is not a coincidence. The figure of the mulatto and, especially, of the mulatta is vulnerable to the possibility of incest. Transgression, as Mary Douglas explains, is contamination; it is “a kind of sex pollution which expresses a desire to keep the body (physical and social) intact. Its rules are phrased to control entrances and exits. Another kind of sex pollution arises from the desire to keep straight the internal lines of the social system” (141). That is, all margins serve as points of vulnerability and, therefore, of danger—an important idea, and one that is fundamental to my formulations on incest and the mulatta.

The mulatto, as a liminal figure caught between the racial divide, is one of the most vulnerable points in the boundary between the races. The mere fact that he exists speaks to the possibility of transgressing the racial border: the body of a mulatto is testimony that interracial sex did occur once, and that it therefore could again. Moreover, in his racial ambiguity, the mulatto suggests the essential unreliability of the visual signifier, and the consequent need for performance as a way to mark racial difference. This further erodes the idea of racial difference,¹⁷ for if race can be performed, if blackness and whiteness are disguises that can be donned and shed at will, then where or how can we locate race? The notion of the separation between blackness and whiteness deconstructs, and we are left to surmise the inherent instability and elusiveness of race as a category. By inhabiting the space between races, the mulatto throws into question the

¹⁷ For more on the idea of performing race, see Butler (in particular 167-185) and Phelan.

idea that there is such a thing as race at all, and so fundamentally undermines the very idea of a racial barrier.

Because gender occupies a singular place in the maintenance and regulation of the racial boundary, it is the mulatta and not the mulatto who most affects the racial divide. Anne McClintock writes about the feminization of borders. “What is the meaning of this persistent gendering of the imperial unknown?” she asks.

As European men crossed the dangerous thresholds of their known worlds, they ritualistically feminized borders and boundaries. Female figures were planted like fetishes at the ambiguous points of contact.... Explorers called unknown lands “virgin” territory. Philosophers veiled “Truth” as female, then fantasized about drawing back the veil. In myriad ways, women served as mediating and threshold figures by means of which men oriented themselves in space, as agents of power and agents of knowledge. (24)

In a reading of the works of Olive Schreiner, McClintock again invokes the idea of women as boundary markers, but in this case the women are black: “[African women] scrub verandahs, clean windows...welcome newcomers and generally mediate the traffic between colonials and between Africans and colonials, marking by their presence and maintaining through their labor the newly invented borders between private and public, family and market, race and race” (268). This notion of African women policing the borders is a provocative one, not least because of the power that it attributes to these figures. In this regard McClintock’s analysis is consistent with Gayatri Spivak’s reading of Jean Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea, which likewise posits a black woman as a powerful figure in charge of borders.

Spivak notes that Christophine, who is the black nurse of Rhys’ protagonist

Antoinette, is “[t]he first interpreter and named speaking subject in the text” (271); she is, moreover, the one character “whom Rhys allows to offer a hard analysis of Rochester’s actions, to challenge him in a face-to-face encounter” (272). In challenging Rochester’s behavior toward Antoinette, Christophine is challenging the actions and authority of the white male imperialist. A black woman from the Caribbean, she stands at the edge of her world to confront Rochester, a white man from England, and in this way she serves as an immensely strong, privileged figure who controls borders, just as McClintock postulates. In spite of the fact that she is a black female slave, a figure oppressed by virtue of her race, gender, and class, Christophine’s voice is potent—indeed, she is more potent and articulate than Antoinette, who is, in her double capacity as Antoinette and also Bertha, sundered between two names as well as two continents.

Schreiner and Rhys are feminist writers struggling to come to terms with their own relations to race and racism, and we need to foreground that fact when we consider McClintock’s and Spivak’s discussions of black women. In this context Ann Stoler’s historical work on black women is illuminating. Commenting, like McClintock, on the role of gender and sexuality in the policing of racial borders, Stoler argues that women, both white and black, are perceived as points of weakness rather than of power, and that because of this perception of weakness, women and sexuality are rigorously policed. Discussing the impact of gender on imperialism, she notes, “Ultimately inclusion or exclusion [in the colonial elite] required regulating the sexual, conjugal and domestic life of both Europeans in the colonies and their colonized subjects” (635). In the nineteenth century, she tells us, “concubinage was considered to have a stabilizing effect on political

order and colonial health—a relationship that kept men in their barracks and bungalows, out of brothels and less inclined to perverse liaisons with one another” (637), but by the start of this century, black women came to be regarded as a source of pollution, and were therefore considered a threat to the imperial project (647). Through their sexuality and reproductive potential, these black women have the power to shatter racial boundaries, and as such they are threshold figures who should be avoided. In Stoler’s analysis, black women still serve as powerful threshold figures, but they do so in an object rather than a subject position. While McClintock and Spivak posit that black women are boundary markers because they actively control the boundaries, Stoler suggests that it is in their vulnerability that black women offer a point of access across the racial divide: they are riveting and powerful by virtue of their bodies rather than by virtue of their characters, minds or actions.

Jumping off from these discussions, I would posit the figure of the mulatta as a particular source of danger in terms of miscegenation. As a product of the mingling of races, she is a living reminder that the wall between the races is porous and can be easily pierced. As a woman who straddles both sides of the racial divide, a figure whose race can be illegible, she serves as a point of entry, so to speak, a gap through which the wall between the races can be pierced and circumvented—indeed, her very existence calls into question that there is anything like a wall at all between races. At the same time, the mulatta contains the possibility of incest within her: as The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man suggests, because racial ambiguity confuses one’s origins, it can enable incest to occur. Another reason for the mulatta’s vulnerability to incest is the scenario

that Cather hints at in Sapphira—a historical phenomenon related to slave practices.¹⁸ When a slave family was kept by one white family for generations, because of the frequency of rape the slaves would often come to share the blood of their owners, their lineage as well as their histories steadily intertwining. In becoming a shadow family to their owners, the slaves inevitably begin to constitute an incestuous threat to their masters, for if a master rapes a slave woman, and if his son later repeats this act with her daughter, then the son could very well be having intercourse with his half sister.

The mulatta speaks to Georges Bataille's theory on the irresistible pull exerted by the forbidden¹⁹: she is peculiarly desirable because she is forbidden twice over, a figure encompassing the threat of incest as well as of miscegenation. Nancy, whom almost every white character, female as well as male, seems to desire, embodies this double threat.

A Composite Portrait of Black/Blank Womanhood

In Sapphira, "blackness" is largely synonymous with blankness. Despite the spell Nancy's body seems to weave on the white characters of the text, she herself is notably uninteresting. As critics note, all of the black characters in Sapphira are, in fact, remarkably, problematically two-dimensional.²⁰ The flatness of Cather's portrayal

¹⁸ See my discussion at the start of chapter one.

