

CONVEYING THE UNSPEAKABLE:
UNCOVERING THE TRADITION OF EXPRESSIVE
ART THERAPIES IN SOUTHERN LITERATURE

by

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(Under the Direction of John Lowe)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the ways in which literature written by Southern American women both near the beginning and end of the twentieth century demonstrates an impulse to turn to music and other forms of art as means of accessing, understanding, and conveying difficult, often impossible to express emotions. Through engaging with music, characters find both emotional and physical benefits enabling them to survive numerous forms of suffering. I argue that art's ability to connect characters to a semiotic space—one associated with maternal feelings of safety and nurturance as well as an absence of language—provides restoration and empowerment. Support for this theory comes from readings of Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *Violet and Other Tales* (1895), Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby* (1988), Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster* (1987), and Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Meaning of Consuelo* (2003). Using a primarily psychoanalytic lens and pulling from feminist and play theory, this project primarily relies on close readings paired with expressive art therapy scholarship to expose the way in which the texts in question accurately depict the benefits of expressive art therapies for trauma survivors. A

recurring theme of surrogate mothers or other nurturing figures who encourage the use of art proves imperative for each contemporary protagonist to successfully continue recovering from the trauma she has experienced. Just as the mediums through which characters experience music increasingly vary, so do the forms in which the characters find a surrogate caregiver. From Chopin's *Edna Pontellier* to Oriz Cofer's *Consuelo*, in the literature this dissertation examines, we see music's ability to remind us of the staggering human capacity for joy, pain, and resilience.

INDEX WORDS: SOUTHERN LITERATURE, MUSIC THERAPY, ART THERAPY

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DEDICATION

For my parents, who taught me not to fear writing my own lyrics.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: ACCESSING THE SEMIOTIC THROUGH MUSIC AND ART

Get a radio or a phonograph capable of the most extreme loudness possible, and sit down to listen to a performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony or of Schubert's C-Major Symphony. But I don't mean just sit down and listen. I mean this: Turn it on as loud as you can get it. Then get down on the floor and jam your ear as close into the loudspeaker as you can get it and stay there, breathing as lightly as possible, and not moving, and neither eating nor smoking nor drinking. Concentrate everything you can into your hearing and into your body. You won't hear it nicely. If it hurts you, be glad of it. As near as you will ever get, you are inside the music; not only inside it, you are it; your body is no longer your shape and substance, it is the shape and substance of the music. Is what you hear pretty? or beautiful? or legal? or acceptable in polite or any other society? It is beyond any calculation savage and dangerous and murderous to all equilibrium in human life as human life is; and nothing can equal the rape it does on all that death; nothing except anything, anything in existence or dream, perceived anywhere remotely toward its true dimension.

- James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (12-13)

Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the spaces between the notes and curl my back to loneliness.

- Maya Angelou, *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting' Merry Like Christmas* (3)

In their critically acclaimed work *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1939), writer James Agee and photographer Walker Evans document the lives of three sharecropper families managing to survive a long southern summer seven years into the Great Depression. Agee concludes his preamble to the text with a suggestion for readers: listen to powerful music as loud as you can, even if it hurts. Agee's extended passage, shared above, suggests that to most fully experience music would be to become one with the music, an experience that would be so revolutionary it would overpower death. Through this imagined exercise, Agee illustrates the

impossibility of ever truly conveying a lived experience through something as elusive as art—whether it be music or the written word. It is this conundrum—the inability to adequately and ethically convey the experience of another—that Agee agonizes over throughout the preceding pages addressed specifically to Walker Evans and generally to all readers. Agee and Evans’s collaborative work, Agee writes, is “curious, not to say obscene” (5). Though Agee professes a respect and care for the tenants he lived among for weeks and whose lives he now attempts to share with the world, he also sees himself as a suspicious instrument of the unchecked capitalistic forces that have driven him to the South. For the journalist it is “thoroughly terrifying” that the New York magazine charging him to document the lives of poor sharecroppers would “for profit... pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings” (5). When Agee implores his audience to read the text in one sitting, he does so for the same reason he suggests a painful listening to Beethoven’s Seventh: as (what he knows are already insufficient) means to overcome the inescapable fact that one’s lived experience can never be adequately conveyed to another human, and if such a transference *were* possible, it would constitute an inhumane act. For, as Agee claims, if he were able to adequately communicate the existence of his destitute subjects through writing, readers “would not go near it at all... For if [they] did, [they] would hardly bear to live” (11). Claiming he’s done “what little [he] can in writing,” Agee posits that if he were able to convey the full humanity of his subjects, he would do so with photographs, fragments of objects, and even “A piece of the body torn out by the roots” (10).

The premise of my dissertation would suggest that Agee's using music to illustrate the inability of one human to convey true suffering through symbolic language is no accident. Throughout the following chapters, I explore the ways in which literature of the American South written both near the beginning and end of the twentieth century demonstrates an impulse to turn to music and other forms of art as means of accessing, understanding, and conveying difficult, often impossible to express emotions. Through engaging with music, characters find both emotional and physical benefits enabling them to survive numerous forms of suffering. I locate reasoning for these characters' repeated turn to music in what is arguably the first traumatic experience of most every human's life: birth's painful insistence upon our separation from the mother's body. Within the womb, our semblance of life revolves around the mother's body, our first nine months set to the varying beat of our mother's heart, the symphonic rhythms of her bodily functions, and the faint hum of a world filled with hers and others' voices. As a newborn, most of us will find comfort through being held in our mother's (or another caretaker's) arms, listening to her body's heartbeat and gentle hum once more. Accordingly, music becomes a lifelong connection to something comforting and emotional yet impossible to encapsulate in words—the experience of being one with the mother's body and void of language.

The following chapters first signify the linkage of maternity, music, and emotion in the writing of two late nineteenth-century authors before demonstrating how characters in contemporary Southern literature repeatedly turn to music as means to manage and overcome difficult emotions and experiences. Though the therapeutic effects of music are my primary focus, the visual arts also surface repeatedly as means to access what I describe as the semiotic: the metaphorical space we inhabit when we return to a sense of comfort similar to that we felt when intimately connected to a mother despite the absence of language. As my interpretation of

Agee's preamble suggests, music and visual art's abstraction from language allow us an attempt—albeit one doomed to failure—at knowing what it is to be oblivious to the inadequacy of language and suffering of life.

This dissertation offers readings of Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *Violet and Other Tales* (1895), Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby* (1988), Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster* (1987), and Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Meaning of Consuelo* (2003). Though I use a primarily psychoanalytic lens and pull from feminist, trauma, and play theory, my project primarily relies on close readings paired with expressive art therapy scholarship to expose the way in which the texts in question accurately depict the benefits of expressive art therapies as a way for trauma survivors to access a semiotic space. Each of the works read here features a female character who—in response to emotional turmoil, traumatic abuse, or physical illness—turns to the arts as means of finding solace and strength. Though I do not suggest only women are capable of enjoying music's therapeutic benefits, my argument does begin with attention to how both Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Kate Chopin use music as means to elevate a critical exploration of American motherhood at the end of the nineteenth century. While Chopin's and Dunbar-Nelson's respective works feature characters struggling to explicitly name the misogynistic personal or societal abuses causing them despair, their use of music and art to access and temper these feelings predicts scenes within the contemporary work of Allison, Douglas, Gibbons, and Ortiz Cofer. Situated near the end of the twentieth century, these later authors find themselves more inclined to create graphic depictions of women experiencing physical, sexual, and racist violence and overtly engage the troubling silencing often associated with such abuse. Though each contemporary story's protagonist faces a unique set of challenges, they each use music or the

visual arts to communicate their struggle to others, find a sense of safety, or simply experience much needed feelings of control and joy. A close reading of these narratives also reveals that access to a surrogate mother or other nurturing figure who encourages the use of art proves imperative for each contemporary protagonist to successfully continue recovering from the trauma she has experienced. Just as the mediums through which these characters experience music increasingly vary, so do the forms in which the characters find a surrogate caregiver. From Chopin's *Edna Pontellier* to Oriz Cofer's *Consuelo*, in the literature this dissertation examines, we see music's ability to remind us of the staggering human capacity for joy, pain, and resilience, a capacity illustrated in Agee's imagined reader listening to Beethoven at a deafening volume.

While I posit that the recurring themes I study in this dissertation would appear in literature hailing from most any culture or time period, solid reasoning supports twentieth-century southern texts as an entry-point to literature's testament to the therapeutic use of expressive arts. As Lisa Hinrichsen points out, southern studies has "long been attentive to personal and historical trauma" thanks to the "field's longstanding key concepts of memory and history" ("Trauma" 609). My goal to enter texts concerning traumatic events with a focus on healing through expressive arts makes southern studies, already rife with novels marked as narratives of personal and shared traumas, an ideal starting point. In her overview of recent southern studies scholarship, Hinrichsen points to both Jennifer Rae Greeson and Leigh Anne Duck, whose work has helped to show the South as a metaphorical dumping ground for the nation as a whole. Hinrichsen articulates, "The availability of the South as an object of collective fantasy, wherein the contradictions in American democracy have been managed, disavowed, and recast, has played an important political function in enabling ideologies of national progress and

freedom” (7). Though so many recent arguments about the South tend to center on the argument that the South is an *imagined* community of exceptionalism, the *reality* of the South as a physical site of actual trauma cannot be denied.

In 2020, debates continue over the removal of Confederate memorial statues, looming daily reminders of slavery’s role in American history and many southerners’ unwillingness to leave a “Lost Cause” in the past (“Virginia”). While the history of slavery is enough to mark the South as a site of extraordinary trauma, the extermination and forceful removal of Native Americans from southeastern states along with the lynch mobs and daily abuses of the Jim Crow South serve as damning evidence that the South, historically, has carried the weight of the nation’s most horrific memories. More recent events such as Hurricanes Harvey and Katrina, the 2015 mass shooting at an African American church in Charleston, and the 2016 mass shooting of mostly Latinx individuals at an Orlando gay nightclub prove the South—though by no means an exclusive site of trauma—is a continued site of violence often disproportionately impacting historically disenfranchised groups (Fernandez and Panich-Linsman, Craemer). A 2015 study found that in the U.S., the majority of firearm deaths (whether intentional or intended, suicidal or homicidal) occur in the South, an unsurprising fact considering the South’s gun culture and lax firearm laws (Fowler, et. al). The United States undoubtably stands out as a violent nation, and the South plays no small part in creating such a reputation (“Global”). Moving towards a more inclusive understanding of the South, as part of my project, I read Ortiz Cofer, whose work provides a glimpse into the culture of a South frequently neglected in American literature studies: Puerto Rico. Often-overlooked due its small size and status as a commonwealth, Puerto Rico’s history includes the enslavement of indigenous people and captured Africans, the U.S.’s

invasion during the Spanish-American War, political massacres, and multiple recent natural disasters, all echoing similar traumas experienced in the “traditional” American South.

Of course, multiple critics before me have focused on portrayals of music within southern literature, but I see my work as innovative in its emphasis on a pragmatist reading of authors’ portrayals of the realistic ability of music to offer therapeutic support to characters. Still, Courtney George’s 2008 dissertation studying southern women authors’ use of music proves an especially informative work for me. George demonstrates how, in their respective texts, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Dorothy Allison, and Lee Smith each employ various aspects and genres of music in order to highlight southern women’s long tradition of creating and performing music as a way to “illuminate, resist, and revise gender, race, and class discriminations in a patriarchally imagined, yet contested, southern social system” (2). In contrast, my driving interest in the therapeutics of music situates my focus more specifically on the psychology of the characters presented in the texts I explore. While George frames her chosen works as demonstrating how southern women use music to “talk back” to the oppressive structures around them, I demonstrate how the characters of my texts use music and other creative means to semi-privately work through the traumas inflicted, in part, by those structures. Additionally, while George’s dissertation examines the relationships between female characters in her chosen texts, arguing that “[s]outhern women writers employ gendered musical performances in reflexive moments to complicate previous understandings of community as either imagined or ordinary,” I focus on a more intimate, though no less complex relationship: that between the nurturer and nurtured (12). In this way, my dissertation extends George’s argument that literature demonstrates a southern women’s tradition of passing down music’s powers to the next generation. However, my work complicates the tradition by demonstrating that men, too, can

serve as custodians of music's therapeutic powers, as shown in the relationship between Tweet and her grandfather in Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby*. As Tweet's primary caregiver and musical teacher, Grandpa represents a man whose status as nurturer connects him to the power of the semiotic. Cultural ties further help explain Grandpa's ability to teach Tweet about the therapeutics of music, as I argue in chapter two that, through Grandpa and Tweet, Douglas highlights an African American tradition of harnessing the therapeutics of music in coded ways, a phenomenon that I am far from the first to recognize but that I theorize through the term *rival soundscapes*.

Grandpa and Tweet's relationship also points to another theme revealed by this dissertation's focus: as the twentieth century sees technology increase the ways in which we can access music, so too do the ways characters can experience the therapeutic effects of music. Despite Tweet's grandfather dying while she was still a young girl, a much older Tweet taps into the power of familial music through listening to the radio. Through tapping and humming along to the same song her grandfather used to teach her the power of music's invigorating effects, she works toward healing her body and mind after a stroke. Whereas Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson create scenes of women listening to music performed live, Allison's, Douglas's, and Ortiz Cofer's characters all interact with music through either record-players or radios. Thus, my project sheds light on the variations both maternal guidance and music therapy can embody and how these proliferate over the course of the twentieth century.

Critic Lorraine M. Henry comes closest to offering the type of reading I model in the following chapters. In a 2014 article commemorating the life and writing of Maya Angelou, Henry argues that throughout Angelou's biographical writings "music functions to delineate character, to establish scenes and corresponding mood, and to precipitate and/or accompany

epiphanies” (48). Henry’s close readings do powerfully explicate music’s role in Angelou’s writing, but I see Henry’s use of few secondary and theoretical sources as an invitation to more deeply explore how depictions of music therapy form a larger trend within southern literature. Henry writes, “Angelou conveys the function of music to express the feelings of one who is without words,” an idea that speaks to my locating music’s power in its evocation of the semiotic. When Angelou writes that music was a “refuge” she could “crawl into,” she illustrates the metaphorical return to the womb music allows (3). Henry most powerfully argues that several of Angelou’s best scenes “reveal the power of music to strengthen and heal, to inspire, to cut across time and place to link the past and the present” (57). This dissertation adds significant evidence to this claim, while also serving to complicate what may be too optimistic an outlook. As my third chapter shows, multiple impediments can inhibit music’s therapeutic powers.

Most notably, I find my work diverges from Henry’s in that I would temper her claim that “Much like Frederick Douglass, W. E. D. DuBois, and James Wheldon Johnson who revered the spirituals and marveled at the genius of their unschooled creators, Angelou also acknowledges the tremendous power of the sorrow songs to unify, life up, embolden and restore the dispirited soul by transcending human limitations” (63). While I would not deny the visceral effects strong faith combined with communal music can provoke, I see Henry’s word choice of “transcending human limitations” as problematic (though, I’m sure unintended) in its evocation of the idea that African Americans possess a super-human capacity for enduring trauma. Accordingly, I see my work as valuable in its study of white, black, and Latina characters all accessing the powerful—yet ultimately limited—therapeutic powers of music. As *National Public Radio* music correspondent Ann Powers writes in her riveting analysis of music in Steve McQueen’s 2013 adaptation of Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*, “art never offers a

solution, only a way to not only survive but to live in a world where most people are still far from truly free.” In none of the following readings do I suggest music undoes the effects of a traumatic event. Rather, music acts as one way in which characters may remind themselves of their humanity through connecting to both positive and negative emotions, while also providing the physical body real benefits only recently understood through science.

While written testaments to the cathartic impact of the arts date back to ancient Greece, scientific explanations for creative expression’s relationship to our emotions and the limbic system that manufactures them continue to intrigue and elude researchers. Only since the 1990s, have neurologists been able to effectively create and study images of brain activity on a meaningful scale, meaning the field is still a burgeoning one. Trauma specialist and psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk reports that contemporary brain scans validate Freud and other early psychoanalysts’ theories that traumatic events actually cause a psychiatric wound; before the late nineteenth-century, “trauma” referred only to physical injuries, the Greek word “trauma” translating to “wound.” Today’s brain scans make this theorized wound of trauma visible as they reveal that trauma survivors’ left hemisphere of the brain—the side responsible for language—actually shuts down upon the survivor being shown triggering images (van der Kolk 44). Because we now understand that the brain hemisphere in charge of language goes numb in response to trauma, we must seriously question the limits of language’s role in the healing process. As van der Kolk writes:

For a hundred years or more, every textbook of psychology and psychotherapy has advised that some method of talking about distressing feelings can resolve them.

However...the experience of trauma itself gets in the way of being able to do that. No

matter how much insight and understanding we develop, the rational brain is basically impotent to talk the emotional brain out of its own reality. (47)

In van der Kolk's previously mentioned book, he explicitly questions "that language is essential to healing" for everyone, and instead looks toward other methods of helping traumatized victims find ways to feel safe in the present and move past painful experiences to lead healthy, productive lives (245). While he focuses mostly on methods involving EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing) and yoga, he also acknowledges the "thousands of art, music, and dance therapists who do beautiful work with abused children, soldiers suffering from PTSD, incest victims, refugees, and torture survivors," noting that their "accounts attest to the effectiveness of expressive therapies" (244). Just as van der Kolk argues for psychology's need to move beyond pharmacology and talking-centered approaches to healing traumatized patients, I suggest literary studies must be careful not to so emphasize the power of narrative to the extent that other therapeutic methods shown in the texts are neglected. To read carefully into how individuals and entire cultures have managed to survive literally unspeakable terrors serves as a memorial to those who have endured to share their story and provides hope for those recovering from the atrocities of today.

For decades now, professional music therapists have witnessed music aid clients in their ability to articulate survived traumatic experiences and understand their own empowerment and ability to move beyond past events. As with any field, there are multiple definitions of music therapy and as many methods put into practice, but they are all informed by music's ability to help traumatized individuals access emotions not easily articulated. Diane Austin of New York University, a renowned music therapist, has worked for twenty-five years to bring attention to the ways in which singing alone can be a powerful therapeutic tool for survivors of trauma. Due

to the internal vibrations and deep breathing singing requires, Austin argues, singing “enable[s] the traumatised client to reconnect with her essential nature by providing her with access to, and an outlet for, intense feelings” (235). For Austin and many other practitioners, singing and/or creating music “is owning one’s authority and ending a cycle of victimisation” (Austin 236). Along with allowing patients to find a sense of safety and pride, music therapists such as Heidi Ahonen harness music to help clients recreate and express unspeakable emotions felt at the time of the traumatic event. After having clients improvise a musical piece, Ahonen helps them to analyze and verbalize the emotions portrayed. For Ahonen, verbal narration is not always necessary or even possible “because with music we are able to express more complicated feelings than through words” (281). Such a belief aligns with the reality that the pre-verbal, musical right brain hemisphere experiences trauma while the left side essentially goes numb; narration helps some patients create a bridge between the right and left hemisphere of the brain, yet some aspects of trauma remain unknowable and unspeakable in the form of words. Thus, bearing witness to pain through music proves an incredibly useful tool, especially for those who are unable to name the traumas they have experienced.

Engagement with the visual arts also proves beneficial for the brain in ways science has yet to explain fully. The 2009 award-winning documentary *I Remember Better when I Paint* continues to introduce audiences world-wide to the remarkable emotional, physical, and mental health rewards art therapy offers Alzheimer’s patients and others with dementia. For survivors of trauma, too, art therapy has proven helpful. A 2016 *The Arts in Psychotherapy* article discussing work with refugees concludes, “The combination of art therapy and mindfulness helped participants *cope* day to day and allowed participants to begin to get a sense of not only who they were and what they had lived through, but potentially who they could become” (emphasis in

original, Kalmanowitz and Ho 64). Art therapy has proven so promising for refugees and other victims of political violence, an entire body of research focuses on this specific line of inquiry (Kalmanowitz and Lloyd, Akthar and Lovell, Ely et al.). As Amiin, a Somalian refugee, told researchers, “The pictures, show me the way, the way I feel at the moment and the way I feel about the present and the future and brings the story. The story that helps me” (qtd. in Kalmanowitz and Ho 62). Amiin and other refugees’ testimony supports psychologists’ theory that expressive arts can help clients access and understand their stories of survival sooner. My overall project demonstrates that southern literature, too, is full of testaments to the powerful therapeutic tool of engagement with art and its ability to connect survivors to the semiotic.

I derive my understanding of the semiotic from Julia Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language* in which the theorist brings a feminist perspective to Jacques Lacan’s concepts of psychosexual development and writes of the semiotic as closely tied to the mother. When infants are prelinguistic, they are still physically tied to the mother for sustenance. For Kristeva, this time and space, beginning in the womb, when the mother and child are so intimately connected, is associated with “humming, screaming, rhythm, sound, music, and color” in order to convey meaning (Givhan 77). Especially during what Kristeva refers to as the *chora* stage, from zero to six months, infants are in a state defined by “a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated” (25). In other words, having not yet mastered the use of her body or symbolic language, the child is at the mercy of her body and caregiver as she exists in a liminal state that is simultaneously natural, disordered, and, ideally, secure. Kristeva borrows *chora* from Plato’s *Timeaus*, in which Plato uses the term to describe an in-between space he characterizes as “nourishing and maternal” (Kristeva 26). During this stage, the mother’s “replete body, the receptacle and guarantor of demands, takes the

place of all narcissistic, hence imaginary, effects and gratifications”; she is, according to Kristeva, “the phallus” of the infant’s world (47). As of yet, the child possesses no sense of subjectivity, but as she comes to understand herself as a separate entity from her mother and learns language, she will begin to form her own identity. When she first realizes the mother’s castration (that she lacks the father’s penis and is not in power according the paternal order), she also enters the world of symbolism, language, and the overall patriarchal belief system of a society that undervalues women and mothers. Because of the inherent patriarchal and heterosexual norms in language, her subjectivity will be irrevocably tied to her valuation as man’s “Other.”

To engage a space outside the confines of patriarchal systems, Kristeva argues, we must step outside of symbolic language, which relies on binaries instead of the fluidity the semiotic allows. Kristeva concedes that due to a human subject being “always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system she produces can be either ‘exclusively’ semiotic or ‘exclusively’ symbolic” (24). However, Kristeva posits music as one of several “non-verbal signifying systems that are *constructed* exclusively on the basis of the semiotic” (24, emphasis mine). In terms of neurology, this means that an access of the semiotic activates the creative, left hemisphere of the brain, but any attempt to verbally describe that access will require simultaneous use of the right hemisphere responsible for language and logic. For example, the rhythms, sounds, and unpredictable nature of music resist the organized structure linguistics demands—the essence of aural and gestural modes can never fully be captured by the symbolic realm. To illustrate, we might think of the difference between reading the lyrics and music to a favorite song and hearing those lyrics and music performed. Kristeva argues that whenever we engage with poetry or music, we are employing communication that resists the symbolic’s desire

to create fixed meaning and are embracing the fluidity of the semiotic, signifying a partial return to a maternal and nurturing space.

Kristeva's emphasis on the relationship between music and the maternal finds support in musicology and music therapy literature. Music therapist Avi Gilboa argues that the experience of sound in the womb is vital for human development and provides the "building blocks of music" as the fetus becomes familiar with sounds via the mother's varying heartbeats and vocalizations (252). Similarly, professor of music and psychology Richard Parncutt has suggested the fetus's perception of the mother's heartbeat and walking explains rhythm's universal nature (127). The mother's body, then, becomes intrinsically tied to the human experience of music, a relationship reified, at least in American culture, by maternal caregivers soothing infants with lullabies, cooing, and gentle rocking.

As the contemporary case studies and neuroscience I present throughout this dissertation suggest, engagement with the semiotic through music offers solace and restoration on emotional and physical levels. Furthermore, Kristeva argues that because women are more likely to retain identification with their mothers—a premise also argued through a sociological lens in Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*—they are more likely to engage in behaviors linked to the semiotic. Thus, while I believe music has the potential to provide aid to anyone, regardless of their gender, I argue throughout this project that literature shows women (and men who engage in practices traditionally labeled as maternal) as more likely to intuitively employ the therapeutics of music. Though I believe there are many works written by men that would be read productively through the lens of the expressive art therapy, my dissertation's attention to only books written by women nods to the tendency for engagement with the semiotic to be a feminine activity.

Literature denies us the ability to overlook the fact music has long been tied to both daily southern life and trauma. Frederick Douglass's narrative famously refers to "The songs of the slave represent[ing] the sorrows of his heart" (47), but it is Solomon Northup's description of being made to play music for his drunken master who threatens to whip other "unhappy slaves...made to dance and laugh" that most hauntingly suggests the ultimately limited abilities of music to offer a sense of solace (128). Beyond slave narratives, southern literature proves music as an everyday aspect of many southern lives. From the "merry jangle of bells" beginning Alice Dunbar Nelson's description of Mardi Gras in New Orleans (32) to Dorothy Allison's protagonist Bone humming country tunes as she walks around Greenville, South Carolina, music materializes repeatedly as a habitual practice in the texts this dissertation examines. Cofer's portrayal of Puerto Rican music marks it, too, as crucial to the island's culture, entwined with the daily rituals of its people.

The aim of my project lies in looking within trauma narratives and pointing to one of the often overlooked therapeutic methods these narratives repeatedly highlight, making them not stories of victimhood but stories of survival practices that provide insight to the human drive to create meaning and connection even in the most chaotic and neglectful landscapes. Specifically, I aim to question and expose the ways southern literature across the twentieth century provides examples of the healing power of expressive arts, a field of study that has only recently been able to pair scientific, neurologically based research with a longer history of psychological theory and case studies. Just as myriad critical works have examined the way in which humor facilitates healing and community, my project continues the task of expanding trauma studies by focusing on the therapeutic. Studying twentieth-century southern works as primarily stories of therapeutic methods, not testimonies of trauma, does not negate the damage of trauma nor the role of

narratology or memory in recovery; rather, it allows for a more complete understanding of how we might continue confronting and processing the traumas of the past and today.

In chapter one, I argue the therapeutics of music are closely tied to women's bodies and traditions. I read the late nineteenth-century works of authors Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Kate Chopin as demonstrating a connection between wombs and music, a relationship that explains, in part, how listening to music aids engagement with otherwise difficult or impossible to express emotions. Situating Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin within both personal and social histories helps explain the commonalities and differences within their work. While Dunbar-Nelson's work relies heavily on symbolism and coded references to race, Chopin's status as a white woman writing about mostly white characters allows her to compose a novel more explicitly questioning late-nineteenth-century expectations for women.

In the second chapter, I argue two late twentieth-century novelists, Dorothy Allison and Ellen Douglas, demonstrate the extent to which music offers restoration to survivors of both emotional and physical trauma. These contemporary authors create telling stories of female protagonists responding to trauma with the help of surrogate caregivers who serve as musical counselors and role models. Within my discussion of Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby*, I also turn attention to the connection between what I term rival soundscapes and the therapeutics of music within African American culture.

The final chapter explores how certain barriers, most notably a person's negative associations with music, inhibit music's ability to aid in healing after trauma. Kaye Gibbons's and Judith Ortiz Cofer's respective characters Ellen and Mili refuse multiple opportunities to engage with music, finding solace through the visual arts instead. complementing the increasingly acceptable diversity in terms of family structures and gender identities these novels

also demonstrate near the end of the twentieth century. Read together, *Ellen Foster* and *The Meaning of Consuelo* demonstrate the range of both creative art therapies and the potential hazards limiting their usefulness. My closing reading of Gibbons's and Ortiz Cofer's respective novels combines with the work of previous chapters to argue that while images of American mothers and engagement with music have diversified over the past dozen decades, returning to the semiotic—or, said another way, a space free from the confines of language—remains a goal for young women in trauma narratives.

CHAPTER TWO

THE “NECESSARILY VAGUE, TANGLED, [AND] CHAOTIC”: MATERNITY, MUSIC, AND
 EMOTION IN ALICE DUNBAR-NELSON’S *VIOLETS AND OTHER TALES* AND KATE
 CHOPIN’S *THE AWAKENING*

Despite increasing attention paid to Alice Dunbar-Nelson in recent years, her first collection of sketches and poetry, *Violets and Other Tales*, remains understudied. This gap in scholarship is partially due to a belief that Dunbar-Nelson’s earliest work demonstrates an undeveloped style (Hull *Color* 37), along with the lack of narrative thread characterizing several sketches. “In Unconsciousness” stands out as one such piece. Here, Dunbar-Nelson presents a potpourri of disjointed imagery. “There was a big booming in my ears,” the unidentified narrator begins, “great heavy iron bells that swung to-and-fro on either side, and sent out deafening reverberations that steeped the senses in a musical melody of sonorous sound” (36). Next, the speaker sees “images of wailing processions, of weeping, empty-armed women and widowed maidens” that fill her with the “o’er-pressing weight of sorrow” (36). Immediately, two dashes break the prose before we are told, “Now I lay floating, arms outstretched on a illimitable waste of calm, tranquil waters” (36). The miscellany of imagery continues with several references to a mother’s body: the sea “heav[es]” a “*womanly bosom,*” we “*sway upon the breast* of eternity,” and “whirl...down to the very *womb* of time” (37, 38, 39, emphasis mine). While the unconscious was already a “fashionable” topic within western culture by the 1880s (Whyte 169), Dunbar-Nelson’s description of the entanglement of emotion, maternity, and music merit further study, especially considering “In Unconsciousness” appeared only four years before Kate Chopin

published her own psychologically compelling account of a disillusioned mother in *The Awakening*.

Throughout this dissertation, the narratives studied demonstrate how expressive art therapies, especially music therapy, encourage clients to access the semiotic as means of creating a path to both emotional and physical healing. This chapter investigates how we might understand the therapeutic act of harnessing music as a practice closely tied to women's bodies and traditions. Specifically, I argue that the late nineteenth-century works of authors Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Kate Chopin demonstrate a connection between wombs and music, a relationship that explains, in part, how listening to music aids engagement with otherwise difficult or impossible to express emotions. Such a reading, buttressed by feminist psychoanalytic theory, reveals how modern therapy's use of music to access suppressed emotions and foster psychological healing extends a centuries-old tradition.

Because Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin wrote at the turn of the twentieth century, a time when American ideals about motherhood and women's lives in general began to take a decidedly more modern—albeit polemic—turn, each of the authors simultaneously affirms and troubles the idealization of motherhood. I argue that both women achieve ambivalent depictions of motherhood partly through musical imagery and symbolism. While Dunbar-Nelson's sketches feature veiled allusions to the perpetually compound, racist, and violent expectations for black mothers in America, Chopin's novel illustrates a white American woman's increasing ability to access her emotions and autonomy through listening to music. Throughout each woman's work runs a central theme of music's entanglement with maternity and emotion, a commonality I attribute to Dunbar-Nelson's and Chopin's shared appreciation of music and association with New Orleans, one of the most iconic American musical cities.

Below, I first offer an overview of how American rhetoric concerning both white and black mothers evolved from the colonial era into the late nineteenth century. Such a discussion illuminates the cultural undercurrents influencing Dunbar-Nelson's and Chopin's works and reveals the capitalist and racist forces still shaping American motherhood today. I then offer a close reading of two sketches from Alice Dunbar-Nelson's collection *Violets and Other Tales*. I demonstrate how both "In Unconsciousness" and "The Maiden's Dream" feature womb-like imagery and sonic soundscapes, inducing access of a semiotic space. Building on the work of previous scholarship, I argue both sketches feature a mixed-race female protagonist, whose heavily symbolic dream subtly connotes the forever fraught position of black mothers in America. Much more explicit in its depiction of a white woman's ambivalence regarding motherhood, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* also uses sonic imagery to bring attention to the relationship between maternity and the unconscious. Building on already existing scholarship exploring the semiotic and music within the text, I spotlight the complexity of Chopin's presentation of music and its remarkable correspondence to the interventions used by music therapists today, aided by play theory. Throughout my discussion of both women's stories, I offer cultural, biographical, and psychoanalytic explanations for the entanglement of music, emotion, and maternity in their respective works.

American Motherhood

Situating Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin within the larger story of the American family's evolution from the colonial to post-bellum period highlights the innovative and meaningful depictions of maternity within each writer's content, particularly in terms of racism's impact on American motherhood. As scholars such as Dana Nelson have pointed out, early American literature depended on the imagining of a white brotherhood rising out of a mass of men with

various European heritages. Through the objectification and management of women, Native Americans, and African Americans, white men built a supposedly unified nation dependent on men's ability to balance competing characteristics, such as "Nation/Individual" and "Fraternity/Competition" (Nelson 16). The contradictory and oppressive expectations of whiteness and masculinity in early America explain not only the inevitable dissolution of slavery but also the eventual disillusionment of American mothers. As Jodi Vandenberg-Daves's in-depth history *Modern Motherhood* demonstrates, nineteenth-century rhetoric shaping cultural beliefs in an ideal American mother figure "entwined with middle-class identity, and, given the long duration of slavery, these American ideals were deeply racialized" (6). Reading Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin together highlights how the nation's foundation through the construction of white masculinity and global capitalism influenced the creation of an ideal white American mother figure dependent on the subjugation of black mothers.

In *American Manhood*, E. Anthony Rotundo categorizes three phases of American masculinity: 1) communal manhood, which defines the colonial period; 2) self-made manhood, emerging alongside America's independence and capitalist economy; and 3) passionate manhood, influencing late nineteenth-century gender roles. Of course, changes in expectations for men and fathers necessitated changes in the role of women and mothers. Jodi Vandenberg-Daves writes, "Ideas about mothers as unique moral guardians only emerged at the time of the American Revolution" (Vandenberg-Daves 11). Previously, Vandenberg-Daves's reports, women proved their worth to society through producing "children who were considered economic assets" (12). Colonial views of mothers as capital-producing commodities precede the significant shift to the sentimentalized idolization of mothers demonstrated in Chopin's portrayal of "mother-women" in *The Awakening*.

Meanwhile, economic metaphors for white women's reproductive capabilities pale in comparison to the explicit commodification of enslaved women's reproductive abilities. The atrocities of enslavement, including systematic separation of families and capital-driven rape of black women, mean few, if any, generalizations could be true of both black and white American families. In her article "What All Parents Can Learn from Black Mothers," Dani McClain writes, "Black women have had to inhabit a different understanding of motherhood in order to navigate American life" (15). Black feminists, including McClain and her predecessor bell hooks, point to the ways in which African American families have resisted the nuclear structure most contemporary white families inhabit. In contrast to an insular family dynamic, black parents have long relied on a support network of family and community members to help in the raising of children. Such an arrangement was necessitated during enslavement's separation of families, continued during Jim Crow when black women were still expected to care for white children before their own, and persists today amid social and economic inequality and policies (McClain 17-18). Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins refers to this arrangement as "othermother[ing]" ("Meaning" 47), and, as McClain points out, most cultures worldwide have been shown to see child-rearing as a communal practice (17). As the discussion of white motherhood below suggests, the nuclear family ideal arose alongside capitalism, hence its association with the western world today. The daughter of an absentee white father and a formerly enslaved mother, Alice Dunbar-Nelson grew up with a family structure and mother figure different from those of her white literary counterparts. Accordingly, as a reading of *Violets and Other Tales* demonstrates, her portrayal of mothers differs in form and content when compared to *The Awakening*.

Colonial literature offers a sense of how current expectations for American mothers first emerged. J. Hector St. John De Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* allows a glimpse at familial structures in pre-industrialized white communities absent of slavery. Crèvecoeur's narrator, James, asserts that studying how a society raises their children is "[t]he easiest way of becoming acquainted with the modes of thinking...of any people" (127). James describes how since his "first son was born" his mental "excursions...have not exceeded the bounds of [his] farm" (53). Sentimentality tints the narrator's description of observing his wife as "she either spins, knits, darns, or suckles our child," but his reaction of "overflow[ing] in involuntary tears" counters the expected stoicism of fathers in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Moreover, the narrator describes feelings of "paternal ecstasy" while playing with his child and writes of "reliev[ing] his mother of some trouble" by bringing his son into the fields with him. Later in the text, a primarily ungendered description of parenting begins "Letter V." Here, he describes how Nantucket children "are corrected with tenderness, nursed with the most affectionate care, clad with that decent plainness from which they observe their parents never do depart...Frugal, sober, orderly parents...cannot fail of training up children to the same uniformity of life and manners" (127-8). The only gendered reference to parents in this early passage credits Nantucket fathers with setting an example of impeccable "neatness," a characteristic seldomly gendered as masculine in the twentieth century (127). Crèvecoeur serves as an example of Rotundo's conception of "communal manhood"—the colonial expectation that a man's most important job was to serve as head of his household, simultaneously ensuring children were raised properly and representing his family within the local community.

Later in the Nantucket sequence of letters, James describes how whaling draws men away from the mainland, leaving women as authority figures in the home and community. Importantly,

James seems to admire the ability of Nantucket society to carry on so well despite the separation of genders, commenting that Nantucket women are “in general very equal” to their male counterparts in terms of “prudence and good management,” forecasting a future in which women would be charged with domestic authority (157)¹. Crèvecoeur’s text exemplifies the way in which agrarian life allowed for a more egalitarian sharing of parental duties than an increasingly capitalist American society would allow, as evidenced in *The Awakening*’s portrayal of child-rearing as a solely feminine and often outsourced task. Considering the difficulty European colonizers faced to merely survive in the new world (a difficulty dwarfed by the atrocities the colonizers committed against Native Americans), it is no wonder that Crèvecoeur’s letters present a family in which husband and wife share the responsibilities of parenthood.

