BEYOND THE ABYSS:

AMERICAN GASLIGHT AND POPULAR LITERATURE

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by
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ABSTRACT

The mainstream feminist movement in the United States has struggled to include women of color and marginalized women. However, two constants emerge from the work of both white feminists and feminists of color: first, writing is a powerful tool with which women can examine their experiences and theories about gender dynamics, patriarchy, and misogyny. Secondly, to understand and resist patriarchal oppression, women must confront racism and classism that has historically divided the feminist movement by intentionally creating inclusive spaces and opportunities for women to share and discuss their experiences.

Popular fiction can bring a wide variety of voices into conversation, including those of women and color and marginalized women, and help women learn to empathize and better support each other in the face of societal oppression. This work provides examples from fiction that depict the way U.S. Patriarchal Surreality employs society's gender expectations to circumscribe the lives of women. These novels show that lessons and stories passed down to young women ingrain values of Patriarchal Surreality into the country's collective unconscious and ensure ongoing oppression. As a result, not only is oppression accepted, but

the structures that perpetuate this oppression do so insidiously. Popular fiction can help women recognize oppressive structures as it realistically documents manifestations of misogyny and prejudice. Throughout this work, fictional examples are compared with real examples to demonstrate fiction's legitimacy. In these novels as women characters begin to recognize their subjugation, so do readers. Collectively, these examples reveal the systemic nature of the oppression of women in the U.S. Fiction also provides examples of women's reactions to oppression. By depicting the experiences of diverse women who recognize their subjugation and resist Patriarchal Surreality, popular American fiction can catalyze societal and individual self-reflection, ultimately becoming an instrument to dismantle Patriarchal Surreality.

Fiction can bring women together to read and discuss not only the experiences of fictional characters but also the way those examples can and do reflect women's reality. Popular fiction provides a wealth of examples that can bring women together to reflect on these fictional realistic experiences and envision, collectively, the possibility of an alternate future.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, have examined a dissertation titled, "Beyond the Abyss: American Gaslight and Popular Fiction," presented by Anna Marlene Toms, candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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PREFACE

Like many, my identity is multifaceted. I am a daughter, a teacher, a student, and the middle sister. As the only girl with two brothers, I have always refused to be excluded or limited because of my gender. If my big brother played ice hockey, I would teach myself to skate just as well. If he got good grades, spoke French, and excelled in science and math, I would try my best to do the same. Our parents instilled a healthy sense of competition and never discouraged me from doing anything I wanted, even if it was typically "just for boys." I made my own choices and mistakes, having been taught that I could choose my own path, and despite a few bumps and bruises along the way, this mindset allowed me the freedom to decide who I am and how I interact with the world.

When I finally stopped simply following in my brother's footsteps (and gave up on my undergraduate math minor), I recognized that for as long as I can remember, books have been an anchor. Like ice skating on a cold Saturday night (yes, turns out skating became that integral to my identity), fiction brings me back to an authentic place, where I find the experiences of others provide an opportunity to reflect on the woman I am, the woman I have been, and the woman I will be. Interacting with the written word is a means that allows me to become more fully myself. As a white woman in the United States, fiction has provided me with the opportunity to recognize society's limited expectations for all women, gain insight into the experiences of women who are different from me, and define my perspective and values. As a lifelong lover-of-books turned English teacher, I have witnessed literature's

innate power to transform readers' perspectives, whether we embrace it or resist. In this work, I explore the impact that reading and contemplating popular fiction can have on women, in particular. How can fiction help women better understand ourselves, our societal position, and our relation to one another? And how does the act of reading fiction by women and about women's experiences disrupt patriarchal structures in the United States?

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Born in the 1980s, I did not comprehend the exponential rate of improvement in women's lives in the United States that occurred shortly before I was born. My mother told me stories: she gave up on going to college when her father did not offer his support; male supervisors at the bank where she was a teller in the early 70s would leer as she and other women bent down in their skirts; single women at the bank received pay increases, but management denied her a raise because "she had a husband" to support her. And yet, only thirty years later as a freshman in high school in 2001, my life felt so different. I had my own credit card, a car, and a cellphone; at 17, my part-time job was considering me for a management position, and it was a given that I would go to college. After graduating with my bachelor's degree, I made a fair salary, I bought my own home, I lived independently, I had access to contraceptives, and I took for granted the ruling from 1973 that promised that were I ever to get pregnant, it would be my decision to choose if I was prepared or ready to be a mother. I never imagined the government might revoke these freedoms, and so I apathetically took them for granted, believing my country had permanently codified these rights.

However, nearly fifty years after *Roe v. Wade* established a woman's right to an abortion in the U.S. (with several caveats[1]), the decision was reversed in 2022. Political Scientist Carole Pateman might be surprised by this turn of events; in the preface to the 30th Anniversary Edition of *The Sexual Contract,* Pateman ponders whether her book, originally

published in 1988, was still relevant at the time of its re-release in 2018. Pateman writes, "Now, . . . women have gained the remaining civil and legal rights still lacking in the 1980s and are formally equal citizens" (Pateman x). However, in 2023, the American political and social landscape looks very different than it did in 2018, and despite the years of "progress" that lulled me, and women like me, into an existence where my mother's reality of the 60s and 70s felt outdated, distant, and somewhat inconceivable, today I have fewer rights than she did at twenty-five in 1973.

The Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* shocked and outraged many contemporary women who, privileged like me, may have begun to take the hard-fought gains of the feminist movement for granted. However, had we been paying attention, we would not have been surprised. The ruling reflects preeminent, enduring patriarchal structures in the United States, obscured by the facade of Patriarchal Surreality[2]. Women who neglect the examination of their position in society and forget "the range of discriminations women faced and . . . their collective efforts to transform the world around them" (Cobble et al. xvii) strengthen this false reality. Patriarchy, "a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby 214), asserts control in women's lives in a variety of ways. Although Pateman claims women are "formally equal citizens," women's lives are circumscribed by prejudice and patriarchal values, "customs and ideas that legitimate male dominance [and] constitute the *ideology* of patriarchy" (Ferraro 79), like those embedded in *Roe v. Wade*, which guaranteed power to a woman *and her attending physician, only during the first trimester* of pregnancy. The truth is that the revered *Roe v. Wade*, which gave me an impression that I had absolute control over my body, is a facet of a broader strategy: societal gaslighting[3] to disguise the extent of women's subjugation. While

this reality is often less obscure for those who experience intersectional oppression, all women in the U.S. are deceived and coerced by Patriarchal Surreality. Gaslit into believing she has agency, a woman's existence is limited, and when she begins to see and resist these societal boundaries, to join the chorus of voices rising against structural oppression, most women can and should expect to be systematically silenced. Only when women raise their voices across economic, racial, and cultural boundaries can they begin to expose and dismantle entrenched U.S. Patriarchal Surreality.

Describing the facade that veils these prejudiced structures as "surreality" is apt. For one, "surreality" implies a distorted reality; the reality that women inhabit in the U.S. is distorted by those in power to obscure and perpetuate the subjugation of women. Secondly, an attempt to recognize society's collective prejudiced unconscious aligns with the efforts of Surrealists in the twentieth century. Surrealists sought to tap into the unconscious, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of human nature. André Breton claims that "Surrealism sought to break down the boundary between dream and reality and to unite, in one picture or one text, the unconscious and the conscious" (Lutz). Although the idea of a distorted reality is at odds with the Surrealists' goals to achieve higher-level consciousness by uniting the conscious and unconscious, in fact, the comparison is appropriate. Patriarchal Surreality unites the unspoken desires of patriarchy, maintaining power and subordination, with its tangible, distorted reality. Lutz explains that Surrealism was "the most influential artistic movement between 1924 and World War II" (Lutz). Surrealism materialized in Europe soon after the first wave of the feminist movement in the U.S. and directly preceding the most significant years of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. As the country wrestled with redefining its values in the wake of the first world war and emerging political and social movements,

patriarchy shifted and established the Patriarchal Surreality that obscures the circumscribed existence of women today.

This project utilizes examples from four distinct novels, *The Street* by Ann Petry, *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens, and *Valentine* by Elizabeth Wetmore, that depict women who, metaphorically and literally, react violently after recognizing the oppressive reality veiled by the facade of Patriarchal Surreality in the United States. The menacing landscapes in these novels mirror the patriarchal and prejudiced structures that limit opportunities for and, at times, subject women to violence. Like the landscape, oppression is a backdrop that women do not recognize or choose to tolerate, and over which they have little control–like a wind that batters a face, a lurking snake, or waves that force a boat off course. In this way, oppression is an indistinguishable and yet influential cornerstone of U.S. society. In both intimate relationships and at a societal level, women are systematically gaslit to participate in the very structure[4] that perpetuates their oppression. In each of these novels, women face circumstances that become increasingly hostile and restrictive, eventually resulting in an epiphany, sometimes a rupture, that exposes Patriarchal Surreality and forces women to reckon with the underlying structures, expectations, and individuals responsible for their subordination. Women constantly endure a barrage of manipulative messaging and gaslighting, and they inhabit a "confuse[d] and distort[ed]" (Sweet 851) Patriarchal Surreality that controls and subdues by promising security and independence but, in fact, denies these fundamental human rights.

This project explores the ways that society in the U.S. has ingrained the subjugation of women, how women recognize and react to their oppression, and how women respond to these limitations. In the novels selected, women react to oppressive patriarchal and

prejudiced societal structures with both literal and metaphorical violence, and I strive to contextualize their actions. I thought carefully about which perspectives would be appropriate to include in my analysis. As a white woman, I hesitated to critique narratives written by and about women of color. However, I realize that an understanding of oppressive societal structures that ignores variations of woman-ness and womanhood risks further oppressing marginalized voices. Juxtaposing the representations of white women and women of color in popular fiction can lead to valuable insights. As Kimberlé Crenshaw explains in "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," "ignoring difference *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups . . . Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. Thus, when the practices expound identity as "woman" *or* "person of color" as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (Crenshaw 357). Crenshaw's words echo a sentiment expressed by Kathleen J. Ferraro in her non-fiction work, *Neither Angels nor Demons: Women, Crime, and Victimization*, an analysis of the victim/criminal dichotomy in the U.S. Ferraro's work contextualizes criminal acts perpetrated by women by documenting the precipitating experiences and circumstances. She believes "women's lives, particularly marginalized women's lives, offer a unique, more valid perspective on domination than do the lives of privileged people" (Ferraro 11). Ferraro explains, "My hope is that such a rendering will assist in transforming the current punitive environment to one of greater understanding, connection, and support" (Ferraro 8). Ferraro's work provides a valuable example, as her interviews can cultivate empathy, understanding, and progress. Widely available to a public audience, fiction written by and about women of color can serve as a similar tool for readers

for whom these perspectives are unfamiliar. For privileged women, reading and discussing realistic fiction can stimulate self-reflection and cultivate empathy through respectful encounters with a variety of experiences, particularly authentic representations of women of color and marginalized women. Popular fiction, when scrutinized with methodology similar to Ferraro's, can offer an avenue for transformation to occur, for as Pateman claims, "Telling stories of all kinds is the major way that human beings have endeavored to make sense of themselves and their social world" (Pateman 1). Fiction often mirrors reality for women in the U.S. and, as such, can aid in identifying flaws and restructuring societal institutions that contribute to the subjugation of women in the U.S.

The process of recognizing societal structures that perpetuate prejudice and inequality has been an important identifying factor for marginalized individuals, and white Americans must also prioritize this task. By depicting various experiences, popular fiction can help cultivate this understanding in its readers. Crenshaw explains, "This process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized the identity politics of African-Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others. For all these groups, identity-based politics has been a source of strength, community, and intellectual development" (Crenshaw 357). Intersectionality, "The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage" ("Intersectionality."), dictates that the various facets of one's identity shape an individual's social reality in the U.S.

Intersectionality significantly influences the lives of women in the U.S. According to Sweet, women with intersectional identities, "women of color, poor women, immigrant

women, and disabled women" (Sweet 856), are disproportionately affected by abuse. Since the founding of the U.S., society's expectations for women have been largely unattainable for women of color, marking black and brown women as "less than . . . moral, [or] 'true'" women (Giddings 47). The subjugation of women of color is compounded and complicated by additional facets of their identities like gender, health, and economic status. Similarly, Chela Sandoval claims, "U.S. women of color have long understood . . . that especially race, but also one's culture, sex, or class, can deny comfortable or easy access to any legitimized gender category, that the interactions between such social classifications produce other, unnamed gender forms within the social hierarchy" (Sandoval 44). Intersectionality compounds subjugation for women of color: "the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism . . . these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or of antiracism. Because of their intersectional identity as both women *and* of color within discourses shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized within both" (Crenshaw 358). Because women of color do not easily fit into one category, neither *only* "woman" nor *only* "person of color," these women find themselves facing compounded challenges and subjugation[5]. According to the Combahee River Collective, it is difficult for women of color to "separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously" (Combahee River Collective 326). Women with intersectional identities find themselves not belonging because society deprives them of space to stabilize their identities. However, Crenshaw claims, "Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group policies" (Crenshaw 377).

Awareness of intersectionality's significant influence is crucial in understanding the experiences of women of color in the U.S., and popular fiction provides examples to help audiences bear witness to and better understand various manifestations of intersectional oppression.

Although the United States government is ingrained with patriarchal values that contribute to the subjugation of women, the feminist movement has attempted to expose and weaken this oppressive establishment. During the second wave of U.S. feminism, women came together in liberation groups that became a source of empowerment within the movement. The first women's liberation group, the "West Side Group," formed organically in the fall of 1967 after a woman attending the National Conference for New Politics was told by the meeting's chair to "Move on, little girl; we have more important issues to talk about here than women's liberation" (Dicker 78). In response, Jo Freeman invited women to her apartment on the West Side of Chicago and formed the first women's liberation group to talk "about everything from their sense of exclusion from the New Left to their fear of speaking in public to their sexuality" (Dicker 78). Other groups around the country followed in the footsteps of The West Side Group. They provided women with space to discuss and analyze "their experiences as women, which they believed, would lead to personal transformation and then to political action" (Dicker 81). Eventually, women began to refer to their conversations in these groups as "consciousness-raising." Dicker explains, "In a typical CR session, a small group of women . . . would gather and respond to a particular question. Some groups tried to reconstruct in chronological order their childhood, adolescent, and adult understandings of gender role stereotyping. Other groups examined . . . everything from body image and beauty standards to dating and marriage to sexual orientation" (Dicker 81).

Ultimately, "women started to see patterns emerging; they began to develop theory as they realized that the problems they had thought were theirs alone were shared by many. From this insight . . . Carol Hanisch coined the slogan 'the personal is political,' which meant that the private arenas of home, marriage, and family reflected the power dynamics of society at large" (Dicker 81). In addition to consciousness-raising groups, women also organized formal opportunities to share their experiences for the sake of activism. A group called the Redstockings organized a speak-out on March 21, 1969, called "Abortion: Tell It Like It Is." The event did not discuss "abortion in abstract, theoretical, or legalistic terms" (Dicker 85); rather "the organizers . . . decided to use personal testimony, thereby making the issue more concrete for listeners . . . the courageous women who told complete strangers the often-humiliating details of their painful, private suffering persuaded people that abortion should be legalized" (Dicker 86). Members of the women's liberation movement "saw the speak-out, with its reliance on personal voices, as a way to sway public opinion" (Dicker 86). Throughout the second wave of U.S. feminism, groups and events that allowed women to come together to share their experiences became essential to the movement.

As these groups developed theories to explain the structural oppression experienced by women in the United States, they shared their insights more broadly by publishing newsletters and other writing. The West Side Group published their newsletter, *Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement*, "which eventually had eight hundred subscribers nationwide" (Dicker 78). During the second wave of U.S. feminism, *Ms.* magazine "tried to combine the political analysis of feminist publications with the slick production values of women's magazines, becoming . . . the first mainstream feminist periodical on the market" (Dicker 90). The groundbreaking *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, a book that "taught–and continues

to teach–countless women about topics as wide-ranging as sexuality, postpartum depression, and the healthcare establishment" (Dicker 80), emerged from a "series of conversations and workshops" (Dicker 81) that took place between 1969 and 1973 in which women claimed ownership over their bodies by sharing their experiences and insights. But the women's liberation groups of the 1960s and 1970s were not the first nor the last to use writing as a means of expressing their frustration with subjugation. Decades before, during the first wave of U.S. feminism, Charlotte Perkins Gilman published her well-known short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), the novel *Herland* (1915), "a utopian novel about an all-female society" (Dicker 42), and *Women and Economics*, "the book that made Gilman widely known in her time; published in 1898, by 1920 it had gone into nine printings and been translated into seven languages" (Dicker 42). Gilman's writing embodies her belief that "women's lot could be improved only if societal structures shifted to allow women to develop meaningful work" (Dicker 42). Throughout the various iterations of U.S. feminism, women's writing has served as a tenant of the movement's activism by disseminating information and serving as a space to document and examine women's experiences while imagining possibilities for the future.

Despite the gains of the first and second waves of U.S. feminism, the mainstream movement struggled for cohesiveness that would include all women, excluding women of color and other marginalized women. Mainstream consciousness-raising groups and speak-outs primarily provided white women with validation through the sharing of experiences. The mainstream feminist movement functioned by making broad strokes, and consciousness-raising groups that highlighted the individual experiences of women sometimes became hyper-focused on commonalities, which relied "too much on generalization and thus

excluded women of color" (Dicker 82). Some white women irrationally feared including women involved with the black power movement "because these women tended to understand male-female relationships as traditional, with black females assuming subordinate roles so that black males could take on the dominant ones they were denied in the larger society" (Dicker 82). During the Second Wave, as radical feminists became "focused on showing the oppression of women as a 'sex class,' [they] often failed to think through the ways that differences among women—such as those connected to race and sexuality—mattered a great deal" (Dicker 91). Mainstream feminists devalued the perspectives of women of color, and marginalized women were discouraged from joining the mainstream movement because of their experiences with white feminists. As a result, the primarily white mainstream women's liberation movement moved forward and defined its goals without including feminists of color.

However, marginalized women set out to define feminism for themselves and made significant contributions. Women of color formed their own groups[6], including the Combahee River Collective, which according to Estelle B. Freedman, "*created a space apart from both white women and black men, forming study groups and cultural retreats where they addressed not only 'antiracist and antisexist' politics but also 'heterosexism and economic oppression under capitalism*'" (Freedman 325). In "A Black Feminist Statement," the group claims, "In our consciousness-raising sessions, . . . we have in many ways gone beyond white women's revelations because we are dealing with the implications of race and class as well as sex" (Combahee River Collective 327). Feminists of color founded "Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, the first publishing house in the United States for women of color" (Dicker 92), and developed the theory that "oppressions interconnect" (Dicker 92),

laying a foundation for third wave feminists and the theory of intersectionality. In the 1980s, during the third wave, women of color also claimed power by expressing themselves and their experiences in writing. Chicana feminists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa requested work from women to help explore the role that prejudice played in divisions within the feminist movement. The resulting collection, published by the Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, "redefined feminism to include the concerns of women of color and third world women but also called into question traditional ways of understanding knowledge by incorporating a variety of different kinds of writing about gendered identity, such as poetry, consciousness-raising essays, and visual art" (Dicer 109). Although feminism and the goals of the movement evolved throughout the various waves of the movement, two constants emerge: first, writing is a powerful tool with which women can examine their experiences and theories about gender dynamics, patriarchy, and misogyny in the U.S. Secondly, to understand and resist patriarchal oppression, women must confront racism and classism that has historically divided the feminist movement by intentionally creating inclusive spaces and opportunities for women to share and discuss their experiences.

During the various waves of the feminist movement, writing provided an opportunity for women to share their experiences and develop theories regarding their position in society. A groundbreaking piece of writing published during the second wave of U.S. feminism describes how white suburban women come to recognize their relegated position in U.S. society. In 1972, *Ms. Magazine* published "Click! The Housewife's Moment of Truth," an article that explores the "click! of recognition, that parenthesis of truth around a little thing that completes the puzzle of reality in women's minds–the moment that brings a gleam to our

eyes and means the revolution has begun . . . because we have suddenly and shockingly perceived the basic disorder in what has been believed to be the natural order of things" (O'Reilly). While widespread gaslighting and Patriarchal Surreality intentionally deceive and subjugate women, the "click!" is the epiphany when a woman becomes capable of discerning and acknowledging structural oppression. However, O'Reilly's article is limited in scope, targeting white, middle-class women. The article explores the steps a housewife might take after remembering "that she once had other interests, vague hopes, great plans. **She will decide that the work in the house is less important than reordering that work so she can consider her own life**" (O'Reilly, emphasis in original). O'Reilly claims women who have experienced this realization can unite and "present our case: It is unfair that we should bear the whole responsibility for the constant schema of household management" (O'Reilly). She explains several "rules" to follow "as soon as I finish the painful process of thinking about the assumptions that make them necessary" (O'Reilly):

> **(1) Decide what housework needs to be done. Then cut the list in half.**
>
> . . .
>
> **(2) Decide what you will and will not do.**
>
> . . .
>
> **(3) Make a plan and present it as final.**
>
> . . .
>
> **(4) Think revolutionary thoughts.**
>
> . . .
>
> **(5) Never give in.**
>
> . . .

(6) Do not feel guilty.

. . .

(7) Expect regression. And remember, the next step is human liberation.

(O'Reilly, emphasis in original)

These idealistic "rules" are not accessible or realistic for most women in the U.S.; O'Reilly does not address the reality that many women, some white housewives included, do not have the means or privilege to live by these lofty expectations. She fails to address the experiences of women of color and those of women whose lives necessitate that they work, often in the very homes of white women enlightened by the "click!" However, ultimately, O'Reilly acknowledges that taking a stance against patriarchal structures and following her "rules" can completely disrupt women's lives. She explains, "**the sad and solemn truth is that we may have to step out alone . . . The more we try, and argue, and change, the more we will realize that the male ego will be the last thing in this world to change. And the last place it will change is at home**" (O'Reilly, emphasis in original). O'Reilly's unrealistic expectations culminate with an admission that perhaps the only way women might escape patriarchal structures is by abandoning them altogether, simultaneously abandoning their lives and livelihoods. While the article and the rules are insightful, taken alone, this piece of writing does not galvanize women from diverse backgrounds as feminists.

Although it conspicuously excludes women of color and women whose lives do not fit into traditional gender roles, for white housewives, O'Reilly believes the "click!" can serve as a rallying cry for resistance to the misogyny ingrained in suburban America. However, her article fails to explore the ways the "click!" manifests for the majority of U.S. women who do not fit the white, suburban stereotype or conform to traditional gender

expectations. Like other critical writing and endeavors of the feminist movement, "Click! The Housewife's Moment of Truth" oversimplifies and relies too heavily on generalizations rather than exploring the nuances of the epiphany. O'Reilly implies that after completing her daily chores, a woman should ruminate on patriarchy, misogyny, and how she might resist the demands of her husband and children, despite the reality that most women in the U.S. lack the time and means for reflection and resistance.

Scholarship by Lisa Marie Hogeland, Cheri Register, and Joanne S. Frye broadens the understanding of women's experiences as they recognize their subjugated position and develop feminist ideals. Hogeland's work confirms that writing, specifically fiction, "enabled a wider circulation of ideas from the Women's Liberation Movement by moderating those ideas, by softening their political edges, by personalizing and novelizing feminist social criticism" (Hogeland x). In her work, *Feminisms and Its Fictions: The Consciousness-Raising Novel and the Women's Liberation Movement,* Hogeland explores the relationship between fiction and the feminist movement. She claims that feminist fiction "in some cases depicted the protagonist's process of consciousness raising explicitly. In others, it shaped its narrative according to the structure of consciousness rising, the process by which participants come to see the personal as political. In still others, it was designed to transact CR with its readers" (Hogeland ix). Astutely, Hogeland is "less interested in the aesthetics of the CR novel than in its politics – the political and rhetorical meanings of its narrative strategies, or what we might call, paraphrasing Jane Tompkins in *Sensational Designs,* the (counter) cultural work these novels performed" (Hogeland x). However, Hogeland limits the scope of her project to 1970s novels that she considers "feminist fiction." She claims, "Though the CR novel was a specific and historically short-lived fictional form, it and the theories of CR that

were foundational to it continue to shape feminist critical understandings of the relationship between reading and social change" (Hogeland x). Evidence from both Frye and Register supports Hogeland's thinking by exploring the relationship between fiction and feminism. In *Living Stories, Telling Lives: Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience*, Frye explains:

> The fullest participation of the novel in feminist change derives from the reader, especially the woman reader, who might find through the reading of novels the growing edge of her own humanity, extending beyond available roles and categories and into a renewed future. As she learns from female[7] characters new ways to interpret her own and other women's experiences, she helps to reshape the culture's understanding of women and participates in the feminist alteration of human experience" (Frye 191).

This interaction between a novel and its reader is not limited to intentionally feminist writing. While the CR novel might have been short-lived, and Hogeland limits her scope to work from the 1970s, the opportunity for consciousness raising occurs in many works of fiction. By engaging with realistic fiction that authentically depicts experiences of women, including women of color and other marginalized women, readers can broaden their understanding of what it means to be a woman in the United States and cultivate empathy for women with various backgrounds and experiences.

As a feminist scholar, Cheri Register theorized about women's experiences as they come to recognize and resist society's systematic oppression, and she elaborated on the role that fiction can play in this process. While Register's work provides a framework for utilizing literature as a tool for self-actualization, it is grounded in her experiences as a

professor of Women's Studies, teaching women with the privilege to attend college. It is, therefore, limited in a manner similar to O'Reilly's "Click!". By incorporating voices of women of color and marginalized women, Register may have achieved a more comprehensive theory; nonetheless, her work is useful. In her article "Brief, A-Mazing Moments: Dealing with Despair in the Women's Studies Classroom," Register recounts teaching a required course for Women's Studies majors in the fall of 1978 that led her to develop a model (image on page 20), which provides "a conceptual framework, an attempt to understand graphically a process that many of us have gone or are going through" (Register, "Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 10). She asked her students to explore "the impact of feminism on a particular discipline or area of inquiry" (Register, "Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 7) and believed the opportunity to expand their research beyond its usual parameters would be exhilarating. However, reviewing early drafts of the project, Register found that negative emotions stymied her students' growth. From their work, "An image emerged of a vast male conspiracy [to oppress and abuse women] with an irresistible momentum, motivated by a conscious, deliberate evil" (Register, "Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 8). The Women's Studies students were preoccupied with the consequences of the systematic oppression of women by men and contending with overwhelming feelings of "anger, frustration, disillusion, despair" (Register, "Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 8) as they recounted their own experiences and documented the experiences of other women. Register was "disappointed that so few reports had mentioned signs of change attributable to feminism" ("Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 8). Instead, her students focused on the negatives for women in the United States.

As Register reflected on her students' reactions to the project and her personal evolution as a feminist scholar, she developed a theory to delineate the phases of

development and understanding that individuals navigate as feminists. According to Register, the initial phase is "*Compensating*" ("Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 9, emphasis in original): identifying examples of women who have made significant accomplishments or valuable contributions to society despite limitations rooted in gender. These examples serve "as a defense against arguments that women are by nature inferior" (Register, "Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 9). However, she concedes there is an inherent fallacy in this stage: "because we do not yet question male-defined standards, the ultimate symbol of achievement is a woman who disguises herself as a man and proves her worth in an all-male arena" (Register, "Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 9). In this case, society does not recognize a woman who has made great achievements as a woman. Instead, she is required to hide or minimize her identity; society rationalizes her accomplishments because she does not meet traditional gender expectations; or she is perceived in male terms or regarded as masculine. In any case, it is more challenging for a woman to gain recognition in patriarchal society when she is true to her identity as a woman. Register explains that as the examples of exceptional women are exhausted, "it becomes apparent that discrimination is the rule, part of a huge system of oppression which pits men against women" (Register, "Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 9). This realization leads to the next stage, the overwhelmingly negative emotional state experienced by her Women's Studies students, who identified this phase as "The Pit" (Register, "Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 9).

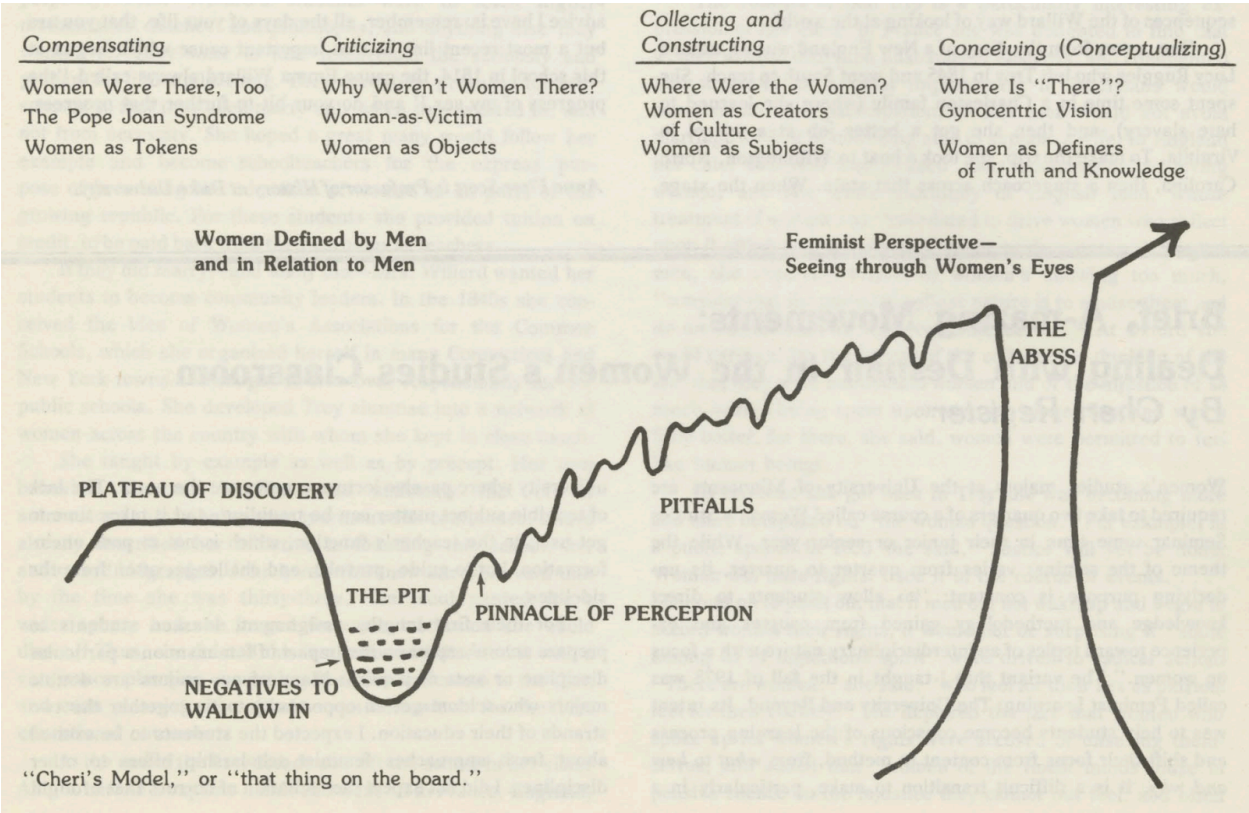
Although the Pit is a painful place, Register believes this stage is essential, for as women recognize the manifestations of patriarchal oppression, they cannot forget the exceptional examples and "begin to wonder how they resisted" (Register, "Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 9), laying the groundwork for progress and growth. In the Pit, individuals identify

the ways that patriarchy manifests and systematically abuses and oppresses women; in the Pit, women start to pull back the facade of Patriarchal Surreality to see the oppressive society it obscures. This "cataloging" of oppression was responsible for Register's students' intense feelings; overwhelmed by a negative reality, they were no longer able to identify or "see" a path toward a different future. Register explains,

> The mode of consciousness-raising that has the most indelible effect begins with a lowering: we descend into "The Pit," immerse ourselves in oppression, and "speak bitterness" to bolster our determination to climb back out on the other side . . . we are indeed "wallowing in negatives," convinced that oppression is all-pervasive and irresistible. When we examine women's experience, we see only victimization. (Register 9, emphasis in original)

However, recognizing her students' hopelessness, Register sought to show them that a way forward exists, even when the final destination remains unknown. From the greatest depths can come the possibility of the greatest progress. She explains that even in the depths of the Pit, "we haven't forgotten all those exceptional heroines, and we begin to wonder how they resisted. Buoyed on our remembrance of them, we pull ourselves up to that first little 'pinnacle' on the graph. From there, we discern a pattern in the oppression–one that we can possibly undo" (Register, "Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 9). Register shared her personal journey with her students, explaining that she emerged from the Pit with the ability to envision the possibilities of an alternate future in which women's relationship to men is not their sole distinguishing factor. In the "*Collecting and Constructing*" phase (Register, "Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 9, emphasis in original), she imagines the possibility of society no longer defined through a masculine lens. Register also presents several crucial and thought-

provoking questions: “What about women who haven’t made it on male terms, but haven’t succumbed to victimization either? What more is there to female experience? What have women done on their own terms?” (Register 9). In other words, in this phase, women are no longer a subject of inquiry because of their relations with men, but, independently, women become a worthy subject all on their own. Register’s phases end with a leap over “The Abyss,” to “*Conceiving (Conceptualizing)*” (“Brief, A-Mazing Moments” 8, emphasis in original), a stage when individuals reimagine the structures that define society in terms no longer dependent on masculinity.



“‘Cheri’s Model,’ or ‘that thing on the board’ (Register, “Brief, A-Mazing Moments” 9)

Register’s Women’s Studies students were stuck in the Pit and needed a roadmap before seeing the possibility of growth ahead. She explains that after sharing the model, “In

class and in their journals, students reported that it gave them hope of overcoming their despair, a vision of better things to come, and a sense of direction" (Register, "Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 10). This loose outline of the process of reckoning with society's flaws provides women with a foundation to support their development, comprehend the role that societal structures play in women's subjugation, and lay the foundation for an alternative future. Unlike O'Reilly, Register admits that the stages are not universal nor are they necessarily linear; individuals may move forward and back between stages or experience multiple stages at the same time. She explains that the model "is not a prescription for future generations of feminists, who must chart their own course" (Register, "Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 10), leaving space for individual experiences, perspectives, and variations. While developed from a privileged perspective, the story of the theory's inception reveals that the act of sharing, bearing witness to, and discussing experiences as women, helps women on their journey toward growth. Encountering the experiences of other women is validating and can provide women with a foundation from which to challenge societal structures. Women's experiences in the U.S. vary widely, and although lacking from its original inception, Register's model could allow diverse women to find commonalities because it leaves space for individual experience. Sharing and discussing these experiences can help society evolve by contending with ingrained biases and oppression.

Patriarchy, misogyny, and prejudice constrain the lives of women in the U.S., and yet, lulled by the delusions of Patriarchal Surreality, many privileged contemporary women have yet to take an active role in dismantling these oppressive societal structures. However, it is every woman's responsibility to resist and pull back the facade of Patriarchal Surreality. No matter how deeply embedded in U.S. society, self-reflection, both individual and societal,

can expose, challenge, and, ultimately, revise patriarchal and racist values and beliefs. In *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, Rory Dicker explains that in consciousness-raising groups "women sought to analyze and understand the attitudes and conditions that led to inequalities and then to do something to redress these inequalities" (Dicker 15). However, she explains, "People no longer participate in consciousness-raising groups as such, . . . [and] the insight that 'the personal is political' has become such a part of our culture that people understand that the most private corners of their lives are shaped by power relations that are governed by society and culture" (Dicker 15). Despite this understanding, there remains a need for women to come together. Cobble et al. explain that,

> Despite sharp and sometimes painful disagreements, the process of joining with others to pursue a vision of greater equality and freedom—of a better society—has usually been deeply satisfying. This aspect of women's movements has been widely ignored and deserves emphasis. We are social animals, and the camaraderie and friendships formed in collective effort meet many needs, emotional and intellectual. Many considered the rest of their lives better for having participated in movements for social change, and many looked back on those years as among the richest and most fulfilling in their lives. (Cobble et al. xxi)

By engaging in conversation with other women and sharing their experiences, not only can women experience individual benefits, but they can also impact society.

Because it is widely read and disseminated, popular fiction provides a unique opportunity to stimulate conversation and bring the experiences of marginalized women into the mainstream, cultivating empathy between women from different backgrounds. Books

chosen by Oprah, Reece Witherspoon, *The New York Times* Best Sellers list, or recommended by local bookstores make the rounds in suburban book clubs, then find their way onto Netflix or Hulu, adapted for film and TV. Fiction is popular among privileged women in the United States, who share what they read on social media and encourage their followers to engage in discussion. As a society, we should seize on this opportunity for self-reflection. Dramatic and sometimes exaggerated, fictional portrayals of women's experiences can be powerful and influential, magnifying society's flaws along with its virtues and thereby helping readers to see both the good and bad more clearly. Fiction can encourage women readers to reckon with the reality that women's experiences in the U.S. vary widely, and some have more privilege than others. Books can bring women together, allowing them to hear the voices and stories of women they may never meet, to empathize with these characters, and, in conversation, to share their own experiences with other women. Popular novels provide a lens through which to recognize the complicated and restricted nature of U.S. womanhood, a reality obscured and shrouded for generations by the facade of Patriarchal Surreality.

Through the realistic fictional narratives of women characters, readers can pull back the facade of Patriarchal Surreality, learn to support one another, and ultimately, begin dismantling oppressive structures in the United States. Societal evolution requires individual self-reflection, but admitting mistakes, acknowledging responsibility, or conceding previous apathy toward the suffering of others can be intimidating, uncomfortable, or even painful. Despite the discomfort, all women, white women, women of color, and other marginalized women, must work together to recognize, undermine, and ultimately dismantle Patriarchal Surreality and the oppressive structures it obscures. Exposing Patriarchal Surreality is the

responsibility of contemporary women, and popular fiction provides abundant examples to assist in this task. In the 2020s, perhaps the consciousness-raising groups of the feminist movement can morph into something new. Discussing popular literature can serve as the foundation for contemporary women's "consciousness-raising groups" and hone a woman's understanding of how she is gaslit by patriarchal society. In turn, she can see beyond Patriarchal Surreality, and, ultimately, begin to reshape the oppressive reality that resides beneath its distorted veneer.

Patriarchal Surreality veils the oppressive structures that limit women's lives in the U.S., but popular fiction is a tool to see through this facade; as Cheri Register claims, "literature can serve the cause of liberation" ("Bibliographical Introduction" 18). Depictions of women in popular fiction help to identify the ingrained and long-standing patriarchal and misogynistic social structures that limit women's choices, opportunities, and agency. Fiction can "serve as a forum, illuminating female experience" (Register, "Bibliographical Introduction" 19). By documenting and exhibiting women's experiences, popular fiction reveals society's flaws and facilitates an opportunity to begin to destabilize these long-standing injustices. As Register explains, fiction "can assist in humanizing and equilibrating the culture's value system, which has historically served predominantly male interests" ("Bibliographical Introduction" 19). Furthermore, according to Register, literature can "provide role-models; . . . promote sisterhood; and . . . augment consciousness-raising" ("Bibliographical Introduction" 19). Literature can help women imagine the possibility of a future where a woman establishes her identity independently, not in relation to men. Moreover, as writing by women of color and/or authentically depicting the experiences of

characters of color becomes more prominent, it helps to accurately represent the variety of experiences of women in the U.S. Register explains,

> a literary work can serve the cause of sisterhood by recounting experiences that the reader can identify as her own, experiences that are, perhaps, shared by many women. She will feel a common bond with the author and other readers who have similar reactions to the book . . . Literature might also enable a reader to empathize with women whose subjective accounts of female reality differ from her own. ("Bibliographical Introduction" 22)

While fiction cannot replace literal, face-to-face conversation, it does cultivate empathy to break down walls that have historically divided women. It can reveal the injustices unduly experienced by women of color while exposing the privilege afforded and available to white women. A critique that juxtaposes narratives by and/or about women of color with those of by/about white women can allow a woman reader to reflect on her place in society along with broader systemic differences and inequalities in the experiences of women in the United States. Ultimately, this awareness can allow white women, myself included, to become more confident, dedicated, and progressive allies for women of color and other marginalized women. Popular fiction is a tool that allows women to reflect on their existence, relate to other women, and work for change.

Popular fiction is a means to incorporate a wider variety of voices, including those of women and color and marginalized women, to stimulate and fortify Register's process by compensating for the narrow outlook of her original work. I structured this project following her model, incorporating both fictional and real-world examples to demonstrate that popular fiction can accurately reflect U.S. society. In Chapter 2, "Domination by Gaslight," I provide

examples from literature that depict the way U.S. Patriarchal Surreality employs society's gender expectations to circumscribe the lives of women. These novels show that lessons and stories passed down to young women ingrain the values of Patriarchal Surreality into the country's collective unconscious and ensure the ongoing oppression of women. As a result, not only is oppression accepted, but the structures that perpetuate this oppression do so insidiously; they are nearly unobservable and, therefore, more challenging to resist. To recognize these oppressive structures, we must venture into the Pit in Chapter 3, "Criticizing and 'The Pit,'" entering the second stage of Register's model and cataloging the ways that popular fiction documents manifestations of misogyny and prejudice. Women characters begin to recognize their subjugation, as do readers. Collectively, these examples reveal the systemic nature of the oppression of women in the U.S. Chapter 4, "Collecting and Constructing," provides several examples of fictional women's experiences and their reactions to oppression. According to Register's model, the women in this chapter never leap over the Abyss; instead, they remain within patriarchal and prejudicial structures. Chapter 5, "On the Brink of the Abyss," recounts examples of fictional women who attempt to leap, imagining a future where there is a possibility of a society that does not define women by their difference from men. These women attempt to define their lives on their own terms, but ultimately, remain confined within patriarchal structures. Finally, Chapter 6 explores the significance of personal connection between women and the role that popular fiction can play in facilitating these conversations. By depicting the experiences of diverse women who recognize their subjugation and resist Patriarchal Surreality, popular American fiction can catalyze societal and individual self-reflection, ultimately becoming an instrument to dismantle Patriarchal Surreality. Not only can fiction provide a more complete and nuanced

picture of individual women characters, but it also depicts the societal structures that influence and shape choices made by those characters. The dismantling of these damaging structures begins with recognition and understanding; however, historically, women are so fully indoctrinated by these systems that they cannot see their influence. Extensive societal gaslighting creates a false reality that shapes, deceives, and limits the lives of women in the United States. Fiction provides a tool that can "turn up the gaslight" and expose the menacing structure previously obscured from sight.

The Novels

Ann Petry's 1946 novel, *The Street*, portrays the experiences that lead several black fictional characters to recognize misogyny, racism, and Patriarchal Surreality in 1940s Harlem. According to Tayari Jones, *The Street* was "Marketed as a tale of vice and violence in Harlem" (Jones), and it was the first novel by an African American woman to sell "more than a million copies" (Jones). Jones claims, "Petry laces through the story shrewd social commentary about the relentless nature of poverty and its effect on black women in particular" (Jones). These qualities helped the novel gain its following when it was originally published and as its popularity resurges. Throughout the novel, readers root for Lutie Johnson, a black single mother facing seemingly endless challenges while raising her son, Bub. Ultimately, frustration and failure drive her to the point of near madness, a consequence wrought by societal structures limiting her freedoms as a woman of color. Circumstances force Lutie to admit that systematic oppression circumscribes her existence in the U.S., and this realization causes a violent rupture during which she savagely beats a man named Boots Smith until "[h]e was dead. There was no question about it. No one could live with a head battered in like that" (Petry 431). Despite the horror of this deed, the tragedy compounds as

Lutie comes to terms with her actions. The attack begins as self-defense when Boots threatens to rape her: “The first blow was deliberate and provoked, but all those other blows weren’t provoked . . . It hadn’t even been self-defense. This impulse to violence had been in her for a long time, growing, feeding, until finally she had blown up in a thousand pieces” (Petry 434). After striking the first blow, compounded frustration in Lutie pours out, and she cannot stop herself until Boots’ body is a bloody, unrecognizable heap. Lutie labels herself a murderer (Petry 432), and her thoughts turn to her son. She concludes, “A kid whose mother was a murderer didn’t stand any chance at all. Everyone he came in contact with would believe that sooner or later he, too, would turn criminal” (Petry 432-433). After killing Boots, Lutie decides to abandon her son, Bub, and she buys a one-way ticket to Chicago. She thinks, “He’ll be better off without you. That way he may have some kind of chance” (Petry 435). She leaves her son behind, hoping her “bad influence” does not taint his future.

2020’s *Valentine* by Elizabeth Wetmore depicts the misogynistic and racist structures that facilitate the rape of Gloria Ramírez and the miscarriage of justice in the trial of her white rapist in 1970s Odessa, Texas. Gloria’s experience is juxtaposed with the perspectives of several white women, depicting the aftermath of the rape that disrupts society in Odessa. According to Harper Collins, the novel was “An instant New York Times Bestseller” (“Valentine”), and Elizabeth Gilbert, a white writer, describes the novel as “brilliant, sharp, tightly wound, and devastating. Wetmore has ripped the brutal, epic landscape of West Texas out of the hands of men, and has handed the stories over (finally!) to the girls and women who have always suffered, survived, and made their mark in such a hostile world. These are some of the most fully realized and unforgettable female characters I’ve ever met” (“Valentine”). Unfortunately, the novel, written by a white woman, sacrifices Gloria

Ramírez. She pays a grievous, permanent price to coerce white women characters and readers to reckon with a long-held tradition of oppression. *Valentine* exploits Gloria to expose structural prejudice and misogyny.

