Journal of Modern Education Review, ISSN 2155-7993, USA
December 2019, Volume 9, No. 12, pp. 776–790
Doi: 10.15341/jmer(2155-7993)/12.09.2019/007

http://www.academicstar.us

The (In)visibility of Black Female Pain in Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*

Amany Mahmoud El-Sawy
(Faculty of Education, Alexandria University, Egypt)

Abstract: The invisibility of black female pain has long been an issue people of African descent have had to grapple with. Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape* is very significant in the effort to make black women's pain more visible. It overcomes the cultural structures that would consider black female pain insignificant. This is why visibility in reference to the historical lack of acknowledgement of black female pain is essential in the effort to deal with the open wound in the black female body politic. Thus, this paper attempts to bring to the fore the black female pain which has been often dismissed, ignored and constituted an open wound in the black female body politic. McCauley's *Sally's Rape* brings attention to black female pain, and it offers a historical context for the blitz of the devaluation of black female pain in the West. Additionally, it exhumes the pained black female body and places it in a contemporary context in order to address the ongoing impact of the past wounds endured by black women.

Key words: Afro-alienation, Black Female Body, dehumanization, pain, scar, subjectivity

1. Introduction

In the final chapter of Toni Morrison's novel, *A Mercy*, Florens' mother explains her powerlessness in protecting her from slavery. She relates her own rape, of which Florens is a product, and says that "to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (p. 163). I am intrigued by the composite of black female identity, the body and the wound in this passage largely because many works by contemporary black women writers employ similar metaphors, in many cases portraying the black female body as a wounded body. Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape* is a perfect example. Thus, I primarily desired to gain insight into how McCauley treated the black female body's pain in the play.

The centrality of the physical pain in *Sally's Rape* calls up several questions: What role does the depiction of physical pain play in the depiction of the black female body? Is this portrayal necessary for depicting the black female body? Is the depiction of pain productive and if so, what is being produced? What is there to be learned or gained in witnessing the painful experiences of black women, particularly as they relate to historical narratives rendered in present contexts? Thus, this paper tries to point up how McCauley's *Sally's Rape* provides fertile ground upon which to grapple with these questions in order to bring about new representation of black woman's body and new understandings of black womanhood.

Sally's Rape is a dramatization of several layers of pain that black women have endured from slavery to the present. The play is a fluid dialogue with the audience and is largely driven by the audience's energy and

Amany Mahmoud El-Sawy, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, Alexandria University; research areas/interests: contemporary British and American drama. E-mail: amany-elsawy@alexu.edu.eg.

participation in the performance. It features her great-great grandmother Sally, a slave who was raped, Sally Hemmings, the slave well-known for her sexual and personal relationship with her owner, President Thomas Jefferson (which McCauley clearly identifies as rape as well), and McCauley herself, who exists as a contemporary representation of the act of rape visited upon her great-great grandmother and women like her. *Sally's Rape* explores how the historical exploitation and abuse of black women's bodies has contemporary implications for their descendants. In this way, McCauley illustrates how this wound often circumscribes black female identity. The use of her body on the stage as embodying the resurrected bodies of her great-great-grandmother and female slaves causes the audience to consider McCauley in relation to the bodies of female slaves and negotiate connections between the past and present.

2. Theoretical Framework of Black Women's Pain

One important work that contributes to the theoretical framework of this paper is Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Scarry's insights on language and pain are very informative when thinking about just how one goes about expressing physical pain. She notes that a key characteristic of pain is its "unsharability", that "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human makes before language is learned" (Scarry, 1985, p. 4). She also argues that there are political consequences in not expressing pain (p. 14) and that achieving an expression of physical pain "eventually opens to the wider frame of invention" (p. 22). Scarry frames invention in the context of belief, ideology and the way the world is experienced; however, writers such as McCauley offer important new vantage points when considering what is invented from expressing physical pain. In this context, language serves as the primary tool of invention in terms of representing pain both formally and aesthetically. The black female body becomes visible through language; correspondingly, black women's pain becomes voiced and legitimized.

While Scarry's work presents useful ideas for my analysis, it does not thoroughly consider how race and gender play a role in the expression and nature of that pain. She offers examples of physical pain that include pain from torture during war, disease, etc. Nevertheless, when the black female body is regarded as continuously unprotected — historically subject to rape and violence at any moment — the psychological components of that pain must be considered in a different way. Analyzing the black female body in pain enhances the understanding of the creative process emerging out of the act of expressing physical pain. Doing so expands Scarry's work to consider a particular kind of invention, motivated by those previously subjugated; moreover, it demonstrates how selfhood is constructed from this specific kind of pain. What emerges from McCauley's *Sally's Rape* is a humanized representation of the black female body, a depiction that also highlights not only the physical effects of the universal pain black women have endured but also the psychological aspects of this pain.

With respect to race, pain, and the body, bell hooks in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* cites James Baldwin's claim that "'there has been almost no language' to describe the 'horrors' of black life" (Hooks, 1992, p. 2). Hooks later states that "the young black male body is represented most graphically as the body in pain" and that "black males are unable to fully articulate and acknowledge the pain in their lives" (p. 34). Interestingly, Hooks does not make a similar claim regarding black women. Her discussions of black women and representation in the work are largely grounded in the sexual exploitation of black women and the lack of revolutionary black female voices. I agree with hooks that the black male body too has unaddressed pain, that this pain has a deep

impact on the black male psyche. However, there is great silence on black women's physical pain, particularly the violence visited upon their bodies on multiple levels. Throughout their history in the West, black women were central to maintaining the slave system — functioning as laborers, child-bearers, and bodies that could be freely abused through whippings and sexual exploitation. Rarely is this history of abuse or its implications acknowledged, even within black communities.