Of course, biology necessitates that women perform the bulk of reproductive labor, and the significance of this labor for colonial women cannot be understated. Large families were imperative for successful colonization, which meant producing children was a patriotic duty. As Vandenberg-Daves asserts, “Women’s fertility was essential to community survival” (Vandenberg-Daves 14). To be a woman was to be a mother, and sheer numbers prove the validity of such a statement: “New England white women...spent on average twenty to twenty-

¹ It should be noted James’s observation of the women’s “prevail[ing]” habit “of taking a dose of opium every morning” perplexes the narrator (160). Nathaniel Philbrick interprets this detail as evidence the Nantucket women become overwhelmed by the increased workload during the absence of men, one way in which he argues the Nantucket sequence contributes to “Crèvecoeur’s gradually unfolding tale of disillusionment” (415). However, Anna Carew-Miller interprets Crèvecoeur’s mentioning of rampant drug use as signaling his unease at the first signs of fathers losing authority within the American home (Carew-Miller 253). While both readings are compelling, I find Carew-Miller’s lacking in that she does not reference James’s referral to the male sheriff (who is also a physician) who “takes three grains” of opium every day, leaving him “[un]able to transact any business” (160). It is only after complimenting the women’s ability to efficiently carry out business in their husbands’ absence that James tells us the sheriff becomes unable to perform his duties while under the influence; he then concludes the opium discussion by saying he was “never acquainted with a less vicious or more harmless” communal “folly” (160). James’s suggestion that the women are able to avoid overindulgence whereas a man is not, in addition to the fact he refers to a man who serves two important roles in the community as an example of an opium user add greater weight to Philbrick’s reading of the drug as a coping mechanism for stress, not as a detail meant to undermine women’s competence.

five years pregnant or nursing babies" during colonial times (Vandenberg-Daves 13). Coined the "motherhood mandate" by Margaret Marsh and Wanda Ronner, "the idea that all women must be mothers" was an influential ideology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and its impact is still felt in twenty-first-century governmental regulation of women's bodies and societal expectations that women be mothers (Vandenberg-Daves 16). In short, hopes for a prosperous America weighed heavily on colonial women's bodies (both white and black) and had little connection to women's capacity for overseeing children's spiritual and emotional growth².

With the figurative birth of a nation, though, American conceptions of motherhood were transformed. Culture at large no longer valued white women solely for the physical labor involved in conceiving, birthing, and raising offspring. The approaching Revolution called for a new emphasis on women's roles as moral and civic educators. Men, now called to serve their nation outside the home and local community, began to turn over the role of supervising familial matters to women. As Rotundo notes, middle- and upper-class women were now looked to as "custodian[s] of moral goodness," a change that would eventually lead to women's increased involvement in public life as well (24). "Republican motherhood," a term from Linda Kerber, called for white women to take part in creating a strong nation through "rais[ing] virtuous sons who could continue to handle effectively" the business of an emergent government (Vandenberg-Daves 17). The increased focus on mothers' obligation to be moral role models also partially stemmed from the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century, during which "three of every five converts were female" (Vandenberg-Daves 18). In addition, as Crèvecoeur's

² The trend of directly tying white women's wombs to the nation's success continues even in contemporary American circles. Notably, when 2017 saw U.S. fertility rates reach a "30-year low" (Chappell), worries about the effect on the nation at large abounded (Cha, Dvorak). Later in the year, House Speaker Paul Ryan would suggest the best method for boosting a struggling economy was for Americans to produce "more people" (Wong), read by some as a thinly veiled call for more "wealthy Whites" (Sherman).

passage on whaling foreshadows, rising capitalism necessitated a larger percentage of fathers working outside the home (Samuel, Thurer). Thus, women became more associated with the domestic space, influencing the evolution of American conceptions of motherhood and eventually leading to the notorious double-standards associated with gendered parenting in the twentieth century.

The expectation that white women lead their children to be good citizens through providing a flawless example of purity and self-abnegation was influential throughout the nineteenth century, during which both Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin came of age³. Popular literature of the nineteenth century heavily features the expectations of what Vandenberg-Daves terms “moral motherhood.” However, as the author notes, attainability of moral motherhood ideals was limited “to those with economic privilege” (Vandenberg-Daves 31). Enslaved, immigrant, and poor white mothers were all denied hope of being society’s ideal mother, even though all these populations grew in size during the nineteenth century. Abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, perhaps best remembered today as editor of Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, attempted to make moral motherhood a more realistic goal for all women (Karcher 2-3). Despite never rearing children of her own, Child gained popularity through “writing the earliest domestic advice books to address the needs of low-income housewives and mothers” (Karcher 3)⁴. In 1831, Child advises mothers, “The simple fact that your child never saw you angry, that your voice is always gentle, and the expression of your face always kind, is worth a thousand times more than all the rules you can give him about not beating his dog, pinching his brother

³ Chopin was born Catherine O’Flaherty in St. Louis on February 8, 1850, and Dunbar-Nelson was born Alice Ruth Moore in New Orleans on July 19, 1875.

⁴ Notably, Child’s *The Frugal Housewife* (1829) and *The Mother’s Book* (1831) would sell exceptionally well until 1833, when Child’s publication of *Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* led to plummeting sales of her previous works. Child’s politically progressive writing for the time marked her as an unfit source of advice for White mothers (Karcher 98-9). Decades later, Child would return to domestic advice, writing for newly emancipated families in *The Freedman’s Book* (1865).

&c. It is in vain to load the understanding with rules, if the affections are not pure" (qtd. in Vandenberg-Daves 20). Such an imploration, with its suggestion that mothers suppress reprimands and rely instead on modeling saintly behavior, characterizes the unrealistic and confining expectations set for mothers throughout the nineteenth century and provides context for the rhetoric informing Chopin's portrayal of "mother-women."

Child was far from the only writer concerned with both parenting and politics, as abolitionist literature often featured images of enslaved women having children ripped from their arms on the auction block. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) serves as the most famous example of an abolitionist work centered on the destruction of Black families. That women were often the authors of these texts, as well as leaders of social reform groups, was no accident. President Lincoln's oft-cited quotation, "All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother" points to an engrained American belief that a mother's influence determines a person's capacity for greatness (qtd. in Billington 233). Women, perpetually tied to the role of mother, were expected to be impeccable moral guides in not only the home, but also in public affairs, a notable progression from the more silent roles of colonial women. As Vandenberg-Daves concludes, moral motherhood "created a new sense of self-consciousness, introspection, and arguably empowerment for middle-class women" while at the same time "exacerbate[ing] gender distinctions and legitimat[ing] women's economic and political dependence" on men (31). Chopin's Edna Pontellier provides an apt example of moral motherhood's inconsistent outcomes as she seeks autonomy after increased introspection about her own identity as wife and mother.

As moral motherhood's influence on white women rose over the course of the nineteenth century, an intentional and malicious cultural concept of Black motherhood intensified. In her work *Clinging to Mammy*, historian Micki McElya examines the history behind the persistent

and racist “Mammy” caricature. Prior to 1830, the term “mammy” referred to both white and Black mothers (McElya 7). However, as tensions increased in an antebellum United States, slavery’s apologists and their paternalistic narratives attempted to counter abolitionist texts (which, as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* also famously represents, often relied on racist stereotypes).

McElya explains:

The image of the grandmotherly mammy, described as a beloved cook and a loving caretaker, was offered in response to abolitionists’ charges that the institution of slavery was wracked with sexual depravity and the rape and concubinage of black women by white men. In this way, southern proslavery writers sought to legitimize relations between black women and white men as maternal and nurturing, not sexual. (8)

Through her supposed devotion to her white master’s family, the “mammy” figures as part of a larger trend in slavery apologia to portray black men and women as faithful servants who were happy to care for the white families holding them captive. The systematic racism pervasive in post-Civil War America led to increased idolization of racist Black mother stereotypes.

“Mammy” frequently appeared in plantation fiction, where her maternal devotion to her white charges worked “to absolve the South—and even the nation—of collective guilt over the actual, coerced relationships that constituted slavery” (Vandenberg-Daves 42). The white imagination’s depiction of a woman selflessly committed to caring for her oppressors, of course, radically contradicts and violently erases the actual lives and stories of Black mothers, which Dunbar-Nelson subtly alludes to in several sketches and explicitly addresses in her later essays.

After emancipation, many African American mothers labored and sacrificed to extraordinary ends to glean the basic right of caring for their own children. Vandenberg-Daves offers a brief but apt summary of post-emancipation families when she writes, “The cost of

reproducing the labor force that sustained the southern economy was now shifted fully to African American families, who had to become self-sustaining economic units in spite of all obstacles arrayed against them” (41). Vandenberg-Daves cites Rosaline Rogers as an example in her choice to continue living on the plantation where she had been enslaved so that she might keep her fourteen children together, rather than separated and sent to other fields for work (41). As Collins asserts, after “emancipation, the majority of African-American women remained exploited agricultural workers,” a choice that allowed many to “combine childcare with field labor” (“Meaning” 49). In contrast, many other freed men and women chose to leave their former masters behind, and this meant large numbers of African Americans moving from rural to urban areas. Atlanta, Georgia, for example, saw the percentage of its black citizens rise from 20 to 46 percent between 1860 and 1870 (Hunter 21). In the cities, othermothering would remain an important aspect of African American life, as the discussion of Dunbar-Nelson’s work will later elucidate. In contrast to white supremacist myths, Black families survived not because of paternal slaveholders and overseers, but because of black women’s persistent cultivation of “community-based power” despite their circumstances (Collins, “Meaning” 51). Black mothers still faced gendered expectations of domesticity and purity, but the white ideal of moral motherhood was never a confining expectation for black mothers. Since their forced arrival in America, they were made to perform both hard labor and domestic duties, serving white families before their own. Such ideology continues today in books and movies such as Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* that temper the unjust labor relations of mid-century America black domestic workers and their white employers through a focus on the sentimental notion of familial relationships between black caregivers and their white charges.

Among its many devastating effects, “Mammy” mythology furthered the divide between white and black mothers in the nation’s collective memory and contemporary practices. As Collins documents, the “Mammy” is far from the only harmful stereotype forced upon black women. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins writes, “Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women’s oppression.... These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (70). Devastating effects of racist black mother stereotypes linger in the alarming fact that Black mothers are “243 percent more likely [than white mothers] to die from pregnancy- or childbirth-related causes” in contemporary America (Martin and Montagne). Though myriad variables contribute to these statistics, ingrained conceptions of black women as better able to withstand suffering and as less capable or worthy of motherhood are certainly partially responsible and are linked to motherhood rhetoric, including “Mammy” and other racist iconography. Collins asserts, “Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought,” and I argue Dunbar-Nelson’s sketches include previously overlooked challenges to such images (*Black* 70).

During the nineteenth century, the shift of national priorities from an emphasis on *quantity* of children to *quality* of children produced would also lead to a decline in the birthrate among middle-class families. As Vandenberg-Daves writes, “New efforts to regulate women’s reproduction [in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries] were critical in the making of modern motherhood—a motherhood that allowed for rational and scientific control of a process formerly deemed primarily the will of God” (50). Despite the Comstock Laws of 1873 declaring emerging birth control methods “obscene” and “immoral,” many late nineteenth-century women

used contraception to limit family size (Toth 154). When situated in front of this backdrop, Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin represent the increased variability of women's experiences in terms of motherhood at the end of the nineteenth century. While Kate Chopin would give birth to six children over a span of eight years, Dunbar-Nelson never bore children, despite marriages to three different men.⁵ Both authors grew up in a nation firmly invested in moral and obligatory motherhood, but their status as educated and relatively privileged women⁶ would mean they were among the first class to envision the possibility of an American womanhood impervious to mandated motherhood, as evidenced in their respective works.

Reading Chopin's *The Awakening* and Dunbar-Nelson's *Violets and Other Tales* in light of the nineteenth-century's changing and racialized expectations for mothers exposes similarities within the two authors' respective use of maternal and sonic imagery, while also revealing Dunbar-Nelson's coded references to the more marginalized position of black mothers in comparison to their white counterparts. Notably, both Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin resist hypercritical expectations for American mothers, while still clinging to the idea of a healing mother figure. Such hesitancy to let go of a sentimentalized motherhood signals not only the

⁵ While Dunbar-Nelson at one point hoped to have children with husband Paul Laurence Dunbar, she never gave birth, leading to speculation surrounding her reproductive health (Hull *Color* 46). Meanwhile, her journals reveal an active sex life with both men and women and suggest her "clandestine marriage" to Dunbar was partially due to a pregnancy scare (Hull *Color* 45). Whether the absence of children in Dunbar-Nelson's life was a result of infertility or a concerted effort to prevent pregnancy remains unclear, though as Kevin K. Gaines suggests, her childlessness seems contrary to her public discourse on black women's roles as mothers (231). Regardless, evidence suggests both Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson exercised more control and choice in their sexual and reproductive lives than their foremothers.

⁶ Gaines refers to Dunbar-Nelson as living in "genteel poverty," a condition familiar to most of the earliest members of the black middle class (233). Gaines also makes the important point that, "For many African Americans, regardless of class, the health of relationships was fundamentally a matter of economics...the struggles of Black women cannot be understood in isolation from the equally trying existence of Black men," which meant that almost all black women, whether single or married, had to earn money (219). Despite Dunbar-Nelson's black and Native American ancestry, she enjoyed a relatively privileged lifestyle in comparison to other African Americans of the late 1800s. Instead of the manual and domestic labor many African Americans remained tied to after emancipation, for most of her life Dunbar-Nelson supported herself through her work as a "teacher, stenographer, executive secretary, editor, newspaper columnist, platform speaker, and campaign manager" (Hull "Intro" xxx). Chopin, through birth, marriage, and her own writing, enjoyed a much more economically stable lifestyle.

pervasiveness of cultural rhetoric, but also finds support in psychoanalytic and sociological theories.

Dunbar-Nelson, Chopin, and Music

While a large amount of scholarship focuses on the portrayal of motherhood in *The Awakening*, few scholars offer in-depth explorations of mother figures in Dunbar-Nelson's work⁷. Additionally, while Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin have more than once been paired in scholarship due to their proximity in time, associations with local color, and shared ties to New Orleans, no study I have found interrogates the similar depictions of music and maternity found in their works (Ammons, Mohr, Nagel, O'Neal). Nineteenth-century rhetoric surrounding women's duty as mothers accounts for Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin's shared theme of maternity, while biographical details help explain their shared interest in music.

Both Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin were talented musicians and wrote of their passionate and moving experiences with music, especially opera. Dunbar-Nelson played the mandolin in a New Orleans orchestra (Alexander 47) and once confessed opera was her "one weakness, extravagance, and passion" (qtd. in Alexander 48). Chopin, too, was an opera fan and impressed acquaintances with her ability to play music by ear, using her personal piano to recreate bits of the opera she heard the night before (Toth 73). After seeing famed Norwegian violinist Ole Bull play in St. Louis, an eighteen-year-old Chopin wrote:

To describe the effect his music had upon me would be impossible. It seemed the very perfection of the art, and while listening to him, I for the first time longed to be blind, that

⁷ The only significant discussion of maternity in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's work I have found comes from Megan Peabody, who writes about "Dunbar-Nelson's preoccupation with and anxieties about ethnicity and race as they relate to women's possibilities, fertility, and legitimacy" (66). Similar to the discussion here, Peabody reads an ambivalence toward motherhood in Dunbar-Nelson's fiction as influenced by transforming roles for women at the turn of the twentieth century. However, Peabody's treatment concerns different texts than those cited here and her focus rests at the intersection of race, sexuality, and maternity, whereas my reading primarily investigates the relationship between music, the semiotic, and maternity.

I might drink it all in undisturbed and undistracted by surrounding objects. (qtd. in Toth 86)

As the passage above indicates, music had a powerful effect on Chopin's senses. Like Dunbar-Nelson, several of Chopin's earliest short stories feature singers or other musicians (Hull *Color* 39, Toth 180-181). Chopin even published sheet music for a piano polka, and in *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, like her creator, is repeatedly and powerfully moved by music (Toth 181, 175).

Because both Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin were talented performers and exceptionally attuned to music, modern science suggests their brains would have shared characteristics marking them as unique in comparison to the population at large. As Oliver Sacks reports, "Anatomists today would be hard put to identify the brain of a visual artist, a writer, or a mathematician—but they could recognize the brain of a professional musician without a moment's hesitation" (100). While we may not think of Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin as professional musicians, Dunbar-Nelson's playing for money and Chopin's publishing an original composition marks them both as having paid a great deal of attention to their musical study and performance. In 1995, a team of researchers from Harvard demonstrated that "the corpus callosum, the great commissure that connects the two hemispheres of the brain, is enlarged in professional musicians" (Sacks 100). The enlarged corpus callosum correlates to the bilateral stimulation of the brain music requires: while the right hemisphere attends to creativity and melody, the left side of the brain oversees structure and language. This enhanced connection between a musician's two brain hemispheres provides clues as to why the works of both Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin heavily feature references to the semiotic, which relies on bilateral stimulation as well. Both women's musical talent and interest gives partial explanation for aspects of their stories' content, but the similarities with later works by Dorothy Allison, Ellen

Douglas, Kaye Gibbons, and Judith Ortiz Cofer suggest a more universal connection between the themes of maternity, music, and emotion.

Living in New Orleans during impressionable portions of their lives most likely influenced Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson's personal experiences and adoration of music. In his history of the *Music in New Orleans*, Henry A. Kmen explains New Orleans's reputation as one of America's most musical cities. Kmen argues this reputation resulted from what was first the city's passion for dancing, a phenomenon linked to the city's status as "America's first cultural melting pot" and "solidly Latin-Catholic" influence, which prevented a Puritan understanding of dancing as immoral (10). In New Orleans, Spanish, French, Latin, African, and Anglo-Saxon musical traditions all merged in the development of a sonorous city known for its raucous celebrations, including balls, concerts, and parades. One reason for Dunbar-Nelson's and Chopin's passion for opera becomes apparent when Kmen reports that New Orleans served as an early American hub for opera. Kmen asserts, "Opera was New Orleans' cultural glory throughout the nineteenth century," in part because of its ability to connect the New Orleans French to their homeland (56, 103). Throughout his work, Kmen cites nineteenth-century accounts of a citywide "mania" for music in New Orleans, describing a rich soundscape Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin would have found impossible to escape (212). As the readings below demonstrate, each woman's writing evidences the influence of nineteenth-century motherhood rhetoric along with the more personal and local influence of musical experiences in New Orleans.

“Thoughts too deep and sacred for words”: Music in Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s *Violets and Other Tales*

In 1895, a twenty-year old Alice Ruth Moore⁸ published her first collection, *Violets and Other Tales*. Since Gloria T. Hull’s recovery efforts renewed interest in Dunbar-Nelson, some critics—Hull included—have viewed the collection as “juvenilia” lacking in quality when compared to her later work (Hull *Color* 40). Dunbar-Nelson herself wrote of being “heartily ashamed” of the collection, a harsh sentiment even if we acknowledge the self-effacing social moves expected from a young black female writer at this time (qtd. in Hull *Color* 37). In contrast to these readings, I join Adenike Marie Davidson, Jordan Stouck, and others who read Dunbar-Nelson’s earliest collection as indicative of a writer using sophisticated techniques to address complex social issues. Davidson calls for understanding *Violets and Other Tales* as not an example of Dunbar-Nelson’s artistry in its infancy but as evidence of her ability to symbolically address the intersectional confines she faced living as both an African American and a woman during the late nineteenth century. Accordingly, Davidson suggests we read Dunbar-Nelson’s early stories as “calling for complete artistic freedom for the African-American woman artist” and asserts that “Without an overt racial theme, [Dunbar-Nelson] calls for the boundaries of African American literature to expand beyond plantation fiction, dialect, and racial uplift” (59). My work highlights Dunbar-Nelson’s call for expanded boundaries through my attention to her profound interest in psychology, music, and intersectionality.

⁸ By the time Alice published her next collection, *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories*, in 1899, she had married Paul Laurence Dunbar, taking his last name. As is well documented in Alexander’s *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow*, the marriage would be a short and rather volatile one. Alice would keep the name of “Dunbar,” and adding a later husband’s last name (Robert Nelson) gives us the name which has come to be most often used when referring to the author.

Both Dunbar-Nelson's form and content merit attention for their innovative nature. Davidson argues that the hard-to-follow sketches in Dunbar-Nelson's first volume are prose poems, a genre which "offered [Dunbar-Nelson] a sense of freedom she did not experience in life" (56). Reading Dunbar-Nelson's poetry as genre-breaking resistance aligns with psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva's assertion that poetry's emphasis on sound and experimentation represents a semiotic rupture of the strict binaries often required in symbolic language, a concept central to my analysis of Dunbar-Nelson's texts. I discuss Kristeva's theories in further detail below as part of my argument that, like their form, the content of Dunbar-Nelson's sketches resembles the work of later writers.

Critic Jordan Stouck also uses Kristevan theory for her reading of two early Dunbar-Nelson stories. "Little Miss Sophie" and "The Stones of the Village," Stouck argues, offer a critique of society's prescribed but deeply flawed dichotomies of race and gender. Stouck employs Kristeva's theories of the abject to parse the performance of identity within these stories, complementing my own glimpses of the feminist theory permeating Dunbar-Nelson's work. Instead of viewing Dunbar-Nelson's early work as simplistic imitations of local color or sentimental fiction, Stouck insists Dunbar-Nelson's status as an educated reader means she employs such familiar tropes to highlight the "more complex and split meanings" that stereotypes such as the tragic mulatto "have generally been acknowledged as possessing" (275). Informed by Stouck, my readings rely on a belief that Dunbar-Nelson intentionally uses nineteenth-century literary tropes to deliver coded commentary on the lives of African American women at a time when the intersectional nature of such an identity was seldom acknowledged.

Other readers have noted Dunbar-Nelson's interest in psychology, as well. In her 1987 work *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, Hull was the first to call for a "radical revision" of Dunbar-

Nelson's "literary position" (27), noting that "some of Dunbar-Nelson's best unpublished stories rely on psychological probing of her characters," an observation that finds support in more recent readings of the author's work as well (26). The 2016 *Legacy* special issue honoring Alice Dunbar-Nelson featured two new stories by the author discovered in the archive. In their introduction to the stories, the issue's editors write that Dunbar-Nelson "explores...the use of transitional objects by children to deal with the mother's absence with a prescient sophistication long before Sigmund Freud's and D. W. Winnicott's theories were widely disseminated" (Adams et al. 406). Such observations align Dunbar-Nelson with Chopin in terms of producing what now seems prophetic work, as their narratives demonstrate awareness of psychological and social concepts yet to reach a wide audience in the late 1800s. The editors' remarks also support query into how *Violets and Other Tales* prefigures a Kristevan understanding of the semiotic through its psychologically compelling sketches of women's lives and interactions with music.

My readings of Dunbar-Nelson's sketches as commenting on the lives of African American women rely heavily on subtle symbolism due to the notable absence of explicit references to black life in *Violets and Other Tales*. As Elizabeth Ammons reports in *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn of the Century*, "Intent on being an artist, Dunbar-Nelson was determined not to be bound by race in any direct way, either linguistically or thematically" when composing fiction (65). A desire to be free from constraints was one reason Dunbar-Nelson avoided writing heavy dialects, which had helped propel her first husband, Paul Laurence Dunbar, to fame; after his death, Dunbar-Nelson would begrudge the many requests she received to read her late ex-husband's dialect poems during public appearances (Gaines 233). Other biographical details suggest Dunbar-Nelson's characters may reflect personal conflicts surrounding her own experience of race. We know little about Dunbar-Nelson's earliest years,

except that she shared its details with exceptionally few people (Alexander 52). In one unhappy letter, she tells Paul Laurence Dunbar, “how painfully often, when scarce meaning you have thrust my parentage in my face” (Dunbar-Nelson qtd. in Alexander 50). Born to a white merchant marine father and a formerly enslaved mother of African and Native American heritage, Dunbar-Nelson possessed skin light enough to forge an identity as part of the sophisticated New Orleans Creole society (Alexander 52-59). Both Hull and historian Eleanor Alexander report Dunbar-Nelson’s personal writing, including her letters to Paul, indicate she sometimes exhibited racist views, judging those with darker skin as less worthy or respectable, and this perspective provides one reason for her desire to identify as Creole instead of black (Hull *Color* 45, Alexander 64-65). After attending Straight College, Dunbar-Nelson taught school in New Orleans for four years. She would continue her studies of English education and psychology later, when she moved north and attended classes at several other institutions, including Cornell, Columbia, and the University of Pennsylvania (Hull *Color* 62). Throughout her adult life, she engaged in political activism and published newspaper articles reflecting her interests in politics and psychology, while also becoming well-known for her views on civil rights. Among other efforts, she participated in the women’s suffrage movement, organized anti-lynching activists, and helped found two schools for African American girls (Hull “Introduction” lviii-lix). Meanwhile, Dunbar-Nelson’s creative writing would resist outright engagement with Black life.

Hull sees Dunbar-Nelson’s “aracial” characters as a way for her to avoid contemporary tastes for plantation fiction with offensive stereotypes (“Introduction” xxxii) and wonders if she “used class as a psychological metaphor to replace race in her writings” (*Color* 55). As readings referenced above demonstrate, many literary critics find extending Hull’s inquiry into Dunbar-

Nelson's veiled discussions of race fruitful. Stouck, for one, argues Dunbar-Nelson's fiction "reveals the injustices that her activism sought to redress politically" even though they never explicitly feature a black woman (272). Perhaps Dunbar-Nelson's fiction provided her a needed space to write free of the emotional labor of explicitly addressing white supremacy, or perhaps she felt using only coded references to race would make her work more profitable. As Margot Sahrbeck Sempreora asserts, "Authorial identity was a complex journey" for a multiracial woman "who spent her first twenty-one years in New Orleans during a period marked by Jim Crow bigotry and racial violence...and who peddled her stories in the racist and sexist Victorian publishing institution" (63). Whatever the case, Davidson's proposal we read these sketches as prose poems, Dunbar-Nelson's enduring interest in psychology, and trends within the scholarship surrounding her work support my approaching *Violets and Other Tales* with a keen eye for allusion and symbolism.

Below, I use my Kristeva-informed understanding of the semiotic (explained in the introduction) to read Dunbar-Nelson's sketches "In Unconsciousness" and "The Maiden's Dream." Reading these similar pieces one after the other, I argue both demonstrate music aiding in the access of difficult emotions and utilize subtle symbolism to reference the multifaceted experience of black womanhood, which, due in part to othermothering, is always already tied to black motherhood. While "In Unconsciousness" provides glimpses of music's therapeutic aid to survivors of trauma, "The Maiden's Dream" combines grief and joy to meditate on the black mother's perpetually tense and oppressed position in America. Together, the two sketches are rife with psychological and sociological import that indicates not only Dunbar-Nelson's interdisciplinary knowledge and literary talent at an early age, but also the hypocritical sentiments regarding black motherhood that would characterize her later writings.

“In Unconsciousness”

The sketch discussed briefly at the opening of this chapter, “In Unconsciousness,” offers a productive starting point for a reading of *Violets and Other Tales* as concerned with music’s connection to the semiotic. As shown in the introduction to this chapter, Dunbar-Nelson makes repeated references to stirring sounds, powerful emotions, and a mother’s body. The three references to maternity, in addition to the oceanic imagery throughout the piece contribute a womb-like atmosphere at times. At one point, the narrator, “float[s]” in the “green waters of this ocean of eternity, describing “the tender blue sky arched down in perfect love of its mistress, the ocean” (36-37). The narrator “drift[s] alone, silent,” though (37). While the mournful music suggests the possibility of an afterlife experience, the sensations of floating, the specific mention of “eddying circles, down, down to the very womb of time,” and the solitude of the narrator all contribute to a setting symbolizing a return to the mother’s body (39). Most pertinent to my reading, however, is the reference to the narrator hearing distant bells, “toll[ing] out the incessant dirge, grown resignedly sweet now; so intense in its infinite peace, that a calm of love, beyond all human understanding and above all earthly passions, sank deep into my soul” (37). Here, the speaker describes experiencing feelings communicated via sound but for which humanity has no words, a phenomenon I identify as a semiotic experience. As Kristeva’s description of the semiotic suggests, pre-verbal communication not only relies on sounds and movement, but also allows for an understanding of the world apart from binaries, such as “Black/White” or “man/woman.” Detaching from symbolic language means no longer being tied to the false fantasy of fixed meaning; instead, a semiotic experience embraces an ever-changing and reactive understanding of the world that privileges subjectivity, as seen here in the narrator’s floating in the ocean.

Complementing Dunbar-Nelson's semiotic imagery, the unique form of "In Unconsciousness" also rewards close attention. The text consists of seven sections, each no longer than three paragraphs, separated by dashes. Section breaks usually accompany a sharp shift in the emotions felt and the sounds heard by the narrator while in an unconscious trance. For instance, "And now, peace, perfect unconditioned, sublime peace, and rest, and silence," begins section four, which gives way to section five's opening line, "But hark! discord begins" (39, 40). Cleverly, Dunbar-Nelson's chooses "discord," simultaneously signaling a change in the emotions felt ("a vague fear" overcomes the narrator) and a change in the soundscape ("Peal out, ye brazen bells, peal out the requiem of the sinner," the narrator calls to the bells gone silent in the last section) (40, 41). The seventh and final section, the shortest of all, ends with the revelation that the narrator's journey into unconsciousness, "was not opium, nor night-mare, but chloroform, a dentist, three obstinate molars, a pair of forceps, and a lively set of nerves" (43). Admittedly, this "twist" of an ending might provide an example of why *Violets and Other Tales* has often been described as Dunbar-Nelson's artistry in its infancy. However, I argue "In Unconsciousness" serves as one of the most revealing excerpts of the collection through its insight to not only Dunbar-Nelson's persona as a writer (a claim Margot Sahrbeck Sempreora has previously argued), but also the author's remarkable insight to both trauma and music's effect on the brain.

In her innovative reading, Sempreora identifies this sketch as the only one within *Violets and Other Tales* featuring a racialized character. "In Unconsciousness," Sempreora argues, "describes the literal returning to consciousness of a racially-mixed, female body" (71). As evidence, Sempreora points to the repeated references to "auburn hair" within the sketch, arguing that, for Dunbar-Nelson's contemporary readers, such a detail would identify a character as

being of mixed-race (71). Similarly, scholars Violet Harrington Bryan, Kristina Brooks and Jordan Stouck all highlight mentions of “auburn hair” and “dusky-eyes” in Dunbar-Nelson’s stories as insinuations of race often overlooked by twenty-first century readers (Bryan 125, Brooks 12, Stouck 274). Support for these readings is found in Werner Sollors’ influential studies of the “tragic mulatto” trope, in which “dark hair and eyes [serve] as racial markers” (Stouck 274). Coincidentally, not so long after the publication of *Violets and Other Tales*, Paul Laurence Dunbar would refer to Dunbar-Nelson’s “hazel eyes and auburn hair” in his love poem “The Wooing” (qtd. in Alexander 74). That the narrator mentions her “white fingers” once within the text does not detract from this reading since Dunbar-Nelson was light skinned and sometimes “passed” for white; instead, the reference suggests how readers often fail to recognize the sketch as one about a mixed-race character. Sempereora sees “In Unconsciousness” as evidence of Dunbar-Nelson’s “authorial identity gasping for air,” suggesting the narrator’s struggle with the hair that almost drowns her speaks to the author’s attempt to create an artistic voice untethered to race (72). I add that reading the narrator as a mixed-race woman also provides support for my reading the work as commentary on the often tragic experiences of black motherhood.

In addition to offering insight to Dunbar-Nelson’s developing style, I argue “In Unconsciousness” attests to the young author’s intense interest in music and psychology. As mentioned earlier, Dunbar-Nelson adored opera and played the mandolin professionally; in an early courtship letter, she also tells Dunbar she was learning the violincello (qtd. in Alexander 47). Like Kate Chopin, Dunbar-Nelson must have been greatly moved by music, and her later newspaper columns provide evidence of such. In a May 1926 Pittsburgh *Courier* column, Dunbar-Nelson asks, “Was it Milton, or was it Wordsworth or was it both who said that all great

achievements, emotions and deeds are built to music?" (*Une* 166). Here, Dunbar-Nelson explicitly express her belief in music's ability to summon emotions, a concept "In Unconsciousness" and other sketches illustrate. In the same column, Dunbar-Nelson laments that some African Americans would "suppress [spirituals] for their connotation of slavery and oppression" and asserts that "the music of our people [African Americans] is the best in the world" (*Une* 164). She urges that readers "not seek to Freudize [music] into the limbo of suppressed desires," referencing the psychoanalyst whose theories of suppressed emotions influenced American culture in the 1920s (167). Thirty years earlier, though, Dunbar-Nelson's sketches indicate an awareness of the inextricable link between the unconscious and emotions, as well as a foundational belief of music therapy: that engagement with music allows us to engage otherwise elusive and difficult emotions.

That the writings of Dunbar-Nelson, a well-educated teacher and student of psychology, would reflect a burgeoning interest in the therapeutic benefits of music is most likely not coincidence. Music therapy failed to be professionalized or acknowledged as a legitimate health intervention during Dunbar-Nelson's lifetime; however, some of music therapy's earliest proponents had begun to study and publish articles on music's benefits. Music's association with healing and emotion, of course, can be traced as far back as ancient Greece, but the concept would be little more than anecdotal until methodical, scientific inquiry into the subject began in the mid-1900s. During the 1800s, various American educational institutions, mostly those serving the visually or mentally impaired, used music in their curricula "for purposes of socialization and physical well-being" (Byers 17). A handful of medical publications would mention the benefits of music therapy throughout the nineteenth century, including two dissertations overseen by Dr. Benjamin Rush, a prominent figure in both medicine and education

(“History,” Nelson 11). According to the American Music Therapy Association, “The 1800s also saw the first recorded music therapy intervention in an institutional setting...Corning’s use of music to alter dream states during psychotherapy” (“History”). Dunbar-Nelson’s “In Unconsciousness” reflects a complementary thought experiment, as the narrator’s experience of emotions such as “sadness,” “content[ment],” “fear” and “peace” are consistently paired with the sound of bells (36-40).

Dunbar-Nelson’s conclusion of “In Unconsciousness” with the revelation that a dentist’s chloroform led to the narrator’s emotional experience also foretells twentieth-century music therapy interventions. After music therapy’s professionalization in the 1940s, one of the most influential practitioners, Helen Bonny, pioneered a specific method of employing listening as an effective intervention with clients. Developed during the 1970s, The Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) outlines a strict protocol for helping clients access their unconscious while listening to classical music. Due to Helen Bonny’s focus on the use of LSD for psychotherapy, her method also dictates the client be in an altered state of consciousness⁹. Many (more likely, most) music therapists employing listening as an intervention today do not conform to Bonny’s original guidelines, choosing music tailored to the needs of clients and abstaining from use of drugs to enter an altered state (Muller). However, Dunbar-Nelson’s decision to end her sketch with a reference to chloroform shows her awareness that altered states only increase the mind’s responses to sound, encouraging the exploration of emotions especially. The sketch’s location in a dentist’s office also predicts the eventual practice of music therapy within professional, medical spaces. As discussed in the introduction, late-twentieth-century advancements in neuroscience and brain imaging have allowed scientists to better understand

⁹ Bonny’s methods were influenced by her time working in a drug crisis intervention program, where people experiencing “bad trips” were aided, in part, by music (Bruscia and Grocke 13).

how the human brain reacts to stimulation, including the at first seemingly disparate experiences of trauma and music. Such a lens brings greater import to “In Unconsciousness.” The repeated references to the narrator’s body make reading the text as evidence of Dunbar-Nelson’s experience of the traumas inflicted upon non-white bodies in the United States tempting. However, a close reading of “In Unconsciousness” as a description of how traumatic events occupy and influence any survivor’s brain proves more fruitful.

Through the lens of trauma studies, the form of Dunbar-Nelson’s sketch emerges as indicative of a survivor’s experience of trauma. A return to the text finds two mentions of war. First, there is the image of the “wailing processions, of weeping, empty-armed women, and widowed maidens” and, then, the atmosphere “Heavy with the screams and roars of war” (36, 40). Other than these quick references, there are no explicit scenes of battle or combat, no clear narrative or naming of whom the maidens mourn. As with the rest of the sketch’s content, these images flash quickly before the reader, including other unhappy sounds: “the curses of the deceived of traitors; with the passionate sighs of unlawful love; with the crushing unrest of blighted hopes” (40). In addition, the repeated references to hair include an alarming personification: “Then slowly, softly, the net of auburn hair begins to drag me down below the surface of the sea,” the narrator tells us (38). She will later beg the “shining web of hair” to “burst loose [its] bonds” (42). Aside from *Sempreora*’s metaphorical reading of the “auburn hair” signifying a mixed-race woman feeling entrapped by white supremacy, the tactile sensations of drowning and bondage evidence traumatic violence. Since the linguistic center of the brain shuts down when trauma is recalled, survivors often are only able to remember flashes of images and sensations experienced during traumatic events. Dunbar-Nelson’s choice never to linger on an

image and begin new sections of the sketch with a “triggering” sound and resulting emotion mirror the experience of a survivor recalling trauma.

Just as technological advancements have furthered neuroscience’s understanding of trauma, an array of studies also shows that engaging in expressive art therapies—such as art, dance, or music therapy—stimulates the brain in beneficial ways, proving especially helpful for survivors of trauma. Both art and music therapy have been shown to increase neuroplasticity, encouraging development in children’s brains and healthy activity in adult’s brains (Ehresman, Kraus et. al.). Also, music’s stimulation of the brain proves helpful for accessing otherwise suppressed memories and emotions. With her linkage of a reverberating bell, conflicting feelings, and fragmented images, Dunbar-Nelson depicts sound’s activation of emotions and memories otherwise buried deep within the unconscious. The narrator’s experience under chloroform allows flashes of traumatic memories to emerge, but tellingly lacks a clear elucidation of the connection between images described. As a whole, the sketch urges consideration of music’s ability to aid in the access of difficult emotions, including those for which there are no words.