Gloria's rape violently exposes her to the reality of prejudiced and patriarchal society. The novel begins on the morning "after" when Gloria wakes up in the dirt. She drags her battered body across the desert and begins to plan for her future. She watches the sunrise and observes, "It is a sky without end, and the best thing about West Texas, . . . She will miss it when she goes. Because she can't stay here, not after this" (Wetmore 2). When Dale Strickland violates her, shattering her innocent worldview and bringing a misogynistic and prejudiced reality into focus, Gloria instinctively understands that the attack will haunt her, even more so if she remains in the town where it happened. She will become a symbol in the town of "what not to do," and her story will always precede her. Even though Gloria's wounds will heal, and she will rename herself, she cannot remain in Odessa because she has been marked by the attack. On the morning after the rape, she concludes that she must leave the only home she has ever known and begin again somewhere new. Like Lutie, Gloria chooses to leave rather than remain in the town that facilitated her assault.

Gloria's rape also impacts other women in Odessa. That morning in the desert, Gloria seeks refuge at the first farmhouse she sees, drawing a white woman, Mary Rose Whitehead, into the situation. After being victimized, the young Mexican girl serves as the catalyst for Mary Rose to recognize harmful societal structures that she has long refused to see, but before her rape, Gloria is unknown, illustrating a distasteful pattern identified by Sarah Stillman: "One must think carefully about how to represent marginalized victims in life rather than simply embalming them in death, helping audiences to move beyond the dogma

that poor, non-white women's bodies can only gain public visibility once they have been gruesomely violated" (Stillman 496). Although she survives, Dale Strickland's rape irreparably harms Gloria, and yet, her perspective is limited to three chapters, fifty-one of three-hundred-and-six pages. The white women in the novel commandeer Gloria's story, and Mary Rose's account depicts much of the abuse that Gloria experiences following the attack and during the trial. By taking up this mantle of "support" for Gloria Ramírez, Mary Rose further marginalizes the girl's voice. Her intentions are good, but ultimately, she fails to support Glory or to make a difference in the town's attitude toward women of color.

Delia Owens' 2018 novel, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, recounts a young girl's coming-of-age in extreme rural poverty, as she struggles to provide for and protect herself. The novel is a #1 *New York Times* Best Seller and was chosen by the Reese Witherspoon Book Club; in 2022, it was adapted into a major motion picture. Like *The Street* and *Valentine*, Owens did not write this novel from a single perspective. The story jumps forward and back in time and employs various narrators. *Where the Crawdads Sing* begins in 1969 with the discovery of Chase Andrews' dead body. Chase, the handsome town hotshot, was popular since his days as a high school football star in Barkley Cove, a village in North Carolina. The investigation into Chase's death is juxtaposed with Kya Clark's story, beginning in the 1950s. Kya, the youngest in her family, lives with her five older siblings, mother, and father in a cabin in the North Carolina marsh. At six years old, Kya watches her mother, unable to further endure abuse from her husband, leave their home with a suitcase. Kya's closest brother, Jodie, who is seven years older, reassures her that their mother will come back: "A ma don't leave her kids. It ain't in 'em" (Owens 6). However, Kya recalls that her brother recently told her about a mother fox who left her babies. Jodie explains, "Yeah, but that vixen got 'er leg all tore up.

She'd've starved to death if she'd tried to feed herself 'n' her kits. She was better off to leave 'em, heal herself up, then whelp more when she could raise 'em good. Ma ain't starvin', she'll be back" (Owens 6). Despite Jodie's insistence, Kya's mother does not return, and by ten, the rest of Kya's family abandons her. Kya is left to raise herself. She attends one disastrous day of school and never goes back; instead, she learns by exploring the marsh. Years later, when Chase is found dead in the woods after a fall from the Barkley Cove fire tower, Kya, called the Marsh Girl in the village, becomes the prime suspect in his murder.

Just as Lutie and Gloria's rapists personify prejudiced and patriarchal structures, Kya grapples with this reality when she becomes the object of Chase's indomitable desire. Chase is attracted to Kya because he considers her "untamed;" he wants "to snag her, to be the first, but watching those eyes firing, he was entranced" (Owens 162) but despite his initial intentions, Chase and Kya enter into a romantic relationship. However, when Kya learns that Chase is engaged to a girl in Barkley Cove, she breaks up with him. Despite his engagement, Chase will stop at nothing to continue the affair. When he finds Kya alone on a beach, he violently attempts to rape her, but the "wild" side that Chase finds irresistible fuels Kya's will to fight him off. "Finding strength from somewhere primal" (Owens 265), she incapacitates Chase with a kick to the groin and escapes. After the attack, Kya fears that Chase will "come for her. He might come today. Or wait for night" (Owens 271). She recalls learning "over and over from Pa: these men had to have the last punch . . . As Pa would have it, Kya had to be taught a lesson" (Owens 282-283) for resisting. Kya becomes paranoid, and when she finally ventures back into the marsh, she explores "areas Chase wouldn't know, but was jumpy and alert, making it difficult to paint . . . wherever she went, [she] mapped an

escape route in her mind" (Owens 274). Kya tries to stay away from Chase, but she feels desperate and trapped because he continues to pursue her.

Despite her fear, Kya does not report the attempted rape or Chase's stalking. As an outsider, she knows that the sheriff and people in Barkley Cove will be skeptical of her version of events. Kya believes "the law would never believe the Marsh Girl over Chase Andrews . . . they'd never defend her. They'd say she had it coming . . . been seen smooching with him . . . behaving unladylike. *Actin' the ho*" (Owens 271). Kya blames herself, and she expects the town to do the same rather than question their hero, Chase. But Kya cannot hide the bruises, and when Jumpin', one of her few friends, sees the fading evidence of the attack, the fatherly figure demands the truth. Kya pleads with him: "You know you can't tell the sheriff or anybody. They'd drag me into the sheriff's office and make me describe what happened to a bunch of men. I can't live through that" (Owens 301). Kya is overwhelmed by shame and too intimidated to recount the attack to the male sheriff and his deputies. She reasons with Jumpin': "you know how it is. They'll take his side. They'll say I'm just stirring up trouble. Trying to get money out of his parents or something" (Owens 302). She compares her experience as an outsider to that of people of color in Barley Cove, asking Jumpin', a black man, to "Think what would happen if one of the girls from Colored Town accused Chase Andrews of assault and attempted rape. They'd do nothing. Zero . . . It would end in big trouble for that girl. Write-ups in the newspaper. People accusing her of whoring. Well, it'd be the same for me, and you know it" (Owens 302). Shunned by the town since childhood, Kya believes she cannot ask for help. She tells Jumpin', "I've always protected myself before; I just slipped up this time because I didn't hear him coming. I'll stay safe" (Owens 302). Although Kya puts on a brave face for Jumpin', she is more desperate than she

admits. She thinks, “Being isolated was one thing; living in fear, quite another” (Owens 284) and “imagines taking one step after the other into the churning sea, sinking into the stillness beneath the waves, . . . The dangling, shiny prize of peace just out of grasp until finally her body descends to the bottom and settles in murky quiet. Safe” (Owens 284). In the end, she tells Jumpin’ that she will avoid Chase to protect herself, but Kya decides to take action. She believes she must kill Chase, removing the threat to restore her peace of mind.

Gone Girl by Gillian Flynn, published in 2012, ventures into the mind of a New York City socialite who moves to Missouri with her husband. After the move, Amy Dunne becomes increasingly delusional, and her actions are driven by a desire to control people around her. The novel made *The New York Times* Best Sellers List, and it was adapted into a film released in 2014. In the book, Nick Dunne arrives home on his fifth wedding anniversary to an empty house. He finds the iron on, the tea kettle burned on the stove, and evidence of a struggle. His wife, Amy, is gone. Like the other novels, Flynn employs various perspectives to construct the narrative. Part One contrasts Nick’s side of the story with Amy’s diary entries, painting a picture of a complicated and volatile domestic dynamic between a detached husband and a devoted but frightened white housewife. The diary wins the hearts of law enforcement, the media, and the public, who begin to suspect that Nick murdered his wife. However, Part Two reveals that as Nick and Amy had grown apart, both dissatisfied in their relationship but unwilling to admit it, Nick begins an affair with a student enrolled in his junior college journalism class. This young woman, Andie, gives Nick the admiration and intimacy lacking in his marriage. For over a year, Nick believes he has hidden this indiscretion from his wife, but later, the narrative reveals that Amy serendipitously witnessed the couple’s first kiss and was aware of the affair since its

inception. Nick's extramarital relationship is the final straw, and Amy decides she cannot abide further disrespect. She begins preparations for retribution: faking her murder to manipulate her husband, their local community, and society at large. "Actual-Amy" (Flynn 297) explains, "I'm so much happier now that I'm dead. Technically, missing. Soon to be presumed dead" (Flynn 295). Amy's understanding of patriarchal societal structures allows her to construct a narrative and fabricate evidence for her husband's downfall. She enjoys her newfound freedom, and Nick suffers as law enforcement's prime suspect.

CHAPTER TWO

DOMINATION BY GASLIGHT

"You never smell it when you grow up here." (Wetmore 104)

Although gaslighting is traditionally understood and the term most often utilized to describe abusive dynamics in intimate relationships, less well-known societal gaslighting serves as the foundation of Patriarchal Surreality. Widespread and ongoing gaslighting obscures women's subjugation in order to perpetuate patriarchal structures. Cynthia A. Stark explains, "In therapeutic discourse, (manipulative) gaslighting is typically treated as a relational, as opposed to political, phenomenon: gaslighting is seen as a property of individual relationships and not of social systems" (Stark 229); however, she contends that the "same psychological injuries can be experienced by women who are not personally in gaslighting relationships, but who live in a culture in which the gaslighting of women is widely practiced" (Stark 229). In other words, not only does gaslighting occur in intimate relationships but also on a broader scale. Societally, it aims to destabilize a victim's identity and establish a false reality that ultimately benefits the individual or individuals enacting the abuse. According to Paige L. Sweet, gaslighting is "a type of psychological abuse aimed at making victims seem or feel 'crazy,' creating a 'surreal' interpersonal environment" (Sweet 851). Sweet explains the origin of the descriptor, which has become "increasingly ubiquitous . . . to describe the mind-manipulating strategies of abusive people" (Sweet 851): "George Cukor's 1944 film *Gaslight* tells the story of Paula (Ingrid Bergman) and her new husband

Gregory (Charles Boyer), who sets about the task of isolating her and making her believe she is insane. His eponymous tactic is to dim and brighten the gaslights and then insist she is imagining it" (Sweet 851). Significantly, Sweet explains, "Gregory aims to undermine Paula's sense of self and everyday life, to confuse and distort her reality such that she must accept his imposed reality in place of her own. (Sweet 851). As Gregory imposes a false reality on his new wife, U.S. society imposes the facade of Patriarchal Surreality on women from birth, depriving them of the perspective necessary to realize that societal structures circumscribe their existence. Limiting the definition of gaslighting to characterize power imbalance and manipulation only in intimate relationships ignores the term's broader significance. Sweet expands the traditional understanding of gaslighting, explaining that this abuse is most "effective when it is rooted in social inequalities, especially gender and sexuality, and executed in power-laden intimate relationships" (Sweet 852), the very circumstances perpetuated by Patriarchal Surreality. As a result of gaslighting's foundation in societal power dynamics, both intimate partner gaslighting and widespread gaslighting create and exist in a symbiotic relationship; each cyclically establishes, maintains, and bolsters the other.

Because its impact extends beyond intimate relationships, a better understanding of gaslighting can shed light on social dynamics. Sweet asserts that "Gaslighting is fundamentally a social phenomenon" (Sweet 852), and as such, sociologists should be paying attention. According to Sweet,

> the importance of gaslighting for sociologists extends well beyond the case of domestic violence: first, gaslighting occurs in other types of interpersonal relationships, creating and exacerbating power imbalances; second, accepting purely

> psychological approaches to gaslighting risks the proliferation of context-free analyses; and finally, gaslighting exposes how the association of women with irrationality exacerbates existing gender and sexual inequalities. A theory of gaslighting, therefore, offers an opportunity for sociologists to identify and analyze underrecognized, gendered forms of power and their mobilization in interpersonal relationships across a range of situations. (Sweet 852).

Beyond the context of domestic violence in intimate relationships, "gaslighting is rooted in power-laden intimate relationships, creates a sense of surreality, and mobilizes gender-based stereotypes, intersecting inequalities, and institutional vulnerabilities against victims . . . abstract social inequalities can be transformed into interpersonal weapons" (Sweet 869). The clinical definition of gaslighting and Sweet's expanded interpretation provide a framework to recognize power-laden societal dynamics between men and women in the U.S., and ultimately, this broader understanding of gaslighting exposes how Patriarchal Surreality obscures prejudiced societal structures.

There are several circumstances enshrined in the political and social structures of the U.S. that facilitate widespread gaslighting, which coerces women's complacency in within Patriarchal Surreality. Carole Pateman's work critiquing contract theory is useful when deciphering the underlying societal structures that circumscribe social interactions between men and women in the U.S. Pateman explains that *The Sexual Contract* was written in response to a boom in the popularity of contract theory, which attempts "to show how major political institutions should properly be understood" (Pateman xiv). Pateman explains that "One interpretation of the original contract is that the inhabitants of the state of nature exchange the insecurities of natural freedom for equal, civil freedom which is protected by

the state . . . all adults enjoy the same civil standing and can exercise their freedom by, as it were, replicating the original contract" (Pateman 2). Contract theory asserts that as members of a society, individuals consciously choose to trade the unpredictability of the natural world for structure and consistency. It claims that "individuals are naturally free and equal to each other, or that individuals are born free and equal" (Pateman 39), and, as such, "A naturally free individual must, necessarily, *agree* to be ruled by another. The creation of civil mastery and civil subordination must be voluntary; such relationships can be brought into being in one way only, through free agreement" (Pateman 40). By emphasizing an individual's free choice to participate in societal give-and-take, contract theory attempts to distance itself from patriarchy, paternalism, and subjugation. However, ultimately, it fails to achieve this goal.

The assumption that individuals "choose" to participate in any society ignores several problematic factors. Most people are born into the society they inhabit, thereby perceiving their participation as predetermined. If one is unaware that there are options beyond participation, one is unlikely to question their participation, and therefore, participation can no longer be considered voluntary. Being born and raised in the society one inhabits hinders one's ability to develop perspective. From birth in the U.S., women are subject to a social and political contract, whether they consciously choose to participate, and implicit participation creates the opportunity for widespread societal gaslighting. Pateman also identifies additional faults, including the limited scope of contract theory. Contract theory delves deeply into the social contract, but "the story of the sexual contract has been repressed . . . half the agreement is missing" (Pateman 1). This omission is by design, for "The missing half of the story tells how a specifically modern form of patriarchy is established" (Pateman 1). Theorists claim that "freedom" is the cornerstone of contract theory; at the same time, it

is, ultimately, why contract theory fails to adequately represent the relationships between men and women in the U. S. According to Pateman, "freedom becomes obedience and, in exchange, protection is provided" (Pateman 7). Women who obey and fulfill their part of the contract gain space and protection (albeit superficially), which keeps them content (superficially), creating a cycle in which they continue to participate (often unknowingly). An American woman cannot agree to be ruled by the patriarchal structures that circumscribe her existence as contract theory requires because widespread societal gaslighting conceals the very structure maintaining her subjugation. By excluding the sexual contract from conversation, contract theorists help to maintain Patriarchal Surreality.

The concept of "freedom" is one facet of institutional patriarchal structures that coerces women and individuals of color in the U.S. into obedience in exchange for "space" to exist and, for some, relative privilege. Ferraro explains that "The belief that individuals are ultimately the architects of their own destinies is foundational to the liberal democratic principles of equality and freedom" (Ferraro 3-4), but as Pateman explains, "in contract theory universal freedom is always a hypothesis, a story, a political fiction" (Pateman 8). The contract that promises freedom and constitutes the political and social foundation of the U.S. generates oppression because "Contract always generates political right in the form of relations of domination and subordination" (Pateman 8). The right to political and social power is granted to a limited few and contributes to the oppression of others. Ferraro explains, "Since the founding of the United States, of course there has been a tension between the ideals of liberal autonomy and egalitarianism and the realities of racism, sexism, and classism" (Ferraro 78). Despite strides forward (or backward, as illustrated by the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*) and an idealistic dream of a more fair

and just society for all people, Ferraro rightfully claims, "the ideological and structural bases for inequality remain" (Ferraro 78). These ideological and structural bases perpetuate prejudice and circumscribe the lives of marginalized women in the U.S. With this understanding of women's existence, participation in the sexual contract is anything but voluntary because refusing to participate inevitably has consequences. Women who refuse to submit to patriarchy or attempt to undermine patriarchal structures face consequences for violating this unwritten contract. Pateman explains that in this way, "the actual contracts of everyday life . . . [the] exchange of obedience for protection . . . create what I shall call *civil mastery* and *civil subordination*" (Pateman 7). Men maintain their control over women despite women's illusion of freedom and equal partnership. The illusion of freedom and societal gaslighting pacifies the subjugated, who are deceived by Patriarchal Surreality.

Contract theory avoids an analysis of the unwritten expectations regulating the actions and opportunities granted to men and women in the U.S. because this discussion would expose Patriarchal Surreality and, in turn, undermine and weaken its foundation, for obscurity perpetuates the structure and its subjugation of particular individuals. Contract theory's gaping omission of the sexual contract belies "the connection between patriarchy and contract [which] has been little explored, even by feminists, despite the fact that, in modern civil society, crucially important institutions are constituted and maintained through contract" (Pateman 4). Contract theorists guarantee a false freedom, a promise that deludes, entices, and gaslights women, exchanging subordination for a woman's circumscribed American existence. In this way, "Rather than undermining subordination, contract theorists justified modern civil subjection" (Pateman 40). The unwritten Sexual Contract, contractual patriarchy, demands that women compromise their integrity and sense of self simply to exist

in U.S. society, but a woman's circumscribed reality is obscured and sustained by Patriarchal Surreality.

Contemporary women understand their subjugation as de facto, part of the "natural order," when truthfully, this structure of oppression is deliberately established and maintained by forces within society. Widespread gaslighting, the foundation for Patriarchal Surreality in the U.S., is deeply rooted in family storytelling and the informal education of women, but popular fiction can be an effective means of exposing prejudiced societal structures. Passed down from one generation to the next, stories, lessons, and behavior modeled by women and family members reinforce patriarchal values and prejudice. Shaped by these influences since birth, women collectively lose perspective and learn to define themselves through distorted narratives rather than through unprejudiced experience and reflection. *The Street*, *Valentine*, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, and *Gone Girl* illuminate the perpetuation of patriarchal and prejudiced values in younger generations through storytelling and informal education. In Harlem, Lutie struggles to reconcile the adolescent lessons that fostered her individualist perspective and the obstacles that perpetually undermine her success as an adult. In West Texas, Mary Rose and Corrine are encouraged to relinquish their hopes, dreams, and identities after becoming wives and mothers. And in the marshes of North Carolina, Kya's informal education cements her societal distrust and guides her decision-making. Amy, in *Gone Girl*, society's bias and chooses to exploit these structures first to attract her husband then punish him for his infidelity. Storytelling and informal education shape these women's perspectives and, in turn, their interactions with society. As their stories begin, these women accept subjugation as natural. Whether residing in not-so-blissful subjugated ignorance, choosing to acquiesce to society's limitations, or attempting to

exploit an exploitative system, a woman's perspective is shaped by stories passed down to her and her informal education. Sometimes deliberately and sometimes unconsciously, previous generations provide the foundation for Patriarchal Surreality by ensuring that society diminishes future generations of women, but popular fiction can help dismantle this foundation by revealing oppressive societal structures.

Gaslight in *Valentine*

In *Valentine*, mothers and grandmothers take pride as they pass down the stories and legends that recount women who sacrifice for their families. From a young age, previous generations teach each woman in West Texas to expect an isolated and lonely existence in service to her husband and children, a long tradition on the American frontier. Society expected women to endure the natural threats of the untamed land while navigating their challenging, rural lives and providing unquestioning support to their husbands. Stories of these women and their sacrifices help to ensure future generations "stay in their place" and "behave." These legends, woven into the fabric of society, glorify women who sacrifice for their families and encourage women like Mary Rose, Corrine, and even children like Debra Ann to endure hardships in isolation. Ginny, Debra Ann's mother, explains that her grandmother "never much cared to talk about the women who made it out [of West Texas] alive, but the stories about the ones who died trying? They are bright and enduring, as if somebody took a branding iron and seared them into Ginny's memory" (Wetmore 85). Ginny's grandmother's stories glorify a woman who in 1935 "served lunch to a dozen ranch hands and then hanged herself on the front porch" (Wetmore 85); another who "saddled up her husband's best mare and dug in her heels, and they were flying fast across the desert when they ran into a barbed-wire fence" (Wemore 86). The note the woman left behind said

"she had to see something green, anything at all" (Wetmore 86). If she ran into the fence accidentally or intentionally is not part of the story; Ginny's grandmother concluded simply, "It's easy to get turned around out there, . . . if you don't know where you're going" (Wetmore 86). These stories glorify women who will meet the demands placed on them by society and their husbands or would rather die trying. They speak to the harsh reality of life for women in the West: a landscape and society that still, nearly forty years later, poses threats to contemporary women and expects them to prioritize family over their well-being. Society has not revised the circumstances that led these women to take (or perhaps give) their lives. Despite the passage of time, the difficulties and emotions experienced by women in *Valentine*'s 1970s Texas are much like those of the women who came before.

While Ginny's grandmother's stories recount the experiences of nameless and faceless women from the past, the story of Gloria Ramírez's rape in the oil fields provides an example that serves as a warning about the contemporary dangers that men pose toward women in West Texas. Gloria suffers nearly irreparable physical and mental harm that compounds when she becomes a symbol of "what not to be" for young women in Odessa. On the morning after Strickland rapes her in the oil field, Gloria, the daughter of an undocumented Mexican immigrant, fears that she will end up dead. Her white attacker sleeps in his truck only feet away from the spot where she lies with "His skin and blood under her fingernails, a reminder that she fought hard" (Wetmore 9). Despite Gloria's resistance, the man overpowered her. The following morning, having spent the night sleeplessly in the dirt, Gloria observes Strickland while he sleeps: "she is hoping he dies young . . . The sight of him is a torment and she wishes again that his death will come soon, that it will be vicious and lonely, with nobody to grieve for him" (Wetmore 1). Thoughts of Strickland's death bring

Gloria comfort as she tries to regain her sense of self and forces her body to rise from the dirt to escape.

As Gloria stumbles toward a farmhouse in the distance, she reckons with the irreversible effects this attack has wrought upon her physical body and her identity. Society has taught Strickland to see women, especially women of color, as a means to fulfill physical desires, prompting his attack on the young girl. Strickland forcefully claimed and violated her physical body, as evidenced by the narrative as Gloria gathers herself. Throughout the scene, the description of Gloria's body is devoid of possessive pronouns; instead, Wetmore employs generic articles to demonstrate her dispossession: "she knows only that this body–yesterday, she would have called it *mine*–sits in a pile of sand, somewhere in the oil patch" (Wetmore 2). She imagines that the parts of her body are dislocated and strewn across the dirt: "Here is an arm, a foot" (Wetmore 3). Although it is still "her" heart, she imagines that even this vital organ is separate from her body, presumably in the spot upon which the assault occurred, "over there, on the ground next to the wooden drill platform, her heart" (Wetmore 3). Because Strickland forcefully possessed her, Gloria feels disjointed and disconnected from her own body. She no longer claims ownership of her physical self. However, despite the ways the assault has altered her relationship with her physical body, Gloria demonstrates immense mental strength. She "turns her head this way and that, gathering the body, covering it with clothes that are torn and strewn around the site, as if they are trash, disregarded and cast aside" (Wetmore 3-4). The scattered clothes speak to the brutality of the attack. After Strickland took what he wanted, he discarded Gloria in the dirt just as he ripped her clothing from her body and tossed it away.

In addition to an altered relationship with her physical body, Gloria attempts to navigate a change in her identity, specifically, her relationship with her name. As she recalls snippets of the attack, she reveals the role her name played in her encounter with Strickland and the way that he weaponized her name during the rape. When Gloria introduces herself through the window of Strickland's truck, Patti Smith's "Gloria" is serendipitously playing on the radio. Strickland turns up the song, remarking, "And here you are . . . in the flesh. That's fate, darlin'" (Wetmore 6). The song is one of Gloria's favorites, symbolizing her teenage rebellion, and its playing feels like kismet, propelling Gloria to defy her mother's warnings and get into Strickland's truck. Initially, Gloria's name lends charm to the introduction; however, during the assault, Strickland repeats her name "again and again, those long hours while she lay there with her face in the dirt. He spoke her name and it flew through the night air, a poison dart that pierced and tore. Gloria. Mocking, mean as a viper" (Wetmore 8). Not only does Strickland claim Gloria's physical body during the rape, but he also claims her name and, with it, her identity. He tarnishes her given name by positioning it as a reminder of the attack.

Strickland is not alone in his claim to "Gloria." After that night in the oil field, the story of the attack lives on, not to condemn Strickland's actions or empathize with Glory, but rather to blame her and serve as a "warning" for other girls and women. In Odessa, "Gloria Ramírez–for years to come, her name will hover like a swarm of yellow jackets over the local girls, a warning about what not to do, what never to do" (Wetmore 5). In the aftermath of the rape, both Gloria's and Strickland's moral character, the details of the attack, and the trial are discussed widely in Odessa. The town does not deploy Strickland's name as a means of chastising a man who drove a teenage girl into the oil field, supplied her with alcohol, and

raped her; instead, they assign responsibility for the attack to his victim, and Gloria's name and her story perpetuate Patriarchal Surreality.

The town gossip circles discuss Gloria Ramírez, and the local newspaper documents the prejudiced reaction to her rape. The newspaper publishes her photo, and Gloria avoids venturing in public, afraid she will be recognized. The town blames Gloria for the attack and uses the inaccurate representation presented by the newspaper as evidence to perpetuate prejudiced Mexican stereotypes. In the novel, Gloria claims she is detached from her Mexican heritage. She does not speak Spanish because her mother, Alma, never taught her: "Here in Texas . . . Spanish is the language of janitors and housekeepers, not her daughter, and kids who speak Spanish at school land in detention or worse" (Wemore 131). Although Gloria's mother tried to distance her daughter from negative stereotypes, in the end, neither woman has control over the way they are perceived. Alma could not control society's perceptions of her daughter before the attack, and Gloria cannot control the narrative after that night in the oil field. She sees the media's response, knows that the reports fuel gossip and shape her "bad" reputation, and realizes that the story of the rape will forever define her in Odessa's eyes. Like many women who experience sexual assault, both the rapist and society inflict pain on Gloria. Not only does she endure an extended and brutal physical attack, but long after that night, she continues to suffer with lingering trauma and fear exacerbated by the media and the community. The town disregards the implications of co-opting Gloria's identity and her story, claiming her name, the lynchpin in a fable to scare future daughters of West Texas into obedience and compliance. "Gloria Ramírez" is not seen as a young woman deserving of dignity or empathy but rather as a disembodied entity of warning. Just as Ginny's grandmother retold stories extolling the virtues of obedience and

sacrifice on the American Frontier, the town retells Gloria's story, warning their girls to be wary of the men in Odessa. Shared from generation to generation, these stories serve as a mode of societal gaslighting and establish the foundation for Patriarchal Surreality.

Gaslight in *The Street*

Valentine's stories of the American Frontier encourage women to relinquish control and sacrifice themselves for the benefit of their husbands and families, and in *The Street*, Lutie Johnson's informal education instills a steadfast resolve that hard work will result in her success. Society teaches her to believe that she controls her destiny and that, with careful planning, she can achieve financial security and independence. This individualist belief, a "model of human behavior [which] holds people responsible for the failures and success of their lives" (Ferraro 4), is the foundation of the American Dream, and the ubiquity of this message in the United States helps to sustain Patriarchal Surreality. Because she is a single mother and is also a black woman, the odds are against Lutie, but societal gaslighting instills determination and hope for the future. These values stem largely from Lutie's interactions with white society, and although financial security and ambitious goals might be attainable for mid-century white American men, these are almost certainly out of reach for a woman of color like Lutie in 1940s Harlem. However, Lutie embraces the values perpetuated by Patriarchal Surreality, keeps her head down, works hard, and is so deluded that she cannot recognize society's domination of her existence. Although desperation occasionally rattles her belief in the power of hard work, Lutie suppresses those punctuating glimpses of a stark reality and returns to her false belief: she "knows" she can achieve success by making the "right" choices and taking the "right" steps.

As a young mother, Lutie has various encounters with white society that shape her idealist values and decisions. Before she and Jim separate, the family struggles financially because her husband is unemployed, and as a result, Lutie decides to find work. She sees a newspaper advertisement in which Mrs. Henry Chandler is seeking a housekeeper and nanny, and Lutie writes a letter of introduction to Mrs. Chandler. Lutie acknowledges the significance of her race, and along with her qualifications, the letter reveals that she is black. Her letter is "a good letter . . . nice neat writing, no misspelled words, careful margins, pretty good English. She was suddenly grateful to Pop. He'd known what he was doing when he insisted on her finishing high school" (Petry 31). However, Lutie quickly realizes that despite her education, she has no "real" work experience or references. Lutie goes to Mrs. Pizzini, an Italian immigrant who sells vegetables in her neighborhood and asks the woman to serve as her reference. Mrs. Pizzini is impressed by Lutie's letter, but she admits, "Me and Joe don't write so good. But my daughter that teaches school, she'll write for me" (Petry 32). When Lutie returns for the reference letter, she is surprised by the return address in a part of her New York neighborhood "where the houses were big and there was lawn around them and evergreen trees grew in thick clusters around the houses" (Petry 32). After learning where the Pizzinis live, Lutie cannot help but compare her financial situation with that of the Italian family: "Who would have thought that the old Italian couple who ran the vegetables store would be living in a fine house in a fine neighborhood? . . . They had a fine house and they had sent their daughter to college, . . . If she could find out how the Pizzinis had managed, it might help her and Jim" (Petry 33). In her admiration for the Pizzinis' success, Lutie acknowledges the family's ethnicity and status as immigrants, characteristics that would have created challenges for the Pizzinis in 1940s New York. Like Lutie, this Italian family would

have faced hostility because of their "otherness." However, unlike Lutie, the Pizzinis' first-generation, college-graduate daughter can pass in white society, giving her access to greater opportunities. Despite this significant difference, the Pizzini family makes a lasting impression, providing Lutie with an example of upward mobility that sustains her hope throughout the novel. Lutie believes that she, too, can achieve success, but she underestimates the impact of race on her future. As she pursues financial stability through self-sacrifice and hard work, society's promise of prosperity remains unattainable because of the intersecting factors of Lutie's identity.

With Mrs. Pizzini's reference, Mrs. Chandler offers Lutie the job, and her experiences in the Chandlers' home also significantly influence her values. Learning of the Pizzini's success reinforces Lutie's belief that with hard work and planning, "there isn't anything I can't do," (Petry 63), and her experiences in the white household cement her opinions on wealth and upward mobility. Upon first meeting Mrs. Chandler, Lutie observes, "Everything she has on cost a lot of money, yet she isn't so much older than I am—not more than a year or so" (Petry 36). The Chandlers come from money and privilege, which provides a solid foundation. In contrast, Lutie's family has no generational wealth, and yet she views the Chandlers as an example of what she can achieve with enough determination and hard work. As she spends more time working for the Chandlers, Lutie admires this seemingly perfect life: the large home, Mrs. Chandler's beauty, Mr. Chandler's good looks, and their happy son. The example of the Chandler family reinforces Lutie's mindset on wealth: "she absorbed some of the same spirit. The belief that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough" (Petry 43). These experiences cement

Lutie's individualist mindset that she can overcome her challenges with hard work, planning, and determination.

In addition to cementing Lutie's opinions on wealth and upward mobility, the Chandler household exposes Lutie to society's racist stereotypes about black women, which fuels her determination to avoid these patterns in her life. Lutie often overhears Mrs. Chandler's conversations with her friends and the narratives that these white women perpetuate about black women. Mrs. Chandler's friends warn the young woman: "I wouldn't have any good-looking colored wench in my house . . . You know they're always making passes at men. Especially white men" (Petry 40-41). Similarly, Mrs. Chandler's mother questions her daughter's choice to employ Lutie. The woman admonishes her daughter: "That girl is unusually attractive and men are weak. Besides, she's colored and you know how they are" (Petry 45). These women perpetuate stereotypes about the sexual habits and desires of black women, and according to Giddings, Lutie's fictional experience is grounded in reality, mirroring historical circumstances dating back to the late nineteenth century. These stereotypes can be traced back to historians like Philip A. Bruce, who wrote derogatory descriptions of black men and women. Bruce "formulated in the 1889 publication *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman* . . . that Blacks, 'cut off from the spirit of White society,' had regressed to a primitive and thus criminal state" (Giddings 27). He propagated the stereotype that black men held a "penchant for rape. Black men, he said, 'found something strangely alluring and seductive in the appearance of White women'" (Giddings 27). Bruce claimed that black women were "'morally obtuse' and 'openly licentious'" (Giddings 31), and "because they were women, their regression was seen as much worse than that of men. For it was women who were 'responsible' for molding the institution of marriage and a

wholesome family life which was the 'safeguard against promiscuity' (Giddings 31). These bigoted white women, Mrs. Chandler's friends and her mother, exemplify multigenerational racism. Women perpetuate stereotypical and racist assumptions, and younger generations embrace these beliefs without knowing any better, ensuring their proliferation.

Lutie is disgusted by the racism that she witnesses in the Chandlers' home, but there is little that she can do to challenge this prejudice: "the instant they saw the color of her skin . . . they were so confident about what she must be like they didn't need to know her personally in order to verify their estimate" (Petry 46). She concludes, "it was an automatic reaction of white people—if a girl was colored and fairly young, why, it stood to reason she had to be a prostitute . . . [Or] sleeping with her would be just a simple matter . . . In fact, white men wouldn't even have to do the asking because the girl would ask them on sight" (Petry 45). Despite these assumptions, Lutie's grandmother instilled in her an aversion to white men. She "had said over and over, just like a clock ticking, 'Lutie, baby, don't you never let no white man put his hands on you. They ain't never willin' to let a black woman alone. Seems like they all got a itch and a urge to sleep with 'em'" (Petry 45). Lutie's grandmother's lesson confirms the generational influence of prejudice and societal gaslighting. The lesson from her grandmother and the opinions of the white women in the Chandlers' household influence Lutie's self-worth and sexuality. Just as the white women perpetuate stereotypes about black women, this lesson from Lutie's grandmother was repeated "so often and with such gravity [that] it had become a part of you, just like breathing" (Petry 45-46). Lutie's grandmother insists she take responsibility and consciously avoid reinforcing stereotypes about black women, and Lutie's time with the Chandlers

teaches her why. She internalizes the messages about her sexuality as a black woman, is coerced into avoiding white men, and is incapable of defining her sexuality herself.

Lutie's experiences destabilize her sexual identity, contributing to societal gaslighting that maintains Patriarchal Surreality. According to Paige L. Sweet, "Gaslighting efforts are further embedded in the gendered (and racialized) social organization of sexuality . . . attacks on sexual respectability were a regular part of intimate abuse, rooted in the association of female sexuality with deviousness, danger, and threat" (Sweet 863). Black female sexuality is not defined positively by what it is or what it can be. Its definition is actively negative, defined by outside forces as what it must not be. According to Sweet, Fabiola, a woman who she interviewed about her experience with intimate partner gaslighting, "could not rely on her sexual identity to ground her reality, because it was constantly used as a weapon against her . . . Because Fabiola was isolated from others who could have offered her a different narrative about the relationship, her boyfriend's attempts to undermine her sanity and sexual identity were more effective" (Sweet 864). Lutie is isolated while working in the Chandlers' home, and she is more susceptible to the influence of the white women's offensive stereotypes. Although Lutie is not in a traditionally defined abusive relationship with an intimate partner, her experience in the Chandlers' home has similar effects on her mindset and choices.

Cyclical gaslighting, like that pertaining to Lutie's sexuality, plays a significant role in the maintenance of Patriarchal Surreality. Throughout their lives, women often remain oblivious to the ways gaslighting shapes their perception; however, fictional examples like Lutie's provide a lens through which to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon. The examples of the Pizzinis and the Chandlers chip away at Lutie's realistic perspective on her own life. Although Jim sought employment "desperately, eagerly, anxiously" (Petry 30) and

Lutie worked tirelessly, she "thought she saw what had been wrong with them before—they hadn't tried hard enough, worked long enough, saved enough" (Petry 43). This mindset represents a shift in Lutie's thinking away from the truth about her family's situation and into Patriarchal Surreality. Lutie's admiration for the Pizzinis and the Chandlers reinforces societal gaslighting. Rather than acknowledging that biased structures within a racist and patriarchal society prevent her and her family from achieving their goals, Lutie internalizes an imagined deficit, blaming herself and her husband.

Although Lutie realizes that the Chandlers' perfect appearance belies hidden problems, she does not question the values that she embraces while working in the household, especially her belief in the power of wealth. She twists some of the more disturbing events she witnesses while working in the household to fit her distorted narrative. Eventually, Lutie sees through the veneer and realizes Mrs. Chandler has a propensity to seek attention from men other than her husband; Mr. Chandler drinks too much; and the couple has a vulgar preoccupation with being "'filthy' rich, as Mr. Chandler called it" (Petry 43). The most shocking example of the family's underlying issues comes on Christmas morning when Lutie witnesses Mr. Chandler's brother, Jonathan, shoot and kill himself in front of the Christmas tree. In the aftermath of the shooting, Lutie overhears Mrs. Chandler's mother on the phone with her husband "in Washington . . . 'Now you get it fixed up. Oh yes, you can. He was cleaning a gun'" (Petry 49). In addition to calling upon the elder Mr. Chandler's powerful connections, the younger "Mr. Chandler talked very quietly but firmly to the local doctor and to the coroner. It took several rye highballs and some of the expensive imported cigars, and Lutie could only conjecture what else, but it ended up as an accident with a gun on the death certificate" (Petry 49). Witnessing this cover-up cements Lutie's belief that

money "wouldn't necessarily guarantee happiness. What was more important, she learned that when one had money there were certain unpleasant things one could avoid . . . money transformed a suicide she had seen committed from start to finish in front of her very eyes into 'an accident with a gun'" (Petry 49). Despite the gruesome and tragic scene, the Chandlers preserve their perfect external appearance, avoiding the "embarrassing" (Petry 48) scandal that would come if the truth about Jonathan's death became public. The family brandishes their wealth and influential connections, constructing their own truth. As she did after learning of the Pizzinis' success, after witnessing this cover-up, Lutie overlooks crucial differences between her family and the Chandlers: race and access to power, generational wealth that begets additional wealth, and supportive extended family. Because of her race and gender, society fundamentally restricts Lutie's access to power, and she does not have powerful connections like the Chandler family. Lutie's father is not financially stable, and her husband cannot find work. Lutie brings in a steady income, but the paycheck requires that she sacrifice time with her family and ultimately leads to Jim's infidelity. Lutie leaves her position with the Chandlers after learning of her husband's affair, but the sexual identity and values that she embraces during this time become the foundation for her future decisions. Despite many experiences that contradict these values, Lutie struggles to see through her gaslit Patriarchal Surreality.

Gaslight in *Where the Crawdads Sing*

In Delia Owens' novel, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, family stories and informal education shape Kya's perspective. She recalls memories of her alcoholic father's abuse, including a time when her mother "tied a white scarf pirate style, low across her forehead, but the purple and yellow edges of a bruise spilled out" (Owens 10). Her siblings endured

similar abuse, and Kya experiences a beating when "Pa shoved Ma into the kitchen wall, hitting her until she slumped to the floor. Kya, sobbing for him to quit, touched his arm. He grabbed Kya by the shoulders, shouted for her to pull down her jeans and underpants, and bent her over the kitchen table. In one smooth, practiced motion he slid the belt from his pants and whipped her" (Owens 67). In the most brutal and violent episode, Pa attacks Kya's mother and her brother, Jodie, on Easter Sunday. Questioning how his wife could afford chocolate bunnies for the children, he first accuses her of "whoring" (Owens 229), then "He lifted the iron fire poker from the corner and moved toward Ma" (Owens 230). Kya "screamed as loud as she could and grabbed at Pa's arm as he slammed the poker across Ma's chest. Blood popped out on the flowery sundress like red polka dots" (Owens 230). When Jodie interrupts the attack, shielding Kya and his mother so they can run from the house, Kya witnesses her father "raise the poker and whack Jodie across the face, his jaw twisting grossly, blood spewing" (Owens 230). Kya's family's poverty and isolation in 1950s rural North Carolina exacerbates Pa's propensity for violence. Without the witnesses or the possibility of assistance, Kya's mother and the children must endure her father's abuse alone.

Patriarchal expectations of men and feelings of inadequacy influence Kya's father's mindset. Pa's violence is motivated by alcoholism, financial failure, and an act of cowardice during World War II that haunts him throughout his life. During one of the rare moments when Kya connects with her father, he explains some of their family history: "My folks weren't always po', . . . They had land, rich land, raised tobaccy and cott'n and such . . . We lived in a house wif a verander that that went a' the way around, two stories high. It wa' fine, mighty fine . . . Then it all went wrong together . . . there was the D'pression, cott'n weevils, . . . it was gone. Only thing left was debts, lotsa debts" (Owens 57). Later, when he returns as

an adult, Jodie gives Kya more information about her family's complicated history. He explains, "I remember New Orleans a little bit. I guess I was five when we left. All I remember is a nice house, big windows overlooking a garden. But once we moved here, Pa wouldn't let any of us talk about New Orleans, our grandparents, or any of it. So it was all wiped away" (Owens 234). Jodie explains that their aunt, Rosemary, filled in gaps in their mother's story, telling him that their mother wrote letters explaining "her circumstances–living in a swamp shack with a drunk man who beat her and her children" (Owens 234). Neither Kya nor Jodie know the whole truth about their mother and father, but Kya pieces together glimpses of her family's history as the foundation for her own identity. This violent and unstable reality is all that Kya knows, and her past shapes her identity and practices. She becomes apprehensive, secretive, and dubious of others as she grows older, rarely feeling safe enough to trust new people, especially men, who come into her life.

Although her mother and siblings all leave, Kya's brother, Jodie, unintentionally encourages Kya to remain and endure their father's abuse. Rather than encouraging her to leave the dangerous situation, Jodie teaches Kya to avoid people outside their family and anticipate their father's rages. After her mother abandons them, each of her siblings leaves one by one until only Jodie and Kya remain with her father. When Jodie decides he, too, can no longer bear Pa's abuse, he gives Kya a few final words of encouragement: "ya be careful, hear. If anybody comes, don't go in the house. They can get ya there. Run deep in the marsh, hide in the bushes. Always cover yo' tracks; I learned ya how. And ya can hide from Pa, too" (Owens 13). Alone with her father for the first time in her life, Kya heeds Jodie's advice. She learns to "keep out of the way, don't let him see you, . . . Up and out of the house before he rose, she lived in the woods and in the water" (Owens 16). Eventually, Pa also leaves for

good, but Kya continues to distrust society, and the ability to hide remains essential to her physical and emotional well-being. Remaining unseen allows Kya to avoid the townsfolk's ridicule and rejection. Although lonely, she feels safe and protected by the isolation in the marsh.

Just as her informal education and experiences shape Kya's values, the townsfolk's prejudice toward those who live in the marsh is passed down and perpetuated by younger generations. Residents of Barkley Cove label those who live in the marsh as descendants of dishonorable "renegades" (Owens 7). According to local history, the "infamous marsh became a net, scooping up a mishmash of mutinous sailors, castaways, debtors, and fugitives dodging wars, taxes, or laws they didn't take to" (Owens 7). No one in Barkley Cove challenges the ownership of this land "because nobody else wanted it. After all, it was wasteland bog" (Owens 8). Those who live in the march cannot escape the stereotypes and prejudice that stem from this history. In town, "Marsh People" are seen as no better than the "worthless" land, and even the youngest residents of Barkley Cove are not shy about expressing their prejudice toward these outsiders.

Kya is subject to this prejudice toward "Marsh People" on the only day she goes to school, a pivotal experience that influences her understanding of society and teaches her that she is unwelcome in Barkley Cove. Not long after Kya's mother abandons her, Mrs. Culpepper, a truant officer, comes to the shack and, tempting Kya with a warm meal, convinces the six-year-old to go to school. Kya is excited to "learn to read and what came after twenty-nine" (Owens 27), but her appearance and life in the marsh make her a target for bullying. Kya walks barefoot into the classroom and sees "Plaid shirts, full skirts, shoes, lots of shoes, some bare feet, and eyes—all staring. She'd never seen so many people" (Owens

28). Kya stands out because she is one of only a few children without shoes, and she sets herself up for ridicule when she introduces herself. Kya recites, "'Miss Catherine Danielle Clark,' . . . because that was what Ma once said was her whole name" (Owens 28). Later, the other students will mock Kya for calling herself "Miss" and adopting an air of respectability despite being one of the "Marsh People." The teacher seals Kya's fate when she asks Kya to spell dog, and Kya spells, *"G-o-d"* (Owens 28). The other students burst into laughter. Despite their teacher's scolding, Kya is humiliated, and at lunchtime, she can eat only a few bites. On the bus home after the torturous day, "a chant rose from the front: 'MISS Catherine Danielle Clark!' . . . 'Where ya been, marsh hen? Where's yo' hat, swamp rat?'" (Owens 30). The students relentlessly tease Kya until she finally gets off the bus. Because of the harassment on that first day, Kya resolves that she will never go back to school, and each time Mrs. Culpepper comes to the shack, Kya follows Jodie's advice and runs "into the marsh, stepping heavily across sandbars, leaving footprints plain as day, then tiptoeing into the water leaving no tracks" (Owens 31). By hiding, Kya avoids going to school, where she would be exposed and the other students would bully her, but because she chooses to protect herself in this way, she is deprived of a formal education and friends her age.