Rather, notions persist of black women as sexual bodies, superhuman, and insensitive to pain. One particularly salient example of the belittlement of black women's pain is a news story cited by Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson in their introduction to *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women*. They mention a May 1998 story in the Indianapolis Recorder in which two black women and two white women engage in a physical confrontation where both parties become injured. The police charge only the black women because they find "no evidence of injury on the bodies of the black women" whereas the white women's flesh showed visible bruises and bite marks (Bennett and Dickerson, 2001, p. 1). In this case, we see in a very literal way the invisibility and the diminishment of black women's pain. However, this is but a present example of the long history of renunciation of black women's pain.

Jennifer Morgan's *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* sheds light on the historical lack of acknowledgement of black women's pain established in white Western discourse by early modern English writers and slave owners as justification for the "theft of bodies" during slavery (Morgan, 2004, p. 15). A remarkable example of this characterization is the narrative of explorer William Smith, noted in Morgan's text. In his description of the African women he encounters during his voyage to the Gold Coast, he mentions being told that "A Negroe Woman … has been deliver'd of a Child in less than a Quarter of an Hour, and in their Labour, they use no Shrieks or Cries; nay the very same Day it is customery for the Lying-in women to go to the Sea-Side and bathe herself, without ever thinking of returning to her Bed" (Morgan, 2004, p. 45). Significantly, Smith's furtherance of the notion that black women experience no pain in child birth and immediately resume work thereafter, renders black women's bodies as unnatural and superhuman. The denial of pain establishes a foundation for future representations of black women in slavery, particularly the popular myth that they could deliver children and take to the fields the next day, suckling their children by throwing their breasts over their shoulders. These kinds of mythology also justify black female abuse and sexual exploitation.

Saidiya Hartman is also clarifying regarding this systematic disavowal of pain in her work *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. She explains the investment slave owners had in making the slaves appear pain-free and happy, particularly on the auction block. Slave owners used the tactic of "jollification", greasing slaves' bodies to make them appear more youthful and forcing them to display excess enjoyment in being a slave (Hartman, 1997, p. 38). Hartman argues that the disavowal of a slave's pain functions as a use of the slave's own body against him or herself (p. 39). Hartman also relays the rhetoric by which slave pain was disavowed: "No the slave is not in pain. Pain isn't really pain for the enslaved because of their limited sentience, tendency to forget, and easily consolable grief. Lastly, the slave is happy and, in fact, his happiness exceeds 'our' own" (p. 36). The depiction of slaves as happy, unfeeling, and resistant to the experience of pain continues the troubling discourse of dehumanization.

Not only does Hartman propose the general rhetoric of denial of slaves' pain, she presents the story of Sukie, a slave who refuses to mask the pain of the auction block. As her teeth are being examined, she "put up her dress an' tole de nigger traders to look an' see if dey could find any teef down dere" (p. 40). Hartman explicates that "Sukie's gesture to teeth down there, delineates the debasing exhibition of the black body as object of property, as

it was common for bidders to feel between women's legs, examine their hips, and fondle their breasts" (p. 41). This scene highlights the level to which the dehumanization of black slaves occurs and it demonstrates the particular case of black women slaves whose historical pain and exploitation receives limited critical attention.

With respect to the image of pain as represented in photography and illustration, there are few visual depictions of black bodies, particularly black female bodies, in pain and this works to maintain the silence around this subject as well. This is true for the perpetuation of images of black women in general from the Western perspective. Deborah Willis and Carla Williams call attention to this lack of representation in their work *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*. They explain,

> Nineteenth-century photographic images of black women are scarce. Western visual art offers precious few portrait studies of black women, no black heroines celebrated on canvas or in stone for an act of bravery, few gentle glimpses of a spiritual or intellectual being within the black female body. … Exotic but rarely exalted, the black female image frequently functioned as an iconographic device to illustrate some subject believed to be worthier of depiction, often a white female. When she appeared at all, she was a servant in the seraglio, a savage in the landscape, "Sarah" on the display stage, but always merely an adjunct (Willis & Williams, 2002, p. 1).

Thus, in large part, black women were represented from a minimally humanizing perspective at best. The rarity of these images highlights the relative invisibility of black women in visual representation. Furthermore, when they were visually represented, the depiction was often deliberately reductive. Willis and Williams make this point when discussing images of black women produced in the United States of America, stating, "In the United States a quite different image of the black woman developed [than ones in London and Paris in the late 19th century]. Antebellum America elevated the image of the nurturing, asexual mammy as the standard even as white males continued to systematically rape black women and breed new generations of slaves" (Willis & Williams, 2002, pp. 3-4). This is a powerful example of the erasure of black women's pain from societal view, a suppression that is foundational to the historic denial that such brutal acts like rape, beatings, etc. ever occurred in slave life. Elevating black women as asexual mammies or debasing them as jezebels, not only misrepresents their varied identities, but also promotes caricatures of them that obscures their humanity and by extension their sentience.

Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* provides a supporting perspective as to why the West, particularly the United States, perpetuates certain notions about black women and men that do not address the brutality they have experienced during slavery and beyond. She writes,

> Indeed, there is no Museum of the History of Slavery — the whole story, starting with the slave trade in Africa itself, not just selected parts, such as the Underground Railroad — anywhere in the United States. This, it seems, is a memory judged too dangerous to social stability to activate and to create. The Holocaust Memorial Museum and the future Armenian Genocide Museum and Memorial are about what didn't happen in America, so the memory-work doesn't risk arousing an embittered domestic population against authority. To have a museum chronicling the great crime that was African slavery in the United States of America would be to acknowledge that evil was here. Americans prefer to picture the evil that was there, and from which the United States – a unique nation, one without any certifiably wicked leaders throughout its entire history — is exempt. That this country, like every other country, has its tragic past does not sit well with the founding, and still all-powerful, belief in American exceptionalism (Sontag, 2003, p. 88).