In terms of motherhood, too, Dunbar-Nelson’s sketch refuses to paint a purely soft and tender depiction of maternity, scattering both maternal and traumatic imagery throughout the piece. The ocean allows for an embryonic floating that brings peace and a “sway[ing] upon the breast of eternity” that provides the gentle comfort of a mother’s rocking, but there is also the threat of “whirl[ing]...down, down to the very womb of time; to the innermost recesses of the mighty ocean” (38, 39). Further, the pairing of “empty-armed women” and “widowed maidens” in the “wailing processions” suggest the first set of women mourn lost children (36). Like the ambivalent depictions of marriage and maternity others have recognized in Dunbar-Nelson’s

fiction¹⁰, here motherhood features as an all-encompassing and powerful force, capable of being both a life-giving and life-threatening experience. That this concept is illustrated in another sketch from Dunbar-Nelson's *Violet and Other Tales* reifies the accuracy of such a reading. Alexander confidently asserts that though Dunbar-Nelson "left no clear data on her life prior to her emergence in New Orleans's African American society...some coded clues surface in her fiction" (49). I argue the unconscious of the persona presented in both "In Unconsciousness" and "The Maiden's Dream" are examples of such "coded clues surface[ing]" to reveal a young Dunbar-Nelson's own emergent and complex experience of Black motherhood.

"The Maiden's Dream"

Like "In Unconsciousness," "The Maiden's Dream" features an uncanny representation of the semiotic in a sketch that may seem simplistic at first glance. Hull writes that this work "present[s]...a refined, literary version of a young woman whose head is full of romance" and suggests it may be either "autobiographical or merely a use of expected convention" (39). My reading, however, sees Dunbar-Nelson suggesting the inextricable link between music and the semiotic and disrupting common racialized literary conventions of her day. Further, the ambivalent depictions of motherhood within "The Maiden's Dream" speak to Dunbar-Nelson's burgeoning, often conflicting, expectations for herself and her fellow black women.

While Dunbar-Nelson herself was not a biological mother to children, her concern with the conditions of black motherhood stem from the conditions of her childhood and African American cultural concepts of family. Patsy Moore, Dunbar-Nelson's mother, was one of many

¹⁰ Hull identifies "a thematic ambivalence about woman's concept of self and proper role in the world" as a characteristic of *Violets and Other Tales* and identifies three stories as examples, none of them sketches I examine here (*Color* 39). Violet Harrington Bryan also examines Dunbar-Nelson's contribution to discussions of women's role in society through *Violets and Other Tales*, similarly concluding she offers conflicting messages (131). As previously mentioned, Peabody's work also argues Dunbar-Nelson portrays an ambivalence toward motherhood influenced by turn-of-the-century rhetoric.

former slaves who left a Louisiana plantation to live in New Orleans after emancipation¹¹.

Alexander reports that Moore mostly worked as a seamstress, but she also speculates that Moore was separated from Alice and her older sister Leila while she worked as a live-in servant for an unclear amount of time around 1887 (57). “Because of the brutality commonly afflicted female servants by employers,” Alexander argues, Moore most likely left Alice and Leila with her mother, “of whom Alice was very fond” (57). Regardless of the specifics, what we know of Patsy Moore indicates that Dunbar-Nelson would have witnessed firsthand the struggles of formerly enslaved mothers as they fought to make a living and care for their children, often relying on the support of other women, but the traditional practice of othermothering extends beyond the day-to-day caregiving children require. Collins explains:

Black women’s experiences as othermothers have provided a foundation for Black women’s social activism. Black women’s feelings of responsibility for nurturing the children in their own extended family networks have stimulated a more generalized ethic of care where Black women feel accountable to all the Black community’s children.

(“Meaning” 49)

Dunbar-Nelson was certainly a part of the late nineteenth century othermother community work of racial uplift, especially through her role as an educator and founder of schools for young women, yet she was also an othermother in another, more immediate sense, as after her divorce from Paul Laurence, she “managed the household that she shared with her mother, sister, and

¹¹ Matt Sakakeeny reports, “in the decades following the Civil War...approximately 40,000 freed slaves and their offspring migrated to New Orleans from rural plantations.” These new citizens and the musical traditions they carried with them would come to heavily influence the sounds of the city. Even during slavery, though, New Orleans was known for its balack music. Dunbar-Nelson herself refers to the famous Congo Square, an area of New Orleans where enslaved peoples would gather to dance and sing (“People” 26).

nieces” (Gaines 210). For Dunbar-Nelson, as for many women, the duties associated with mothering were accompanied by sacrifice and struggle.

As an active and educated woman, a twenty-year old Dunbar-Nelson was most likely already beginning to understand black women’s expected role within the project of racial uplift. In *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, Africana Studies and History Professor Kevin K. Gaines reminds readers of the pressure on early African American leaders to always present themselves as positive and unflinching in their pursuit of civil rights. For Gaines, Dunbar-Nelson serves as one of several early twentieth-century female black leaders who exemplify such a position and the comparatively increased pressure placed upon women. Gaines asserts, “Within [racial] uplift black women cannot exist for themselves, but only insofar as they serve the utilitarian project of race building” (231). Such an interpretation exposes the restrictive effects of othermothering as a gendered communal expectation. Gaines writes:

Dunbar-Nelson’s public and private writings, taken together, provide an example of the deference and dissemblance uplift ideology imposed upon black women. Her views on black women’s reproduction also suggest the degree to which many advocates of racial uplift, even someone as critical of its ideals as Dunbar-Nelson, might nonetheless cling to outmoded, if not oppressive ideals. (231)

In an essay entitled “Woman’s Most Serious Problem” appearing in a 1927 issue of *The Messenger*, Dunbar-Nelson laments the declining birth rate among African American women and asks her female readers to think carefully about abstaining from motherhood. Dunbar-Nelson insists, “the training of human souls needs to begin at home in the old-fashioned family life, augmented later, if necessary, in the expensive schools and settlements of the great cities”

(“Woman’s” 292). Through such a call, Dunbar-Nelson echoes earlier white American decrees for Republican Motherhood. Yet, for herself, domestic duties failed to count as “real” work. In one diary entry she writes, “I shall castigate myself until I can work without dawdling and can do this little bit of room-cleaning, washing, ironing, etc. in double-quick time and leave time for writing and real work” (Dunbar-Nelson qtd. in Gaines 213). Quoting multiple other excerpts from Dunbar-Nelson’s diary, Gaines shows “that uplift ideals of altruistic service and sacrifice did not always provide Dunbar-Nelson with the fulfilment she sought” (232). Gaines also reveals how, despite publicly encouraging black women to focus on raising children instead of earning money (a stance revealing her own class privilege), Dunbar-Nelson herself clearly placed emphasis on receiving financial reimbursement for her racial uplift work (232). Through such a lens, Dunbar-Nelson’s complex and sometimes contradictory portrayal of love and motherhood in the two sketches discussed here are due to the consistently confining messages Dunbar-Nelson both received and espoused as a black woman.

I argue the narrative frame of “The Maiden’s Dream” shows a young woman accessing the semiotic with the aid of music. Dunbar-Nelson begins by describing a “maid [who] had been reading love-poetry, where the world lay bathed in moon-light, fragrant with dew-wet roses and jasmine, harmonious with the clear tinkle of mandolin and guitar” (*Violets* 85). The absence of dialogue or a clearly defined setting and the focus on the senses—the light of the moon, the smell of flowers, the tactile-sensory of “dew-wet,” and the music of instruments—marks this as a womb-like atmosphere¹². The ambiguous setting and blend of sonic, tactile, and olfactory

¹² In her reading of “The Stones of the Village,” Stouck identifies a marginalized character named Victor as “retreat[ing] to the isolated, womb-like atmosphere of [a] bookstore” (281). In both this story and “The Maiden’s Dream” Dunbar-Nelson juxtaposes books laden with symbolic language and the semiotic world of the womb. Sempreora also sees a “womb-like source” of water in her reading of Dunbar-Nelson’s “Natalie,” an early short story Dunbar-Nelson never published (92). Of course, womb imagery abounds in literature, but the repeated creation of symbolic wombs in Dunbar-Nelson’s early work seems notable.

imagery also mirror the setting of “In Unconsciousness.” Another similarity with the prior sketch appears when Dunbar-Nelson writes that “lethargy, like unto that which steeps the senses, and benumbs the faculties of the lotus-eaters, enveloped [the maiden’s] brain” (85). Just as the dentist’s chloroform induced unconsciousness in the speaker of the previously discussed sketch, something drug-like induces the maiden’s altered state here. Again, Dunbar-Nelson’s work proves her interest in the mind’s complexity. That the maiden has been reading “love poetry” does not detract from this semiotic setting, as Kristeva points to poetry as an example of revolutionary language that willfully defies traditional constraints of patriarchal language. Instead, the reading of poetry and the sensuous surroundings encourage the maiden to drift into what the narrator describes as a “trance,—awake, yet sleeping; conscious, yet unburdened with care” (85). The contradictory juxtaposition in the maiden’s being “awake” and “sleeping” creates a semiotic space through its suggestion of fluidity as opposed to firm binaries. Tellingly, Dunbar-Nelson sets up “conscious” and “unburdened with care” as antonyms as well, revealing the maiden’s—or perhaps the nineteenth-century African American woman’s condition—of always carrying the psychological weight of pain or worry while awake.

A theme of race emerges when reading the sketch’s opening in relation to the popular “tragic mulatto” narrative trope of the nineteenth century. As discussed above, multiple readings of “In Unconsciousness” rely on a reading of “auburn hair” suggesting a mixed-raced narrator, since the phrase was a common description of such characters. In *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*, Werner Sollors analyzes the emergence of the tragic mulatto trope. Sollors explains how Lydia Maria Child (previously mentioned here for her popularity as an authority on child-rearing) “revised” earlier stories of interracial relationships in order to write “work [that] has been viewed as the origin of miscegenation

literature in the United States” (202). Most notably with her short story “The Quadroons,” Child created a blueprint for many of these stories that featured so heavily in abolitionist literature. One aspect of Child’s “literary code,” which would come to influence works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and William Wells Brown’s *Clotel; or The President’s Daughter*, is the “high-flown literary allusions, sentimental strategies, and detailed botanical observations” (205-209). Often, a white suitor keeps his mixed-race beloved hidden in a quaint and secluded cottage surrounded by flora. “The natural paradise” surrounding the home, “forms a sharp contrast to the moral tragedy of its human inhabitants,” which Sollors reads as emblematic of man’s original fall from grace in Eden (205). Dunbar-Nelson’s placement of the maiden in a “world...fragrant with dew-wet roses and jasmine” may be what Hull identifies as expected romantic language, but it also encourages reading the sketch as concerning a tragic affair (85). A later allusion within the sketch also supports reading the sketch as Dunbar-Nelson’s attempt to represent the psyche of a “tragic mulatto”: the maiden will see “Glaucus, supporting the half-fainting Ione, following Nydia, frail, blind, flower-loving Nydia, sacrificing life for her unloving beloved” (89). Here, Dunbar-Nelson references *The Last Day of Pompeii*, an 1834 novel by Edward Bulwer-Lytton inspired Karl Bryullov’s painting of the same name. Within the novel, Nydia, a blind slave from Egypt, becomes trapped in an agonizing love triangle and ultimately dies by suicide, the classic ending to “tragic mulatto” tales. Additionally, Hull has suggested “The Maiden’s Dream” features the same voice as “In Unconsciousness,” providing further reasoning for a reading of the maiden as a mixed-race woman (*Color* 39). Critically, a reading of the maiden as a biracial woman allows further significant symbolism to emerge.

Once within a trance, the maiden experiences a dreamlike world I identify as the semiotic and the same space which trained music therapists often aim to help clients access due to its

association with soothing non-linguistic communication and maternal comfort. Dunbar-Nelson describes the maiden's movement into the semiotic:

And there stole into her consciousness, words, thoughts, not of her own, yet she read them not, nor heard them spoken; they fell deep into her heart and soul, softer and more caressing than the over-shadowing wing of a mother-dove, sweeter and more thrilling than the last high notes of a violin. (85)

Here, the emphasis on sensations of touch (“softer and more caressing”) and sound (“high notes of a violin”) continues as the “words” and “thoughts” the maiden experiences are described as somehow removed from formal, orderly language: they are not spoken or read but felt without need of a symbol. The description of sans-language communication and its effect as being like the “caressing...of a mother-dove” further suggests Dunbar-Nelson wishes to describe a woman accessing the same space Kristeva would define as the pre-verbal, or semiotic. Instead of relying on words, the maiden seems to experience only sensations and images while in this trance.

Dunbar-Nelson's “mother-dove” possesses multiple levels of significance due to the bird's association with both soothing and foreboding connotations. As art historian Hope B. Werness surmises, “The dove's soft, full plumage, graceful flight, and reputation for gentleness (at odds with actual behavior) result[ed] in its popularity,” as a symbol for fertility and love (143). The “cooing” sound most often associated with doves further suggests a nurturing fondling, similar to the human mother's soft lullabies¹³. This partially explains why prehistoric civilizations closely associated the bird with the Great Goddess figure (Werness 143). As ancient matriarchal societies gave way to “literate” and “patriarchal cultures,” such as those following Judeo-Christian tradition, the dove persisted as a powerful figure (Werness 143). Growing up in the

¹³ The *Oxford English Dictionary's* second definition of “coo” reads, “To utter a sound like that of a dove; *esp.* said of an infant.”

Catholic-influenced culture of New Orleans, Dunbar-Nelson would have known the dove's representation of renewal and peace in Noah's story. Christian art also heavily features doves as symbols of the Holy Ghost, often depicting the birds hovering near Jesus during baptism or the Virgin Mary during the divine conception (Werness 144). However, the dove also serves as a sacrificial figure in Christianity, spilling blood for humanity's sake (Werness 144). In a similar vein, the Mourning Dove, today "the most widespread and abundant game bird in North America," earned its name because of its "soft, drawn-out calls [that] sound like laments" ("Mourning"). That a bird associated with fertility, sacrifice, and grief would appear in an African American woman's meditation on maternity speaks to the complex nature of Black motherhood, particularly at the close of the nineteenth century.

With its fertile and sacrificial connotations, the dove resonates as a figure of the inordinate amount of sacrifice black mothers have made to obtain some semblance of autonomous motherhood in comparison to their white counterparts. In *To 'joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War*, historian Tera Hunter focuses on life for post-emancipation black women in Atlanta, Georgia. Hunter's findings, however, speak to patterns seen throughout the South in the late 1800s. Hunter points to both government- and missionary-run programs supposedly meant to aid in the reuniting of black families. Instead, Hunter reports, white directors often placed more emphasis on placing black children in white households as domestic servants rather than in black households as cherished kin (a practice begun during slavery) (35-37). If a black woman were able to find and keep her children, she most likely struggled to care for them financially. Economic necessity dictated black women secure employment for their and their families' survival, and "in Southern cities their options were confined to household labor" (3). In Atlanta, for example, over "90 percent of black female

wage-earners were confined to domestic work at the turn of the century” (Hunter 111).

Ostensibly free, black mothers of the late nineteenth century faced inhumane conditions that threatened both financial and familial stability.

As Hunter details through close attention to first-hand accounts, legal codes, and even trends in urban development, the conditions of black women’s labor were often grim and perilous. Mirroring the deceitful tactics of slave masters turned share-cropper overseers, white employers in the city often denied workers their full wages (Hunter 106). Even the most respected white employers still paid incredibly low wages, and this meant many black women, though now free, were able to spend little time with their own children due to long hours (107). Hunter reports that while white employers often preferred to hire live-in maids and cooks, black women understandably saw such an option as a “last resort” (106). Hunter quotes one live-in employee, whose words testify to how little emancipation did to change the lives of many African Americans: “I see my own children only when they happen to see me on the streets when I am out with the [employer’s] children or when my children come to the ‘yard’ to see me....I’m on duty all the time—from sunrise to sunrise, every day in the week....I am the slave, body and soul, of this family” (106). Away from the plantation, black mothers still faced difficulty securing the ability and time to care for their own children. In addition to unrelenting work conditions and sacrificed autonomy, live-in domestic workers (such as Dunbar-Nelson’s mother) also faced increased danger of sexual exploitation, a perpetual concern of black women in contact with white men (Hunter 34, 106). Like the nurturing and sacrificial figure of a “mother-dove,” post-emancipation black women were at once associated with an abundance of love for the children they could finally call their own and with an involuntary and violent sacrifice of their bodies for the nurturance of said children.

The dove's association with peace, calming, and lamentations—the use of music to confront and process grief, integral to the African American tradition—also make the bird an excellent symbol of the therapeutic benefits of music, reminding us not only of how mother and child “coo” in communication at the beginning of life, but also of how music often serves as a solace and remembrance at funerals once life has ended. In the introduction to her article on Black motherhood, McClain recalls a “defining ritual of her childhood”:

When I was 7 or 8 years old, my mother would put on Whitney Houston's “Greatest Love of All” every day before we left for school and work, and we sang along from start to finish....[W]e belted out lyrics about self-reliance and persistence, finding a kind of armor through song.... Black children and their families need this. We need a kind of anthem, a melodic reminder to ourselves and each other that we are not who the wider world too often tells us we are: criminal, disposable, lazy, undeserving of health or peace or laughter. (14)

McClain's remembrance speaks to an African American tradition of passing down the self-soothing power of music, a concept I explore further in chapter two. Beginning with the work songs and spirituals of slavery, African Americans accessed the therapeutic benefits of music long before any scientific evidence of music's effect on the body and mind existed. Finally, the dove's associations with death, including its mournful call, speak to Dunbar-Nelson's youth in New Orleans, a city still well known for its funeral parades, which Dunbar-Nelson undoubtedly witnessed and heard. Architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe wrote in 1819 of viewing two such parades in honor of African American burials and suggested the tradition was “peculiar to New Orleans alone among all the American cities” (205). “By the 1830's,” Kmen reports, “newspapers carried frequent notices for funeral parades,” which involved large crowds of

mourners and full brass bands (206). Often, Kmen explains, the marches (which continue today) provide mournful music on the way to a funeral, while the procession afterwards plays livelier, more celebratory music (206). Whether Dunbar-Nelson consciously chooses the dove as a symbol for the theme of black motherhood running through her writing may prove impossible to know, but remarkably the bird serves as a compelling representation of black women's caretaking, sacrifice, and traditions.

The dove's multifaceted symbolism sets a tone for the following passages of "The Maiden's Dream," as Dunbar-Nelson blends references to love and motherhood's ability to bring both great happiness and sorrow. Within the semiotic, the maiden envisions several scenes, the first demonstrating the immense glory and destruction of love. The maiden reflects that for a chance of experiencing its great powers, deities have praised love while "men in all the bitterness of hatred fought, bled, died by millions, [for love] their grosser selves to be swept into the bosom of their ancient mother" (86). This second reference to a mother helps establish maternity as a theme within the sketch and suggests Dunbar-Nelson's interest in the role mothers play in what she terms "that marevellous [sic] machine, the human brain" (87). Following this opening reflection on love's power, the maiden will picture a "broad and *fertile* plain, tender *verdure*, soft blue sky overhead, with white billowy clouds nearing the horizon" (87, italics added for emphasis). The succinct images of life-giving land reiterate the sketch's association with a nurturing, maternal space, while also adding a second instance of the lush romantic settings associated with "tragic mulatto" narratives.

The maiden then envisions several other scenes, which include an appearance by the Old Testament figures of Laban and Rachel, two characters whose stories prove meaningful in relation to the experience of black mothers due to their ancestral connection to Israel. Because

Rachel gives birth to Joseph and Benjamin, two of the dozen patriarchs forming the twelve tribes of Israel, Rachel is said to have “built the house of Israel” along with her sister Leah (Ruth 4:11 RSV)¹⁴. Within African American literature, any connection to Israel or Egypt (mentioned twice in the sketch) looms as meaningful (89, 90). In *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*, Allen Dwight Callahan explains, “African Americans heard, read, and retold the story of Exodus more than any other biblical narrative. In it they saw their own aspirations for liberation from bondage in the story of the ancient Hebrew slaves” (83). As Callahan and other scholars have demonstrated, references to Israelites and the Exodus from Egypt abound in African American literature still to this day. Spirituals sung during and after slavery often alluded to a Christian God’s impending judgment on slaveholders and freeing of the enslaved (Callahan 85). Similarly, the African American jeremiad became a popular abolitionist convention, thanks to the Exodus’s “central[ity]” in what David Howard-Pitney calls the “Black socioreligious imagination” (11). With her reference to Israel in the form of Rachel, Dunbar-Nelson joins contemporaries such as Frederick Douglass and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who utilized references to Israel in their creation of early African American literature. Rachel’s ethnicity does not negate her ability to serve as a coded symbol of black womanhood. As Callahan explains, “African Americans did not relate to the Exodus ethnically but experientially, and only to the extent that the experience of oppression shared the same elements....They were like the Israelites, and the Israelites were like them, to the extent that both were an enslaved people pleading with God to provide a way out” (112-113). Rachel’s experiences mirror those of the Black mother through her position within patriarchal systems of oppression and her tragic inability to protect her long-coveted children.

¹⁴ Through her handmaid Bilhah, Rachel also produces two more of the tribes:

First, Rachel's appearance in the Bible links to themes of trickery and servitude. The book of Genesis tells how Jacob asks Laban for his daughter Rachel's hand in marriage. Dunbar-Nelson directly quotes Genesis 29:18 (KJV) when she writes, "And Jacob loved Rachel, and said, I will serve thee seven years for Rachel, thy younger daughter" (88). Dunbar-Nelson then begins a new paragraph defined by chaos: "How different the next scene! Heaven's wrath burst loose upon a single community" (88). Again, as in "In Unconsciousness," Dunbar-Nelson creates a sketch composed of fragmented scenes viewed by a young woman within a trance, and her quick shift from the scene of "young and blushing and beautiful" Rachel's betrothal to a scene of fiery destruction hint at the conflict central to the story of Laban, Rachel, and Jacob (88). When the promised marriage takes place, Laban replaces Rachel with his older daughter, Leah. When Jacob complains, Laban argues it is only customary for the eldest daughter to be married before her younger sisters and promises that, in exchange for another seven years of labor, Jacob may finally receive Rachel as a bride. An allusion to Laban, then, points toward the historical ties between patriarchal economic practices of trading human beings and keeping the disadvantaged in debt through deception: Laban stands in not only for men's historical use of women as property but also for America's promised emancipation only leading to disenfranchisement in the forms of sharecropping and incarceration. Dunbar-Nelson introduces Laban as "haughty, stern, yet withal a kindly gleam in the glance which rested upon the [sheep] about [sic] him" (87). Through this quick but telling descriptor, Dunbar-Nelson demonstrates Laban's lack of concern for anything but "the riches of [his] flock," (87). Using his own daughter as a pawn to secure free labor, Laban resembles the callous slave owners depicted in many abolitionist works and exposed by actual events. Slavery's apologists would claim slaves were valued family members, and often, children born into slavery were the result of a white master's raping of an enslaved

woman; but metaphorical or biological relations seldom protected enslaved family members (McElya 9). Instead, as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* most famously attests, economics (along with systematic cruelty designed to reinforce slavery's effects on the African American psyche) meant slave masters routinely and purposefully broke up enslaved families. Laban's treatment of Rachel as little more than a piece of property to be bartered for labor speaks to the first way in which patriarchal codes deny her subjectivity.

According to Genesis, Rachel appears to inherit her father's knack for trickery when, after her eventual marriage, she steals her father's household idol. Scholars disagree on Rachel's motivations, with one theory suggesting she acts to procure financial compensation for Jacob's fourteen years of labor (Frymer-Kensky, Nowell 36). Before she, Jacob, Leah, and their children set out for Canaan, Rachel takes the prized possession and hides it from her suspicious father by refusing to stand for a search of her person, claiming she is menstruating. Rachel has succeeded in using the trappings of her lower status as a woman to outsmart the patriarchy and claim something of value for herself—a trickster technique like those used in African American folktales¹⁵. Meanwhile, Jacob dismisses Laban's accusations and proves his innocence by cursing the thief himself. In this way, a trusting Jacob unknowingly curses his prized bride. As such, Rachel becomes a woman who cannot win, tragic in both her father's deliberate transgressions and her husband's unintended damnation. The Laban and Rachel allusion, then, suggests at the very least the maiden's subconscious concern with men's treatment of women as goods to be bartered.

Rachel's experience of being cursed by her own husband also speaks to the black woman's experience of intersectionality. In *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist*

¹⁵ For a detailed analysis of trickster typography in the Jacob and Joseph stories, see chapter four of Susan Niditch's *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (2000).

Approach, comparative literature scholar Ilana Pardes speculates about the extent to which Jacob knowingly curses Rachel, who struggled for years to produce children. Pointing to Rachel's suggestions that Jacob may be responsible for her barrenness, as well as Jacob's failure to plead with God for divine intervention, Pardes highlights the growing tension between the couple. Jacob's cursing Rachel, then, could be "perceived as the expression of an unwitting wish to set limit to his counterpart's [Rachel's] plot" through suppressing her attempts to "become a subject" rather than the subjected (73-4). As a final and rather damning piece of evidence, Pardes points to Jacob's choice to be buried by Leah instead of Rachel (74). Subjugated by both Laban and Jacob, Rachel emerges as a complex character connoting the effects of consistently being treated as the less worthy Other.

Importantly, during what Henry Louis Gates Jr. has referred to as "The Black Woman's Era" of 1890 to 1910, Alice Dunbar-Nelson published her first works alongside numerous other influential thinkers (Gates xvi). Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* appeared in 1892, three years before *Violets and Other Tales*, and included essays arguing for the rights of African American women. Cooper declares, "The colored woman...is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, [sic] and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both" (76). A pertinent example lies in Cooper's reference to the two rooms she must choose between at a train station: one marked "FOR LADIES" and one designated "FOR COLORED PEOPLE" (58). In the late nineteenth century, both women and African Americans vigorously fought for expanded rights, but neither early feminist nor civil rights movements acknowledged, much less centered, the radically restricted conditions of black women's lives. Nyasha Junior, for example, argues nineteenth-century black male leaders such as Frederick Douglass "marginalize(d) African American women by removing them from

consideration” within discussions of voting rights, characterizing “suffrage as a struggle between white women and African American men” (13). Racial uplift’s gendered divide also shows up during Dunbar-Nelson’s social work. As Gaines reports, “gender and class conflicts within black institutions were neutralized by an ethos of service, which tended to place black women at the center of their communities, making them less aware of their subservient status in a male-dominated world” (232). Dunbar-Nelson hardly seemed oblivious to her positionality, though. After voicing her own opinions, Dunbar-Nelson recorded her disappointment when Black male politicians referred to her as a “silly woman...and other vile names” (qtd. in Gaines 218). When considered as an allegory, Rachel and Jacob both suffer under her father’s deception and bondage, but Jacob fails to see his wife as an equal or ally. Laban and Jacob each deny Rachel’s subjectivity in their respective ways, similar to the manner in which black women have historically had to fight for their own voices to be heard within the communal struggles for racial and gender equality.

As mentioned above, Rachel fails to give Jacob children for many years after marriage. Dismayed at her inability to conceive, Rachel becomes desperate to produce a son for Jacob and enlists her handmaid to serve as surrogate and sleep with Jacob, a recurrent act that will result in two sons and a fertility battle between Rachel and Leah, who also asks Jacob to sleep with her handmaid so that she may give him even more children. When God eventually answers Rachel’s incessant pleas, she gives birth to Jacob’s eleventh and most beloved son, Joseph. During the family’s journey to Canaan, Rachel will again produce an heir, Benjamin, but she dies in childbirth, perhaps a direct result of her earlier theft and Jacob’s ensuing curse. Pardes observes, “She who desperately cried, ‘Give me children, or else I die’ ironically dies upon bearing a son” (72). While Rachel’s situation differs greatly from that of chattel enslavement, she does

personify a complex and difficult relationship to motherhood connected to self-sacrifice. Biblical scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky writes, Rachel “becomes an image of tragic womanhood” as, even in death, she grieves. In Jeremiah, God hears “lamentation and weeping,” identifying the sound as Rachel “weeping for her children [the Israelites]; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are not” (Jeremiah 31:15 RSV). Rachel’s symbolism of precarious motherhood is further confirmed by the sketch’s later allusion to *The Scarlet Letter*. Dunbar-Nelson writes of the maiden hearing, “‘Mother, why does the minister keep his hands over his heart?’ and [seeing] the white drawn face of Hester Prynne, with her scarlet elf-child” (91). Like Rachel, Hester connotes themes of women’s suffering underneath patriarchal, Judeo-Christian traditions. Hester’s raising her daughter alone while the child’s father remains free from society’s scorn or parental responsibilities mirrors the experience of many black women, while Rachel’s cries for Israel echo those of four centuries of African American mothers crying for their children lost to the ceaseless violence of white supremacy.

While the enduring care and community of black mothers merits celebration, the genuine grief and anxieties that come with raising black children in America cannot be overstated. In *Clinging to Mammy*, McElya recounts the United States Senate’s 1923 decision to grant the United Daughters of the Confederacy land for the erection of a monument honoring the “faithful colored mammies of the South” near the recently dedicated Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. (*Congressional Record* qtd. in McElya 116). The resulting outcry included many references to the Dyer Anti-Lynching Law that had recently been blocked by a Democratic filibuster. Opponents to the “Mammy Monument” clearly saw efforts “to valorize the faithful slave stood side by side with lynching among the White supremacist tactics of racial control” (McElya 177). One editorial read, “There can be no sincerity in the action of the Congress for the same men

refused to pass the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill. Everyone with an ounce of brain realizes that the passage of a law to protect the descendants of those women would be more beneficial and a greater tribute than any monument erected with stone and mortar” (qtd. in McElya 176). The monument controversy provides just one example of American attempts to disregard the devastating violence inflicted upon black families in favor of vacuous tokens of supposed racial conciliation.

Recently, contemporary conversations surrounding police brutality have shed light on a key difference between white and black parenting: discussions of race. In her article, McClain cites scholarship demonstrating that, by and large, white parents do not talk about race because they do not know what to say (16). “Black mothers,” McClain writes, “haven’t had the luxury of [silence]....Instead, we must act as a buffer and translator between [our children] and the world, beginning from their earliest days” (16). As Collins points out decades earlier, black mothers must continually decide how to balance teaching their children to survive within oppressive systems while simultaneously resisting the same systems (52-54). Collins describes how:

Black daughters are raised to expect to work, to strive for an education so that they can support themselves, and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities because these skills are essential for their own survival as well as for the survival of those for whom they will eventually be responsible. And yet mothers know that if daughters fit too well into the limited opportunities offered Black women, they become willing participants in their own subordination. Mothers may have ensured their daughters’ physical survival at the high cost of their emotional destruction. (53)

As the daughter of a former slave and an educator of young black women, Dunbar-Nelson most assuredly knew the difficult truths McClain and Collins would write explicitly in the twentieth

and twenty-first century. The ambivalence with which Alice Dunbar-Nelson depicts marriage and motherhood in her sketches stems from larger conversations surrounding women's role at the turn of the twentieth-century, but her allusions to grief-stricken and outcast mothers, no matter how subtle, specifically speak to the more difficult and violent expectations black mothers have faced throughout American history.

Dunbar-Nelson's inclusion of difficult and multifarious emotions also align her sketches with the semiotic's seemingly chaotic environment from the perspective of the symbolic world. Whether still in the womb or not, when without language, we are without a way of knowing. There is no sense of dichotomies or danger, only instinctual and immediate response to environmental factors. Near the conclusion of "The Maiden's Dream," Dunbar-Nelson writes:

Oh, the pictures, the forms, the love-words which crowded her mind! They thrilled her heart, crushed out all else save a crushing, over-powering sense of perfect, complete joy.

A joy that sought to express itself in wondrous melodies and silences, filled with thoughts too deep and sacred for words. (91-92 emphasis mine)

Culminating with these lines, the maiden's experience encapsulates the connection between music and the semiotic, as she accesses knowledge that cannot be put into words. Music, with its "melodies and silences" stands in for the expression of a joy so rich it resists symbolic language. The above passage also resembles the "In Unconsciousness" speaker's experiencing a "calm of love, beyond all human understanding and above all earthly passions, [that] sank deep into [her] soul" (37). Together, the two sketches suggest journeys into the mind aided by music allow for the retrieval of meaningful images and powerful emotions, both sorrowful and joyful.

As mentioned in the discussion of "In Unconsciousness," Dunbar-Nelson's descriptions of music and the unconscious complement common interventions used by modern day music therapists, as

they utilize music to aid in the accessing, processing, and sharing of emotions so difficult they are sometimes impossible to put into words. Benedikte Barth Scheiby, for example, writes of Mia, a 27-year-old client who avoids discussing losing her father to suicide when she was five-years old until after several sessions of improvisational music. After a session during which Mia “fiercely” plays bells and gongs in a way that reminds Schieby of Balinese funeral music, Mia writes in her diary:

Music---the unspeakable--- the thing that only can be whispered or hissed out with the breathing. DEATH. EMPTINESS. ABANDONED. ALONE. I DON'T WANT TO SPEAK ABOUT IT....Music for the dead --- TIBET --- Climax --- release, after that the sorrow, the silence. AS IF I SMASHED A WINDOW AND ENTERED THE ROOM OF SORROW.
(279, qtd. in Scheiby 280)

After the improvisational music, an emotional Mia verbalizes her emotions and speaks to Scheiby about the loss of her father for the first time. For Mia and many others, music offers a tool for breaking down walls built around deep and painful emotions, but we know that music also aids in the access of positive emotions. Two separate studies published in 2017, for example, found respectively that “symptoms of anxiety and depression decreased significantly” in pregnant women who regularly listened to music and that listening to music and, even more so, singing was associated with “fewer symptoms of postnatal depression” (Nwebube, Glover, and Stewart 4, Fancourt and Perkins 150). Such research serves to broaden our understanding of music, which most of us already know to be inherently tied to emotion.

Dunbar-Nelson’s choice to end “The Maiden’s Dream” with a romantic conclusion understandably tints some readings of the sketch, but a closer reading provides other possibilities. The sketch concludes with the maiden awakening beside her lover, to whom she

“whisper[s]: —/Take all of me—I am thine own, heart, soul, / Brain, body, all; all that I am or dream” (92). Again, Hull reads the work as “a refined, literary version of a young woman whose head is full of romance” and describes the maiden as “thrilled by the amorous words crowding her mind” (39). Such a reading glosses over the chaos, destruction, and heartbreak that also characterize the maiden’s dream. Especially when combined with the images from “In Unconsciousness,” the maiden’s mind may be full of romance, but is also preoccupied with the corruption of humanity and the grief of heartbroken mothers and lovers. Considering the two sketches as descriptions of one woman’s two separate journeys into her psyche, the maiden’s final expression of love, as trite as it may seem, offers a novel culmination in its daring to see a mixed-race character find a happy ending full of romantic love’s promises. Simultaneously, though, such an ending reinforces larger cultural narratives insisting that the most rewarding roles for both black and white women are those of wife and mother.

In her discussion of Dunbar-Nelson’s struggle to find her authorial voice, Sempreora describes a letter Dunbar-Nelson once wrote “clearly express[ing] an experience of the self separated from language” to her then husband, Paul Laurence Dunbar (73). Dunbar-Nelson writes:

Do you know what is it to have something within you crying for utterance, beating the bars of its prison, begging to be let out and you cannot give it freedom? If you do not, then you do not know what it is to suffer the most exquisite pain. It is the better self within, the other consciousness, not the subconsciousness. For it is never subordinate but the original soul struggling for utterance. (qtd. in Sempreora 73)

Sempreora sees Dunbar-Nelson speaking to the difficulty of forging an identity for herself, especially amid feelings of “artistic anxiety” and “cultural suppression” (73). I agree and also

find the passage remarkably indicative of a desire to return to the semiotic. Dunbar-Nelson describes an “original soul,” one free from symbolic and patriarchal language, elusive in its inability to be named. Perhaps playing the mandolin and listening to opera allowed Dunbar-Nelson access to feelings she felt unable to express elsewhere. Even if not, the scenes from *Violets and Other Tales* explored here suggest Dunbar-Nelson allowed her musically entranced characters to momentarily escape the confines of language through exploration of the unconscious.

I argue Dunbar-Nelson’s thoughts on black motherhood were not “too deep and sacred for words,” only too radical in their depiction of the black woman’s plight for them to be explicitly featured in her debut publication (92). In lieu of the confident and assertive voice her later newspaper columns would possess, in *Violets and Other Tales*, Dunbar-Nelson alludes to the anxieties of black motherhood. She also suggests the ability to explore emotions and find comfort through a return to the semiotic aided by music. An othermother within her community then and today, Dunbar-Nelson serves as an example of how an artist can write fiction so ambitious in its “passing” that it is read as “aracial” instead of confrontational to the surrounding racist culture. Four years after *Violets and Other Tales*’ publication, Kate Chopin’s white privilege would allow her to publish a much more explicit condemnation of compulsory motherhood’s implications.

A “taste of life’s delirium”: Play and Music in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*

As Ammons has observed, “Edna Pontellier is able to swim dreamily to her death for one very clear and highly political reason: black women will raise her children” (74). Throughout *The Awakening*, black women appear at the periphery of the text, serving as maids, caretakers, and exoticized figures of sensuality. Anna Shannon Elfenbein reads these briefly glimpsed black

characters as signaling Chopin's more progressive views on race compared to her white contemporaries. In *Edna*, Elfenbein sees an intentionally realistic depiction of a white woman's "tragic false consciousness": caught up in her own struggles with objectification, Edna fails to see her own liberation's problematic reliance on black women's labor and even in death never "escape[s] from the conventional constraints placed upon white, upper-class women by a racist, classist, and patriarchal society" (183, 179-181). The debate over Chopin's intentions when including "nameless, faceless black women" throughout her novel will likely never settle (Ammons 74). However, studying her iconic novel alongside Alice Dunbar-Nelson's more veiled representations of race does reward us with many other profitable lines of analysis. Despite the authors' differing vantage points in terms of race, class, and motherhood, Dunbar-Nelson's and Chopin's respective portrayals of the semiotic and music align to produce a common theme of southern American women instinctively drawn to the therapeutics of music, a theme that would emerge repeatedly throughout twentieth-century southern literature.