Before he abandons her, Pa also takes Kya to Barkley Cove, and she has another experience that confirms that she is unwelcome. Around seven, Kya's relationship with her father improves, and the two begin fishing together. One afternoon after fishing, Kya's father suggests they go to the diner in Barkley Cove. Kya is excited about a meal in a restaurant, admitting she "had never eaten restaurant food; had never set foot inside" (64). She gorges herself during the meal, afterward feeling "So full, Kya thought she might get sick, but figured it'd be worth it" (Owens 65). However, just as bullying ruined Kya's lunch at school,

this once-in-a-lifetime meal is overshadowed by a negative encounter as Kya steps out of the restaurant. While her father pays inside, Kya stands on the sidewalk waiting for him. Innocently, a four-year-old girl approaches her and says hi. Kya, perpetually grimy from playing in and exploring the marsh, is amazed by the cleanliness of the girl, and despite their differences, when "she looked into the girl's eyes, . . . she herself was reflected as just another kid" (Owens 65). Society has yet to teach the four-year-old girl to judge the "Marsh People," and she returns Kya's gaze with curiosity. Kya extends her hand to shake, and as she does, the girl's mother interrupts: "Hey there, get away!" (Owens 65). She grabs her daughter and commands, "Maryl Lynn, dahlin', don't go near that girl, ya hear me. She's dirty" (Owens 66). Kya listens as the mother tells another woman, "I wish those people wouldn't come to town. Look at her. Filthy. Plumb nasty. There's that stomach flu goin' around and I just know for a fact it came in with them. Last year they brought in that case of measles, and that's serious" (Owens 66). Kya's experience at school and this encounter outside the diner cement Kya's determination to stay away from Barkley Cove. She avoids other people in the marsh, and she only comes into town when it is unavoidable.

As Kya gets older, she ventures into Barkley only on rare occasions. This choice protects Kya from prejudice, but her sporadic appearances intensify the lore surrounding the "Marsh Girl." Unfortunately, the "Marsh Girl's" notoriety, or perhaps infamy, sometimes brings the prejudice of Barkley Cove to Kya. One night when she is fourteen, Kya is drifting off to sleep when she hears boys' voices approaching her shack. Knowing that her home offers little protection, she slips into the marsh for cover and overhears the boys: "Here we come, Marsh Girl! . . . Hey–ya in thar? Miss Missin' Link! . . . Show us yo' teeth! Show us yo' swamp grass!" (Owens 91). Like Maryl Lynn, whose mother teaches her to judge "Marsh

People," these boys have also learned their prejudice. The boys play a game, running up to smack the door of her shack before running off, "hooting and hollering with relief that they had survived the Marsh Girl, the Wolf Child, the girl who couldn't spell *dog*" (Owens 91). The boys' taunting hurts Kya, but her informal education in the marsh has taught her to compare human behavior with natural phenomena. This comparison helps Kya normalize the behavior and accept it as instinctual. Kya understands that the boys and people in town target her because she is unusual, and she recalls witnessing animals that are different experiencing similar rejection by their species. Kya compares herself to a wild turkey that she saw murdered by her flock. She remembers that "Jodie had said that if a bird becomes different from the others–disfigured or wounded–it is more likely to attract a predator, so the rest of the flock will kill it, which is better than drawing in an eagle, who might take one of them in the bargain" (Owens 90). Even before her family abandoned her, Kya lived as an outsider, and she rarely spoke to anyone who was not family. She understands that she is vulnerable to those in town who, rather than trying to understand her, immediately reject and fear her because she is different. However, Kya accepts isolation as her fate, and she willingly stays away from Barkley Cove. She chooses to isolate herself rather than risk facing the ridicule and rejection she experienced as a young girl. She finds comfort in nature and with her few friends–Jumpin' and his wife Mabel, a black couple who run the marina gas station and sometimes provide her with clothing and food; Tate Walker, a friend of Jodie's who befriends Kya and teaches her to read, eventually becoming her first love; and even Chase Andrews, who is intrigued by Kya's feral upbringing and pursues her after Tate goes to college. Kya experiences loneliness and hunger, love and heartbreak, but she is content to live passively on the fringes of society, avoiding prejudice and bullying in Barkley Cove.

Gaslight in *Gone Girl*

Despite the contrast between Kya's rejection in Barkley Cove and the adoration experienced by Amy in *Gone Girl*, early experiences shape the perspectives of each woman and exacerbate her societal gaslighting. In her parents' eyes, Amy is a miracle; she explains, "My mother had five miscarriages and two stillbirths before me" (Flynn 297), all named Hope. From a young age, Amy "grew up feeling special, proud. I was the girl who battled oblivion and won. The chances were 1 percent, but I did it . . . I've always been better than the Hopes. I was the one who made it" (Flynn 298-299). Amy's parents channel their adoration for their surviving daughter into a best-selling book series called *Amazing Amy*. The fictional character based on their daughter is "perfect," written to serve as an example for young readers, flawlessly fulfilling society's expectations for women and girls. Amazing Amy is demure, honest, and makes the right choice in every situation. While Amy takes pride in being the inspiration for the character, enjoying the financial success and notoriety that comes with the series' popularity, fictional-Amy also fuels the real Amy's deep-seated insecurities. She explains, "Amazing Amy has to be brilliant, creative, kind, thoughtful, witty, and happy. *We just want you to be happy*. Rand and Marybeth [Amy's parents] said that all the time, but they never explained how" (Flynn 302). In addition to feeling pressured to live up to the expectations set by the character, Amy feels as if she must compete with the babies that came before her. She admits that she has "always been jealous too, always—seven dead dancing princesses. They get to be perfect without even trying, without even facing one moment of existence, while I am stuck here on earth, and every day I must try, and every day is a chance to be less than perfect" (Flynn 299). Because of the pressure

created by the Hopes and Amazing Amy, the real Amy learns to hold herself to unattainable, "perfect" standards and becomes judgmental of other women.

Not only does Amy's informal education led her to have unrealistic expectations for herself, but she also theorizes about and disparages other women. Amy's profession reflects her tendency to judge others. She has a degree in psychology and writes "personality quizzes" (Flynn 13) for women's magazines. A foundational element of Amy's philosophy on women is the "Cool Girl." Amy believes that the "Cool Girl" is the woman that every man desires and the woman every woman wants to be:

> Men always say that as *the* defining compliment, don't they? *She's a cool girl*. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner, and let their men do whatever they want. *Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl.* (Flynn 299-300)

Amy's "Cool Girl" is an amalgam of qualities that society has taught her that men desire; she is all fun and never too serious. This caricature is an exaggeration of stereotypical male interests and an entity designed for objectification. To personify this ultimate object of male desire, a woman must relinquish her interests and happiness, minimalizing her feelings and her appetite. Amy believes that the "Cool Girls" around her are vapid and fake, oppressed by the false persona.

Amy passes judgment on the consequences wrought on women who embody qualities of the "Cool Girl." While she despises the men who fall for "Cool Girls," Amy claims, "the Cool Girls are even more pathetic: They're not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they're pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be" (Flynn 300). Amy's analysis of the "Cool Girl" reveals one way men's desires shape women's lives. To be the perfect "Cool Girl," most women would need to change their bodies to meet nearly unattainable beauty standards and hide their true selves and interests. The "Cool Girl" measures her worth by her desirability, and she cannot risk being unappealing to be the person she wants to be. In Amy's opinion, most women see a man's desire for this persona as ubiquitous. They do not see how pandering as the "Cool Girl" comes with self-sacrifice. As Amy delves more deeply into her theory of the "Cool Girl," she accuses women at large of having "colluded in our degradation!" (Flynn 301). Believing she has identified interlopers and refusing to join their ranks, Amy feels ostracized: "Pretty soon Cool Girl became the standard girl. Men believed she existed—she wasn't just a dreamgirl one in a million. Every girl was supposed to be this girl, and if you weren't, then there was something wrong with *you*" (Flynn 301). The "Cool Girl" buys into and perpetuates Patriarchal Surreality. She needs to be wanted, so she molds herself to fit male desires. In the process, she encourages women around her to buy in as they also compete for attention from men, further encouraging men to continue to pursue this unattainable caricature of a woman.

Despite judging "Cool Girls," Amy alters her personality to gain Nick's attention, but eventually, as she predicted, she begins to feel unfulfilled by inhabiting a persona rather than being her true self. On the night Amy and Nick meet, Amy is confident that he wants "the Cool Girl," so "for him, I guess I was willing to try" (Flynn 301). Amy admits that she often

pretends “to have a personality. I can’t help it, it’s what I’ve always done: The way some women change fashion regularly, I change personalities. What persona feels good, what’s coveted, what’s au courant? I think most people do this, they just don’t admit it, or else they settle on one persona because they’re too lazy or student to pull off a switch” (Flynn 299). She is charmed by Nick’s good looks and charisma, and she decides she will give the “Cool Girl” a try. Amy is conventionally attractive, and she decides to compliment her beauty with the easy-going, fun-loving, never-too-serious “Cool Girl” persona. She has no problem gaining Nick’s attention and winning him over. Initially, Amy claims she finally understood how to be happy; “he was so much fun . . . He was the first naturally happy person I met who was my equal . . . I was probably happier for those few years—pretending to be someone else—than I ever have been before or after” (Flynn 302). However, she starts to feel as if she has relinquished her freedom and sacrificed respect to play “the Cool Girl.” Amy explains, “If you let a man cancel plans or decline to do things for you, you *lose.* You don’t get what you want . . . Sure, he may be happy, he may say you’re *the coolest girl ever,* but he’s saying it because *he got his way*” (Flynn 303). Just as Amy believes “the Cool Girls” played their part in undermining respect for the whole of womankind, she acknowledges that men have used this persona to increase their control over women. Amy explains, “They try to make it sound like you are the Cool Girl so you will bow to their wishes” (Flynn 303). Eventually, Amy convinces herself that “Committing to Nick, feeling safe with Nick, being happy with Nick, made me realize that there was a Real Amy in there, and she was so much better, more interesting and complicated and challenging, than Cool Amy” (Flynn 303), but “Nick wanted Cool Amy anyway” (Flynn 303-304). She abandons many of the fun-loving and playful characteristics that initially attracted drew Nick. Amy describes this shedding as showing her

"true self" (Flynn 304), and as she expresses this part of herself, she perceives Nick's loss of interest. Amy fears she has lost control of their relationship. According to Sweet, "Women report fear of seeming excessively emotional in intimate relationships with men, and they experience a lack of power over the trajectory of those relationships as a result" (Sweet 855). She asks the reader, "Can you imagine, finally showing your true self to your spouse, your soul mate, and having him *not like you*?" (Flynn 304). She reveals, "So that's how the hating first began. I've thought about this a lot, and that's where it started" (Flynn 304). After revealing her "true self," Nick drifts away, and Amy devises the plan to disappear and frame Nick for her murder. Amy's informal education at the hands of her adoring parents, the pressure added by *Amazing Amy*, and her habit of judging other women all contribute to her distorted perception of society and, ultimately, result in her choice to meticulously dismantle her life.

Widespread gaslighting distorts women's perspectives and obscures their institutionalized oppression in the United States. From birth, society teaches women to view their subjugation as de facto or part of the "natural order" of society. Stories passed down by previous generations and the informal education of women by family, friends, and other women teach subsequent generations of women to diminish themselves and accept their place in society. This informal education creates a foundation of generational psychological trauma, violence, and abuse that perpetuates patriarchal and prejudiced values. These influences converge to establish Patriarchal Surreality, a distorted perspective that coerces women to accept, expect, endure, and sometimes contribute to their own and the subjugation of other women.

CHAPTER THREE

CRITICIZING AND "THE PIT"

"People think it's all snakes and scorpions out there in the oil patch, but hell, those are the most harmless things in the county. At least the rattlesnakes let you know they're coming, most of the time." (Wetmore 282)

"We lose the men when they try to beat the train and their pickup stalls on the tracks, or they get drunk and shoot themselves, . . . when they stumble into the chute and a bull calf roars and kicks them in the heart . . . when they drown in the lake or fall asleep at the wheel . . . to crystal and coke and painkillers . . . And the women, how do we lose them? Usually it's when one of the men kills them." (Wetmore 268)

Patriarchal Surreality cyclically perpetuates and disguises itself with societal gaslighting, making intentional reflection crucial to identify its features. This structure, sustained and perpetuated by societal unconscious, can be challenging to comprehend, but examples from popular literature help to expose aspects of Patriarchal Surreality, lending substance and structure to this intangible force. By identifying the manifestations of Patriarchal Surreality, one can bring the unconscious, obscured by societal gaslight, into focus.

As demonstrated, women are ingrained with the values of Patriarchal Surreality through informal education: stories passed down by mothers and grandmothers, the examples

of other women and families, and life experiences. Because this indoctrination begins from birth, women often fail to recognize the impact of Patriarchal Surreality on their lives, including society's limiting gender expectations, the objectification and sexual commodification of women, feelings of isolation and loss, and ongoing acts of discrimination and prejudice. Women take constraints for granted, assuming that abuse and sacrifice are a natural state-of-being for women. However, as documented by the accomplishments of consciousness-raising groups, speak outs, and the enlightening women's writing that emerged from the feminist movement, when provided with opportunities and means to examine their existence, women can recognize the ways that society has systematically denied them full agency. During the second wave of the feminist movement, women who came together to discuss their experiences "started to see patterns emerging; they began to develop theory as they realized that the problems they had thought were theirs alone were shared by many. From this insight . . . Carol Hanisch coined the slogan 'the personal is political,' which meant that the private arenas of home, marriage, and family reflected the power dynamics of society at large" (Dicker 81). Feminist events, groups, and gatherings helped to broaden women's perception, but mainstream feminism fell short, excluding the voices and experiences of women of color and other marginalized women. Fortunately, where these groups failed, popular fiction can begin to fill the void, providing a woman access to various perspectives that can help her acknowledge the ways that she inhabits and is a victim of Patriarchal Surreality and give her an opportunity to recognize the experiences of women who are different from her.

As Register claims, to see the reality beneath the facade of U.S. Patriarchal Surreality, we must begin by descending into the Pit, collecting and cataloging examples of

the systematic subjugation and abuse of women, revealing the patterns of oppression. Women must gain perspective to understand that those in power manufacture the subjugation of women to fulfill their desires and maintain control. However, after a lifetime of gaslighting, it is often difficult and, sometimes, painful for a woman to identify the ways that society distorts her sense of reality. Register explains, "It might even be worthwhile to lower yourself into the negatives now and then, to regain the impetus for overcoming the pitfalls on the way up" (Register 10). This process is not easy: in her women's studies course, Register witnessed the desolation that can paralyze women in the Pit, and in "Click! The Housewife's Moment of Truth," O'Reilly cites "the painful process" (O'Reilly) of thinking about circumstances in society that limit women's opportunities. While self-reflection can be challenging and painful, popular fiction makes this reckoning more bearable. As a reflection of the society from which it emerges, fiction provides distance from reality to cushion the pain of realization and facilitate meaningful discussion, while still allowing the opportunity for reflection. It not only documents the storytelling and informal education that gaslight women and provide the foundation for Patriarchal Surreality, but it also recounts day-to-day manifestations of this distortion. Fictional characters' interactions and experiences allow women readers, most of whom have been gaslit from birth, to objectively observe and begin to "see" the manifestations of Patriarchal Surreality. Examples in popular fiction "turn up the gaslight" and reveal that in the United States, Patriarchal Surreality manifests in society's limiting gender expectations, the objectification and sexual commodification of women, feelings of isolation and loss, and ongoing acts of discrimination and prejudice.

Gender Constraints

The lives of women and men in the United States are shaped by "ideas about what it is to be masculine or feminine [that] are deep-seated and slow to change, not least in the highly sexualized cultures in which we now live" (Pateman x). These deep-seated conceptualizations bestow power and control on men and perpetuate the subjugation and oppression, both mentally and physically, of women. Whether by limiting women's thinking or physically limiting a woman's agency, men circumscribe the lives and choices of women. Stereotypical gender roles allocate the most power – intimate, social, and political – to men. Ferraro claims this structure is based on "biologic notions of the proper spheres of activity for each sex and males' inherently greater capacity for leadership; social notions of appropriate family responsibilities; and religious teachings about male and female roles . . . men should be the economic providers and authoritative heads of households while women should provide emotional support and domestic service" (Ferraro 79). Often in popular literature, women are subject to, sometimes exaggerated, traditional expectations, and those who resist their circumscribed position face backlash in the form of misogyny, "a property of social systems wherein noncompliant women are subjected to various kinds of hostility, the purpose of which is to enforce certain patriarchal norms, in particular the demand that women, graciously and amenably, serve men" (Stark 227). Literature often realistically portrays misogyny when fictional women refuse to relinquish their freedom after marriage, insist upon financial independence, and resist objectification and sexualization.

As evidenced by its sweeping objectification of women, Wetmore's *Valentine* depicts a stereotypical patriarchal town in 1970s West Texas. In this novel, men expect compliance and obedience from "their" women, but Corrine Shepard and Mary Rose Whitehead refuse to

acquiesce as obedient wives. Before she was married, Corrine, a college graduate, was distinct from other women. She remembers her husband, Potter, saying, "when we met, you were the only person I had ever known who went to college" (Wetmore 37), and Corrine's ambition did not end after she completed her degree. After college, she begins a career as a high school English teacher and strives to inspire her students to "get the hell out of Dodge" (Wetmore 169), but when her pregnancy begins to show, "the principal sends her home with a handshake and a jar of his wife's locally famous chow-chow" (Wetmore 176). After giving birth to her daughter, Alice, Corrine struggles with societal expectations that she should stay home to care for her family. She admits to Potter, "The only thing I hate more than being home with Alice all day long is feeling guilty about not wanting to do it" (Wetmore 188). She misses teaching, and yet, she feels as if she "should" be content as "just" a mother; she "should" be happy to give up her career, as is stereotypically expected of mothers in the U.S. Instead, Corrine's new isolating and confined reality causes bitterness, shame, and depression.

Like many women, after becoming a wife and mother, Corrine struggles to maintain her sense of identity. She loves her daughter, but she loses herself. She feels isolated and admits she was "unprepared for how boring motherhood is" (Wetmore 177). Corrine can think of nothing except Alice, and she gives up hobbies that previously represented her independence and identity: "I used to memorize poems and bring myself to tears when I recited them. I used to walk out the door and go for a long drive anytime I wanted. I used to bring home my own paycheck" (Wetmore 180). With all her attention on Alice, Corrine has no time for herself or a career. Her unhappiness also strains her marriage; while Potter assumes she will be grateful for the opportunity to stay home, Corrine feels trapped. She

explains, “I love Alice. She’s the best thing you and me ever did together. But . . . I am losing my everloving mind” (Wetmore 190). Having given up so much, Corrine realizes that she must do something to preserve her own identity, but societal pressure makes this undertaking more challenging. In addition to the pressure from Potter[8] to embrace her role as a stay-at-home mom, Corrine also experiences patriarchal pressure from her community. She calls the school where she used to teach, inquiring about returning to work, and the secretary asks, “What does Potter think . . . Maybe Corrine could ask him to give the principal a call?” (Wetmore 179). The secretary’s comments confirm that Corrine will “need her husband’s permission, and even then they might not hire her” (Wetmore 190). Corrine’s experience reveals the extent to which men rule the lives of women in West Texas; the secretary, a woman herself, upholds patriarchal values by asking Corrine to prove that she has her husband’s permission. Like many women, a lifetime of gaslighting has distorted the secretary’s perspective, and she helps to maintain Patriarchal Surreality, rather than questioning or resisting women’s subjugation.

Despite the pressure from both her husband and the community, Corrine stands her ground and advocates for her return to work. She confesses to Potter that while he was fighting in World War II, the hard work that she and other women did in addition to their jobs made her feel independent and strong. However, when the war ended, “all you men came home and we were just supposed to get knocked up as soon as possible and slink back into the kitchen like a bunch of old cows headed back to the barn” (Wetmore 189). While many husbands in Odessa would punish a wife who desired independence, Potter respects Corrine, and eventually, he agrees to allow her to return to work. By standing her ground, Corrine can be both a mother and have a career; however, her choice to resist societal

expectations for women comes with consequences. Corrine is labeled an interloper, cementing an invisible barrier between her and others in town. While Potter remains a beloved member of the community, some men judge Corrine as obstinate and defiant. At the same time, she is ostracized by many women who, like the secretary at the high school, have internalized patriarchal values. Corrine's experience reveals limiting gender expectations within Patriarchal Surreality and the consequences of resisting this distorted reality.

While Corrine's exclusion from society is bearable, women often face more severe consequences if they choose to resist the gender expectations of Patriarchal Surreality. Pateman explains that in the U.S. in 2018, one of the remaining problems arising from patriarchal societal structures is "Most notably, domestic violence [that] continues to be endemic" (Pateman x). Like Corrine, Mary Rose stands her ground when her perspective differs from that of her husband or pushes the boundaries of society's expectations. However, Mary Rose and Robert struggle to resolve their disagreements, and often their arguments turn physical. When the couple argues about the safety of their isolated home, Robert reacts to Mary Rose's defiance with intimidation, trying to force his wife to acquiesce. He claims that the ranch is "No place for women, or little girls" (Wetmore 15), but Mary Rose contradicts him: "this is my home, . . . I'm not leaving" (Wetmore 16). The argument escalates, and Mary Rose recounts, "At some point, I punched Robert in the chest, a thing I had never done before. He couldn't hit me back because I was pregnant, but he could throw a fist into our front door, three, four times" (Wetmore 16). According to Mary Rose, the pregnancy protects her because, as is revealed later, Robert is desperate for a son and will not risk the life of their unborn child. Mary Rose's pregnant body symbolizes the epitome of womanhood in patriarchal society and is at odds with her defiant attitude. Robert refuses to jeopardize the

baby, so rather than physically assaulting his wife, he unleashes his frustration in the form of violence on their front door. Robert, like many men in the United States, wields violence and brutality as a means to force his wife to submit to the patriarchal gender expectations.

Later in the novel, another conflict arises between Mary Rose and Robert when he learns that Mary Rose is publicly challenging traditional patriarchal expectations for the dynamics between men and women. After Mary Rose provides shelter for Gloria Ramírez on the morning after Strickland rapes her, she begins to question the beliefs that Odessa ingrained in her since childhood, including the rationalization of men's abuse of women to satiate their sexual desires. Like many women, Mary Rose's informal education taught her to tolerate and excuse men's violence toward women. This fight between the Whiteheads nearly escalates to the point of violence when Robert learns that Mary Rose is publicly condemning Strickland as a rapist and defending Gloria in Odessa's social circles. He demands, "Can't you even try, . . . Every day, I'm doing my damnedest to keep us from losing everything . . . You think you're doing our family any favors by making yourself out to be the town lunatic?" (Wetmore 124-125). Robert's accusations, based on society's expectation that a wife should unquestioningly obey and support her husband, just as she should silently accept society's mistreatment of women, constitute intimate partner gaslighting. He pressures Mary Rose to believe that her opinions are irrational, wants her to question her judgment, and ultimately hopes to coerce her to conform to societal structures. The fight escalates because Mary Rose refuses to back down. In this instance, she prepares for violence. Mary Rose explains, "When his eyes narrow and his hands curl into a fist, I yank the kitchen curtains open and start looking around for my big wooden spoon. If we are going to start hitting each other, I want to strike first" (Wetmore 126). As the fight feels reaches a boiling point, the

phone rings, interrupting the argument, and after answering, Robert's frustration has subsided. His attention shifts: "he sidles up to me at the kitchen sink and asks if I don't miss him even just a little bit" (Wetmore 126). Immediately following a nearly physical fight, Robert's sexual advances are not a veiled apology but rather evidence that he considers his wife a sexual object. This vacillating exchange between Mary Rose and Robert reveals the nature of the violence between men and women in Odessa. For Robert, a fight with his wife that nearly escalates to physical violence seems to feel like foreplay. The ringing phone breaks the tension between the two, and Robert immediately moves on to sex without reflecting or questioning his threatening behavior. He expects Mary Rose to allow him to intimidate her with violence in one moment and allow him to use her sexually in the next. Mary Rose is reduced to an object to serve and be used by her husband.

In 1940s Harlem, Lutie Johnson's experience is not only determined by her gender, like that of Corrine or Mary Rose, but also by her race and other parts of her identity. In *The Street,* Lutie's intersectional identity comprises many facets: she is a beautiful young woman who is also a poor, Black, essentially-single mother. After her husband loses his job, Lutie watches him struggle, but Jim cannot find employment. Eventually, the couple applies to serve as foster parents, which comes with a weekly stipend. Although this arrangement means money is coming in, the additional children create more challenges. Lutie spends her days scrimping to find cheap food, cooking big meals, and cleaning up after the large household. To further complicate the situation, Lutie's father moves in after being evicted from his home, and unknown to Lutie and Jim, Lutie's father begins throwing "parties" when they are out of the house. When the police notice these parties and other illegal behavior, the foster children and the weekly stipend are revoked.

Lutie feels responsible for this loss of income, and like many Black housewives in the twentieth century, as she becomes desperate, she looks to opportunities outside her household to make money. She decides to reply to an advertisement in the newspaper looking for a housekeeper and nanny. Lutie's fictional experience mirrors the historical experience of Black women in contemporary America. According to Paula Giddings, the reality that Black men could not find work forced Black women into jobs outside the home, a fact in America dating back to the years following the Civil War. Black women taking jobs outside the home put stress on gender and family dynamics. Giddings explains, "To men's minds, for a woman to work . . . undermined Black manhood and the race as well" (Giddings 60). Just as Potter fears what "the fellas" will say if Corrine returns to work, Jim is embarrassed because he cannot support his family and is further humiliated when his wife secures a job. After beginning her new position, Lutie realizes that she can save money by rarely making the trip home, and she chooses to sacrifice time with her family to better provide for Jim and Bub. While Lutie's intentions are centered on her family, later in the novel, she reflects on how this working arrangement and patriarchal societal pressure emasculated her husband, contributing to his insecurity.

Eventually, Lutie receives a letter from her father, informing her that Jim is having an affair with another woman who has moved into their home. On the way to confront them, Lutie cannot help but be reminded of a warning given by Mrs. Pizzini when she first applied for the out-of-town job: "Not good for the woman to work when she's young. Not good for the man . . . It's best that the man do the work when the babies are young" (Petry 53). Mrs. Pizzini's warning echoes not only patriarchal beliefs expressed by the women in Odessa who questioned Corrine's desire to go back to work but also the emasculation of black men

described by Giddings. Lutie realizes: "she'd been washing someone else's dishes when she should have been home with Jim and Bub. Instead she'd cleaned another woman's house and looked after another woman's child while her own marriage went to pot" (Petry 30). When she decides to take the job and spend most of her time away from home, Lutie does not think of the negative effect that her absence will have on her husband. She walks into her house to find "The girl . . . cooking supper and Jim . . . sitting at the kitchen table watching her" (Petry 53-54). Lutie rages, but Jim laughs, asking, "What did you expect?" (Petry 54). Emasculated by his inability to find employment and embarrassed that his wife has become the breadwinner for the family, Jim turns to another woman who allows him to possess her, both sexually and domestically, and he asserts his masculinity. Lutie concludes, "While she was gone Jim got himself a slim dark girl whose thighs made him believe in himself again and momentarily released him from his humdrum life" (Petry 183). The mistress allows Jim to reclaim his masculinity because she, herself, meets society's expectations that women provide domestic service and satisfy the sexual needs of men. Again, Lutie's experience mirrors a historical reality, for according to Giddings, "Following the Civil War, men attempted to vindicate their manhood largely through asserting their authority over women" (Giddings 61). Nearly eighty years later, this assertion of authority is evident in Petry's novel, as the first and only glimpse of the unnamed mistress is of her cooking, a responsibility stereotypically assigned to women, while Jim looks on, objectifying her.

Society's gender expectations facilitate the abuse and subjugation of women in *Valentine* and *The Street*, while Amy in *Gone Girl* exploits these stereotypes and perpetuates the values of Patriarchal Surreality. Amy incorporates stereotypical gender expectations into her diary, the foundation of her "*Fuck Nick Dunne*" (Flynn 319) plan. She composes the

"true and the not true and the might as well be true" (Flynn 296) diary so police can "discover" it after her disappearance. As she prepares to disappear, Amy constructs a narrative that will speak for her once she is gone. According to Real Amy, the diary consists of "Seven years of diary entries, not every day, but twice monthly, at least" (Flynn 320). Amy takes pride in having completed this undertaking: "Do you know how much discipline that takes? . . . To research each week's current events, to cross-consult with my old daily planners to make sure I forgot nothing important, then to reconstruct how Diary-Amy would react to each event?" (Flynn 320). In the end, she wrote, "One hundred and fifty-two entries . . . I wrote her very carefully, . . . She is designed to appeal to the cops, to appeal to the public should portions be released" (Flynn 320-321). The diary deploys gender stereotypes to manipulate detectives and the public by gaining sympathy for Amy and sabotaging her husband's character. Real Amy explains, "They have to read this diary like it's some sort of Gothic tragedy. A wonderful, good-hearted woman–*whole life ahead of her*, *everything going for her*, whatever else they say about women who die–chooses the wrong mate and *pays the ultimate price*" (Flynn 321). The diary includes incriminating evidence, corroborates claims made by acquaintances about Amy, Nick, and their relationship, and effectively draws upon patriarchal societal structures to emotionally (and otherwise) manipulate law enforcement, the media, and the public. By doing so, Amy falls victim to the structures she despises, becoming a willing proponent of Patriarchal Surreality by employing its values to achieve her goals.

As a critical component of her plan, the diary must prove her husband's guilt, and Amy draws upon society's gender expectations to achieve this goal. In the diary, she highlights (primarily fabricated) ways that she capitulated to stereotypical societal

expectations for women and wives in her marriage. Amy correctly anticipates that the small-town detectives investigating her case will fit one of two molds: men who find Amy's (supposed) unwavering dedication to her detached husband endearing, therefore, sympathizing with her; or women who find Nick's (supposed) exploitation and disregard for his wife offensive, therefore, turning on him. While in *Valentine* women turn against Mary Rose and Corrine for resisting gender norms, thirty years later, the public in *Gone Girl* has evolved somewhat. In Amy's eyes, the diary depicts an outdated stereotype of femininity that will enrage women in her twenty-first-century audience with its portrayal of an attentive and dedicated housewife whose identity is dependent upon her relationship with her husband. Amy's diary earns her audience's sympathy as they assume her husband must have pressured and coerced Amy into this role. At the same time, the doting Diary Amy wins over much of her male audience by appealing to their attraction to the model of the perfect wife. Diary Amy explains that she is happy and excited to serve her new husband; she finds herself "fat with love . . . A happy, busy bumblebee of marital enthusiasm. I positively hum around him, fixing and fussing . . . I have become a wife, I have become a bore, I have been asked to forfeit my Independent Young Feminist card. I don't care" (Flynn 52). Amy plays to both sides, knowing that some will find her diary character's self-sacrifice endearing and admirable, while others will pity Diary Amy for relinquishing her identity and independence after getting married. No matter which side they choose, Diary Amy wins over most of her audience by depicting a woman who lives up to the stereotypical demands placed on women in the U.S. Unlike Mary Rose and Corrine, who both resist the confines of gender expectations, Diary Amy claims to relish her mundane, wifely duties: balancing his checkbook, trimming his hair (Flynn 52). Diary Amy will do anything for Nick. In return,

she claims Nick mellows her out with his laid-back attitude. She no longer worries so much about the little details and deadlines. Diary Amy explains, “Maybe that is what I like best about him, the way he makes me. Not makes me feel, just makes me. I am fun. I am playful. I am game. I feel naturally happy and entirely satisfied” (Flynn 53). Diary Amy emphasizes that Nick “completes” her identity and makes her a better version of herself. He helps her meet the demands that society places on women. In turn, the diary’s depiction of their relationship dynamic builds up the collective male ego that takes pride in the example of a beautiful woman who claims she would be nothing without her man.

Just as Amy integrates stereotypical expectations for wives, she also incorporates the tropes of abusive relationships to further win over her audience. By doing so, not only does the diary perpetuate harmful stereotypes and glorify Amy’s supposed “victimhood,” but it also exploits the experiences of real women who experience abuse in their relationships. She writes that after both she and Nick are laid off from their jobs in New York City, her husband initially tries to make the most of his time, but eventually, “He went dull-eyed. Now he watches TV, surfs porn, watches porn on TV. He eats a lot of delivery food, the Styrofoam shells propped up near the overflowing trash can. He doesn’t talk to me, he behaves as if the act of talking physically pains him and I am a vicious woman to ask it of him” (Flynn 114). Insecurity replaces Amy’s initial giddiness in her relationship, and she intentionally belittles herself by writing that her husband’s lack of interest could be her fault, tapping into her audience’s pity. Diary Amy fears Nick “would be happier with a woman who thrills at husband care and homemaking, and I’m not disparaging these skills: I wish I had them” (Flynn 192). She wishes she could be an “unconditionally loving woman whose greatest happiness is making my man happy” (Flynn 192). Again, she claims the problem is hers and

not her husband's, admitting, "I was that way, for a while, with Nick. But it was unsustainable. I'm not selfless enough. Only child, as Nick points out regularly" (Flynn 192). Diary Amy begins to hint that because she can no longer force herself to keep her husband happy, she is responsible for his increasingly abusive behavior. Diary Amy blames herself and implies that Nick's behavior is a natural, understandable reaction to her inability to be a good wife. Her entries depict instances of gaslighting that exacerbate her disordered thinking.

According to the diary, Nick's gaslighting makes Amy feel disoriented and confused, further isolating her in their new town. In an exchange during their housewarming party, Nick demands, "Be friendly, Amy" (Flynn 164). Diary Amy claims this comment "really hurts my feelings, because if you asked anyone in that room whether I'd been friendly, I know they'd say yes" (Flynn 165). Although she believes she has been welcoming, Amy begins to question her perception of her behavior, and she writes that as the abuse continues, she begins to question her sanity. This "crazy-making" is, according to Sweet, fundamental to gaslighting. Diary Amy writes, "I've been tracking Nick's moods. Towards me. Just to make sure I'm not crazy" (Flynn 229). She claims that after a year of hostility, Nick suddenly begins behaving lovingly for "nine days . . . In a row" (Flynn 229). Amy describes how she and her husband have reconnected, but she worries: "The neurotic in me, of course, is asking: Where's the catch? Nick's turnaround is so sudden and so grandiose, . . . it feels like he must want something. Or he's already done something and he is being preemptively sweet for when I find out. I worry" (Flynn 231). Just as Nick's comment at the party causes Amy to question her judgment, Amy questions her perception of Nick's behavior and his motives,

and Diary Amy takes it further to win her audience's sympathy: she admits she feels guilty for being suspicious.

Not only does Amy include examples of psychological abuse in the diary, but she also incorporates characteristics of physically abusive relationships to garner her reader's sympathy. She writes about an instance when she suggested that she and Nick try to get pregnant; a fight ensues, and "His eyes go dark, canine, and he grabs me by the arms again . . . 'I can't handle one more thing to worry about. I am cracking under the pressure. I will snap.' For once I know he's telling the truth" (Flynn 254). This fabricated threat echoes those experienced by Mary Rose at the hands of her husband, Robert, in *Valentine*. Amy builds tension in the diary's account of her marriage. She writes, "something is horribly wrong with my husband, . . . I can feel him watching me sometimes, and I look up and see his face twisted in disgust, . . . He's so angry, so unstable" (Flynn 263). Toward the end of the diary, Amy contrives an altercation that goes beyond threats and intimidation: "He shoved me. Hard . . . and I fell and banged my head against the kitchen island and I couldn't see for three seconds" (Flynn 264). Again, Amy writes that she feels responsible for Nick's actions: "I knew what I was doing, I was punching every button on him. I was watching him coil tighter and tighter–I wanted him to finally *say* something, *do* something. Even if it's bad, even if it's the worst, *do something*, . . . I just didn't realize he was going to do *that*" (Flynn 264). Fact and fiction collide when Amy tries to buy a gun in real life to corroborate her claim that she lives in fear: "I wanted a gun, just in case. In case things with Nick go really wrong" (Flynn 265). Amy depicts herself as a victim in the diary and creates the persona that later will help to trap her within the confines of Patriarchal Surreality when she reconsiders her plan to disappear.

Amy's diary intentionally incorporates gender stereotypes and characteristics of mentally and physically abusive relationships to emotionally manipulate readers and gain their sympathy. The diary depicts a woman living in fear, trying to discern what is happening and what is not. As Amy's diary manipulates investigators after her disappearance, Flynn's novel also gaslights readers. During part one of *Gone Girl*, the stark contrast between Amy's Diary and Nick's version of events is befuddling. Something must have gone disastrously wrong in this marriage for a relationship that, according to the diary, began like a fairy tale to unravel to such a disastrous extent. Truth begins to feel elusive, and the reader is unsure which version of events is accurate. As such, not only does the diary depict gaslighting, but as readers attempt to reconcile these two contrasting narratives, they experience gaslighting themselves.

Sexual Commodification and Objectification

In addition to being limited by society's gender expectations, American women are often objectified; a woman is stripped of her identity, thoughts, and emotions and reduced to a sexualized commodity that exists for entertainment, pleasure, and possession. Objectification by itself is troubling, but within Patriarchal Surreality, women's reactions to sexual commodification are also disturbing. Women often dismiss or choose to endure objectification rather than confront this inappropriate behavior.

In some of its most disturbing scenes, Petry's *The Street* depicts Lutie's commodification and objectification. Lutie's husband, Jim, abandons his wife and child when he feels he no longer possesses her. Lutie works tirelessly to provide for her family, and Jim finds another woman to satisfy his sexual and domestic desires. Lutie decides to leave the marriage when she learns of Jim's infidelity, but despite having left an unhealthy

relationship, she does not escape misogyny. As a single woman, men objectify her, blatantly expressing their desire to physically possess the beautiful, young woman. Jones, the Superintendent of Lutie's apartment building, provides a particularly disturbing example. He covets Lutie from the moment he first meets her. When she rejects his advances, Jones enters Lutie's apartment without her knowledge, and while literally violating the woman's space, he metaphorically violates the woman to satiate his desires.

When Lutie inquires about the apartment on 116th Street, she knocks on the superintendent's door, and the sound of an aggressive dog foreshadows the threatening behavior to come from the individual in the apartment. A "tall, gaunt man" (Petry 10) opens the door, he violently kicks the dog aside, and Lutie meets Jones, the Super. Jones immediately intimidates Lutie, but she tries to dissuade herself, even though, "It isn't my imagination. For after his first quick furtive glance, his eyes had filled with a hunger so urgent that she was instantly afraid of him and afraid to show her fear" (Petry 10). She becomes increasingly uncomfortable throughout this encounter, but as society has conditioned her, Lutie rationalizes the man's behavior. Although she does not trust her instincts, Lutie admits that she can feel the man objectifying her as they walk up the stairs to tour the vacant apartment: "he was staring at her back, her legs, her thighs. She could feel his eyes traveling over her—estimating her, summing her up, wondering about her" (Petry 13). Jones cannot hide his desire, and even as she becomes noticeably uncomfortable, he allows his behavior to go unchecked. Lutie's distress grows: "As she climbed up the last flight of stairs, she was aware that the skin on her back was crawling with fear . . . she felt the sweat start pouring from her armpits, dampening her forehead, breaking out in beads on her nose" (Petry 13). Once the two enter the apartment, Lutie describes his "hot, choking awfulness of

desire for her [that] pinioned her there so that she couldn't move" (Petry 15). Nevertheless, even as these instinctual warnings become impossible to ignore, "She told herself she was a fool, an idiot, drunk on fear, fatigue, and gnawing worry . . . It isn't possible to read people's minds, she argued. Now the Super was probably not even thinking about her" (Petry 15). Lutie acknowledges Jones' inappropriate behavior, his penetrating looks, and her intuition; however, shaped by a lifetime of societal gaslighting in Patriarchal Surreality, Lutie is conditioned to distrust her judgment. She rationalizes these unsettling feelings and disregards Jones' behavior.

Lutie's perspective and her decisions are shaped significantly by both intimate and widespread societal gaslighting. According to Cynthia A. Stark, "Misogynist gaslighting . . . serves to enforce the norms of patriarchy by discouraging women from bringing accusations against men who injure them . . . misogynist gaslighting induces women to suppress or doubt their judgments in the domain of gender relations" (Stark 230). Lutie's choice to silence her intuition and endure Jones' troubling behavior is typical. Lutie tells herself that she is overreacting, just as women often minimize their feelings and ignore their instincts. She silences her voice of reason that warns of a threat. Tragedy compounds when, despite her fear, Lutie leases the apartment out of necessity. Unfortunately, Lutie's initial encounter only hints at the lengths to which Jones will go to satiate his desire. Throughout the novel, he allows his yearning to go unchecked, even though Lutie never reciprocates his advances and actively avoids him. When the narrative meanders into Jones' mind, his inner dialogue confirms a pattern of objectification and obsession, gone unchecked and encouraged by Patriarchal Surreality. Jones believes women are disposable: once a woman has fulfilled his desires or when someone "better" comes along, he discards her. His misogynistic attitude

manifests in his behavior, including the objectification of women, a predilection for young women, and a long history of abuse.

Jones reduces women to objects to satisfy his need for sex and companionship, and he refuses to control his desires or take responsibility for his behavior. He blames Lutie for his feelings about her. He claims that seeing her makes "him more aware of the deadly loneliness that ate into him day and night . . . a loneliness born of years of living in basements and sleeping on mattresses in boiler rooms" (Petry 85). Rather than choosing to curb his inappropriate desire, Jones allows this feeling to bloom, refusing to take responsibility and blaming his circumstances. Jones, too, is heavily influenced by Patriarchal Surreality and the circumstances that have circumscribed his life. However, while Lutie believes she has agency to improve her situation, Jones consigns control to outside forces that he blames for his failures. Like Lutie's husband, racism limits Jones' job options, and also like Jim, who blamed Lutie for his infidelity, Jones uses his dissatisfaction with his history of menial jobs as an excuse for his abusive behavior toward women. He claims that while isolated by a job at sea, dreaming of "brown women" (Petry 85) helped him endure the feeling that he was "buried alive in the hold" (Petry 85). However, when Jones returns to land, "he went half-mad with a frenzied kind of hunger that drove the women away from him" (Petry 85). Jones confesses that he aggressively pursued women to the point that they fled, but he justifies his behavior. By claiming that he went "half-mad," Jones abdicates responsibility for his contemptuous behavior, claiming it was beyond his control.

After his time at sea, Jones takes a job as a night watchman, exacerbating his loneliness and yearning to possess young women's bodies. He reveals that when he finds a woman who will have him, his "frenzied hunger" manifests itself violently. Jones confesses,

"It was all of three years since he had had a really young woman. The last young round one left after three days of his violent love-making" (Petry 87). Conspicuously, Jones does not refer to the woman by her name. In his description, she is objectified and reduced to her physical characteristics. Continuing to blame his working conditions for his behavior, Jones gives up his night watchman job and takes the position of superintendent of the building on 116th. However, despite having changed his job, he fails to curb his penchant for objectifying women, allowing unhealthy desires to go unchecked and engaging in sexual brutality. After meeting her, Jones "wanted this young one—this Lutie Johnson—worse than he had ever wanted anything in his life" (Petry 87). When Lutie shows no interest in him, rather than stifling his desire, Jones allows his impulses to dictate his actions, which become more threatening and, because of his proximity and power as the superintendent, invasive.

Because Lutie rejects him, Jones cultivates a relationship with her son, Bub, to gain access to his mother. Initially, he gains the boy's trust by asking him to run errands, and eventually, he helps Bub build a shoeshine box, so he can make a little money to help his mother. However, the super's attempt to ingratiate himself into Lutie's life by connecting with her son backfires. She angrily disapproves of Bub working as a shoeshine, and she throws the box away. Although this attempt fails, Jones continues to manipulate Bub, and realizing that the boy is home alone one night, he seizes an opportunity to fulfill his "need" by entering Lutie's space without her permission. Jones goes to Lutie's apartment, telling himself he will "keep an eye on the child" until his mother gets home. He rationalizes his inappropriate behavior by thinking to himself, "It would be all right, . . . She might even come home while he was up there and she would be glad he had stayed with Bub. That was it. He would go up and keep Bub company while she was out" (Petry 101). Although initially

he claims honorable intentions, Jones elaborates, revealing his indecent motivation: "he would see how the place looked. He would see her bedroom" (Petry 101). After coercing eight-year-old Bub to let him into the apartment, Jones' behavior becomes more alarming. He tries to distract Bub and enter Lutie's bedroom, but those attempts fail, and the two begin a card game. While playing, Jones notices a lipstick on the coffee table. He stares at the lipstick, noticing every detail of the case, until "almost involuntarily he reached out without moving his chair and picked it up" (Petry 105). Jones describes his behavior as "almost involuntary." He shows no self-control, just as he fails to suppress his inappropriate desires and abusive treatment of women.