¹⁹ According to him, the taboo actually invites the occurrence of the forbidden act: "the object is 'forbidden,' sacred, and the very prohibition attached to it is what arouses the desire. Religious cannibalism is the elementary example of the taboo as creating desire.... This paradox of the attraction of forbidden fruit [is] seen once again when we come to eroticism" (72).

²⁰ See Morrison. Ammons calls attention to what she calls "the mind-boggling fact that no slave in Sapphira and the Slave Girl hates slavery" (Stories 135). In another work,

becomes particularly noticeable in the triad of the three most prominent black female figures: Nancy, Till and, perhaps most significantly, Jezebel, the oldest slave of the Colbert household. As I will explain, while the narrator's representation of Jezebel seems deliberately designed to flatten her as a character, for the most part it is the white characters who conflate blackness and blankness. Still, because it is through their eyes that we experience much of the world of Sapphira, the motivations of the black characters remain unreadable to us throughout the narrative—indeed, they do not seem to have motivations at all.

The way the white characters see or, more precisely, do not see their black counterparts is directly responsible for the suppression of the possibility of incest in the novel. The mystery surrounding Nancy's paternity hinges on the insubstantiality of her mother, Till. We cannot know for sure whether Nancy and Martin share a father because Till is the only one who might possibly speak to the subject, and she is silent about her past lovers, her demeanor offering nary a clue. While one might surmise that the fact that Till does not come forward to proclaim incest as possibility or fact, when it is her daughter who is in danger, means that Till never had sexual relations with Martin's father, such an assumption would be false. Till is rendered as emotionless—the perfect servant, seemingly with no will or desires of her own—to the point that she appears subhuman. It seems all too likely that Till would not admit to her masters that she had intercourse with Martin's father, even if her daughter is in danger of being raped by his son.

Ammons usefully compares Cather's attitudes toward race with the prevailing attitudes of her time—and demonstrates that they fall short even in that context (“My Ántonia and African American Art”).

Apparently divested of all emotions except the desire to fulfill her mistress's desires, Till is presented as a slave, first and foremost; a mother only by default. To the other characters, she appears to lack human warmth; Nancy does not even consider complaining to her of Martin's sexual harassment, turning instead to Sapphira's sympathetic daughter Rachel. When Rachel asks if Nancy has told her mother about her troubles, Nancy's shocked reaction seems to reveal Till's emotional distance: "Nancy looked up at [Rachel] with wondering, startled eyes. 'To Maw? How could I, mam?'" (218). Rachel later muses on the reasons for Till's ignorance about her own daughter's evident state of distress:

She understood why Nancy did not go to Till for advice and protection. Till had been a Dodderidge before ever she was Nancy's mother. In Till's mind, her first duty was to her mistress.... Nancy had come into the world by accident; the other relation, that with the Dodderidges, Till regarded as one of the fixed conditions you were born into.... Yes, Mrs. Blake knew why Till shut her eyes to what was going on over at the Mill House. (219)

I would underscore that this passage denies us direct access to Till's thoughts and motivations; on the vital point of why Nancy turns to her mistress' daughter rather than her own mother for help during a crisis, we only get Rachel's speculations. As a result, we have no way of knowing whether Rachel is correct in her belief that Till is more devoted to her mistress than to her daughter.²¹ It is because we see through the prism of a white character's perspective that blackness is synonymous with blankness in this passage.

²¹ As Morrison points out, "Because Till's loyalty to and responsibility for her mistress is so primary, it never occurs and need not occur to Sapphira that Till might be hurt or alarmed by the violence planned for her only child. That assumption is based on another—that slave women are not mothers; they are 'naturally dead,' with no obligations to their offspring or their own parents" (Playing 21).

Till's illegibility as a character complicates our perception of her sexual as well as maternal identity. She is married to old Jefferson, a man who disgusts her. When Sapphira, commenting on his dislike of shoes, "confidentially" asks Till why it is so difficult "to keep leather on a nigger's feet," Till replies, "I jest don't know, Miss Sapphy. The last thing I done was to caution that nigger about his boots. When I seen him wrigglin' his old crooked toes yonder in the gravel, I was that shamed!" As the narrator somewhat redundantly explains, "[Till] was ashamed. Jeff was her husband, had been these many years, though it was by no will of hers" (34). Till's willingness to castigate her husband to her mistress suggests that she prioritizes her slave duties over her wifely ones, and as we learn, her marriage to Jefferson was arranged specifically in order to reinforce and even force such a prioritization. Till has been married to Jeff because he is, in the words of the cook Lizzie, a "capon man": "Miss Sapphy didn't want a lady's maid to be 'havin' chillun all over de place,—always a-carryin' or a-nussin' 'em'" (43). Till accepts this marriage "with perfect dignity," the narrator once again making clear to us how her appetites and emotions have been subsumed under her desire for position:

How much [the arrangement] hurt her pride no one ever knew; perhaps she did not know herself. Perhaps the strongest desire of her life was to be "respectable and well-placed".... It was the right thing for a parlour maid and lady's maid to be always presentable and trim of figure.... Some years after she had moved her belongings from her attic chamber in the big house over to Jeff's cabin, the Cuban painter came along to do the portraits. He was a long while doing them. (72-73)

Coyly evasive in its representation of Till's sexuality, this passage admits a wide range of readings. In that "long while" the Cuban painter spent at the Colberts' house, there is

room for the one romance of Till's life—the one time in which she selfishly indulged her sensuality and fulfilled her appetites. Yet we also cannot omit the possibility that she was raped by the painter, Henry's brothers, or all three. The opaqueness of her character makes her sexuality so hard to read that her body is neither an object of desire or even interest in the text.

Nancy, on the other hand, is sexually irresistible to the white characters precisely because of her blankness. So passive is she that we end up suspecting she is intentionally being characterized as forgettable. Morrison speculates that “Rendered voiceless, a cipher, a perfect victim, Nancy runs the risk of losing the reader's interest” (Playing 24), but while she is right to posit this blankness as a flaw of the text, I would also stress that this lack of a voice and distinctive personality is where one form of black sexuality resides in the novel. Nancy's character is not of interest because it has been upstaged by her body, which transfixes the white characters' attention and consumes their thoughts. Indeed, if her character and voice were any stronger, her body could not contain the others' sexual fantasies to the extent that it does.

In order to see how Nancy's body accommodates the myriad desires of others, we need first to see that an important motif in this text involves the substitution of one black body for another, and that this exchange is made possible by the black characters' lack of individuation. Tormented by jealousy and terrified that her husband is spending his nights with Nancy, Sapphira forces the slave girl to sleep on the floor outside her door, but even this preventative measure cannot completely quell her fears: “Hours ago she had heard Nancy put her straw tick outside the door. But was she there now? Perhaps

she did not always sleep there. A substitute?—There were four young coloured girls, not counting Bluebell, who might easily take Nancy’s place on that pallet. Very likely they did take her place, and everyone knew it” (106).