The remarkable history of *The Awakening*'s rediscovery offers an enduring example of how evolving social climates can turn a flop into a masterpiece. As Margo Culley writes in the preface to the Norton critical edition of *The Awakening*, when the novel first appeared in 1899, it "was immediately condemned by many, though not all, early reviewers for its immoral or amoral sensibility" (ix). Despite the adage insisting all publicity is good, news of the supposedly shocking text did not drive sales up, and "the novel quickly fell into obscurity and was out of print in English for almost sixty years" (ix). Since the work's rediscovery amid the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s, a multitude of scholars have written about Chopin's once forgotten novel.

In her 2011 article for *The Southern Literary Journal*, Xianfeng Mou divides the wealth of scholarship surrounding the text into four themes, including “Edna’s sexual awakening” and Chopin’s innovations “in terms of literary traditions and breakthroughs” (104-5). Most relevant to the current reading are the categories Mou describes as “Edna’s quest for a feminine mode of subjectivity” and “deal[ing] with women’s relationship with language” (104). As Mou notes, Patricia Yaeger and Jacqueline Buckman each produced essays critical to these lines of scholarship. In her work, Yaeger questions the tradition of seeing Edna’s sexual awakening as an emancipatory act. Instead, Yaeger argues that Edna’s infidelity is not truly subversive since conversations within the text clearly establish “the adulterous woman” as one of the possible roles already available to women in late nineteenth-century American society. Acting within this prescribed role means Edna’s actions ultimately fail to be as transgressive as what Yaeger finds more compelling: “Chopin’s representation of a language Edna Pontellier seeks but does not possess” (198). Drawing on the work of psychoanalysts including Kristeva, Yaeger argues that Edna’s struggle throughout the novel is the search for a way to express herself outside of patriarchal language and conventions. Similarly, Jacqueline Buckman relies on Kristeva’s theory of the dialectic to suggest that the “interpretative ambiguities that haunt the novel” are a result of “the transgressive impulses of the female imaginary” as it attempts to escape the confines of patriarchal language (55, 58). Buckman claims *The Awakening* demonstrates the dialectic between the semiotic and symbolic registers and finds evidence in devices such as alliteration, which she highlights in an analysis more focused on form than either Yaeger’s or my own reading.

I place myself among several scholars who have focused on music within *The Awakening* as means to extend Yaeger’s and Buckman’s work, suggesting that music gives Edna

access to the emotions and thoughts for which she lacks a language. Nicole Camastra, for one, suggests, “Music in *The Awakening* is a way to discover the things that cannot be spoken,” but Camastra concedes that though “Music provides communion and community for Edna...it does not save her” (165, 157). Building in part on Camastra’s work, Brian Daniel Howton offers a reading focused on specific music mentioned in *The Awakening*, revealing how allusions in the text foreshadow later events and bolster the novel’s theme of individual vs. society. I extend both Camastra’s and Howton’s readings by exploring the ways in which Chopin’s depiction of Edna’s interactions with music signals a prescient understanding and appreciation of interventions professional music therapists practice today.

In the following section, I first offer a close reading of sonic imagery’s symbolism of the inescapable trappings of maternity in several scenes from *The Awakening*. Within these readings, I highlight how Edna’s interactions with both natural and human-made music enhance the text’s theme of women’s perpetual inability to define themselves outside of motherhood. I then turn to a reading of Edna’s engagement with various forms of play as means to alleviate her growing feelings of despondency and isolation. Through engaging her imagination, practicing certain hobbies, and displaying her unique knowledge, Edna briefly manages to experience the feelings of autonomy and satisfaction she finds lacking in motherhood. Finally, I suggest that Edna’s experiences with music not only continue her therapeutic play but also mirror interventions used in modern day music therapy, creating a connection between century-old cultural and philosophical beliefs and contemporary evidence-based scholarship about music. When considered as a whole, the soundscape of *The Awakening* demonstrates not just music’s status as an integral part of the human experience but also as an understudied aspect of literature.

The Semiotic and Sound in *The Awakening*

I am far from the first to recognize the Kristevan semiotic underpinning Chopin's *The Awakening*, as the above references to Buckman and Yaeger's readings prove. Additionally, Jean Wyatt offers a reader-response analysis in *Reconstructing Desire: The Role of the Unconscious in Women's Reading and Writing*. Here, Wyatt reads over a dozen novels written by women with an eye toward how the preoedipal surfaces in the text and how such an occurrence influences female readers. Wyatt argues that Chopin creates a semiotic voice for the sea through "alliteration and rhythmic repetition," which reminds Edna and, by extension, Chopin's readers of their own experience before the symbolic order, complicating patriarchal society's insistence on women's adherence to stable, circumscribed roles (71-72). Wyatt aligns her analysis with the earlier, highly influential reading of Sandra Gilbert who reads *The Awakening* as a fantastical re-telling of the Aphrodite myth, suggesting Chopin demonstrates "what would 'really' happen to a mortal turn-of-the-century woman who tried to claim for herself the erotic freedom and power owned by the classical queen of love" (Gilbert 45). Reading Edna as Aphrodite makes sense for many reasons, including the strong connection each woman has with water that gives life¹⁶. Of course, Edna's story is complicated by her final swim, but Gilbert argues that "Edna swims...not into death, but back into her own life, back into the imaginative openness of her childhood" (Gilbert 57). For Gilbert, this conclusion promises a feminist rebirth for Edna—a mythological resurrection countering Jesus's emergence from the tomb (57). When Wyatt examines the ending's impact on Chopin's readers, she concludes that "As Edna moves into a fluidity beyond patriarchal discourse, so do we" (81). While such readings excite and inspire my own interaction

¹⁶ While the Aphrodite myth shows the goddess being born from the sea, a standard reading of *The Awakening* sees Edna's learning to swim as symbolic of her emerging sense of power and autonomy. As Gilbert writes, Edna is "mystically and mythically revitalized, renewed, reborn" through swimming (51-2).

with the text, my primary interest does not rest in the allegorical or theoretical aspects of Edna's experiences with sound. Positioning myself somewhere between Gilbert and Wyatt, I am focused on the practical ways in which sounds described in the text (not the sound of the actual text) offer insight to how individuals might create therapeutic experiences through mindful engagement with sound.

Chopin's portrayal of Edna's ambivalent feelings about motherhood have always been a topic of scholarship surrounding *The Awakening*; the novel explicitly concerns itself with maternity and children from early on. Mr. Pontellier feels Edna "fail[s] in her duty toward their children" and Edna herself has trouble identifying with the mothers surrounding her (10-11). "Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman," Chopin writes and defines the "mother-women" of Grand Isle as those who "idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (11). Chopin's description of self-effacing "ministering angels" aligns with Vanderberg-Daves's description of a moral motherhood in which mandated mothers act as saintly examples for their children. Readers easily see why Edna fails to fit in with this group. Instead of sewing garments for her children, she spends her summer learning to swim. Rather than fawn over her sons, she enjoys the flirtatious company of young Robert. Chopin makes Edna's ambivalent maternal feelings explicit when she writes, Edna "was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them" (21). Chopin's depiction of Edna as an intelligent and passionate woman longing for independence but stifled by motherhood comments on the way in which late nineteenth-century ideology confined women by asking them to serve as knowledgeable leaders but only in the domestic venues assigned to them.

Increasingly, sonic imagery plays a role in Edna's ability to name wife- and mother-hood as that which confines her. Though Edna's feelings, particularly that of "relief" in the children's absence, would be considered standard in the twenty-first century, the strict expectations the nineteenth century saw come to a head explain Edna's reluctance to "admit" her own feelings about motherhood "even to herself" (21). The narrator's assertion that Edna "was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being" after Robert invites her on a sunset stroll alongside the ocean's "sonorous murmur," certainly refers, in part, to Edna's oft-discussed sexual awakening (16, 15). However, her increasing reflections on motherhood also demonstrate vexed feelings emerging from her unconscious aided by the ocean's music. Chopin makes the connection between Edna's awakening and the ocean apparent when she describes the nature of suppressed emotions in one paragraph and the ocean's sound in the next. "But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing," Chopin writes in a passage depicting Edna's emergent access of the semiotic (16). Soon after, a new paragraph begins, "The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (16). Here, Chopin explicitly links the ocean's sound to Edna's ability to explore her unconscious. Social expectations for both Edna's sexuality and maternity lead to the suppression of a longing for autonomy, and music—both from the sea and from Mlle Reisz—plays a vital role in her exploration of these surfacing desires.

Early scenes within *The Awakening* establish a rich and raucous soundscape. The opening lines of the novel erupt with not the sound of music but the squawking of a parrot. An immediate metaphor for marriage's restriction of women, the caged parrot appears and denies Mr. Pontellier the quiet needed to focus on reading his newspaper. As if purposefully driving Edna's husband

away, the bird cries out in French, “Go away! Go away! For God’s sake!” before his English, “That’s all right!” (4). We are told, “He [the parrot] could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence” (4). Yaeger points to the phrase “a language which nobody understood” as Chopin “emphasiz[ing] Edna’s need for a more passionate and intersubjective speech that would allow Edna to” express desires subjugated by society (204). While I see the same important foreshadowing in these first few paragraphs, I suggest there are at least two other highly important signifiers at play in the opening scene’s aural imagery.

First, the parrot’s multilingual exclamations, the mocking-bird’s whistling, and the house that is “more noise[r] than ever” suggest a chaotic setting, similar to the womb (4). Prior to birth, the fetus continually hears the rhythmic beating of the mother’s heart, other inner workings of the mother’s body, and most every sound the mother herself encounters. Pointing to late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century work studying the development of fetuses, Gilboa explains how these studies prove earlier conceptions of the womb as providing a “soothing” environment through “steady and moderate” sounds false (242). Instead, research suggests, while the womb can certainly provide what we would term a “soothing” environment at times, the sounds of the womb are also quite often what we would describe as “stressful, chaotic, and insecure” (242). This revised understanding of the fetus’s experience of sound aligns with Kristeva’s theories. Kristeva reminds us, “The kinetic functional stage of the *semiotic* precedes the establishment of the sign; it is not, therefore, cognitive in the sense of being assumed by a knowing, already constituted subject” (27). In other words, because the fetus lacks a dichotomous language, there can be no “calm” vs. “chaotic” tension, only a fluidity of

experience, including sound. Thus, the opening passage's description of Mr. Pontellier fleeing from the mixed sounds of the birds immediately suggests an inability or unwillingness of Edna's husband to engage with a semiotic soundscape—one that fails to adhere to orderly language structures. On another level, Edna's absence from the house with its "chattering and whistling birds," "the Farival twins playing piano," and Madame Lebrun's "bustling" about giving orders signifies Edna's longing to separate from the noise of domesticity, reiterated by her "silently" reaching out to Mr. Pontellier for her rings upon returning from the beach (4-5). Second, the narrator's early suggestion that the two birds may share a "language which nobody [else] understood," foreshadows the relationship Edna forms with Mademoiselle Reisz through music, the specifics of which I discuss below. With her opening paragraphs, Chopin establishes a setting of domestic discontent, partly developed through resonant imagery.

Through sound and movement, two modes of communication outside the bounds of symbolic language, Edna recognizes the emotions she will struggle with throughout the text. Once Mr. Pontellier explicitly states his dissatisfaction with his wife's motherly performance, maternity's connection to the semiotic surfaces once more. Her husband having "reproached" her "habitual neglect of the children," Edna escapes to the cottage porch, where she "rock[s] gently to and fro" (9). From this position, she sits in the dark of night. The narrator reports, "There was no sound abroad except the hooting of an old owl in the top of a water-oak, and the everlasting voice of the sea, that was not uplifted at that soft hour. It broke like a mournful lullaby upon the night" (9). Here, the narrator first notes the unceasing "voice of the sea" that will inspire and eventually seduce Edna. A sharp contrast to the parrot and mocking-bird that drive Mr. Pontellier away, the night sea's song and the uncaged owl's cries seem a welcome and peaceful setting for Edna, evidenced by the narrator's first suggesting there, in fact, "was no sound." Meanwhile,

references to both Edna's rocking in a chair and the sea's "lullaby" connote a mother's care for her infant. The scene provides a foil for the opening in which Edna presents as separate from the noise of domesticated motherhood. Instead, here on the porch, Edna finds comfort in the maternity of nature. She self-soothes through her rocking, and the audible owl and sea invite her to safely have a "good cry" away from her husband (9). During this first emotional scene, Edna "could not have told why she was crying," but the narrator tells us, "An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish" (9). The "vague anguish" Edna feels stands in for emotions and desires for which she does not yet have words; engaging with the semiotic allows Edna's repressed feelings to surface, though she does not yet know how to articulate them and does not need to vocalize them to benefit from their surfacing. At the same time Chopin questions society's idolization of motherhood, then, her portrayal of solace found through a mothering nature reaffirms maternity's veneration.

Several scholars have pointed to scenes such as the one treated above as evidence of Walt Whitman's influence on Chopin's work. In his biography of Chopin, Per Seyersted posits that the author was especially taken with Whitman's work due to his willingness to write openly about sexual desire (89). Later biographer Emily Toth quotes an 1894 *St. Louis Life* article by Sue V. Moore, a friend of Chopin, who reports that Whitman was one of Chopin's most beloved authors. Moore writes that Chopin "always has a copy of his [Whitman's] prose writings, as well as his 'Leaves of Grass,' at hand" (qtd. in Toth 242). Because no records of Chopin's private book collection or public library account remain, anecdotal evidence and her texts' allusions form the only evidence as to the extent of Whitman's influence (Franklin 47). Both the poem "Out of the Cradle" and sections of *Song of Myself* have been suggested as influencing the

depiction of a vocal and maternal sea in *The Awakening*. As Elizabeth Balkman House points out, the ocean serves as just one example of how Chopin pays homage to Whitman through her “repeated juxtapositions of eros, birth, and death” (56).¹⁷ House’s and others’ observations also bring Dunbar-Nelson’s “In Unconsciousness” to mind. Chopin’s description of the sea’s “mournful lullaby” mirrors the language of Dunbar-Nelson’s sketch, in which we saw an ocean with connotations of both life and death. That Dunbar-Nelson’s oceanic imagery was also inspired by Whitman seems likely. Acknowledging Whitman’s influence does not detract from the complex and innovative nature of either woman’s work. Gay Barton, who provides one of the more extensive readings of Chopin’s relationship to Whitman, brings attention to an important distinction between the two writers: while Whitman gave Chopin an example of nonjudgmental literary portrayals of women’s sexuality, he still places undue emphasis on women’s role as mothers. As Barton argues, Whitman’s views were “consistent with the views of most feminist reformers of his time,” whereas Edna’s refusal to play the role of “mother-woman” makes Chopin “a far more radical rebel” than her literary predecessor (9). Thus, even in their depictions of a maternal and ultimately dangerous sea, both Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson bring new meaning to the image through their use of the ocean as means to question compulsory motherhood.

Simultaneously, *The Awakening* portrays obligatory motherhood as toxic *and* demonstrates the cathartic benefits of returning to a maternal space, an idea that would feature prominently in twentieth-century psychiatry and philosophy. At times, Edna does find joy in mothering. After visiting her children during their extended stay with a grandmother in Iberville,

¹⁷ In addition to Whitman, Gilbert points to Algernon Charles Swinburne’s “The Triumph of Time” as an influence for Chopin, most especially because of its speaker’s imagining a suicide similar to Edna’s (61). Gilbert also points to the commonalities between the function of water in *The Awakening* and Emily Dickinson’s depictions of an erotic sea in “Wild Nights—Wild Nights!” (61).

Edna carries their memory home with her: “All along the journey homeward their presence lingered with her like the memory of a delicious song. But by the time she had regained the city the song no longer echoed in her soul. She was again alone” (96). Though motherhood provides Edna with brief feelings of satisfaction, ultimately, she will find that mothering cannot replace her desire to return to a semiotic space. According to the Lacanian theory on which Kristeva bases her work, once children enter the symbolic realm and realize their existence as separate from the mother, they begin to repress a universally felt longing to return to being one with the mother. As literary critic and theorist Toril Moi summarizes, “This first repression is what Lacan calls the primary repression and it is this primary repression that opens up the unconscious” (97). As Freud would most famously suggest, accessing the unconscious allows suppressed memories and feelings to emerge in a cathartic fashion. Thus, the trappings of maternity define the lives of many, as a desire to return to the mother always lurks beneath the surface, promising a liberating release. In the scene analyzed above, Edna flees the domestic sphere, wherein her husband’s expectations for a doting mother constrain her personal freedoms. On the porch, though, Edna receives comfort not only through her own rocking but the sea’s motherly song that allows her to access her unconscious. Chopin allows Edna to return to the role of infant, defined not by her relationship to her husband or children, but by her own subjectivity. The soundscape of the owl and ocean induce the semiotic, a coming back to the womb that momentarily frees Edna from the confines of the symbolic realm which demand she play a prescribed role always already defined in relationship to men, whether it be wife, mother, or, as Yaeger reminds us, adulteress. Early on, then, the text suggests that Edna can be freed from the ties of her own maternity, but only if she returns to a symbolic mother for herself.

Edna and the Benefits of Play

Over the course of *The Awakening*, Edna becomes increasingly aware of painful and conflicting feelings. Chopin writes, “Edna looked straight before her with a self-absorbed expression upon her face. She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vendor, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic” (55). A loss of interest in the world around her, including her own sister’s wedding, and feelings of detachment characterize Edna as experiencing classic symptoms of depression. Her growing ambivalence toward life itself becomes apparent when Chopin writes, “There were days when [Edna] was unhappy, she did not know why,—when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation” (60). The changes in Edna’s personality are recognized by her perturbed husband who notices her failure to comply with the typical lifestyle of a New Orleans society wife. Mr. Pontellier “wonder[s] if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally” and visits Doctor Mandelet for advice (59). Adhering to nineteenth-century medicine, the doctor fails to diagnose Edna as suffering any serious malady and, instead, credits her changing personality to women’s fickleness, pithily advising Mr. Pontellier, “Most women are moody and whimsical” (68). Meanwhile, Edna’s feelings of restlessness and isolation grow. An exploration of Edna’s self-soothing responses to these feelings highlights the human instinct to heal through engaging in play, a practice that goes hand-in-hand with Edna’s therapeutic access of music.

Seeking respite from her depressive moods, Edna instinctively turns to several different forms of play to gain brief feelings of control and joy, among other benefits. In 1938, Johan

Huizinga became a pioneer in play studies with the release of his book *Homo Ludens*, in which he ponders the role of play in society. Huizinga asserts that despite its seeming irrationality at times, “All play means something” (19). For Huizinga, a defining feature of play emerges: play “is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life. It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (26). Repeatedly, Edna “steps out” of her prescribed roles of wife and mother by engaging in playful activities, from art to gambling. In her previously cited reading of *The Awakening*, Gilbert rightly refers to these actions as Edna’s “attempts at revisionary self-definition,” but her Edna-as-Aphrodite analysis does not see them as deserving a more thorough investigation (56). Gilbert writes, “because these entanglements [painting, gambling, friendships] participate in a mutually agreed-upon social reality that gives them ‘realistic’ plausibility as therapeutic possibilities, none is equal to the intensity of what is by now quite clearly Edna’s metaphysical desire” to attain an “extraordinary state” of mythical proportions (56). In contrast, my analysis stays rooted in the realist aspects of Edna’s story, and I argue a more thorough examination of Edna’s play allows us better insight to both Edna’s and today’s world.

First, Edna’s painting speaks to Huizinga’s overview of art’s long association with both imaginative play and high esteem. As later play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith summarizes, modern ideas of art are informed by “romantic theories [that] left the world with an identification between art and play, as both involve the freedom, the autonomy, and the originality of the individual” (133). Through painting, Edna allows herself a sense of independence and personal accomplishment. Instead of engaging in the surrounding society’s expected norms, such as remaining home on Tuesdays to greet any callers, Edna increasingly spends her time as she pleases. “For a time,” Chopin tells us, Edna “had the whole household enrolled in the service of

art. The boys posed for her. They thought it amusing at first, but the occupation soon lost its attractiveness when they discovered it was not a game arranged especially for their entertainment” (59). Playing the role of artist, Edna becomes the subject and her children an object to use in pursuit of her own needs, providing an important contrast to her usual objectification, seen most vividly when Mr. Pontellier “look[s] at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property” (5). As an artist, Edna takes on the power vested in the roles of observer and commenter, contributing to a greater sense of self, a phenomenon seen in contemporary art therapy practices. One article discussing art therapy’s effectiveness in clients with depression reports, “In the experience of professional therapists, art therapy can help clients by promoting personal change, development of identity and self-awareness” (Blomdahl et al. 322). Edna confirms painting provides her with a newfound sense of identity when she tells Mlle. Reisz, “I am becoming an artist” (65). Edna laughs before her declaration and a general air of coyness tints their conversation: “Do you think I could not become an artist?” Edna responds to Mlle. Reisz incredulous response (65). Edna’s increasingly presenting herself as an artist to Mlle. Reisz, Madame Ratignolle, and even her stern father defies Edna’s hasty assertion she is not a painter during a heated argument with Mr. Pontellier (57, 70, 59). Her husband’s complaint that a woman’s time would be better spent “contriving for the comfort of her family” than in an artist’s studio only serves to increase Edna’s interest in painting, a practice that allows her to enjoy an identity as someone other than mother and wife (59). Not only does painting provide Edna with work to fill her days, but it also gives her reason to proudly exhibit her work and enjoy the compliments of viewers such as Madame Ratignolle (97, 57). Without professional assistance, Edna instinctively turns to art as means to combat her depressive symptoms, providing testament to the human psyche’s ability to self-soothe.

Art's stimulation of Edna's creative mind also causes suppressed emotions to surface. While painting, Edna "sometimes sang low the little air, '*Ah! Si tu savais!*,'" a song reminiscent of Robert,¹⁸ and "It moved her with recollections. She could hear again the ripple of the water, the flapping sail" (60). Through stimulating the creative regions of her brain, Edna accesses the semiotic, signified by the remembrance of the ocean's voice. Such an experience speaks to the ideas of "Communication theorists [who] tell us that play is a form of metacommunication far preceding language in evolution because it is also found in animals" (Sutton-Smith 7). Through the playfulness of art, Edna accesses a pre-verbal state and activates thoughts and feelings she has yet to name. As usual, access of this space involves multiple and often conflicting emotions. Edna's inability to articulate the feelings emerging is no wonder due to the confusing entanglement of her simultaneous desires for both attention from Robert and freedom from patriarchal norms.

Edna's emergent ability to name the cause of her dissatisfaction accompanies her pursuit of art. After sharing her work with the kind and cheerful Ratignolles at their home, Edna finds she "felt depressed rather than soothed" because "The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, longing" (58). She does not leave the scene of marital bliss with a desire to revitalize her marriage and achieve a similar relationship; rather, she realizes "It was a not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui" (58). Entering the familiar space of Madame Ratignolle's home as a self-identified artist rather than as a fellow mother and wife for the first time allows Edna the cognitive dissonance needed to fully understand her dissatisfaction with her prescribed lifestyle.

¹⁸ As the Norton critical edition of *The Awakening* notes, the sung phrase translates to "Could Thou But Know," Chopin's own creation and telling verse. Chopin first pairs the song with Robert during the summer on Grand Isle, and its association with him and Edna's increasingly vexed feelings for him are alluded to when Victor sings the song during Edna's dinner party (42, 92).

As she contemplates this newfound realization, Edna reflects on Madame Ratignolle's "never hav[ing] the taste of life's delirium" and then "vaguely wonder[s] what she [Edna] mean[s] by 'life's delirium'" (58). Chopin writes that the phrase "had crossed her thought like some unsought, extraneous impression" and, in this way, demonstrates the surfacing of thoughts Edna remains unable to label within the symbolic (58).

In other, less obvious ways than painting, Edna continues to access the benefits of play, capturing moments of the unbridled excitement and spontaneity suggested in the phrase "life's delirium." After her children have left to visit their grandmother, Edna finds "A feeling that was unfamiliar but very delicious came over her. She walked all through the house, from one room to another, as if inspecting it for the first time" (74). Imaginative exploration gives Edna new eyes through which to see and experience her own home as if it is a new world. Like a child at play, Edna finds a spirit of exploration inspires her "tr[ying] the various chairs and lounges, as if she had never sat and reclined upon them before" and her greeting the "flowers...like new acquaintances" (74). In the words of Huizinga, Edna "steps out" of "real life" through rediscovering her home in the absence of children. This animated spirit continues in the garden, where Edna "stayed, and stooped, digging around the plants, trimming, picking dead, dry leaves" (74). Because Edna's "playing" in the dirt is not necessitated (she does not seem to be solely responsible for the garden, nor does her family rely on the garden for food), through gardening she practices what play theorist Roger Caillois identifies as a "hobby, a secondary and gratuitous activity, undertaken and pursued for pleasure" (32). Edna's privileged socioeconomic status and setting near the end of the nineteenth century makes her a part of the first generations to engage in such play, since, as Caillois suggests, hobbies have only arisen alongside "[i]ndustrial civilization" (32). Hobbies emerged, Caillois argues, out of "the desire for relaxation and the

need, of which man cannot be rid, to utilize purposefully the knowledge, experience, and intelligence at his disposal” (33). Just as Edna’s painting allows her to make meaningful decisions, gardening enables her to attend to the life of the garden, a place where she independently chooses to nurture life. In contrast to the depletion Edna feels when expected to perform her wifely and motherly duties, Edna’s spirits are lifted while she tends to the plants. The narrator tells us Edna’s mood is so elevated that when the “The children’s little dog came out, interfering, getting in her way,” she reacts by not just “scold[ing] him,” but also “laughing” and “playing” with him (74). In uncharacteristic behavior, she “talk[s] intimately to him” about the children and gives him scraps of food at dinner (75). In the children’s absence, their canine companion basks in the attention of a more playful Edna than the children usually enjoy simply because she has been allowed time to play for her own benefit, rather than her children’s. In *The Profession and Practice of Horticulture Therapy*, Rebecca L. Haller and René Malone cite multiple studies showing “Gardening and gardens may be seen as antidotes to the stress of urban environments” and “The psychosocial welfare of urban and rural dwellers seems to be inextricably linked to access to nature, including gardens” (75). More than five hundred studies have demonstrated horticulture’s contribution to improvements in areas such as “muscle strength, flexibility, range of motion, eye-hand coordination, . . . blood pressure, . . . [and] quality of sleep” (Irish and Young 203). Chopin’s description of Edna’s mirthful evening following her exploration of house and garden attests to such findings, as Edna goes to bed and finds “a sense of restfulness invade[s] her, such as she had not known before” (75). As her longing for independence grows, Edna turns to the hobbies of painting and, briefly, gardening as means to experience feelings of happiness, autonomy, and accomplishment.

Another type of play allows Edna much needed exercise for her intellectual abilities. Perhaps nowhere in *The Awakening* is Edna depicted as lively and animated as she is while at the New Louisiana Jockey Club: “The fever of the game flamed in her cheeks and eyes, and it got into her blood and into her brain like an intoxicant” (76). In part, horse races are a uniquely human type of play due to their partial reliance on “a surrender to destiny” (Callilois 18). Instead of relying on one’s own skill, “play as fate,” allows humans to temporarily let go of responsibility for one’s destiny, and instead enjoy the thrill of letting “fate” decide (Sutton-Smith 10). However, as Callilois points out, horse racing combines both luck and skill (18), and Edna has a great deal of the latter. The most successful of betters possess an ability to analyze past outcomes, current track conditions, and even the form of horse and jockey. Because of her childhood spent in Kentucky stables, “There were possibly a few track men out there who knew the race horse as well as Edna, but there was certainly none who knew it better” (76). Displaying her prowess in terms of horse racing offers Edna important mental exercise. Earlier in the novel, Edna’s lack of intellectual stimulation exposes itself when she asks Madame Ratignolle what she is thinking one afternoon and receives the response that “It is really too hot to think, especially to think about thinking” (18). Among mother-women, Edna finds little common ground to discuss, most infamously seen when she and Madame Ratignolle engage in a “heated argument” over the lengths to which they would sacrifice for their children (49). Edna tells her companion, “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn’t give myself” (49). However, the narrator observes, “the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language” (49). At the race track, though, Edna becomes an expert with many eager listeners, as “more than one lent an attentive ear to [Edna’s] utterances, hoping thereby to secure the elusive but ever-desired ‘tip’” (76). At the track, Edna

enjoys an elevated, more traditionally masculine subjectivity through possessing a currency of knowledge. When Chopin tells us that Edna “s[its] between her two companions as one having authority to speak,” she alludes to the power and importance the race track allows Edna to experience (76). Through different forms of play, Edna accesses emotions she finds missing in the role of “mother-woman,” but nothing matches the level of excitement she enjoys through music.

Edna and the Therapeutics of Music

Early passages in *The Awakening* show the sonorous sea initiating Edna’s access of an “unfamiliar part of her consciousness,” while later scenes concentrate on her imaginative interactions with human-made music (9). Before Edna hears Mademoiselle Reisz play for the first time, we are told of Edna’s “fond[ness] of music” and that “Musical strains, well rendered, had a way of evoking pictures in her mind” (28). Edna appreciates the effects of music so much, she “sometimes liked to sit in the room of mornings when Madame Ratignolle played or practiced” (28). Edna’s enjoyment is not odd or surprising, but her vibrant imagination serves as another marker of her difference from the circle of “mother-wom[en]” whose imaginings appear consistently tied to their children (11). For example, Edna “could not see the use of” Madame Ratignolle’s “making winter night garments [for the children] the subject of her summer meditations,” as they sharply contrast Edna’s more self-interested summer activities of learning to swim and flirting with Robert (11). Edna’s active mind established at this point, Chopin further stresses Edna’s imaginative tendencies through sharing an image brought to Edna’s mind by Ratignolle’s performance. Chopin writes:

One piece which [Ratignolle] played Edna had entitled ‘Solitude.’ It was a short, plaintive, minor strain. The name of the piece was something else, but she called it

‘Solitude.’ When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him. (29).

Here, Edna’s invented scene does more than foreshadow her own undressing before her final walk into the water. Chopin demonstrates a clear belief in the ability of repressed emotions to surface through dreams and imagined images, a nod to a rising interest in the unconscious even though Sigmund Freud’s theories would not reach the U.S. for a few more years. Readers easily see Edna’s own feelings of unhappiness and isolation reflected in the image, though this information comes multiple chapters before Edna will begin to verbalize her emotions. The obvious foreshadowing here makes the passage an oft cited one, but it also stands out due to Edna’s invented title of “Solitude,” which brings Chopin’s original title for the novel to mind: “The Solitary Soul” (Franklin 47). For Chopin, then, this scene undoubtedly merited emphasis, and to focus on the scene evoked and not *how* or *why* the scene is evoked overlooks Chopin’s interest in how music influences its listeners.

Chopin’s personal and early writings establish her nearly lifelong interest in music’s emotional effects. Discussing an adolescent Chopin’s writings, Toth claims, “Kate seemed truly interested only when she wrote about music: Already she was struggling to describe the ineffable and overwhelming emotional effect of music on susceptible minds” (84). Chopin’s was certainly one of those “susceptible minds.” Passages from her commonplace book include a late 1860s description of:

the harmony of that wondrous “Miserera,” now, now stealing forth from the darkness like the first wail of a broken heart, growing fainter and fainter till it dies away in silence as if

the grief were too great for the strain; then leaping forth, not like the voice of the song, but of agony—floating and swelling with irresistable [sic] power till it sinks again into the low broken tones of intense anguish. (qtd. in Toth 80)

Toth describes Chopin as “preoccupied with death” by this time in her life, having lost her father at the age of five and her brother during the recently ended Civil War (79). I posit the above passage documents Chopin’s own therapeutic interaction with music in the face of loss and her early creative interest in merging music with oceanic and death imagery. Possibly already influenced by Whitman, she describes the song as “floating” and “sink[ing]” amid the harkening of sorrowful emotions. Reflecting on the melody heard and describing the passions conveyed allows Chopin the cathartic act of identifying emotional responses without ever claiming them as her own. Chopin feels and names the emotions that sweep over her, coming and going like an ocean’s wave. Such a practice, sometimes referred to as mindfulness of emotions today, encourages the feeling of difficult emotions without judgment or suppression, an approach important for its refusal to suppress certain memories or feelings simply because of their discomforting nature. This personal passage from Chopin strongly suggests she bases Edna’s experiences with sound on her own relationship with music and its emotional effects.

Chopin’s attention to Edna’s imaginative listening habits also anticipates music therapy interventions that were not yet common practice when she wrote *The Awakening*. Over forty years later, however, World War II’s devastation would see the U.S. Army establish the first musical programming to “systematically implement and evaluate music to boost morale and, subsequently, to improve health outcomes,” marking the first major step towards a professionalization of music therapy in the United States (Byers 17). One method of music therapy implemented by the army involved listening to music, which may seem a simple, passive

act at first. But, as Temple University Professor Emeritus of Music Therapy Kenneth Bruscia writes, listening activities guided by trained professionals can “bring[] a person new levels of consciousness about oneself, one’s life, and one’s universe” (Note 13). Music therapy interventions are often used as part of or in addition to other forms of therapy, such as psychoanalysis. “Projective listening,” for example, involves a therapist playing music for a patient encouraged to “react...imaginatively” (Bruscia Note 1). As these reactions may include free association, such an intervention invites the client and therapist to explore the meaning behind images and feelings brought to the surface by music. Through such a lens, Edna’s picturing the lone man on a beach as a direct result of Madame Ratignolle’s playing suggests Chopin’s belief in repressed feelings rising from the unconscious, as well as music’s ability to summon such emotions to the surface. Such a practice benefits clients of music therapists trained to help in productively interpreting images called to mind.

Reading Edna’s experiences listening to Madame Ratignolle’s music through the lens of both play theory and music therapy offers a glimpse as to how and why humans instinctively engage in therapeutic acts. Music’s function within human society, Huizinga suggests, resembles that of play; both phenomena, according to Huizinga, “lie[] outside the reasonableness of practical life; ha[ve] nothing to do with necessity, or utility, duty or truth” (182). Similarly, poetry serves a primarily playful function for humans, and Huizinga finds commonality in that “rhythm and harmony are factors” of music, play, and poetry (182). In comparison to poetry, though, only music “never leaves the play-sphere” (Huizinga 182). This is even more so the case for dance, which Huizinga labels “the purest and most perfect form of play that exists” (189). For Huizinga, play, music, and dance all figure as integral to the human experience due to their

respective abilities to offer meaning in the absence of language, which I suggest is another way of saying they rely on the semiotic.

Over thirty years later, music therapist David Aldridge turns to similar reasoning to explain the therapeutic effects of music on the body in his book *Music Therapy Research and Practice in Medicine*. Now best known for his work on music therapy in relation to dementia and palliative care, Aldridge entered the field after observing a young woman with mental and physical disabilities sing. The usually non-verbal woman went from making only “high-pitched shrieks and wails” to “improvising a duet” with a music therapist (Aldridge 2). Stunned, Aldridge felt he “was witnessing an intense form of human communication” and set out to establish protocols for creating empirical research studies that would persuade physicians to understand “there is healing in making music” (2). For Aldridge, music’s ability to help assess and regulate biological functions rests, at least partially, in its inherent tie to rhythm. Reminiscent of Gilboa’s claim the mother’s heartbeat and other sounds of the womb provide the “building blocks of music” (252), Aldridge writes, “musical components are the fundamentals of communication” and “rhythm, in particular, is the primary aspect of communication in which we relate to ourselves and to others” (51). Like Huizinga, Aldridge locates the source of music’s restorative capabilities in its relationship to non-verbal communication. For Aldridge, “movement, interval, and time” are “the very essences of music and of biological function”; people are not “composed” simply of “bones and blood” but are “musical beings in regard to relationship patterns, rhythms, and melodic contours” (27). When a person’s musical order becomes compromised, so, too, does their total health. In comparison to popular medicine’s “current unilateral exhortations to follow expert health care prescriptions based on warnings and denial,” Aldridge’s work suggests that encouraging individual and public engagement with

music could prove a more practical and positive campaign for optimizing health (283). Aldridge concludes his book with these thoughts:

Optimism and a sensual pleasure in everyday activities and situations are valuable for promoting personal health.... Music has a vast potential for pleasure. Music is to be played. Play can be serious business, as any child will remind us. Perhaps as adults, too, we can be reminded that play is not a trivial activity, and a little bit of fun is a powerful medicine....How our lives are performed is a serious activity, and music therapy is an important healing activity through which our futures can be orchestrated. (283)

Aldridge's theories expose Edna's playful activity and imaginative listening throughout *The Awakening* as self-preservation enabled by the medicine of enjoyment. Even without the assumption musically conjured images illicit pleasure for Edna, theories such as Huizinga's and Aldridge's encourage a reading of Edna's listening habits as emotionally and physically restorative activities.