The image's power to provoke, shock, challenge, etc. offers opportunity to confront pain in a tangible way. It is important to present these images because they have been long suppressed and denied. If, as Scarry asserts, pain destroys language, the image depicting the pain functions as an expression of it. The depiction of pain also serves

as an undeniable representation of the brutality visited upon black slave bodies.

Considering the importance of visual representation in addition to the literary, the work, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* is significant in this context. Bibb presents the image of a female slave being beaten while attempting to nurture her child; Bibb contemplates the sad realities of his own wife and daughter who are slaves and laments over his powerlessness to protect them from physical and sexual violence. The use of this image functions as a forceful display of the horrors of slave life and it reveals the violence that endures beyond the person being abused. In this image, the child is also in the scene being torn away from his or her mother and is witnessing the mother being whipped. The child is a first-hand witness to this tragedy and likely suffers the trauma of witnessing as well. Not only does the image draw attention to the multiple levels of abuse in this instance, but it calls for a consideration of how pain can be passed down from one generation to the next, again illustrating the notion of the festering wound.

Thus, this paper analyzes the use of the visual most specifically in terms of the theatrical stage in McCauley's *Sally's Rape* in order to represent what is often considered un-representable. Analyzing the use of the visual in representing black female pain allows for an exploration of how McCauley re-presents the black female body in a more humanizing perspective, thus making prominent her sentience. Also, the visual depiction of the black female body topples the historical misrepresentations as referenced in Willis and Williams' *The Black Female Body*. The dramatic stage in particular is an important site for re-presenting the black female body primarily because the image functions on multiple levels. First, it calls attention to the black female as objectified. Second, it allows for new understandings about the implications of black women on display given its historically debasing nature. Lastly, it implicitly highlights the act of witnessing and allows for the possibility of reflection on the part of the audience. Because visual representation carries such significance in the framework of drama, this paper examines how McCauley uses this medium in order to include her perspectives on how the black female body has been and is presented.

Another important aspect of visual representation is the scar and its presence in black women's writing on the black female body. The scar is an important symbol because it stands as evidence of the body's pain. It speaks what is in large part unspeakable. Hartman discusses the significance of the scarred slave body, particularly in the context of branding:

> WICS25 or T99 [branding marks] — no one wants to identify her kin by the cipher of slave-trading companies, or by the brand, which supplanted identity and left only a scar in its place. I'm reminded of the scene in *Beloved* in which Sethe's mother points to her mark, the circle and cross burned on her rib and says to her daughter, "This is your ma'am … If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you know me by this mark." The mark of property provides the emblem of kinship in the wake of defacement. It acquires the character of a personal trait, as though it were a birthmark (Hartman, 2007, p. 80).

The connection between identity and scarring is notable here. The scar figures centrally as an identifier, a symbolic expression not only of a painful experience, but also a representation of the lack of protection slaves had over their own bodies and their status as property. Similar conclusions can be drawn from examining scars from the slave whip, which symbolize just as many things about identity as the slave-trading brand that marked many bodies of black female slaves. In the same way that the brand is used to recognize a potentially unrecognizable body, the scars signify an inexpressible pain. The scar is the remnant of that experience.

In relation to this idea, Carol Henderson analyzes the scar and its role in the reinvention of African American subjectivity in her work *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*. Her

goal is to examine the "discursive ways in which African American writers recoup the African American body through a literary evocation of its physical trauma, thus reclaiming the essence of a selfhood fragmented under the weight of the dominant culture's gaze" (Henderson, 2002, p. 7). Henderson asserts that the scar is alternatively a representation of wounding and a representation for healing (p. 7). While this is an important argument, it is equally important to consider other uses of the scar as a narrative device. The scar gives individual pain its specificity, reinforcing the notion of pain's unsharability. Therefore the depiction of the scar in literature is the result of the process of invention. Where language fails, the scar speaks.

As far as the presence of the festering open wound in the black female body politic is concerned, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's theories in *The Shell and the Kernel* on the phantom and transgenerational haunting are significant. The use of the open wound as a trope in McCauley's *Sally's Rape* corresponds with Abraham and Torok's notion that "some people unwittingly inherit the psychic substance of their ancestors' lives" (Abraham & Torok, 1994, p. 166). *Sally's Rape* explores the idea of inheriting pain or of pain being passed down like an "heirloom". It theorizes the implications of an unresolved past through their representation of wounding across generations.

McCauley's *Sally's Rape* takes up key elements of this history and re-presents them in contemporary contexts. It locates the deep wound because it deals with historical events that laid the groundwork in shaping how the black female body is viewed. A central idea that resonates in McCauley's *Sally's Rape* is the notion of resurrection, in which it both literally and metaphorically exhumes he bodies of black women in order to fully engage with the subject matter. *Sally's Rape* presents the complex query of whether or not the pain visited upon the black female body can be redressed and if not, what are the repercussions of that for future/generations?