The idea that the black characters are essentially interchangeable undergirds Henry and Sapphira’s conversations. It has been said that Cather’s narratives are characterized by the strategy of indirection²²; these two characters certainly converse in code. Over tea, Henry complains to his wife about the slave girl Bluebell’s cleaning:

“Don’t try any more Bluebell on me!”
His wife replied with her most ladylike laugh....
“Poor Bluebell! Is she never to have a chance to learn?
Why are you so set against her?”
“I can’t abide her, or anything about her. If there is
one nigger on the place I could thrash with my own hands,
it’s that Bluebell!”
The Mistress threw up her hands; this time she
laughed so heartily that the rings on her fingers glittered. It
was a treat to hear her husband break out like this. (52)

Henry and Sapphira are figured as self-contained, but this brief conversation holds within it two emotional explosions—his outbreak of anger and her burst of laughter. The high emotional pitch in this exchange becomes understandable when we realize that according to Sapphira, at least, this discussion substitutes black bodies for each other. As the narrator tells us, after her husband leaves, “[Sapphira] smiled faintly; it occurred to her that when they were talking about Bluebell, both she and Henry had been thinking all the while about Nancy. How much, she wondered, did each wish to conceal from the other?” (53).

²² See Middleton, who examines Cather’s cryptic style as well as a range of critical receptions thereof (51-65).

Much later in the novel, when Henry, who is worrying about Nancy's safety around Martin, complains to Sapphira about their nephew's long visit, the same substitution of black bodies occurs once again. "Well, if you take pleasure in his company, I shan't say anything," says Henry. "But he will demoralize the servants. His way with the young darkies is too free. He goes into the woods across the creek to hunt mushrooms with that trifling Bluebell." Sapphira thinks with amusement that "It was almost as good as a play...the way whenever she and her husband were thinking of Nancy, they invariably talked about Bluebell" (199). Sexually obsessed with Nancy herself, Sapphira believes that both she and Henry are constantly and deliberately confusing Nancy's body with the body of another young black slave girl. Whether or not this is true, Nancy is denied space and an identity of her own in this passage.

It is critical to note that Nancy's ready accommodation of a variety of other identities applies not just to other black characters but also to white ones. Bluebell is, after all, similar to her in color and age, and so the fact that Henry identifies Nancy with the character of Mercy in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress—a white woman, and an icon of Christianity to boot—comes as much more of a shock. Henry identifies Nancy with one of Bunyan's characters: "Even when she was scarcely more than a child, he had felt her eagerness to please him. As she grew older he came to identify her with Mercy, Christiana's sweet companion. When he read in the second part of his book, he saw Nancy's face and figure plain in Mercy" (67). Nancy's blankness as a character is important because her body serves as a canvas on which her white masters can map any of their fantasies, religious as well as sexual. Her body constitutes a ready symbol,

standing in for any number of people or things, and it is this versatility which makes her so attractive to the Colberts.

Patricia Yaeger comments on the part that flour-dust plays in Sapphira.

Ubiquitous in the landscape, it falls constantly and covers everyone, white characters as well as black, in an egalitarian fashion. Observing how white Sapphira's crippled legs are, "as if some demonic aura of whiteness had dropped down on her body and immobilized it forever," Yaeger argues that whiteness in Sapphira is not representative of innocence. In her words, "this flour floats through the air like so much dead skin, like the leavings of some decaying albino body. It creates an intriguing sense of disconnection, unanchored identity, and fragmentation...a bizarre self-scattering" (Dirt 22)²³—whiteness as a disconnecting, fragmenting, and destabilizing force. As a corollary to Yaeger's argument, I would suggest that whiteness blinds people as well as covering them, and that in the process it creates a sense of disconnection and destabilization. The white characters' ability to project a range of desires upon Nancy is, after all, predicated upon a certain willed myopia on their part; it is based in the fact that they see her as a blank character—or, rather, in the fact that they do not see her as a character in her own right at all.

²³ As she elaborates in "White Dirt," "[W]hite skin becomes a source of pollution; it enters the text with the unwashed power of defilement. Whiteness becomes something extraneous, inassimilable, or unclean: the scattered, disassimilated body a form of white dirt" (140). See also Pollard, who likewise views the flour-dust as a sign of trouble, although he does not make the connection to whiteness as a racial signifier: "The flour-dust at the Mill House represents the constant temptations that Henry feels he must subdue throughout the novel.... The tension in his eyes suggests the constant struggle within Henry to become righteous and, metaphorically, to prevent sin from accumulating like dough on his face. Like minuscule devils trying to break Henry's strength at every opportunity, the flour-dust literally converges around Henry from every angle...." (46-47).

If the Colberts were to allow themselves to see Nancy as an individuated being, they could no longer see her as Henry's lover, Sapphira's betrayer, Martin's victim or Bunyan's Christian icon. And as a result of this blindness, the thought of incest remains occluded from them and, by extension, from us as well; the riddle of the narrative goes unanswered, and the revelation of incest is absent from the text.

The Erasure of Jezebel

While there seems to be a decree that all of the black characters in the novel have to be bland, cowed, and meek, there is one character who comes close to being an exception to this rule. Jezebel, who is shown in a flashback as she journeys to America on a slave ship, grants us a glimpse of a spectacularly vivid black character. A black character who is dangerously passionate to the point of feral is, of course, no less stereotypical than an emotionally flat one, but in this case it is the way this character's passion is tamed and eventually extinguished that seems particularly problematic in terms of the representation of blackness. The portrait of Jezebel, the wild African who becomes a slave and Nancy's great-grandmother, lies almost at the heart of Sapphira. The section in which the events of her past and the circumstances of her present are recounted stand alone as a discrete unit. Indeed, if the Jezebel section were to be lifted out of the story, what would be left would not have to be changed to maintain the coherence of the story; the narrative of Jezebel plays no discernible role in the larger plot except, perhaps, to suggest that Sapphira does have a certain rapport with a few slaves.

I will argue that the inclusion of Jezebel's character, which seems almost jarring

in the context of both the plot and the representation of the other slaves, supports and also complicates the notion that Nancy's blankness renders her attractive to her masters. I also want to make a connection between the Jezebel section and the elision of the incest theme from the text. I have argued that by not capitalizing on the potential of the incest hints threaded through Sapphira, Cather is being subversive; she suggests that the racist ethos of the South is so strong that the white characters are unable to see the black characters for who they are, and thus cannot see that Nancy embodies the threat of incest. The Jezebel section can be read as similarly subversive: by suggesting that slavery has the potential to suck the vitality from a character as passionate as Jezebel, it too offers an indictment of slavery. Yet the vanquishing of Jezebel, like the suppression of the incest theme, is ultimately too subtle to be effective.