Chopin's writing at the end of the nineteenth century, a period when Romantic music flourished, provides further reasoning for her view of music as tied to elevated imagination and powerful emotions. In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith explains that during this period, "play was potentially dignified for the first time in Western civilization" thanks to a belief "play [was] essential to the aesthetic," and, thus, "moral" (Sutton-Smith 129). Like her representation of a growing class of hobby gardeners, Edna's listening habits also exemplify a time when play was just beginning to achieve attention as a worthwhile pursuit. At least one literary critic has previously noted the Romantic period's emphasis on expression through art as influential for Chopin. In his analysis of "Music as a Motif in *The Awakening*," Howton describes how the composers Mlle Reisz plays, such as Frédéric Chopin and Richard Wagner, wrote with "a

concern for affecting the primal emotions that underlie human nature” (195). As Howton points out, the Ratignolles’ *soirées musicales* represent a trend of musical listening within Romantic salons. Howton suggests, though, that such events were contradictory: while the most “sophisticated” of Romantics sought an emotional listening experience, public performances made such personal reflection and catharsis hard to come by (195). Chopin demonstrates the cultural trend’s ubiquity when Robert writes a letter to Mlle Reisz asking her to play Edna a certain piece because he “should like to know how it affects her” (65). In contrast to social gatherings centered on music, Mlle Reisz provides a more private, introspective, and productive atmosphere for listening to music and, thus, serves as “a guide to Edna’s awakening, leading her through a labyrinth of ideas and emotions and warning her of the dangers within it” (Howton 197). Howton’s article further highlights Chopin’s musical knowledge as the author analyzes how Mlle Reisz masterfully weaves together fitting compositions for the emotions Edna experiences. For example, Mlle Reisz plays Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, an opera based on the classic tale of the two ill-fated lovers for which the piece is named (Howton 199). In this way, Mlle Reisz serves as an amateur counselor for Edna, as she engages in a process similar to how modern-day music therapists prepare musical selections for a session with each client’s background, interests, and symptoms in mind.

Romanticism’s high esteem for music and the imagination carries over into contemporary music therapy interventions and elucidates Mlle Reisz’s counseling and encouragement of Edna’s playfulness. In 2017, after their work with female survivors of military sexual trauma, music therapists Story and Beck proposed a best-methods approach for working with traumatized clients. Their method involves helping clients identify their own inner-resources of resilience and positivity, signified through the images evoked while listening to music (94). For psychotherapist

and music therapist Gabriella Giordanella Perilli, such a practice enables clients to “integrate cognitive and affective components,” a vital step on the pathway to improved self-worth and increased ability to interact with others productively (398). Importantly, not all of Madame Ratignolle’s songs elicit sad or uncomfortable images for Edna. Chopin writes, “Another piece called to her mind a dainty young woman clad in an Empire gown, taking mincing dancing steps as she came down a long avenue between tall hedges. Again, another reminded her of children at play, and still another of nothing on earth but a demure lady stroking a cat” (28). The details of these three images are sparse and they lack outright emotion in comparison to Edna’s associations with “Solitude.” Combined, a simple psychoanalytic reading of these images confirm Edna’s preoccupation with the trappings of woman- and mother-hood. Had Edna reflected more deeply on the images summoned by Madame Ratignolle’s music, she may have sooner named her longing for an escape from set paths, inspired by the “young woman” walking between “tall hedges” (28). She may have recognized the playfulness reflected in both the images of “children at play,” inspired by music and the sensations of joy elicited through her own play. Tragically, Edna’s eventual suicide serves as her only escape route from a patriarchal society that will always cast her as man’s subservient “Other,” but her experiences with hobbies and music remind us that play remains a beneficial coping mechanism in the daily struggle against oppressive systems.

Nineteenth-century philosophy also helps explain Edna’s interactions with music. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche pulls from Greek mythology in order to symbolize and probe what he sees as a perpetual struggle between two opposing forces, or drives (a word predicting Nietzsche’s influence on Freud’s theories) characterizing the human

experience¹⁹. The Apollonian drive represents an orderly and calm interaction with beauty; Nietzsche writes, Apollo serves as “master of the beautiful appearance of the inner world of the imagination” (21). Conversely, Dionysus represents a complete surrender to the pleasure beauty provides us in its many forms, an effect Nietzsche uses “the analogy of intoxication” to portray (22). Nietzsche explains that “Either under the influence of the narcotic drink of which all original men and peoples sing in hymns, or in the approach of spring which forcefully and pleasurably courses through the whole of nature, those Dionysian impulses awaken, which in their heightened forms cause the subjective to dwindle to complete self-oblivion” (22). Here, the alignment of the Dionysian with the consumption of an intoxicant brings to mind Edna’s realization that Madame Ratignolle has never had a “taste of life’s delirium,” and recalls Huizinga’s understanding of play as that which allows us to “step[] out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” as well as Dunbar-Nelson’s maiden emerging from the effects of chloroform (Chopin 58, Huizinga 26). Chopin, Huizinga, and Nietzsche all depict the arts as aiding a human desire to escape the mundane nature of everyday life through imaginative play.

¹⁹ One of the smaller trends found in Chopin criticism tends to see the author as influenced in varying degrees by philosopher Nietzsche, who was greatly inspired himself by Wagner’s music. Prompted by a “pattern of scholarly reticence when it comes to making too direct a connection between [the two authors],” Patricia L. Bradley addresses this pattern directly in her article “*The Birth of Tragedy and The Awakening: Influences and Intertextualities.*” Bradley first argues that both Chopin’s membership in a German reading club and her friendship with Austrian physician Frederick Kolbenheyer mark Chopin as likely to have been inspired by *The Birth of Tragedy and The Spirit of Music* (1872). However, Bradley ultimately persuades readers that intertextuality, not influence, matters most. To become fixed on matters of influence rather than intertextuality, Bradley suggests, is to remain locked in “limiting and patriarchal” arguments (54). Even if Chopin were not familiar with Nietzsche’s philosophy through a direct reading of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Bradley asserts Chopin would know through experience “the tensions unique to an artistic woman,” which would include an awareness of the conflict central to Nietzsche’s philosophy of music (45). Ultimately, the worth of arguing to what extent aspects of Chopin’s work were inspired by Nietzsche (or Whitman for that matter) pales in comparison to the reward found when we choose to inspect their respective work for variations on the common themes uniting these thinkers.

The argument that Edna accesses the semiotic through the pleasures of art and play finds support in Nietzsche's claim that giving into the Dionysian leads to a loss of subjectivity, an assertion reminiscent of the semiotic's sensations of oneness and fluidity. Nietzsche's assertion that "In the Dionysian dithyramb, all the symbolic faculties of man are stimulated to the highest pitch of intensity; something never before experienced struggles toward expression" further supports an understanding of the Dionysian as the drive to connect to the semiotic (26). To indulge the Dionysian effect of art, especially music, is to let go of a desire to express one's meaning with language. Instead, a giving over to the passions and expression of self through other, less structured and formalized means, becomes permissible. Finally, Nietzsche's pointing to the breaking of sexual taboos as part of "Dionysian festivities" seen across varied cultures further characterizes Edna's delving into the world of music, art, and sexuality as a giving over to the Dionysian drive.

Once Edna hears Mademoiselle Reisz play for the first time, she finds not all music brings images to her mind and begins a more intensive exploration of her unconscious aided by music's semiotic character. As Mlle Reisz plays, Edna "saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her" (28). Edna's inability to visualize scenes or articulate emotions at this and later instances when Mademoiselle Reisz performs demonstrate music's ability to connect us to a semiotic space—one absent of structural symbolism and reliant on sensations conveyed through sound and movement alone. Patricia L. Bradley, too, notices this shift, suggesting Edna has moved from the more ordered Apollonian relationship with music, characterized by Edna's ability to name images brought to mind, to a Dionysian experience dependent on feelings

incapable of being expressed through symbolic language (50). Chopin purposely brings attention to this change, portraying the inability to express her emotions in words as a positive development: the narrator suggests that maybe it was “the first time [Edna’s] being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth” (28). Here, with her optimistic reference to a “truth” discovered, Chopin proposes Edna has made progress in the transition from seeing her emotions reflected in imagined scenes to experiencing those emotions for herself (28). When the “very first chords...sen[d] a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier’s spinal column,” Chopin suggests music and its stimulation of emotion allows Edna a connection to her physicality; instead of being a numbed body to be possessed by men, she begins to mindfully inhabit her body, a process buoyed by her swimming lessons and ultimately leading to her intimate encounters with men other than her husband.

Beyond understanding Edna’s increasingly intense explorations of music and art as a signal of her giving over to the Dionysian, Nietzsche’s theories help explain why the protagonist finds herself sleeping with not her initial love interest Robert, but known philanderer Alcée Arobin. Bradley reads the brothers Robert and Victor as symbolic of Apollo and Dionysius. While Bradley reads Robert as associated with the sun (his name means “bright” and Edna met him in the summer) like “the “deity of light” Apollo, Victor’s imaginative indulgence at Edna’s dinner party label him as like Dionysius (Nietzsche qtd. in Bradley 46). Near the end of the novel, Edna realizes Robert is too closely tied to a patriarchal ordering of the world when he expresses hope Léonce might “free” Edna to become his (Chopin 109). Presumably Victor, who runs in the same social circle as Robert and is rumored to have slept with the brown-skinned Marquette (a move deemed socially acceptable in New Orleans society, where married men often attended quadroon balls), also prescribes to a similar view of women as property to be won and

used. Victor's humming the "Si tu savais" tune associated with Robert and consequentially upsetting Edna at her dinner party symbolizes the similarity of the brothers' minds and behavior, as well as Edna's growing realization that the two men exist in a societal structure she can no longer abide (Chopin 92). In comparison, Alcée offers Edna a greater opportunity to truly experience a falling away from her normal life in favor of resisting the patriarchal systems of marriage. Though still occupying what Yeager argues is a prescribed role of "adulterous woman," sleeping with Alcée allows Edna the beneficial ability to explore sex as a playful and pleasurable act with a man she can be sure will make no attempt to name her his own due to his well-known reputation as a philanderer. Alcée exists outside of the socially acceptable roles predefined and available to him, making him more attractive to Edna. Still, by the time she walks to the sea for a final time, Edna has realized a day will come when she would tire of any romantic interest or sexual partner, as she longs most for independence and autonomy (Chopin 115).

Like Edna, many music therapy clients find expressing their reactions to music difficult when initially engaging with a therapist. One of the thousands of soldiers participating in the Army Rehabilitation Program serves as an excellent example. A "listless 30-year-old lieutenant who had endured two years of active combat in the Pacific" began sessions with a musician in order to help with depression, anxiety, and obsessive "recollections of combat" (Rorke 205). Not until the "fourth or fifth music session" did he begin to talk, declaring, "I'm so mixed up" (Rorke 205). From there, listening and responding to music from his pre-combat days aided the man's ability to latch onto feelings of positivity and hope, creating a desire to return home once more (Rorke 205).

Today, trained music therapists continue assisting clients in vocalizing difficult and conflicting emotions, practicing responding to such emotions with more positive and healthy attitudes. In this way, music helps bring a sense of order and control to a patient's life via the practice of verbalizing what was once only felt—a move from the semiotic to the symbolic. Though Edna has no therapist to help her name and discuss the emotions music provokes, she does seek out music to stimulate her creativity. When she finds herself in a depressed mood—the one which incites her existential comparison of “humanity...to worms struggling blinding toward inevitable annihilation”—she “hunt[s] up Mademoiselle Reisz” because she “felt a desire...above all, to listen while she played upon the piano” (60). Later, “The despondent frame of mind in which [Edna] had left home began again to overtake her, and she remembered that she wished to find Mademoiselle Reisz” (Chopin 63). When Edna does arrive at Mlle Reisz's, the pianist shares the letter from Robert with her and begins to play an improvised “soft interlude” that gives way to the requested “Chopin Impromptu” (66). Mlle Reisz artfully transitions into the “love-notes of Isolde's song and back again to the Impromptu with its soulful and poignant longing” (66). Meanwhile, Edna listens, Robert's letter in hand, until she is “sobbing, just as she had wept one midnight at Grand Isle when strange, new voices awoke in her” (66). These “strange” voices represent the suppressed emotions emerging via music's tapping into the semiotic. As Edna listens to the “turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty” music, she engages with the passionate yet painful emotions Robert's letter arouses (66). Despite having been brought to forceful tears by Mlle Reisz's playing, Edna tellingly asks if she may return another day. Lacking a place where she can freely express her growing desires for Robert and self-sufficiency, Edna realizes the incredibly beneficial nature of musically aided catharsis.

Like the parrot and mocking-bird of *The Awakening*'s opening paragraphs, Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz seem to understand one another. Edna adores the unmarried woman's musical abilities and Mademoiselle Reisz admires Edna's honesty. Chopin brings attention to the therapeutic nature of Edna's visits to Mlle Reisz when she writes, "There was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna's senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. It was then...that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free" (81). Undeniably, the text acknowledges music's ability to affect emotions and suggests that *who* plays the music matters. In contrast to Madame Ratignolle, Mlle Reisz supports Edna's emotional exploration through collaborative reflection. Professional music therapists not only create safe spaces for their clients, but they are also careful to read and respond to clients' reactions and progression. Like any trained counselor, Mlle Reisz presents Edna with questions to explore: "Are you in love with Robert?", "Why do you love him when you ought not to?", "What will you do when he comes back?", she asks during one session (83). Here, I read Mlle Reisz's suggestion Edna "ought not to" love Robert not as condemnation, but as an acknowledgment of the societal pressures Edna finds herself confronting. As an unmarried and artistic woman herself, Mlle Reisz knows what it means to resist societal pressures. She is not judging Edna but offering her language to express the conflict she faces and fears to name or explore. Edna confides in Arobin that Mlle Reisz expresses ideas "you find yourself thinking about afterward" (85). In this way, Mlle Reisz's homespun music therapy sessions encourage Edna's increasing introspection.

While the bulk of my argument rests on the realism in Chopin's portrayal of the therapeutic nature of music that ultimately fails to save Edna, I read *The Awakening*'s conclusion as suggesting sound allows for a metaphorical return to the comfort of a universal mother figure. The evening before Edna's suicide, she visits the bedside of Madame Ratignolle as she

experiences the “sufferings” and “agonizing moments” of childbirth, creating a telling connection between the pangs of motherhood and Edna’s fateful decision (111). During the night, “Despondency... come[s] upon” Edna and she returns to Grand Isle. Chopin’s narration reveals Edna has come to the realization that one day Robert, too, would “melt out of her existence” and no longer bring her excitement (115). Though “The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her,” the narrator insists Edna “was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach” (115). Instead, Edna’s senses demand all her attention. “The voice of the sea” calls out to her and she relishes the “delicious” sensation of standing naked before the ocean (116). The attention to sonic and tactile imagery instead of coherent, verbalized thoughts initiates Edna’s return to the womb. As she swims out, she thinks of the family she leaves behind and Chopin’s final references to sound nod to the semiotic: just as Gilbert sees Edna swimming back into her childhood, I recognize her swimming back towards the womb.

Edna’s final moments are most associated with the sounds of her childhood, characterizing the soundscape as different from those she has encountered throughout the text. Chopin describes a blending of noise: “Edna heard her father’s voice and her sister Margaret’s. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air” (116). Here, Chopin’s syntax becomes relatively simple, mirroring Edna’s growing exhaustion. Edna’s immersion in the ocean allows her to recall the sounds and smells of her youth, a time filled with play, possibility, and an innocence she can never fully recover having now identified her subject position in a patriarchal world. The reference to the cavalry officer provides a final nod to phallogocentric order, and Edna swims past the voices of her

father and sister, seeking a mother. The pleasant connotations of humming clash with those of “barking” and “clanging”— a mix of sounds without a visible source, just as a fetus experiences the world. These remembered sounds contrast with the music of Mlle Reisz’s piano in that they emerge from Edna’s own mind and follow no pre-determined tempo, signaling her final attainment of independence from society. In contrast to the scene in which Edna sobs to the sound of Chopin’s Impromptu for the sake of Robert’s curiosity, Edna’s body alone supplies the sonic soundscape of her death. The final references to bees and flowers also align with Edna’s return to a more natural and animalistic world, absent of symbolic language. Like other Chopin heroines, Edna dies because death offers her only possible escape from the trappings of a patriarchal society. Music, in multiple forms, assists Edna in her journey toward a separate identity from her husband and children but ultimately fails to save her from death. Paradoxically, she returns to the shelter of nature’s womb while simultaneously robbing her own children of a mother’s comfort. Edna, then, remains a fitting symbol of woman’s positionality in a society that persists in its concurrent praise and punishment of the female body’s reproductive abilities.

Conclusion

Dunbar-Nelson’s and Chopin’s respective portrayals of music as connected to the unconscious and emotions evidence the ways in which the humanities affirm societal beliefs long before formal science allows. In *Violets and Other Tales*, Dunbar-Nelson demonstrates a prescient awareness of Western society’s twentieth-century fascination with meaningful images summoned during unconsciousness. The same increasing interest in psychology characterizes Chopin’s *The Awakening*. Together, these works beg us to examine our own relationships with music, as well as our conceptions of motherhood. Throughout the twentieth century, southern authors will repeatedly depict characters instinctively turning to music in the face of tragedy.

Multiple ideas discussed in this chapter—including the concepts of othermothering and play’s connection to music—will also feature in the analysis of works examined in the chapters ahead.

In the next chapter, works written by two women in the late 1900s will use sonic and maternal imagery to comment on the misogyny, racism, and violence still defining America a century after Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin wrote.

CHAPTER THREE

SINGING TO SURVIVE: THE THERAPEUTICS OF MUSIC IN DOROTHY ALLISON'S
BASTARD OUT OF CAROLINA AND ELLEN DOUGLAS'S *CAN'T QUIT YOU, BABY*

Though documentation of music's cathartic impact dates back to ancient Greece, scientific explanations for music's relationship to our emotions continue to elude modern researchers²⁰. At MIT, neuroscientists work to understand how the brain recognizes and responds to music versus other sounds (Angier). In Montreal, research at McGill University shows listeners register music recorded by live artists as more "emotional" than that created by computers (Bhatara et al. 932). Meanwhile, music therapists from Beth Israel Medical Center conclude premature babies eat more and grow stronger when they hear personalized lullabies played in-person rather than recorded generic lullabies, suggesting that music does not only aid in emotional release but also in physical health (Loewy et al. 909). Longtime music lovers do not need scientific proof to know melodies can affect our minds and bodies; however, increased interest in the science behind the therapeutics of music promises to bring improved healing to those who suffer emotional and physical distress.

In the following chapter, I argue two late twentieth-century novels—Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) and Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby* (1988)—confirm awareness of the extent to which music offers restoration to survivors of both emotional and physical trauma. Bone and Tweet, Allison and Douglas's respective

²⁰ An earlier version of this chapter appears as the article "Rocking and Humming to 'a prayer in the dark': The Therapeutics of Music in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*" in *South Atlantic Review*'s vol. 82, no. 2, (Summer 2017), pp. 117-135.

protagonists, represent a southern imagination steeped in respect for music's role in survival, healing, and intimacy—a continuation of a motif explored by earlier southern women writers. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how late-nineteenth-century writers Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar Nelson prefigure a Kristevan understanding of the semiotic through their psychologically compelling depictions of motherhood and music. Here, I argue that both Allison and Douglas, writing a century after their foremothers, use their respective novels to delve deeper into the relationship between music and areas of the brain where language alone fails to penetrate. The years separating Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson from Allison and Douglas saw the rise of modern psychology and an increasingly connected, literate American society that allowed for the theories of Freud and other psychoanalysts to spread widely. As Lisa Hinrichsen points out, interest in the psychology of trauma increased dramatically after the American Psychiatric Association officially recognized PTSD as a clinical diagnosis in 1980, a move motivated by lobbying Vietnam War veterans. It is within this context—an American society increasingly concerned with trauma's long-term effects on the psyche and the possibilities of recovery—that Allison and Douglas pen their stories. Against this backdrop, the authors' telling stories of how their respective protagonists face and process trauma becomes a third-wave feminist project as they bring attention to trauma's occurrence far from the masculine site of war. At the same time, Allison's and Douglas's choice to give music a meaningful role in their characters' stories suggests a simultaneous look backward to motifs of their literary predecessors' stories and forward to findings of neuroscience's music-based studies.

Those studies touting the power of live music and personalized lullabies mentioned above suggest that *who* sings *what* matters. Today's professional music therapists remain cognizant of this concept, and Bone and Tweet's respective stories further support this deeply held tenet, as

their respective creators depict them engaging in meaningful actions and conversations as a result of their responses to music. Facing the neglect or absence of their biological mothers, Bone and Tweet find surrogate caregivers in the form of close relatives who also take on the role of musical mentors. Bone finds a musical role model in her Aunt Ruth, and Tweet learns music's therapeutic powers from her grandfather. Both protagonists turn to music in the face of trauma during their narratives and eventually harness music as an alternative to language as means to facilitate difficult relationships and conversations with other women. When read together, *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Can't Quit You, Baby* prove music's worth as more than a cultural artifact, inviting nuanced explorations into music's role in both our day-to-day lives and our most climactic moments.

Aside from their surrogate caregivers, survival of trauma, and relationships with music, Bone and Tweet share several other characteristics. Both hail from southern states: Bone from South Carolina and Tweet from Mississippi. Both have living but largely neglectful or absent mothers and antagonistic father figures. Both, too, are marginalized figures: Bone comes from a poverty-stricken "white trash" family and Tweet grows up black in the Jim Crow south. The differences between the two should be noted, though: Bone not only benefits from her status as white, but also from an extended family that offers her multiple points of refuge, a luxury Tweet does not enjoy as a child.

Narrative-wise, Bone and Tweet are quite distinct. *Bastard Out of Carolina* tells the story of a few years during Bone's childhood through a first-person narrative. Tweet is one of two protagonists in *Can't Quit You, Baby* and it is through her dialogue with white employer Cornelia that we hear stories of her childhood. We learn more about Tweet from a third-person narrator who paints a portrait of the character as a middle-aged

woman. Despite these differences in form, the overarching similarity cannot be denied: both women use music as a life-sustaining force in the face of devastating circumstances. Whereas we see music punctuating the bleak start to Bone's life, we witness music aiding recovery in a much older Tweet, providing a hopeful outlook for Bone and other survivors of the most heinous traumas.

Rocking and Humming to “a prayer in the dark”: The Therapeutics of Music in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*

Many readings of Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* center on the trauma experienced by its young protagonist, Bone Boatwright, and how she manages to survive her painful childhood marked by sexual violence. Critics often note Bone’s narration of masturbatory fantasies and gruesome stories as means to achieve some mitigation of pain. Both Natalie Carter and Mélanie Grué explore Bone’s use of narration to create a sense of control despite her inability to escape or overpower her abuser. Following the example set by Laurie Vickroy’s *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Carter and Grué both ground their readings of Bone’s narratology in Suzette Henke’s theory of scriptotherapy, which maintains that writing through one’s traumatic experiences can lead to a sense of empowerment. More recently, Jolene Hubbs explores how Bone employs her imagination to envision longed-for foods to survive intense hunger. Such readings provide insight into various coping devices Bone employs throughout Allison’s text, but my work highlights an overlooked therapeutic tool Bone also utilizes: music.

Several critics discuss Bone’s relationship with song, but Courtney George offers the most comprehensive reading of the work’s musical content as she points to the power of both gospel and country music to offer Bone some form of salvation. Through examining the history

and community associated with each of the two genres, George demonstrates how “music acts not only as a space to reflect on the trauma of childhood abuse but also as a site to criticize and revise the exclusivity of an imagined southern community dependent on the hierarchies of race, class, and gender” (“It Wasn’t” 127). More specifically, through a close reading informed by the biographies and discographies of Kitty Wells and Patsy Cline—two artists Bone mentions repeatedly—George reveals that Allison provides commentary on the sociocultural forces surrounding music’s production and reception. George contends that Allison’s allusions to certain songs by Wells and Cline allow Bone to realize “women are damned not only by the constructions men create for them, but also by women’s complicity in this constructed patriarchy”—a statement suggestive of the inescapable truths leading Edna Pontellier to suicide (144). Such a reading of Bone’s ability to recognize and, on some level, talk back to the very systems that oppress her provides an example of how an exploration of the intertextuality between music and literature allows for insightful readings. While Bone’s relationship with music receives excellent treatment from George, my analysis differs from hers in its focus on Bone’s use of music as a therapeutic resource rather than as means of subversion and response to sociocultural forces.

One benefit of music therapy is its ability to be used with a wide range of patients; in contrast to talk and other therapies, music therapy can be used with patients as disparate as newborn infants and elderly Alzheimer’s patients²¹. The optional nature of language during sessions makes music therapy particularly well suited for victims of

²¹Much has been written about the use of music therapy with each of these age groups. For the sake of brevity, I point to two books as evidence: Monika Nöcker-Ribaupierre’s *Music Therapy for Premature and Newborn Infants* and Kenneth E. Bruscia’s *Case Examples of Music Therapy for Alzheimer’s Disease*.

childhood sexual abuse, a trauma intrinsically tied to the silencing of its victims. Music therapist Gitta Strehlow reports, “One of the typical characteristics of an early traumatic experience is the inability to deal with the overall experience and to find words to describe it” and “[m]usic therapy with its specific way of communication offers a way out of silence” for victims (168). Understanding the “how” and “why” behind the brain’s processing of music has necessitated decades of research, but the recognition of music’s emotional and physical effects enables survivors of sexual assault to access therapeutic benefits today.

By focusing on music specifically as a therapeutic device and an important method through which Bone practices self-care, *Bastard Out of Carolina* becomes a testament to not only the power of music but also the resourcefulness of the human psyche among survivors of childhood trauma. For my reading of the novel, I first apply positive psychology, play theory, and music therapy concepts to scenes from Allison’s text to show how Bone utilizes music to survive an abusive environment. Next, I look specifically at the character of Aunt Ruth and her role as a guide for Bone in the process of using music as a tool for empowerment and healing. Finally, I demonstrate how *Bastard Out of Carolina* materializes as a narrative which reveals music’s unique ability to give trauma victims access to the Kristevan notion of the semiotic, an impossible feat for Bone’s scriptotherapy alone.

Bone’s Use of Positive Psychology and Music

Growing up in the Greenville, South Carolina, of the 1950s, Bone lives in a time before clinical music therapy would have existed within the culture that surrounds her. Even if music therapy were available, Bone’s socioeconomic status and unstable support systems would render such a service inaccessible. For contemporary music therapists, Allison’s text, especially due to its semi-autobiographical nature, testifies to the ways in which individuals have utilized music

therapeutically for centuries, while also demonstrating how a professionally trained therapist might allow children such as Bone to make greater strides in their reflection and recovery.

Musicology professor Even Ruud promotes therapists understanding the ways individual patients can use musical identities to foster self-empowerment, often implementing positive psychology. “One of the most promising recent ideas within the tradition of positive psychology,” Ruud argues, comes through social psychologist B. L. Fredrickson’s research on the impact of positive emotions on overall health (92). Ruud explains that the positive emotions Fredrickson emphasizes are also crucial in music appreciation: “joy,” “interest,” and “contentment” (92–93). Fredrickson suggests that repeatedly accessing these emotions “can optimize health, subjective well-being, and psychological resilience” (2). These three core emotions are apparent throughout Bone’s interactions with music, and, by repeatedly tapping into them, Bone benefits from positive psychology.

The joy that Bone finds in music surfaces most clearly in the gospel music heard throughout *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Fredrickson describes joy as an eagerness to participate in happiness-inducing activities, and Bone’s enthusiasm heightens while she listens to the sounds emerging from a revival tent one evening (Fredrickson 4). Describing the music as “a river trying to wash [Bone] clean,” Allison not only alludes to baptism but also purposefully chooses to describe music as a force, as it takes the form of a “river,” a strong, moving body of water that sweeps Bone away (136). Bone’s willingness to be carried away by “whatever interaction presents itself” informs her proclamation, “Aunt Alma swore all gospel singers were drunks, but right then it didn’t

matter to me. If it was whiskey backstage or tongue-kissing in the dressing room, whatever it took to make that juice was necessary, was fine” (136). Music’s ability to activate joy is so potent that the recently converted Bone, who wishes at other times “to save [her] poor uncles from their heathen ways” of drinking and fighting, finds no problem accepting such debauchery if it will mean more enjoyment through gospel music (149).

However, Fredrickson understands joy as more than mere enjoyment; she defines spontaneity and “the urge to play . . . encompassing not only physical and social play, but also intellectual and artistic play” as key aspects of joy (4). In contrast to the scenes featuring Bone and gospel music, Bone’s interactions with country songs demonstrate this more kinetic facet of joy. After singing along to Al Dexter and the Troopers’ “Pistol Packing Mama,” Bone notices “Aunt Ruth’s face was pink and happy”—a description reminiscent of a child flushed from active play (138). Thanks to such playfulness, a gravely ill Aunt Ruth becomes a lively figure, “laughing until she almost strangled” as she reacts to Bone’s “mimic[king] Stonewall’s deep sad sound.” From Aunt Ruth’s “pound[ing] her hand on the couch” and “waving at [Bone] to join in with her” to Bone’s manipulation of her voice, physical play marks the experience of music at Aunt Ruth’s house (Allison 138). Ruth and Bone’s laughter while singing along with the record player speaks to the social and artistic play of the moment, exemplified in Ruth’s choice of words when she implores that Bone “*play* it again” (139, emphasis added). Through the shared experience of country music, Aunt Ruth and Bone both access the physical and mental benefits of knowing joy.

Together, Aunt Ruth and Bone illustrate a connection between music therapy and long-held theories about the role of play in culture. As discussed during chapter one’s analysis of Edna Pontellier, pioneering play theorist Johan Huizinga defined play through its status as “not

‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life” (26). Instead, Huizinga writes, play “is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (26). Ruth and Bone’s play clearly allows them respite from their daily lives, and for Bone especially, this means access to an identity other than that of an abused child. Later play theorist Roger Caillois divides all types of play into one of four categories, including the category of “simulation, or mimicry,” during which Caillois suggests, “the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself” (19). The benefit of such play, Caillois argues, is that the individual “forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another” (19). More recently, Brian Sutton-Smith has questioned the impulse of psychologists and theorists to understand children’s desire to play as an intrinsic impulse aiding in children’s social, mental, and physical development. Instead, Sutton-Smith “suggest[s] that power and identity rhetorics are given too little influence...in their application to children” (111). I argue Bone’s imitation of Stonewall Jackson provides a pertinent example of a child using play not for any developmental purpose, but for the same purpose often assigned to adult play: its ability to aid in explorations of identity. Bone’s mimicry of Jackson and his deep voice not only allows her momentary relief from the worries and horrors of abuse but also allows her the chance to imagine the strength and freedom she might experience had she the body and life of a grown man instead of her own.

The joy Bone finds in music correlates to interest, the second positive emotion Frederickson ties to music’s health benefits, which represents a specific way music stimulates Bone in a positive manner. “Interest,” Frederickson writes, “arise[s] in contexts appraised as safe and as offering novelty, change, a sense of possibility . . . challenge . . . or mystery” (5). The passages above clearly exhibit excitement paired with joy, but Bone’s emotions are more precisely classified as exhibiting “interest” when she

spends time with Shannon Pearl and her family, who introduce Bone to the gospel singing circuit. Because of music, Bone finds herself motivated to strike up a friendship with Shannon Pearl, whom others find too shockingly “ugly” to befriend. Not only does the Pearl family provide Bone access to the singers she admires, but through the gospel circuit, music also becomes tied to the ability to travel, carrying with it “a sense of possibility” and “change” that is denied Bone by frequent moves within the county of Greenville due to Glen’s changing jobs. Despite the adventure it may seem to offer, moving with Glen can never be paired with interest due to the impossibility for Bone to feel safe in her stepfather’s presence. In scenes related to both gospel and country music, Allison effectively portrays Bone as a smart, curious child who soaks up all the information she can about the two genres that fascinate her. “Everybody knew that Opry stars started as gospel singers,” Bone reports matter-of-factly, asserting her knowledge, which is further evidenced by her ability to easily name artists (140). “I sang quietly along with everything,” she recalls, “not just the gospel shows but the country hits that followed—Marty Robbins, Kitty Wells, Johnny Cash, Ruth Brown, Stonewall Jackson, June Carter, Johnny Horton” (137). Filled with intense feelings of interest, Bone becomes a knowledgeable source on country and gospel, which grants her a sense of pride and control that her mother’s neglect and Glen’s abuse denies her in other areas of her life.

Finally, Fredrickson points to “contentment” as an important emotion for effective positive psychology, a concept demonstrated when contentment leads to important moments of safety and self-reflection for Bone. Through “[e]motions like serenity, tranquility, and relief,” individuals who once felt betrayed or unsafe can experience a sense of belonging and safety (Ruud 93). Contrary to the notion that contentment is related to a sense of stasis, Fredrickson explains:

Contentment is not simply behavioral passivity but rather a reflective broadening of a person's self-views and world views. Contentment, according to this analysis, is a mindful emotion. It involves full awareness of, and openness to momentary experiences; it carries the urge to savor and integrate those experiences, which in turn creates a new sense of self and a new world view. (5)

Bone displays such an awareness of herself and various emotions in the aforementioned revival scene, tapping into a physical and emotional reaction summoned by the gospel music: "I rocked back and forth, grinding my heels into the red dirt, my fists into my stomach, crooning into the dark night and the reflected glow from the tent. I cried until I was dry, and then I laughed" (136). Bone not only notes her body's reaction to the music but also reflects on the ways in which she has been emotionally impacted: "That was what gospel was meant to do—make you hate and love yourself at the same time, make you ashamed and glorified. It worked on me. It absolutely worked on me" (136). This revelation for Bone comes only after accessing feelings she may have otherwise left unexplored as she reflects on her guilt over her inability to cure Aunt Ruth's cancer. Experiencing and identifying multiple, conflicting, and difficult sensations at once, Bone portrays mindfulness of her emotions and an ability to live within the moment. Music, again, becomes a therapeutic device thanks to its relationship to play, which Huizinga characterized as often full of tension, noting that games must involve some sense of uncertainty as to the outcome in order to be enjoyable (29). Bone's uninhibited physical reaction to the music suggests an eagerness to embrace and "savor" experiences, including uncertainty of not knowing what comes next, even if it means failure or embarrassment instead of pleasure and victory. Bone is not at all passive as she interacts with the music surrounding her; instead, she takes careful inventory of her body and mind, an important act for someone repeatedly denied autonomy through abuse.

Bone's physical unrestraint paired with her awareness of her body's movement from heels to fists marks the experience as one of contentment even as it involves tension.

The most easily identified moments of contentment for Bone, though, come when near her mother Anney and, again, are associated with music. Anney repeatedly plays "The Sign on the Highway,"²² a gospel song lamenting the death of a young couple due to a drunk driver. Bone remembers:

What surprised me was that Mama, who wouldn't go to church and never even said Jesus' name, had the same response to that music I did. She cried every time she heard it, and she wanted to hear it all the time. . . . Mama would play it over and over, and I'd come in to sit with her while she listened, her with a glass of tea in one hand and the other over her eyes, and me as close to her as she'd let me, both of us crying quietly and then smiling at each other and playing it again. (150)

In this passage, Allison demonstrates the cathartic properties of music. The incessant replaying of the song, the pairing with a ritualistic beverage,²³ and the knowing smiles shared between mother and daughter all establish this as another instance in which music allows for the emotion of contentment. Through this shared musical experience, Bone feels safe and close to her mother.²⁴

This sense of shelter appears again at Shannon Pearl's funeral, where "the purest gospel" leads to a physical connection between mother and daughter (203). Bone remembers, "I turned and

²²Though the text does not tell us the name of the artist, most likely the version referenced is Little Jimmy Dickens's 1951 single.

²³When Anney visits Bone at Aunt Ruth's, Bone describes in detail how she cuts a lemon into "six paper-thin slices" and methodically uses them in the pouring of her mother's sweet ice tea, the drink establishing a connection between daughter and mother (131). Tea is drunk throughout the novel during meetings between Anney and her sisters and becomes symbolic of community and comfort.

²⁴In her work on *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Natalie Carter argues that "Anney's abandonment, and not Glen's prolonged physical and sexual abuse [is] the source of [Bone's] most grievous trauma" (887). While I am hesitant to agree with a ranking of Bone's traumatic experiences, here and throughout my paper, I do make my arguments with the understood claim that Anney's abandonment is just as much a form of trauma as Glen's abuse.

pushed my face into Mama’s dress. All my hardheaded anger was gone. As if she understood completely, Mama’s hand stroked my neck and down my back while she crooned under her breath her own song—muted, toneless, the same hum I’d been hearing all my life” (203). Bone senses that Anney, who has ignored Bone’s literal and figurative cries for help in escaping Glen’s abuse, understands and cares for her, creating a safe space in which Bone can access and then release feelings, including anger.²⁵ Bone labels this space of comfort marked by song as unique to her mother, suggesting music and its cathartic properties are entangled with maternal spaces.

The above passages exhibit Bone experiencing the positive emotions of joy, interest, and contentment at various points throughout *Bastard Out of Carolina* as she enjoys the playfulness music invites. While the immediate impact of these feelings may seem minimal, Bone’s ability to access these emotions for short periods of time—even if the moment lasts only as long as a brief, heartfelt refrain—serves as a testament to children’s emotional and mental drive to survive trauma experienced at home. Music therapy specialist Dr. Michael Swallow writes that “used appropriately and with care, music . . . has the power to heal by helping people to understand and rationalise emotions” (50). Bone’s most explicit self-reflection occurs during scenes of contentment, but joy, interest, and the actual physical experience of music all have the ability to impact Bone in the long term. Strongly supported by Fredrickson’s research, Ruud believes that the repeated access to positive emotions allows individuals to undo damage caused by painful negative emotions (95). Sutton-Smith, too, in *The Ambiguity of Play* devotes a small section near the back of the book to neuroimaging—still a technology in its infancy

²⁵Ann Cvetkovich’s article on the band Tribe 8 “recognizes the ways music and story-telling create a ‘safe space’ for queer women to express themselves” (George 127). Though Cvetkovich discusses *Bastard Out of Carolina* in the same article, she does not explicitly address the role music plays in Bone’s survival of trauma.

when he was writing in 1997. Sutton-Smith concludes his work by stating that play is a “lifelong stimulation of the key neonatal characteristics of unrealistic optimism, egocentricity, and reactivity, all of which are guarantors of persistence in the face of adversity” (231). Accordingly, music and its powerful ability to connect us to positive emotions, including those tied to play, should not be overlooked when examining Bone’s ability to survive amid repeated egregious traumas.