Once the lipstick is in his hand, Jones' deviant behavior intensifies. He "pulled the top off and looked at the red stick inside. It was rounded from use and the smoothness of the red had a grainy look from being rubbed over her mouth" (Petry 105). Despite Bub's presence, Jones begins to fantasize: "He wanted to put it against his lips. That's the way her mouth would smell and it would feel like this stuff, only warm. Holding it in his hand he got the smell from it very clearly . . . He raised the lipstick toward his mouth" (Petry 105). Jones' fixation on the thought of the lipstick touching Lutie's mouth is unsettling, even more so as he indulges in this sexual fantasy in front of her child. As Jones scrutinizes the lipstick, Bub becomes uncomfortable, and he "suddenly reached out and took it out of his hand, putting it in his pants pocket" (Petry 105). Despite this rebuke from an eight-year-old, Jones glares at Bub and internally chastises himself. He continues to fixate on the lipstick:

> It would be good to hold it in his hands at night before he went to sleep so that the sweet smell would saturate his nostrils. He could carry it in his pocket where he could touch it during the day and take it out and fondle it down in the furnace room.

> When he stood outside on the street, he wouldn't have to touch it, but he would know it was there lying deep in his pocket. He could almost feel it now—warm against him. (Petry 106)

The way Jones describes his desire to touch the lipstick, carry it, and feel it against his body reflects his desire to possess Lutie. Petry's deliberate choice to use the word "fondle" in this passage exemplifies the obscene nature of Jones' behavior. The lipstick becomes a phallic symbol as if Jones were fondling himself while thinking of Lutie. Jones understands that his possession of Lutie's lipstick would be inappropriate because he admits it must be a secret—he will only take it out "down in the furnace room"—a place that resembles the spaces where he first allowed his unhealthy thoughts and desires to escalate.

The indecent lipstick fantasy does not satisfy Jones' insatiable need to feel close to Lutie, so he sends Bub out for beer and cigarettes, giving him a few solitary moments in the apartment. While Bub is gone, Jones further invades Lutie's space and privacy. He enters her bedroom and notices the feminine smell from the talcum powder on her bureau. Jones remarks to himself, "She sprinkled this under her arms and between her legs–that's how she would smell when he got close to her" (Petry 107-108). Just as he felt the need to caress the lipstick and bring it to his lips, being alone in Lutie's bedroom becomes an opportunity to assault the young woman indirectly. As Jones makes his way around Lutie's space, he becomes preoccupied with sexual thoughts. He opens her closet and among her blouses finds, "the thin, white one . . . It had a low round neck and the fullness of the cloth in the front made a nest for her breasts to sit in" (Petry 108). He thinks of her wearing the blouse and pulls the shirt from the closet. Jones "crushed it violently between his hands squeezing the soft thin material tighter and tighter until it was a small ball in his hands" (Petry 108). This

savage display again demonstrates his desire for power over Lutie. Jones' behavior alludes to previous violent sexual encounters; while he wanted to caress the lipstick, he crushes the blouse. Although he attempts to smooth the shirt once his rage subsides, like the women who are traumatized by Jones' harassment and violence, the blouse remains wrinkled as he shoves it back into the closet. To Jones, Lutie's possessions represent the woman. Like the objects that he molests in her apartment, Jones wants to use Lutie to satisfy his whims, only to discard her, damaged, when finished.

In addition to physically invading Lutie's space and groping her belongings, Jones indulges more indecent fantasies while in her apartment. In the bathroom, he imagines "how Lutie would look with water from the shower running down over her. Or lying there in the tub, her warm brownness sharply outlined against the white of the tub . . . Perhaps he could hold her next to him while he patted her body dry with one of those white towels" (Petry 109). These thoughts further demonstrate Jones' penchant to objectify women as a means to satiate his sexual desires. Jones makes no effort to control his shockingly inappropriate behavior or to respect Lutie's privacy. After subjecting the reader to Jones' disturbing exploration of the apartment, the super hears Bub coming back upstairs, and he returns to the living room. Jones guzzles the beer that Bub returned with and leaves. On the way down to his apartment, he thinks, "It's got to be soon. He had to have her soon. He couldn't go on just looking at her. He'd crack wide open if he did" (Petry 110). Once again, Jones refuses to control his inappropriate desire. He enters her apartment, probes her belongings without her permission, and tells himself that he "must" have Lutie or something inside of him, out of his control, will break through. His desire to assert power over Lutie dictates his behavior, and she is unaware that she needs to protect herself from Jones' invasive and troubling conduct.

Crossing racial and economic boundaries, brazen objectification of and violence toward women are common in Patriarchal Surreality. The women in *Valentine* experience pervasive objectification and harassment, and like Lutie, who is conditioned to distrust her judgment, society teaches these women to tolerate objectification. Toward the end of the novel, in a chapter titled "Karla," an unnamed first person, plural "we" narrator tells Karla's story. Like so many women in Odessa, Karla got pregnant as a teen, and, despite her best efforts, "the pregnancy stuck" (Wetmore 275). After the baby is born, seventeen-year-old Karla starts working at a bar and restaurant, where the more experienced women teach her to navigate patriarchal society.

At times, the "we" narrator takes on the collective persona of the other women at the restaurant, teaching Karla how to survive in Odessa. The narrator preaches that women in Texas must always be prepared "with jumper cables and Fix-a-Flat in our trunks. We carry pistols and Mace in our purses" (Wetmore 270), self-defense against the threatening behavior from men in town. In addition to being self-sufficient, the women must also be vigilant. The narrator claims they walk to their cars together at the end of each night and ensure no one is left alone in the parking lot. The women teach Karla, "which men don't mean anything by it . . . and which men do . . . About the second group, we say never let them get you alone. Don't tell them where you live" (Wetmore 274). These lessons reveal that threats are pervasive, and women are aware that certain men would cause harm given the opportunity, but violence against women is so ingrained in society that they must tolerate it. When male acquaintances and friends, or even fathers, brothers, husbands, law enforcement, judges, and politicians, perpetrate violence against women, women cannot turn to those in power for help. Instead,

women in Odessa rely upon one another, prepare for trouble, and, if possible, avoid men known to become threatening or violent.

The "we" narrator reveals that many of the women in Odessa know Strickland, Gloria's rapist, as a man to avoid. After Karla begins waitressing, the women warn her to "watch out for that one–we point to Dale Strickland . . . getting drunk all by his lonesome–he's a pervert with a thing for brunettes" (Wetmore 274). Months after Strickland assaults Gloria, this warning rings true when Karla has an encounter with Strickland that echoes his interaction with the fourteen-year-old. One night after paying his tab, Strickland stops Karla and begins a conversation: "Hey there, Valentine. You look like you just lost your best friend . . . Smile, he tells her" (Wetmore 279). As he did when he abducted Gloria, Strickland calls Karla "Valentine." He pesters her, becoming increasingly agitated: "Why don't you smile? You got a piece of coal stuck up your ass?" (Wetmore 279). Karla insults the drunk man, and Strickland takes a swing at her. Before he can try to punch her again, some regulars drag him into the parking lot and beat him up. In instances like this, Strickland will be unwelcome in the bar for a couple of weeks, but eventually, he will return. The "we" narrator sardonically comments, "how nice it must be for Dale Strickland and his kind . . . to move through the world knowing everything will work out for them in the end" (Wetmore 279-280). Strickland treats Karla disrespectfully, and when she rejects him, he reacts violently, but the other men in the bar rebuff him only briefly, and there are no legal consequences for his behavior.

Despite an awareness of the danger men pose in Odessa, women, like Karla's role models at the restaurant, do not address the behavior; instead, society has taught each to live with the abuse, look the other way after violence, rape, or murder, and hope that by doing so, she will survive. The women in Odessa experience societal gaslighting that teaches them to

leave well enough alone to survive. This passive acceptance of "the way things are," contributes to a society that eventually facilitates Gloria's rape and Strickland's acquittal. The media and the town stereotype Gloria as overtly sexual and promiscuous. Many participate in victim blaming, stating that the attack must have been her fault because of her choices or the way she dressed. These baseless opinions are the product of prejudice and life-long experiences that teach women that surviving violent men is their responsibility. Just as Jones refuses to take responsibility for his actions, society in Odessa expects women to look after themselves and gives men a pass for disrespectful and violent behavior, an attitude typical in the U.S. In her essay, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," Kimberlé Crenshaw writes that "battering and rape . . . are now largely recognized as part of a broad-scale system of domination that affects women as a class" (Crenshaw 357). Men deploy violence and rape to exert control over women, and both Gloria, the intersectionally-oppressed daughter of a Mexican immigrant, and the white women in Odessa navigate a complicated system of domination, ranging from extreme violence to everyday manipulation and coercion. Both Gloria and the white women are victims of men in Odessa. However, while society forces Gloria to leave Odessa after her attack because of its impact on her reputation, some white women continue to perpetuate misogynistic Patriarchal Surreality. The narrator admits,

> To speak up would require courage that we cannot even begin to imagine.
>
> Are we guilty? We are guilty as sin, guilty as the day is long . . . Come sit down at the bar and take a long look around at all of us unrepentant sinners–con artists and liars and dreamers, bigots and grifters and murderers. (Wetmore 281)

Although “we” admits that it comes at a cost for the white women, the narrator implies that survival is worth the price paid by those who suffer at the hands of men and those who helplessly stand by. Grateful that they have “made it,” these women pass down the lessons and advice that ensured their survival. They play a part in widespread societal gaslighting and help to perpetuate patriarchal and prejudiced values.

Like Lutie and the women in *Valentine*, Kya in *Where the Crawdads Sing* experiences objectification that leads to violence. Whether Chase has genuine feelings for Kya or not, she refuses to see him after he marries Pearl Stone, but he continues to pursue Kya, and her rejection fuels Chase’s desire. Kya actively avoids Chase until he finds her on a secluded beach and, despite being a newlywed, tries to force himself on her. Chase is excited by Kya’s resistance, telling her, “There’s my lynx. Wilder than ever . . . I know ya want me” (Owens 264). Kya tries to escape, but he becomes more violent, pushing her down onto the dirt, and “Kneeling, he jammed his knee in her stomach, knocking the breath from her, as he unzipped his jeans and pulled them down . . . Suddenly he slugged her face with his right fist. A sick popping sound rang out inside her head. Her neck snapped back, and her body was thrown backward onto the ground” (Owens 265). Despite the haze and pain, Kya continues to fight, but Chase is undeterred. After flipping her over onto her stomach, he rips off her shorts and underwear and “Shoved her throbbing face into the dirt, then reached under her belly and pulled her pelvis up to him as he knelt behind” (Owens 265). He tells Kya, “I’m not lettin’ ya go this time. Like it or not, you’re mine” (Owens 265). In Chase’s mind, Kya is exotic, and he is attracted to her “untamed” side, as if she is an animal that he could possess.

Kya fights Chase and escapes without being raped. Slowly, her physical wounds heal, the swelling lessons around her eye, and the bruises begin to fade; however, the

psychological effects persist. Kya's feelings realistically portray the reactions of many women after they experience sexual assault. Like Gloria, Kya wrestles with guilt, believing that "She'd brought this on herself. Consorting unchaperoned" (Owens 273). During their relationship, Kya acknowledged, "She didn't know exactly how she felt about Chase, but she was no longer lonely. That seemed enough" (Owens 185). Spending time with Chase helped ease Kya's feelings of isolation, but she never loved him. She admits, "A natural wanting had led her unmarried to a cheap motel" (Owens 237) on the night that she first had sex with Chase. Following the attempted rape, patriarchal society's expectation that women remain chaste and "pure" until marriage fuels Kya's guilt, and even though Chase forced himself on her, Kya takes responsibility while his actions go without reprimand. In Kya's mind, the attack is a punishment for her choice to give in to her desire for human connection.

Lutie, the women in Odessa, and Kya rationalize objectification to survive, while Amy in Flynn's *Gone Girl* purposely victimizes herself and submits to society's misogyny as a means to facilitate her revenge plan. After Amy and Nick's relationship falls apart, she realizes that her physical appearance, which served as the canvas for her "Cool Girl" persona, will also play a crucial role in Nick's undoing. Amy's idolization by the media, investigators, and the public becomes a form of broader social objectification that is common, particularly for white women, in American society. Real Amy reveals that as she conceived her plan, she was aware of stereotypes in the American media and social landscape. Inherent prejudices and "Missing White Woman Syndrome" provide avenues for Amy to exploit the media and the public in her campaign to condemn Nick. According to NPR's Gene Demby, "Missing White Woman Syndrome" is "a phrase coined by Gwen Ifill . . . It refers to the mainstream media's seeming fascination with covering missing or endangered white women—like Laci

Peterson or Natalee Holloway—and its seeming disinterest in cases involving missing people of color" (Demby). Amy is aware of this fault in mainstream American media and exploits it to her advantage. After she disappears, the investigation and the media's coverage occur as Amy expected.

News coverage begins with a press conference on the day after Amy's disappearance, and immediately, the media emphasizes Amy's appearance. Police tell Nick that "the main point [of the press conference] . . . is just to get people looking for Amy and knowing she has a family who loves her and wants her back" (Flynn 84-85). Despite this insistence that the goal is to humanize Amy by way of her relationships with family and friends, a striking photograph of Amy takes center stage: "the PR woman placed a cardboard poster on a nearby easel, . . . it was a blown-up photo of Amy at her most stunning, that face that made you keep double-checking: *She can't be that good-looking, can she?*" (Flynn 86). The centering of Amy's blonde, thin, white, stereotypically beautiful appearance appeals to the American psyche that, according to Eugene Robinson of *The Washington Post,* loves a story of a "damsel in distress." He explains that to garner the media and the public's attention, "A damsel must be white. This requirement is nonnegotiable. It helps if her frame is of dimensions that breathless cable television reporters can credibly describe as 'petite,' and it also helps if she's the kind of woman who wouldn't really mind being called 'petite,' a woman with a good deal of princess in her personality. She must be attractive—also nonnegotiable. Her economic status should be middle class or higher" (Robinson). Amy fits these criteria and more; she also has cult status as the inspiration for her parents' *Amazing Amy* book series.

The press conference regarding Amy's disappearance quickly gains the attention of the local news, and their coverage similarly emphasizes Amy's appearance. Amy's mother, Marybeth, watches the newscast and comments, "Perfect photo, . . . People will see it and really know what Amy looks like" (Flynn 104). Marybeth's statement implies that this photo best depicts Amy's appearance, but Nick describes the photo as "a head shot from Amy's brief fling with acting—beautiful but unsettling" (Flynn 104) because of its seeming perfection. He believes sharing candid photos of Amy would help the investigation, but law enforcement, the press, and even Marybeth implicitly understand that showing Amy in a less-than-perfect photo might erode the public's interest in her case. Amy's stereotypically beautiful appearance and her cult status immediately cement her position in the hearts of the media and the public.

Not only does Amy's story gain the attention of the local and regional news, but her disappearance takes the national stage after garnering attention from *The Ellen Abbott Show.* Amy claims that Ellen Abbott, a Nancy Grace-type television journalist, "is part of my plan too. The biggest cable crime-news show in the country" (Flynn 329). According to Amy, Abbott is "protective and maternal . . . about all the missing women on her show, . . . [and] rabid-dog vicious . . . once she seizes on a suspect, usually the husband. She is America's voice of female righteousness" (Flynn 329). Amy knows Ellen Abbott will play a pivotal role in turning the public against Nick, and she "can't see how she could resist. I am pretty, Nick is pretty, and I have the *Amazing Amy* hook" (Flynn 329). Amy achieves the pinnacle of "Missing White Woman" objectification when the news of her "pregnancy" is revealed and secures Abbott's coverage. As she assumed, "the key to big-time coverage, round-the-clock, frantic, bloodlust never-ending *Ellen Abbott* coverage, would be the pregnancy. Amazing

Amy is tempting as is. Amazing Amy knocked up is irresistible" (Flynn 346). According to Amy, the fake pregnancy is essential to garnering attention and pity from the media and the public. She explains, "Americans like what is easy, and it's easy to like pregnant women– they're like ducklings or bunnies or dogs" (Flynn 346). As Amy anticipated, her disappearance becomes the most prominent headline on Abbott's television news show. When she makes her "debut!" (Flynn 330) on the show, "I know from the second Ellen shows up, glowering like Elvis, that this is going to be good" (Flynn 330). Like the press conference, Abbott focuses on physical appearances. The segment includes "A few gorgeous photos of me, [and] a still shot of Nick with his insane *love me!* grin from the first press conference" (Flynn 330). Abbott's segment reveals that "There has been a fruitless multi-site search for 'the beautiful young woman with everything going for her'" (Flynn 330). Abbott zeros in on Nick, who, according to Amy, has "fucked himself already. Taking candid photos with a townie during a search for me. This is clearly what hooked Ellen, because she is *pissed*" (Flynn 330). The revelation of Amy's pregnancy cements the public and Abbott's vitriol, and "the hatred against Nick has ballooned" (Flynn 346). Amy accurately assumed how the media would manipulate public opinion, pressure detectives to fixate on Nick as the main suspect, and ensure swift prosecution and condemnation. Amy buys into Patriarchal Surreality and plans for the misogyny of the media, investigators, and the public to lead to her objectification. She is born with the right skin color and into the right family, maintains her physical appearance, and adds in a pregnancy to ensure that she will cement her place as the darling and doomed "Missing White Woman" that American society reveres.

Isolation

The systematic isolation of women is another manifestation of Patriarchal Surreality. While children are often a source of joy, for some women, pregnancy and motherhood magnify the impact of Patriarchal Surreality. Lutie feels isolated after her marriage has ended, and being a black woman exacerbates her challenges. She experiences prejudice based on both her gender and race. Lutie is determined to do what is best for her son, so she endures Jones' harassment, works tirelessly, and attends night classes, all while trying to be a loving mother. She struggles financially and receives no support from Bub's father, further exacerbating her hardship. Society often isolates women as Lutie is isolated. Although Corrine Shepard's husband, Potter, grants her some control over her future after the birth of their daughter, society expects women in Wetmore's *Valentine* to relinquish their freedom and aspirations after the birth of a child. Ginny Pierce's narrative depicts this stark reality. At fifteen, Ginny drops out of high school after becoming pregnant. As she waits to be picked up from school on her last day, "She tried to imagine what her grandmother was going to say about this, Ginny making the same mistake as the daughter she had lost to a car accident a decade earlier" (Wetmore 87). Ginny's mother also got pregnant when she was a teen, a common occurrence in Odessa. Knowing that this pregnancy has irrevocably changed her life, Ginny associates her teen pregnancy with her mother's death, and as she struggles emotionally after the birth of her daughter, the association between pregnancy and death becomes more troubling.

After Debra Ann is born, Ginny experiences feelings of depression and helplessness that may have led to suicidal thoughts. The pregnancy marks the end of her education and the beginning of a lifetime in service to her family. Like Corrine, Ginny struggles to make sense

of her conflicting emotions: she "loves her daughter, but she feels like she's sitting in the bottom of a rain barrel, and there's a steady drizzle filling it up" (Wetmore 88). In addition to feelings of isolation, confinement, and helplessness, Ginny experiences harassment and objectification in Odessa's misogynistic society: "the men on the street who holler every time she steps out of her car to gas up, or the unceasing wind and relentless stench of natural gas and crude oil, . . . the loneliness that is briefly staved off, sometimes, when Jim comes home from work, or Debra Ann climbs into her lap" (Wetmore 88). Feeling as if her life is suffocating her, Ginny takes money from her bank account, shared with her husband, and "drives out of West Texas as if her life depends on it" (Wetmore 89), abandoning Debra Ann with her father. As she claims to run "as if her life depends on it," it is possible that Ginny contemplated suicide, which raises questions about her mother's tragic death. Postpartum depression is common among women, and at times, the disorder can become so severe that it leads to thoughts of self-harm or child-harm. While presumed "accidental," when considered alongside her daughter's narrative of depression, one begins to wonder if Ginny's mother had a similar experience after her daughter was born. Perhaps the story of Ginny's mother's death in a car accident excludes details. Perhaps, just as both she and her daughter got pregnant when they were teens, they both may have experienced similar struggles with mental illness. Unfortunately, motherhood may have cost Ginny's mother her life.

Mary Rose's narrative supports the claim that pregnancy and motherhood have a dark side that leads to costly choices. She reveals that between Aimee's birth and that of her most recent child, there was another pregnancy she kept secret from Robert. She was ten weeks along when she discovered she was pregnant, and despite her husband's desire for another baby, "just the thought . . . made me want to hang myself in the barn" (Wetmore 106). Like

Ginny, Mary Rose draws connections between pregnancy and suicide, claiming she would rather die than endure the consequences of another pregnancy. She describes feeling detached from her husband, who spends most of his time working and living away from his family, while Mary Rose takes care of the children. Like Ginny, Mary Rose dropped out of high school with her first pregnancy, and she explains, "I'd been thinking about trying to get my GED, maybe take some classes at Odessa College" (Wetmore 106). Another baby would require that Mary Rose again put her education on hold. Considering these consequences, she prioritizes herself and terminates the pregnancy, a responsibility that she hides from her husband and shoulders alone. Making the excuse that she is taking Aimee on a road trip, Mary Rose drives four-hundred-and-thirty-seven miles to Albuquerque, New Mexico– leaving Texas for only the second time. With the trip to the abortion clinic, Mary Rose attempts to preserve the last shreds of her identity. The choice to have an abortion rather than go through with the pregnancy illustrates the desperate situation in which women sometimes find themselves. She is willing to make a difficult, life-altering decision and endure the lasting pain that will come with this choice. However, Mary Rose admits, "Four months later I was pregnant again, and this time, hardly believing my own stupidity, I decided to have the baby" (Wetmore 108). Although she is unsatisfied with a life solely devoted to caring for her husband and children, Mary Rose will continue to sacrifice her desires for theirs. It will be nearly impossible for her to pursue her independence, education, or career, and yet, Mary Rose finds herself unable to fathom the alternative: a second abortion.

Not only are the lives of mothers shaped by Patriarchal Surreality, but young women also experience its consequences. While Ginny's narrative helps to reveal dark truths about the sacrifices of pregnant women and mothers in West Texas, the perspectives of those left

behind in Odessa, including Debra Ann, serve to further illuminate this suffocating reality. When she abandons her family, Ginny leaves Debra Ann to her own devices. Her father works long hours in the oil field, and despite having a house, Debra Ann lacks a "home." She takes on the bulk of the household responsibilities at nine years old, doing her best to care for herself and her father. Although Debra Ann is young, she is acquainted with the pain and loss experienced by most women in Odessa. She struggles to understand why her mother would choose to leave her family behind, and she experiences ongoing uncertainty because she does not know if Ginny is coming back. Debra Ann is unable to make sense of her mother's absence, and her pain is compounded by a lack of closure: "People get old and die . . . Men die all the time . . . Women are killed . . . When people die there is proof and protocol" (Wetmore 81); however, "Ginny Pierce is not dead. She left–left town, left a note and most of her clothes, left Debra Ann and her daddy" (Wetmore 81). Debra Ann exists in limbo, unable to move forward with her life while she waits for her mother to return. She tries to maintain a tough appearance, bragging to Mary Rose's daughter, Aimee, that she has not bathed properly since June. She explains, it is "the best thing about not having her mother around" (Wetmore 199). She claims to see the bright side and distracts herself, but beneath the bravado, Debra Ann struggles with uncertainty and loss.

Unsupervised and lonely, Debra Ann befriends a homeless veteran, Jesse, after her mother leaves. She spends a lot of her summer with Jesse, and despite their growing bond, she refuses to discuss the pain caused by her mother's abandonment. When a postcard arrives from Ginny, the postmark, Reno, contradicts the location depicted in the card's image. Jesse points out the discrepancy, and Debra Ann's tough exterior cracks. She says, "I know it, . . . I don't have any idea where in the hell my mother is, . . . she plucks the card out of her friend's

hand, takes off running up the steep embankment without saying goodbye. She is rushing to leave him behind, to get somewhere private, where nobody can see her grief" (Wetmore 197). Debra Ann's reaction to Jesse's comment not only confirms that she has yet to find peace with her mother's departure but also reveals that she experiences the same pressures that society places on adult women. Although she is not yet ten years old, Debra Ann believes she must bear the burden of her pain alone. Society has taught her to avoid being emotional and to hide her feelings. Embarrassed by her sadness, confusion, and pain, Debra Ann runs away before beginning to cry. Even in the presence of her closest friends, Debra Ann attempts to hide the pain she experiences.

Debra Ann is not alone in her feelings of loss and isolation. When she is not busy with Aimee or Jesse, she occupies herself by trying to spend time with Corrine. Before he died, she often spent time with Potter, Corrine's husband who enjoyed her company, but Corrine considers the girl a nuisance. Debra Ann bangs on the front door when Corrine is busy or sleeping, and when Corrine is nowhere to be found, Debra Ann lets herself into the garage to explore and take what she wants. However, one day when she enters the garage, Debra Ann finds "Mrs. Shepard sitting in Mr. Potter's old truck with the motor running" (Wetmore 75) and the garage door closed. Although Debra Ann does not understand Corrine's actions, this suicide attempt is evidence that after her husband's death, Corrine struggles with feelings of abandonment and isolation that are similar to Debra Ann's after her mother leaves. Corrine admits that frequently she begins this process in Potter's truck, but she stops before things go too far. Debra Ann witnesses the depths of Corrine's depression but does not recognize it as such. Like Debra Ann, Corrine hides the pain and loneliness that result from her husband's death. She feels betrayed by his choice to commit suicide after a

cancer diagnosis, and as an outsider in Odessa, she is somewhat isolated in her home. Because women in Odessa tend to hide their painful emotions, they find themselves further isolated despite the prevalence of these feelings among women in the community.

While painful emotions are often a source of isolation for women in Odessa, opinions that differ from the majority in the town or those that contradict traditional patriarchal values often lead to further struggles. As Mary Rose begins to share her perspective regarding Strickland's guilt in Gloria' rape, she is further isolated and begins to question her long-held opinions of the town, her family, friends, and even her husband. Gloria opens Mary Rose's eyes, and she begins challenging the racism of her family and friends. However, just as being opinionated creates tension in her marriage, speaking up about a controversial opinion leads many of the popular and powerful individuals in Odessa, including her husband, to turn on Mary Rose. Like the challenges of the physical landscape, generational isolation, exclusion, and loss are a way of life for the women of West Texas and beyond.

Prejudice

Examples from *Valentine* indicate how racism passes from generation to generation. As a teacher, Corrine witnessed and attempted to break this cycle in her classroom. Previous generations pass down prejudice that Corrine calls "poison" (Wetmore 252). Corrine has seen this poison spread in her students, their parents, her neighbors, family, and friends. She explains, "She has watched her own kith and kin pour this poison into their best glassware, spoon it onto plates and bowls their ancestors hauled in wagons from Georgia and Alabama" (Wetmore 252). When jobs dried up or money was scarce, this poison fueled a need for a scapegoat, and for the people of Odessa, the blame fell on outsiders, usually those with darker skin. She explains, "they sure can point a finger at somebody else" (Wetmore 252).

Scapegoating becomes an excuse for acts of violence, and the people of Odessa rationalize and excuse their behavior.

Outside the classroom, Corrine encounters this poison in her neighbors, family, and friends, including Debra Ann, who lacks a mother's guidance and serves as an example of a child who has already begun to imitate the racist behavior of the adults around her. While attempting to make conversation with Corrine, Debra Ann sees a group of men moving furniture into a house across the street. Debra Ann asks Corrine, "Are those Mexicans moving *here*? . . . Some people ain't going to like that one bit . . . This is *our* street" (Wetmore 48). Just as she attempted to break the cycle of generational racism when she was a teacher, Corrine rebukes Debra Ann, saying, "You stop that. Those men have as much right to be here as you and me" (Wetmore 48). Knowing that Debra Ann admired Potter, Corrine invokes her late husband to emphasize her point. She asks Debra Ann: "What do you think Mr. Shepard would think if he heard you talking like that?" (Wetmore 48). Corrine will not tolerate racism from Debra Ann, and she tries to override Odessa's negative influence, but the girl's comment confirms that racism is pervasive, and very few townsfolk are willing to denounce hateful or disrespectful behavior.

While Corrine challenges Odessa's racist values, for most of her life, Mary Rose abides this intolerance. Before her encounter with Glory, Mary Rose chooses not to confront injustice directly, but she does attempt to shield her daughter, Aimee, from inherited prejudice. One morning, the two hear a pastor giving a "sermon [on the radio] about the evils of desegregation, which he likened to locking a cow, a mountain lion, and a possum in the same barn together, then being surprised when somebody gets eaten" (Wetmore 14). When the pastor finishes the story, Aimee asks for an explanation of the parable. Mary Rose replies,

"Nothing you need to know about, little girl" (Wetmore 14), sparing her daughter from the pastor's intolerance. While attempting to shield her daughter is honorable, Mary Rose chooses, or refuses, to address the hate embedded in the religious message. Mary Rose knows that it is dangerous to challenge the status quo, even in her own home. However, circumstances will force Aimee to confront the consequences of pervasive racism much sooner than Mary Rose expects because the same day they hear the pastor's racist sermon, Glory knocks on the front door of the farmhouse for help.

Mary Rose finds Glory battered and bleeding on her front porch, and she becomes determined to challenge Odessa's pathological prejudice. Until witnessing Glory's pain and imagining that her daughter could have just as easily been Strickland's victim, Mary Rose is unable to comprehend the dangers of racism or empathize with victims of prejudice. It was not until she returned from her honeymoon at seventeen, her first trip beyond the Texas state border, that she noticed the gassy, rotting smell that perpetually lingers in Odessa. Like pervasive racism that is ingrained in Patriarchal Surreality, "You never smell it when you grow up here" (Wetmore 104). After Mary Rose finds Glory on her front porch, an example of the suffering that can result from intolerance and apathy, she cannot ignore or accept racism and misogyny. Mary Rose chooses to take on the system by testifying against Strickland. However, as more people in the town become aware of Mary Rose's intention to speak out against Glory's rapist, she also becomes a target of hateful behavior. Regularly, Mary Rose receives threatening calls in the middle of the night, demanding, "You going to stand up for that spic? You going to take her word over his?" (Wetmore 96). These threats are meant to scare Mary Rose into silence, but by revealing the depths of Odessa's prejudice, they cement her conviction to help bring Strickland to justice. In the eyes of the town, Mary

Rose has betrayed a way of life. The phone calls emphasize her betrayal, describing her as "a liar and a traitor. They know where I live. I am ruining that boy's life because a girl didn't get her way. I am testifying against one of our boys on behalf of a slut" (Wetmore 96). In addition to shaming Glory and insulting Mary Rose, some of the phone calls are violent and threatening: "Know what happens to race traitors, Mary Rose? Maybe I'll drive over there and rape you myself, you bitch" (Wetmore 219). The calls, rife with racism and misogyny, are horrifying on their own; however, Mary Rose's reaction is equally disturbing. Like the smell that pervades Odessa, she reveals, "I have been hearing this language my whole life without ever giving it much thought" (Wetmore 96). Mary Rose grew up surrounded by racism, and she has done little to oppose these attitudes, but Glory brings hate and violence to Mary Rose's doorstep. She believes, "Gloria could be any of our girls" (Wetmore 98). After this change of heart, the hateful language and violence described in the phone calls, "now it rankles" (Wetmore 96); she can no longer stand by passively. Glory serves as a brutal wake-up call that forces Mary Rose to acknowledge the systemic prejudice of Patriarchal Surreality.

Mary Rose's altered perspective further isolates her from most of the other people in Odessa, who downplay and rationalize the rape. She begins openly challenging prejudice, and as a result, many reject Mary Rose as discussion of the attack intensifies. Some white citizens stand up for Glory and call for a fair trial, but most blame the young Mexican girl, citing her race as evidence that she must have provoked the attack[9]. The newspaper publishes opinions that defend Strickland and criticize Glory, including a bigoted letter to the editor that engages in victim blaming and undermines Glory's narrative of events. In the letter, "an upstanding citizen reminded all of us that the alleged victim was a fourteen-year-old Mexican

girl who had been hanging around the drive-in by herself on Saturday night. Witnesses swore the girl had climbed willingly into that boy's truck. Nobody held a gun to her head. We ought to think about that . . . before we ruin a boy's life" (Wetmore 111). This description, conspicuously including Glory's ethnicity, implies that because she got into Strickland's car willingly, either her story of rape must be a lie or, perhaps, if it did happen, she should have expected it. The letter's message echoes the sentiment in Strickland's words that haunt Glory in a recurring dream: "Time to pony up, Gloria, he says, time to pay for all my beer you drank, all this gas I used to get us here" (Wetmore 136). Both the letter to the editor and Strickland's demand imply that Glory is responsible for what happened to her.

In addition to publishing biased opinions, the newspaper also publishes Glory's school photo, further agitating townsfolk. After Potter's death, Corrine spends most nights alone in a bar, where one evening, she overhears a conversation between men about "two competing stories, a textbook case of he said, she said[10]" (Wetmore 41). One of the men recalls Glory's picture: "I saw that little Mexican gal's picture in the newspaper . . . and she didn't look fourteen" (Wetmore 41). Corrine and Potter were disturbed when the paper printed Glory's school photo. She remembers telling him, "there ought to be a law against putting that girl's name and picture in the local paper–a minor, for God's sake" (Wetmore 42). Initially in the bar, Corrine keeps her opinions to herself. However, she refuses to stay quiet as the men begin to discuss prejudiced stereotypes: "That's how they are, . . . they mature faster than other girls. The men laughed. Yes, sir! A *lot* faster" (Wetmore 42). Corrine downs her drink and turns to the men, rebuking them: "That girl is fourteen years old, you sons of bitches. You gentlemen have a thing for children?" (Wetmore 43). Corrine thinks, "Fourteen years old. As if there might have been some moral ambiguity . . . if Gloria

Ramírez had been sixteen, or white" (Wetmore 43). Corrine's life experiences led her to question and challenge the pervasive prejudice ingrained in society, and while she attempted to impede the spread of these values in her classroom and continues to make small gestures in opposition, in the bar that night, Corrine must accept that many factors, including the news media, perpetuate stereotypes and hate.

The newspaper's treatment of and biased attitude toward the victim in Glory's case is typical. In fact, according to Crenshaw, often, "patterns of othering nonwhite women are apparent in journalistic accounts of domestic violence" (Crenshaw 364). Crenshaw cites an episode of *48 Hours* that introduces seven women who had been victims of domestic abuse. According to Crenshaw, most of these women are white, and the show presented their experiences in ways that elicit empathy from the audience. However, she notes that the "seventh victim, the only nonwhite one, never came into focus. She was literally unrecognizable throughout the segment, first introduced by photographs showing her face badly beaten and later shown with her face electronically altered in a videotape of a hearing at which she was forced to testify" (Crenshaw 364). Although Glory's identity is very clearly depicted in the newspaper when they choose to publish her school picture, she is analogously victimized. Her identity is used as a tool to condemn her choices. Crenshaw explains, "The overall point of the segment 'featuring' this woman was that battering might not escalate into homicide if battered women would only cooperate with prosecutors . . . the program diminished this woman, communicating, however subtly, that she was responsible for her own victimization" (Crenshaw 364). In the same way that *48 Hours* blamed this particular victim, the newspaper did not publish Glory's photo to humanize her; on the contrary, they provided her name along with the photo that revealed the color of her skin, providing citizens

with an individual to stereotype and scapegoat. The egregious choice to publish a minor's identity in a small-town newspaper deprives Glory of anonymity that might preserve her opportunity to move on in Odessa after the attack. Glory's reputation is in tatters, and she refuses to testify against Strickland, serving to further the town's suspicions about her account of the attack.

By depicting fictional examples of the manifestations of Patriarchal Surreality, including gender expectations, sexual commodification, isolation, and prejudice, popular fiction can help women access the perspective necessary to recognize the biased society in which they reside. According to Register, Fry, Hogeland, and O'Reilly, this painful process, the descent into the Pit and the resulting awareness of structural oppression is the first step that paves the way for resistance to patriarchy and prejudiced societal structures.

CHAPTER FOUR

COLLECTING AND CONSTRUCTING

While "*Collecting and Constructing*," "we examine women's experience through women's eyes and from a feminist perspective-that is, with a consciousness of oppression and the need for change understood." (Register 9)

Whether experienced as a "click!" or by way of a descent into Register's Pit, white women, women of color, and other marginalized women in the U.S. have varied experiences as they begin to recognize and confront patriarchal and prejudiced societal structures. For some women, recognizing oppression becomes an opportunity for personal growth, while for others, the epiphany is a rupture that results in destructive, desperate, and even violent resistance. These dramatic reactions can elucidate an equally severe reaction from society, and women who resist the confines of Patriarchal Surreality sometimes experience backlash, being negatively labeled as nonconformist, unscrupulous, sinful, or *feminist*. Women who go further, who violently or combatively resist patriarchal structures, sometimes find themselves facing legal consequences. However, the justice system often overlooks societal structures and circumstances that contributed to a woman's violent resistance and, in this way, serves Patriarchal Surreality by relegating rebellious women to even further margins, disregarding their experiences and silencing their voices.

By providing a comprehensive look into the lives of its women characters, popular fiction allows readers to better understand the motives behind their actions. In contrast, the

justice system can fail to explore the nuances that contribute to a woman being labeled and charged as a criminal. In this way, fiction becomes a powerful tool to truly understand the impact that patriarchal and prejudiced societal structures can have on the lives and actions of women. In her book, *Neither Angels nor Demons: Women, Crime, and Victimization*, Kathleen J. Ferraro explores "victim" and "offender," "categories used within the law, social science and public discourse to describe social experience with a moral dimension" (Ferraro 1). She contends that one who is labeled a "victim" is often seen as entirely innocent, while those labeled as "criminal" are considered as wholly bad. Although anecdotally, many individuals recognize that a distinct victim/criminal dichotomy is false, "scholars have only recently begun to focus on the links between victimization and offending" (Ferraro 3). Legal and political discourse and "the language of domestic violence and crime excludes the experiences of women who fall outside the boundaries of the categories of victim/offender, the battered woman, self and other" (Ferraro 8). Despite the shortcomings of the U.S. judicial system, Ferrero, emulating the speak-outs and consciousness-raising groups of second wave feminism, gives women offenders the opportunity to share their experiences in one-on-one interviews, her attempt to better understand the circumstances that ultimately resulted in violent or criminal behavior. The transcripts of these interviews can, at times, be emotional, disturbing, or convoluted as a woman tries to make sense of her choices, but the act of telling the story in her own words provides an opportunity to explain her circumstances and grants the woman ownership over her narrative.

When women break with traditional societal expectations violently or criminally, law enforcement, the media, and the judicial system often pursue over-simplified answers that provide a demanding public with the illusion of truth, justice, and retribution. However,

Ferraro explains that the stories she recounts "and the lives they speak of are not clean: they are complicated and confusing" (Ferraro 7). Each individual's experience is unique and complicated, requiring careful attention and consideration, necessities that are often systematically unavailable to women, especially marginalized women and women of color. Ferraro's interviews and her accompanying analysis explore the complicated lives of women in the U.S. and document various ways women react after recognizing society's oppression; popular fiction provides a similar perspective that can depict the contradictory and nuanced reality of women's lives. Fictional accounts of women who break with Patriarchal Surreality can realistically depict the lives of women in the U.S. Unlike the one-dimensional and sometimes stereotypical depictions of women by law enforcement, the judicial system, or the media, fictional narratives can paint a more comprehensive portrait, cultivating greater empathy and understanding from a reader.

In "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," Kimberlé Crenshaw writes, "The violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class" (Crenshaw 357). One cannot overstate the truth in Crenshaw's claim; however, the various dimensions of a woman's identity and her proximity to power and privilege influence violence committed by women and the way such violence is perceived by society. These novels demonstrate that often, the desire to survive, protect themselves, or protect a child or loved one drives women to act violently. However, while women of color might perpetrate acts of violence with motives similar to those of white women, the outcomes following such acts can be very different. These novels demonstrate that white women often retain control of the narratives that unfold following a violent act, while society claims ownership and shapes the narratives

of women of color. As a result of this discrepancy, society reacts differently to acts of violence perpetrated by women of color. The narrative of these acts and the reaction to that narrative serve as a measure of the intersectionality of a woman's identity and her access to power.

As Register explains, women can be overwhelmed by the emotions that arise in the Pit as they catalog examples of injustices and abuse experienced by women in the U.S. However, she believes that exploring examples of other women who have experienced the same realization demonstrates that there is a possibility of a path forward. In *The Street*, *Gone Girl*, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, and *Valentine*, readers encounter examples of the various ways that women reckon with the reality beneath Patriarchal Surreality. Women who recognize Patriarchal Surreality gain the ability to scrutinize and, perhaps, revise their interactions with this socially constructed facade. However, many women, like those depicted in Ginny's grandmother's stories who were willing to sacrifice their lives on the Frontier to be in the service of men, choose or have no option but to remain within society's confines despite its limitations and the toll that it takes on their physical and mental well-being. Often women who experience intersectional prejudice and do not have access to power do not have the option to resist safely. These women realize their choices are limited and their realities dictated by those in power, and their best option is to participate in the system that oppresses American women and people of color.

Glory

Gloria's teenage naivety is stripped away on the night that Dale Strickland drives her to the oil field and brutally rapes her, exposing a misogynistic reality shrouded by Patriarchal Surreality. The rape signals Gloria's descent into the Pit, where she must grapple with

feelings of guilt and shame exacerbated by Odessa's reaction to her attack, the societal structures that facilitated the rape, and the struggle to redefine herself and her place in society. Whereas before the attack, Gloria's biggest concerns were getting caught skipping school and disagreeing with her mother about the importance of her education, the rape forces her and her family to reckon with the patriarchy and prejudice that serve as the foundation for power structures in Odessa. While Gloria physically recovers from her injuries, she wrestles with reconstructing and redefining her shattered identity, and Gloria's story takes on a life of its own, becoming a local legend, a warning to younger generations of women about how not to behave. Society largely abandons Gloria, who is left to do the work of recovery without support, and she realizes that she will need to leave Odessa to escape her damaged reputation.

Gloria begins to grapple with her new reality immediately, even as she makes her way away from Strickland's truck, tripping on brush, cutting her feet on rocks, leaving bloody footprints, and silencing herself so as not to wake her rapist. She grapples with the effects of the violent rape on her sense of identity. During this trek, Gloria takes a significant step to reclaim her sense of self by giving up the name that Strickland claimed and that will soon be co-opted by the rest of the town. She vows that "she will never again call herself by the name she was given, . . . From now on, she will call herself Glory. A small difference, but right now it feels like the world" (Wetmore 8). Glory is no longer the young woman who she was before. She redefines herself with a new name, relinquishing "Gloria," who will always serve as a reminder of the rape. Later in the novel, memories flood back when someone makes the mistake of using Glory's given name. Her uncle questions why she no longer wants to be called Gloria, and although she refuses to admit it out loud, Glory thinks,

"Because every time I hear it . . . I hear his voice" (Wetmore 131). Every time she hears "Gloria," she is reminded of Strickland's invitation into his car and the way he spit her name venomously during the attack. Gloria chooses a new name as an anchor for her new identity and a means to begin to let go and distance herself from the memory. Although Gloria is gone and her life can never be the same, Glory perseveres.

After managing to get away from her rapist, the immediate effects of the attack are evident because she is unable to speak, and even as time passes, Glory struggles to claim her story as her own. As she fought against Strickland, Gloria used her voice to protest and to scream for help, but despite these attempts, her voice was stripped of its power by Strickland's overwhelming strength and the isolation of the oil field. Later in the novel, Glory reveals that since the attack, she cannot stand to listen to music. She explains, "Out there in the oil patch, he played his music loud, . . . And why wouldn't he play the music loud? Who was out there to hear?" (Wetmore 131). This memory reveals Strickland's premeditation. He purposely chose to take Gloria into an isolated area where there was no chance of getting caught or opportunity for someone to hear her. Glory remembers him telling her, "Nobody is coming to help you, . . . and he was right" (Wetmore 131). Strickland's loud music and his ominous reminders strip power from Gloria's voice; no matter how much she might scream or cry for help, no one will hear. On the morning after the rape, Glory must be as quiet as possible to get safely away from Strickland, and, finally, she realizes that she is out of earshot, so she tries to use her voice. Glory strains: "For the first time in hours, she means to say something out loud. She struggles to find some words, but the best she can manage is a small cry. The sound comes forth briefly, and pierces the quiet and disappears" (Wetmore 9). Glory wants to say something, perhaps to confirm that

she is still alive or to assert herself, but when she attempts to use her voice, the sound is "small" and it "disappears" (Wetmore 9), evidence of the lasting damage Strickland has caused. It will be months before Glory can speak about what happened in the oil field. Despite possessing the strength to lift herself from the dirt, to reclaim her physical body, and to choose a new name, Strickland silenced Glory's voice during his attack, and she struggles to find it again. Her "small" cry reminds readers that she is only fourteen, a child, and it reinforces her vulnerability. Glory can pull herself out of the dirt when it is her only means of survival, but she cannot ease the weight of the trauma or erase her scars. She can escape the immediate physical threat, but the impact and consequences of this night will be long-lasting.