Because Jezebel is a minor character, because her story, cast as a narrative within a narrative, can be easily bracketed from the rest of the novel and because, furthermore, she is so different from the other characters, especially the slaves, it is easy to dismiss the chapter about her as an interesting but irrelevant digression. Hence the relative paucity of critical commentary on her character. When critics do discuss her, they usually focus on her character's relation to the others in the novel: thus one scholar's suggestion that she is a double to Sapphira (Morgenstern 201).²⁴ While I would agree that Cather is implicitly comparing the two matriarchs, Jezebel's importance extends far beyond the

²⁴ In Urgo's words, "Sapphira's sexual cruelty...is foreshadowed by events in Jezebel's middle passage" (93). Wald offers another perspective: "Jezebel makes a brief and haunting appearance—quite literally so, since it is her narrative function to die. Drawing upon familiar Christian tropes of reward in the hereafter, Cather would seem to be encouraging the conclusion here that death is the privileged form of agency for an enslaved black woman" (93-94 Romines). Wald further elaborates that in laying out Jezebel's history in such detail, the narrative also gives us a sense of the "dehumanization and engendering" that slavery causes (94).

light she sheds upon Sapphira's character. I would argue that if we are to understand Sapphira in all of its complexity and contradictions, we ignore the story of this perplexing, peripheral figure at our own peril.²⁵

Jezebel's induction into slavery was violent and tragic, but not, apparently, all that memorable. In Cather's words, "That night of fire and slaughter, when she saw her father brained and her four brothers cut down as they fought, old Jezebel now remembered but dimly. It was all over in a few hours; of the village nothing was left but smoking ashes and mutilated bodies" (90). A dangerous, fierce cannibal of eighteen when her village is destroyed, she eventually becomes a fully domesticated, loyal slave; when she dies at around the age of 95, she is given a Christian burial with all of the trimmings. This is not just a thumbnail history of a slave, but also of slavery itself—or, in any event, a history as written by the slave-masters. Jezebel's life story seems to be included to inform us about

²⁵ I have argued in a conference paper that there is an important comparison to be made between Jezebel and another peripheral character of a Cather text: Mother Eve, the mummified figure of a murdered young woman discovered in the ancient, hidden civilization of New Mexico's Blue Mesa. Both Jezebel and Mother Eve are named after notorious, sexualized women in the Bible, and both receive their names from white men, late in the game: Mother Eve's discoverers give her her title posthumously. Neither of their original, "native" names can be found in the text. Both characters are also coded as racial others; they are representatives of distant, far older civilizations. They are, moreover, both seen as socially transgressive, with Jezebel attacking others and Mother Eve probably having committed adultery: alone among the characters in their respective novels, they appear to act out their passions without regard to societal proscriptions. Finally, both women are associated with a potent combination of sex, violence, and devouring hunger. Mother Eve's physical description is startling: "Part of the nose was gone, but she had plenty of teeth, not one missing.... Her teeth were even and white, and so little worn that we thought she must have been a young woman" (192). A woman's face, contorted in the agony of a terrible death, decayed until it is all gaping mouth and teeth: this image is a stunning imbrication of the themes of sexuality and hunger. It also strongly recalls Jezebel's teeth, which might not be described in as much physical detail, but receive just as much attention in terms of what they bite through. The descriptions of these two menacing, marginalized female figures suggest the anxiety and fear that Cather's characters feel about the racialized female other.

a process that is responsible for no less than the complete transformation of Africans: from attackers to helpers, from heathen cannibals to upright Christians.²⁶

As we learn in the “Old Jezebel” chapter, the great-grandmother of helpless, mild-mannered Nancy was once a magnificent physical specimen. Alert, strapping, and armed with a formidable set of teeth, this Jezebel makes grown men cower. Snapping “like a mastiff,” she bites the second mate, who subsequently threatens to throw “the female gorilla” overboard (93). The animal comparisons in this scene multiply from there. With a bridle placed upon her, she is subjected to the scrutiny of the skipper, who deems her equal or even superior to the men: “He judged this girl was worth any three of the women,—as much as the best of the men. Anatomically she was remarkable, for an African negress: tall, straight, muscular, long in the legs. The skipper had a kind of respect for a well-shaped creature; horse, cow, or woman” (94-95). When it comes time for Jezebel to be sold, the second mate calls her “Strong as an ox” (95); treating her as if she were a horse, a prospective buyer gives her sugar to figure out if she can be tamed. Dog, gorilla, horse, cow, ox—within the space of a couple of pages, a veritable menagerie has been summoned to describe her. So thickly and quickly do these metaphors mount, it seems all too obvious that Cather is trying to make a point. All of these animal images emerge from the minds or the mouths of the sailors: Cather seems to be showing us the literally dehumanizing treatment that Jezebel endures at the hands of these men.

²⁶ In a reading of this text, Cynthia Griffin Wolff remarks on the difficulty of telling the narrative of slavery: “It is one of the stories that no one wants to hear and no one knows how to tell, a story whose essential terms have never been admitted into narrative or even into public discourse, a story whose fundamental elements remain entombed in the not-utterable chaos of not-memory and not-recognition” (212).

Still, degrading though these images are, they convey an unmistakable sense of vitality and, especially, of virility; in this context I would emphasize the transition from cow to ox, since the latter metaphor explicitly identifies her again with the masculine. The proliferation of animal images also testifies to her wildness: indeed, the scene leaves it suspensefully open to question whether she can ever be tamed. Consider, for example, how indomitable she appears in this passage: “Jezebel was brought up in heavy irons for [the skipper’s] inspection. Her naked back was seamed with welts and bloody cuts, but she carried herself with proud indifference, and there was no plea for mercy in her eyes” (92). She cuts an impressive, poignant figure in this passage. Even in shackles, naked, wounded, and bleeding, she remains unbowed, confidence and dignity intact, anger unabated; she seems the embodiment of a fearsome, lethal fury and pride. In a novel filled with incredibly dull black characters, this is an astonishing scene. Yet what is even more astonishing is the way in which this scene, taken in the context of the novel, does not astonish: vivid though it is, this portrait of Jezebel carries no resonance because the novel’s narrative structure swallows it up.

For the description of Jezebel as a young captive, which is so compelling and moving when read out of context, is irreparably diminished by the scenes that bookend it. The story of Jezebel’s life is told in three parts. Because Cather does not hew to a chronological narrative, when we first meet Jezebel she is old, sick, and very close to death. Helpless as Sapphira, with skin of a grayish hue, she is subdued, immobile and, significantly, toothless. In this incarnation she is said to resemble “a lean old grey monkey” (86). Considered retrospectively, in view of the type of animals she will be

compared to in the next section, this is a revealing image: as simian metaphors go, it would be difficult to find a sharper contrast than between a gorilla and a lean old monkey. On the slave ship, Jezebel seems untamable, her teeth a permanent danger to those who come into contact with her. Yet this image is inevitably colored by the fact that we have already encountered her as a very old, toothless woman. When we read about how she bites the second mate's hand, we know already that she will lose her ability to do damage with her teeth, and that she will, moreover, learn how to control her violent tendencies and her appetite for human flesh, becoming a helpmate rather than a threat to her masters. Because we know this, it is impossible for us to be afraid or even truly enthralled when we read about the scene on the slave ship. We have heard the punch line too early; knowing how the story ends, we necessarily attend to the unfolding of the story with less interest. The order in which the story is told drains the woman of her power, and the scene of its impact.