A perceptive child, Bone demonstrates an awareness of music’s ability to calm and empower her. While walking to Shannon Pearl’s home, she hums “snatches” of favorite hymns, and when walking to Aunt Raylene’s, she sings Ruth Brown and Patsy Cline hits (198, 256). Without ever being taught or told to do so, Bone identifies and uses stress-relieving techniques that can be powerful tools in her continued survival of trauma and its lasting impact. NYU professor Diane Austin reports that singing’s “restorative” powers are due to the type of deep breathing singing requires, which “slows the heart rate and calms the nervous system, stilling the mind and the body. Relaxation is the result—a state that is beneficial to everyone, but is especially helpful to anyone in a state of panic or extreme anxiety” (235). Austin goes on to argue that singing creates beneficial internal vibrations, which “are particularly relevant to traumatised clients who have frozen, numbed off areas in the body that hold traumatic experience. . . . Singing can enable the traumatised client to reconnect with her essential nature by providing her with access to, and an outlet for, intense feelings” (235). Due to the extent of Bone’s abuse, she would most likely benefit from this practice that would allow her to access the parts of both mind and body that have become closed off or numb—and, at least on some level throughout the text, she does. Whether sitting on the couch with Aunt Ruth or walking her way

around Greenville County, Bone accomplishes this feat, becoming her own best advocate and healer.

The Counselor's Role in Music Therapy

Bone seems to possess an awareness of music's power, but Aunt Ruth also supports her in the process of accessing music's benefits. In "Music as a Therapy for Depression in Women," T. A. Jamabo and I. R. George list "non-professionals" as one of the human resources available to patients, noting that "family members" and "loved ones" can "assist in ensuring the use of music as prescribed or needed" for patients (229). In order to more fully understand how Ruth becomes a resource for Bone, I turn again to Strehlow's work with traumatized children. Strehlow shares an outline of how music therapy can aid sexually abused children specifically, along with her own case study of a patient referred to as Kelly, who, like Bone, experiences sexual abuse at the hands of her mother's partner. Just as Anney turns a blind eye to Glen's abuse of Bone, when Kelly reported "the partner had put his hands in her panties, her mother didn't believe her" and "[m]ore sexual assaults took place" (174). Also, neither Bone nor Kelly has a relationship with her biological father; Bone's father is absent from before her birth²⁶ and Kelly's father left her family when she was only two years old. As Strehlow puts it, "Kelly grew up . . . not only without her real father, but also with the experience of being abused by her 'new' father" (174). Bone's use of the name "*Daddy* Glen" (emphasis added) throughout the novel reflects her experience as being almost identical to Kelly's in

²⁶Bone's father saw and held her when she was eight days old, something Bone, of course, cannot remember. Even if she could, her father's being "scared shitless" and Bone's urinating on him indicate a failure to achieve any connection (25). If anything, the scene serves as a metaphor for an almost immediate and natural excretion of each one from the other's world.

respect to surrogate fathers, hence my comparing Ruth's relationship with Bone to Strehlow's work with Kelly.

Strehlow's understanding of how sexual abuse within a family damages a child's ability to trust and build healthy relationships further validates the importance of Ruth's role in Bone's survival and healing. As Strehlow explains, "The attempts of the child to cope can take tragic forms, because he/she tries to maintain the connection to the main attachment figure at all costs, even to the extent of blaming him/herself. Being used and abused appears to be normal and becomes a fundamental belief" (172). Though Bone does not cling to Glen, she does her best to remain close to her mother despite Anney's neglect of Bone and enablement of Glen's abuse. At one point Bone reflects, "My own hands were so small, my fingers thin and weak. I wished they were bigger, wider, stronger. I wished I was a boy so I could run faster, stay away more, or even hit him back," reiterating reasons she may be drawn to imitate the masculine voice and lyrics of Stonewall Jackson (Allison 109). Instead of placing blame on those responsible for the abuse and its persistence, Bone finds fault in her own body, wishing she had the strength and autonomy traditionally ascribed to male bodies. The self-criticism permeates Bone's assessment of her personality, as well. Several times throughout the text she considers the possibility that Glen's insults hold truth: "Daddy Glen said I was a cold-hearted bitch, and maybe I was" (130). Bone's own mind becomes a microcosm of harmful patriarchal thinking about sexual assault as she blames herself, the victim, instead of the perpetrator. Most tragically, readers see Bone's desire to cling to her mother despite her repeated enabling of Glen's abuse in the following confession: "More terrified of hurting her [Anney] than of anything that might happen to me, I would work as hard as he [Glen] did to make sure she never knew" (118). Bone's collaboration in hiding Glen's cruelty demonstrates how long-term

abuse under the supposed protection of a loved one leads to acceptance of such mistreatment as a way of life. Tellingly, the passages above demonstrate how, when Bone expresses herself through language, she perpetuates tired and harmful patriarchal thinking, a contrast to the ways in which she grows and expresses herself during her interactions with music.

This painful reality of the abused child, as Strehlow explains, necessitates that “one of the main aims of therapy [be] to build up instances of good relationships” (172). Through shared musical experiences, Aunt Ruth strengthens her connection to Bone. When first arriving at Ruth’s, Bone reads her role there as one of a passive “audience, someone who would nod at appropriate moments and not interrupt” (Allison 121). It seems Bone anticipates taking on an inactive and silent role during her time with her aunt; however, early in her stay at Ruth’s, Bone’s desire to speak out against her abuser results in her blurting, “Daddy Glen hates me” (122). Ruth, sensing Bone’s burden, asks, “[C]an we talk to each other or not?” and “has Daddy Glen ever. . . . hurt you down there?” (123–24). Though recalling Glen’s hands under her clothes, Bone cannot speak the truth: “No,” she answers. The psyche that has enabled her to keep her semblance of a family intact pushes her to continue covering for Glen: “He just looks at me hard. Grabs me sometimes. Shakes me. . . . You know, when I’m bad.” Bone softens reality and places the blame on herself once more, all the while thinking, “Tell her all of it” (124). These thoughts create hope that Ruth could serve as an outcry witness for Bone, more than can be said for the young, new-in-town doctor with “his stranger’s voice,” who displays ignorance of the deep trust necessary for a child to report abuse at home (114). With

patience and careful therapeutic methods, though, that imperative trust can be developed between a counselor (professional or amateur) and survivor.

At first, then, it may seem odd when Strehlow describes music “as a way of creating distance” while she builds a relationship with her client Kelly (174). During an early session, Kelly plays with a few musical instruments but uses none of them for very long and does not allow Strehlow to join her. Strehlow interprets this as Kelly “establish[ing] her own form of security by being in charge,” suggesting that Kelly’s closed-off behavior allows her to refrain from “feelings of powerlessness and helplessness by transferring them” to the excluded Strehlow (174–75). Remarkably, Kelly’s restrained and unaccompanied way of playing with the instruments parallels Bone’s first description of music at Aunt Ruth’s house:

Every morning, before Aunt Ruth and Uncle Travis were up, I’d go sit close to the radio in their parlor to listen to the “Sunrise Gospel Hour.” In the stillness of the early dawn, I would lean into the speaker and practice my *secret* ambition, cupping my fingers next to my chin and tilting my head back to *whisper-sing so no one could hear me*. I sang quietly along with everything....*I sang so quietly I could barely hear my own voice*, but in my imagination my song soared out strong and beautiful. (Allison 137, emphasis mine)

Here, Bone’s imagination serves as another example of the “artistic play” mentioned in Fredrickson’s definition of joy; however, she takes care to avoid the ridicule and abuse she experiences at home by ensuring she alone hears the radio and her own singing goes unnoticed. Play theorist Huizinga noted secrecy’s role in play and its ability to create or reinforce social groupings, once again aligning the practice of music therapy with theories that have helped to explain the importance of play in society. He writes that play “promotes the formation of social

groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means” (Huizinga 32). Through such a lens, Bone’s and Kelly’s isolating actions actually help create the possibility for socialization. The secrecy and restraint surrounding Bone’s interaction with music are analogous to Kelly’s subdued play and suggest that she is simultaneously testing the safety of her surroundings and fortifying a special bond with her caregiver.

Strehlow reports that, after a few more therapy sessions, Kelly allows her to join her in music making, giving Strehlow a recorder to play after she hears the counselor humming along to a song. Through the same, subtle method of humming, Aunt Ruth gradually gains access to Bone’s musical world: “Aunt Ruth would always smile when she saw me with my head pressed close to the radio. ‘Turn it up,’ she’d say. ‘You an’t the only one likes a little music.’ Sometimes she’d even start humming along” (137–38). Choosing not to take over the radio, Aunt Ruth encourages Bone to enjoy the music, gently joining in until “[o]ne weekend she got Earle to bring his record player over” (138). Bone and Ruth spend “two days listening to [Ruth’s] favorite songs. It turned out Aunt Ruth had a bunch of her own records in a box under her bed,” including “the Clinch Mountain Clan doing Hank Williams’s ‘Are You Walking and a-Talking for the Lord,’ Roy Acuff’s ‘Wabash Cannonball,’ and Roy Acuff singing ‘The Wreck on the Highway’” (138). The placement of Ruth’s records in a private and intimate space symbolizes the intensely personal relationships developed with music and allows Bone to see a shared connection with her aunt as she, too, reveals music previously kept secret.

Aunt Ruth shows further discernment in the songs she chooses to share with Bone, as she includes country ballads with strong Christian themes and tones, tied, of

course, to Bone's beloved genre of gospel.²⁷ This leads to the shared play characterized by Aunt Ruth's invigorated motions, Bone's spirited singing, and, above all, their shared uncontrollable laughter (138–39). These communal experiences are vital for Bone in order to enjoy healthy interpersonal relationships in the future. As Strehlow writes, "Music offers the chance to feel close to each other but without sexuality," an imperative step for sexually abused children on the path to recovery (180). Considering the necessity Bone's relationship with Aunt Ruth be a chaste one, the chosen songs make even more sense, as they avoid any sexual or even romantic themes, focusing instead on describing a noisy train (Acuff's "Wabash Cannonball") or preaching a morality lesson (Williams's "Are You Walking and a-Talking for the Lord" and Acuff's "The Wreck on the Highway"). Thanks to intuition and observation, Aunt Ruth slowly and respectfully builds a relationship with Bone through music at a time when the child desperately needs a safe bond with a dependable adult.

Strehlow's reading of Bone's experiences with Ruth would most likely place Bone rather early in her progression through the therapeutic process. Strehlow outlines nine ways in which she has seen music therapy help victims of sexual abuse, and it seems Bone has accessed at least four of these: "Music as a way out of silence," "Music as a space for good and secure experiences," "Music as a space for pleasurable experiences (with no sexual connection)," and "Music as a space for experimenting with new experiences of relationships" (181). Over the course of eight months of counseling, Strehlow not only helps Kelly access the above benefits but also allows her to use music as a means of expressing her fear and re-enacting the pain and helplessness she experienced at home without having to use the difficult words needed to

²⁷Cecilia Tichi's argument that "country music has a special cultural license to express a feeling so deeply and profoundly disturbing that, elsewhere in society, it is muted, half-hidden, suppressed" further supports country music as an appropriate genre for Bone to enjoy (83).

disclose sexual abuse—words that the abused child often lacks and, thus, cannot vocalize. Though it may make Bone's access to the therapeutic pale in comparison, Kelly's progress does not negate Aunt Ruth's impact as an impromptu music therapist.

Bone spends less than a full summer living with Ruth, but Strehlow reports that “three years therapy is a realistic time frame for [a] child to regain long-term stability and to be able to come to terms with their traumatic experience of being sexually abused” (170). Both Kelly and Bone represent young girls at the threshold of recovery. Bone will not face further violence at Glen's hands, but she will have to endure life as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, while also mourning the loss of her Aunt Ruth through death and her mother through abandonment. Bone's thoughts when Anney comes to tell her goodbye before leaving town with Glen prove that Ruth has left an impression. Bone remembers, “The night Mama came, Raylene was at the record player, listening to every record Earle had brought over,” and Bone tells us she carefully listened to “the scratches and popping of the worn record overwhelming that heartbreaking voice, making [her] wish [she] could still cry the way [she] had with Aunt Ruth” (304–05). On her own, it seems, Bone has realized the ability of music to help her access emotions she cannot yet speak in words or safely access alone, and she connects this ability to Ruth's powerful impression on her. From a hopeful perspective, though, the scene also gives us a glimpse of the possibility that Aunt Raylene will now begin to serve as a new resource and counselor for Bone.

In part, Bone's relationship with Ruth is a successful one because of the gender they share. The importance of Bone drawing strength from older women has not gone unnoticed in previous scholarship. George's work, for instance, suggests “[t]he

Boatwright women represent a resistant community that reverberates with the country sounds of the honky-tonk angels during the era—women trying to challenge a coercive community while unable to completely escape from its sexist values” (“It Wasn’t” 142). Music therapy scholarship, too, only strengthens the argument that the shared gender of Bone and her aunts helps facilitate stronger relationships among the women. Discussing adolescents specifically, Ruud reports that “gender clearly influences how [young people] are using music. Girls . . . use music to regulate their mood, while . . . boys are using music to create a certain look or image” (46). For example, a small but compelling study featured in *Psychology of Music* reveals that shared musical tastes often contribute to “harmonious relationships” between mothers and daughters, whereas music is much more likely to be a source of contention between mothers and sons (Morgan et al. abstract). One teenage participant illustrates his forging a gendered identity through music when he says he “wouldn’t like it” if his mother enjoyed the same music as him, stating, “It wouldn’t be the thing for a middle aged woman. That would ruin the fun as well if she liked [my] music” (qtd. in Morgan et al. 619). Though there is still much research to be done in terms of music’s role in familial settings, existing studies such as this one repeatedly point to music as one way individuals create a gendered identity, one that will either reinforce or lessen an identification with a mother.

The men and women of the Boatwright family illustrate such gendered conceptions of music. Ruth, Bone, and Anney all use music as a way to access emotions, while Uncle Travis and Uncle Earle belittle the women’s enjoyment of music. Bone reports that her and Ruth’s singing along with Al Dexter “dr[ives] Uncle Travis out to sit on the bumper of his car with a bottle of Jack Daniel’s” and complain the two “sound terrible” (138). Ruth counters that she knows they sound bad (to Bone’s surprise) and asks him to join in, but Travis insists he “an’t no singing fool”

(138). Uncle Earle reacts to Anney and Bone's crying to "The Sign on the Highway" with continued denial of music's emotional impact and insistence on emotionality as foolishness. "You just as crazy as you can be," he tells them, "Crying over some people didn't never really die. That's only a slide guitar and some stupid folks can't make a living no other way 'cept acting the fool in front of people like you. . . . I swear this family's got shit for brains" (150). These reactions underscore that not everyone can easily access the therapeutic power of music. Ruth's allowing music to impact her emotional state despite male condescension not only serves as a healthy example of processing emotion for Bone, but it also suggests that she is teaching Bone one way to perform her gender irrespective of male derision.

Bone and the Semiotic

Further exploration of this gendered connection to music reveals Allison's text as an example of Kristevan notions of the semiotic, while also making room for Judith Butler's revisionary response to Kristeva's work. Through a Kristevan lens, Uncle Travis's and Uncle Earle's inability or unwillingness to make an emotional connection with music relates to their status as males who have become more closely tied to the symbolic than the semiotic. For Bone, reverting to music as an outlet for pain and as a way to access joy and other positive emotions is also a way to access maternal space otherwise denied her. While engaging with music, Bone finds a welcome retreat free from the patriarchal language and order of the society around her. As discussed in the previous chapter, music therapist Avi Gilboa's argues that "[t]he dual nature of [sound in] the womb" is vital for human's development and provides the "building blocks of music" as the fetus becomes familiar with "steady versus unsteady, calm versus tense, consonant

versus dissonant” sounds via the mother’s varying heartbeats and vocalizations (242, 252).

Having practiced music therapy extensively with children himself, Gilboa points to several case studies in which he believes children seek to return to the sensations of a fetal state through musical therapy, creating either a calm or chaotic sound environment as part of their therapy sessions. Thus, Bone’s use of music to return to a womb-like environment aligns with contemporary music therapy practices.

Allison describes Bone seeking to reconnect with her mother and the semiotic state in order to escape the patriarchal structures of language and Glen’s abuse several times throughout the text. At one point, Bone recalls the joys of being close to her mother. She refuses to have her hair permed because it would mean losing:

those hours on Mama’s lap sitting in the curve of her arm while she brushed and brushed and smoothed my hair and talked soft above me. She always seemed to smell of buttery flour, salt, and fingernail polish—a delicate insinuating aroma of the familiar and the astringent. I would breathe deep and bite my lips to keep from moaning while my scalp ached and burned. I would have cut off my head before I let them cut my hair and lost the unspeakable pleasure of being drawn up onto Mama’s lap every evening. (30–31)

Here, Allison depicts the mother/child relationship as closely tied to the sensory sensations Kristeva pairs with the semiotic. Bone’s descriptions focus not on the language shared with her mother but the chaste sensuality she experiences in the safety of her mother’s embrace: touch, smell, taste and sound are all alluded to in Bone’s reminiscences. Later, after having accepted that her mother will never leave Glen for her, Bone says of Anney, “Her smell, that familiar salt-and-butter smell, almost made me cry again, but I felt empty. I just watched her” (308). Such descriptions prove Bone’s associations with her mother are closely tied to Kristeva’s definitions

of the semiotic, which brings attention to all the senses and allows communication without symbolic language.

Several times throughout the novel, Bone describes music as connected to semiotic characteristics, suggesting it is music and not Anney that will bring her closest to a comforting place. For instance, after thinking of Glen's abuse and "f[alling] into shame," Bone describes a subconscious return to the semiotic:

After a while I cried myself back to sleep. I dreamed I was a baby again, five or younger, leaning against Mama's hip, her hands on my shoulders. She was talking, her voice above me like a whisper between stars. Everything was dim and safe. Everything was warm and quiet. She held me and I felt loved. She held me and I knew who I was. When I put my hand down between my legs, it was not a sin. It was like her murmur, *like music*, like a prayer in the dark. It was meant to be, and it was a good thing. (253, emphasis mine)

Bone not only explicitly explains her wish to remain a young child connected to her mother but also describes sensations reminiscent of the womb: "dim and safe . . . warm and quiet." In this moment, language does not matter, just as Kristeva suggests the initial relationship between mother and child is characterized by the absence of symbolism. Anney is talking, yet the meaning of the words is not the focus; rather it is only the sound of them, "like a whisper between stars," that reaches Bone, who also ties this feeling of intimate connection to the mother with "music" and the faithful hope of a "prayer in the dark." Here, having already been disappointed in prayer's ability to offer her safety, Bone looks toward her mother and music as a way out of her incredible pain.

Music also allows Bone to connect to the semiotic while sitting in church services. She describes salvation, saying, “It was that moment of sitting on the line between salvation and damnation with the preacher and the old women pulling bodily at my poor darkened soul. I wanted that moment to go on forever, wanted the choir to go on with that low, slow music” (151). Here, the antonyms “salvation” and “damnation” are placed side by side, the slight liminal space between them being what Bone finds so attractive. The juxtaposition of such contrasting emotions defines the *chora*. Despite this intense helplessness, the complete dependence upon a caregiver to provide for our needs means the stage also becomes one of great security and trust. Returning to Fredrickson’s definition of contentment, which privileges contradictory feelings as a way into mindfulness and an appreciation of momentary experiences, Bone’s in-between state is not necessarily precarious. Instead, her feelings of liminality are descriptive of the semiotic and of great rapture, which through Fredrickson’s therapeutic lens also means contentment.

Philosopher Judith Butler’s extension of Kristeva allows us to see how Bone’s association of music with her mother risks being read as perpetuating culturally constructed ideas of maternity. Employing Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, in which he argues for an understanding of the sexes not as a natural binary but rather as designations assigned by power dynamics, Butler offers a more contemporary and progressive understanding of Kristeva’s theories. Like bell hooks, Butler sees maternity as a social construct through which “the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of its self and the law of its desire” (116). For Butler, semiotic language such as music can never be completely subversive as Kristeva suggests because the very designation of semiotic language as maternal feeds into culturally constructed myths of maternity. Work such as Gilboa’s exploring the impact of the fetal sound environment suggests the connection between mother and music does stem at least partially from

biology, not society alone, but even Gilboa's thesis asks us to question connotations of the female body as permanently soothing, safe sites. This thread of contradicting societal expectations ultimately overpowers any suggestion that Allison's text perpetuates socially constructed myths of maternity.

In fact, Butler allows us to see how *Bastard Out of Carolina* offers a fluid understanding of parenting. Bone's ultimate separation from her mother and her choice to live with her Aunt Raylene, a lesbian, fights against culturally prescribed parenting norms and suggests the "open future of cultural possibilities" that Butler hopes for when she writes in response to Kristeva (117). One of Butler's strongest critiques of Kristeva's work is that Kristeva casts lesbianism as a form of "psychosis" (109). In Allison's text, it is a lesbian, Aunt Raylene, who emerges as Bone's final caretaker, offering a maternal figure who does not fit Kristeva's portrait of the heteronormative female as mother. Though Aunt Raylene is a woman, her lifestyle distinguishes her from her sisters in a variety of ways; not only does her sexuality mark her as marginalized, but she also has no children, has traveled far from home, lives on the outskirts of town, and has lived as a man before. Ending the novel with Bone in Aunt Raylene's care, Allison actually suggests that one's gender identity and performance has little to do with their abilities as a caregiver. Aunt Raylene's home is also the site of Bone's final parting with her biological mother, an event punctuated by the background music of Patsy Cline and Kitty Wells. Allison ends her novel, then, on a note suggesting that what offers Bone the most potential for healing is not a female body marked by society as maternal but the nurturing capabilities of music and her nonconformist aunt. While Bone's experience with music can be read as a subversive message of feminine power through music as healing, such a

reading risks reifying tired gender roles and must be extended to consider the possibility that a womb-like musical space allowing for interaction with the semiotic can also be created by caregivers and counselors identifying as male or non-binary in terms of gender.

Outlining the progress Ruud hopes to see in the field of music therapy, he writes, “we [music therapists] do not want medicine that is only curative; we also need preventative as well as health-promotional medicine” (3). In Bone’s case, using music to practice self-care will remain incredibly important throughout her life. Multiple studies confirm teen and adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse such as Bone are at increased risk of physical and mental illnesses, including clinical depression (Lee 20; Kamiya et al. abstract). Though Bone may never experience the support of a licensed counselor, she does have the ability to access the restorative powers of music.

Unable to find dependable security through her mother after Glen’s abuse begins, Bone finds access to the semiotic through music. Scriptotherapy, though powerful and certainly a form of healing used by Bone, cannot connect Bone to a semiotic space due to its dependence on symbolic language. Thus, although Bone uses both methods, music trumps storytelling in terms of connecting Bone to a time when she could trust a caregiver to answer her physical needs and keep her safe. In order to continue her incredible journey of survival, Bone will need to not only sustain relationships with adults she can trust, but also keep rocking and humming along to the joyful music of self-care.

“Sing it, Tweet”: The Therapeutics of Music in Ellen Douglas’s *Can’t Quit You, Baby*

Written four years prior to Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Ellen Douglas’s *Can’t Quit You, Baby* features the coming-of-age stories of not just one but two female protagonists whose lives will become entangled as adults. The novel examines the fraught relationship between

Cornelia O’Kelly, a white homemaker, and Julia Carrier, or Tweet—an African American woman working in Cornelia’s home. In addition, a third female voice—that of the writer—occasionally enters the novel. In *Tracing Southern Storytelling in Black and White*, Sarah Gilbreath Ford explains that Douglas’s novel “becomes postmodern through the use of metafiction, which means fiction commenting on itself. In postmodern works, this usually happens through a narrative voice questioning how a story is told or putting out alternative versions. In Douglas’s novel, this metafiction is rooted in multiple levels of oral storytelling” (125). The text’s self-reflexive narrator, intertwined voices, and movement in time all mark Douglas’s work as more postmodern than Allison’s realist novel with its first-person narrator recalling a few years of her childhood. Douglas’s novel is also markedly different from Allison’s for its emphasis on race relations as a theme. The unnamed narrator admits within the first three pages that we might “try” but will never successfully be “absentminded about race and class, place and time, even about poverty and wealth” while reading the novel (5). The characters themselves, she points out, could not possibly forget about these matters living in 1960s Mississippi (5). Later in the text, the narrator, a white woman, will admit she only ever heard Tweet speaking to Cornelia and worries she never really heard her speak in “her own authentic voice,” the one she would use at home and around loved ones (239). The narrator asks, “What tangle of snakes have I been skiing over?” (240). Plenty of critics—in fact most critics who have written about the novel—have been happy to help rouse and name those snakes.

Three decades after the novel’s publication, scholarship surrounding *Can’t Quit You, Baby* continues to focus on its portrayal of race relations among women. In one of

the earliest and most frequently cited critiques of the novel, Ann M. Bomberger articulates the anxiety many readers feel when she suggests that Douglas continues the long and unfortunate American tradition of white writers using black characters to serve as “spiritual [or moral] guides” for white characters (18). In a reading indebted to Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Bomberger writes, “Drawing on ‘folk’ wisdom at key points in the novel, Tweet becomes Douglas’s way to use African American culture in order to suggest new ways for white women to relate to others around them” (18). Several scholars reply to Bomberger and build towards a consensus that the novel’s ending is not meant to be read as a happy, neatly tied-up story of racial conciliation. Rather, critics such as Susan V. Donaldson read the conclusion as “decidedly uncomfortable” (Donaldson 49), believing Douglas means to suggest a hard road ahead for the women if they do seek a genuine friendship because it requires unpacking the reality of inequality seated at the foundation of their relationship.

While I greatly appreciate these readings for their insight into the novel’s most blatant theme of interracial relationships among American women, scholarship’s incessant focus on this aspect of the novel—and especially its tendency to focus on questions of Cornelia’s conversion from willful ignorance to enlightened participation in conversations of race—detracts from more complete readings of the two characters as individuals, especially Tweet. To read Douglas’s work about race relations exclusively ignores other aspects of the novel that are just as compelling, universal, and timely. *Can’t Quit You, Baby* asks hard questions of its readers and society, not just about race, but also about the nature of profound hardship, fathomless grief, and the possibility of recovery. When we step aside from readings that posit Tweet as serving as merely a foil or crutch for Cornelia, we find Tweet’s coming-of-age story parallels that of Bone’s, as both women learn to self-soothe with music at an early age, a skill that will aid in

their survival of traumatic circumstances. Notably, though, a closer reading of *Tweet* validates Douglas's thoughtful creation of an African American character, as *Tweet* enacts forms of resistance and resilience black women have utilized throughout a history of enslavement and disenfranchisement, including the therapeutic benefits of music.

Douglas's use of blues legend Willie Dixon's famous song for her novel's title has understandably led several critics to examine music in the text. Charles Fister and Robert Rea both use blues culture and motifs in order to examine how Douglas creates a blues heroine out of *Tweet*. Through her treatment of the novel, Courtney George asks us to consider the usefulness of what she terms Douglas's "appropriation" of the blues. Building on scholarship from Ralph Ellison and Paul Gilroy, George argues that the novel "asks us to revise our thoughts on the white cultural appropriation of black music—to reconsider what it means, how it can expose a painful past between black and white women in the American South, and how the blues transcends the pain to allow for the possibility of love and equality" ("Ellen" 79). While I tend to agree with other scholars' less transcendent reading of the novel's conclusion, I do agree with George's impulse to see Douglas's "appropriation" as more productive than harmful. Whereas the scholars I have mentioned here carefully read and question Douglas's uses of the blues genre, my aim lies in highlighting what the novel demonstrates in terms of music therapy's pragmatic and interdisciplinary implications.

To understand music's healing function in the text, I first argue for a reading of Douglas's work highlighting the African American tradition of rival geographies, a concept productively extended to include soundscapes. The idea of survival and healing through rival soundscapes receives support from a body of scholarship linking musical

genres traditionally labeled as African American to the soothing and restorative power of music. Next, I explore how the novel demonstrates the wide-ranging therapeutic applications of music throughout the story of Tweet's life. While examining her childhood interactions with music as a resource for regulating emotions, I draw comparisons with Bone's use of music therapy. Finally, I discuss how a middle-aged Tweet, who begins to recover from a stroke through engagement with music, speaks to the physical applications of music therapy.

Rival Soundscapes through African American Music

Tweet's grandfather, a former Union soldier, becomes a powerful example of the ways in which enslaved peoples and their descendants employ rival geographies. Edward Said coins the postcolonial term "rival geographies," when he writes the introduction to his 1993 book *Culture and Imperialism* (xx). Through this phrase, Said and others identify the way in which the colonizer and the colonized name, understand, and experience the same landscapes differently. In *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, Stephanie M. Camp uses "rival geography" to describe "the slave South, where the challenge for enslaved people was not one of repossession of land in the face of dispossession but of mobility in the face of constraint" (7). Camp's study illuminates how enslaved people utilized their superior knowledge of the woods, swamps, slave quarters, and other sites to enact "creative expression...alternative communication, and importantly, resistance to planters' domination of slaves' every move" (7). Camp describes how, during the Civil War, Union soldiers often relied on African Americans to lead them to resources such as "food, clothing, weapons, and valuables" that had been hidden by plantation owners (135). The enslaved also proved an unparalleled resource when it came to navigating Confederate terrain while remaining undetected. At the heart of Camp's thesis, though, is the role enslaved women played in

“domestic” acts of resistance, such as displaying abolitionist propaganda within slave quarters. Camp argues against dichotomies such as “private and public” to describe acts of resistance, claiming that such a distinction undervalues women’s actions, which were imperative to enabling survival amid slavery. Especially because of their high risk of sexual exploitation and rape, Camp argues, “[t]he body and the home were key sites of suffering but also a resource in women’s survival” (4). In *Can’t Quit You, Baby*, Tweet embodies Camp’s thesis on some level, as her own ailing body becomes the very tool she uses to recover through music therapy. Accordingly, below I will first show how Camp’s theory of rival geographies brings light to several scenes from *Can’t Quit You, Baby* before extending Camp’s argument to include soundscapes as part of the sites used by African Americans to create messages that enable security and survival amid oppression.

First, in *Can’t Quit You, Baby*, Grandpa shrewdly takes advantage of his familiarity with the land he has worked for so long, an example of rival geographies enabling black resilience. Because Grandpa’s land sits like a piece of pie within a larger circle of land owned by the greedy overseer Mr. Lord, he hides his life savings in a pipe secured within the hollow of a cypress tree, accessible only by boat at certain times of the year. With a bee’s nest nearby the hidden pipe, Tweet’s grandpa knows that Mr. Lord will not come looking for the money in such a treacherous location and that if anyone were to notice the makeshift ladder leading up to the hive, it would only be interpreted as a tool to aid in robbing the hive of honey (45). Having hid the money first in 1912, Tweet’s grandpa provides us with an excellent example of how Camp’s theory of rival geographies easily extends after slavery and into the Jim Crow South, as black people

took advantage of their knowledge of places and skills of which their white counterparts would not be cognizant.

Viewed from another angle, descriptions of Grandpa and his blindness can also be read as a metaphor for black people's use of rival geographies. Tweet's father, Julius, approaches Grandpa's house for the first time since Tweet was a baby, Tweet stands on the porch beside her grandfather describing the approaching stranger. "I'm use to being eyes to my grandpa," she tells us (19-20). As such, Tweet herself reminds us of a critical aspect of Camp's thesis—that despite enslaved men's comparatively increased freedom of movement, enslaved women were crucial in enabling others, mostly men, in truancy and escape. Because of their greater access to food and information from inside white households, women served an imperative yet often overlooked role in acts of resistance. Despite Grandpa's blindness, a metaphor for the ways in which whites used their power to disable black bodies during enslavement and beyond, he can still easily navigate his home and land thanks to not only his own knowledge but also the aid of his companion Tweet²⁸. As such, *Cant't Quit You, Baby* thoughtfully and respectfully captures the African American tradition of two genders working together in order to utilize the surrounding landscape in order to survive a world constantly bordered by whiteness and, thus, danger. Tweet may be a young girl lacking experience in many areas of life, but her physical abilities complement her grandfather's impaired vision and weaker body, an apt representation of how

²⁸ I offer this interpretation of Grandpa's blindness with pause after reading the introduction to Delia D. Steverson's dissertation on *The Constitutive Relationship between Race and Disability in African American Literature*. On one hand, Steverson provides support for my reading, as she points out that a major theme in African American literary criticism has been to read black characters' physical disabilities "as a metaphor for something else, usually carrying a negative connotation" (8). However, one of the distinct purposes of Steverson's work is to expose how such readings, with their insistence upon physical normativity and suggestion that disabled bodies are less worthy than others, "implicate" critics "in the perpetuation of the subordination of a historically oppressed group" (9). I admire Steverson's claim here and am admittedly still undecided to what extent my own reading plays into such a trend. For now, I stand by my claim that the interactions between Grandpa and Tweet emulate the types of cooperation necessitated for oppressed people to survive and escape systems of abuse, but I remain open to the possibility of re-reading Grandpa's blindness in less problematic ways.

enslaved men and women combined their resources in order to aid one another in survival and escape.

Grandpa's cypress tree and its ability to be read two ways—as an ordinary home to a beehive or as a safe hiding spot for money—recalls another, more familiar way in which enslaved men and women used double-meaning sonic texts. As Frederick Douglass famously described in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), unsuspecting slave owners had no idea that the spirituals sung on plantations were not just about religious hope but a pressing, earthly desire for an escape north to freedom. Accordingly, it is not just landscapes—but soundscapes—that have served as sites of equivocal readings enabling survival and recovery throughout African American history. In *Can't Quit You, Baby* this history of music serving multiple purposes continues in the form of Grandpa and Tweet, who will one day use music therapy to sing herself back to physical health.

Multiple scholars have pointed to the therapeutics of music as an African American tradition. In her work explicating music in the works of Toni Morrison, Vikki Visvis argues for understanding music as a black therapeutic technique analogous to that of the western concept of the “talking cure,” or the practice of talking about one's trauma in order to achieve catharsis and/or recovery. Visvis argues that in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* “representations of black music as testimony...question [language and Western culture's] privileged status,” deviating from the long-privileged therapeutic act of narrating one's trauma through language alone (256). Visvis suggests Sigmund Freud, Judith Herman, and other trauma theorists all work within a Eurocentric way of thinking and acting, with more contemporary theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman privileging linguistic modes as therapeutic even as they recognize

the limits of language (259-260)²⁹. The idea that narration through speech or writing provides therapeutic relief is not wrong but is culturally and politically influenced. A relevant example takes the form of Bone, whose white skin permits her greater access to books and literacy education than a young Tweet would have at her disposal. As mentioned earlier, many critics read Bone's narration of her story as an act of therapy, and alongside Tweet's story, her use of narratology as therapy becomes possible due to her socio-cultural status. Visvis makes clear that language and music are not dichotomous; in fact, she includes a quotation from Morrison, who suggests that the contemporary black novel now serves much the same function as black music (267). The importance of understanding music as a cultural tool for healing lies in recognizing "music is not invested with the power relations that have served to enslave, marginalize, and monitor the black community. Unlike language, music as a means of expression has not traditionally functioned as a tool of oppression" (263). Just as music becomes a feminist form of therapy for Bone in light of Krsitevan semiotics, music serves Tweet so powerfully, in part, because it lies outside of the written, white, patriarchal, and capitalistic culture that works against Tweet throughout her life.

Douglas's choice to use a famous blues song for her title also encourages an understanding of the text as about the ability of music to aid in recovery, as multiple scholars and writers have cited the blues as a particularly therapeutic genre. In 1960, Paul Oliver published one of the first book-length studies of the genre: *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues*. His introduction concludes with the assertion that the first blues records released in the early

²⁹ It should be noted Caruth responds to a number of critics whom she says misrepresent her ideas as Eurocentric in the afterword accompanying the twentieth anniversary edition of her landmark work *Unclaimed Experience*. Of course, it is an impossible task for the theorist to respond to all of her critics, and, as far as I can tell, none of her afterword provides a compelling answer to the specific claim of linguistic privileging Visvis suggests exists in Caruth's work.

1920s found such a large audience because “the music had meaning not only for the singer but for every African American who listened. In the blues were reflected the effects of the economic stress on the depleted plantations and the urban centres, where conditions of life still did not improve” (10-11). “In the blues,” Oliver concludes, “an unsettled, unwanted people during these periods of social unrest found the security, the unity, and the strength it is desperately desired” (11). Similar to the ways in which their ancestors used spirituals to convey coded messages, blues artists use the seemingly innocuous mode of music in order to rail against the oppressive forces around them and find the strength to continue living.