3. The Black Wound is Given a Voice in McCauley's *Sally's Rape*

The black female slaves on the auction block reflect the onset of the public display of black women in the West. It presented the black female body as grotesque, subhuman – jarring in its vulnerability, debased in spectacle. McCauley's *Sally's Rape* brings the plight of this experience to the contemporary stage, creating possibilities for a re-witnessing of these women's bodies in ways that cause the audience to see them from multi-dimensional and humanizing perspectives. The stage becomes a space of transformation where black female pain is legitimized and given a voice. This is important, particularly in light of Scarry's assertion that doubt of another's pain serves to amplify the suffering (Scarry, 1985, p. 7). Therefore, placing the focus on figures so central to the onslaught of the objectification of black women in the West is a significant attempt at recognition, leaving little doubt as to the pain of this history.

4. Awakening Audiences to the Black Pain

In order to represent this pain on the stage, McCauley utilizes various theatrical devices which result in defamiliarizing perceptions about the black female body; additionally, she destabilizes the audience's position as passive spectators through using forms of participatory theater in which the audience is asked to speak or move about while the play is happening around them. Daphne Brooks theorizes about these kinds of performative strategies in *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Her work highlights the ways that nineteenth and early twentieth-century performers used their bodies as a method of alienating their audiences in order to "defamiliarize the spectacle of 'blackness' in transatlantic culture" and "yield alternative

racial and gender epistemologies" (p. 5). Drawing her inspiration from Bertolt Brecht, who calls for actors to generate "alienation effects [in order to] 'awaken' audiences to history", Brooks terms these kinds of performances "Afro-alienation" transforming traumas of self-fragmentation into "dissonantly enlightened performance" (Brooks, 2006, p. 5). McCauley is driven by similar impulses and helps the audience to see Brooks' ideas from the playwright's perspective.

One particular way that McCauley presents a form of Afro-alienation, as it were, is through her use of the trope of resurrection. The notion of resurrection immediately disorients the audience and their perceptions on what is being witnessed. To think of the body on the stage as "resurrected" brings about a sense of alienation on the part of the audience. It re-frames the body as exhumed, brought back to life, one that must be witnessed differently. In addition to resurrection, the pained body on the stage is considered to be a mechanism for alienation of the audience and is itself alienated. Scarry describes pain as having an annihilating power. She argues that intense pain has the power to destroy "a person's self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. [It is also] language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates" (Scarry, 1985, p.35). The pain of sexual and physical assault, which largely characterizes the experiences of black female slaves, constitutes a form of destruction of the self. Not only are their bodies subject to abuse at any moment, there is no way to voice this pain and no one who deems them victims of the crimes inflicted upon them. Thus, the condition of these women is one of alienation. Their bodies are rendered abject and lacking sentience. Because of this, McCauley must contend with the challenge of representing these alienated and pained bodies in order to relate this experience on the stage.

McCauley proposes that the history of misinformation about the abuse occurring to black women on plantations has implications, not only for those who experienced this violence first hand, but for those who are descendants of those victims. Thus, McCauley's goal is to express a collective and enduring pain; her work addresses history and the present in a visual and explicit way the pained bodies of women whose images have been lost to obscurity. McCauley takes up the notion of freeing the black female body in the context of the festering open wound of slavery and the socially sanctioned rape of black women during this time and arguably years beyond. McCauley presents the plight of black female slaves in a manner that is not sanitized. Also, McCauley uses the black female body in the present to overturn past representations, drawing attention to the pain associated with the history of black female bodies in the West, and the present-day implications of this.

If we consider *Sally's Rape* in the context of Brooks' notion of Afro-alienation, McCauley reflects this concept more because she is a performance artist in the sense that Brooks describes, particularly as it relates to how performing artists alienate their audiences through their "dissonantly enlightened performance" (McCauley, 1996, p. 5). The use of her body on the stage as embodying the resurrected bodies of her great-great-grandmother and female slaves causes the audience to revise their preconceived notions about how the play will proceed. They have to consider McCauley in relation to the bodies of female slaves and settle connections between the past and present.

Although McCauley unnerves her audience by using her body in order to re-modernize aspects of female slave rape, she desires that the audience be not only jarred from their comfort as spectators but also connected to her. In an interview with Vicki Patraka entitled "Obsessing in Public", McCauley states that she wants to foster dialogue with her audience because she considers the audience as with her: "I'm not against the audience, so 'they' are always those who are not in the room. Even if they are in the room, I want them for the moment to identify

with me" (McCauley, 1996, p. 27). In this way, she desires to reach out to her audience in order to foster a relationship. As to alienation, she says, "What some performers are doing when they attack the audience is keeping the audience alienated, which isn't my major strategy. And some people don't want to be brought in. It's like going to church, when you come for one thing and get another" (McCauley, 1996, p. 49). McCauley acknowledges the potential for resistance on the part of her audience, many of whom come expecting to see a show and to not be a part of that show. Therefore, while McCauley attempts to form a connective relationship with her audience, there is an underlying tension inherent in the act of challenging the notion of passive viewership or attempting to render identification on the part of the audience with the performer, character and story. McCauley balances these considerations by creating a dynamic of talking and listening.

Early in the performance in Section 1: "Confessing About Family and Religion and Work in Progress", she and her white co-performer Jeannie request the audience to engage in dialogue with them because for them without a dialogue, "there is no progress" (McCauley, 1996, p. 370).[1] They continue to tell the audience that they are in the play and give instruction on how they will participate. They divide the room into three groups — The agreeable ones, who say "That's right" or "Yes indeed" at points in the play, The Bass line, who offer low toned "uh huh"s and "umm hmmm"s and The Dialogue group who adds to the discussion and/or disagrees. Robbie and Jeannie also pass out food such as cookies and apples in order to commune with the audience as a way of making them receptive.