The old, ailing Jezebel differs from her young self not just in body but also in mind and spirit. She has become a model slave, even though she is, by her own admission, still susceptible to the old cravings. When Sapphira asks if there is any kind of food that she would eat, Jezebel replies with "a flash of grim humor": "No'm, I cain't think of nothin' I could relish, lessen maybe it was a li'l pickaninny's hand." This joke, if it is a joke, is in poor taste, given that the young Nancy, the bearer of precisely such an appendage, is present at the scene. She reacts with horror, crying out to Sapphira that "Oh, she's a-wanderin' agin! She wanders turrible now. Don't stay, Missy! She's out of her haid!" but Sapphira reacts coolly. "I know your granny through and through," she

tells Nancy. “She is no more out of her head than I am” (89).

Discussing another text, McClintock persuasively discusses how a fear about cannibalism can express a fear of sexual engulfment by colonized peoples: “In this familiar trope, the fear of being engulfed by the unknown is projected onto colonized peoples as their determination to devour the intruder whole. Haggard’s map and van der Streat’s discovery scene are no exceptions, for they both implicitly represent female sexuality as cannibalistic: the cannibal scene, the ‘mouth of treasure cave’” (27). It is interesting to read the exchange among Jezebel, Sapphira, and Nancy in light of McClintock’s discussion, as Cather’s invocation of cannibalism seems to have a different function than what McClintock suggests. Jezebel is too weak to attack anyone and, more importantly, she is hungering specifically for a black child’s hand. Her appetites threaten her great-granddaughter’s body and not the white mistress’s²⁷: the racial other in this case poses a danger to her own kind rather than the real enemy, the enslaver.

Finally, the taste for black human flesh that Jezebel expresses differs from McClintock’s model in that this is one very telling way in which Jezebel and Sapphira are being twinned. As Naomi E. Morgenstern notes, Sapphira’s obsessive sexual jealousy of Nancy betrays her own desire for her (188-94). Lisa Marcus remarks that Cather often disappoints critics who wish her to write openly about lesbian desire, and not just mediated heterosexual desire for a woman. But as Marcus goes on to observe, the presentation of desire in Sapphira is even more complicated:

²⁷ This idea of cannibalizing one’s own progeny also rears its ugly head in a different form in an earlier Cather novel, The Professor’s House. The professor himself, who, to judge from his profession, his white Midwestern identity, and his bookish habits, is an avatar of civilization, muses about the possibility: “When a man had lovely children in his house...why couldn’t he keep them? Was there no way but Medea’s, he wondered?” (107).

Cather not only scripts a female character who, through a surrogate, seduces a woman: she makes her authorial identification with this character explicit by entering her own text as a character in the final pages of the novel. Cather thereby metonymically aligns herself with a tyrannical southern heritage and, simultaneously, establishes a troubling connection between sexual and racial alterity that gets mapped out within the violent parameters of master(and mistress)/slave relations. (101)

I am more hesitant than Marcus is to make the connection between Cather and Sapphira. As I will explain later, Cather's appearance in the end of the text as a child observing the proceedings cannot be simply described away as an identification with the character of Sapphira. Still, it seems clear that Sapphira's obsession with Nancy is sexual in nature, and I would highlight Marcus' point that Cather's depiction of the sexual and racial dynamics of the novel speaks to a strong fixation with black female sexuality, and that that fixation is in itself a form of desire. Sapphira, like Jezebel, ends up preying on Nancy's body; when Jezebel voices a desire for a pickaninny's hand and Nancy cries out that Jezebel is out of her mind, I would argue that Sapphira defends Jezebel in part because she identifies on some level with her craving for black flesh. Considered in this light, Sapphira's comment that Jezebel is "no more out of her head than [she is]" takes on a new meaning. Jezebel has not only reformed: in her desire to feed on the black bodies of healthy young slaves, she resembles her reformers.

So what, then, of Jezebel's sexuality? Although the animal metaphors used to describe her in her younger incarnation suggest a certain virility, Jezebel, unlike Nancy, did not ever seem to be the object of any character's lust; nor do we receive any hints that she satisfied her sexual appetites as Till seemed to with the painter. Jezebel in fact

appears to be by far the most asexual of the three black women—which is surprising when we consider the loaded connotations of her name. The Biblical Jezebel, an infamous troublemaker, is of course renowned for her promiscuity as well as her ability to incite lust in men. There is also a more specifically racial implication to the sobriquet. As Sally Robinson informs us, during slavery the name “Jezebel” referred to “a white male fantasy...the image of a libidinous and promiscuous black woman” often set up “in contradistinction to the purity of Southern White Womanhood” (139-40). In contradistinction to, and also in full support of: the purity of Southern White Womanhood, one of the most dearly cherished ideals of the South, in fact relied on the fact that black women were, if not necessarily libidinous, at least highly accessible to a variety of white men because of their status as slaves. According to Marcus, “As a system, slavery rendered southern white women’s bodies sanctified icons of chastity while ideologically constructing the black woman’s body a prostituted vessel for reproducing both labor and desire. Indeed, the mistress’s very chastity depended upon her slave’s sexual availability” (110): we could say that the term “Jezebel” refers to a black character so sexually magnetic that she manages to keep the white women around her safe from the lascivious attentions of their men.

The image of a highly sexualized woman squares poorly with Cather’s Jezebel, who might make men tremble, but hardly from sexual arousal. It seems odd that she, a man-eater only in the literal sense, has been given the name of a woman notorious for being both desirable and desiring. Still, the general point that a female slave’s sexuality is necessary to the preservation of her white mistress’s chastity has direct relevance to

Sapphira: by suggesting that Sapphira wants Nancy prostituted for a different reason altogether, Cather's narrative provides a perverse twist on this idea. Yes, Sapphira wants the young black woman who serves her to be sexually available; yes, she wishes to offer the body of her slave to the white men in her life. But not to keep herself chaste—indeed, quite the opposite. Rather, Sapphira wants her kin and even her husband to use Nancy's body so she can vicariously feel the heat of sexual desire herself.²⁸ This focus on Nancy's sexuality calls into questions why it is the vicious-cannibal-turned-faithful-old-retainer, rather than Nancy herself, who bears the name of the sexual temptress Jezebel.