In the days and weeks after the rape, Strickland's tactics for domination and control on the night of the attack cause Glory's lasting disenfranchisement. Glory expresses shame, guilt, and embarrassment resulting from what happened to her. She skews her interpretation of what happened that night, focusing solely on herself and ignoring Strickland's responsibility. Glory refuses to acknowledge the strength it took to survive. By isolating herself after the attack, she deprives herself of a supportive perspective to help her work through her emotions and misconceptions. The real-life experience of one of Sweet's interviewees, Fabiola, corroborates Glory's experience of isolation. Sweet explains, "Because Fabiola was isolated from others who could have offered her a different narrative about the relationship, her boyfriend's attempts to undermine her sanity and sexual identity were more effective" (Sweet 864). Isolated after the attack, Glory struggles to understand Strickland's behavior, her reaction to it, and make sense of the town's response. But she cannot make much progress. After that night is over, Strickland need not even be present to perpetuate his abuse; her isolation and society's pressures extend the abuse for him.

Throughout the novel, Glory's narrative reveals the impact of the lasting trauma. During the summer after the rape, Strickland continues to appear as a menacing figure in a recurring dream that echoes the tactics that he used to dominate Gloria out in the oil field: "His pupils are black holes surrounded by blue sky. Time to pony up, Gloria, he says, time to pay for all my beer you drank, all this gas I used to get us here" (Wetmore 136). Strickland's words, assumedly the same as those he used during the actual attack, depict his misogynistic attitude; he believes that Glory owes him sex as payment for the "hospitality" that he has shown her, and if she is not willing to give it, he is willing to take what he wants. In the dream, the actual events of that night swirl in Glory's imagination alongside the threatening West Texas landscape. Glory finds herself back in the oil fields, "and she doesn't see the pile of rocks, or the nest of snakes on the other side of it. When she falls and rises shrieking from the ground, they are already on her, wrapping themselves around her ankles and legs, climbing toward her belly and breasts" (Wetmore 136). These snakes represent the threatening Patriarchal Surreality that Glory must navigate as a young Mexican woman. The recurring dream forces Glory to relive that night in the oil field, but it also gives her the opportunity to envision retribution and a safe space where she can resist Strickland. In the dream, Glory uses violence to defend herself. As Strickland begins to force himself on her, "She reaches into the pocket of her jeans and wraps her fingers around the leather handle. The knife opens effortlessly and finds his gullet without fail" (Wetmore 136). Since the attack, Glory sleeps with a knife under her pillow. Knowing that she has a weapon close provides her with a sense of security, and although she never has the chance to enact revenge, she seems as if she would if the opportunity arose.

Although Glory dreams of violent retribution, she refuses to testify against Strickland, but she is hopeful that the court will punish him for the rape. She tells her uncle, Victor, "I hope he suffers" (Wetmore 289). Victor lies to protect Glory and restore his niece's sense of security, but Victor knows that Strickland will not be held appropriately accountable for his actions. He tells her, "Dale Strickland's gonna pay for this every day for the rest of his life . . . He will let her keep on believing that Strickland is at the state prison in Fort Worth, that he'll be farting dust by the time he gets out. They'll have to roll him out the gate in a wheelchair, . . . with a new set of false teeth and a bag of extra underwear" (Wetmore 288). Despite this lie and his desire to see Strickland suffer, Victor understands that "nothing causes more suffering than vengeance" (Wemore 290). By lying, Victor provides Glory with some closure, but he recognizes that the system that facilitated Strickland's crime persists. Victor believes, "maybe he will pay, one way or another . . . but that's got nothing to do with him, or Glory. The cops and lawyers and teachers and churches, the judge and jury, the people who raised the boy and then sent him out into the world, to this town–every one of them is guilty" (Wetmore 290). Victor identifies the individuals who maintain the Patriarchal Surreality that facilitated Glory's rape. Just like Glory, who knew immediately on the morning after the attack, Victor agrees that the two of them can no longer live in Odessa, within the confines of this abusive structure, and after collecting the five thousand dollars that the court orders Strickland to pay, Glory and her uncle leave Odessa and set out to meet her mother in Puerto Ángel, Mexico.

As they drive to Mexico, Victor silently recalls the tumultuous and violent pattern of prejudice in this border region that, ultimately, has precipitated their need to leave. Like Odessa, the region along the border was ruled by racism as newcomers pushed those whose

"land had been in their families for six generations" (Wetmore 299) from their rightful property and across the river into Mexico. He remembers, "Ancestors hanged from posts in downtown Brownsville, . . . Texas Rangers shooting Mexican farmers in the backs as the men harvested sugar cane, or tying men to mesquite trees and setting them on fire, or forcing broken beer bottles down their throats" (Wetmore 299). He believes, "They did it for fun . . . They did it on a bet. They did it because they were drunk, or they hated Mexicans . . . And maybe sometimes they did it because they knew they were guilty, and having already traveled so far down the path of their own iniquity, they figured they might as well see it through. But mostly, they did it because they could" (Wetmore 299). Generations of violence perpetrated in this border region helped to establish and maintain the Patriarchal Surreality that empowered Strickland to brutally rape a Mexican girl without no concern of consequences. Not only does he inflict physical and emotional consequences, but after the attack, Glory and her family are forced to reckon with the reality that their lives will never return to what they were "before." The Patriarchal Surreality that raises prejudiced daughters in Odessa, threatens their lives, and dislocates their sense of identity is especially consequential and traumatizing for Gloria because of her intersectional identity. Gloria experiences hostility and racism from the community in Odessa as they rationalize Strickland's violence; the government deports Gloria's mother to Mexico following a raid at her job; and Gloria's uncle must accept the fact that Strickland will not be held accountable in the West Texas court. After being rejected by their community, the powerless Ramírez family accepts that they must leave their home in Odessa and return to Mexico. The trauma first inflicted by Strickland, then compounded by Odessa's judgment and condemnation, is

made more brutal when Glory must flee the only home that she has ever known for life in a new country where she does not even speak the language. And yet, Glory perists.

Odessa's Women

After Glory knocks on her front door and Mary Rose sees the bloody aftermath of prejudice and misogyny, she begins to confront the apathetic women in her life regarding their interactions with patriarchy. Almost everyone in town turns against Mary Rose, but she connects with Corrine[11], who also sees Odessa's systemic prejudice as problematic. The two women attempt to confront prejudice and racism in Odessa, but they make little progress. Like the women glorified in Ginny's grandmother's stories who give their lives on the Frontier and the women working at the diner who accept abuse at the hands of male customers as a part of life, many of Odessa's women acknowledge their oppression but choose not to resist Patriarchal Surreality.

As Strickland's trial looms, Mary Rose and Corrine have experiences that confirm the pervasiveness of Odessa's prejudice, even among loved ones and women they consider friends. The kinship between Mary Rose and Corrine grows during a conversation with two other women, Suzanne Ledbetter and Mrs. Nunally. Suzanne exemplifies the generational nature of prejudice. Because she comes from a low-income family, Suzanne is hyper-aware of public perception and driven by the pressure to reshape her reputation. She describes her parents and family as "Trash . . . I wouldn't have those people at my table if somebody held a gun to my head–which they might" (Wetmore 153). Her determination to escape her family's reputation causes Suzanne to curate a "perfect" persona and judge those around her who cannot attain the same level of perfection. As Corrine maintained her independence by going back to work after the birth of her daughter, having grown up in poverty, Suzanne is

determined to be financially independent from her husband. However, unlike Corrine, Suzanne refuses to let this choice ostracize her, and she earns her income selling Avon and Tupperware. Doing so appeases Odessa's judgmental citizens because she can work and be a stay-at-home mother. Suzanne keeps a secret safety-net bank account and tells her daughter, Lauralee, "Never depend on a man to take care of you, . . . Not even one as good as your daddy" (Wetmore 152). To further impress her friends and neighbors, Suzanne regularly supports those in need by delivering made-from-scratch casseroles, and at home, she lights candles during every family dinner because "They're pretty, . . . And in this light no one can see the bright red knot where a pimple is trying to sprout on her chin, the chipped front tooth from a fall she took when she was fifteen, the cuticles she can't stop chewing" (Wetmore 157). As society has constructed and maintained Patriarchal Surreality, Susan carefully crafts an appearance of generosity and elegance, believing that controlling how she is perceived is the first step in escaping her family's reputation.

Suzanne's behavior exemplifies her values, and she is determined that her daughter will live by the same principles. She tells Lauralee, "You are going to get everything you want in life . . . but you can't take your eye off the ball. Not even for a minute. People who take their eye off the ball get hit in the face" (Wetmore 152). For Suzanne, keeping her "eye on the ball" means living every day by a to-do list and constantly trying to outdo herself to impress those around her. Despite her family background, Suzanne is determined to control her future and, in turn, provide Lauralee with more opportunities. She reminds Lauralee, "Your daddy and I are the first in our families to own a home in five generations, but someday, your house will be even better. You're going to graduate from college and buy one that is even bigger than this" (Wetmore 157). Ultimately, this attitude leads Suzanne to

become judgmental. While she works so hard to escape the judgment that has weighed for generations on her family, she passes judgment on Glory and her mother. On the morning when Suzanne, Mrs. Nunally, Corrine, and Mary Rose meet on Mary Rose's front lawn, the women discuss Strickland and Glory's case. Suzanne gossips, "I've heard that the girl's uncle is attempting to blackmail Mr. Strickland's family" (Wetmore 115). Although Mary Rose admits that in the past, she has passively accepted stereotypes as an inescapable part of life, her new perspective prevents her from standing by while Suzanne perpetuates prejudice. Mary Rose chides her friend, describing the rumor as "absolutely slanderous" (Wetmore 115), and Corrine, older, widowed, and with less to lose, goes further: "That does indeed sound slanderous . . . but what do you expect from a bunch of bigots?" (Wetmore 115). At this comment, Mrs. Nunally, avoiding the confrontation altogether, heads toward her car, and Suzanne claims, "I'm no bigot, but—" (Wetmore 115). She stops short, seeking affirmation from Mary Rose and Corrine, but the two silently disapprove, and Suzanne turns to leave. Later in the novel, it becomes clear that Suzanne's comments on the lawn only hinted at the extent of her prejudiced attitudes. In another conversation, Suzanne accuses Glory's mother, Alma, of being negligent: "I'll tell you what she *wasn't* doing, . . . Paying attention" (Wetmore 162). She also perpetuates the newspaper's narrative that implies that Gloria did not fight hard enough to protect herself. Suzanne tells her daughter, Lauralee, "Some boy tried to grab me once, when I was just a little older than you . . . I picked up a two-by-four and hit him right upside his head. Knocked him right out. He didn't wake up for three days. Needed stitches, too" (Wetmore 165). She implies that Glory could have escaped, or worse, hints that Glory fabricated her story to cover up a consensual sexual encounter. Suzanne explains to her daughter that after beating the boy, the sheriff encouraged her to find a board

with nails in it next time and leave the boy out in the swamp "for the gators . . . Suzie Compton, he said to me, you are the best thing about this place" (Wetmore 165). Although Suzanne is surprised when Corrine calls her a bigot, she is judgmental and prejudiced. Suzanne believes that as long as one stays focused and works hard toward her goal, she will be successful. Because she was able to escape her family's poverty and curate a reputation of perfection, she judges those who face challenges, blaming personal or moral failings rather than Patriarchal Surreality, a rigged system that thwarts the efforts of most, especially people of color.

Not only does racism pervade conversations around town, but Mary Rose encounters the same attitude at church, revealing the hypocrisy of American prejudice. During a meeting of the Ladies Guild, the women discuss donating used clothes to camps of migrant workers that have formed on the outskirts of Odessa, and the conversation is tinged with prejudice: "Those camps are just awful, . . . Trash everywhere and most of them don't even have running water—she pauses and lowers her voice—and full of Mexicans . . . It's terrible how they do" (Wetmore 118-119). Noticing the prejudiced undertones of the conversation in the church, Mary Rose checks herself: "As if I have never heard this kind of talk in my life, as if I didn't grow up hearing it from my daddy at the dinner table, from all my aunts and uncles at the Thanksgiving table, from my own husband. But now I think about Gloria and her family and it rankles, like an open sore that I can't stop picking at" (Wetmore 119). Witnessing Glory's suffering firsthand has fostered Mary Rose's concern and compassion, and she cannot understand why these women do not feel the same way. She chastises the group: "This was no misunderstanding . . . It was a rape, and I am sick and tired of ya'll pretending otherwise" (Wetmore 119). Mary Rose defends Glory and condemns Strickland, and yet she

cannot sway the opinions of the women. In the end, only one woman responds: "I know what you *think* you saw, but last time I checked we still live in America, where a man is innocent until proven guilty" (Wetmore 120). As the women murmur in agreement, Mary Rose realizes that these women are incapable of empathy for Glory, and this conversation cannot undo generational prejudice. Overwhelmed with emotion, Mary Rose excuses herself to the ladies' room.

Crenshaw explains the women's refusal to empathize with Glory. She claims that people often consider violence against women as "*exclusively* a problem of the poor or minority communities" (Crenshaw 363). In other words, white individuals do not need to address this type of violence as they assume it does not and will not affect their communities. This attitude results in the community's refusal to admit that although Strickland targeted a Mexican girl, "Gloria could be any of our girls" (Wetmore 98). Crenshaw explains that white policymakers enacting the Violence Against Women Act of 1991 "were able to empathize with female victims of domestic violence only by looking past the plight of Other women and by recognizing the familiar faces of their own" (Crenshaw 363). Society in Odessa ignores the fact that many women must regularly take measures to protect themselves from men. Although even white women find themselves victimized, Glory is blamed for Strickland's attack because she did not prevent it. Gloria's rape serves as evidence to condemn her character because she was unable to protect herself. Had Mary Rose not been intimately involved following Glory's rape, she too might be able to remain detached like the rest of the town, but after seeing Glory peering out from behind the curtains with Aimee and sitting at the Whitehead's kitchen table, Mary Rose cannot help but see her daughter when

she looks at Glory. Mary Rose can no longer acquiesce to the prejudice and misogyny of Patriarchal Surreality.

After her outburst in front of the Ladies Guild, Mary Rose tries to compose herself in the bathroom when another woman enters. Under the guise of concern, Mrs. Cowden continues to express bigotry. She encourages Mary Rose to ask the judge if she can write a letter instead of testifying, and "Besides . . . Lou Connelly heard the girl's mother was deported and the girl had been sent to Laredo to be with family. Heck, she might not even come back for the trial. Not unless there's some money in it for her" (Wetmore 122). She also implies that Mary Rose is no longer welcome in the Ladies Guild: "Mrs. Cowden says she and some of the other ladies have been thinking that I might not want to come to any more meetings for a little while . . . Just until I start feeling a little more like myself" (Wetmore 122). Mrs. Cowden's comments force Mary Rose to think back to the morning that Glory knocked on her front door and, later, the moment when Mary Rose refused to comfort the hysterical girl.

Mary Rose sees her actions on the morning of the attack reflected in the women in Odessa who refuse to empathize with Glory. Like Mary Rose, who turned away from Glory as paramedics dragged her into the ambulance, these women choose comfort over the discomfort that would stem from admitting that they have accepted prejudice, violence, and racism all their lives. These women choose to look the other way and continue living in gaslit Patriarchal Surreality. Mary Rose's guilt bubbles to the surface in the bathroom, and with Mrs. Cowden looking on, she asks herself, "What will I be a part of, here in Odessa? What will my days look like now, and who will I become?" (Wetmore 123). Mary Rose's experience with Glory, followed by the reaction of people in the town, fractures the facade of

Patriarchal Surreality. As Crenshaw explains, she must summon "the courage to challenge groups that are after all, in one sense, 'home' to us, in the name of the parts of us that are not made at home" (Crenshaw 377). Mary Rose no longer feels at home in her community, and she realizes she will never be "her old self" again. She explains, "knowing that I have failed another woman's daughter in all the ways that matter, I now want badly to be a person of valor" (Wetmore 124). Embracing this new conviction, Mary Rose throws water in Mrs. Cowden's face, telling her, "Go to hell, . . . Why don't you go pack boxes for all those poor people y'all can't quit judging?" (Wetmore 124). Mary Rose stands up for her new convictions, but sharing her unpopular opinions and behaving dramatically undermines her ability to support Glory or to affect change.

News travels fast in Odessa, and as soon as Robert hears about Mary Rose's behavior, he rushes home to reprimand his wife and force her back into her place within Patriarchal Surreality. Mary Rose refuses to give in to the pressure from her husband. She stands her ground and reiterates the details of Glory's injuries: "Did you hear what they said about her injuries? They had to take her spleen out, for God's sake. For that matter, did you hear what *I* told you?" (Wetmore 125). Robert is steadfast in his prejudice, and even she, his wife, cannot influence him to question his beliefs. When Mary Rose demands, "What if it had been Aimee?" (Wetmore 125), Robert responds with prejudice, "Don't you compare that girl to my daughter . . . You know how those little gals are" (Wetmore 126). Robert holds Glory responsible for Strickland's actions, and he does not support Mary Rose's efforts because of "how those little gals are." As she did in the bathroom with Mrs. Cowden, Mary Rose refuses to back down, but facing her husband, she anticipates violence. The phone rings, diffusing the tension, but Mary Rose's new attitude remains unwavering. She is not only repulsed by

the women in Odessa who refuse to see themselves and their daughters in Glory Ramírez but also by her husband, who dismisses and belittles her. Mary Rose will testify against Strickland, refusing to accept "the way things are," even if she will face social consequences and escalate the tension in her marriage.

Fueled by Odessa's reaction to Glory's rape, Mary Rose feels it is her responsibility to ensure that Strickland is held responsible, especially after she learns that Glory will not testify. She cannot shake the town's patriarchal and prejudiced attitudes, but Mary Rose trusts the court system, convinced that recounting the events on the morning after the attack will lead to a conviction. However, Mary Rose fails to realize that the same values are embedded in Odessa's court system, and despite her honest testimony, she will return home late into the evening on the night of Strickland's trial, humiliated and disillusioned by what transpires in the courtroom.

Mary Rose's experiences in the courtroom further "turn up the gaslight" on Odessa's Patriarchal Surreality. She realizes that not only is society in Odessa patriarchal and prejudiced, but the court system formalizes these values. Before she faces Strickland's attorney, Mary Rose's lawyer, Keith Taylor, warns her that Scooter Clemens "is a stone-cold killer, . . . He's been getting boys out of trouble for thirty years" (Wetmore 221). Clemens specializes in defending men who have gone too far abusing women and drawn the attention of law enforcement, who, when they can, prefer to look the other way. He is skilled at manipulating the courts to help these men avoid costly and long-term consequences. As a result, men have learned not to fear the consequences of their actions but rather to expect leniency from law enforcement and the justice system. Naively, Mary Rose believes Clemens will be her only adversary in the courtroom; she is surprised to realize that misogyny

pervades this symbolic context, beginning with Strickland's defense and ending with the judge.

Judge Rice makes a misogynistic impression immediately. After sitting at the bench, he "pulls a pistol out from under his robe and sets it on his desk. West Texas gavel, he tells all of us. Welcome to my courtroom" (Wetmore 221). Judge Rice claims that the pistol, a symbol of violence, control, and impulsivity, takes the place of the gavel, symbolic of equality and justice. This replacement demonstrates that bias and prejudice skew the balance in Rice's courtroom. Further, after she has taken the stand, Mary Rose notices "that there are only two women in the room–Mrs. Henderson [the stenographer] and me. We don't belong here, . . . This room isn't for us" (Wetmore 223). The lack of women in the courtroom during the trial of a man accused of raping a young woman demonstrates a lack of solidarity between women. In Odessa, women, like those who work in the diner, find solidarity when they share their survival tips, when they protect and cover for their men, and yet, they make a conscious choice not to support an effort to bring the misogynistic and racist tendencies of their men to light. As she revised her opinions of society in Odessa in the weeks leading up to the trial, Mary Rose felt isolated from the rest of the town; now on the stand, the realization that the men far outnumber the women in this courtroom exacerbates her discomfort. Aware that her very presence is objectionable to many of the men in the courtroom, Mary Rose is further agitated as Clemens initiates his pointed line of questioning.

Clemens uses intimidation to undermine Mary Rose's confidence, and both he and Judge Rice discredit her testimony. In front of Strickland, who sits at the defense table with "a slight smile on his face" (Wetmore 224), he nonchalantly reveals the location of Mary Rose's rented home in town where she and her children moved after the attack. Clemens

mockingly tells Mary Rose that after the trial, “I hope you feel like you can go back out there [to the ranch] and be with your husband, where you belong” (Wetmore 224). Clemens compromises Mary Rose’s security by revealing the location of her home to Strickland, and he implies that Mary Rose’s fear is an overreaction. He reminds her that, in Odessa, a woman belongs with her husband, as if she has done something wrong by choosing to move to feel safe in the days before the trial. Eventually, Mary Rose’s lawyer, Taylor, challenges the relevance of this line of questioning, and Judge Rice reveals that stereotypes and his prior knowledge of the witness taint his opinion. In front of the courtroom, Judge Rice tells Mary Rose, “I heard you gave Grace Cowden what-for at church not too long ago, . . . My wife is still talking about it. The judge laughs. You gals! Y’all look for trouble coming and trouble going” (Wetmore 225). After Mary Rose takes the stand, both Clemens and Judge Rice undermine the authenticity of her testimony by insinuating that she is gossipy and emotional and that her version of events is exaggerated and unfounded. Judge Rice’s remarks further distract from Mary Rose’s testimony by making her out to be a woman whose emotions are out of control. Both Clemens and Judge Rice reveal their bias in the courtroom and employ it as a means of thwarting Mary Rose’s efforts to bring Strickland to justice.

Strickland’s lawyer, Clemens, also purposely utilizes pervasive misogynistic and racist stereotypes to turn the all-male jury against the prosecution’s lead witness and Glory. As he digs deeper into Mary Rose’s testimony, he describes Glory as “this little Mexican gal” (Wetmore 226). He blames the victim by asking Mary Rose if Glory appeared to have been drinking or if she had been hungover, and Mary Rose reminds the courtroom that Glory was only fourteen at the time of the attack. Clemens responds with a stereotype that implies a deficit in Glory’s character: “Well, one girl’s fourteen is another girl’s seventeen, least that’s

what my old daddy always said" (Wetmore 226). Just like Mary Rose's lawyer's remarks about Clemens "getting boys out of trouble for thirty years" (Wetmore 221), by sharing this saying from his father, Clemens demonstrates the pervasiveness and longevity of Odessa's prejudice. Later, he further antagonizes Mary Rose by reiterating the story that Strickland told her on the morning of the attack: Glory was Strickland's girlfriend, and they had gotten into a fight. When both Mary Rose and Taylor challenge this narrative, Clemens responds, "Is this not what we do? . . . Do we not consider whether there's enough evidence to make a decision *beyond reasonable doubt* before we ruin a young man's life?" (Wetmore 229), echoing the sentiments expressed by the women at Mary Rose's Ladies Guild Meeting. Like the women of the Ladies Guild, Clemens disregards Glory's humanity but emphasizes Strickland's constitutional "innocence until proven guilty;" however, he fails to comment on the fact that Strickland may have very well ruined Glory's life, or at least upended it for a long while, that night in the oil field.

Although this fictionalized trial may appear exaggerated, Clemens' courtroom tactics and his attack on Glory's integrity depict realities often faced by women of color in courts in the United States. Crenshaw explains that early iterations of rape law required a woman to prove that she had resisted the attack. As a result, when cases went to trial, "Women themselves were put on trial, as judge and jury scrutinized their lives to determine whether they were innocent victims or women who essentially got what they were asking for" (Crenshaw 367). These practices echo Suzanne Ledbetter's story about hitting a boy with a board when he "tried to grab me once" (Wetmore 165). Suzanne, Mary Rose's friend, was commended for defending herself, while Glory, like many women, is judged for "permitting" her attack to occur. Clemens' tactics drip with a similar sentiment, reiterating offensive

depictions of Glory disseminated by the Odessa newspaper. Although Crenshaw explains that lawmakers revised this law to remedy its initial shortcomings, Laura Coates reveals that instances of victim-blaming still seep into contemporary courtrooms. She recalls witnessing the end of a trial in which a barely-teenaged girl accused her mother's boyfriend-turned-stepfather of raping her repeatedly. According to Ferraro, "The criminal processing system, including police, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and judges, requires victims to meet certain expectations in communicating their complaints. These include prompt reporting, consistency over time, corroborating evidence, a clear timeline of events, and a commitment to follow through with prosecution" (Ferraro 46). While the victim in Coates' example meets some of these requirements—she was able to provide a clear timeline corroborated by specific life events (Coates 150), and she was willing to take the stand to testify despite having to face the man who abused her and the mother who allowed it to happen—she falls short in others.

Like Judge Rice, whose opinions are biased despite an oath of impartiality, the girl in Coates' example is judged by her appearance, and ultimately, the judge finds her testimony lacking. Because the girl did not immediately report any of the assaults, which resulted in a lack of physical evidence, "the prosecutors had chosen to charge the assaults as misdemeanors to avoid a jury trial" (Coates 144). They assumed an experienced judge would be more "equipped to understand the psychology underlying the decision of a rape victim not to report the crime immediately and hopefully would preside over and decide a case without the baggage of preconceived notions about how a victim should or would behave" (Coates 144). Despite their best intentions, Coates recalls that as the victim made her way "Skipping down the center aisle" (Coates 143) to testify, her appearance made a negative impression on

the judge. The girl wore "an above-the-knee skirt, breasts bouncing unrestrained" (Coates 143). At times during her testimony, including while she was being sworn in, the girl giggled; she struggled to sit still and fidgeted with her clothing. According to Coates, from the outset, the judge's expression belied her emotional reaction to the girl's appearance. The judge "cocked her head to one side as she looked the victim up and down, pausing periodically at each section of her body just long enough to convey her disgust" (Coates 145). In the United States, a judge symbolizes the pinnacle of unbiased and fair judgment in the criminal justice system, but this judge broadcasted her prejudice against the girl and was "brazen [in her] . . . disinterest in hearing a word from the victim" (Coates 145). Even after the girl explained her odd behavior, "I'm just really nervous. I'm sorry. It's not that I think anything is funny . . . I'm just not sure how to . . . how to be" (Coates 147), the unfair judgment in the courtroom persists. Had Glory chosen to appear in court and testify against Strickland, there is no doubt that the judge and lawyer would have treated her like this young victim. Clemens and Judge Rice treat Mary Rose, a white, married, adult woman, with contempt; their cruelty and disrespect toward Glory, a young, poor daughter of an undocumented Mexican immigrant, cannot be underestimated.

Glory is not present during the trial, but her integrity comes under fire, and although she is white, Mary Rose experiences some of the frustration frequently felt by women of color who turn to law enforcement for help and end up in court. Clemens' rhetorical question in defense of his strategy, "Is this not what we do? . . . Do we not consider whether there's enough evidence to make a decision *beyond reasonable doubt* before we ruin a young man's life?" (Wetmore 229), is the breaking point for Mary Rose, who responds, "She is a child, you piece of shit" (Wetmore 229). Feeling as if she is not being heard or believed, Mary

Rose loses control of her emotions as she did with several acquaintances and her husband when defending Glory. However, just as throwing water in Mrs. Cowden's face haunts her, this courtroom outburst validates Clemens' and Judge Rice's claims that Mary Rose is overly emotional, further undermining the credibility of her testimony. Noticing the judge's attitude toward Mary Rose, Clemons realizes that he can get away with badgering the witness; similarly, Coates recalls the defendant's attorney in the young girl's rape case, "attacked the girl's memory, motives, and honesty with the indelicacy of an interrogator who know he didn't have to be mindful of a panel of jurors expecting kid gloves to be used with a young victim" (Coates 151). Each time the girl dissolved into tears, the judge would turn to her computer and noisily tap on her keyboard until the testimony resumed. With few advocates, the judge, lawyers, and jury disregard both Mary Rose's testimony and that of the young girl. Mary Rose is left feeling stymied and frustrated, and the young girl in Coates' case is left confused as to why her rapist will go unpunished.

Following Mary Rose's outburst, the situation continues to escalate, exposing the full extent of the court's misogyny. The judge raps his pistol-gavel on the desk, then speaks to Mary Rose in a low tone: "it's clear to me how hard this has been on you and your family, but I promise you, if you cuss in my courtroom one more time, you will spend tonight in a jail cell. Do you understand me?" (Wetmore 229). The judge expects Mary Rose to acquiesce to society's standards for women at a time when doing such seems inconsequential. A back-and-forth standoff ensues as Mary Rose replies, "yes" to the question but refuses to add "sir." During this exchange with the judge, Mary Rose remembers a similar experience with her father as a teenager. When she refused to add "sir" to her response, her father slapped her three times before she finally acquiesced. Mary Rose sees Victor Ramírez sitting in the

courtroom and realizes, “Nothing is more important than this, certainly not my pride” (Wetmore 230). She finally gives the judge what he wants, “But he’s not done. He says, It is painful to see a young woman–a mother–use that language in a court of law” (Wetmore 230). And only moments later, he allows Clemens to respond to Mary Rose with, “Good girl” (Wetmore 231) after she answers another question. Mary Rose’s fleeting act of defiance does little to discourage the misogyny of the courtroom. She is forcefully reprimanded for cursing in the courtroom, while Clemens is consciously patronizing and disrespectful without consequence.

During a recess in the trial, Mary Rose sees Victor preparing to leave the courthouse. She rushes over to him, pleading, “I’m sorry . . . I want to help Gloria . . . Please, Mr. Ramírez, make her testify” (Wetmore 231). Mary Rose exposes her naivety, failing to realize that Clemens and Judge Rice would be even more condescending and disrespectful toward Glory. Somehow, she still believes that it is a good idea for the young girl to take the stand, forcing her to face her rapist and relive the ordeal in a hostile courtroom. Mary Rose does not grasp the extent to which the justice system is biased against women, particularly women of color like Glory. Although Mary Rose is still hopeful that the trial will end with justice for Glory, Victor reveals his understanding of the judicial system. He replies, “You people won’t hear what *Glory* has to say. Do you understand that, Mrs. Whitehead?” (Wetmore 232). Victor knows that even if Glory were to take the stand and tell her story, many present in the courtroom would further stereotype her as a promiscuous Mexican girl who deserved it. Before the trial begins, Glory’s character is questioned in the newspaper and town gossip circles as people make meritless assumptions. People accept these claims without question and blame Glory for the rape. Whether Glory was promiscuous or not, popular opinion labels

her as such, further undermining her case. Crenshaw explains, "women who led sexually autonomous lives were usually the least likely to be vindicated if they were raped" (Crenshaw 367). Glory's sexual reputation, whether accurate or not, is an excuse for the town to condemn her and exonerate Strickland. Crenshaw elaborates, "past sexual conduct as well as the specific circumstances leading up the rape are often used to distinguish the moral character of the 'legitimate' rape victim from women who are regarded as morally debased or in some other way 'responsible' for their own victimization" (Crenshaw 369). Not only is the legitimacy of Glory's victimhood called into question in public discussions, but Clemens employs this tactic in the courtroom to further undermine her integrity.

Having witnessed the way that Judge Rice and Clemens treat Mary Rose, a white woman, on the stand, one can assume they would be even more ruthless and re-victimize Glory. Victor's assumption that Glory would be treated unfairly or not "heard" is corroborated by the rape trial that Coates recounts. Not only does the judge disregard and disrespect the young girl as she tries explain what happened to her at the hands of her step-father, but even more egregious, as Coates approaches the bench to confer with the judge, she is shocked by the woman's computer screen: "While a child had poured her heart out relaying the trauma of serial rape without the benefit of even her mother as a protector or champion, the judge was trying to find a cognac knee-high boot that fit an extra wide calf. I wondered what exactly she had been typing during the girl's testimony . . . The callousness was beyond what I had expected" (Coates 154). In the end, Coates' instincts are correct. After pronouncing, "I do not . . . credit the witness's statements regarding the allegations of sexual impropriety or assault" (Coates 158), the judge turned her attention directly to the victim and began to chastise her. The judge admonished,

> No one who has been raped, even a young teenager, would have skipped down the aisle of the courtroom dressed like that . . . her clothes were ill-fitting, and she was not even wearing the appropriate undergarments, not even tights. The skirt was barely covering her behind, and she didn't seem to mind. She giggled through her testimony not like a child assaulted but like one who thought there was something funny about wasting the court's time. (Coates 158)

Like Glory, against whom the judge and jury are prejudiced, this victim's appearance and nervous behavior were unfairly judged and resulted in her rapist's acquittal. Ferraro asserts that a witness's appearance, including race or ethnicity, can be a significant determining factor in a trial. She explains, "'Ideal victims' are . . . meek and distraught, innocent of provoking their victimization, and possessing a body that symbolizes these qualities. Young, white, middle-class, attractive (but not overtly sexy) women embody cultural notions of deserving victims" (Ferraro 19). Unfortunately, the young girl in the rape case that Coates witnessed did not meet these expectations, and perhaps the prosecution and her victim advocate assumed too much by expecting a judge to see past her immature wardrobe choices and behavior.

Mary Rose has whiteness on her side, but it is not enough to overcome the prejudice she encounters in the courtroom. She thoroughly undermines her testimony when, on her way to sit down, she loudly responds to a veiled threat from Strickland:

> Strickland reaches out and presses his thumb lightly against my hand . . . speaks so softly I can barely hear him. His thumbnail scratches gently against my palm . . . Mary Rose, he says–how I hate that he knows my name–I want to tell you how sorry I am for all of the trouble I've brought to you and your family . . . When this is all over,

> . . . I hope to see you again under better circumstances, maybe at your ranch or here in town. (Wetmore 232-233).

In his murmured threat, Strickland weaponizes Mary Rose's name, like he wielded "Gloria" on the night of the rape and reminds her that he knows both the location of the ranch and her home in town. He wants Mary Rose to know that she will never be able to escape him, and in many ways, law enforcement and the justice system have allowed it to be so. Strickland keeps his voice low as he utters these indirect threats so that others in the courtroom cannot hear him, but they frighten Mary Rose. She admits, "I am about to learn something else about Dale Strickland–he's smarter than me" (Wetmore 233). Mary Rose loudly responds, "Well, come on over, . . . I will look forward to blowing your fucking head off" (Wetmore 233). Having lived with fear and anxiety since Glory's knock on her door, Mary Rose's reaction is understandable. She asserts herself, vowing to protect her family, but her response elicits a "She's crazy," (Wetmore 233) from someone in the courtroom. Without the context of Strickland's threat, Mary Rose's response proves that Clemens and Judge Rice were correct to imply that she is a "crazy," irrational, and emotional woman blowing a lovers' argument out of proportion. Overwhelmed by emotion, Mary Rose's behavior becomes a distraction that takes attention away from the purpose of the trial, adequately holding Strickland accountable for rape.

When Mary Rose finally makes it home after the day in court, she tells Corrine the story, trying to reclaim the narrative by injecting humor and sarcasm. After her outburst, Judge Rice declares, "I sure hope your husband can take care of that baby without you tonight, Mrs. Whitehead, . . . because you are in contempt" (Wetmore 233), and with nothing left to lose, Mary Rose doubles down: "Fine, . . . I'm not afraid of you, old man" (Wetmore

233). Corrine thinks Mary Rose's story is "one of the best courtroom stories" (Wetmore 235) she has ever heard. She says she will "remember it until the day I die" (Wetmore 235), and Mary Rose replies, "So will everybody in this town" (Wetmore 235). Like Glory, Mary Rose's reputation will be tainted by this experience that ended in humiliation. Judge Rice releases Mary Rose after six hours in contempt, but without the means to pump, her blouse has soaked through, and as she leaves, she "can hear them laughing all the way down the hall. They are still laughing when I step out of the station and close the door behind me and walk across the parking lot to my car" (Wetmore 234). Despite trying to make light of the situation when she tells the story, Mary Rose has broken conventions for women's behavior and gone against popular opinions. The town will ostracize her for doing so. A call from Taylor later that night to report the trial's outcome compounds Mary Rose's pain: "It was all over by four o'clock, . . . Simple assault. Probation and a fine to be paid to the Ramírez family. These cases are hard, . . . I'm sorry, Mary Rose. He was out by five o'clock this afternoon" (Wetmore 237). Mary Rose cannot help but ask herself, "did anybody believe for a minute that he would be convicted? Anybody but me?" (Wetmore 237). Indeed, Mary Rose should have predicted this verdict, for the odds are against Glory from the beginning.

The outcome of the trial fractures the facade of Patriarchal Surreality, and Mary Rose rages, having lost faith in society and the justice system. She checks the locks on all the doors and windows, and she gets her shotgun, afraid that Strickland will show up to make good on his threats. She lashes out at Corrine, the only woman in Odessa who continues to support her: "If you've got something to say to me, . . . then go ahead and say it. But don't you dare tell me not to be pissed off" (Wetmore 237). Corrine, who understands, replies, "Hell no, . . . Be pissed off. I'm pretty sure it's the only thing that gets me out of bed in the

morning" (Wetmore 237). Like the tension building in Lutie's life as her options for employment disappear and men threaten her security, Mary Rose feels trapped as the town dismisses her perspective and denies justice for Glory. Throughout her life, societal gaslighting and privilege as a white woman have obscured prejudice and misogyny, but Mary Rose feels dehumanized by this experience, and she becomes increasingly anxious and fearful. The very next day, at the height of her anger and fear, Mary Rose snaps and unleashes her pent-up emotion, nearly taking the life of an innocent man in Strickland's place. She will tell Corrine, "I want to kill someone" (Wetmore 263). And yet, Corrine stops her: "Not this man . . . You're not alone" (Wetmore 263). Unlike Lutie, Mary Rose has a support system in Corrine, albeit a small one, that prevents her from killing.

On the day after the trial as a dust storm barrels down on Odessa, circumstances and emotions collide as Mary Rose wrestles with the stark reality now that her experiences have stripped away the facade of Patriarchal Surreality. Debra Ann, Aimee, Lauralee, and another friend, Casey, are playing on Aimee's front lawn. When the wind and dust are nearly upon them, the girls go inside Aimee's house and are surprised to find Mary Rose still in her pajamas. The girls ask if she is all right, and Mary Rose unleashes a storm of her own, fueled by her rage resulting from the trial and verdict. Young and naive, the girls high-five and celebrate when Mary Rose tells them that Strickland must pay a five thousand dollar fine. They do not comprehend the triviality of the sum and general lack of accountability. Mary Rose says, "Oh, shut up. All of you girls *shut up* . . . One year of probation, she says, and her voice is a rupture. Five thousand dollars. Jesus. Fucking. Christ" (Wetmore 242). The girls are shocked by her blasphemy and frightened when Mary Rose throws her iced tea across the kitchen, shattering the glass. She collapses to the ground, the baby screaming in the other

room. Debra Ann volunteers to run across the street to get Corrine, and while everyone is distracted by the storm and Mary Rose, Debra Ann and Jesse take Corrine's truck to drive to Penwell and reclaim his vehicle. The rest of the girls stay with Mary Rose, who is curled on the floor, weeping and shaking: "None of the girls have ever seen a grown woman cry this hard, not even at a funeral, and they are all too young to recognize it as rage" (Wetmore 244). As the day drags on, Aimee, now relegated to her bedroom with the baby, reflects on the injustice of the verdict: "She tells the other girls she has been thinking about probation–what it means, or what she thinks it means. Dale Strickland can still go anywhere he pleases, he can eat ice cream whenever he wants, and go see a football game. What about Glory Ramírez? What happens to her? And what about them?" (Wetmore 245). Aimee cannot know that Glory and her family have already left town for this very reason, but she empathizes with the girl, even fearing that Strickland might pose a threat to her and her friends. Like her mother, she, too, is beginning to see beyond the facade of Patriarchal Surreality. As Aimee begins to realize why the verdict has rocked her mother, Corrine comes to the door of her bedroom with a bottle for the baby, and another reality materializes: Debra Ann is not in the room with the rest of the girls.

The shock that Debra Ann is gone rouses Mary Rose from her oblivion, and she instantly feels a responsibility to protect the girl from the reality that came sharply into focus after the trial. She and Corrine rush across the street to find Potter's truck is gone, and Mary Rose is overwhelmed by fear that Strickland is responsible. Her intense emotions shatter Mary Rose's grasp on reality. The women find a note on the driveway and can "make out the words *Penwell* and *gas station* and, . . . *Jesse Belden*" (Wetmore 247-248), but Mary Rose is convinced that Strickland has abducted Debra Ann as retaliation. She tells Corrine,

"Strickland wanted Aimee, but he got D.A. instead. And it's my fault" (Wetmore 249). Mary Rose grabs her rifle and prepares to find Debra Ann, but recognizing her delusion and desperation, Corrine tries to calm her friend. However, just as blinding rage fueled by a lifetime of locked doors clouded Lutie's vision, Mary Rose cannot be persuaded to think rationally. She refuses to listen to reason despite Corrine's attempts. Mary Rose shouts at Corrine, "She's a little girl and he's a—her voice breaks and goes hollow—monster" (Wetmore 249). As Mary Rose's tone changes, Corrine has a growing sense of foreboding. Mary Rose continues her tirade: "Bastard, Mary Rose spits the word out, as if she's just swallowed a glass filled with vinegar. The rifle is clinched in her hand, knuckles streaked white and red. She is lit with rage and purpose. Deadly, Corrine thinks" (Wetmore 249). Refusing to be swayed to proceed reasonably, Mary Rose jumps into her car and leaves, forcing Corrine to follow her into the oil fields.

Corrine, racing to keep up, considers Mary Rose's eruption of rage, and she understands that her friend has experienced a shift. After this break, Mary Rose picks up the tool so often used by men, those who perpetuate Patriarchal Surreality and the societal structures that she has come to despise: violence. She reflects: "When they were standing in Corrine's driveway and Mary Rose spat out that word—bastard—her voice was flat as the land Corrine is looking at now, and her heart fell to her feet. She has heard this tone of voice a few times in her life, usually, but not always from a man or a group of men" (Wetmore 251). Mary Rose has gone from frivolous emotional attempts to force people to hear her opinions to uncontrollable fear and fury: temporary madness. Corrine fears what she might do next. She recalls, "The flatness of Mary Rose's speech, the hollow affect, the cold and steady tone of voice—all are fear and rage transformed into wrath. Hers is the voice of

someone whose mind is made up. All that's left to do is wait for the next little spark that will justify what is about to happen next" (Wetmore 252). Mary Rose's fear has transformed her into a person akin to those whom she despises; she is no longer rational but guided by primal fear and hate. In this catastrophic moment, Mary Rose allows emotions to pervade her and fuel her violence. Corrine concludes ominously: "while Mary Rose maybe has better reason than most of these fools and sinners to open the door for unbridled wrath, Corrine also knows this: one way or another, it will eventually kill you. But goddamn, you can do some damage on your way out the door" (Wetmore 252). The aftermath of Strickland's attack on Glory and the spectacle of his trial unhinge Mary Rose, and Corrine fears the consequences of what she is about to do.

Almost miraculously, Mary Rose leads Corrine directly to a stretch of road where they see Potter's truck parked on the side. Near the truck, Debra Ann and Jesse walk hand in hand along railroad tracks. Not even seeing Jesse, who looks nothing like Strickland, can alter Mary Rose's trajectory. She jumps from her car, the shotgun over her shoulder, cartridges dropping at her feet. Corrine follows Mary Rose, out of breath and shouting but physically unable to stop the younger woman. She yells, "That's not him, Mary Rose" (Wetmore 258). However, Mary Rose, seeing Jesse but not seeing, raises the shotgun and fires at the man who is holding Debra Ann's hand. As if by divine providence, Mary Rose misses her target, but she is undeterred. Debra Ann runs to Corrine, and Jesse stays motionless, where he dropped to the ground. Corrine instructs Debra Ann to go to the back seat of her car and not to look out of the window; "Yes, Mary Rose says quietly. Tell her not to look out the window. They are the most terrifying words Corrine has ever heard in her life" (Wetmore 260). Corrine, still trying to stop Mary Rose, steps close and puts a hand on

the gun. She asks, “What are we going to do, Mary Rose?” (Wetmore 261), and finally, Mary Rose responds, “I want some fucking justice” (Wetmore 261). Mary Rose has accepted that Jesse is not Dale Strickland; however, having witnessed the justice system fail Glory, Mary Rose is prepared to act preemptively, even if it means killing an innocent man. She tells Corrine, “We don’t know what he’s done, or will do, but we know that he sure as shit won’t be held accountable for it” (Wetmore 261). Corrine persists: “if you shoot this man, you will never be the same. And neither will Debra Ann, or me” (Wetmore 261). Mary Rose slowly begins to calm down, and she asks, “What the hell is wrong with this place? . . . Why don’t we give a shit about what happens to Glory Ramírez?” (Wetmore 263). Finally, the situation begins to diffuse, and Mary Rose approaches Jesse. She helps him to his feet and “tells him how sorry she is, how easy it is to become the thing you most hate, or fear. I never knew, Mary Rose tells him, and I wish I still didn’t” (Wetmore 263).