In addition to talking and listening, they participate in the act of giving and receiving. Fostering this relationship opens up a space for the hearing of the brutality endured by black women in slavery. By creating within the audience the impulse to be receptive listeners, witnesses who acknowledge the pain of this history, McCauley is using the stage as a space to validate often silenced and unacknowledged black female pain. Jennifer Griffiths discusses witnessing and its relation to trauma in "Between Women: Trauma, Witnessing, and the Legacy of Interracial Rape in Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*." She cites Thomas Keenan who discusses the ways that public denial can exacerbate trauma and pain for its victim. He says, "There is a double trauma here [in the denial of the pain]. On the one hand, there's a cataclysmic event, which produces symptoms and calls for testimony. And then it happens again, when the value of the witness in the testimony is denied" (Griffiths 2). Because the pain of this history is often elided in favor of more narratives of the slave experience, the trauma of the initial act continues to fester and resonate across generations.

McCauley focuses on creating an audience who will truly witness and acknowledge this pain in real ways. She relates the multiple layers of witnessing that occur in the play: "I'm being a witness by choosing to remember. What's important about witnessing is that the audience is doing it with me. One of the problems of modern industrial society is the disconnection from that constant witnessing of the past" (McCauley, 1996, p. 35). As she establishes a relationship with the audience, she creates a space of multi-layered witnessing, what Dori Laub refers to as the "third level of witnessing" (McCauley, 1996, p. 6). This is explained in greater detail by Griffiths: "[T]he process of bearing witness to traumatic experience is analyzed and understood. The performance itself bears witness not only to the facts of interracial rape, but also to the dynamic of denial that reproduces the traumatizing effect of the initial violence by silencing and isolating the survivor" (McCauley, 1996, p. 7). While McCauley is not an immediate 'survivor', she is the product of the socially sanctioned rape of her ancestors in

[1] (For clarity, when referring to McCauley as a performer, I will use/"Robbie" as she is named in the play and when referencing McCauley as a/playwright, I will use her full or last name.)

slavery. Thus, the denial of this offense continues to delegitimize the violence done to black women's bodies, in which her own is implicated.

5. The Journey of Chains

McCauley takes up the metaphor of chains. In Section 3: "Trying to Transform", she declares that "It is a journey of chains" (p. 372). Not only is this a clear reference to the Middle Passage, but it is also a reference to links and connection. For McCauley, "History of the past is simply folklore. History has to be connected to the realities of the present" (Patraka, 1993, p. 28). I would contend that if we consider the festering wound of this particular history as a result of unacknowledged pain, then history is inevitably connected to the present because the pain endures.

McCauley attempts to vindicate the unacknowledged pain of black female rape and exploitation by depicting the trauma that constitutes the wound and the denial of that trauma. She figuratively rips the veil off this history when she says in Section 1, "Almost everybody in my mother's family was half white. But that wasn't nothing but some rape" (McCauley, 1996, p. 370). She highlights what most historical narratives, including slave narratives, attempt to gloss over because of its unspeakable nature. It is important to McCauley to place the term rape at the center of the narrative because for her, "That kind of rape [occurring on plantations] changed who we were as a people and that was not our choice. We didn't choose to make ourselves as a result of that rape, we had to improvise ourselves" (Patraka, 1993, p. 30). In this way, rape is a kind of birthmark because it produced generations of African Americans who struggle with the unspoken circumstances of their identities.

The central confrontation, however, that frankly addresses the sanitizing of this history is the exchange with a Smith College graduate who majored in U.S. history. The college graduate says, "I never knew white men did anything with colored women on plantations" (McCauley, 1996, p. 372) to which Robbie responds, "'It was rape.' Her eyes turned red. She choked on her sandwich and quit the job" (McCauley, 1996, p. 372). The fact that the woman holds a degree in U.S. history from a prestigious women's college is an indictment on the failure of even academic institutions to speak/teach the truth of history. The pungent metaphor calls up notions of choking on repressed history – being unable to speak what is primarily unspoken.

McCauley then proceeds to depict the historical pain of black female rape by re-enacting the rape and the experience of being displayed on the auction block. Rather than depict these as separate experiences, McCauley merges their bodies, primarily represented by her great-great grandmother, with her own stating, "It's about my great-great grandmother Sally who was a young woman with children when official slavery ended. And she's in me" (McCauley, 1996, p. 371). Declaring that "she's in me," she makes clear that her grandmother's past pain, history and experiences are intimately connected to her own. Also, it demonstrates how she carries her great-great-grandmother within to such a degree that she feels a sense of cohabitation with her. Harvey Young refers to Robbie's body in the play as her "ancestral body" (McCauley, 1996, p. 146). He explains, "It represents, and indeed re-presents, the bodies and the embodied experience of her ancestors whose previous actions invoked her current experience" (McCauley, 1996, p. 146). Robbie's expression of her existence in this way, reveals how much of those experiences are a part of her understanding herself.

The intertwining of the self and one's ancestors also removes the line that exists between the living and the dead, a concept vividly expressed in Sharon Patricia Holland's *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Holland cites Orlando Patterson's notion that slaves experience a social death because they

exist as "genealogical isolates because they are denied access to the social heritage of their ancestors" (Holland, 2000, p. 14). This social death is what Patterson and by extension Holland would argue as a liminal state in which the dead and the living somehow co-exist and in that context, the same idea operating in McCauley's play can be noted. Holland provides greater clarity into her overall theory on the lack of a line between the living and the dead, particularly for black Americans. She says,

> The unaccomplished shift from enslaved to freed subjectivity and the marked gap between genealogical isolation and the ancestral past form the meeting place where the bulk of my ruminations on death and black subjectivity reside. It is possible to make at least two broad contentions here: a) that the (white) culture's dependence on the nonhuman status of its black subjects was never measured by the ability of whites to produce a "social heritage"; instead it rested on the status of the black as a nonentity; and b) that the transmutation from enslaved to freed subject never quite occurred at the level of the imagination (Holland, 2000, p. 15).