There is another apparent problem to the naming of Jezebel. After giving us her definition of the term “Jezebel,” Robinson compares it with that of “Sapphire,” which she describes using Deborah Gray White's words: “a domineering black woman who consumes men.... Sapphire emasculates men by the aggressive usurpation of their role' as head of the family.” That “Sapphire” is a term applied to a black persona is an intriguing idea,²⁹ and one to which I will give due attention below. Robinson goes on to hone the definition by declaring that although Sapphire herself is not sexual, she is still “an extension of Jezebel;... ‘a castrator of males,’ [making] it clear that power and

²⁸ Marcus has a different take on how this sexual dependence plays out in Sapphira: “Cather exaggerates this dynamic by making Sapphira a cripple to iconic chastity, while Nancy displays a stereotypical blooming, fresh sexuality.”

²⁹ Camacho informs us that “Sapphire” is figured first and foremost as a spouse: “Wife to the Kingfish on Amos ‘n’ Andy, Sapphire stands close in historical proximity to Cather's Sapphire as a dominating wife—an intelligent, extremely competent, independent, and wrong-headed woman” (65). Camacho does not expound upon the meaning of this, mentioning it only in passing as a segue into a discussion of what it means for a white writer to appropriate the voice of racial others.

sexuality are irrevocably linked” (145-46).³⁰ Parse the descriptions of Sapphire and Jezebel side by side, and it seems again as if Cather made a mistake with her characters’ names—Sapphira should have been named Jezebel, and vice versa. With her sexual fixation on Nancy, her desire for her nephew Martin and, as I will argue below, even for the young man who becomes her son-in-law, Sapphira seems far more libidinous than Jezebel, and in that she attempts to give the men around her sexual access to the nubile Nancy, she seems to wish at least to create a “Jezebel” (and vicariously live out the fantasy of such a life) even if she cannot be one herself. The actual Jezebel, by comparison, is certainly the most domineering of black women, known for consuming men or, at least, part of their hands; in that she makes them quail with fear, we could surely think of her as a “Sapphire,” a woman who emasculates men.

I would propose that in the strange universe created by Cather, it makes perfect sense that it is the ferocious cannibal, the woman who inspires terror rather than lust in men, who is given the name of Jezebel, and not the much desired Nancy nor the much desiring Sapphira. In Cather’s novel, the white characters again and again make a connection between the racial other and sex. Jezebel’s name is, in fact, a giveaway, signaling to us that sexuality is mapped onto her just as it is onto Nancy. The circumstances of her naming are worth considering in this context. It is the sailors on the slave ship who give her the Biblical moniker by which she is known:

When the two hands...had seen that all the females were lying in the spaces assigned to them, they put out their lanterns and went on deck to take the air. A little later the

³⁰ Robinson has told me in conversations that the term “Sapphire” has only been traced back to the late 1950s. Camacho, however, writes that according to a radio historian, “Sapphire” was already “a generic folk term among African Americans for a domineering wife” in the days that Cather was writing her last novel (65).

second mate, hearing shrieks and screams from the women's quarters, ran down from his cabin to find the guards flogging a girl they had dragged out from a heap of rolling, howling blacks.

"It's this here Jezebel made all the row, sir," one of the men panted. (92)

The reason she is given the appellation of Jezebel is not related to any kind of sexual activity with men; it is not even based in any aggression toward men. Instead, the violence she exhibits here—which might in a stretch be construed as sexual, but not in any traditional or certainly heterosexual sense—is directed toward other black women. Certainly it is as the sailors attempt to control Jezebel after this fracas that she bites the second mate, but that attack is more likely self-defense than an endeavor to find nourishment.

Even though Jezebel's target of choice appears to be black women rather than white men, even though she does not display any explicitly sexual urges in that scene or at any other point, she has been deemed a Jezebel by the sailors. They seem to feel a kind of sexual anxiety about her—the way they compare her to both a cow and an ox suggests that they find her androgynous, and the skipper equates her with the best of men. Through the proliferation of animal metaphors used to describe Jezebel on the slave ship, Cather is making a point about Jezebel's dehumanization in the hands of the sailors; at the same time, she is suggesting the sexual anxieties and fears that Jezebel provokes in her captors. There seems to be widespread confusion among the white characters about what kind of threat both Jezebel and Nancy represent; it is as a result of this confusion that the cannibal-cum-asexual-slave is dubbed a Jezebel, while Nancy, the bland, blank girl who whips all the white characters into a frenzy of desire, is given the unremarkable, unmemorable name that she has.

In other words, Cather offers an image of black female sexuality for the sole purpose of neutralizing and extinguishing it. So the most alluring woman of the novel, the one whose sexual magnetism derails all the other characters and, in so doing, sets the plot into motion, is rendered as a cipher; so the question of Till's sexuality is shrouded in mystery to the extent that who fathered her daughter is an unanswerable question, leaving the door wide open for the possibility of incest to saunter into the narrative. So a woman with the name of Jezebel, a character who slakes her hunger on the flesh of men and women, is a peripheral character pushed further back into the periphery of the novel by the achronology of the narrative; the scene of her voracious hunger and deep passions is sandwiched between slices of bread so mild and white, as it were, that afterwards we can barely remember the taste of the meat. Jezebel can be anointed with the name of a woman famed for her skill in seducing men only because she is stripped of all sexual power so effectively that she is little more than a joke.

It is, ultimately, in the order in which Jezebel's story is told that we can best see the complicated, ambivalent nature of Cather's portrait of black womanhood. Just as our first introduction to Jezebel, the scene at her deathbed, irredeemably undercuts the drama of her rampage on board the ship, so too does the scene which follows her display of teeth and temper diminish the force of her wrath and strength to irrelevance. It is as if the narrative structure punishes Jezebel for her passions. We find out that Jezebel is bought by a Dutch farmer, and that she becomes useful but is judged unfit for human interaction, and so continues to be treated like an animal: "When [the farmer] reached home, he set about breaking in his new wench.... [H]e had discovered that her personal manners were too strong for even a Dutch farmer's household, so he lodged her in the haymow over the

cow barn. She learned to milk the cows and to do all the stable work, but she was kept in the barn and never allowed to touch the butter” (96). On the slave ship, she is compared with a cow and then with an ox, her comparison to the male member of the species a promotion, since it pays tribute to her ferocity and virility; now she is once again being associated with a cow.