The events on the day after the trial remind Corrine of a conversation she had with Mary Rose that hinted at her dissatisfaction with the treatment of women in Odessa. Sharing a cigarette on Mary Rose’s back patio, “Corrine thought she saw in her neighbor’s eyes, ever so briefly, something that might have been despair” (Wetmore 256). She offers help, but Mary Rose declines, and Corrine suggests she ask Robert to come into town from the ranch. Mary Rose admits that she does not want Robert at the house. She tells Corrine that she has been thinking a lot about her marriage. Mary Rose explains, “when I ask myself what is lost between Robert and me, . . . Well. How would I even know? Shit, I got my first cheerleading outfit when I was still in diapers. All of us did” (Wetmore 256-257). Mary Rose tells Corrine that she has realized “why we [women] were put on this earth. To cheer them [men] on. To smile and bring a little sunshine into the room. To prop them up and know them, and be nice

to everybody we meet. I married Robert when I was seventeen years old, . . . Is this what I am supposed to do? Cheer him on?" (Wetmore 257). That night, Corrine allows Mary Rose to share her thoughts and comforts her while she cries, then in the months that follow, she sees the stress take a physical toll, "watching her grow thin as a mesquite leaf, noticing the dark shadows under her eyes when she sits on the front porch and watches her daughter as if she might disappear at any moment" (Wetmore 255). Out in the oil fields pursuing a man who she believes is attempting to brutalize another young girl, Mary Rose carries out an act of rebellion against her dissatisfaction and her awakening. She will no longer be sidelined; she will no longer unquestioningly cheer the actions of men.

Corrine, Mary Rose, Jesse, and Debra Ann drive home in a quiet caravan. Suzanne is waiting at Mary Rose's house to care for the broken woman, and Corrine takes Debra Ann inside her own home for a warm bath. Corrine pledges to be there for Debra Ann "any time, as long as it's after ten a.m." (Wetmore 265), and she asks the little girl not to "tell anybody about Mrs. Whitehead firing that gun. We don't want anybody to suffer more than they need to" (Wetmore 265). Debra Ann agrees because "She never wanted anybody to suffer" (Wetmore 265). All evidence of that tumultuous summer, including Jesse's makeshift camp, is washed away when thunderstorms come in the days after the dust storm.

While Mary Rose's attempt at retribution is, thankfully, unsuccessful, at the hands of another young mother, Strickland experiences consequences for his habitual mistreatment of women. Karla's encounter with Strickland takes place after the trial; he drunkenly makes a pass, and when Karla rejects and embarrasses him, Strickland swings and tries to punch her. Strickland is dragged out to the parking lot by regulars at the restaurant who beat him up for publicly threatening a woman with violence. Not long after, the sheriff comes to the

restaurant asking questions about an incident later that night: Strickland, still drunk, was struck several times by a car in the oil field. He explains, "he suffered, . . . He wandered around in the oil patch all night and most of the next day. When we found him, he was covered head to toe in red mud and chiggers. Scorpions got at his ankles, and he has a bump on his head as big as a baseball, and two broken arms. The doctor says it's a miracle he's alive" (Wetmore 283). After being run over, Strickland experienced a night much like that experienced by Glory following the rape. He spends the evening wandering the oil fields and being maimed by the landscape, just as Glory spent a night in the dirt and then fought her way from Strickland's truck to Mary Rose's front porch. Although it is not perfect retribution because it does not force Strickland to take public responsibility for his actions, diminish his power in the community, or vindicate Glory, it comes pretty close.

Just as Corrine, Suzanne, and Debra Ann choose to cover up Mary Rose's violent breakdown, the women realize Karla is responsible for running over Strickland and choose to protect her. The narrator in Karla's chapter reveals that women who worked with her noticed "red mud on Karla's bumpers and the new dent in her driver's side door, the bounce in her step" (Wetmore 283), but they tell the sheriff they do not have any information on who might have hit Strickland with their car. Although Karla never admits to the attack, it becomes clear that, like Mary Rose, she sees through Patriarchal Surreality and is unsatisfied with "the way things are." Not only does she exact her revenge for Strickland's disrespectful behavior that night in the bar, but on the day after her eighteenth birthday, she packs her bags, takes her daughter, Diane, and the two move out of the small town. Unlike Mary Rose, who sacrifices herself attempting to redefine established societal structures, Karla follows in Ginny's footsteps, but she brings her daughter along. Karla leaves Odessa to try to find a place where

the influence of patriarchy and prejudice is not as strong. Like Glory, who leaves Odessa to escape her ruined reputation, Karla hopes to find a more promising future elsewhere. She is ambitious and wants to go to college. Years later, Karla and Diane will finally return to Odessa, and "Diane will stand nearly a foot taller than her mother. They will walk from one end of that town to the other, and no one will know who they are" (Wetmore 286). The only way that Karla can strive to be more than a teenage mother and then someone's wife is to leave Odessa behind. Karla breaks the cycle that portends an unjust outcome in Strickland's trial, fuels Corrine's lifetime of frustration, and leads to Mary Rose's breakdown. By doing so, she forges a new identity that is unrecognizable upon her return.

As women become aware of their existence within Patriarchal Surreality, their reactions vary. Mary Rose reacts impulsively with violence when the facade of Patriarchal Surreality fractures, exposing oppressive structures that societal gaslighting previously obscured. She nearly shoots an innocent man, and without the support of several women in her community, Odessa would have most certainly further ostracized her. Karla refuses to tolerate Strickland's sexual advances, facilitated by Patriarchal Surreality, but she manages to get her violent revenge in secret. Like Mary Rose, a community of women band together around Karla to protect her from law enforcement. While Lutie and Mary Rose act impulsively, literature provides contrasting examples of women whose reckoning with Patriarchal Surreality comes more gradually. Rather than a painful fracturing that instantly exposes societal gaslighting that has kept them in the dark, these women see through the cracks in the facade.

Lutie's story anchors *The Street*; however, the novel includes two additional voices of women that complicate its depiction of Black female identity in 1940s Harlem. Like Lutie,

Mrs. Hedges and Min desire independence. However, they, too, are thwarted by various elements of Patriarchal Surreality, including society's expectations of beauty and the interference of men. Mrs. Hedges and Min's stories, presented alongside Lutie's, help to further illustrate the confines that Patriarchal Surreality imposes upon women, especially Black women, in midcentury New York. Experiencing oppression leads both Min and Mrs. Hedges to conclude that life as a Black woman in the U.S. will always have its limitations, but they can make choices to ease their difficulties. These women choose to reside complacently within Patriarchal Surreality.

Mrs. Hedges

To live independently, Mrs. Hedges exploits Patriarchal Surreality by choosing to benefit from the hardships of people around her, especially the young women in the neighborhood. However, Mrs. Hedges' choice to participate in this inequitable system is complicated; her history includes rejection and trauma at the hands of both white and Black society. When Lutie inquires about the apartment on 116th Street, Mrs. Hedges is sitting in the front window of the building, where she can be found at nearly all hours, observing the street outside. That first day, Mrs. Hedges makes an intimidating impression; Lutie observes that she "was very black, she had a bandanna knotted tightly around her head . . . The woman's voice was rich. Pleasant. Yet the longer Lutie looked at her, the less she liked her" (Petry 5). Although Lutie does not know anything about her, she is unsettled by their initial encounter, explaining, "It was the woman's eyes. They were as still and as malignant as the eyes of a snake. She could see them quite plainly—flat eyes that stared at her—wandering over her body, inspecting and appraising her from head to foot" (Petry 6). Later, Lutie learns that Mrs. Hedges oversees young sex workers who share her apartment, and once Lutie

moves into the building, Mrs. Hedges offers her the opportunity to work for her. Lutie refuses and realizes that her unsettled feelings around the woman are warranted. Mrs. Hedges' experiences reveal that she has lived on the outskirts of society for most of her life, and Lutie's beauty and petite stature cause Mrs. Hedges' long-repressed memories to surface.

When thinking back on looking for work as a young Black woman, Mrs. Hedges recalls continuous rejection based on her unusual physical appearance. Walking into employment agencies, "there was an uncontrollable revulsion in the faces of the white people who looked at her. They stared at the blackness of her skin. They glanced at each other, tried in vain to control their faces or didn't bother to try at all, simply let her see what a monstrosity they thought she was" (Petry 241). Mrs. Hedges' is very tall and dark-complected. Her striking appearance, which does not meet the traditional standards for beauty for white women or women of color, prevents her from finding work. She hoped living in New York City would allow her to blend in with the crowd, but "she was so huge that the people there never really got used to the sight of her" (Petry 242). Prejudice impedes Mrs. Hedges' employment, and as a result, she must find other ways to support herself. With no income, Mrs. Hedges must depend on discarded scraps and trash that she finds on the city streets and in dumpsters. She admits, "Her big body had been filled with a gnawing, insatiable hunger that sent her prowling the streets at night" (Petry 241), digging through trash cans and dumpsters in search of food. On one of these late-night excursions, Mrs. Hedges meets a white man, Junto, and he offers her an opportunity to make money by collecting scrap metal and bottles. Not long after, Junto buys a building, and Mrs. Hedges begins working for him as the superintendent. At this stage in life, Mrs. Hedges's thinking is preoccupied with making money, for just as Lutie believes that wealth will be the answer to

all of her difficulties, Mrs. Hedges concludes that "if she had enough money she could pick out a man for herself and he would be glad to have her" (Petry 243). She believes that a woman's wealth is attractive no matter her physical appearance. As Junto expands his business ventures in the neighborhood, he continues to provide Mrs. Hedges with opportunities. Junto's influence grows as he expands his enterprises and gains "employees" like Mrs. Hedges; eventually, he holds authority over much of the neighborhood.

However, as quickly as Mrs. Hedges' work prospects improve when she meets Junto, her chance of "picking out a man when she has saved enough money" goes up in smoke. While working and living in one of Junto's buildings, Mrs. Hedges is trapped in a fire and badly burned. She fights for survival, and the fire and smoke nearly kill her as she forces her large body through a small basement window to escape. Even in this life-threatening situation, worry preoccupies Mrs. Hedges' thinking: "as she struggled, she kept thinking that all she needed to do was to get badly burned, and never as long as she lived would any man look at her and want her . . . No sum of money would be big enough to make them pretend to want her" (Petry 244). As she recovers in the hospital after the fire, Mrs. Hedges gives up hope that she will find a man willing to accept her for her money. She is devastated, but Junto admires her will to survive, and after she heals physically, he provides her with an apartment. While Junto's feelings appear to grow beyond admiration, Mrs. Hedges closes herself off, allowing Junto to provide for her but nothing more. Life experiences have taught Mrs. Hedges never to trust white people, and she admits that Junto is the only white man with whom she will associate. Mrs. Hedges tells herself that "even he would never want her as a woman . . . Scarred like this, hair burned off her head like this, she would never have any man's love. She never would have had it, anyway, she thought realistically. But she could

have bought it. This way she couldn't even buy it" (Petry 246). Although he hints at stronger feelings, Junto never expresses the depth of his admiration, and he refuses to challenge societal norms by pursuing romance with Mrs. Hedges.

Despite their stymied romantic relationship, after the fire, Mrs. Hedges and Junto are perpetually linked. He tells her, "We got to stay together after this. Close together. We can go a long way" (Petry 245). They cement their business relationship, and Mrs. Hedges provides valuable perspective and innovative suggestions. She explains that her ideas "came from looking at the street all day. There were so many people passing by, so many people with burdens too heavy for them, . . . she learned a lot just from looking at them" (Petry 251). Mrs. Hedges, resigned to her life as an outsider, spends her time observing the individuals and the interactions outside her window. This unique perspective helps her to see the racist and misogynistic structures that form the foundation for Patriarchal Surreality, and out of necessity, Mrs. Hedges chooses to exploit those structures. Although her story begins with the pursuit of companionship and an honest day's work, ultimately, rejection and hardships leave her with few opportunities. Eventually, Mrs. Hedges chooses to exploit the suffering and disillusioned people of color that she observes outside her window. She takes advantage of young women abandoned by their husbands, and she exploits Black men influenced by misogyny and rejection. Society beats them down, but Mrs. Hedges sells affection to soothe broken egos.

Society's rejection based on her physical appearance before the fire tormented Mrs. Hedges psychologically, but after being burned, she stands out even more as she is left physically disfigured and scarred. She believes herself to be so repulsive that "the determination never to expose herself to the prying, curious eyes of the world grew and

crystallized" (Petry 247). Junto provides Mrs. Hedges with an apartment, and she confines herself. Unwilling to venture outside, Mrs. Hedges takes in a young woman boarder whose husband recently deserted her. The boarder, Mary, cleans, does the shopping, and runs errands for the homebound woman. While living with Mrs. Hedges, Mary's confidence grows, and one night, a man stops by to visit her. Mrs. Hedges appraises the man while they wait for Mary to return. She believes he is "the kind that rarely got married, and when they did, they didn't stay put" (Petry 248). As Mrs. Hedges studies the young man in her living room, she decides to take advantage of his desire. She understands that the daily challenges of life disillusion him as a Black man in mid-century New York, and her suspicions are confirmed when the man admits that he does not work because "I got tired of cleaning up after white folk's leavings" (Petry 249). Mrs. Hedges begins to form a plan, realizing that this man is looking for companionship and sex to validate his masculinity in ways that society refuses to do so. She tells the man that if he wants to sleep with Mary, he will have to pay; "Mary would earn money, and she, Mrs. Hedges, would earn money from Mary's earnings" (Petry 249). Mrs. Hedges understands that "The street would provide plenty of customers. For there were so many men just like him who knew vaguely that they hadn't got anything out of life and knew clearly that they never would get it, . . . She would provide them with a means of escape in exchange for a few dollar bills" (Petry 250). According to Mrs. Hedges, "That was how it started. As simply and as easily as that" (Petry 250). She shares her plan with Junto, and he agrees to use his influence over the neighborhood to provide her with protection[12]. By choosing to facilitate and benefit from sex work, Mrs. Hedges takes advantage of circumstances that originate within Patriarchal Surreality. She chooses to participate, seeing an opportunity and deciding to exploit it rather than resist. Mrs. Hedges

needs to support herself financially, these young women need a place to live and a wage, and male customers are plentiful. She sees no reason why she should not take advantage of the situation.

Min

Min, like Mrs. Hedges, recognizes the confines of patriarchy and racism that influence her reality, and she, too, chooses not to resist. The novel introduces Min as a phantom-like woman who shares Jones' apartment. Lutie describes her as "a drab drudge so spineless and so limp she was like a soggy dishrag" (Petry 57) and "the shapeless whispering woman" (Petry 75). Lutie never sees beyond her initial impressions, but just as it does with Mrs. Hedges, the narrative meanders significantly into Min's perspective, revealing that the quiet character is complex and determined.

Before Lutie's arrival, Jones is comforted by Min's presence. He explains, "The sound of her talking would drive away his loneliness and she might stay a long time because her husband had deserted her" (Petry 95). However, not long after Lutie moves into Jones' building, his unhealthy obsession blooms, and as a result, his feelings toward Min change drastically. Jones admits, "he hated her. He wanted to hurt her, make her cringe away from him until she was as unhappy as he was" (Petry 95). He sees Min as an obstacle in the way of a relationship with Lutie. Min senses this shift in Jones' feelings and notices changes in his behavior. She realizes that her stable life with Jones has been upset by Lutie's arrival and decides to assert herself.

Despite Min's meek appearance, she is proactive when Jones threatens her living arrangement. Knowing that her relationship with Jones has deteriorated and realizing that she is at risk of losing her rent-free home, Min decides to sacrifice her savings, set aside for new

false teeth, and she asks Mrs. Hedges for help: “I thought mebbe you could tell me where I can find a root doctor who could help me. Because I ain’t going to be put out, . . . I can pay for it” (Petry 120). Min chooses to forgo one necessity, false teeth, to secure another, a place to live. On the bus ride to visit the root doctor, Min reaffirms her determination. Her feet begin to ache from standing, and Min thinks, “They could keep right on hurting, . . . because no matter what she had to go through, no matter how much money it cost, she wasn’t going to let Jones put her out. She swayed back and forth as the bus lurched, trying to wipe out the thought of the pain in her feet by determinedly repeating, ‘And I ain’t a-goin’ to be put out’” (Petry 122). Min hopes that, ultimately, the outcome of her visit to the root doctor will be worth the pain. Her determination to secure her place in Jones’ apartment is similar to Lutie’s determination for independence and financial security.

As Min waits for her chance to talk to the root doctor, the Prophet David, she acknowledges the enormity of her choice to visit him for advice. She realizes, “It was the first defiant gesture she had ever made. Up to now she had always accepted whatever happened to her without making any effort to avoid a situation or to change one” (Petry 126). Living within the confines of Patriarchal Surreality, Min has tolerated the challenges and injustices of life, but in this instance, for the first time, Min chooses to resist. Her train of thought continues: “she was frightened by her own audacity. For in coming here like this, in trying to prevent Jones from putting her out, she was actually making an effort to change a situation” (Petry 127). Lutie’s initial “spineless” impression was somewhat accurate, as Min realizes she can no longer stand by allowing life to happen to her. As a black woman in 1940s New York, she has few options, but Min takes what action she can, even if that means giving a man her savings in exchange for his help.

When it is Min's turn to go behind the curtain and discuss her problem with the Prophet David, his demeanor puts her at ease, and she candidly explains the situation. She is comforted by the man's remedies, but more importantly, Min realizes that "The satisfaction she felt was from the quiet way he had listened to her, giving her all of his attention. No one had ever done that before" (Petry 136). Min's experience with the Prophet David is pivotal to understanding the significance of her character. As she wraps up this interaction, she explains that throughout her life, people have dismissed her, including Jones, her madams, and a former preacher; Min has never felt heard or been taken seriously, "But this man had listened and been interested, and all the time she had talked he had never shifted his gaze, . . . she had got what she came after. And it had been simple and easy and not as expensive as she had expected" (Petry 137). The Prophet David provides Min with remedies that he claims will prevent Jones from kicking her out of the apartment, but even more importantly, he grants her an opportunity to talk and be heard, which elicits within her a new sense of self-respect.

Telling her story to a man who listened without interrupting or contradicting awakens in Min noticeable confidence and resolve. In the coming days, when Jones does not put Min out of his home and, in fact, appears intimidated and almost fearful, she attributes his change of attitude to the remedies from the Prophet David: a red liquid to drip into Jones' coffee each morning, a powder to carry with her at all times, a cross to hang over her bed, candles to burn for ten minutes each night, and a directive to thoroughly clean the apartment each day (Petry 135). Jones finds the cross over the bed unsettling, and he is suspicious of Min's new cleaning habits. However, even more consequential is Min's newly found confidence, noted by Mrs. Hedges when Min returns after visiting the Prophet: "Her voice was so full of life and confidence that Mrs. Hedges stared at her amazed" (Petry 138). Only minutes later,

Jones notices a difference in the way that Min unlocks the front door: "Normally Min's key was inserted in the lock timidly, with a vague groping movement, and when the lock finally clicked back, she stood there for a second as though overwhelmed by the sound it made. This key was being thrust in with assurance, and the door was pushed open immediately afterward . . . on top of that she slammed the door" (Petry 138). After her consultation, Min no longer resides in the stereotypical subjective place for a woman in Patriarchal Surreality. She is no longer intimidated by Jones, and he finds her confidence unsettling.

After she meets with the Prophet, Jones continues to scheme to get rid of Min, but he hesitates because "She had changed lately, now that he thought about it. She dominated the apartment. She cleaned it tirelessly, filled with some unknown source of strength that surged through her and showed up in numberless, subtle ways. She was always scrubbing and cleaning the apartment just as though it were hers" (Petry 293). By following the Prophet's directive to clean daily, Min further asserts herself by developing a sense of ownership over the space. Jones, who previously dominated Min so fiercely that she appeared physically diminished and "shapeless," is increasingly threatened by Min's growing presence in his apartment. Even Min is surprised when she realizes that this bit of independence and confidence has nurtured in her a desire for more; she met with the Prophet David to secure her place in Jones' home, but in the end, Min concludes that "she didn't want to stay here anymore" (Petry 354). Having spent so long convinced that a woman needed a man to live, Min is unsure at first: "Her eyes blinked at the thought. Her mind backed away from it and then approached it again—slowly . . . Strange as it seemed, it was true" (Petry 354). Min concludes that she wants to move out of the apartment, and she is proud of herself for having enough money left in her savings to do so.

Instinctively, Min knows that she must conceal from Jones her decision to leave the abusive relationship, and she plans to make a clean break in secret. Again, Min goes to Mrs. Hedges as she makes arrangements. Knowing the woman is always watching life on the street outside her window, she asks Mrs. Hedges to recruit a "pushcart moving man" (Petry 355). Send him, "'bout eleven,' she said, and was startled because her mouth seemed to know what she should do before her mind knew" (Petry 356). Min plans to take a few hours to pack her things and "really decide that she was going to get out, for it never paid to do things in a hurry. At the end of an hour or two, she would have her mind full made up, and she'd never regret leaving, because she would know it was the only thing she could have done under the circumstances" (Petry 356). Despite this plan to take her time and settle into her choice, a brief, final encounter with Jones thoroughly convinces her that she has made the right decision.

Min encounters Jones in the apartment, and he lashes out with such violence that Min fears for her life. He accuses her of spying on him, and as he menacingly approaches, Min visualizes the attack that is to come:

> He would probably kill her, she thought, and she waited for the feel of his heavy hands around her neck, for the violence of his foot, for he would kick her after he knocked her down. She knew how it would go, for her other husbands had taught her: first, the grip around the neck that pressed the windpipe out of position, so that the screams were choked off and no sound could emerge from her throat; and then a whole series of blows, and after that, after falling to the ground under the weight of the blows, the most painful part would come—the heavy work shoes landing with

force, sinking deep into the soft, fleshy parts of her body, her stomach, her behind. (Petry 257)

Min is no stranger to abusive relationships. Her experiences echo Mary Rose's, whose husband, Robert, uses violence and intimidation as a means of controlling his wife. Like many women, Min knows the pattern of both psychological and physical abuse, and she prepares herself. Her visualization of Jones' attack centers around the way that he will choke and silence her voice, one source of her new confidence. After sharing her story with the Prophet David, Min gains confidence and a sense of independence, but this encounter with Jones shows her how this man can easily overpower her and wrench away her control. As Jones raises his hand to strike, Min resigns herself to the attack: "So it would be the face first and the neck afterward" (Petry 358). In this moment, Min takes comfort in the memory of her encounter with the Prophet and "the quiet way he had listened to her talk" (Petry 358), and she makes the sign of the cross. Just as it has hanging over the bed, the symbol provokes fear in Jones, and he declares, "You god damn conjurin' whore!" (Petry 359) before "He walked out of the room without looking at her" (Petry 359). After Jones leaves, Min is in shock, unconsciously repeating over and over the excuse she gave him for entering the apartment. Although not as quickly or loudly as with the Prophet or Mrs. Hedges, Min finds her voice.

Jones' threatening behavior solidifies Min's determination to move out of the apartment. She realizes that "she got to believe that not having to pay rent was so important, and it really wasn't. Having room to breathe in meant much more. Lately she couldn't get any air in here" (Petry 362). Min decides she can no longer sacrifice her independence in exchange for a place to live. Like Lutie, who vows to protect Bub from negative influences

and live independently, Min finishes packing and is soon walking down the street with a hired stranger who pushes her belongings on his cart.

Determined as she was after her final encounter with Jones, as Min considers the challenges of living on her own as a Black woman in 1940s Harlem, reality begins to set in: "A woman living alone didn't stand much chance" (Petry 370). She considers the pushcart man: "Now this was a strong man and about her age . . . willing to work" (Petry 370). Min begins to have second thoughts about her decision to live alone; although the idea of independence and "room to breathe" was temporarily invigorating and helped her escape a dangerous relationship, Min acknowledges that freedom comes with challenges. She thinks of landlords who take advantage of single women living alone: men like Jones, who has harassed Lutie since the first day he laid eyes on her. Min acknowledges the security a woman can gain from having a male partner, claiming, "With a man around, there was a big difference in their attitude. If he was a strong man like this one, they were afraid to talk roughly" (Petry 371). With these difficulties in mind, Min makes the decision not to resist Patriarchal Surreality. Min uses her voice again; she moves closer to the man pushing her things and coquettishly asks, "you know anywhere a single lady can get a room? . . . but not on this street" (Petry 371). Like Jones, Min hopes the pushcart man will take her in and provide more security than she can attain independently.

After Min's proposition, the narrative vacates her perspective, leaving the reader to speculate, but the outcome is inconsequential. Greater significance lies in Min's decision to make the appeal. While Lutie relentlessly pursues her goal of financial security and independence, Min's conscious choice to pursue a partner rather than independence provides an alternative perspective. She is willing to knowingly relinquish freedom and embrace

traditional gender expectations in exchange for security. Min hides the confident spirit that took root when she was given the opportunity to share her story with the Prophet, grew as she claimed space and asserted herself in Jones' apartment, and finally bloomed when she realized she was ready to leave the abusive man for good. This fleeting independence is alluring, but Min is aware that no amount of confidence will guarantee her security. On the other hand, this strong man, pushing all her worldly possessions down the street, could offer Min more security than she has on her own. Min accepts the give-and-take nature of patriarchal society, realizing that a male partner can provide protection from the more damaging manifestations of Patriarchal Surreality.

Lutie

Min and Mrs. Hedges observe the pressures of racism and patriarchy, but both choose to participate and benefit as best they can in biased American society. On the other hand, no matter the limitations or challenges she experiences, Lutie continues to steadfastly believe in the possibility of the future, pursuing independence and security. She is optimistic, refusing to believe that she or her son will be another casualty of the street. Like Mrs. Hedges, Lutie is observant. She sees herself as different from the people around her:

> the same combination of circumstances had evidently made the Mrs. Hedges who sat in the street-floor window turn to running a fairly well-kept whorehouse—but unmistakably a whorehouse; and the Superintendent of the building—well, the street had pushed him into basements away from light and air until he was being eaten up by some horrible obsession; and still other streets had turned Min, the woman who lived with him, into a drab drudge so spineless and so limp she was like a soggy dishrag. None of these things

> would happen to her, Lutie decided, because she would fight back and never stop fighting back. (Petry 56-57)

Like Lutie, these characters face challenges beyond their control, but Lutie ignores the implications of societal circumstances. Based on her individualistic belief in the power of hard work and determination, she sees the people around her as examples of what can go wrong when one is personally or morally deficient. Lutie ignores this stark reality, continuing to fight back, working countless hours, attending night classes, and scrimping to get by. She does not realize that societal gaslighting, which shrouds a prejudiced reality in a facade of Patriarchal Surreality, provides the foundation for her belief in upward mobility. However, eventually, Lutie's experiences crack the facade and bring into focus the harsh reality.

While people of color comprise the majority of Lutie's neighborhood, white society significantly influences their lives. By perpetuating Patriarchal Surreality, white society shaped Lutie's mindset about wealth and upward mobility, created monsters like Jones, and looked the other way when both white and Black men traverse 116th Street to patronize Black women in brothels. Not only do these individuals of color live within Patriarchal Surreality that teaches them to devalue themselves and accept limitations, but at times, their lives are directly influenced by white individuals, like Old Man Junto, who wield power over people and dynamics, shaping the lives of individuals of color in the neighborhood.

When Lutie meets Boots Smith, he seems to be the answer to her prayers, but eventually, she learns that Old Man Junto controls Boots. Lutie's chance encounter in "The Junto," a bar named after its owner, appears to be the opportunity she needs. While sitting at the bar, Lutie begins to sing along to a song on the jukebox, and she gets the attention of the patrons, including Boots. He is impressed by her voice, and Boots offers Lutie the chance to

audition for a regular singing gig with his band. Unable to resist the opportunity for a steady, livable paycheck and a job doing something she loves, Lutie agrees to an audition the very next evening. Despite her excitement about Boots' offer, Lutie is one to have her guard up; experience has taught her that things will not always come as easily as they appear. She does her best to remain vigilant and in control during negotiations with Boots, realizing that his offer might be too good to be true. However, the promise of financial stability causes Lutie to ignore warning signs that would usually cause her to pause. On the evening they first meet, Lutie notices "no expression in his eyes, no softness, nothing to indicate that he would ever bother to lift a finger to help anyone but himself" (Petry 152). When she first meets Mrs. Hedges, Lutie makes a similar observation about her eyes: "They were as still and as malignant as the eyes of a snake . . . flat eyes that stared at her" (Petry 6). She is immediately suspicious and withholds her trust in Mrs. Hedges because of her lifeless eyes; however, Boots' life-changing offer clouds her judgment. She decides she can outwit him, admitting, "It wouldn't be easy to use him. But what she wanted she wanted so badly that she decided to gamble to get it" (Petry 152). Despite the warning signs, Lutie tells herself that she has Boots wrapped around her finger. She is encouraged after her audition when the band promises her the job. That night after the audition, Lutie entrances Boots. He tells her, "You know, baby, I could fall in love with you easy" (Petry 225), at the same time admitting to himself, "it's true. And that if he couldn't get her any other way, he just might marry her" (Petry 225). Despite his initial intrigue, Junto forces Boots to choose between his livelihood and his romantic interest in Lutie. After offering Lutie a ride home that night, they are headed out of the casino when one of the bouncers stops Boots and instructs him to visit Junto's bar; "He wanta see you" (Petry 227), the man says. Junto's request unsettles Boots, but Lutie does not notice.

She is flying high, dreaming about the possibilities for her and Bub now that Boots has promised her a reliable, paying position.

After dropping Lutie off at her apartment, Boots stops by the bar at Junto's request, and the old man declares, "That girl—Lutie Johnson— . . . You're to keep your hands off her. I've got other plans for her" (Petry 262). Without her knowledge or consent, Junto lays claim to Lutie, and Boots faces a dilemma. He reveals that in the same way that Junto has supported Mrs. Hedges, the old man has played a significant role in shaping Boots' opportunities. Should Boots choose to defy Junto's request, he runs the risk of sacrificing his financial security. Boots weighs his options, considering how Lutie stands out from other women. He admits that "He had had all kinds of girls . . . But this one—Lutie Johnson—was the first one he'd seen in a long time that he really wanted" (Petry 262-263). Boots acknowledges the unique way that Lutie carries herself. She is different because "There was a challenge in the way she walked with her head up, in the deft way she had avoided his attempts to make love to her" (Petry 263). Lutie's deliberate decision to avoid a relationship with Boots, despite its advantages, sets her apart from other women depicted in the novel, both black and white. Mrs. Hedges' circumstances leave her with few options to support herself financially other than sexually exploiting young women, and women like Mrs. Chandler, her friends, and her mother willingly perpetuate stereotypes that preserve their places as the privileged wives of white men. Lutie refuses to bend to society's expectations for Black women, and despite admiring her determination, Boots considers the experiences that led him to come to rely on Junto and concludes that he is unwilling to take a risk, even for a woman as beautiful and unique as Lutie Johnson.

Before Boots began working for Junto, he worked as a Pullman Porter, and his recollection of the experience comes in bursts, but even these flashes of memory are disturbing: "Porter this and Porter that. Boy. George. Nameless . . . No Name, hold my coat. No Name, brush me off. No Name, take my bags. No Name. No Name. Niggers steal. Lock your bag. Niggers lie. Where's my pocketbook? . . . Niggers rape. Cover yourself up. Didn't you see that nigger looking at you?" (Petry 264-265). Boots remembers the demeaning language, stereotypes, and constant suspicion that were inescapable during that time in his life, and despite Lutie's allure, he realizes, "She didn't weigh enough when she was balanced against a life of saying 'yes sir' to every white bastard who had the price of a Pullman ticket . . . One hundred Lutie Johnsons didn't weigh enough" (Petry 265). Like Lutie, who chooses to sacrifice for her son, Boots chooses to give up on the relationship because Junto is responsible for Boots' employment, his comfortable lifestyle, and helping him avoid the army after being drafted. Junto could easily strip Boots of his job or worse. Boots admits that he is willing to give up on Lutie, to give up on anyone and anything, to preserve the life he has now. He confesses,

> I'd sell anything I've got without stopping to think about it twice, because I don't intend to learn how to crawl again. Not for anybody.
>
> Because before the Pullmans there was Harlem during the depression. And he was an out-of-work piano-player shivering on street corners in a thin overcoat. The hunger hole in in his stomach had gaped as wide as the entrance to the subways. Cold nights he used to stand in doorways out of the wind, and sooner or later a white cop would come up and snarl, 'Move on, you!'" (Petry 265).

Considering his painful past and the possible consequences of defying Junto, Boots trades the possibility of a future with Lutie for his security.

After Boots agrees to Junto's request, the old man instructs him not to pay Lutie for singing but to string her along with gifts purchased with Junto's money. Boots warns Junto that it might take time for Lutie to overcome the fact that Junto is white, but the old man responds, "Money cures most things like that" (Petry 275). Because he manipulates the lives of many in the neighborhood, Junto believes he can coerce Lutie into bed. However, had she known about Junto's claim, Lutie's background—the lessons from her grandmother and her defiance of stereotypes about black women—would never allow her to compromise self-respect for intimacy with Junto. In the end, she pays a dire price for her refusal to bend to his demands.

While Boots and Junto compromise to determine her future, Lutie walks toward her building. As it does in the opening scenes of the novel, "The wind lifted the full folds of her skirt, blew the short, full coat away from her body" (Petry 228). However, with the prospect of Boots' offer looming large in her consciousness, the windy weather does not affect her. Believing that she has finally taken control of her future, "The cold couldn't reach through to her, even with this thin coat on . . . Because the fact that she wouldn't have to live on this street much longer served as a barrier against the cold" (Petry 228). Lutie watches as a woman chases a man from a building, yelling that he stole her pocketbook, and as if on cue, this incident reminds her why she is determined to leave this neighborhood. As the woman shouts, voices from the windows above yell down, telling the woman to shut up and go home (Petry 229). Lutie remarks, "No one could live on a street like this and stay decent. It would get them sooner or later, for it sucked the humanity out of people—slowly, surely,

inevitably" (Petry 229). Using her voice as a means of making a living, Lutie believes that she will be able to get Bub out of this environment just in time, and her pride blossoms:

> she and Bub were leaving streets like this. And the thought that she had been able to accomplish this alone, without help from anyone, made her open the street door of the apartment house with a vigorous push. It made her stand inside the door for a moment, not seeing the dimly lit hallway, but instead seeing herself and Bub living together in a big roomy place and Bub growing up fine and strong.
>
> The air from the street set her skirt to billowing around her long legs and, as she stood there smiling, her face and body glowing with triumph, she looked almost as though she were dancing. (Petry 230)

As Lutie enjoys this moment of triumph, Jones heads down the cellar stairs. He stops, turning to see who entered the building, and Lutie's moment is horrifically interrupted.

This meeting in the entryway occurs shortly after Jones trespassed in Lutie's apartment, and in Jones' mind, it is hardly coincidental. He tells himself his time has come; "he would have her now, tonight" (Petry 234). Thinking back to crumpling her blouse in his hands on the evening before, Jones blocks Lutie's path up the stairs, mumbling, "You're so sweet. You're so sweet. You little thing. You young little thing" (235). Unable to understand what Jones is saying, as "he was so excited that his voice came out thick and hoarse" (Petry 235), Lutie's only response is, "Don't" (Petry 235), as she turns to try to go back out through the front door of the building. However, Jones' pent-up desire and fabricated entitlement to Lutie's body are relentless. He restrains her: "his arm went around her waist. He was pulling her back, turning her around so that she faced him. He was dragging her toward the cellar

door" (Petry 235). Desperate to escape, Lutie scratches at his face, braces her feet, and grabs the banister, but Jones overpowers her.

The scene is horrific. Lutie "tried to scream, and when she opened her mouth, no sound came out" (Petry 236). Only moments earlier, Lutie's pride bloomed as she relished the fact that her voice would soon allow her to provide stability for her son, but as Jones' attack escalates, Lutie finds herself trapped in silence. She thinks, "this was worse than any nightmare, for there was no sound anywhere in this. There was only his face close to hers—a mouth open—and his straining, sweating body kept forcing her ever nearer that partly open cellar door" (Petry 236). Early in the novel, Lutie silences the instincts that warn her of Jones' ill intentions because she needs to find an apartment; when he physically attacks her, she is desperate to cry out, but Lutie is unable to make a sound. She cannot scream for help, but the silence finally breaks when Jones' growling dog bounds from his apartment: "The horror of it was not to be borne, for the man was trembling with his desire for her as he dragged her toward the cellar, and the dark hall was filled with the stench of the dog and the weight of his great body landing on her back" (Petry 236). In minutes as she enters her apartment building, Lutie goes from feeling empowered and hopeful to ambushed, silenced, and powerless.

Luckily, the dog snaps Lutie out of her paralysis, and finally, she "found her voice . . . She screamed until she could hear her own voice insanely shrieking up the stairs, pausing on the landings, turning the corners, going down the halls, gaining in volume as it started again to climb the stairs. And then her screams rushed back down the stair well until the whole building echoed and re-echoed with the frantic, desperate sound" (Petry 236). Lutie's screams bring Mrs. Hedges into the hallway, and the woman pulls Lutie from Jones' grasp,

ending the attack. As Lutie recovers, Mrs. Hedges warns Jones: "I just wanted to tell you for your own good, dearie, that it's Mr. Junto who's interested in Mis' Johnson. And I ain't goin' to tell you again to keep your hands off" (238). Although she appears to act in solidarity by protecting Lutie, Mrs. Hedges' warning further confirms Junto's influence.

Following these revelations divulging Junto's profound influence in the neighborhood, the reader is again dragged back into Jones' mind, where his thoughts amplify the horrors of this reality and reveal the influence of society's misogynistic gaslighting. Glimpses into Jones' thoughts reveal his rationalization of his intrusive behavior and his violent attack in the entryway of the apartment. Cynthia A. Stark explains that "Misogyny is enacted . . . primarily through the displacement building component of gaslighting: men who are credibly accused of abuse by women . . . punish women for those accusations by ascribing defects to them to 'explain' their accusations" (Start 227). Although Lutie never formally reports Jones' behavior, he practices victim-blaming in his mind by accusing Lutie of being responsible for his unacceptable behavior. Stark explains that victim-blaming is a form of displacement; in this case, "The accused concedes that he did something harmful to the accuser, but maintains that the victim brought the incident upon herself" (Start 228). Jones believes that Lutie deserved it.

Fixating on Mrs. Hedges' words that night, Jones begins to imagine a history between Lutie and Junto. He tells himself, "That was why Lutie had fought like that and screamed and couldn't stop [sic] She was in love with the white man, Junto, and she couldn't bear to have a black man touch her" (Petry 280-281). Jones' imagination runs away with this idea, torturing him with the image of Lutie naked in bed with Junto. Although he tries to put the idea out of his head, he begins to obsess over the possibility, which breeds resentment and feelings of

hatred. Following the attack, Jones considers giving Lutie a gift, but he cannot help but compare himself to the wealthy and powerful Junto. He thinks, "Junto probably gave her presents . . . What present could he give her that could compare with the things Junto could give her?" (Petry 282). Jones believes that Lutie would be easily charmed by wealth, yet he realizes he cannot compete with Junto's money and power. With these thoughts swirling in his head, Jones' resentment toward Lutie festers. He imagines Lutie's thoughts and feelings:

> Black men weren't good enough for her. He had seen women like that before . . . No use for men their own color. Well, he'd fix her. He'd fix her good . . . Her fighting against him as though he was so dirty she couldn't bear to have him touch her, her never looking at him when she went in and out of the building, her being frightened that night when she came to look at the apartment and they were up there together–all of it proved that she didn't like black men, had no use for them.
>
> So she belonged to a white man. Well, he would get back at both of them. Yes. He'd fix them good. (Petry 282-283)

Not only is Lutie unaware of the fact that Junto and Boots have commodified her, but she is also similarly unaware of Jones' growing resentment and the threat that he poses to her. She continues to hope that she and Bub can move into a different neighborhood and believes she possesses agency. However, her lack of control is shrouded in the facade of Patriarchal Surreality that destines her for violence and destruction.

Although Lutie believes she can outwit the system through careful observation and planning, she cannot overcome unseen obstacles. After her experience working for the Chandlers, she believes that "anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough

and figured it out carefully enough" (Petry 43). This confidence leads Lutie to the steps of the building on 116th Street, where she will meet Jones, Junto, and Boots Smith, characters who, ultimately, will all play their part in orchestrating Lutie's fate. This building is a harbinger of Lutie's demise, but she is unaware of its threat. Although the apartment is dark and stifling, it is Lutie's only option, and the situation deteriorates after Lutie claims this space as her own.

Unaware of how her life is controlled by Patriarchal Surreality and manipulated by different men, including Junto, Lutie's sense of personal agency diminishes when Junto exerts his influence and takes away her opportunity with Boots' band. Only then does Lutie begin to recognize the confines of her Patriarchal Surreality. Despite having promised her the singing job, the next time Lutie comes to the casino, Boots informs her that she will begin with unpaid training. Boots claims, "The guy who owns the Casino—guy named Junto—says you ain't ready yet" (Petry 304). Shocked by this unexpected about-face and unwilling to add an unpaid gig to her workload, Lutie quits. Heartbroken over losing what she thought was the opportunity that would change everything, Lutie is furious that she allowed herself to begin to hope that her goals were within reach. She doubles down on her efforts to move out of the building on 116th Street. Walking home from the casino after Boots retracts his offer, Lutie decides, "From now on they would have to live so carefully, so frugally, so miserly that each paycheck would yield a small sum to be put in the bank. After a while they would be able to move. It would be hard. She might as well get used to that too" (Petry 309). Although this determination sounds like the hardworking attitude that motivated Lutie at the novel's beginning, her motivation has shifted. Lutie is no longer only intrinsically motivated by the

desire to succeed and provide for her son, but now, her efforts also become fueled by rage directed at Junto and white men in general. As Lutie lays in bed that night,

> Her thoughts returned to Junto, and the bitterness and the hardness increased. In every direction, anywhere one turned, there was always the implacable figure of a white man blocking the way, so that it was impossible to escape. If she needed anything to spur her on, she thought, this fierce hatred, this deep contempt, for white people would do it. She would never forget Junto. She would keep her hatred of him alive. She would feed it as though it were a fire. (Petry 315).

As her hatred and bitterness increase, Lutie's fears and frustrations about money, which she tries to hide from Bub, begin to the surface, and more often, she loses control of her emotions.

As Lutie wrestles with the fact that the singing job is now out of reach, Jones schemes to find a way to enact revenge for Lutie's imagined affair with Junto. He is offended by Lutie's rejection and believes that "There wasn't anything he could think of, no way he could reach her" (Petry 283). However, as he took advantage of Bub's trust and entered Lutie's apartment without her permission, Jones decides to exploit his relationship with Lutie's son again. He thinks to himself, "He could get at the kid. He could fix the kid and none of them could stop him. They would never know who was responsible . . . he could hurt her through the kid" (Petry 283). After coming to this conclusion, Jones devises a plan. First, he designs a master key to open mailboxes in the neighborhood; to cover his tracks, he asks Min to run the errand and have the key made. Next, Jones claims he is working with the police and tells Bub he could make a little money doing "some detective work catching crooks" (Petry 298).

Jones explains, “There’s these crooks and the police need help to catch them. They’re using the mail and it ain’t easy to get them. You gotta be careful nobody sees you or they’ll know you’re working for the police . . . Now what you have to do is open mail boxes and bring the letters to me” (Petry 299). Jones believes that if he can get Bub to agree to the “work,” it will be only a matter of time before he gets caught in the act, leading not only to consequences for Bub, but also more difficulties for Lutie. However, when Jones makes his offer, Bub is instinctively suspicious, and he refuses.

In the meantime, Lutie is distracted from her son while seeking another singing opportunity. Lutie responds to an ad in the newspaper looking for performers for Broadway shows and nightclubs. However, when she shows up to audition, everything about the office is offensive, including the man holding the audition. His desk is a mess, covered in clippings from newspapers, magazines, photographs, vinyl records, and an ashtray overflowing with cigar butts. The man, Mr. Crosse, is similarly repulsive: “He was so fat that he appeared to be bursting out of his clothes. His vest gaped with the strain of the rolls of fat on his abdomen. Other rolls of fat completely obliterated his jaw line. He was chewing on an unlit cigar” (Petry 319). Despite the abhorrent setting, Lutie continues the audition, and the man encourages her: “You’ve got a good voice. Very good voice . . . I can practically guarantee you a job. At seventy-five dollars a week” (Petry 320). However, he informs Lutie that before her first paying gig, she must commit to six weeks of training, costing one hundred and twenty-five dollars. Again, Lutie’s dreams seemed within reach, only to be ripped away, and like she did when Boots told her she must sing without pay, Lutie gets up to leave the office immediately.

Seeing his prey slipping from his grasp, Mr. Crosse gives Lutie options. After she refuses an installment plan to cover the cost of the training, he stops her again: "You know a good-looking girl like you shouldn't have to worry about money, . . . In fact, if you and me can get together a coupla nights a week in Harlem, those lessons won't cost you a cent. No sir, not a cent" (Petry 321). Disgusted by the proposition, Lutie's repulsion toward white men intensifies. She thinks to herself, "if you were born black and not too ugly, this is what you get, this is what you find . . . This is the Superior race, . . . black, oily hair; slack, gross body; grease spots on his vest; wrinkled shirt collar; cigar ashes on his suit; small pig eyes engulfed in the fat of his face" (Petry 321-322). Lutie is overcome with rage, as she was after Boots informed her of Junto's decision about her job with the band. She grabs the inkwell from the man's desk and "hurled it full force in his face" (Petry 322). Frustration fuels Lutie's violence toward the man, and it foreshadows a more vicious attack. She feels the walls of Patriarchal Surreality closing in and begins to realize that no amount of hard work or careful planning will bring her dreams into reach. Lutie begins to see past the facade to the racist and patriarchal reality, and she begins to lash out against the structures that contain her.