In one sense McCauley's use of her own body as a vehicle for resurrecting the bodies of the black women who are the focus of the play could be read as a representation of the continuous state of blacks being caught between being enslaved and freed subjects. However, McCauley also creates a space where the transition between enslaved and freed can truly occur by taking these stories and giving voice to these women's unacknowledged pain. Her work's success in making this transition is also elucidated by Holland who argues that black literature, for example Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which takes up various voices of the living and the dead creates a "discourse of margins" that come together "to create a space where there was none before; where multilayered discourse can exist; where physical bodies and the disembodied speak" (Morrison, 2008, p. 64). McCauley constructs a discourse of margins in the performance that provides a voice not only for her persona on stage but the resurrected ones as well.

McCauley makes clear her attempts to merge her voice with that of her ancestors in Section 3 "Trying to Transform". She says, "I'll become others inside me standing at the bus stop with my socks rolled down screaming things I shoulda said, 'Just because people are crazy don't mean they can't think straight!' Hollering periodically at white men 'YOU RAPED ME! GODDAMN MOTHERFUKA! YOU RAPED ME!'" (McCauley, 1996, p. 371). Robbie uses her voice to express the long-held anger at the socially sanctioned act of raping black slave women. She is also forcing acknowledgement on the part of the victimizers in a metaphorical sense. Griffifths reinforces the significance of speaking these words in the play, explaining that:

> [R]ecovery [from a traumatic event] requires a reintegration of fractured memory forms. This reintegration occurs when the original trauma survivor processes the story with a willing witness, who assists the survivor in understanding the connections between the event and its impact on her life. However, failing to recognize the survivor's experience, on a cultural as well as individual level, reproduces traumatic experience (Griffifths, 2005, p. 2).

The need for recognition for the survivor of the trauma, to have her pain heard and recognized is central to the act of recovery. Thus, McCauley's screaming at the bus stop to white men "YOU RAPED ME!" becomes an act of expression whereby the women are able to scream at these representative white men t6hings they could not have said as slaves. Serving as that medium, Robbie illustrates the impact of the systemic denial of black women's pain for many years. Robbie relates this pain as though she feels it as deeply-signaling a personal element in the telling of these stories and the anger at the socially sanctioned rape of black women. Hartman addresses this issue in her essay "Seduction and the Ruses of Power" as she details how the law was constructed to view black women

as always already willing participants in their own sexual abuse and exploitation. Hartman explains that the impression of the willing black slave woman was central in establishing legal differences between slaves and whites. She says,

> The (re)production of enslavement and the legal codification of racial subordination and sexual subjection depended upon various methods of sexual control and domination: anti-miscegenation statutes, rape laws which made the rape of white women by black men a capital offense, the sanctioning of sexual violence against slave women by virtue of the law's calculation of negligible injury, the negation of kinship, conveyance of property and black subordination (Hartman, 1996, pp. 541-542).

With the law being established to make sexual violence against slave women "of negligible injury," we can see the onslaught of how even in the law black women had no alternative and no medium whereby their pain could be addressed. McCauley makes that fact central when she expresses to Jeannie, "You … let the cabs roll by … let shit roll off your back … stay … ain't no rape crisis center on the plantation" (McCauley, 1996, p. 375). To this, Jeannie asks, "Then what do you do about it?" (McCauley, 1996, p. 375). Robbie's statement and Jeannie's response to it are central to understanding what is at stake in this play. Robbie makes clear in her statement "ain't no rape crisis center on the plantation" that for all the contemporary treatment we have to address rape in our time, those kinds of outlets were not available to black women in any form; thus, they cannot fully be addressed in a present-day framework. Robbie's words go to the heart of the trauma of black women having to suffer in silence and face an enduring lack of recognition of the impact of these crimes not only on their bodies but also on their psyches. Jeannie's rhetorical question "Then what do you do about it?" ends Section 6 "In a Rape Crisis Center." By leaving this question open, McCauley is acknowledging the limitations of her own writing and body to do anything "about it". Other than tell the stories of her ancestors and of women like Sally Hemmings, McCauley can only go so far in providing healing for those wounds existing long ago. This is why the stage as a space for imagining a voice for these women, where their pain can be expressed, where their descendants can potentially be freed of the residual pain, is so significant. McCauley also uses the black female body on stage as an outlet for healing through the auction block imagery.

Section 5 "Sally's Rape" is the central place where McCauley's venture comes together. Early on in the scene, Jeannie and Robbie think on and act out various imagery from the experiences of black female slaves. They begin by imagining Sally Hemmings in European tea rooms with Thomas Jefferson, Robbie's great-great-grandmother Sally and the children she bore as a result of being raped by her master, and Harriet Tubman's escaping to freedom (McCauley, 1996, p. 374). During this travel through time, Jeannie makes the statement that "These are dreams but the wounds remain and there are no meetings of ourselves at these crossroads" (McCauley, 1996, p. 374). This moment can be read in a few ways. Since Jeannie is white, perhaps she literally feels that the past in which they are navigating doesn't allow a space for her to access these memories with Robbie, who is much more intimately connected than she. It also points to the possibility that neither of them can exist along the crossroads where the wounds of history remain. Even Robbie, who has imagined herself an embodiment of her ancestors cannot truly access their historical pain. This moment leads into the scene where Robbie strips naked and stands on the auction block. Disregarding the limitations presented to her in her attempts to connect with her ancestors' wounds, she becomes a slave to be sold while Jeannie takes on the role of auctioneer.