Once the Dutch farmer dies, Jezebel is then sold to other masters until she is eventually bought by Sapphira’s family. Working for them, she becomes more than a hardworking slave: she also voluntarily turns into her masters’ punitive arm, upholding and reinforcing their system of values. Patching the farm-hands’ pants in the winter, Jezebel “mete[s] out justice” by giving the slack workers a rough seat, and when one farm-hand complains about his uncomfortable pants, she scornfully tells him off in colorfully comedic dialect: “You ain’t no call to be comf’able, you settin’ down de minute a body’s back’s turned. I wisht I could put dock burs in yo’ pants!” (97). Scant evidence here of the woman who endangers the sailors of the slave ship with her teeth. This passage, which shows us Jezebel brandishing a very different sort of weapon, could indeed be a parody of the scene on the ship. Where she had once used her own teeth, she now wields needle and thread, those most feminine and domestic of implements. While she had once endangered the safety of white men, her weapons are now employed in their service, to punish the other slaves.³¹ Pertinent, too, is the fact that with this scene, the portrait of Jezebel comes full circle. Having begun with her as an old, sick woman making comments that imply a threat to Nancy’s well being, the Jezebel narrative ends with her as an old woman once again, directing her ire at another young slave.

³¹ Hoover has a very different reading. She writes that in this scene, “[Jezebel] is apparently subservient but with a decided sense of her own autonomy” (243).

The pants-patching passage arrives on the heels of the slave ship scene: the representation of an angry, ravenous black woman is not allowed to linger in our imagination. We are left instead with a stock character, one straight out of Gone with the Wind—the good Mammy who is, at least to the white members of the audience, a bit ridiculous and a lot comforting; a loyal being who is chagrined at the laziness of the other slaves, who always has the interests of the white people at heart, and whose rage is used only to comic effect. This impression is the last we have of Jezebel alive; we then hear of the preparations for the funeral, the event itself, and the thoughts that Sapphira and Henry have in its aftermath. This funeral is the final nail on the coffin, so to speak: it quite simply buries any last memory we have of her in her earlier incarnation. A kind of status-symbol ceremony, Jezebel's funeral provides Sapphira with an opportunity to show off her largesse, with the preacher's eulogy harping on how much Jezebel had reformed since her heathen days. And with that Jezebel is dropped from the narrative; with her death and the funeral, the suppression and burial of a fierce black female sexuality are complete. Sapphira resumes her diabolical plotting; the story of the sweet-natured, victimized slave so desperately in need of rescue proceeds for another 182 pages. As much as possible, the novel revises and then erases our memory of the young African cannibal.

I mentioned the dearth of critical commentary on Jezebel. The reason the character has garnered so little attention is that in trying to critique slavery for the way it tames slaves, Cather goes overboard, as it were: her burial of the slave ship scene is too subtle in the way it mirrors the process by which African-American characters are buried by slavery, and it is so effective that we end up forgetting all about the scene. A mere

change in the sequence of the Jezebel section would have made Sapphira a far more effective novel. If Cather had begun with the hand-biting incident, letting suspense build around the question of whether this seemingly unbeatable African woman could ever be domesticated, or if she had, alternatively, ended with that scene, allowing that image of unrepentant anger to be our last of Jezebel, then the whole Jezebel chapter and in fact the whole novel would have been more emotionally and intellectually engrossing. Such a change would have led to a more persuasive critique of slavery. It would have given us more of a sense of what was at stake with slavery—the human spirit that was crushed and destroyed, the proud anger that was beaten into meekness and servility.

What, finally, of the fact that “Sapphire” is a handle for a black persona? I have focused on how problematic and inconsistent Cather’s portrayal of black characters is in this novel. Blank, dull, and somehow still very sexy, or scary and dangerous and then suddenly toothless and, again, dull—the African characters play into stereotypes of extremes. They are, furthermore, without agency. Even as she terrifies the sailors on the slave ship, Jezebel is still a victim of her circumstances; no matter how she bites and kicks, she will still be sold as a slave. Clearly Till has no vote in her fate, nor does she even seem to wish for one, and Nancy is the very definition of victim. In Sapphira, only the white characters are in control of their fates. Even so, I would argue that the African characters are at least equally of concern, and that one way we see their importance is that Sapphira, based on her name, is a version of a black persona. As I mentioned above, critics have suggested that Jezebel adds to our understanding of Sapphira, with one stating that she is a double to her mistress; Joseph Urgo similarly states that Sapphira is

“matched” by Jezebel (93). But if the character of Sapphira is loosely based on a black persona and is, indeed, no less than an extension of the Jezebel stereotype, then it is just as legitimate to declare that Sapphira is a double to her slave, and that Jezebel is being “matched” by Sapphira. We should ask instead how the white heroine of the novel adds to our understanding of the marginalized character of Jezebel.

Just as Sapphira has a lot of power but fails, ultimately, to wield it with success, so too does Jezebel fail. Sapphira is the epitome of frustration and embitterment; because these traits are not in evidence when it comes to Jezebel’s story, it is interesting to contemplate whether she, too, feels bitter or frustrated about her plight in life, and if so, to what extent. Just as Sapphira is trapped by her failing body and powers, unable to accomplish the goal of effecting Nancy’s rape, so too is Jezebel imprisoned first by chains and then by enforced servitude. But even though these comparisons are not without merit, they are not especially enlightening. The concept that Sapphira is an extension of Jezebel rather than the other way around is, in the end, useful in that it points us toward a recognition of the primacy of black characters in the novel. The slaves of Sapphira are not just a source of labor, nor are they mere devices to set the plot in motion. They are not even just objects of fascination, sexual and otherwise. They are, instead, subjects in their own right; I would contend that they are, in fact, the subject of the novel.

Incest in the Colbert Clan

As if to remind us that Sapphira includes the possibility of incest but does not allow it to take the form of a dramatic revelation, there are traces of incestuous desire throughout the narrative—not just what the white Colberts feel for Nancy, but also what

they feel for each other. As a flashback reveals, Sapphira desired the young man who becomes her son-in-law. We learn that

[Michael Blake] spent some days at the Mill Farm.... [T]he Mistress was charmed by his good manners, his handsome face and blue eyes. When he said good-bye and rode up into the Capon River country, she missed him.

In two weeks he came back to the Mill Farm.... When, on this second visit, he asked the miller and Sapphira for their daughter's hand, they were speechless from astonishment. After the interview in which they gave their consent, Mrs. Colbert retired to her room and bolted the door for an hour to regain her composure. (131-32)

Because Sapphira's attraction to Michael occurs before he is related to her, designating her liking for him as incestuous may not seem wholly accurate. However, in a novel in which most familial relationships are fraught with sexual jealousy, it is difficult not to read her anguish after Michael's proposal as arising at least in part from a sexual rivalry with her daughter. In other words, it is not just the knowledge of Michael's forthcoming marriage which upsets her, but the fact that he is getting married to her daughter which she finds disturbing.