After this particularly repulsive encounter, Lutie cannot contain her anger and frustration. On the way home, she admits that "She wished that it [the train] would go faster, make more noise, rock more wildly, because the tumultuous anger in her could only be quelled by violence" (Petry 322). Lutie cannot help but take stock of the injustices she has experienced throughout her life: "She thought of Mr. Crosse with a sudden access of hate that made her bite her lips; and then of Junto, who had prevented her from getting the job at the casino. She remembered the friends of the Chandlers who had thought of her as a nigger wench . . . And the hate in her increased" (Petry 323). Although she previously tolerated

racism and misogyny, believing that eventually she could overcome the challenges of daily life as a woman of color, Lutie's encounter with Mr. Crosse is the final straw. This exchange infiltrates the darkness of lifelong pervasive gaslighting. The facade gaslighting established prevented Lutie from understanding that daily prejudice is a part of a broader societal system, Patriarchal Surreality, that perpetuates the oppression of men, women, and children of color. Mr. Crosse's vulgar behavior brings reality into stark focus. Lutie concludes that the streets of Harlem are apparatuses in a prejudiced system: "Streets like the one she lived on were no accident. They were the North's lynch mobs, she thought bitterly; the method the big cities used to keep Negros in their place" (Petry 323-324). Just as fear stoked by lynching in the South could coerce individuals of color to acquiesce to the demands of white society, never-ending obstacles rooted in prejudice and a false American Dream kept the inhabitants of the street floundering. Lutie takes stock of the ways this structure stymied the men in her life: "she began thinking of Pop unable to get a job; Jim slowly disintegrating because he, too, couldn't get a job, and of all the subsequent wreck of their marriage; of Bub left to his own devices after school" (Petry 323-324). Like Jones, the circumstances in which Jim and her father live stunt their accomplishments, and Lutie begins to believe that the same circumstances destine Bub to end up like the black men who came before him.

Lutie visualizes Patriarchal Surreality as a wall society has slowly constructed around her. She acknowledges that "From the time she was born, she had been hemmed into an ever-narrowing space, until now she was very nearly walled in and the wall had been built up brick by brick by eager white hands" (Petry 323-324). Realizing that a never-ending cycle of hard work with little reward traps her, Lutie is overwhelmed by helplessness, frustration, and anger. Lutie's experience exemplifies what Ferraro refers to as a "nightmare state" (Ferraro

72), the surreality created by ongoing abuse. Lutie is abused on both a grand and intimate scale. Society teaches her to believe in opportunities that are inaccessible to her as a black woman, beginning in her days with the Chandlers. Like some of the women from Ferraro's real-life interviews, as more and more people betray her, Lutie's "trust in basic human goodness that allowed her to form relationships and feel safe in the world was obliterated" (Ferraro 73). That evening, Lutie tries but is unable to hide her frustration from Bub. He gets the feeling that Lutie is mad at him, and despite her repeated insistence that she is not, Bub continues to sense the intense emotions radiating from his mother. When she burns her hand making dinner, Lutie "couldn't check the rage that welled up in her. 'Damn being poor!' she shouted. 'God damn it!" (Petry 325). Witnessing his mother's frustration, Bub makes the fateful decision to agree to help Jones with the "undercover" work in hopes that he can earn enough money to alleviate some of his mother's stress.

Initially, Bub does not get caught stealing letters from mailboxes in the neighborhood. Jones opens the letters and "pays" him from the money inside, motivating Bub's continued participation. The boy becomes more confident in his "work," and eventually, he is proud to have enough money to buy a pair of earrings as a gift for his mother. However, that afternoon after he purchases the earrings, Bub goes to "collect" more letters for the super, and police detain him for tampering with the U.S. mail. Later, Lutie learns that Bub is being held in a children's shelter, and she becomes hysterical, desperate to help her son. Law enforcement informs Lutie that Bub will have a hearing in the Children's Court, and she assumes that she needs a lawyer. Like Mr. Crosse, who hoped to exploit Lutie's desire to become a paid singer, the first lawyer she consults sees a woman in distress and decides to take advantage of the situation. He demands two hundred dollars to take her son's case, and as Lutie leaves his

office, he thinks, “Now why in hell doesn’t she know she doesn’t need a lawyer? He shrugged his shoulders. It was like picking two hundred bucks up in the street” (Petry 392). Of course, Lutie does not have the money, but immediately, she begins desperately seeking a way to get the cash. Overwhelmed with frustration, rage, and shame, Lutie’s pursuit of the two hundred dollars leads her down a destructive path.

When Lutie is finally able to visit Bub at the shelter, she learns that he will be held for the week leading up to his hearing. She can only visit Bub briefly, and she spends much of her time anxiously analyzing their dire situation. She struggles when alone in their apartment and finally realizes that perhaps some of her challenges with Bub stemmed from his fear when left by himself in the dark, cramped space. Lutie struggles with the fact that as she worked tirelessly in pursuit of financial security, Bub was also trying to find a means, as an eight-year-old, to help support his mother and ease her preoccupation with money. Lutie concludes that “It was her fault he’d got into this trouble. No matter how she looked at it, it was her fault. It was always the mother’s fault when a kid got into trouble, because it meant she’d failed the kid somewhere . . . She was the one they ought to have arrested and taken to court” (Petry 405-406). Lutie is unaware that Jones manipulated Bub into participating in the theft as a means of retaliation for her refusal of his advances and her imagined affair with Junto. Throughout the novel, despite the many struggles that she and Bub face, Lutie never reaches out to Jim, to whom she is still married, or to her father; she is of the mindset that she must independently protect her son and provide him with stability. Lutie’s perspective in this situation and her fierce conviction that she must do it all echoes beliefs that Paula Giddings identifies as ingrained in women and society throughout the twentieth century.

Desperately, Lutie asks Boots Smith for the cash. She agrees to meet him at his apartment, and he promises he will give her the money. However, when she arrives, Boots introduces her to Junto, and Lutie learns that the two hundred dollars will come with strings attached. Taking Lutie into the bedroom while Junto waits in the living room, Boots claims, "Junto's the answer. He'll give it to you . . . All you got to do is be nice to him. Just be nice to him as long as he wants and the two hundred bucks is yours. And bein' nice to Junto pays off better than anything else I know" (Petry 421). In this moment, Lutie realizes that Old Man Junto, who denied her the opportunity to sing with Boots' band and intensified the challenges that have unraveled her life, is attempting to manipulate her further. Junto and Boots believe Lutie is finally desperate enough to give in to Junto's desires. As she was after the encounter with Mr. Crosse, the men's assumption fills Lutie with rage. She thinks, "I would like to kill him . . . It is as though he were a piece of that dirty street itself, tangible, close at hand, within reach" (Petry 422). Having previously started to recognize the ways that she experiences systematic oppression, at this point, the faces of her oppressors begin to come into focus.

Lutie realizes that Boots and Junto play significant roles in Patriarchal Surreality that has denied her stability and financial security. As Boots tries to convince Lutie to acquiesce to Junto, Lutie suddenly finds her voice; "It was hoarse, loud, furious. It contained the accumulated hate and the accumulated anger from all of the years of seeing the things she wanted slip past her without her ever having touched them" (Petry 422). She shouts, "Get him out of here!" (Petry 423). She imagines that "Junto has a brick in his hand. Just one brick. The final one needed to complete the wall that had been building up around her for years, and once that one last brick was shoved into place, she would be completely walled in"

(Petry 423). This final brick will complete the facade of Patriarchal Surreality, trapping Lutie in a never-ending cycle of oppression.

Despite her stark realization and the desperate need to help her son, Lutie refuses to let Boots and Junto coerce her into having sex. Lutie becomes more upset, and Boots tells Junto to leave but to return later, confident he can convince Lutie to change her mind. However, once Junto is gone, and Boots is alone with Lutie in the apartment, he revises the plan: "He hadn't intended to in the beginning, but he was going to trick him and Junto would never know the difference. Sure, Lutie would sleep with Junto, but he was going to have her first . . . this time a white man can have a black man's leavings" (Petry 423). Just as Jones felt he deserved to punish Lutie when Mrs. Hedges pulled her from his grasp and told him Junto had claimed her, Boots feels entitled to punish Lutie for the Junto's demands. He reveals, "Junto had pushed him hard, threatened him, nagged him about Lutie Johnson. This would be his revenge" (Petry 423). Lutie becomes a pawn wrestled back and forth by the whims of the two men.

As Boots forces himself on Lutie, the facade fractures. Lutie sees through Patriarchal Surreality that has disguised her oppression and kept her compliant, and she refuses to continue being a victim. She rages at the situation, society, and the men who have coveted and abused her; she "wanted to hit out at him, to reduce him to a speechless mass of flesh, to destroy him completely, because he was there in front of her and she could get at him and in getting at him she would find a violent outlet for the full sweep of her wrath" (Petry 428). Lutie indulges her violent impulse, striking out at Boots who becomes an "anonymous figure—a figure which her angry, resentment transformed into everything she had hated, everything she had fought against, everything that had served to frustrate her" (Petry 429).

With a heavy iron candle stick, Lutie hits Boots over and over, and "A lifetime of pent-up resentment went into the blows. Even after he lay motionless, she kept blindly striking at him" (Petry 430). Boots becomes a symbol of oppression: "First she vents her rage against the dirty, crowded street" (Petry 430). Next, Boots' lifeless body comes to represent the husband who betrayed her, the judgment-laden stares of white women, the hungry gaze of white men, and then Jones, the Super who tried to drag her down into the dark basement and rape her (Petry 430). Finally, Lutie imagines she is "striking at the white world which thrust black people into a walled enclosure from which there was no escape; and at the turn-of-events which had forced her to leave Bub alone while she was working so that he now faced reform school, now had a police record" (Petry 430). Lutie strikes out at the people and circumstances that have thwarted her success. Frustration, desperation, anger, and fear power her blows. For Lutie, this violent attack on Boots fully exposes American Patriarchal Surreality. Although the attack begins as self-defense, it morphs into violent retribution for the ways that Lutie has been continuously and systematically wronged by society and men, in particular.

Lutie makes a conscious decision not to report to law enforcement any of the trouble that she encounters on her path to this breaking point. She does not speak up about Jones' attempted rape; she does not report Boots' or Junto's coercion; she does not receive meaningful guidance from the court after the police detain her son. The one man that Lutie goes to for guidance, the lawyer, sees an opportunity to take advantage of a desperate woman and chooses to extort an unattainable sum of money for unnecessary services. Ultimately, the false reality that Lutie inhabits cannot withstand these compounding factors. She can no

longer rationalize her subjugation, and Lutie lashes out at an individual who represents the many ways that society has oppressed her.

When Lutie emerges from the cloud of overwhelming emotion and comes back to her senses after the vicious attack, she can see no path toward redemption. Boots is dead, the crime scene is horrific, and this violent murder seals her fate. Although Boots began the altercation by forcing himself on Lutie, she fears that her side of the story will come under suspicion if she were to report the incident. Lutie knows that as a black woman, no one will believe her version of events. She also begins to feel the weight of shame as she imagines what people will say, the stories that they will tell, and the assumptions that they will make about her as a mother. While Lutie has spent her life living as her grandmother taught her, avoiding behavior that could validate false stereotypes about black women, this single act negates all her efforts[13]. Lutie's experiences have depleted the hope that sustained her despite overwhelming circumstances. She believes there is no future for her in Harlem, no future for her as a mother. Faced with the reality of this impulsive, violent attack, Lutie believes that her only option is to abandon her son and flee. She goes to the train station and buys a one-way ticket to Chicago, leaving almost immediately. Lutie believes that Bub will be better off as a ward of the state. Sadly, her assumption is plausible; it is unlikely that she would find support from those in law enforcement or the justice system. Junto's influence over the neighborhood would most likely taint the investigation from the beginning. Perhaps, as she claimed, Bub would be more scarred knowing that he is the son of a murderer than by her abandonment.

Like Glory's reluctance to testify against Strickland in *Valentine*, Lutie's decision not to report Boots' attempted rape reflects a challenge faced by many real women in the United

States. In her book, Coates reveals that often, she struggled morally with the ways laws and the judicial system tied her hands. The intersectionality of her own identity added tension to her situation. Coates asks, "how could I, a Black woman, do that to another person of color in this country? How could I have a hand in oppression? . . . there are many descriptors that precede my hyphenated America. A Black woman. A wife. A mother. A public servant. A human being" (Coates 22). These different aspects of her identity were particularly relevant when preparing a young black woman to testify in front of a grand jury about the violent abuse she experienced at the hands of her fiancé. Coates recalls that she and the young woman "were the same age, born on the very same day. We even resembled each other" (Coates 55). Despite the significance of the young woman's sworn testimony, for Coates, the more significant conversation happened before the two ever entered the chambers, and a member of the grand jury confirmed their resemblance, asking if the two were related. Just as Mary Rose concludes that Aimee could easily have been Strickland's victim, Coates realizes that had circumstances been a bit different, she could have found herself in this victim's shoes.

As she prepared the woman for trial, Coates was careful with her language. She emphasized that the woman should simply tell the truth. Coates recalls that she was "careful not to use the word 'story.' I didn't want to imply that I was being cute and didn't believe her, that her testimony was conjured or embellished. I used the word 'truth' and implored her to speak hers" (Coates 57). However, despite Coates' efforts to encourage and assure the woman, she shows her apprehension when the woman begins to cry. Coates fears that the woman will choose not to testify against her attacker. She admits, "a victim's desire to go forward is almost irrelevant. Federal prosecutors are not the personal attorneys of an

individual victim. They advocate on behalf of the United States and all of the people who don't want to be victimized in the future" (Coates 67); however, she is conflicted by her personal opinions and experience with other women in similar positions. Coates reveals, at the same time, "I wanted her to come to her own conclusion about what she needed to do for herself and her child. I knew that it would be better for her to feel powerful against her abuser by making the choice to testify today" (Coates 65). The woman reveals that she fears Coates is judging her. She asks, "Do you think I'm stupid? . . . you think I'm weak, don't you? . . . I know you're judging me. I saw the way you looked at my ring. Do you wanna know why it's still there? . . . I can't get it off! . . . My hand is swollen [because of her fiancé's attack] and I can't take it off! I tried!" (Coates 65). Realizing that her face conveyed her apprehension, Coates begins to gain a better understanding of the woman's emotions during this interview: "she was projecting her own fears and assumptions of what others might think of her based on having judged others who had been in the very unfortunate position in which she now found herself. Now that she was the target of her own prior assessment that a woman victimized by her abuser was stupid, and it was intolerable" (Coates 67). Like these fictional characters, this young woman felt shame and blamed herself for allowing herself to be a victim. The facts of the attack are irrelevant to the woman as she takes on all the responsibility.

Coates explains the universality of the woman's emotions. She believes her feelings are the result of societal assumptions and judgment. Coates explains, "Our society denies the prevalence of domestic violence and actively seeks to discredit its victims . . . Our collective approach exerts an emotional, psychological, and physical hold over victims that is nearly as powerful as the hold their abusers have over them, and it has a chilling effect" (Coates 68).

This pressure from society encourages victims of abuse to stay silent, as the pain experienced when retelling and experiencing society's judgment is nearly as painful as the abuse itself. Society assumes that a woman experiencing abuse could escape or ask for help, but Coates describes the many factors and societal structures that make these solutions nearly unattainable. Coates elaborates, "We somehow have lulled ourselves into believing that the issue is black-and-white: stay or go. We ignore the economic, familial, and psychological dynamic that creates, for so many, a barrier to leaving. We belittle people for their choices and pretend the choices themselves don't feel like illusions" (Coates 68). Finally, Coates is honest with the woman, telling her that she has seen situations like hers go both ways–some women stay away from their abusers, and some go back. The woman insists that she will choose the former (Coates 70).

Coates' real-world experience lends credence to the experiences of fictional victims of sexual assault, abuse, and violence. In her exchange with the woman, Coates witnesses the effects societal structures can have on a victim, shaping the way that she views herself, rocking her self-confidence, and forcing her to reckon with feelings of guilt and shame in the aftermath of an attack. By connecting with this woman and sharing her experiences honestly and without judgment, Coates bolsters the victim's resolve. Her actions confirm her increased confidence when the victim surprises Coates by unexpectedly appearing in person to make her victim statement. As Coates hands her the printout of her written statement, "She made a point to take it with her left hand, displaying it to me awkwardly. The ring was gone" (Coates 72). Although the indent from the ring remains on the woman's finger, just as the physical and psychological wounds from the attack will endure, with the encouragement and

support of another woman, this young victim chose a step in the direction of regaining control over her identity and her future.

Although it ends with Boots' violent murder, Petry's novel serves as a biting critique of a system that disproportionately and unfairly stacks the odds against a young woman because of her race, gender, and socio-economic status. During her time with the Chandlers, Lutie comes to believe that "when one had money there were certain unpleasant things one could avoid" (Petry 49). However, unlike the white Chandler family, who benefit from generational wealth, society's racism and misogyny keep money and stability just out of Lutie's grasp. When Lutie sets out on her own, she encounters a society that harbors additional dangers. Not only does Lutie experience prejudice based on enduring stereotypes about women of color, but she also faces threats from several men. Confronted by the bloody scene in Boots' apartment, Lutie reckons with the fact that no matter her story, she will never have the power to control her narrative as the Chandlers did theirs. Her gender and the color of her skin dictate her future.

Lutie's violence is the culmination of a life mired in frustration, exploitation, and desperation, and her environment and the people around her serve as prolonged, provoking factors. It is difficult not to become attached to Petry's protagonist, rooting for her despite her mistakes, waiting for a break in the clouds and a beam of sunlight that might begin to warm her cold world. However, rather than incorporating this hope that might contribute to enduring societal gaslighting, which, from an early age, teaches people of color to believe in a reality where conforming to societal expectations is rewarded, Petry's work exposes the facade of Patriarchal Surreality. This "reality" and all its promises are a fiction constructed and maintained to keep those in power in control and appease the oppressed. Lutie does her

best to make the "right" choices in life, and yet, she loses everything she values. Petry's novel serves its purpose as readers side with Lutie, championing her determination, mourning the annihilation of her innocence, fearing for Bub's future, and forgiving her because her violent act is a direct, desperate response to circumstances of Patriarchal Surreality.

Lutie's decision to abandon Bub and leave New York City after murdering Boots echoes Glory's decision to leave Odessa. After working relentlessly to find her place in a society that relegates her to the outskirts, dismisses her, and disbelieves her, societal structures finally break these women. Unlike Min and Mrs. Hedges, who choose to secure places in the society that rejects them, Lutie and Glory cannot compromise and, therefore, have no choice but to leave. Glory leaves the U.S. for Mexico, where she will be with family and reunited with her mother and where she will no longer stand out because of her ethnicity, but also where she does not know the language, where again she might be seen as or feel like an outsider. Lutie takes a train to Chicago, where she will attempt to begin again but will no doubt face many of the same challenges and racism that she encountered in New York. These women will continue to live on the margins, outsiders, never entirely fitting in and never fully in control of the direction and narrative of their lives, but they will refuse to stop trying to find their place.

Through its sensational lens, Petry's novel depicts the circumstances that might lead a black woman in the 1940s to commit a horrendous, violent murder. Long before Crenshaw helped to disseminate contemporary theories of intersectionality, Petry's novel illustrates that it is not one singular circumstance that leads Lutie down this path. It is the intersectionality of her race, gender, and economic situation that culminates in Lutie's act of violence. As she claims after the police detain Bub, "the white world . . . thrust black people into a walled

enclosure from which there was no escape" (Petry 430). Published in 1946, Petry's novel prophetically describes what Crenshaw now defines as "the basement," a contemporary metaphor for the position of individuals outside the power structure who are vying for space in society.

Petry's novel is also illustrates an important truth that complicates the relationships between contemporary women. Publishing her book in 1946, Petry turned a spotlight on a reality that was all too real for many young black women in the 1930s and 40s. This publication of the novel was itself an unusual act of resistance. In *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*, Rebecca Traister explains:

> the movements to liberate women and African Americans have so often been understood as having been led by white women and black men. They are understood this way because white supremacy and patriarchy permit white women and black men greater access to money, and more proximity to the media that covers social movements and the politicians who respond to them, than black women have. (Traister 127)

Nearly seventy years after Petry allowed Lutie Johnson to become a violent conduit to express her rage against the unfairness of twentieth-century society in the U.S., contemporary women writers turn to violence in literature as a means to examine their place in society, better understand their own selves and relationships with both men and women, and express dissatisfaction with the fact that we are well into the twenty-*first* century, and there is still a long, long way to go before women's voices are recognized and valued like the voices of men. Glory, many of the women in Odessa, Mrs. Hedges, and Lutie each recognize the societal structures that limit their existence in U.S. society. However, unsupported by their

communities, these women have few choices beyond acquiescing to the oppression or being forced out entirely. Glory and Lutie have no choice but to flee, and Mrs. Hedges and most of the women in Odessa must find a way to endure their situations. Although these characters are unable to influence the patriarchal and prejudiced structures that circumscribe their lives, these strong women persevere in the face of this adversity, and so their narratives are valuable as real women make sense of their place in society in the United States. Each makes difficult and costly sacrifices: a home, a child, independence, and the lives of other women, in order to survive the harsh society they inhabit, and yet, these women persist.

CHAPTER FIVE

ON THE BRINK OF THE ABYSS

While some women cannot resist Patriarchal Surreality, others attempt to leap across the Abyss and conceive a different future. However, this choice has consequences. These women make the costly decision to resist patriarchal structures but sacrifice their integrity in the process. The white women in this chapter have greater access to power and opportunity, influencing their reactions to Patriarchal Surreality. Unlike Lutie, these women have the luxury of time to plan their response and, after the fact, the means or support necessary to carry on with their lives. Lutie is aware that the color of her skin will prejudice law enforcement after she murders Boots, but these women act brazenly and disregard possible consequences.

Kya

Throughout her life, Kya's position as an outsider exacerbates many of her challenges. As a little girl abandoned by her family, Kya learns to fend for herself, and the few times that she ventures into town, she experiences the cruelty of children and adults alike, who do not hesitate to insult and reject her. When Chase's body is discovered, and the police begin their investigation, Kya's reputation intensifies suspicions in Barkley Cove that she is responsible. However, after the police arrest her and during her trial, her lifetime of rejection becomes an asset that provokes an emotional reaction from the town. Coming face to face with the young woman they abandoned and neglected as a child, many of the

residents in Barkley Cove begin to regret their prejudice. She knows little about the court system and all but refuses to participate in her trial, but the townspeople's feelings of guilt influence their opinions and, ultimately, significantly impact the verdict.

Because of her reputation, the court provides Kya with experienced counsel, who leverages her reputation as the "Marsh Girl" to evoke the town's collective guilt and uses these feelings to her advantage. At first, Kya is appointed a young attorney, but when an experienced local hears of her case, he "came out of retirement and requested to represent her pro bono" (Owens 256). Her lawyer, Tom Milton, is intrigued by the case and the young woman because "Like everyone else, he had heard stories about the March Girl" (Owens 256). He does not hesitate to address Kya's reputation and the town's entrenched prejudice. Kya barely speaks to her attorney as he prepares for the trial, but he treats her with kindness and respect. Before the trial, he encourages her to consider a plea bargain, explaining, "considering how people in this town are prejudiced, you have to be prepared that it won't be easy for us to win" (Owens 287). Despite Milton's warning, Kya refuses, telling him, "I won't say anything that implies guilt. I will not go to prison . . . I won't stay in jail" (Owens 287). She implores Milton: "Please get me out of here. One way or—the other" (Owens 287). Kya, whose desperation and fear led her to contemplate suicide after Chase's attack, seems prepared to die, be it at the hands of the state or by her own. Milton pledges that he will do all he can (Owens 288), and hoping to negate the town's prejudice, he requests relocation for the trial. Like Milton, Judge Sims does not shy away from the discussion of Kya's reputation, but he denies Milton's request. Judge Sims addresses the court: "I accept that she has lived in unusual circumstances and been subjected to some prejudice, but I see no evidence that she has endured more prejudices than many people on trial in small towns all across this nation"

(Owens 259). Although he refuses to move the trial, Judge Sims is unbiased, and he will not tolerate prejudice of any kind. In the courtroom, he instructs the bailiff "to announce that anybody of any color or creed could sit anywhere they wanted in his courtroom, and if somebody didn't like that, they were free to leave. In fact, he'd make sure they did" (Owens 293). Judge Sims and Milton reiterate throughout the trial that they will not tolerate prejudice. However, these two men are unique in 1970s North Carolina. They provide a striking contrast to the prejudice expressed by Judge Rice and Strickland's lawyer, Clemens, in 1970s Texas even though the latter is likely a more accurate representation of an actual southern courtroom. Nevertheless, despite the town's prejudice against the Marsh Girl, Sims and Milton are determined to give Kya a fair chance.

Throughout the trial, the town's increasing guilt over the way they treated Kya undermines the prosecution's case and, ultimately, leads to her acquittal. By dragging her into the spotlight, the trial humanizes Kya and forces individuals in Barkley Cove to admit their cruelty. Members of the jury and spectators begin to empathize with Kya, and circumstances are to her advantage. Milton discredits the prosecution's largely circumstantial case, and Kya's whiteness gives her an advantage because it allows white members of the jury and spectators to identify with her more easily. During the trial, Sarah Singletary, the clerk at the Piggly Wiggly in Barkley Cove, recalls seeing Kya when she testifies to confirm her alibi: "I looked up as the bus stopped, and there was Miss Clark stepping off it. I pointed her out to the other checkout ladies" (Owens 325). Kya's appearance garners attention because "For once, she looked quite normal, dressed in a brown Sears, Roebuck skirt, white blouse, and flats. Shopkeepers busied about, tending customers, sweeping the sidewalk, everyone of them staring at her" (Owens 310). The quick glimpse of Kya looking "quite

normal," combined with testimony about Kya's romance with Chase and her respected work documenting flora and fauna in the marsh, helps some individuals in town see her in a different light. Tate's father, Scupper, experiences a moment of clarity during the trial, and his "face blazed with shame as he realized that he—like some of the ignorant villagers—had been prejudiced against Kya because she had grown up in the marsh . . . He was so proud of his son, how he had always known what he wanted and how to achieve it. Well, Kya had done the same against much bigger odds" (Owens 328). Individuals like Scupper gradually realize the injustice of their prejudice toward Kya, and Milton's closing statement forcefully reminds the jury and spectators that, collectively, Barkley Cove abandoned her, significantly influencing the unusual, solitary woman:

> I grew up in Barkley Cove, and when I was a younger man I heard the tall tales about the Marsh Girl . . . Many still call her that . . . in reality, she was only an abandoned child, a little girl surviving on her own in a swamp, hungry and cold, but we didn't help her . . . Instead we labeled and rejected her because we thought she was different . . . If we had taken her in as one of our own—I think that is what she would be today. If we had fed, clothed, and loved her, invited her into our churches and homes, we wouldn't be prejudiced against her. And I believe she would not be sitting here today accused of a crime. (Owens 340)

Milton concludes, "It is time, at last, for us to be fair to the Marsh Girl" (Owens 341). Milton's implication of collective responsibility resonates with people in town, and as they wait for the verdict, "It seemed that the village—not Kya—awaited judgment, and few felt the salacious joy they had expected at this juncture" (Owens 346). After ostracizing Kya and

immortalizing the legend of the Marsh Girl, many in town expected to take pleasure in seeing their suspicions of her savagery confirmed; however, having finally seen her, learned more about her, and eventually even empathized with the young woman, most conclude that her guilt is inconsequential. In the end, the town abandoned Kya, and if she did kill Chase in self-defense, they understand the role that society played in facilitating the tragedy.

There is a collective sense of relief when the jury acquits Kya. After the verdict, Sarah "scowled like everybody else but discovered that she was greatly relieved" (Owens 347). Mrs. Culpepper, the truant officer who tried to get Kya to go to school as a little girl and served on the jury, feels similarly. When the verdict is read, "A long tear trailed down Mrs. Culpepper's cheek, and then a shadow smile for the little swamp truant escaping again" (Owens 347). Others in the courtroom are also silently relieved: "Miss Pansy hoped no one saw her jaw relax" (Owens 347). By finding her not guilty, the town begins to atone for abandoning and turning its back on Kya. As time passes, "most everyone agreed the sheriff never should've arrested her . . . It had been truly cruel to treat a shy, natural creature that way" (Owens 360). After the trial, "Kya never went to Barkley Cove again in her life, and for the most part, she and Tate spent their time in the marsh alone. The villagers saw her only as a distant shape gliding through the fog, and over the years the mysteries of her story became legend, told over and over with buttermilk pancakes and hot pork sausages at the diner. The theories and gossip over how Chase Andrews died never stopped" (Owens 360). The trial exposes the damage caused by Barkley Cove's prejudice, and as further atonement, the town allows her to live the rest of her life in peace to make up for the years that she was ostracized and bullied.

While villagers never stop speculating about Chase's demise, it is not until after Kya's death that Tate discovers that Kya is, in fact, responsible. Searching for Kya's will under the floorboards in the kitchen, Tate finds evidence that confirms Kya's role in the murder: a poem entitled "The Firefly" written by Kya's favorite poet, Amanda Hamilton, and the shell necklace that was conspicuously missing from Chase's neck when his body was found. "The Firefly" is among drafts of other Hamilton poems, "most of them unfinished, with lines crossed out and some words rewritten in the margin in the poet's handwriting—*Kya's handwriting*" (Owens 366). Tate realizes that Kya published poetry throughout her life, and "Amanda Hamilton" was her pen name. As he reads the poem, Tate realizes it recounts Chase's death: "Luring him was easy / . . . The last step, a trap. / Down, down he falls, / His eyes still holding mine / Until they see another world" (Owens 367). Tate opens a box and finds the shell necklace, originally a gift from Kya to Chase, and the evidence proving Kya's guilt. Besides shock and disbelief, Tate provides very little commentary when he discovers the truth, but overall, Owens' novel glorifies Kya for her cunning ability to outsmart authorities and, eventually, for taking the law into her own hands. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator claims, "When cornered, desperate, or isolated, man reverts to those instincts that aim straight at survival. Quick and just . . . It is not a morality, but simple math" (Owens 8). After Chase's attack, Kya lives in fear that he could find her again at any moment, so she lures him to the water tower and pushes him to his death. But is Kya's solution just? Rightfully, Kya does not trust the people in Barkley Cove and refuses to go to them for help. However, had Kya chosen to voice her experience with Chase, perhaps her vulnerability could have helped to expose the societal structures in her small town that allowed Chase to become a misogynistic philanderer and rapist. Because she quietly "took

care of the problem herself," the town must acknowledge their role in shaping Kya into a woman who might be capable of murder, but they can overlook the root of the problem. Patriarchal Surreality that enabled Chase Andrews goes unexamined, remaining veiled by generational gaslighting.

Amy

By ridding Barkley Cove of Chase Andrews, Kya regains her sense of safety. Mercifully, she chooses a means of killing by which his death comes swiftly, and although the trial confirms rumors that she and Chase had a relationship, his reputation remains intact. At no point are Chase's threats or his attempt to rape Kya used as evidence to claim the murder could have been committed in self-defense. In contrast, Amy deliberately intends to destroy Nick's reputation and possibly end his life if a jury were to convict him of murder. By leaving behind the contrived diary corroborated by manipulative "clues," Amy implicates Nick and undermines her husband's version of events. She "punishes" him for his perceived wrongs and shortcomings. When she reconsiders her plan and decides to return to her husband, she murders her high school boyfriend, Desi, who serves as a scapegoat to exonerate Nick from the crime that never occurred. Although Nick is the prime suspect while Amy is missing, after her "escape," she claims Desi was kidnapped and held her hostage in his lake house until Amy was able to brutally murder him and escape. Before, during, and after her disappearance, Amy wields her white woman-ness as a weapon, exploits her access to power, and weaves a narrative that defines her own alternate reality, gaslit by manipulation and lies. Ultimately, once she decides to make the miraculous and triumphant return of a "survivor," Amy remains trapped by her conceived false reality and entrenched in Patriarchal Surreality.

As the search for Amy gets underway, individuals from North Carthage, eager to help with the investigation, come forward with stories about Amy that Nick finds hard to believe. Nick is surprised when his old friend, Stucks Buckley, appears to aid in the search. Stucks tells Nick and Rand Elliott about a time when Amy made a special trip to bring him a soda after seeing him painting a house on a hot day. Stucks recalls, "She's such a sweet person" (Flynn 152). Nick's knowledge of Amy contradicts Stucks' story, and he thinks to himself, "This was a lie. Amy cared so little for Stucks or his refreshment that she wouldn't have bothered to piss in a cup for him" (Flynn 152). As these inconsistencies add up, Nick condemns the public's sympathy for his missing wife. He explains, "Maybe it was the journalist in me, but facts were facts, and people didn't get to turn Amy into everyone's beloved best friend just because it was emotionally expedient" (Flynn 152). Nick and Amy's relationship was so icy that he cannot bring himself to believe in the warm and friendly version of Amy recounted by individuals in the community.

In addition to questioning Stuck's description of Amy, Nick is surprised when detectives ask him about Noelle Hawthorne, a woman who lives in the couple's neighborhood. Nick did not think his wife had any friends in Missouri, but according to the police, Noelle claims to have been Amy's best friend. Nick dismisses the assertion: "That happens to Amy a lot, . . . She talks to people once, and they latch on. It's creepy" (Flynn 123). Initially, Amy's parents corroborate Nick's claim that the friendship must have been a one-sided fantasy. However, later in the investigation, the detectives explain, "the Hawthornes' living room is covered with photos of Noelle and your wife" (Flynn 246). Nick struggles to accept this relationship, going as far as asking the police if the woman in the photos was Amy or if they could have been faked. As Amy knew he would, Nick quickly

dismisses claims from people like Noelle and Stucks, and when physical evidence refutes Nick's narrative, his contradictions further undermine the police's trust in him.

Later in the novel, Amy reveals that she intentionally cultivated relationships and her reputation in North Carthage to benefit her plan. She explains, "I'd been careful to be low-maintenance, easygoing, cheerful, all those things people want women to be. I'd waved to neighbors, I ran errands for Mo's friends, I once brought cola to the ever-soiled Stucks Buckley" (Flynn 355). In addition to charming acquaintances, Amy carefully manipulates Noelle, sharing exaggerated and fabricated "details" of her marriage, arming her friend with information to further erode Nick's version of events after Amy's disappearance. Real Amy reveals that Noelle was her "vacant-brained friend . . . Nice enough but with a soul made of plastic–easy to mold" (Flynn 347), and she fulfilled an important purpose. Noelle believes their friendship had been genuine, but Amy explains, "I knew I needed a pliant friend for my plan, someone I could load up with awful stories about Nick, someone who would become overly attached to me, someone who'd be easy to manipulate, who wouldn't think too hard about anything I said because she felt privileged to hear it" (Flynn 347). When Nick is out of the house, Amy spends her time with Noelle and even goes on float trips and to the zoo with Noelle and her kids. Real Amy admits that the time with Noelle was torture, but the sacrifice pays off after her disappearance when Noelle behaves just as Amy anticipated. She becomes the suspicious best friend, casting doubt on Nick by revealing intimate and damaging details of Nick and Amy's marriage. Noelle drops her biggest bombshell during a televised candlelight vigil in Amy's honor. From the back of the crowd, a pregnant Noelle and her triplet toddlers push their way to the stage, where Nick's microphone picks up Noelle's hysteria. Her voice booms over the crowd, claiming that when she disappeared, Amy had just

discovered that she was pregnant. Amy watches the press conference and thinks, “Thank you, Noelle Hawthrone, the world knows it now, you little idiot” (Flynn 346). Not only does Noelle serve her purpose by revealing that Amy is pregnant, but Noelle’s urine unknowingly helped Amy falsify a pregnancy test. Detectives question Amy’s doctor, and although it seems outlandish to Nick, Amy’s medical records confirm the pregnancy. After Noelle shared with Amy that she was pregnant again, Amy conceived another damning aspect of her plan. She decided to fake her pregnancy: “Nick gets another motive, I get to be sweet missing pregnant lady” (Flynn 347). Like her friendship with Noelle, Amy reveals that the unborn child is a fabricated detail to help condemn her husband.

In the days after executing her plan, Amy relishes her new sense of freedom. She explains, “I’m so much happier now that I’m dead . . . It’s been only a matter of hours, but I feel better already: loose joints, wavy muscles. At one point this morning, I realized my face felt strange, different. I looked in the rearview mirror . . . and I realized I was smiling” (Flynn 295). At this point, Amy lives in a liminal space: beyond the confines of her role as a wife and outside of her parents’ and society’s expectation that she serve as the living embodiment of fictional Amazing Amy. Amy describes this space as “the real world” (Flynn 376), where she is independent, can make choices, and lives for herself. As Amy drives away from North Carthage, she catches herself smiling as she basks in her power and her ability to weaponize her white womanhood.

However, just as she eventually becomes dissatisfied with playing the role of Nick’s wife, Amy’s life in this liminal space loses its luster in a little over one week when Amy realizes that she is less prepared than she anticipated. She admits, “I didn’t ever have to actually budget . . . My parents never bothered teaching me this, and so they left me

unprepared for the real world" (Flynn 376). Despite Amy's extensive plan and the year of preparation, she realizes that her affluent background has afforded her little understanding of finances, and the nine thousand dollars in cash she saved will not sustain her long.

As Amy becomes nervous about her finances, she also becomes suspicious of Jeff and Greta, two people she met after moving into a seedy Ozark motel. Amy befriends the two separately, but as Jeff and Greta become closer friends, Amy begins to fear that they are planning to rob her or suspect her real identity. One evening after letting Jeff and Greta into her room, Amy thinks, "what a fool I am, to have let these two people inside. To have assumed I could control them, when they are feral creatures, people used to finding the angle, exploiting the weakness, always needing, whereas I am new to this. Needing. Those people who keep backyard pumas and living-room chimps—this must be how they feel when their adorable pet rips them open" (Flynn 380). While Amy easily controlled Noelle and others in North Carthage, Jeff and Greta seem to live by another set of rules. She concludes that Jeff and Greta do not experience the same societal pressures present in her suburban town. There is something different about Jeff and Greta, a savagery or desperation that makes them more dangerous than Amy's other "friends." Despite Amy's misgivings that night in her motel room, a white lie about not feeling well gets Jeff and Greta to leave, and later, when Jeff shows up offering Amy fifty dollars for a "Coupla hours" (Flynn 381) of work, Amy takes him up on the opportunity, ignoring her instincts.

After Amy agrees to the gig, Jeff tells her to wear a swimsuit, "the full one, the one you can really swim in" (Flynn 381), and the two of them drive to the job: the dock below a lakeside restaurant. Jeff admits that he has recruited Amy to help him steal fish to sell, and Amy realizes that, like her, Jeff is also playing a part: "He isn't a Grizzly Adams, guitar-

playing, peace-loving granola guy at all. He is a redneck thief who wants to believe that he's more complicated than that" (Flynn 382). Despite noting this similarity, Amy does not extrapolate that in addition to deception, Jeff might share Amy's proclivity for manipulation. Instead, the illicit opportunity exhilarates her, and although her past self would have refused to take part, she admits that "Dead Amy," is "fairly interested. How many women can say they were part of a fish smuggling ring? 'I' am game. I have become game again since I died. All the things I disliked or feared, all the limits I had, they've slid off me. 'I' can do pretty much anything. A ghost has that freedom" (Flynn 382-383). After Amy and Jeff finish fishing, they are covered in blood and viscera. Jeff tells Amy they need to wash off before getting back into his car. Amy hesitates, but she eventually agrees, leaves her money belt wrapped in her dress on the shore. She swims out into the lake, and as she comes up for air, she realizes that Jeff is swimming quickly toward shore. Afraid he may be headed for her money belt, Amy races back and barely reaches her possessions first. The following day, Amy's instincts again warn her not to trust Jeff. Upon waking up, she admits, "There was something about Jeff and that race to the shoreline, toward my bundled dress and my money belt" (Flynn 402). Amy is unsure if her suspicions of Jeff and Greta are well-founded or if she is "being paranoid" (Flynn 402), but with her nerves in tatters, she realizes that she has revealed too much to her new "friends," and she decides that it is time to move on.

However, before Amy has time to clean her cabin and leave, Jeff and Greta knock loudly on her door, and Amy's fears are confirmed. Under the guise of saying goodbye, the two politely force their way in, and Amy considers "screaming or slamming the door, but I don't think either will go well. Better to pretend everything is fine and hope that is true" (Flynn 409). As Amy watches, Jeff goes through the cabinets and drawers in the room,

claiming that he's helping her prepare to leave: “You got to clear everything out” (Flynn 409). In reality, he is searching for her cash, and when he does not find it, they demand that Amy hand over her money. Jeff and Greta confront Amy with the inconsistencies in the stories that she told each of them separately, and when Amy threatens to call the police, Greta tells her, “You’re hiding . . . you’re not going to call the police. So just give us the money” (Flynn 410). Amy continues to refuse, and “Greta swings toward me, shoves me against the wall, one hand smashed over my face, and with the other, she pulls up my dress, yanks off the money belt” (Flynn 411). Despite Amy’s ability to inflict psychological violence, she does not fight back when Greta attacks her physically. Amy explains, “the truth is, I don’t know how to fight, and there are two of them, and it doesn’t seem worth it . . . I’ve never been hit. I’m scared of getting hurt by someone else” (Flynn 411). Jeff and Greta take all of Amy’s cash, and on the way out the door, Greta tells Amy, “Next place you go, be more careful, okay? You gotta not look like a girl traveling by herself, hiding out” (Flynn 412). Amy, who believes she can manipulate almost anyone to get life to go her way, has been strong-armed into handing over more than eight thousand dollars in cash, her only means of supporting herself after disappearing.

Amy’s encounter with Jeff and Greta reveals a weakness in Amy’s character. Her lifestyle, upbringing, education, and wealth have instilled in her a sense of entitlement and superiority. She believes she has a profound understanding of human nature and an uncanny ability to manipulate people. However, Amy’s interactions with Jeff and Greta reveal the shortsightedness of Amy’s assumptions. When Amy begins to distrust Jeff and Greta, she thinks to herself, “what a fool I am . . . To have assumed I could control them, when they are feral creatures, people used to finding the angle, exploiting the weakness, always needing, . .

. Those people who keep backyard pumas and living-room chimps—this must be how they feel when their adorable pet rips them open" (Flynn 380). In reality, the structures of misogyny and patriarchy perform differently in different societal arenas. Amy understands societal expectations and unwritten rules in upper-echelon New York City and the suburban U.S., but Jeff and Greta come from different "stock" and play by different rules. Manipulation that works on acquaintances in North Carthage, the diary's public audience, the media, and detectives does not work on Jeff and Greta. These two do not feel sympathy for Amy. When Jeff and Greta turn on her, Amy asks Greta if Jeff talked her into the robbery. In Amy's world of Noelle Hawthornes, women who hang on her every word, admire, and even worship her for her beauty and charisma, Amy expects Greta to feel the same, but Greta replies, "I talked Jeff into it" (Flynn 410). Amy brutally manipulated Noelle, but she does not anticipate similar ruthlessness from another woman. This encounter sends her careening back into the world that she chose to escape, where she will also find herself trapped by her own web of deception. After encountering individuals who are not influenced by her good looks and charm, Amy chooses to return to the reality that she knows, affluence, influence, and Patriarchal Surreality.

While Amy revises her plan in the Ozarks, Nick digs deeper into her past, learning more about his wife and learning that she has a history of cruel manipulation. It becomes evident that Amy has long been aware of her power and privilege as a stereotypically beautiful, smart, and admired white woman. In high school when she was only fifteen, Amy turned on Hilary Handy, who had previously been a close friend, and orchestrated a plan to get Hilary expelled from school. Hilary tells Nick that toward the end of their friendship, Amy started "getting me to do things . . . she starts setting me up. She asks if she can color

my hair the same blond as hers, . . . She has me start prank calling her house, telling her parents I'm the new Amazing Amy . . . one time she had me run up to her mom and tell her I was going to get rid of Amy" (Flynn 388-389). After laying this groundwork, Amy has a terrible "accident" and tells the administration at their school that an "obsessed" (Flynn 389) Hilary attacked her. In actuality, Amy threw herself down a flight of stairs, breaking ribs and causing other injuries. After seeing the "evidence," which included friends who revealed Amy had been "so frightened" (Flynn 390) of Hilary before the attack, school administration believed Amy's narrative of events, and Hilary was expelled. Although Amy fabricated the "evidence," adults failed to realize the truth. Amy's initial success manipulating her friends and school administration fuels her confidence that leads to future manipulation. In her early thirties, Amy felt wronged by Tommy O'Hara after he broke off their romance. After the breakup, Amy showed up at his apartment one last time, brought burgers and a DVD, and eventually, the impromptu date night led to consensual sex. Not long after when detectives knock on Tommy's door, he learns that immediately following their encounter, Amy went to the police and claimed that he raped her. Just as she did in high school, Amy inflicted injuries on herself, including ligature marks on her wrists, to lend credibility to her claims. The officers searched Tommy's apartment and found neckties tucked into the headboard of his bed—ties that he does not recognize, but that could have caused the marks on Amy's wrists. Amy escalated in Tommy's case as she chose to involve law enforcement. Her deliberate manipulation of the situations with Tommy and Hilary is confirmed when they each receive anonymous letters claiming responsibility and rebuking them for "all they had done" to Amy. Hilary explains, "Amy wanted people to believe she really was perfect. And as we got to be friends, I got to know her. And she wasn't perfect . . . She got rid of me because I know she

wasn't perfect" (Flynn 390). Nick and his lawyers cannot use the information provided by Hilary and Tommy, but this insight into Amy's character inspires Nick. He realizes that Amy's ego demands one of two things: "for me to learn my lesson and fry like the bad boy I was; or for me to learn my lesson and love her the way she deserved and be a good, obedient, chastised, dickless little boy" (Flynn 399). Nick realizes that, like Amy, he, too, can be manipulative, and he decides to use the media coverage to his advantage.