Robbie says, "On the auction block. They put their hands all down our bodies to sell you, for folks to measure you smeltcha …" (McCauley, 1996, p. 374). This is a dehumanization and physical violation of black women's bodies on display. Robbie puts her body on display in order to truly capture the violence of this

experience. She also makes the audience is essential to who I am?'" (McCauley, 1996, p. 30). She notes that in performance vulnerability is strength (30). As the scene goes on, Robbie intimates that according to her Aunt Jessie, men got their manhood by coming down to the quarters and "do[ing] it to us and the chickens" (McCauley, 1996, p. 374). By repeating her aunt's stories, she is raising them up to be witnessed, giving voice to the sexual abuse of black female slaves on plantations. She also states that she stands naked before the audience on the auction block in the hopes of being freed from "this" —"this" referring to her naked body. She sees her freedom as intertwined with the freeing of female slaves from their pain and subjugation. According to Robbie, "Any old socialist knows one can't be free till we all are free" (McCauley, 1996, p. 375). The use of the pronouns "us" and "we" demonstrate how McCauley, in writing the play, envisions the struggles of the female slave ancestors as a continuing struggle for black women in the present, a past pain and characterization of "always already willing," something they need to be "freed" of.

She does not only address the humiliation of the auction block, Robbie then goes further to re-live the rape of her great-great grandmother and says "in the dream I am Sally being done it to I am down on the ground being done it to bound down didn't wanna be bound down on the ground" (McCauley, 1996, p. 375). Again, McCauley is re-visiting the pain of rape and the black female slave's position of being "bound down on the ground". The impact of performing this event for the audience shifts the former dehumanization of the auction block and subsequent rape to the pain of the event and offers the female slave's perspective and voice.

McCauley's presentation of her own body — a body in search of freedom and healing for black women highlights the use of drama as a mode of recapturing a mortifying performance such as the one on the auction block in order to give voice to the pained experience. By using her own body as a representation of the exploited black female body, McCauley goes to the very heart of the wounds that come as a result of that exploitation. This is so much so that when Robbie commands Jeannie to step up on the auction block and reveal herself in Section 7, (McCauley, 1996, p. 376) Jeannie chooses not to.

Jeannie had been attempting throughout the section to identify with the experience that Robbie was relating about her family history, including home education and negotiating the realities of race in America, but Robbie reveals that their experiences aren't truly comparable. She uses the symbol of the auction block to make Jeannie aware of this. In this moment, Robbie makes clear that she is tapping into an experience specific to black women and as a descendant of that history, she desires to rescue the unheard voices from the overwhelming silence about the sexual abuse of black women.

Thus, McCauley's primary objective is dramatizing victimization. Her approach has a certain kind of utility that is important if we consider how to grapple with the trauma that resonates out of this history. Ann Nymann in "*Sally's Rape*: Robbie McCauley's Survival Art," makes the point that "trauma creates a cessation of identity, culture, and tradition; continuance is living through and responding to that trauma. Survival art aestheticizes this constant 're-traumatizing,' not to offer transcendence or simple resolution, but to stimulate an immediacy of emotional and intellectual response" (Nymann, 1999, p. 579). To this end, although McCauley focuses on victimhood and how to work through its implications, she is not offering a simplistic presentation. Nor is she suggesting that her work necessarily "frees" black women from the historical and present implications of their bodies. The play does not offer a sense of resolution; it stimulates an emotional and intellectual response to this victimization by shedding light on it through the platform granted to her by the stage.

McCauley's *Sally's Rape* re-presents historical bodies and their pained experiences as acts of freedom by highlighting the continued captivity beyond death which takes the form of the social and political implications of

being abused and having that abuse delegitimized. McCauley forces her audience into active spectatorship whereby they can offer a sympathetic witnessing that helps to alleviate the enduring pain of this history. Thus, McCauley's *Sally's Rape* gives voice to silenced experiences and offers a different lens through which to view these bodies on display — revealing the truth and pain of the exploitation.

6. Conclusion

In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hartman impressively asserts that "the effort [of John Rankin, a white man who attempts to identify with the slave in order to expose the cruelty of the system] to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible" (19). The invisibility of black pain, especially the black female one, has long been something people of African descent have had to grapple with. Hartman locates this lack of intelligibility and its origins in the slave system and we continue to see the consequences of insensitivity to black pain in present day events such as the 2005 tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, LA, the brutal raping of women in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the continual blind eye that Western media turns in relation to missing, killed, or abused people of color. This is why exploring pain as a feature of black female life is so significant in McCauley's *Sally's Rape*.

Hooks in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* makes the point that in the film industry and in society in general black women do not register as women (Hooks, 1992, p. 118). She argues that in film "the woman to be looked at and desired is 'white'" (p. 118). Thus, McCauley's *Sally's Rape* focus on humanizing black women and bringing to light the long ignored black female pain which constitutes a festering wound in the black female body politic. Denying the historical abuse and pain visited upon the black female body causes the wound to fester. Antonius C.G.M. Robben makes the point that: "People cannot mourn their losses when others deny that those losses took place … [T]he contest of memory denies conflicting parties sufficient room to work through their traumas, hinders them from gradually standing back from the past and proceeding from testimony to historical interpretation and from re-experience to commemoration" (qtd. in Griffiths 2). This is precisely what is seen in early pieces about the black female body which are rife with dehumanizing rhetoric about black women. McCauley's *Sally's Rape* seeks to acknowledge black female pain in order to open a space for mourning, acknowledgement and potentially healing. It takes on the challenge of rendering pain into language in order to bring about this reckoning. Recalling Scarry's argument in *The Body in Pain* that pain resists and actively destroys language (4), and that there are political consequences to allowing pain to remain voiceless (Scarry, 1985, p. 12), McCauley's *Sally's Rape* makes black women's pain more visible. It overcomes the cultural structures that would deem black female pain insignificant. Scarry also makes the point that: "It is not simply accurate but tautological to observe that given any two phenomena, the one that is more visible will receive more attention" (p. 12). This is why visibility in reference to the historical lack of acknowledgement of black female pain is essential in the effort to deal with the deep festering wound in the black female body politic.