The lyrics of Dixon’s “Can’t Quit You, Baby,” from which Douglas draws her title, exemplify the irony of wanting to live despite the pain and suffering each day brings, a commonly cited blues theme. As Richard Wright explains in his introduction to *Blues Fell This Morning*:

the most astonishing aspect of the blues is that, though replete with a sense of defeat and down-heartedness, they are not intrinsically pessimistic; their burden of woe and melancholy is dialectally redeemed through sheer force of sensuality, into an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope. No matter how repressive was the American environment, the Negro never lost faith in or doubted his deeply endemic capacity to live. (xv)

This frustrated desire makes Dixon’s song a fitting one for Douglas’s title and for the dialogue between Tweet and Cornelia near the novel’s conclusion. “I love you, baby, but I sure do hate your ways....I love you darling, but I hate your treacherous low down ways”: Tweet sings the Dixon lines to Cornelia and she may as well be singing to all of America (256). Just as generations of African Americans have found themselves living as second-class citizens in the

same land society teaches them to love for its grandeur and freedoms, Tweet feels a conflicted devotion to Cornelia after so many shared stories and years working alongside one another. Others, such as Courtney George and Theresa James, have read this exchange of lyrics between the women as a sign that a new, frank way of speaking has begun for the women with the disclaimer that it will be a long and painful road to create a genuine dialogue. I, too, read the lyrics as a reminder of the perpetually painful state of race relations in the United States. Wright asks, “Was this hope [demonstrated in the blues] that sprang always phoenix-like from the ashes of frustration something that the Negro absorbed from the oppressive yet optimistic American environment in which he lived and had his being?” (xv). Music, especially in the form of the blues, does offer temporary release from both physical and mental pain, and repeated usage can lead to better overall health. However, just as the blues can possess immense value without ending racially motivated violence in the U.S., Tweet and Cornelia’s song can only be an accessory to much larger thinking and action in order to achieve real change in terms of power relations between the women.

While Oliver cited many hardships, including unrelenting poverty and broken families, as responsible for the communal despair that spurred the blues genre to popularity, more recently, scholars have argued for violence as the most influential social ill responsible for the blues genre. In *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*, Adam Gussow argues for understanding the emergence of blues music in the 1890s as a response to increased white terrorism against blacks. Using mostly blues lyrics and blues artists’ autobiographies, Gussow shows subtle ways in which blues music responded to lynching and other horrors of the Jim Crow south. Gussow reads blues songs as texts that “transcode and redress histories of racial violence and as a lyric transformation from the black subject from figurative lynching victim to

figurative lynching propagator” (22). Importantly, though, these songs are “are intentional but veiled, speaking clearly to blacks while avoiding offense to whites” (22). Gussow’s remarkable study allows us to see how, decades after their enslaved ancestors communicated via coded spirituals in order to evade their master’s suspicions, African Americans used an emerging genre of music to speak back to the violence and terror surrounding them in the Jim Crow South. Gussow’s choice to read these lyrics as “unconscious” representations of the painful truths dictating black life in the segregated South also suggests an understanding of the composition and performance of blues as therapeutic acts. Neuroscience’s recent confirmation of trauma’s impact on the brain adds greater weight to Gussow’s claim that most early blues lyrics are “unconscious transformations...of lynching tropes and scenarios” (22). In this light, the blues figure as a cultural tool through which artists of the Jim Crow era processed traumas they were not yet able or willing to form into conscious, explicit narratives. Through this lens, blues is another rival soundscape for African Americans, continuing the tradition of curative coded music begun by their ancestors in the form of spirituals.

The healing nature of traditional African American songs has led to their use in modern-day practices by several music therapists. Herein lies what I argue makes black music a rival soundscape: traditional African American songs have proven themselves as not just aesthetically moving, but as pragmatic tools that allow access to the same individual and communal healing device their ancestors once employed. Today, spirituals and the blues continue to possess meaning and value inaccessible to those outside of the culture. Professor and counselor Janeé R. Avent reports that multiple scholars have “posited that music is especially effective when working with and understanding African Americans” (40). A fair amount of music therapy

research focuses on the use of hip-hop and rap with African American clients³⁰, but others reach further back in time to access the healing power of black music. Bisola Mariguay writes of using traditional African American “[s]pirituals to facilitate psychospiritual self-healing groups for women recovering from trauma, substance abuse, and severe health conditions in a women’s center located in the Tenderloin community of San Francisco” (92). A similar program run at Glide’s Women Center, also located in San Francisco, utilized spirituals to aid African American women, who are statistically much more likely than white women to face violence and incarceration yet less likely to seek counseling services (Ravernell). Participants in the program confirmed that the spirituals sung were not only helpful because of their familiarity—often learned in church or at community gatherings—but also because of the knowledge that the very same songs had aided their ancestors through their suffering (Ravernell). Mariguay explains how she believes today’s trauma survivors can access the same therapeutic potential of spirituals their enslaved ancestors used, in part, to “preserv[e] the integrity of their selfhood despite being subjected to forced labor and innumerable indignities” (92). Citing musicology and African American scholarship, Marignay outlines how spirituals served a therapeutic function for the enslaved, as they allowed not only a sense of mental and physical autonomy, but also formed one of multiple “indirect and inconspicuous ways of obstructing total domination” (97). Marignay’s description of music’s value thus mirrors the use of rival geographies by the enslaved as explored by Camp.

³⁰ Avent cites Stephens et al. and Kobin and Tyson. At the time of writing, a search of the database *PsychInfo* for peer-reviewed articles published between 1998 and 2018 with the subject terms “music therapy” and “rap” or “hip hop” produces 216 results. Raphael Travis’s book *The Healing Power of Hip Hop* might best serve as a starting point for those interested in more work examining this particular genre and music therapy applications.

Just as enslaved and oppressed African Americans' knowledge of familiar landscapes enabled cunningly concealed resistance, black music has repeatedly created rival soundscapes that aid their makers and listeners in engaging in coded acts of opposition and holistic acts of healing. Denied literacy in multiple ways, African Americans have turned to song repeatedly as a therapeutic outlet of expression for sorrows those of other cultures can never completely identify with, though the music itself remains universal in its appeal. As Marignay concludes, "the larger message to be taken from this account includes the meaning given with the rich legacy of medicine music left by people, bereft of material possessions, that is available anytime for self-healing. Knowing that we have within ourselves the resources we need for healing is medicine for the mind" (104). Through the characters of Tweet and her grandpa, Douglas shares this message with readers, as the songs they sing serve multiple purposes, creating a rival soundscape that only a close reading of the novel unveils.

Tweet and the Emotional Benefits of Music Therapy Therapeutics of Music

Following her grandfather's example of cleverly hiding money, as a grown woman Tweet will hide her own savings beneath a false bottom in her underwear drawer. However, complementing his lessons in rival geography, the therapeutic powers of music comprise another powerful lesson Tweet learns from her grandfather. As part of her first description of Grandpa, Tweet describes him singing the blues as he works in the field with his mule, but Grandpa employs music in more forms than a work song. One evening, when a mysterious wind blows and the accompanying eerie scream frightens Tweet, Grandpa sings to her: "Yeah, Tweet, ain't going to die right yet...Hmmm, Tweet, ain't going to die right yet" (33). Using personalized song to soothe the young Tweet,

Grandpa begins to teach her the power of music in the face of fear. Tweet learns the lesson quickly, as soon after, during an anxiety-ridden trip to town, Tweet notices Grandpa “seems...[to be] marching to a tune” (53). “I’m stepping along beside him,” Tweet tells us, identifying the beat as that of “We Are Soldiers” (53). While “We Are Soldiers” may not be familiar for many contemporary readers, the traditional hymn provides a familiar rhythm for Tweet and inspires feelings of confidence as she joins her grandpa to face the despicable Julius by any means necessary. According to the *African American Heritage Hymnal*, the traditional lyrics are as follows:

We are soldiers in the army.

We have to fight although we have to cry.

We’ve got to hold up the blood-stained banner.

We’ve got to hold it up until we die! (488)

Assuming Grandpa and Tweet sing these or similar lyrics, their song captures the same tenacious spirit as Oliver and Wright defined as characteristic of the blues. The phrase “although we have to cry” signals a conflict between the need for emotional catharsis and the need to continue fighting until death, a conflict resolved through the singing of the song itself. As Tweet’s narrative suggests, hearing her grandpa’s song and singing the words of the spiritual anthem allows her to allay painful emotions in order to access strength and dedication. Similar to Bone mimicking Stonewall Jackson, Tweet learns to use music in order to momentarily occupy an identity other than her own, perhaps that of one of her ancestors who sang the same hymn while summoning the courage to face their own hardships and fears. Tweet’s experience also parallels Bone’s in that gospel music provides some of Bone’s earliest experiences with music’s ability to

elicit positive emotions, but Tweet's experience also suggests that in doing so she is participating in a rich cultural tradition of rival soundscapes.

Grandpa's role as Tweet's primary caregiver further aligns Douglas's text with Allison's in that they both argue nourishing and restorative musical spaces do not have to be tied to a certain biological body or process; instead, they can be created by a diverse group of caregivers. The above scenes mark Grandpa's musical relationship with Tweet as similar to that of Aunt Ruth's with Bone. Both the young Tweet and Bone seem somewhat naturally in-tune to music's therapeutic potential, but just as Aunt Ruth helps Bone to access the power of music, Tweet's grandfather serves as a similar counselor. As readers, we are given no hints that Tweet experienced sexual abuse as a child, and this may explain why the shared gender important to Ruth and Bone's relationship is not necessary between Tweet and Grandpa. Whether intentional or not, Douglas provides an example of the African American tradition of othermothering through Grandpa's raising of Tweet. Grandpa's status as the most reliable and nurturing figure in Tweet's young life shows Douglas also joining Allison in the project of offering non-traditional images of parenting, separating the act of caregiving from the female body. Still, Bone's more privileged position due to her race reveals itself when situated alongside Tweet's story: while Bone enjoys musicking with Aunt Ruth in the comfort of a safe home away from Daddy Glen, Tweet learns her lessons in the midst of distressing scenes. In fact, song punctuates the most traumatic incident of all in young Tweet's life.

Attempting to kill both Tweet and Grandpa so that he might inherit the land he so desperately covets, Julius sets fire to their home one night. Once they have escaped the burning building, Grandpa instructs Tweet to "Sing. Keep us going," and so she begins to

sing “We are Soldiers” (56). Again, the gospel hymn bolsters the pair’s courage. Soon, though, Tweet must leave her weakened grandfather in the snow as she runs for help. His final words to her will be his charge to “Sing it, Tweet. Sing it.” (57). The plural pronoun in “Keep us going” is removed and replaced with an order for Tweet alone, as Grandpa symbolically passes down the tradition of rival soundscapes and prepares to die. These moments of song may seem insignificant at first—nothing more than an adult’s attempt to distract a child—but rival soundscapes and music therapy would have us read these scenes as testaments to the ability of music to aid the body in moments of severe stress. Not only does singing mandate the restorative breathing discussed earlier but multiple studies have shown music “to reduce stress and stress-related responses” in various settings (Miller and Spence 348, Jiang et al.). When Grandpa instructs Tweet to sing, he is not simply teaching her a method of distraction for difficult times; he is passing on heritage. While anyone of any culture may be able to access the restorative power of music, the African American experience speaks to a long tradition of using music as holistic medicine and engaging in the practice of self-care during life’s most devastating circumstances.

Tweet’s Physical Recovery through Music Therapy

By the end of *Can’t Quit You, Baby*, Tweet’s embrace of music’s therapeutic powers makes an undeniable impact on her life; she not only learns to use music as a tool for emotional regulation as a child, but as an adult she will utilize music to inspire physical transformation as well. As mentioned earlier, the conclusion of the novel sees Tweet recovering after an aneurysm leaves her unable to communicate with the world around her. When Cornelia first visits Tweet after illness strikes, Tweet’s mother Rosa tells Cornelia, “Sometimes [Tweet] hums. Hums till it drive you out of your mind. And then, seems like sometimes she listens to the music. Music

quiets her down—blues and gospel. The rest she don't pay no attention to" (233). A close reading of Tweet's physical recovery enriches Douglas's theme of the therapeutics of music in several ways.

First, the sounds assisting Tweet's recovery creates a direct connection back to Tweet's grandfather, forming a tribute to the long history of African American musical healing practices, the song a rival soundscape. Tweet's incessant humming serves as a sonic reminder of the humming beehive, a significant influence in her life and pertinent reminder of her grandfather. Further, during Cornelia's first visit, the narrator tells us that when a certain song "plays on the radio, Tweet moves her hand to "peck[] at the chair arm with her fingertips. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four" (236). Tellingly, the song causing this reaction is "We Are Soldiers," the same song Grandpa asked Tweet to sing during times of strife in her childhood. Though the significance of the hymn remains lost on Rosa and Cornelia, close readers note the nod to Grandpa's role in the healing process about to take place. The choice of hymn, again, suggests Douglas's keen discernment. Though perhaps not remembered in the popular imagination as well as songs such as "We Shall Overcome" or "Go Down, Moses," "We Are Soldiers" was one of many traditional hymns sung by members of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and '60s, the time period in which Tweet's recovery is set (Dunaway par. 18, Woodard 28). Douglas's choice to feature a traditional hymn revitalized as part of the Civil Rights movement bolsters the novel's theme of African American healing and musical traditions. Throughout scenes of Tweet post-stroke, Grandpa's presence in the form of two signifiers—the humming reminiscent of a beehive and the familiar hymn "We Are Soldiers"—reminds us of the passed down lessons of music's pragmatic uses. Tweet's

remarkable recovery is made possible through both her astonishing willpower and her learned appreciation of musical therapeutics, a lesson made possible by cultural heritage.

Second, Tweet's rehabilitation is made possible due to a combination of physical and musical therapy, a phenomenon supported by recent medical research. One visit from Cornelia sees her helping Tweet practice squeezing a "sponge-rubber ball" (244). The radio playing in the background, Tweet begins humming and tapping out a rhythm again, eventually raising her voice for the first time since her stroke to sing out, "SHIT, SHIT, SHIT" (247). As Cornelia's grandchild points out, "Tweet can't talk, but she can sing" (247). Over the course of just a few minutes, this evolves into Tweet's singing decipherable versions of "hungry again" and "want to pee," vocal indicators that not only signify the beginning of her recovering speech but also her ability to assist in her own physical recovery (248). Though *Can't Quit You, Baby* was written in the 1980s, today, an increasing number of stroke victims, notably including country music star Randy Travis, enjoy the benefits of music therapy alongside their physical therapy regimens (Panicker). Studies show that listening to music aids stroke survivors in accessing and recuperating injured areas of the brain that aid in sensory and motor recovery (Scholz et al., Särkämö et al.). In late 2016, a systematic review of medical literature concluded, "comprehensive research suggests that [music-supported therapy] could be useful because of its promotion of relaxation and of cognitive and motor improvement in post-stroke rehabilitation" (Zhang et al. 1-2). A 2017 literature review from *The Lancet: Neurology* came to a similar conclusion and included the assertion that "self-implemented or caregiver-implemented musical activities such as music listening" are therapeutic methods that "can easily be implemented" to aid patients in neurological recovery (Sihvonen 658). Among other factors such as repetitious movement and auditory-motor coupling, researchers point to the "emotional impact of music" as

one of the reasons this type of therapy proves so beneficial after the brain experiences trauma (Zhang et al. 2). Tweet's singing of expletives such as "shit" and "damn," as well as her heated speech to Cornelia, speak to the way in which music summons powerful emotions (254). Though the emotions brought to the surface may be painful for those involved, the stimulation of such areas of the brain encourages neuroplasticity and holistic recovery. In contrast to the coded songs of her enslaved ancestors, Tweet uses music to vocalize plainly her contempt for Cornelia and her whiteness.

As mentioned above, Tweet's singing morphs into an emotional speech that signifies music's ability to tap into our deepest, most guarded emotions. Tweet tells Cornelia, "I hate you, hate you, hate you" (254). For critic Theresa James, the communication between the two women via music is an "improvis[ation of] ways to cooperate across racial lines" (79). While James is quick to point out this dialogue does not mean a happy ending for the novel or the relationship, she argues that this new form of communication "marks development toward genuine and honest interaction" (80). James is right to point towards the use of music as meaningful, and I believe Kristeva's theories of the semiotic—the idea that music allows us to access a prelinguistic, and thus a pre-patriarchal and pre-racist order—explain why music serves as the means of communication for the two women, as well as for the African American community for over three centuries.

The space created as Tweet begins to access music for healing is decidedly womb-like considering the previously mentioned theories and studies that confirm life in-utero can be a chaotic mix of sounds and sensations. In addition to the sound of tapping, humming, and singing, we are told "Cornelia moans" as Tweet begins to sing and speak

(254). An emphasis on colors—the repeated mention of the “gold barrette” and the description of Tweet’s bowl of “jewelry, sparkling green and blue and scarlet in a shaft of sunlight”—also helps create an environment marked not by symbolic language but by the perception of various sensations aligned with Kristeva’s description of a prelinguistic state (252). As Tweet begins to vocalize her hatred for her long-time employer, Cornelia “feels as if her joints are being pulled apart, as if a jackhammer is sending its vibrations all through her body” (254). The bodily reaction further situates the women in a fetal space. As Gilboa reports, a fetus’s ears fully develop around the sixth month; prior to this, it engages only in “*reactive listening*, in which the fetus senses the vibrations of sound on its skin and reacts to this sensation” (243). Any fetal reaction before six months, according to Gilboa, is in response to “tactile” stimulation. Similar to case studies Gilboa describes, Cornelia and Tweet create a fetal state of chaos in the room as a way to access the difficult emotions they have to share if they are to productively move forward in a relationship. “Chaotic” describes, too, the physical and emotional space America has repeatedly resigned black Americans to throughout the nation’s history, inadvertently creating a womb for one of America’s most unique musical genres, the blues, as its originators employed self-care in the form of song.

Closely reading the character of Tweet does not just tell us something about Douglas’s white imagination, but also enables us to teach key concepts and themes from African American history, such as the importance of everyday acts of resistance, whether they employ land or song. Instead of approaching the novel as one about how a white woman interacts with her black employee, closely reading the character of Tweet allows us to use *Can’t Quit You, Baby* to prompt students’ discovery and discussion of works by African American writers. In addition to Frederick Douglass’s previously mentioned narrative, the novel might be taught alongside

Solomon North's *Twelve Years a Slave*, in which North's violin offers him not only a form of respite from more demanding forms of labor but also means to travel more freely than his fellow slaves. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* might also form a productive pairing with *Can't Quit You, Baby*. In addition to musical themes, Angelou's experience growing up in the early to mid-twentieth century South mirrors Tweet's in several ways. Tweet's confessing to have hated Cornelia and every other white woman, for example, reminds us of Angelou's recalling her wish "Nat Turner had killed all whitefolks in their beds and....Christopher Columbus had drowned in the *Santa María*" (152-153). Teaching Douglas's fiction alongside some of the non-fiction that may have helped inspire her character, allows us to more fully understand and appreciate the character of Tweet. Of course, too, students would find connections to the previously mentioned Morrison texts and the hearty amount of fiction featuring the blues, such as that by Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, August Wilson, and Alice Walker. Finally, we should not miss the opportunity to read Tweet's story as one of promise in terms of how art therapies offer potentially life-giving benefits to survivors of both emotional and physical trauma.

Conclusion

Both *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Can't Quit You, Baby* end in uncertainty. While many readers see a glimmer of hope in these conclusions, all agree a difficult path awaits the respective characters. Allison and Douglas each create protagonists who bear witness to the ways in which the lives of marginalized women in twentieth-century America were marred by sexual, physical, and mental trauma, but these two authors also provide insight to how humanity has harnessed the power of music to face life's

difficulties for centuries. Both Bone and Tweet learn the power of music from trusted elders and invite us to learn from them as well. The many similarities found between Bone and Tweet beg us to ask what other narratives speak to the passing down of musical therapeutics from caregiver to child; could the musical othermother be persistent enough to form a trope, and, if so, what meaning lies in the existence of such a universal figure?

Gender's role, too, continues to be a question of interest as we consider the extent to which Bone and Tweet's identification as female plays a role in their ability to access the healing properties of music through the semiotic. Of course, the differences between Bone and Tweet prove just as fruitful in terms of conjuring new readings: does the idea of rival soundscapes find support in other fictional works featuring African American characters, and how does such a tradition continue today? What rewards and what dangers lie in reading music in such a way? While many questions remain, the argument remains that the two protagonists explored in this chapter provide deft insight to the ways in which humans have managed to survive and heal after life's most devastating events thanks to the self-administered balm of music. Though we may see only the beginning of Bone's life, her story along with Tweet's allows us to wonder at how something as simple as humming our favorite tune might aid us in facing our daily stressors and greatest struggles.

CHAPTER FOUR

TELLING “THE STORY THAT HELPS ME”: THE THERAPEUTICS OF EXPRESSIVE ART
IN KAYE GIBBONS’S *ELLEN FOSTER* AND
JUDITH ORTIZ COFER’S *THE MEANING OF CONSUELO*

While the two previous chapters focus on music’s ability to aid emotional exploration and healing, this chapter explores how certain barriers, most notably a person’s negative associations with music, inhibit music’s ability to aid in healing after trauma³¹. Here, I examine how music fails to support the healing process for the title character of Kaye Gibbons’s *Ellen Foster* (1987) or the supporting character Mili of Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Meaning of Consuelo* (2003). Neither Ellen nor Mili finds powerful release or respite through music, and each girl also resists or is incapable of engaging in talk therapy. Instead, both turn to drawing and painting to engage with their inner world. Assisted by several surrogate caregivers, Ellen finds a sense of pride and accomplishment through her art, which I read as crucial to her survival story. Mili, however, engages with the visual arts but without anyone to mentor and encourage her. In the absence of encouragement, Mili ultimately suffers an all-too-early death, reminiscent of Edna Pontellier’s final swim into the ocean. Together, Ellen and Mili’s stories evidence a thread in contemporary southern literature: one that ties female survivors of trauma and their unspeakable grief back to their literary foremothers who also used art to grapple with difficult emotions and connect to a metaphorical mother. Without a mother figure willing to offer Mili encouragement

³¹ An earlier version of this chapter appears as “From Silence to Song: Reading the Therapeutics of Expression in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Meaning of Consuelo*” in *Label Me Latina/o*, vol. 8 (Summer 2018), pp. 1-14.

in her use of art, the young girl fails to survive her traumatic childhood, suggesting that the artistic othermother and counselor serves a vital role in the stories examined in the previous chapter. Ellen and Mili's respective stories, with their opposing outcomes, support increased attention to art's ability to allow traumatized children a sense of respite, agency, and hope.

Both Ellen and Mili refuse multiple opportunities to engage with music, finding solace through the visual arts instead. I argue that while different in their preferred art forms, Bone, Tweet, Ellen, and Mili all practice self-care through using creative expression to connect to the semiotic. Such an observation does more than offer theoretical support complementing the growing body of quantitative evidence bolstering creative art therapies' legitimacy and reputation as not "alternative" medicine but as valid treatments to be used in conjunction with more mainstream clinical methods. When considered alongside one another, the larger narratives from which these women emerge suggest significant changes in American conceptions of maternity occurring over the twentieth century. The works by Chopin, Dunbar-Nelson, Allison, Douglas, Gibbons, and Ortiz Cofer examined throughout this dissertation all suggest an inherent connection between artistic expression and emotional exploration. While the nineteenth-century work of Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson represents female characters using music (and in Chopin's case painting also) to explore growing anxieties about the confining idealization and racialized position of American mothers at the turn of the century, works written toward and after the end of the twentieth century by Allison, Douglas, Gibbons, and Ortiz Cofer depict neglectful—and sometimes completely absent—mothers. These realistic mother figures do more than signify the Angel of the House's stark fall from grace, which critics mentioned below have read as sociocultural commentary. These authors all portray the experience of traumatized daughters finding comfort and healing through various arts, signifying a persistent belief in creative

expression's ability to connect us to the semiotic, an insular and maternal space allowing us feelings of safety and contentment. Mili's story, though, stands out from the rest, as her tragic death demonstrates the consequences of having no reliable adult figure to encourage her artistic and emotional exploration.

Of course, I am not the first to examine literary representations of American mothers over the course of the twentieth century. Kimberly C. Weaver's dissertation on "Mothering and Surrogacy in Twentieth-Century American Literature" studies *Ellen Foster* and *Bastard Out of Carolina* alongside Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Sapphire's *Push* (1996) to argue that "The twentieth-century American woman writer deconstructs the notion of nineteenth-century motherhood...to illustrate the trauma experienced by the female children due to the abandonment, abuse, and trauma inflicted by their own marginalized mothers"; once separated from their biological mothers, Weaver argues, these female children are often mothered by "non-normative surrogates who are also often times the new socially deviant and invisible" (1)³². A credit to her work, I see the novels studied throughout this dissertation as further evidence of Weaver's assertion: I add Douglas and Ortiz Cofer to the list of authors portraying problematic mother figures who dismantle the nineteenth-century idealization of mothers, while also connecting this trend to the much earlier work of Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson.³³ In the following

³² The surrogates Weaver identifies are similar in function—but not always the same in name—as the characters I have identified as other-mothering amateur musical therapists helping to connect motherless survivors to the semiotic. While explaining her use of the term "surrogates," Weaver writes, "Patricia Hill Collins would call it 'othermothering': those who help to pick up the pieces and maintain some sense of normalcy for the girls" (14). The differences in our chosen terms point to distinctions in our readings. In her reading of both *Ellen Foster* and *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Weaver is much more selective in who she terms a "surrogate" for the girls, only choosing one or two characters as fitting of the title. My own readings label numerous characters as "othermothers," a term more fitting for my reading than for Weaver's since the very term originates in the need for a community of caregivers, not just one or two, to raise a child, especially within a marginalized subculture.

³³ Further support for this claim is found in the novels I suggest for future work in this dissertation's epilogue. Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* are both set in the earlier twentieth century and feature much tamer critiques of motherhood and depict characters engaging with the therapeutics of music more actively than either Gibbons or Ortiz Cofer do.

chapter in particular, I suggest the inadequacy of music as a therapeutic tool for the characters of Gibbons's and Ortiz Cofer's narratives functions as one way the novels further symbolize a turn away from American society's traditional idealization of mothers as intimate sites of safety; however, the daughters in both of these works still seek a connection to the maternal space of the semiotic through engagement with creative arts. As chapter one argues, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, using music to soothe and release emotions was already a well-established mothering practice. Together, Gibbons's and Ortiz Cofer's works represent an increasing awareness of the multiple forms self-soothing may take, complementing the increased diversity in terms of family structures and gender identities these novels also demonstrate near the end of the twentieth century.

In the novels discussed below, both Gibbons and Ortiz Cofer depict men as more closely tied to music, while female protagonists are often pictured as poignantly silent. In her dissertation "Reading Silence Actively: Recovering the Maternal Narrative in Contemporary Women's Novels," Terri B. Pantuso offers nuanced readings of how women in twentieth-century novels learn the power of silence from their mothers. Instead of viewing female silence as a passive act in the face of oppressive patriarchal systems, Pantuso cites a body of work positioning silence as an active and deliberate rhetorical choice which women—African American women especially—have long utilized. With this framework in mind, Pantuso argues silence is "a feature of resistant language that demonstrates an intertextual matrilineal trajectory" across multiethnic, contemporary women's fiction (30). Through my work below, I engage Pantuso's reading of silence in *Ellen Foster* and then apply her understanding of silence to *The Meaning of Consuelo* in order to clarify why music offers limited value in the respective characters' self-soothing practices after they experience trauma. While I appreciate Pantuso's

insight to how mothers pass down the tradition of silence, I question the optimism of reading silence as agency in the texts examined here. While the novels discussed certainly depict silence's usefulness as a survival strategy, I argue they also depict art therapy as a more productive and healthier act of resistance than silence. Read together, *Ellen Foster* and *The Meaning of Consuelo* demonstrate both the range of creative art therapies and some of the roadblocks impeding their utilization on a larger scale. From a more theoretical stance, my reading of Gibbons's and Ortiz Cofer's respective novels combines with the work of previous chapters to argue that no matter the degree to which images of American mothers have diversified over the past dozen decades, returning to the semiotic—or, said another way, returning to an idealized mother—remains a goal for young women in trauma narratives. And, as Mili's story poignantly suggests, the absence of a caregiver supportive of engaging the semiotic proves detrimental.

Crafting a Home: Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster*

Several commonalities between Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster* (1987) and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) explain the novels' respective narrators as a popular pair for studies of contemporary southern fiction (Belcher, Foster, Weaver). Rebecca Harshman Belcher's "Eliminating Barriers and Expanding Borders through White Trash Literature," for instance, includes Gibbons's and Allison's works as examples of narratives that deconstruct whiteness, arguing that "each author creates permeable and accessible borders within the diverse cultures of America" (ii). When the traumatic abuse each "white trash" character experiences causes readers to sympathize with them, Belcher suggests, the separation between poor whites and other whites and between whites and people of color weaken (ii)³⁴. Incestuous father figures

³⁴ Belcher's argument proves especially interesting when considered alongside Sharon Monteith's take on Ellen's interracial friendship with her black neighbor Starletta. Monteith's reading argues Gibbons's thorny explanation of

further unite Ellen and Bone through their survival of sexual abuse, as explored most thoroughly by Elizabeth Rose Thompson. In contrast to the larger American tradition of using incestuous imagery to portray the south as humorously “backwards” and “stagnant,” Thompson argues southern women writers such as Gibbons and Allison have brought warranted attention to the somber and universal phenomenon of incest as their depictions of molestation and rape refuse readers the opportunity to read incestuous abuse as a crude, victimless joke. Whereas Belcher’s and Thompson’s respective works focus on shared trauma’s linkage of Ellen and Bone, my own reading demonstrates how Ellen’s methods for survival and healing both differentiate her and unite her with the characters previously examined in this dissertation.

The abuse Gibbons describes often parallels that in Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Like Bone, nine-year-old Ellen experiences the loss of both an emotionally unavailable mother and severely abusive father figure, leading her to move among uninviting environments, searching for a suitable home. However, the specifics of Ellen’s maternal interactions and paternal abuse prove crucial to how she will mitigate pain differently than other characters explored throughout this project. After her mother’s suicide, Ellen lives with her drunken father for some time before family members and school authorities intervene in various ways. Ellen bounces from home to home, temporarily living with relatives who look down upon her, accusing her of engaging in the same debauchery as her father and even blaming her for her mother’s death. Meanwhile, Ellen’s only friend, Starletta, cannot offer her a place to live thanks to both Ellen’s learned racism and the institutionalized racism of the 1970s South that labels it

Starletta’s silence throughout the novel forms a classic example of what Toni Morrison identified as the White Imagination. Monteith’s work forms some of the most compelling scholarship to be written about *Ellen Foster*, and while I do not extensively engage with her reading here, a later draft may draw connections between Gibbons’s portrayal of Starletta and Ortiz-Cofer’s scenes describing Mili’s classmate Lucila.

inappropriate for Ellen to live with a black family³⁵. Much of the story comes to us through flashbacks, the present-day of the novel seeing a now 11-year-old Ellen in a semi-permanent home, where she lives comfortably with a foster mother and several siblings (misunderstanding the term “foster family,” Ellen takes on the last name of “Foster” to signify her newfound identity and mother; we never learn her legal last name). While Ellen’s re-telling of her tumultuous journey begs suggestions that narratology serves as a therapeutic act for her³⁶, I argue several aspects of her story make it emblematic of how the physicality and play of creating art offers trauma survivors hope and healing.

In the following section, I demonstrate how Ellen’s use of silence to survive her home environment makes music and talk therapy unfit tools for her healing. I then argue that the narrative arc of *Ellen Foster* shows the protagonist moving from inert silence to the active therapeutic methods of play, gardening, and art making. Understood through play theory and neuroscience, Ellen’s various methods of play and artistry increasingly aid her survival and healing as she interacts with adults able to give her more rewarding forms of play than she can access while living in poverty. In contrast to Bone and Tweet, Ellen finds her strongest connection to a semiotic space not through the enjoyment of music, but through the physicality of play, gardening, and drawing require, aligning her experience with that of Edna Pontellier. In comparison to her predecessor, though, Ellen’s interaction with multiple othermothers

³⁵ In contrast to Monteith’s readings mentioned in the previous footnote, multiple critics read Ellen as experiencing a racial epiphany during the novel. Groover writes that the end of the novel proves, “Ellen finds the love that sustains her only when she abandons both her community’s prejudices and its restrictive definition of a family” (194), and Weaver reads Ellen’s narrative “journey” as one that “reveals that she transcends the racism of her surrounding entrapment” (161).

³⁶ Watts’s and Pantuso’s respective readings offer support for this idea in their shared argument that Ellen creates her own identity through recovering her mother’s story. As part of her discussion of this idea, Watts credits Linda Tate for the suggestion that “to the women of Gibbons’s novels, language is like nourishment, a vital fuel for the regeneration of a woman and her community” (Watts 224-225). My argument strays from this line of thinking by focusing on the fact that Ellen’s survival and healing has more to do with the unspeakable than the spoken.

encouraging her sense of pride and independence allows her story to end on a more optimistic note.

Silence as Survival in *Ellen Foster*

Through content and form, Gibbons establishes silence as a major theme in *Ellen Foster*. Even the figurative language Ellen uses captures her negative associations with sound; she describes the uncomfortable experience of being at her emotionally abusive grandmother's house as "like a record you play on the wrong speed" (71). Even more revealing, when describing her life at school, Ellen tells us, "Monday is always music day. I cannot carry a tune so I do not sing out loud for somebody to laugh at me. I just move my lips to the words and try to look eager and in tune. There is enough people to sing so that my not singing does not make a drop in the bucket" (97). Such a disdain for music clashes with the experience of Bone and Tweet, who turn to song for strength repeatedly throughout their childhood. However, multiple flashbacks in *Ellen Foster* explain the protagonist's insistence that her raised voice is neither valuable or missed, as silence links to both maternity and safety for the young girl.

Though readers glimpse Ellen's mother before her suicide described so early in the novel, they hear little of her voice. A victim of chronic illness and domestic abuse, Ellen's mother still seems absent even when home from the hospital. Ellen watches as her mother comes home after being discharged and her father "asks about supper right off. What does she have planned? he wants to know" (3). Ellen tells us, "I listen to him and to her not saying a word back to him. She stands between his mean highness and the television set looking at him make words at her....He is just too sorry to talk back to even if he is my daddy" (3). Importantly, Ellen describes herself as listening not just to her father's words but her mother's silence. For Pantuso, Ellen's recollection of her mother as a woman who enacted agency through silence in scenes such as

these allows Ellen to later “recreate her matrilineal heritage” despite her mother’s absence (78). However, I argue Ellen displays initial discomfort with her mother’s decision to stay silent and, by the end of the novel, clearly rejects silence’s usefulness.

Early in the novel, Ellen pleads with a silent mother not to leave her, an act undoubtedly influencing Ellen’s later decision to move from silence to speech. As a witness to her mother’s suicide induced by overdose, Ellen pleads with her mother to “vomit” up the pills. When her mother’s stoic, quiet face affirms she will not, Ellen resigns herself to lying by her mother’s side until she passes (10-11). Accordingly, the young girl’s final moments with her mother are associated not with tender goodbyes, but silence. As she lays beside her mother, Ellen tells her, “You can rest with me until somebody comes to get you. We will not say anything. We can rest” (12). While Ellen’s words may suggest an acceptance of her mother’s silence, they also depict a young girl forced to take on the role of caregiver. Later, Ellen will face feelings of guilt as relatives blame her rather than her father (who threatens to kill Ellen if she calls for help) for her mother’s death (10). Ellen does not stay quietly by her mother’s side due to a learned respect for silence; rather, her active attempts to save her mother’s life are met by both her mother and father’s insistence on silence. Though Ellen witnesses her mother’s use of silence as a survival mechanism, she also possesses an intellect keen enough to realize inaction and silence are, in part, responsible for her mother’s likely preventable death. Unlike Bone, who associates music with feelings of intimacy with her mother, Ellen’s mother’s illness, depressed state, and eventual death mean silence, not melody, permeates Ellen’s memories of her earliest caregiver. For Ellen to connect to the semiotic, therapeutic methods other than music will be necessary.

Ellen’s father’s associations with song further explain her disinterest in music. As Pantuso summarizes, “Throughout the text, Ellen is portrayed as an intuitive girl whose silence

serves as a survival tactic and method of self-preservation” (89). While still living at home after her mother’s passing, Ellen repeatedly hides in a closet while a drunken crew of her father and his friends “have a free-for-all” occasionally punctuated by singalongs (44). Ellen recalls:

My daddy has got his guitar out now and thinks he can play like a star. He will hang his head and sing the Tennessee Waltz but his favorite is On Top of Old Smokey. He says he will play a tune for old times sake.

Oh Lord they all know the words and how many are in there I cannot say but I know it must be five or six drinking whiskey out of my glasses and singing On Top of Old Smokey. (44)

Unlike Bone who has fond memories of singing along to songs with Aunt Ruth and Tweet whose grandfather teaches her to sing in times of trouble, Ellen associates music with her father’s drunken neglect necessitating her own silence (Allison 138, Douglas 33). Like too many children living in abusive home, Ellen knows she must remain still and quiet in order to avoid her father or his friends’ attention during scenes such as the above excerpt. “It would have been OK if he had let me alone to begin with,” Ellen insists:

but he [her father] got confused. Sometimes he would come stand outside the closet door just to tease me. Talking to me all about my mama’s little ninnies.

You got girl ninnies he might say.

I became the champion of not breathing or blinking to be heard. Somebody else calling out sugar blossom britches might sound sweet but it was nasty coming from him. He could make anything into trash. (52)

Ellen’s paralysis in reaction to her father’s insidious intentions—recognized as the coping mechanism of dissociation by critics like Weaver (158)—make it impossible for music to carry

positive connotations. Instead, music signals Ellen's need to hide herself from potential abuse, a compelling reason for Ellen to later fear adding her own voice to the school chorus.

In contrast to Allison's graphic depictions of Daddy Glen's molestation and rape of Bone, Gibbons chooses to provide few specific details about the abuse Ellen experiences at the hands of her father. Due to her attentive listening, Ellen hears one of her father's companions tell him, "I married Delphi when she was thirteen....Yours is just about ripe. You gots to get em when they is still soff when you mashum" (44). As Ellen tries to flee the house, her father catches her. Ellen recounts:

Get away from me he does not listen to me but touches his hands harder on me.

That is not me. Oh no that was her [her mother's] name. Do not oh you do not say her name to me. That was her name. You know that now stop no not my name.

I am Ellen.

I am Ellen.