Nick assumes, accurately, that he can manipulate Amy via the media so she will reveal herself and absolve him from the murder charge. And as Amy watches press conferences and interviews, her resolve to complete the frame-up by killing herself begins to weaken. At every opportunity, Nick publicly proclaims his love for Amy and begs to get her back. In an ill-advised, impromptu, half-drunk interview, Nick proclaims, "I failed my wife so entirely. I have been so wrong . . . I love her. I need her to be okay. She has to be okay. I have so much to make up to her" (Flynn 404). When asked how he will make up for his failure, he explains, "First, I'm going to find her and bring her home . . . Then? Whatever she needs from me, I'll give her. From now on" (Flynn 405). Based on what she sees in the media, Amy begins to believe that she has regained control of Nick. She explains, "My husband loved me. Or at least last night he loved me. While I was plotting his doom in my crummy little cabin that smells of moldy towel, he loved me" (Flynn 406). Amy is not ready to back out of her plan altogether, but she hesitates, tempted by her desire to reclaim power over Nick. Biding her time before she finally decides to return, Amy reaches out to Desi Collings, her wealthy boyfriend from high school, for financial help.

Before she disappeared, Amy always told family and friends, including Nick, that Desi (like Hilary and Tommy) was obsessed, trying desperately to get her back after she

ended their relationship. She claims that after their breakup at boarding school, he became "a ghostly figure in dark blazers, leaning against wintry, leafless oak trees. Amy returned from a dance on February night to find him lying on her bed, naked, on top of the covers, groggy from a very marginal pill overdose" (Flynn 111). While both Hilary and Tommy cut Amy off, Desi remains in contact with her as adults and even during her marriage. According to Nick, "he still phoned her, . . . and several times a year sent her thick, padded envelopes that Amy tossed unopened" (Flynn 111) into the trash. In truth, Amy's claims about Desi are as false as her claims about Hilary and Tommy. Amy admits, "I'd always like that lie about Desi trying to kill himself over me. He had truly been devastated by our breakup, and he'd been really annoying, creepy, hanging around campus, hoping I'd take him back. So he might as well have attempted suicide" (Flynn 437-438). Throughout her life, she has pathologically lied about Desi, manipulating friends and family to turn against him, and she assumes she can manipulate Desi. Amy calls, and immediately, he drives from nearby St. Louis to meet her. Amy asks for money, but Desi insists she stay in his "lake house." She weighs her options, and ultimately, Amy cannot resist the luxury of Desi's offer: "Desi's lake house would have a grand kitchen, it would have rooms I could traipse around in . . . The house would have Wi-Fi and cable . . . and a gaping bathtub and plush robes . . . It would have Desi, too, but Desi could be managed" (Flynn 440). Knowing that Desi has been infatuated with her for nearly all his life, Amy believes she can use his adoration and attraction against him, maintaining control with her beauty and sexuality. However, when Amy shows up battered and bloody on Nick's doorstep, it is clear that something went terribly wrong at Desi's lake house. Amy collapses into her husband, and the ever-present crowd of journalists and newscasters snap photos, documenting the reunion for Amy's adoring public.

After a brutal attack, kidnapping, and repeated sexual assault, Amy tells Nick and the police that she finally escaped and made it home. The physical evidence of Amy's attack is extensive. Nick explains, "Her ankles were ringed in dark violet. From one limp wrist dangled a piece of twine . . . Her face was bruised, her lips swollen . . . her entire midsection was stained with dried blood" (Flynn 495). Being held captive in the lake house, Amy claims that she had no choice but to kill her ex-boyfriend to escape. Shortly after she arrives at the lake house, Amy notices that Desi is reluctant to grant her requests. She asks for cash, but Desi assures her she will have no use for it; he will provide for all her needs. In case of an emergency, Desi reluctantly gives her forty dollars, and Amy wonders if she may have "made a very big mistake" (Flynn 456). By withholding money, Desi deprives Amy of independence and the option to leave. In the following days, he spends more and more time at the lake house. Desi starts controlling Amy's eating, stocking the fridge and pantry and giving her tiny portions of food so she will lose the weight she gained during her time at the motel. Eventually, Desi begins considering a move into the lake house so he can "be here all the time and keep you safe, and if anything happens, we could leave together" (Flynn 481), and Amy admits, "I thought I could control Desi, but I can't. I feel like something very bad is going to happen" (Flynn 484). Amy's frustration is mounting because she cannot get her way. Desi provides her with an opulent home where he can come and go as he pleases, while Amy remains, like Desi's "princess . . . under his gilded protection in a castle that no one can breach but him" (Flynn 439). Amy begins to plot her escape, and unfortunately for Desi, she plans to use violence to dispose of her problem.

Amy's scheme to escape Desi is ruthless. Just as Amy inflicted injuries on herself to frame Hilary, Tommy, and Nick, Amy hurts herself to "present" (Flynn 500) the medical

examiner and law enforcement with a body that Amy believes represents a "textbook" (Flynn 500) rape victim: "My rope-wreathed wrists, my damaged vagina, my bruises" (Flynn 500). After seducing Desi and then offering him a sleeping pill-laced martini, Amy cut Desi's throat while he slept. She took his keys "and climbed, still slick with his blood, into his vintage Jaguar and returned like some long-lost faithful pet, straight back home to my husband. I'd been reduced to an animal state; I didn't think of anything but getting back to Nick" (Flynn 500-501).

When faced with a four-hour interrogation by the police, once again, Amy controls the narrative. She shifts the interview focus to the incompetence of the investigation: "It sounds like a bunch of cops who got hung up on my husband being guilty, and now that I am alive and he's clearly not guilty, they look like giant idiots, and they're scrambling to cover their asses" (Flynn 509-510). Amy's accusations force the detectives to capitulate and tell her exactly what she wants to hear, as Nick declared his love and begged Amy to come home: "We've spent so long on this case, we want to figure out every detail that we missed so we don't repeat our mistakes. But you're absolutely right, we're missing the big picture, which is: You are a hero. You are an absolute hero" (Flynn 510). Despite yielding to Amy in the interrogation, Detective Rhonda Boney sees through her story; however, she concedes that it is best for Nick that they accept Amy's version of events, at least for the time being. With her return, Amy has saved her husband's life, but Boney explains to Nick, "You have no credibility, . . . Your only credibility comes from Amy. She's single-handedly rehabilitated you. And she can single-handedly undo it" (Flynn 540). Nick's attorney, Tanner Bolt, and Boney encourage Nick to try to get Amy to admit that she was responsible for her disappearance and that Desi's death was murder instead of self-defense. They believe that

Amy will reveal the truth, and on the evening of her return, Amy gloats about what really happened. After forcing him to strip and checking for a wire, Amy brings Nick into the shower, turns on the water, and whispers her confession. Nick relays Amy's confession to Tanner: "She killed Desi because he was basically . . . he was annoying her, he was power-playing her, and she realized she could kill him, and it was her way back to her old life, and she could blame everything on him" (Flynn 523). However, with no recording of the confession or physical evidence, the police are unable to prove that Amy murdered Desi.

Despite this confession, the truth about Amy was revealed long before when Jeff and Greta robbed her in the motel room. During this encounter, Amy chooses not to fight back because she claims that no one has ever hit her, and she is afraid of being hurt. The irony of this encounter seems lost on the main character in the moment—or she chooses to ignore what the experience reveals. Although Amy claims that no one has physically hurt her in the past, her history of psychological pain runs deep. Feeling pressure from societal structures, Amy is motivated by Patriarchal Surreality to lash out. She tries to live up to the perfection of Amazing Amy, but when she fails to meet society's expectations for women and discovers her husband's affair, Amy wages psychological warfare, blowing up her life and the lives of those around her. Amy is so terrified of and pissed off at a system that demands women live up to unreasonable expectations that she chooses to "fuck" that system rather than resign to its constraints. Amy's parents' novels glorify a stereotypical, feminine, perfect Amy, and Amy claims they stand "on my psyche, earning money for themselves" (Flynn 536). When the real-life Amy did not believe she could honestly live up to society's lofty expectations or Amazing Amy's perfection, she adopted a persona that to hide her authentic self. Throughout her life, Amy has been acting, becoming whoever will please the people around her. Her

patience for hiding her true self runs out when she is married to Nick, and she lashes out against the confines of their relationship and the society's expectations. Amy coerces the police into doggedly pursuing her husband and gains the sympathy of the public through the media. After making her triumphant return, despite the claims made by Diary Amy, she continues manipulating the police detectives, her parents, Nick, and others.

By choosing to return, Amy traps herself and sacrifices authenticity to maintain the fragile false reality that hides her crimes. Outwardly, she traps herself in the persona that she conceived in the diary—a woman who is happy to accept and perpetuate the values of Patriarchal Surreality. After she returns, Amy and Nick's marriage symbolizes the broken interdependency of patriarchal society and womanhood. Realizing she cannot alter Patriarchal Surreality, Amy recognizes her privilege and capacity to manipulate those around her. For Amy, that means "taking care" of Hilary Handy and Tommy O'Hara after they see through her "perfect" exterior, accusing Desi of an obsession that led to a "suicide attempt" as a teenager and Amy's "abduction" as an adult, manipulating her parents and the police detectives, and above all, it means controlling and exploiting her husband, Nick.

As Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* nears its conclusion, Nick and Amy's relationship becomes a metaphor for the co-dependent patriarchal structure beneath the surface of American social structures. Patriarchy cannot exist in a vacuum. Those in control rely upon those they oppress to maintain the structure. After Amy returns, she refuses to leave the marriage and refuses to allow Nick to leave the relationship despite his demands that they end it. Amy claims, "I feel a rush of hate toward him, that he's still trying to wriggle out of our marriage even though I've told him—three times now—that he can't. He still thinks he has power" (Flynn 528). Amy explains to Nick, "You are a man . . . "You are an average,

lazy, boring, cowardly, *woman-fearing* man. Without me, that's what you would have kept on being, ad nauseam. But I made you into something. You were the best man you've *ever* been with me. And you know it. The only time in your life you've ever *liked* yourself was *pretending to be* someone *I* might like" (Flynn 529). She concludes, "I'm the *bitch* who makes you a man" (Flynn 530). Although Nick is disgusted by his wife, he cannot help but find the truth in her claims. As this conversation reaches its boiling point, Nick grabs Amy around the neck and begins to squeeze, but suddenly, a thought pops into his head: "*If I kill Amy, who will I be?*" (Flynn 531). Nick asks himself, "Who would I be without Amy to react to? Because she was right: As a man, I had been my most impressive when I loved her—and I was my next best self when I hated her" (Flynn 531-523). Finally, Nick concludes, "Amy was toxic, yet I couldn't imagine a world without her entirely. Who would I be with Amy just gone?" (Flynn 532). As the days pass after Amy's return and the two return to the routine of living together, Nick claims that they only "pretend to be in love, and we do the things we like to do when we're in love, and it feels almost like love sometimes, because we are so perfectly putting ourselves through the paces. Reviving the muscle memory of early romance" (Flynn 542). Both tell themselves their marriage is based on something false, but it has become an accurate representation of the dynamics between men and women in the U.S.

Like Amy and Nick, men and women have a toxic, co-dependent relationship based on the oppression. By belittling and reducing women, men extol themselves and exert dominance. By placing women on a pedestal that demands femininity and particular behavior, men ensure their freedom. Men dote on women to ensure that women will continue to allow themselves to be oppressed. In *The Sexual Contract*, Pateman explains, "A woman agrees to obey her husband when she becomes a wife; what better way of giving public

affirmation that men are sexual masters, exercising the law of male sex-right, in their private lives" (Pateman 182). Amy believes she has flipped the stereotypical marriage; she thinks she holds the reins, and her influence stems from her control over the narrative. Amy explains, "every day I get calls to tell *my* story. My story: mine, mine, mine" (Flynn 536). In the last few pages of the novel, Amy believes she has cemented her power:

> I have a book deal: I am officially in control of our story. It feels wonderfully symbolic. Isn't that what every marriage is, anyway? Just a lengthy game of he-said, she-said? Well, *she* is saying, and the world will listen, and Nick will have to smile and agree. I will write him the way I want him to be: romantic and thoughtful and very very repentant . . . If I can't get him to say it out loud, he'll say it in my book. Then he'll come on tour with me and smile and smile. (Flynn 544)

By writing her story, Amy physically solidifies her narrative, and in the end, she goes even further to control the way she is perceived by society.

To guarantee that Nick will never come forward with the truth and satisfy Patriarchal Surreality's greatest expectation for its white women, Amy becomes a mother. Pateman writes, "In modern patriarchy, masculinity provides the paradigm for sexuality; and masculinity means sexual mastery. The 'individual' is a man who makes use of a woman's body (sexual property); the converse is much harder to imagine" (Pateman 185); however, Amy does just that. Nick does not believe Amy's positive pregnancy test: "I made her do it again in front of me. Piss on the stick, me squatting next to her on the bathroom floor, watching the urine come out of her and hitting the stick and turning it pregnant-blue" (Flynn 549-550). He insists that it must not be his baby, but then remembers his "semen in a hospital

freezer somewhere" (Flynn 550). Amy has had herself artificially inseminated with Nick's sperm. Using the pregnancy, Nick's unborn child, as leverage, Amy coerces Nick to perpetuate her lies and continue in their marriage. Amy privately admits her guilt to Nick, but she thinks, "I can't be discovered. If I were ever found, I'd be the most hated woman on the planet. I'd go from being the beautiful, kind, doomed, pregnant victim of a selfish, cheating bastard to being the bitter bitch who exploited the good hearts of all America's citizens" (Flynn 380). By manipulating Nick, Amy solidifies the persona she created as part of her plan and gains power in their relationship. Nick admits, "We had spent years battling for control of our marriage, of our love story, our life story. I had been thoroughly, finally outplayed" (Flynn 550-551). Amy demands that Nick delete the manuscript of his own tell-all book, "And just to put that other matter to rest, we'll need an affidavit, and you'll need to swear that . . . you did once think I was framing you, but *now* you love me and I love you and everything is good" (Flynn 550). Nick admits a subordination to Amy, realizing, "I was a prisoner after all. Amy had me forever, or as long as she wanted, because I needed to save my son, to try to unhook, unlatch, debarb, undo everything that Amy did. I would literally lay down my life for my child, and do it happily. I would raise my son to be a good man" (Flynn 551). Nick consents to Amy's demands, telling the detectives and his sister that he is finished trying to expose the truth about her. He chooses to confirm Amy's narrative in its entirety.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

"Stories can save your life." (Wetmore 170)

"What about women who haven't made it on male terms, but haven't succumbed to victimization either? What more is there to female experience? What have women done on their own terms?" (Register, "Brief, A-Mazing Moments" 9)

The ways these fictional woman characters react to oppression of vary greatly. Amy manipulates the perception of those around her, but she never achieves genuine freedom from oppression, as she has created her own iteration of Patriarchal Surreality. Like Amy, Kya also gets away with murder, but she, too, is trapped within the narrative she constructed to secure her acquittal, unable to attain true belonging because she can never share the true story of the murder. Ultimately, after recognizing the manifestations of patriarchal oppression, Amy and Kya return to and reside predominantly within the phase that Register would call "*Compensating*" because they deny society the chance to recognize their authentic selves. After recognizing the limitations of patriarchal society, Min and Mrs. Hedges also relinquish some freedom and to make the most of their lives within the confines of Patriarch Surreality. But unlike Kya and Amy, they are not confined in inauthenticity. Min and Mrs. Hedges still have the option to choose to step away from the facade, as Min nearly did when she decided to leave Jones. Racism and sexism deny Lutie security and independence, and societal

structures take her son. She deems herself unworthy of motherhood, after committing a brutal murder, the likes of which she never imagined. Similarly, a small community that refused to take responsibility for prejudice and misogyny permitted the rape that left Gloria lying in the dirt in the oil fields, shattered and exploited. From this destruction, Glory emerges from the oil field, enacts revenge in her dreams, and moves with her family to begin a new life. Lutie leaves New York for Chicago where she, too, will persevere. The women leave the societies that have destroyed them with the option to begin somewhere new, guaranteed to face recurring and novel challenges, but determined to keep going. Kya and Amy are trapped by their actions, Min and Mrs. Hedges choose to acquiesce to Patriarch Surreality, and Luite and Glory must begin new lives, exemplifying the variety of responses from women who recognize their oppression in the United States.

In contrast, according to Ginny's grandmother's stories in *Valentine*, for a woman, there is only one acceptable reaction to oppressive patriarchal structures. Ginny's grandmother's stories teach younger generations of women that they must acquiesce to society's demands; a woman is expected to give of herself until there is nothing left to give, until she drops dead or puts an end to her own life. Ginny, on the other hand, shares with her daughter the example of a woman who kills a man before he can hurt her and survives by isolating herself from the rest of society. Like Glory and Lutie, Ginny's mother follows this example, abandoning her family and leaving Odessa, a last resort to save her own life.

Ginny

Ginny joins in Odessa's tradition by sharing stories with her daughter, Debra Ann, that enshrine the women of the Frontier who first lost their sanity and then their lives in service to the men and children around them. In turn, Debra Ann learns from her mother and

does her part to pass on the stories. But Debra Ann's retelling of one particular legend also reveals that Ginny, who felt wronged by society's expectations of her as a young mother, was unsatisfied with the status quo. Ginny passed on her grandmother's macabre stories, but she also shared at least one tale with her daughter that demonstrates an awareness of Patriarchal Surreality.

After being abandoned by her mother, Debra Ann's father often leaves her unsupervised while at work. She notices a man living in a large drainpipe near her home and becomes curious. The narrator explains, "Ever since her mama left town, D. A. has been looking for something to do with her weekends. She's been looking for a project, and this man might be it" (Wetmore 71). Secretly, Debra Ann leaves him food and small gifts, gaining his trust. The young man, Jesse, becomes the perfect distraction from her loneliness. Debra Ann learns that Jesse is in his early twenties, and although they make a strange pair, the two become friends.

On a particularly hot day when Jesse is struggling with the mental and physical effects of his experience in Vietnam, Debra Ann distracts him with one of Ginny's stories. The story begins with loss, central to many of Ginny's grandmother's stories. Debra Ann explains, "There was this old rancher's wife . . . a beautiful woman with hair so thick and red that when she stood in the sunlight, she sometimes looked as if she were on fire" (Wetmore 208). The woman and her family lived on the outskirts of town, "But she was unlucky. A blizzard came up suddenly while her children were out riding fence with their daddy, and they all froze to death" (Wetmore 208). Following this catastrophic loss, the woman did not return to town for three years, and no one bothered to check on her. Finally, they decide to send someone out to her ranch to "cut her body down or pull the buzzards off her bones"

(Wetmore 209). Regularly experiencing loss, the townsfolk are desensitized. Everyone assumes that, like many women before her, having lost her children and her husband, the family's provider and protector, this woman would not have survived; the town abandons her to die.

The story could have ended like those told by Ginny's grandmother, "who didn't know how to tell a story with a happy ending" (Wetmore 86), but this story, Ginny's story, conspicuously provides an alternative, revealing that the woman did not die or end her life after losing her family. Instead, she devised ways to thrive despite her woman-ness and her seclusion. The town sends a sixteen-year-old boy to the ranch, and he finds that the woman is "very much alive and working in her garden. She was bony and sunburned, and her hands were covered with scars and sunspots. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were so sun-bleached they were practically white. But what a garden she had! The boy had never seen anything like it" (Wetmore 209). The town assumed the woman would be helpless on her own and take her own life, yet she dug a trench by herself to divert water from the river to sustain her garden, and she survived. In Ginny's story, the boy is amazed, thinking, "All by herself, the woman had changed the course of the river!" (Wetmore 209). When the boy returns to town with a bounty of vegetables from the woman's garden, "everybody admired the woman for her green thumb and her fortitude" (Wetmore 210). The woman shares her food with the town and, after living for years in isolation, begins to reconnect with society. However, the town's admiration does not last, and the story takes on a cautionary tone. Rumors begin to spread, and some townsfolk claim that the woman is a witch who used magic to change the river's course.

As the accusations against the woman strengthen, "predictably, there was an influenza outbreak" (Wetmore 210), explains Debra Ann. At this pivotal moment in the story, Jesse meaningfully interjects. He is surprised by her use of "predictably," and Debra Ann reasserts her storytelling: "Yes . . . That is the exact word my mama always used. Predictably, . . . and she meant that every tall tale has to have some kind of calamity" (Wetmore 210). However, this turn of events is more than a plot device. In Debra Ann's mind, influenced by her mother's storytelling and her lived experience, the calamity is not the loss of her entire family; it is not when the town abandons her to die. These are everyday, expected occurrences in women's lives on the Texas Frontier. Rather, the calamity is the flu outbreak, and Debra Ann explains, "because the men couldn't believe it was just bad luck, or their own stupidity, they started looking for someone to blame" (Wetmore 210). The woman in her story is "unlucky" because her whole family dies, but the men need an explanation for the outbreak of illness; society expects women to quietly accept and endure, while men demand an explanation and retribution. They further question the solitary woman: "How could a woman grow such a marvelous garden all by herself? How could she change the course of a river? How could she bear to go on living without her husband and her children? Any self-respecting woman would have killed herself, one man said, or at least gone back to the midwest" (Wemore 210). The limited views of the townsfolk prevent them from believing that a woman could survive after such a significant loss. They are disturbed by the woman's ability to thrive, which contradicts their stereotypical expectations. Because she is unusual, the woman becomes a scapegoat for the town's fear as the flu outbreak takes its toll. Her story becomes a warning for strong and opinionated women.

Although the woman continues to live on her ranch in isolation, her presence bothers the townsfolk. Cynicism pushes them past a breaking point, "When several babies and young children fell ill and died, [and with that,] the woman's fate was sealed" (Wetmore 210). After a night of drinking, five men set out toward the woman's ranch for retribution, but only one survives the journey. When he arrives, the man pounds on the woman's door, "hollering at her to open up, open this goddamned door!" (Wetmore 212). Just as Debra Ann used to, Jesse asks, "What happened to her? . . . Something bad?" (Wetmore 212), and just as Ginny always did, Debra Ann ends the tale abruptly: "Well, she shot him on the spot and dragged his body to the edge of her property" (Wetmore 212). The woman swiftly dispatches the threat, and like she did after the loss of her husband and children, she carries on and nurtures her garden, but she cut ties with the town that betrayed her. According to Ginny and Debra Ann, "Evenings, she sat on her front porch and watched all of the stars come out, one by one. She lived to be a hundred and five years old and died peacefully in her sleep, and by the time it occurred to anybody to ride out there and check on her, she was nothing but a pile of dusty bones in her bed" (Wetmore 212). Ginny's unnamed protagonist refuses to live within society's boundaries for women. She thrives after unimaginable loss, and because of her fortitude and unexpected resilience, the town turns against her. Although she survived the town's attempt at retribution for her imagined misdeeds, she will never be accepted. Instead, the woman chooses to remain in isolation, where she can live peacefully without society's judgment.

Ginny experienced a similar urge to save herself when life as a mother in Odessa leaves her feeling as if she is drowning. As the woman on the ranch chose isolation, Ginny concludes that she must leave her life and her daughter behind to survive. Most women in

Odessa cannot imagine why a woman might leave her family; however, for Ginny, this is a life-or-death choice. Unlike the women in her grandmother's stories, Ginny chooses not to sacrifice of herself to the point of madness or suicide. This story of the woman on the ranch justifies Ginny's choice to leave Debra Ann. The strong, woman protagonist can teach her daughter not to lose herself by acquiescing to the pressures of society. Although Debra Ann does not make the connection at the time, Jesse seems to understand this more profound truth. After Debra Ann tells the story, "his eyes are shining. That's a good story, he says. I'm sorry your mom left" (Wetmore 213). Although he may only recognize how this memory reveals the close relationship between Debra Ann and her mother, perhaps he realizes the greater significance and the lesson that Ginny was trying to teach her daughter with this bedtime story.

Although it is challenging to understand Ginny's choice to abandon her daughter, in a society that encourages women to acquiesce to patriarchal structures, she provides a unique example of strength and resilience. Early on, society teaches the women in West Texas that to survive, they must placate to the demands of husbands and children, endure mental and physical abuse, and relinquish their identities. Stories of previous generations of women provide a grim warning of death, disappearance, and madness. However, Ginny chooses a different path. She removes herself from the situation that is diminishing her will to live, resulting in isolation similar to that chosen by the woman in her story, but also creating the possibility of a different future. After she is gone, the story of the woman on the ranch stays with Debra Ann. Through it, Ginny encourages her daughter to see the limitations of life and motherhood in Odessa, hoping she, too, might eventually choose a unique path that could lead her beyond Patriarchal Surreality.

The women in these novels find themselves isolated, miniscule in the eyes of a monolithic and nearly timeless structure that promises further isolation, that leads to desperation and death. How can these women come to see reality and themselves accurately? After documenting various reactions to the realization that women reside in a false Patriarchal Surreality, *Valentine* brings the reader full circle, reminding audiences that through human connection, women can make strides toward reshaping reality as more equitable and tolerant of all individuals, no matter their gender, race, ethnicity, or any other characteristic that makes them other from dominant white men.

Although Glory is the catalyst that forces Mary Rose to reckon with Odessa's ingrained prejudices, she does not meaningfully support the young girl. Mary Rose condemns Strickland but fails Glory. On the morning that Mary Rose opens the front door to find Glory "tottering" (Wetmore 17) on her porch, she takes note of the girl's injuries: "Both eyes were blackened, one nearly swollen shut. Her cheeks, forehead, and elbows were scraped raw, and vicious scrapes covered her legs and feet" (Wetmore 17), and she correctly assumes a man attacked her. Mary Rose admits, "mercy is hard in a place like this. I wished him dead before I ever saw his face" (Wetmore 12). She reflects on empathy and mercy, explaining, "I used to believe a person could teach herself to be merciful if she tried hard enough to walk in somebody else's shoes, if she was willing to do the hard work of imagining the heart and mind of a thief, say, or a murderer, or a man who drove a fourteen-year-old girl out into the oil patch and spent the night raping her. I tried to imagine what it might have been like for Dale Stickland" (Wetmore 10). However, from the moment she sees Glory, Mary Rose admits that she will never be able to summon anything close to mercy for Strickland. She

recognizes that Patriarchal Surreality has obscured her reality. By crossing the oil field to knock on Mary Rose's door, Glory traverses the distance between the two women, the distance and difference that perpetually divides a white woman and a woman of color in the U.S., the comfortable distance and delusion that prevents Mary Rose from noticing her own oppression and the oppression of other women around her. Mary Rose can no longer keep the victims of Odessa's prejudice out of focus and at a distance. Glory forces Mary Rose to bear witness to the hate that allowed her rape to occur, but ultimately, Mary Rose is unwilling or unable to commit to Glory.

As Mary Rose realizes what happened, she becomes acutely aware of the cost that prejudice and misogyny can have in the lives of the most vulnerable. Mary Rose sees her child, Aimee, in Glory: "My daughter was nine years old, just a few years younger than the stranger I was about to find standing at my door" (Wetmore 14). The first part of Mary Rose's narrative foreshadows her awakening that is to come, for in several instances, she admits, "Now I think differently" (Wetmore 14). This admission in the first few pages of the novel discloses a reality shift like that experienced by Lutie in the final pages of *The Street*. Lutie realizes that despite a lifetime of promises, the future she desires will always remain out of reach because of the color of her skin, and once this realization occurs, she strikes out violently against a scapegoat for her pent-up rage. Lutie never would have imagined that she could lash out so violently; however, her experiences change her fundamentally. Similarly, Mary Rose's experience changes every aspect of her life, identity, and even her subconscious.

In the days and weeks after Glory shows up on her front porch, Mary Rose describes a recurring dream in which she wakes up, hearing knocking on her front door. Mary Rose

does her best to ignore it and drown it out by covering her head, but the knocking becomes louder and more insistent. Finally, when she goes to the front door, Mary Rose finds Aimee on the front porch, "beaten and torn up, her feet bare and bleeding. Mama, she cries, why didn't you help me?" (Wetmore 117). Mary Rose's dream is symbolic in several ways. First, it reveals that although, logically, Mary Rose might remind herself that Glory is not her flesh and blood, she cannot control her maternal instincts, which drive her to protect the girl. Mary Rose is troubled by the fact that if circumstances were different, her own daughter could become the victim of a similar attack. The incessant knocking on the front door symbolizes the truth about her town that, until this point in her life, Mary Rose has failed to acknowledge or resist. However, after witnessing Glory's injuries, Mary Rose sees how life in Odessa has influenced her thinking. It is as if witnessing Glory's injuries, then watching as the town reacts to the rape, cracks a lifelong facade that taught Mary Rose to accept the prejudice that permeates her town. She sees beyond the veneer to the sinister side of Odessa, but when Glory needs her most of all, Mary Rose turns her back on the girl in whom she claims to see her own daughter.

Mary Rose admits that she callously turned away from Glory, refusing to comfort her at a pivotal moment on that morning after the rape[14]. When the police and ambulance arrived, Glory and Aimee locked themselves in the house and refused to let the first responders enter. After they finally unlocked the door, Glory refused to let anyone near her except Mary Rose. Mary Rose tried to encourage her to accept help, but Glory was terrified. While she draws a connection between Aimee and Glory, in this moment, Mary Rose reminds herself that Glory is not her daughter. She thinks, "Who is she to me? She is not my child Aimee and this child whose feet and fists kick and flail, they are somebody to me. They are mine. This girl, Gloria,

she is not mine" (Wetmore 26). As paramedics lead her to the ambulance, one puts his hand on Glory back, and Glory "screamed as if she had been stabbed . . . She fought and kicked and screamed for her mother. She ran over and held on to me" (Wetmore 123). Glory ran to Mary Rose in terror, but "by then, I was worn out and heartsick, and I turned away. Even as she was reaching for me, I turned away and stepped inside my house and closed the door" (Wetmore 123). By admitting this betrayal, Mary Rose reveals one source of her guilt and motivation to testify against Strickland. Offered the opportunity to provide support in Glory's moment of need, Mary Rose chooses her own comfort instead. She has the privilege to turn away, and she rejects Glory at her most vulnerable. Turning away from Glory, Mary Rose naively puts her faith in the patriarchal structure, the justice system, as a means of punishing Strickland. She refuses to comfort Glory as she screams for her. While her testimony means nothing to Glory and has little impact, Mary Rose refused when the opportunity arose to comfort this battered child.

In contrast, another encounter with a stranger provides Glory the opportunity to tell her story without judgment and fills the gaping void left by Mary Rose. After the attack, Glory and her uncle move into a motel, where she "is starting over . . . Glory's life is a long pause, a stopped tape. But she is getting ready to start moving again," (Wetmore 139). Her mother, Alma, has been deported back to Mexico, and she pushes her uncle away, spending her time alone in her room, unable or unwilling to discuss her pain. She thinks of calling a friend, "but she has not spoken to anyone from school since February. And what would she say? Hello, from the stupidest girl in the world, who climbed into a stranger's truck and slammed the door shut, whose picture ended up in the paper, blowing any chance she had at getting past this" (Wetmore 138). Glory's uncle encourages her to see her survival as a

triumph. He remarks on the star-shaped scar on her palm, “Grabbed onto a barbed-wire fence to stop yourself from falling? . . . Tell people you squeezed that fence until the barbs bent flat in your hand” (Wetmore 140). But Glory cannot see her story this way, “My story? No. This is not my story” (Wetmore 140). Glory refuses to claim her experience. The story printed in the newspaper, shared in the town diner, and presented under oath in the courtroom is not Glory’s story and will not be her story. It is Patriarchal Surreality’s version of events rationalizes Strickland’s behavior and condemns his victim.

Tina

Most days at the motel, Glory watches from inside as a mother and her kids swim in the pool, but one day, her room is stifling in the West Texas summer. The heat and the loneliness become too much to bear, outweighing “her embarrassment about her scars and hair, her desire not to be seen, and her fear and sorrow that she has been stolen from herself, that she has been wounded, maybe fatally” (Wetmore 139). Wearing a t-shirt and shorts over her one-piece swimsuit and carrying a knife for protection in her pocket, Glory heads down to the pool. Not long after she gets comfortable on a lounge chair, the family arrives at the pool. Although at first they give her space, eventually the little boy swims over as if he wants to begin a conversation. Glory does not respond, and the boy, who is young enough to be missing his two front teeth, asks, “Why don’t you get in the swimming pool? . . . Are ya afraid ya might get grease in the water? Afraid your back might get wet? . . . Wetback” (Wetmore 142). The boy’s comments confirm Glory’s fear that she is tainted and unwelcome, and as she prepares to go inside, the boy’s mother, Tina, rushes over and pulls him out of the pool. She admonishes his behavior and threatens him: “You won’t be able to sit down for three days if I *ever* hear you talking like that again” (Wetmore 143). Tina sends

her kids to their room and tells Glory, “I’m sorry about that, he gets it from his daddy’s side of the family” (Wetmore 143). Although Glory is skeptical, she appreciates that Tina disapproves of the boy’s behavior. Tina tries to make up for his hurtful comments by offering Glory a Dr Pepper, but Glory requests a cigarette, and Tina obliges; it seems she, too, is looking to stave off her loneliness.

After Glory decides to stay, Tina opens up. She explains that they are from Louisiana and only in Odessa temporarily while her husband works on an oil rig. Tina tells Glory she misses home, its good parts and bad: “You can’t throw a rock without hitting some good old boy with a bad attitude, and the bayou is full of gators and ‘skeeters and rats . . . but the fishing’s good and some people are nice. And there’s trees. Dogwood and sugarberry, cypress” (Wetmore 145). Tina explains that when her family has enough money, she plans to buy a shrimp boat: “That’s all I want, a fishing boat for Terry to earn a living, and for my kids to go back to school” (Wetmore 145). And then it is Glory’s turn: “it occurs to her now that she is expected to say something, tell the woman something about her life, participate in the give and take” (Wetmore 145). Glory will not testify in court, where her words will be questioned and twisted by lawyers, the judge, reporters, and the public: all stewards of Patriarchal Surreality. She tells her uncle, “I’m not doing it, . . . I don’t care what happens to him” (Wetmore 139). But floating in the motel pool, her barely-healed incision thinly veiled by a wet t-shirt, her short-cropped hair just beginning to grow back, Glory considers the story that she has refused to claim. She explains, “I’m here with my uncle, . . . He works in Big Lake, hauling water and mucking tanks. I’m recovering from—an accident” (Wetmore 145). Tina encourages Glory to go on, and as she does, Glory begins to claim her narrative:

> Pauvre ti bête, Tina says, and when Glory looks at her, Poor little thing. Is that what happened to your feet?
>
> Glory looks down. Dozens of thin scars cover her feet and ankles—from cactus thorns and stray pieces of steel, broken glass and bent nails, a mess of stickers and a stray piece of barbed wire, all the things she stepped on when she walked away from his truck—and her throat closes on itself.
>
> It's okay, hon, Tina says.
>
> Glory opens her mouth, closes it. She shakes her head and looks at her cigarette. I was attacked by a man out in the oil patch.
>
> God damn it all, Tina says, and after a long pause, I'm sorry. (Wetmore 145-146)

Tina listens without judgment. This is Glory's testimony; this is Glory's truth. She finally tells her story.

As Glory explains what happened, she braces for Tina to react like the others and blame her for the attack, but the horrified woman shows her support. Her reaction encourages Glory to continue. She admits the source of her shame: "I got in his truck and went with him," (Wetmore 146), and Tina replies, "That don't mean jack. That evil belongs to him, it's got nothing to do with you" (Wemore 146). Glory's uncle has tried to impart the same wisdom to his niece, but this reassurance from a stranger has a more significant impact. Tina owes her nothing. Just as quickly as the rest of the town, Tina could judge and dismiss Glory, call her a whore, and tell her children to stay away. But Tina reflects Glory, allowing the girl to finally see herself, finally claim her truth, and finally accept that what happened to her was not her fault. Strickland raped Gloria that night because he knew that he lived in a society

that would protect him and believe the handsome young white man over the young brown girl, a society that rejected Glory after she saved herself from her attacker who might have killed if he had the chance. Like the woman in Ginny's story, Glory is rejected and suspected, and she too must leave, but in this moment in the motel pool, when she tells her story, Glory is seen, heard, and validated.

Eventually, the connection between the Glory and Tina becomes mutual trust when the young girl takes Tina's hand as she continues to share. It becomes clear that not only does Glory carry the weight of her shame and the negative assumptions and prejudice of the town, but she is also suffering because she fosters guilt that she has disappointed her mother. As Glory tells her story, she experiences the power of narrative. According to Frye, "We use narrative to assess cause and effect in a pattern of significance, to relate ourselves to a sense of purpose, to claim a shared reality with other people, and to identify a specificity and a continuity of self through memory. In short we use the process of creating narrative shape to identify our place in the world" (Frye 19). Tina reassures Glory that her mother will not hold her mistakes against her. At a time when Glory feels terribly alone and endures pain that no woman, let alone a child, deserves, Tina's willingness to listen without judgment allows Glory to take a another step toward recovery. After this conversation, Glory and Tina,

> will never meet again. This day will feel too big for Glory, and she will retreat back to room 15 for another week . . . By the time Glory carries her pocketknife and her towel and a bottle of cold Dr Pepper to the pool again, Tina will be back in Lake Charles. But Glory will never forget her kindness, or her throaty laugh, or the slippery warmth of her hand against Glory's when

> they threaded their fingers together and Tina asked, When did it happen? (Wetmore 148).

This exchange in the pool cannot undo Glory's experience or the pain it has caused, but by allowing her to share her story, Tina has a lasting impression. She shows Glory that not everyone will immediately judge her or define her by what has happened to her. Tina, who enters the conversation with no preconceived notions or assumptions, provides Glory with an opportunity to claim her story, telling it herself, rather than having it told for her. By telling her story, Glory actualizes her new identity.

Not only does *Valentine* provide women readers with examples of the various ways that one can react to patriarchal and prejudiced structures in the U.S., but Glory's interaction with Tina provides an example of the ways that women can support one another in an oppressive society. Popular fiction can bring women together to learn from the experiences of fictional women, to encounter various perspectives, to share and celebrate, and to imagine a system remade. Frye explains, "As outsiders in a patriarchal culture, women have also been held in relative isolation from each other and from a sense of social consensus" (Frye 26). However, novels often bring women together to read and discuss not only the experiences of fictional characters but also the way those examples can and do reflect women's reality. In fiction, women can test the possibilities, play them out, and see what fits. The power of story is that it can reflect ourselves back to us if we are willing to look; to find ourselves in characters; to admit our weaknesses, our strengths, our desires, our fears. Fiction can help us identify the similarities that bring us together and the differences that make us unique. We can find our true selves in the women who fail, in the women who triumph, in the women who kill, in the women who surrender. As Frye claims, "Narrative can . . . be claimed as a

crucial human means for understanding lived experience" (Frye 20). We are all of these women, and none of these women, and therein lies the truth. We cannot be the women who came before, and we must redefine our place in society for the women who are to come after. We must tell stories, and experiment in stories, and rewrite stories, until we have redefined ourselves, until we actualized our new identities. According to Frye, "In studying literature, . . . we come to a greater understanding of women's—and men's—lives, of their relationship to the surrounding culture, and of the possibilities for living differently" (Frye 17). Women's narratives in popular fiction can replace the narratives and informal education that serve as the foundation for societal gaslighting and perpetuate Patriarchal Surreality. Fiction, although reflective of reality, is still just that, fiction, and so its purpose varies significantly from the seemingly-unquestionable legends and stories meant to "teach" us how to interpret the world. Because it is fiction, and thereby more open to critique, it is a tool that can be used to recognize society's faults. Frye explains, "I consider the woman reader as an active participant in the processes of cultural change. As she interacts with the narrative form by which protagonists shape their lives, the woman reader herself becomes an interpreter: of the protagonist's experience, of her own experience. In learning to read differently, she also learns to see differently and in some sense to live differently" (Frye 10). Popular fiction provides a wealth of examples that can bring women together to reflect on these fictional yet realistic experiences and envision, collectively, the possibility of an alternate future.

ENDNOTES

[1] According to the majority opinion of the U.S. Supreme Court as written by Harry A. Blackmun: In the first trimester of pregnancy, the state may not regulate the abortion decision; only the pregnant woman and her attending physician can make that decision. In the second trimester, the state may impose regulations on abortion that are reasonably related to maternal health. In the third trimester, once the fetus reaches the point of "viability," a state may regulate abortions or prohibit them entirely, so long as the laws contain exceptions for cases when abortion is necessary to save the life or health of the mother. ("Roe v. Wade.")

[2] Although I use "surreality," I do not refer to the cultural and artistic movement, but rather the literal definition, "the quality of being bizarre and dreamlike" ("Surreality"). Women unknowingly inhabit a false reality. Patriarchal influence is ubiquitous in U.S. society and apparent in social interaction, law enforcement, the media, the judicial system, etc. Ultimately, patriarchal influence has established a self-sustaining social structure that limits the freedoms and resources available to women, particularly women of color.

[3] An understanding of gaslighting that occurs beyond intimate relationships is useful to conceptualize societal structures that perpetuate inequality, patriarchal values, and the complicated racial dynamics ingrained in society in the U.S. Along with intimate-partner gaslighting, societal gaslighting erodes an individual's sense of identity and contributes a false reality.

[4] Ferraro explains, "social reality is an accomplishment of human perception and interaction rather than a set of objective 'facts'" (Ferraro 76).

[5] Not only do women of color experience subjugation by patriarchal structures, but they also can experience prejudice and rejection by other women. According to Ferraro, "The context in which women's agency is played out includes cultural scripts about appropriate female behavior, economic, legal, and political resources, and individual biographies. These are all influenced by women's race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and physical abilities" (Ferraro 82).

[6] Dicker explains, "Although short-lived, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), which formed in 1973, created a space to understand 'the vital and revolutionary importance of [feminism] to Third World women, especially black women'" (Dicker 91-92).

[7] Throughout this work, I have intentionally chosen to use "woman/women" in order to include all individuals who identify as women based on the social construct of gender as opposed to biology.

[8] Potter experiences pressure and judgment based on society's expectations for men that causes him to further pressure his wife to stay home. As Corrine pleads for his support, Potter admits, "he can't imagine what he'll say to the fellas" (Wetmore 177). Just as society expects Corrine to stay home, society expects Potter to provide so his wife can focus on raising their child and taking care of her husband. He is afraid that if he "allows" Corrine to return to work, the men in town will question his masculinity and ability to provide for his family.

[9] Most people also defend and make excuses for Strickland, who happens to be the son of a preacher. Innumerable letters are sent to the district attorney in his defense. Mary

Rose explains, “if you believe the local paper and some of the more vocal citizens in town, he’s a good kid” (Wetmore 110). The newspaper publishes an editorial that justifies his behavior on the basis of exhaustion and sanctioned drug abuse: the “writer noted that the accused had, on the night in question, been awake for two days after taking some amphetamine tablets his foreman had given him, a common practice in the oil fields” (Wetmore 110). Strickland’s supporters attempt to make excuses for his actions and claim this behavior is out of character for the young man.

[10] Immediately realizing that Glory’s and Strickland’s stories are the two in question, Corrine recalls her own circuitous connection to the events that night. On the evening that the rape occurred, she and Potter sat in his truck in the Sonic parking lot and watched Glory get into Strickland’s car. When the attack came to light, Potter was wracked with guilt because despite his misgivings as he watched the interaction between the young girl and the man, he chose not to intervene. Corrine shares this guilt, and she is reminded of it in the bar.

[11] After the attack, Mary Rose, Aimee, and the new baby are often alone on the ranch while Robert is out caring for the cattle. Traumatized by what occurred in the oil fields, Mary Rose chooses to move with the kids to a house in town, and Corrine lives across the street. Mary Rose has the privilege to leave one comfortable home for another.

[12] Mrs. Hedges’ only one condition for her establishment is that it is for black men only: “I ain’t prejudiced, . . . I just ain’t got no use for white folks. I don’t want ‘em anywhere near me” (Petry 251).

[13] Additionally, Lutie feels the weight of her values and morality - this behavior is beyond anything she ever would have allowed herself to do. She is horrified. She felt the

weight of holding herself as an American black woman to a higher standard, and at this point, there is no going back.

[14] Mary Rose has the privilege to manipulate the narrative. This admission reveals that she is an unreliable narrator who many shape the story to achieve her own goals or save face.

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