The theme of sexual rivalry between family members surfaces once again in the relationship between Henry and Martin. With Nancy at the apex, the two men form a classical love triangle, with Martin's lust for Nancy spurring Henry into feeling the same: "The poison in the young scamp's blood seemed to stir something in his own. The Colbert in him threatened to raise its head after long hibernation" (209). According to René Girard, the birth of desire in European literature is a triangulated process, having as much to do with the third party as with the ostensible object of fascination. Then, too, there is Eve Sedgwick, who, building upon the work of recent anthropologists as well as Girard, makes the influential argument that male homosocial relations serve to uphold various patriarchal institutions,

among them the traffic in women; when two male characters battle over a woman, the bond between the men becomes homosocial, and possibly homoerotic as well. The sexual rivalry between Henry and Martin seems homoerotic, and as such close to incest. When the awakening of Henry's lust is described, the female object of desire is conspicuously absent, with "[t]he poison of the young scamp's blood" directly infecting Henry's. The image of "[t]he Colbert in him threaten[ing] to raise its head" is a notably phallic one, and that this "erection" occurs specifically in response to the thought of Martin suggests the homoeroticism which underlies Henry's feelings toward his kinsman.

As Shaw attests, Sapphira also desires Martin. Sitting at tea together just after he arrives, the narrator tells us that "[h]e looked at her frankly.... Easy, confidential, a trifle free in manner, as if she were not an old woman and an invalid. That was how she liked it. She told herself that Martin's visit would be very refreshing. She almost believed she had urged him to come solely because she liked to have young people about" (154). This enigmatic passage leads us to the question of why she invites Martin to stay—whether it is because she incestuously desires her nephew, or because she is so tormented by her jealousy of Nancy that she wishes him to seduce or rape the slave girl. If she is contriving Nancy's rape, which seems likely, then what does she hope to accomplish? Morrison also remarks on the difficulty of untangling Sapphira's motivations: "Given the novel's own terms, there can be no grounds for Sapphira's thinking that Nancy can be 'ruined' in the conventional sense. There is no question of marriage to Martin, to Colbert, to anybody. Then, too, why would such an assault move her slave girl outside her husband's interest? The probability is that it would secure it" (Playing 25).

Sapphira invites Martin to stay because she desires him and because she desires Nancy, and this leads to her wanting him to deflower Nancy. For while Henry maps the image of Mercy onto the blankness of Nancy's character, Sapphira maps an image of herself. Crippled to the extent that she is dependent on her slaves for a visit to the lavatory, driven through her forced inactivity to a morbid brooding on the object of her jealousy, Sapphira attempts to control the sexuality of all those around her: Till, Nancy, Martin, her husband and even the young slave Tansy Dave, whose marriage she tries but fails to arrange. Inevitably, perhaps, her sexual fantasies involve the healthy bodies surrounding and tending her. Again in Morrison's words, "The surrogate black bodies become her hands and feet, her fantasies of sexual ravish and intimacy with her husband, and, not inconsiderably, her sole source of love" (Playing 26). By mentally substituting Nancy's body for her own, Sapphira can enjoy Martin's sexual attentions: the black female body becomes the only medium through which Sapphira's incestuous longings for her nephew can be given full rein.

The Literary Failure of Sapphira

From a critical point of view, Sapphira is an anomalous work in Cather's oeuvre. Morrison describes it as "a text that has been virtually jettisoned from the body of American literature by critical consensus" (Playing 18), and Rosowski says that when it comes to Sapphira, "[w]hat we find in the criticism is a startling silence" (Voyage 233).³² Sapphira has taken a drubbing for its poor writing and weak story; its ending, in

³² Morrison's essay has done much to bring Cather's relatively neglected last novel into the spotlight; works such as Romines' collection provide an extensive look at the new scholarship on Sapphira.

particular, has been criticized for its sentimentality as well as the way it straddles the line between fiction and fact.³³ In arguing that Cather suppresses the incest theme in Sapphira in order to indict slavery, I do not propose that we should explain away all or even many of the flaws of Sapphira, but instead that the novel, faults and all, be read and understood in light of these efforts. So, for instance, the narrative's unsatisfying story can be explained by the fact that Cather fails to bring the incest hints scattered through the narrative to a climax: as a result we chafe, cheated of the (re)resolution of incest, against the lack of order and closure that characterizes its last pages.

Then there is the ending's sentimentality and unusual foray into the realm of autobiography, the appearance of "Willa" at the end of the text. Wolff points out how the text pairs the narrator, the young girl who makes what is little more than a cameo appearance at the end, with Nancy, the oppressed and harassed slave girl of the title who figures so prominently throughout; they are "undeniable doubles, the two women—the two children that they once had been—reflecting one another" (228). The bond between the two characters is closer and more complicated than Wolff acknowledges: if Nancy is Henry's niece, and the niece is Henry's granddaughter, then Nancy and the narrator are second cousins, and the ending is showcasing a familial doubling which cuts across racial lines. Another way to phrase this idea is that Cather is identifying herself with a black character.

A remarkable story told by Lewis suggests what such an identification may signify. As Lewis tells us, "[Cather] told once of a old judge who came to call at

³³ Skaggs, for one, hazards that Cather is "deliberately refus[ing] to maintain the formalist boundaries between writer, narrative persona, and characters" (The World 180), but I would echo Rosowski's comments ("Subverted Endings") about the uneasiness with which the novel's last chapter does so.

Willowshade, and who began stroking her curls and talking to her in the playful platitudes one addressed to little girls--and of how she horrified her mother by breaking out suddenly: 'I'se a dang'ous nigger, I is!'" (13). Lewis claims that this anecdote indicates that Cather began rebelling against the constrictions of her gender and position at an unusually tender age. I would suggest instead that the young Cather—and, by extension, the older Cather who remembers and tells the story—is performing an identification with the black race, an identification which is “dang’ous.” She is acting out blackness, just as some years later, she would famously act out masculinity by chopping off her hair, dressing up as a man, and taking on the sobriquet of “William Cather,” and in the process, she is crossing a line that she herself recognizes is perilous.

Cather’s relationship to blackness is clearly complex. On one hand, she presents us in the novel with the blankness of Nancy’s character, the silence and passivity of Till, and the transformation of the fierce cannibal Jezebel into a harmless old woman and buffoonish slave; on the other, there is the nostalgia with which she writes about the South, the almost wistful admiration with which Willa regards the prodigal Nancy, and the story of young Cather seeking shelter in a dangerous black identity. Yet the complexity of Cather’s attitudes towards the racial other is most poignantly betrayed by the incest plot hidden in the novel. For while we could take the presence of the incest threat in Sapphira as a warning against the dangers of interracial mixing, of too much intimacy between master and slave, we could also interpret the buried narrative as a cautionary tale about the dangers of refusing to acknowledge the kinship between blacks and whites; we could say that the moral of the story is that if you attempt to hide or deny you or your offsprings’ origins, incest may be the result. It is true that the characters

never do acknowledge the possibility of such a kinship, and that the rape is averted nonetheless. Still, the threading of the threat of incest through the narrative suggests that Sapphira contains a condemnation—albeit one both obscure and perhaps half-hearted—of the racist ideals and practices which constitute the institution of slavery.

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