In a nut shell, McCauley's *Sally's Rape* offers a historical context for the onslaught of the devaluation of black female pain in the West. Additionally, it exhumes the pained black female body and places it in a contemporary context in order to address the ongoing impact of the historical wounds endured by black women. It causes the audience to consider how pain is passed down and the impact that unacknowledged pain has on future generations.

Black women have certainly been featured in cultural discourse but primarily in objectifying contexts. Willis and Williams make the point that "In Europe in the nineteenth century, the body of the black female symbolized three themes — colonialism, scientific evolution, and sexuality. Virtually always when she is depicted she is either a sexualized mythology or a neutered anomaly, defined by her sexuality or lack of it" (Willis & Williams, 2002, p. 2). This is true not only for Europe but for most Western countries who engage with the black female body. hooks *in Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* provides more clarity on the devaluation and the narrow views regarding black women. She argues:

> No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or as a present part of the larger group of "women" in this culture. When black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgement of the interests of black women; when women are talked about racism militates against a recognition of black female interests. When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women (Hooks, 1990, p. 7).

Hooks highlights the marginalization of black women that has caused them to fall outside of the realm of persons to sympathize with or have empathy for. Essentially, black women are often left out of consideration when it comes to matters of pain and abuse.

The groundbreaking work *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* expresses a similar sentiment as hooks in making the case for Black Women's Studies. Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith make the argument that: "The political position of Black women in America has been, in a single word, embattled. The extremity of our oppression has been determined by our very biological identity" (p. xvii). Indeed, black women in the West are caught in the precarious position of being doubly oppressed and unrecognized. This sheds light on why as pained bodies, black women receive relatively little attention. They are often lost in discussions in both women's studies and black studies arenas (although it is important to note that contemporary efforts in both areas of study have gone a long way in correcting this).

This is reflective of Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?". She writes: "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (Spivak, 1994, p. 102). In the case that Spivak describes here, the subject is rendered mute, unable to articulate her own thoughts regarding her circumstances and position in the world. Conversely, in the context of the black female body, black women writers, such as McCauley, struggle with the paradox of invisibility and visibility. The body is objectified and the voice is silenced; thus it is important to feature and recognize these voices, particularly with respect to the subject matter.

Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" provides clarity for the roots of this marginalization in her examination of the underlying causes of black female dehumanization. One notable argument she makes is that in Middle Passage, there was no distinction between male and female. "Under these conditions [the slave trade], one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into 'account' as quantities. The female in 'Middle Passage', as the apparently smaller physical mass, occupies 'less room' in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart" (Spillers, 1987, p. 72). The transition from viewing black women (and black people in general) as quantities to persons has been a long and enduring process. Beyond simply acknowledging their personhood, black women are continually viewed in the narrow contexts of sexual savages, mammy figures, or asexual.

McCauley is continually working to counterbalance these misconceptions. *Sally's Rape* causes the audience to view the black female body beyond the limiting and reliable paradigms referenced above. It brings to light the invisibility of black female pain and forces us to see the black female body as pained and human.

References

Abraham Nicolas and Maria Torok (1994). *The Shell and the Kernel*, Vol. 1, Trans. Nicholas T. Rand, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Bennett Michael and Vanessa D. Dickerson, Eds. (2001). *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Brooks Daphne. (2006). *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Griffiths Jennifer (2005). "Between women: Trauma, witnessing, and the legacy of interracial rape in Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*", *Frontiers*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp. 1–23.

Hartman Saidiya (2007). *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Hartman Saidiya (1997). *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hartman Saidiya (1996). "Seduction and the Ruses of Power", *Callaloo*, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 537–560.

Henderson Carol. (2002). *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*, Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.

Holland Sharon Patricia (2000). *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hooks Bell (1990). *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism*, Pluto Press.

Hooks Bell (1992). *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Boston, MA: South End Press.

Hull Gloria T. Hull et al. (1982). *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York.

McCauley Robbie (1996). *Sally's Rape. Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans — The Recent Period (1935-Today)*, James V. Hatch and Ted Shine (Eds.), New York: The Free Press, pp. 368-380.

Morgan Jennifer (2004). *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Morrison Toni (2008). *A Mercy*, New York: Alfred A Knopf.

Nymann Ann E. (1999). "*Sally's Rape*: Robbie McCauley's Survival Art", *African American Review*, Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 577–587.

Patraka Vicki and Robbie McCauley (1993). "Robbie McCauley: Obsessing in public — An interview" , *The Drama Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2, pp. 25–55.

Scarry Elaine (1985). *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Sontag Susan (2003). *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Spillers Hortense J. (1987). "Mama's baby, Papa's maybe: An American grammar book", *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 65–81.

Spivak Gayatri (1994). "Can the Subaltern Speak?", *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Eds.), New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 66-111.

Williams Carla and Debra Willis (2002). *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.