He pulls the evil back into his self and Lord I run. (45)

That the details of the scene are not made explicit but left for the reader to infer means silence again becomes part of the novel's form and reflects reality. As mentioned in the previous chapter, victims of sexual assault, especially children, often react with silence due to the trauma's paralyzing effect on the brain. Weaver recognizes this truth as well, when she writes, "For Ellen as for other victims of such abuse, the silence is a way to help slip into a past where the affected can wonder if the abuse is actually real" (158). Weaver also compares Ellen's silence to Bone's "wonder[ing] if she imagined the initial rape by her stepfather" (158). Young survivors of sexual abuse possess limited knowledge of the language needed to describe such abuse, seen here in Ellen's reference to her father pulling "evil" back into himself in order to

describe the culmination of her rape. Ellen's above account of her rape provides evidence that linguistic methods of processing the trauma she has experienced fail to serve her as fully as they might aid other survivors.

Ellen's limited ability to verbalize her experiences and the safety silence promises Ellen mean the counselor she visits each week at school will never make progress in learning her past if he insists on her talking. As Ellen asserts to readers, "I might be confused sometimes in my head but it is not something you need to talk about. Before you can talk you have to line it all up in order and I had rather just let it swirl around until I am too tired to think" (104). Like Bone and other child survivors of abuse whose trust of adults has repeatedly led to trauma, Ellen must be made to feel safe and comfortable with a counselor before considering verbalizing her experiences or reactions. Talk therapy with an unknown man offers no feasible support for Ellen, and Gibbons's inclusion of the school counselor nods to the impossibility of institutional and standardized forms of healthcare realistically addressing the needs of a diverse and traumatized population of patients. Whereas her positive connotations of music mean homespun versions of music therapy offer Bone a way out of silence, Ellen's negative associations with music mean she must find therapeutic release through other methods.

Ellen and the Therapeutics of Play

Like her mother, Ellen turns to silence as a survival mechanism while living with her father. However, unlike her mother, Ellen makes the active choice to run away from his abuse, finally seeking shelter at her friend Starletta's home. Having watched her mother delve into a deep, quiet depression from which she never recovers, Ellen sets out to create a new story for herself, embodying a sense of resistance and actively participating in various therapeutic modes. Linda Watts writes about how Ellen heals after the loss of both parents through developing a new

identity, a process which involves, in part, inserting herself into her mother's story, which she must learn through multiple sources. Watts argues that, "A daughter's story inheritance does not preserve [...] but rather continuously activates, makes ever alive and newly felt, her identity through matrilineal connection" (221). Such a statement complements Pantuso's argument that Ellen's memories of gardening with her biological mother serve as a way for her to "reclaim the pre-patriarchal associations with nature as inherently feminine" and recover "silenced maternity" (86). Though I find both Pantuso's and Watts's readings of *Ellen Foster* enlightening, the inherent value in therapeutic acts such as gardening and creative expression goes unexamined while narrative's ability to effect healing remains privileged. I argue memories and narration are not the only—nor most crucial—devices in Ellen's therapeutic toolbox; rather, physical acts such as gardening and creating art require stimulation of the brain that crucially allow Ellen to experience feelings of confidence and safety. Below, I argue that Ellen's story demonstrates active participation with the visual arts prove just as powerful a therapeutic mode of expression as singing.

Just as Chopin's Edna and Allison's Bone find healing through the therapeutic act of play, so too does Ellen. Watts makes this very argument without meaning to when she contradicts herself within her essay. She writes that Ellen:

has not the luxury of play, but as a compensation, she develops a variety of academic interests. When looking through her microscope, painting 'brooding oceans,' and writing in her diary, Ellen's world is enlarged, and she is permitted to experience her own power of perception, one of her most life-sustaining and life-affirming gifts. Through these activities, she is reminded that she is worthwhile and that she can function creatively. (Watts 227)

Despite her claim that Ellen does not have “the luxury of play,” Watts’s following sentences describe varieties and benefits of play as outlined by the play theorists discussed in chapters one and two. The joy, interest, and contentment Ellen finds through her hobbies—which Watts labels as “academic interests”—make them examples of repeated activities that contribute to a healthier and more resilient psychological state according to Frederickson (see Chapter 2, page 112). Just as Edna’s time at the racetrack and easel allows her a sense of pride and accomplishment, Ellen’s time at the microscope, canvas, and page aids the young girl’s emotional recovery and personal growth. Rather than pointing to the absence of play in Ellen’s life, Watts’s chosen examples demonstrate how Ellen, like Bone, manages to find ways to play despite the limitations of poverty and neglect.

In another similarity with Bone, secrecy heightens the thrill of Ellen’s play. Just as Bone likes to imagine herself as a famous musician while she “whisper-sing[s]” along with the radio in the mornings, Ellen keeps her microscope and its slides hidden from others (Allison 137). Ellen tells us she:

only viewed the slides when everybody was asleep. Then I would pretend I was on the brink of a discovery and then here it is. After all these years of research and science I have found the mysterious euglena. I had looked at that slide a hundred times and I knew it was made in a factory in town but *that is the way I enjoyed playing*. I didn’t see anything wrong with it just as long as I kept in mind that I was old Ellen not a laboratory doctor. (120 italics mine)

Through their respective daydreams, Bone and Ellen imagine themselves as famous or highly esteemed women, a fantasy most children can relate to, but one that holds special value for Bone and Ellen whose parents fail to provide them with the praise their curiosity and intellect deserve.

Huizinga notes, “Even in early childhood the charm of play is enhanced by making a ‘secret’ out of it. This is for *us*, not for the ‘others’” (31). Because Bone and Ellen each play by themselves in the scenes cited above, the sense of secrecy and importance is heightened further. Their secrecy can also be tied to the circumstances of their childhoods: secrecy serves as means to avoid unwanted attention from adults. The loss of innocence Bone and Ellen experience due to the nature of their abuse further explains their desire not to be seen by others as children. In the excerpt above, as in other scenes throughout the book, Ellen makes clear she understands the difference between what is imagined and what is real. After her mother dies, she describes putting on her mother’s clothes: “Put it back put it back just like it was. When I am old I can come back and wear it. When it is not for play” (13). A maturity borne out of the necessity for caring for herself means Ellen parents herself while she engages in play throughout the novel, seemingly oblivious to the injustice of the dual role of mother and child she plays. To return to Huizinga’s theorization of play, Ellen’s play allows her “step[] out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (26). Playing—whether it takes the form of pretending to be a scientist, painting a picture, or dressing up as her mother—allows her an escape from the psychological distress her daily life holds, most notably the stress of parenting herself. Like the coping mechanism of dissociation, play allows Ellen a way to survive her childhood, providing the benefits of respite from troubles and a sense of pride and possibility.

Closer attention to the ways Ellen plays throughout the novel reveal neurological mechanisms allowing her to reach a healthy emotional state by the novel’s close despite the abuse she has experienced. In her book *Lifting Depression: A Neuroscientist’s Approach to Activating Your Brain’s Healing Power*, Professor of Behavioral Neuroscience Kelly Lambert argues that contemporary society’s emphasis on increasingly “hands-free” lifestyles means

“we’ve lost something vital to our mental well-being—an innate resistance to depression” (7). Lambert’s research focuses on what she terms the human brain’s “*effort-driven rewards circuit*” (7). According to Lambert, because of how the “motivation, pleasure, movement, and thought” regions of the brain work together, completing tasks that require hand movement and create visible results helps us maintain emotional health (7). Lambert writes, “Our brains are programmed to derive a deep sense of satisfaction and pleasure when our physical effort produces something tangible, visible” (28). Just like pharmaceuticals alter our brains’ chemistry in order to make us happier and more motivated so do what Lambert terms “behaviorceuticals” (qtd. in “How Busy”). When we cook a meal or knit a sweater, Lambert explains, “We also experience an increased perception of control over our environment, more positive emotions, and, perhaps most important, enhanced resilience against mental illnesses such as depression” (29). Lambert’s theories provide a neurological explanation for how and why Ellen experiences increased feelings of enjoyment in the homes of her art teacher and “new mama,” a reading that highlights the importance of fostering hands-on play to encourage emotional health and growth in not only children, but the world at large.

While Ellen seems to enjoy looking through her microscope and making art no matter where she resides, her other methods of play while she lives in an abusive household differ from those in which she engages in her other, healthier homes. Lambert argues that the increased automation of society is at least partly to blame for why “those born in the middle third of the twentieth century [are] ten times more likely [to] suffer depression than those born in the first third of the century” (26). Through such a lens, Ellen’s increased happiness in the homes of her art teacher and new mama results not just from the nurturing she receives in each environment but also the modes of play available to her. While still living with her father, Ellen describes how

she “had to have something to do” during the winter months, “so mostly [she] played catalog” (31). In a style familiar to many who grew up in the age of Sears holiday catalogs, Ellen “plays” in a poignantly consumerism-driven twentieth-century fashion. Ellen recalls:

I picked out the little family first and then the house things and clothes. Sleepwear, evening jackets for the man, pantsuits. I outfitted everybody. The mom, the dad, the cute children. Next they got some camping equipment, a waffle iron, bedroom suits, and some toys. When they were set for the winter I shopped ahead for the spring. I had to use an old catalog but they had no way of knowing they were not in style. I also found the best values. The man worked in the factory and she was a receptionist. They liked to dress up after work. (31)

In contrast to playing with paper or baby dolls, whose dressing requires a range of motor skills, Ellen’s play occurs almost exclusively in her mind, her hands only needing to occasionally turn the glossy pages before her. While the imagination and interest involved in playing catalog make Ellen’s description of the activity as “play” valid, the absence of anything concrete resulting from Ellen’s play means the activity fails to activate the effort-driven rewards circuit Lambert describes.

When Ellen gets “tired of the catalogs,” she joins the Girl Scouts, an organization whose focus on confidence- and skill-building promises to offer Ellen more physical and rewarding activities than a Sears catalog can provide (31). However, Ellen’s lack of supervision and funds prevents her from completing any assigned tasks. Ellen admits, “I wanted the badges more than I needed to be honest so I signed my daddy’s initials saying I had made a handicraft or wrapped a ankle or whatever the badge called for” (31). Doing her best to parent herself, Ellen allows herself to break rules so that she may enjoy the feeling of pride that accompanies each new

badge. Soon, though, Ellen tires of attending meetings and leaves the organization, an unsurprising development given Lambert's explanation of why Ellen's brain would find more satisfaction and motivation in her making a craft or practicing first-aid than receiving a falsified badge. A popular notion presumes all children need to play is an active imagination, but Ellen's experiences playing catalog and joining the Girl Scouts demonstrate how neglect and poverty limit her access to the mental and emotional rewards more privileged children experience through the more varied types of play available to them.

Lambert addresses the effort-driven rewards circuit of children specifically when she discusses the benefits of Montessori schools. When Maria Montessori established her teaching methods—now practiced in thousands of schools worldwide—she emphasized both sensory experiences and hand movements. She then observed what Lambert and other Montessori school visitors see today: children given hands-on activities, or “jobs,” to independently complete in an otherwise quiet environment. Lambert describes how Montessori saw children so focused on the tasks assigned to them, they would not stop what they were doing, even for promised treats (71). Without knowing it, Lambert explains, Montessori:

offered tasks so appealing to the children's senses that they stimulated their pleasure center (accumbens), which directed them to their activity of choice; extensive involvement of their hands, which activated the striatum as the kids picked items up, measured, and stacked them; thought processes required to compare, contrast, and categorize, which were provided by the prefrontal cortex. The extended time devoted to each task solidified the intricate connections among the brain components of the effort-driven rewards circuit, which in turn further increased the child's attention span and the amount of time he or she stayed “on task.” (72-73)

Montessori activities' stimulation of the effort-driven rewards circuit explains why studies demonstrate students who attend Montessori schools as young children are more energetic and intrinsically motivated than those who were not Montessori alumni (73). Montessori methods show so much promise for encouraging a healthy brain that researchers are currently "experimenting with a therapeutic form of Montessori intervention for Alzheimer's patients in an attempt to build new brain connections to compensate for the neuron damage" caused by the disease (75). The undeniable health benefits of activities requiring simultaneous engagement of the movement, motivation, and problem-solving areas of our brain explain why so many people find hobbies such as knitting, woodworking, gardening, painting, and various crafting rewarding. Such insight also suggests the long-term benefits Ellen misses out on each time she earns a Girl Scout badge without actually building a craft or practicing a skill.

Poverty also limits Ellen's ability to create "behaviorceuticals" by restricting her food choices when she lives with her father. Ellen relates how she survived the months after her mother's death, recalling, "I fed myself OK. I tried to make what we had at school but I found the best deal was the plate froze with food already on it. A meat, two vegetables, and a dab of dessert" (30). Having to watch her budget, Ellen notes prepackaged meals cost her less than the fresh ingredients she would need to recreate the meals she eats at school. While living in poverty and neglect, Ellen's meal preparation involves little more than the opening of a box and the setting of a microwave or oven, but she finds a much different culture surrounding food in her foster home. When she accompanies her new Mama to the grocery store, the variety of available food astounds her and she spends the car ride home in culinary anticipation:

Riding home in the car with all the food you feature how it will look and smell cooked. Chicken does not look like much raw but wait till you fry it. Then it melts in the mouth.

She [Ellen's foster mother] promises to fry the chicken for Sunday lunch but only if I help.

Oh yes.

And please what about some sweet corn and potatoes or if you do not have any corn what about some peas? Does that sound good to you?

That sounds fine. But only if you help me.

Oh yes. (51)

Ellen's excitement for fried chicken and sweet corn fuel her enthusiasm for helping in the kitchen. Like many children, Ellen wants to help with tasks around the house, but science suggests this is not an altruistic desire. Lambert's theories indicate that our brains reward us for activities such as cooking with pleasurable feelings because the activity requires hand movement to create sustenance essential for our survival. Lambert suggests we "Think about effort-driven rewards as a clever evolutionary tool, a way to motivate early humans to maintain the level of physical activity needed to obtain the resources to live" (29). Increasingly efficient hunting and farming techniques required physical labor but also anticipation of the end goal, bolstering the connection between the areas of our brain responsible for movement and motivation. For Lambert, all of this means "that movement—and especially hand movements that lead to meaningful outcomes—plays a key role in both preventing the onset of and building resilience against depression and other emotional disorders" (30). Ellen's foster mother also requires each child help with food preparation every Sunday morning (69), a ritual Groover refers as "a

communal activity...at the heart of Ellen's new domestic life," providing Ellen with "spiritual nourishment" (191). In the light of neuroscience, though, Ellen's new mother is not only providing lessons in the benefits of community, but also engagement in an activity that will bolster mental and emotional health for years to come.

As Ellen moves into more attentive and middle-class home environments, the range of play open to her and the emotional benefit of her play increases; at the same time, the diversity and number of caregivers in Ellen's life grows. After officials at Ellen's school notice the bruises on her body, Ellen finds herself temporarily placed in the home of art teacher Julia and her husband Roy. Though Pantuso and other critics tend to only briefly refer to Ellen's time with Julia and Roy, I see Julia and Roy's home as Ellen's most powerful site of healing and growth. Ellen's assertion that "Me and Julia and Roy laughed and carried on right much" provides our first glimpse of an Ellen able to enjoy life and see herself as part of a functional family that challenges her previous conceptions of domesticity (56). Ellen introduces Roy with the information that "he could clean a house like a woman. Wash the dishes. Do the clothes. Do it all and smile when you ask him how he can stand working like a woman" (55). Similar to Bone's Aunt Raylene serving as an example of a woman unafraid to make her own rules, Roy's life as a man unafraid of "working like a woman" opens a world of possibility for Ellen, as she begins to understand that men, too, can offer a nurturing environment.

While staying at her grandmother and, later, her aunt's house, Ellen spends much of her time alone or away from her court appointed caregivers. At Julia and Roy's, however, Ellen becomes part of an active family for the first time, one that purposefully sets aside time for play. Ellen recalls, "Every Sunday we would all three lay on the floor drawing each other with blue hair or two noses or something silly. You name it. Or we would all take a part reading Prince

Valiant and stand up and strike a pose when it is your turn to read. That was the best” (56). Again, the play Ellen describes allows for an imaginative escape from reality, but also sees adults as active collaborators in play. Thus, aside from Starletta’s parents, Julia and Roy are the first adults to earn Ellen’s trust, allowing them to serve as amateur counselors in her healing process. Julia even encourages Ellen to engage the therapeutics of music: “She [Julia] said it was good I loosened up. We would run around and she would tell me to let it all hang out. Let your hair down good golly Miss Molly let it all hang out. Go with the flow, she would say. Make up a tune and throw in some words and go with the flow” (56). “I had no idea people could live like that,” Ellen remarks (56). Though music remains an unappealing hobby for Ellen, the active and imaginative space of Julia and Roy’s home explain why she finds her time there transformational.

Ellen and Art

Even before Gibbons introduces the character of Julia, Ellen alludes to her interest in art several times. When buying her own Christmas presents³⁷, Ellen picks out “two variety packs of construction paper” (32) and while commenting on Starletta’s selection of toys, she complains that if Starletta “gets any crayons she breaks them just to hear them snap” (37). Ellen “will not color with a broke crayon” and tapes Starletta’s crayons back together “like they are supposed to be” (37). Ellen’s behavior links to that of the refugee children art therapist Miriam Nabarro worked with in Sudan; Nabarro describes how having “their own paper, their own space,” their own images allows otherwise displaced and confused children to feel a sense of control and ownership they are not allowed in other areas of their lives (82). But Ellen’s taping of Starletta’s crayons is not only a transference of her desire to have more control over her life and body, but

³⁷ While living at home with her father, Ellen survives via funds left in the mailbox by various relatives moved to support the girl financially but unwilling to take her into their home.

also signifies the fact that she—as she later tells Starletta—is “serious” about art supplies (62). When Julia and Roy give Ellen an art set for her birthday, she describes the colored pencil set with its “circles and circles” of color (61) and then:

There was oil paint.

We do not even have paint like this at school. I said Julia this is like your paint.

By God they are oil paints that do not wash out or off with water and to change a picture idea after you have started one you just have to tear the whole business up and start over. You can use them to paint something the way it is supposed to be not all watered down but strong. (62)

Ellen’s “By God” exclamation and observation that paints like these are not even available at school evidence her excitement, while her spoken comment to Julia suggests a strengthening bond between the two. More telling, though, are Ellen’s thoughts on the significance of oil paints, which she sees as enabling an artist to capture their subject more accurately than other paints. The inability to wash away mistakes and easily start over means Ellen must think more carefully than ever about the brush strokes she makes. Just as Edna increasingly “plays” the role of artist after moving into her own house, Ellen’s time with Julia and Roy allows her to gain more confidence and pride in her work. Meanwhile, her expanding artist’s palette symbolizes her growing ability to control her own life and body once away from her father.

As Ellen develops as a painter, her preferred subject matter evidences her using art form to explore her unspoken feelings. Ellen specializes in painting “brooding oceans,” which she calls “experiment pictures” (123). Just as the ocean represents a maternal, semiotic space in the works of Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin, here Ellen’s interest in repeatedly painting oceans symbolizes her longing for a mother who allows her a sense of comfort and safety. The

“brooding” aspect of her oceans imply the emotional weight she attaches to the scene. Ellen’s referring to them as her “experiment pictures” further signifies how important each painting is to her while also suggesting a sense of the unknown (123). Through the act of painting a brooding ocean, Ellen taps into emotions she has yet to fully understand or articulate. Such a reading finds support in Ellen’s explanation for why she cannot paint an ocean as a gift for her insensitive aunt and cousin:

I would really like to paint them one of my brooding oceans but they would miss the point I am sure of how the ocean looks strong and beautiful and sad at the same time and that is really something if you think about it. They would not like the picture because it looks so evil when you first look at it. It is not something that would grow on them. Not like these cats hopping around teasing with a ball of yarn. I like that picture fine except once you look at it one time you have seen and felt everything you will ever see and feel about those cats. (123)

At the crux of this passage is the idea that Ellen’s family members are not thoughtful enough to reflect on a painting whose meaning rests in symbolism. While other characters examined in this dissertation have relied on music to reflect otherwise unspeakable emotions, Ellen conveys the thoughts she cannot say aloud through her art. Her explanation of the ocean which might look “evil” at first allows us insight to the difficult emotions she struggles with: after being told repeatedly by her grandmother she is a bad person, Ellen wonders if she has become evil like her father³⁸. Despite this, Ellen seems to understand that those who truly know her will see her strength and beauty. When Ellen observes that it “is really something if you think about it” that

³⁸ Ellen’s grandmother tells her she cannot stand to look at Ellen because she looks too much like her “bastard of a daddy” and suggests Ellen does not grieve her mother’s loss (76, 78). After not giving Ellen anything other than a pack of paper for Christmas and showering her own daughter with gifts, Aunt Nadine tells Ellen she is an “ungrateful little bitch” who needs to be beaten (131).

the ocean can be strong, beautiful, and sad all at the same time, we witness her coming closer to the realization that she herself can possess all these qualities as well, making her just as impressive as the formidable ocean.

Most assuredly, Ellen's oceans symbolize the human capacity for overpowering grief and joy, but they also represent a longing for a safe maternal space she long ago lost—the semiotic. In their introduction to *Art Therapy and Political Violence*, Debra Kalmanowitz and Bobby Lloyd describe how “making art, like poetry, may provide a place in which pain can live alongside joy, questions can live unanswered, symbols and metaphors can represent that which is beyond human comprehension, memories can be expressed and witnessed” (3). Just as the music therapists cited in previous chapters use song to help clients express difficult or impossible-to-word feelings, art allows those who have experienced trauma to safely begin to connect with painful memories. A prevalent theme emerging from Zhara Akthar and Andrew Lovell's interviews with art therapists working with refugee children is that art offers non-verbal access to memories and feelings that may feel too uncomfortable or frightening to express aloud. Summarizing one therapist's viewpoint, Akthar and Lovell write, “art therapy gives children an avenue through which to communicate non-verbally....the use of art materials encourages both the exploration of feelings and memories to emerge from the unconscious, allowing the unspeakable to be revealed through the artwork” (143). Like music, art connects us to the semiotic. For contemporary psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, this moment is one of “existential memory of communication through deep rapport, prior to the acquisition of words” (32). The ocean's complexity—its potential for both creation and destruction—allows it to hold both Ellen's memories of a time before language when she was safe in her mother's womb, but also the memories of coming into a world characterized by pain, neglect, and language. Ellen's

describing the ocean as “really something” complements the fact the ocean is really the semiotic—that which cannot be named through language alone.

Ellen’s decisions about whom to share her art with are just as revealing as her thoughts on the art. As Kalmonowitz and Lloyd write, for survivors of trauma, “It is the safe pre-traumatic past that is lost, though sought after. But the same lost past is merged with the memory of its destruction, which itself is the very thing which must not be remembered because of the elements of pain, grief, and horror it contains” (21). Kalmanowitz and Lloyd cite psychotherapist Anna Alvarez, who argues a child survivor of abuse must actually forget the trauma she experienced so that “she can slowly begin to build up non-abused aspects of her personality” (22). Only once the child finds a sense of safety, can she engage the trauma in “manageable digestible portions” (Alvarez qtd. in Kalmanowitz and Lloyd 22). Ellen never explicitly discusses or even alludes to the abuse she has experienced when making art with Julia or Roy; instead, art serves the crucial therapeutic purpose of allowing her to shore up feelings of safety and comfort, which will allow her to survive when she goes on to live with her grandmother and then her aunt. While living in these less than hospitable environments, painting allows Ellen to continue building her self-confidence. Her brooding oceans suggest art proves so therapeutic that she begins to process the abuse she has experienced, the horror surfacing in the waves she paints. Importantly, though, Ellen instinctively creates boundaries for herself, deciding not to gift an ocean to her aunt and cousin because she knows they do not offer a safe place to explore such emotions or memories. Through such self-protection, Ellen continues to slowly heal on her own until the end of the novel, when she has developed such a feeling of safety and trust with her new mama that we catch glimpses of her actively confronting her fears and learning new coping mechanisms. Ellen tells us, “there have been more than a plenty days when she [new mama] has put both my hands

in hers and said if we relax and breathe slow together I can slow down shaking. And it always works” (141). When Ellen tells us that her foster mother has promised she will eventually quit hearing her grandmother’s threatening voice in her head, we know that Ellen must have begun to verbalize some of her past experiences of abuse. Art therapy alone may not be sufficient for a healing process to occur, but in Ellen’s case, art allows her a safe way to metaphorically hold her anger and pain until she finds a home where more pronounced healing can take place in the arms of a surrogate mother.

Ellen and Gardening

Drawing serves as only one example of how Ellen increasingly engages her effort-driven-rewards circuit. Through the physical act of gardening, which produces tangible rewards, Ellen reconnects with a semiotic space which allows her increased feelings of comfort and confidence. Julia and Roy’s home, where Ellen begins to thrive, is immediately associated with green life, symbolizing the space’s healthier environment compared to Ellen’s previous home. Ellen tells us Julia “lived in a blue house with plants in the windows and hanging all in the kitchen,” the location of the plants within the home further indicating a site of nourishment (55). Importantly, Julia and Roy’s home also includes a garden, inspiring memories of Ellen’s mother:

The times me and Julia and Roy worked in the garden I did not think about him [Ellen’s father] but of my mama and the way she liked to work in the cool of the morning. She nursed all the plants and put the weeds she pulled up in little piles along the rows. My job was to pick the piles up and dispose of them. (58)

Ellen’s recollections take her to a time before her mother’s depression reached a debilitating level. While Ellen may not have many memories of her mother lovingly caring for her, here she recalls her mother’s capacity for nurturing life in the garden. Ellen fondly remembers working

alongside her mother, picking fresh beans, knowing which ones were mature by comparing them to an example bean her mother gives her to hold. Ellen asserts, “It took a long time to pick that way but you have that sort of time while she is humming” (58). Here, Ellen associates her mother with sound for the first time, remembering a time when she was content enough to hum, one of the maternal sounds associated with the Kristevan semiotic (Givhan 77). The scene above further points to the power of the semiotic as Ellen’s mother uses beans as signifiers, allowing a young Ellen to know which beans are ready to be picked. Through “behaviorceuticals,” gardening benefits Ellen and her mother, allowing them to feel positive emotions and a sense of accomplishment. At Julia and Roy’s house, Ellen benefits not only from engaging in gardening with her temporary caregivers but also through remembering a time when she felt safe, happy, and connected to her mother before her passing into a fatal depression.

Importantly, gardening also presents as a therapeutic activity at Ellen’s foster mother’s home. When Ellen and her foster siblings assemble a terrarium, Gibbons’s description of the activity brings attention to the hands-on nature of the activity and suggests the act works to bring Ellen’s emotions to the surface. Describing a scene that might take place in a Montessori school, Gibbons provides careful attention to detail, giving us access to even the most mundane dialogue, though it is unclear which words are spoken and which are thought:

They [the other foster children] are making a terrarium. She [the foster mom] said last week she planned to bring some springtime in this house. Who would have thought of this?

I can do this. Just let me get my coat off.

Oh yes. A terrarium. I have seen them in the stores. And we are going to make one.

Let Ellen put in some dirt.

OK. You have to keep the dirt off the sides of the glass so people can peek in and see how nice it all looks.

Have you done this before? my new mama wonders.

No. But it makes sense to do it like this.

That's good. Now let the others try. Everybody gets to put something in. (41-42)

Ellen's foster mother provides gentle guidance throughout the process, encouraging the children's work and ensuring everyone gets a turn to participate. After Ellen puts in "one more plant. A fern," the terrarium is complete, and Ellen's guardian directs the children to place the creation on the windowsill for all to see. Ellen reports that "The light hits it right and it will get some sunshine all afternoon. We all stand and look at it" (42). Throughout this scene, Gibbons's attention to detail emphasizes the careful movement and teamwork the children must engage in while building their own microcosm. Their work already rewarded by the creation of a tiny green world, the children are further encouraged by the foster mother's insistence the terrarium sit where all can view its beauty. Through her patient unfolding of the scene, Gibbons calls attention to the therapeutic and rewarding act of working together to create something new. As they stand looking at the terrarium, Ellen's new mama speaks: "Are you OK? Ellen? Are you all right? Don't you like the terrarium? You did a nice job" (42). Without any narration from Ellen, we are left to imagine the scene has brought her to tears. She tells us only, "I'm fine. I'm just hungry is all I told her" (42). The experience of nurturing new life with her own hands clearly brings up emotions for Ellen, connecting her to something she either does not want to speak aloud or for which she does not possess words. Ellen's tears represent the pain of knowing she can simultaneously mourn the mother she once had, enjoy the comfort of a new mother, and take pride in her own ability to nurture life.

The terrarium also serves as a metaphor for the way in which Ellen's foster mother supports her growth through both emotional and physical gestures. Just like Ellen brushes her pony, knowing it must feel good, Ellen's foster mama washes Ellen's hair—an activity involving closeness, touch, water, warmth—all the same things that make Bone love having her mother brush her hair. After having her hair washed, Ellen lies in the patch of sunshine on her bed, aligning her with the terrarium sitting on the sunny windowsill. She observes, "I see the mirror from the bed. No matter how I turn my head when I look I still seem like a stranger in my own self" (43). Here, Ellen's inability to recognize herself speaks to the growth and healing she has experienced in a loving home. Watts argues Ellen has created a new identity for herself, but a more powerful reading of the scene does not see Ellen as a new person. Rather, Ellen's inability to recognize herself in the mirror reflects the same reason her brooding oceans require more than a brief glance to understand. Ellen's new mother's gentle, caring touches and her safe, warm home allow her the ability to face the unspeakable, to sit with uncertainty and memory and not be overwhelmed.

While play, art, and gardening enable Ellen to engage with the unspeakable, the novel's conclusion evidences her rejection of the silence she saw her mother cling to during her final days. Ellen's interactions with her new mother show the young girl beginning to work through painful memories, and, as Ellen tells us, "Every day [she] tr[ies] to feel a little better about all that went on when [she] was little" (141). When Starletta visits, Ellen says aloud, "I came to your house so much because I did not want to be with my daddy and mostly because I like you so much" (145). Instead of ignoring the past, Ellen directly refers to her father and her own mistreatment of Starletta (145). This speech indicates a remarkable change from the young girl at the beginning of the novel who did not want to talk to a therapist because it was better to leave

things unsaid. The increased self-confidence and sense of resilience “behaviorceuticals” and trusted adults have afforded Ellen allow her to tackle what she sees as her most pressing issue (affirming her friendship with Starletta) head on. Through engaging in art, gardening, and other hobbies, Ellen practices expressive arts and horticulture therapy and encourages readers to consider how they can manage to “laugh[] and carr[y] on right much” in spite of life’s most devastating circumstances (Gibbons 56).

From Silence to Song: Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Meaning of Consuelo*

As part of his reflection on Judith Ortiz Cofer’s life, Rafael Ocasio, her close friend and Puerto Rican “fact checker,” recalls the “many” times the two discussed “the healing power of literature” (Ocasio, “Judith”)³⁹. Most humanities scholars share a similar respect for art’s ability to offer restorative solace, but as the sources cited throughout this project demonstrate, in recent decades an increasing number of scientists have also turned their attention to the connections between the arts and healing. Such research provides significant insight to often-overlooked scenes from Judith Ortiz Cofer’s novel *The Meaning of Consuelo* in which members of a troubled family find themselves gravitating toward the arts in various ways— the youngest daughter drawing curious images, the concerned mother dancing to beloved records, and the worried father playing his forgotten guitar once more.

While these images of the Signe family seeking solace through art merit our attention, most existing scholarship on *The Meaning of Consuelo* focuses on issues of gender and nationalism. Susan C. Méndez, for example, offers a reading of the three leading female characters in the novel, each serving as an allegory for a different way to interpret Puerto Rico’s

³⁹ Many thanks to Rafael Ocasio for allowing me to interview him and for offering suggestions for revision after seeing an earlier draft. I am ever grateful for his kindness and mentorship.

identity: “as nation, commonwealth, or ethno-nation” (33). Meanwhile, in her book *Troubling Nationhood in U.S. Latina Literature*, Maya Socolovsky devotes a chapter to Ortiz Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun* and *The Meaning of Consuelo*, arguing these “texts disrupt U.S. national identity by showing the ambiguity of Puerto Rican presence on and off the island” (99). Yet another critic, Hilary Brewster, successfully argues for closer readings of queerness in the novel, proving that the titular character of Consuelo provides an example of what Gloria Anzaldúa terms the “*mestiza* consciousness...a perception of self and reality that blurs the lines of sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and nationality” (Brewster 66). While such readings are valuable, I suggest the importance of reading for another theme that brings great import to the narrative of *The Meaning of Consuelo*—the therapeutics of self-expression in the face of trauma. Almost every review or article written about the novel mentions Mili, the title character’s younger sister “tragically afflicted with schizophrenia,” and yet little scholarship closely examines the portrayal of Mili’s pained struggle to communicate with the world around her and her family’s use of coping mechanisms as *la tragedia* unfolds (Benson 126).

Here, I add a layer to the existing body of scholarship on *The Meaning of Consuelo* and argue that this work also demonstrates the complex healing nature of the expressive arts. Borrowing key words from chapter titles in the novel, I present my work in three sections. First, in *Tragedia*, I explore how trauma permeates the storyline of *The Meaning of Consuelo*, establishing both Mili and Consuelo as in need of therapeutic tools. Next, in *Silencio* I read Mami’s, Mili’s, and Consuelos’s respective silences as examples of learned responses to patriarchal power dynamics. Finally, in *Consolar*, I illustrate how each of the Signe family members benefits from turning to the expressive arts but fails to utilize these therapeutic methods as means to greater mental health for Mili. When examined, musical imagery throughout the

novel coalesces to create a message about the stunning but underappreciated powers of expressive art therapy. My reading invites us not only to consider cultural healing practices, but also Ortiz Cofer's status as one of contemporary literature's most perceptive and poignant writers in regards to the portrayal of survival practices. Through my reading, Mili joins a long line of southern protagonists who take solace in the arts after traumatic events, a tradition extending at least as far back to Chopin's Edna Pontellier.

Tragedia: Trauma in The Meaning of Consuelo

The Meaning of Consuelo contains multiple examples of traumatic events in the life of the titular protagonist and other members of her family. Consuelo, a young woman coming of age in 1950s Puerto Rico, turns a careful and discerning eye to both her sister and parents throughout the novel. By the end of the first chapter she tells us, "There was no way for any of us to know that Mili's talent for losing herself—as if inside her there was a hole she dove into, like Alice in Wonderland—was also the start of our family's spiraling toward what we would always call *la tragedia*, the events leading to the terrible day that changed everything for each of us, forever" (10). With the fantastical imagery of Mili falling down a rabbit hole within herself and the language of "spiraling toward," Ortiz Cofer creates a sense of urgency as she prefigures Mili's mental deterioration due to schizophrenia and her final, fatal disappearance into the ocean. Such foreshadowing continues throughout the text, suspense and fear building as Consuelo experiences several different traumatic moments, each one a tragedy. While most critics who write about *The Meaning of Consuelo* focus on the allegorical nature of the novel's tragic moments, deciphering what they suggest about Puerto Rico's political status or women's prescribed roles, I examine these tragedies in a literal sense, asking what the responses of Consuelo and her family reveal about humankind's ability to cope with trauma and heal from its

impact. Examined in light of what neuroscience tells us about trauma and the arts, as well as the southern tradition of survivors healing through song, the themes of silence and language permeating Ortiz Cofer's novel become all the more meaningful.

Like Ellen, Consuelo and Mili repeatedly bear witness to their parents' rocky and sometimes violent relationship, a phenomenon so prevalent that many readers may fail to recognize such scenes as indicative of trauma. Upon coming home to see their father throwing a plate, "Mili grab[s] [Consuelo's] hand in terror" (58). Consuelo confesses, "My parents argued a lot, but it was usually Mami who broke things. When a man breaks something in anger, the next thing he grabs may be one of your limbs; we heard that said by women in our own house" (58). While this instance of thrown plates turns out to be only a show of the new Pyrex dishes' durability, Mili's reaction and Consuelo's commentary speaks to a truth Bessel van der Kolk acknowledges in his work: a great number of children grow up in homes punctuated by parents' violent quarrels and continue to feel the chaos's impact throughout their lives (1). Perhaps not surprisingly, "more than half of the people who seek psychiatric care have been assaulted, abandoned, neglected or even raped as children, or have witnessed violence in their families" (van der Kolk 24). The impact of growing up in unharmonious homes should not be underestimated. As van der Kolk elaborates, these experiences can "leave traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems" (1). Though we never see Papi physically hurt Mami or one of his daughters, the loud confrontations clearly disturb Consuelo, as she mentions them on multiple occasions. "I heard [Mami and Papi] arguing fiercely behind their bedroom door," she tells us at one point, the word "fiercely" indicating the sharp physical impact of even verbal assaults (62). On another day Consuelo "hear[s] [her parents'] argument all the way in [her] room," suggesting an alarming

volume and creating an image of her parents' discord invading what Consuelo rightfully expects to be a private and peaceful haven (94).

Most painful for Consuelo, though, seems to be her father's infidelity, likely the cause of her parents' fights. Through her cousin Patricio, Consuelo learns that her "father was seeing a woman at the olden Palms"; afterward, she tells us, "I walked around with my chest and head heavy with the burden of my knowledge" (83). Here, Ortiz Cofer's chosen language not only describes the figurative weight Consuelo has taken upon herself, but also indicates the truth that bearing witness to parents' confrontations and transgressions leaves many children with genuine ailments. As Janie Sarrazin and Francine Cyr report in their overview of parental conflict's effect on children, witnessing parents fight can cause "increased cardiac rhythm, higher blood pressure, [and] lower body temperature" in children and teens (79). Consuelo and Mili stand to suffer both emotional and physical distress due to their parents' repeated fighting, resulting in a home life marred by pain. The failure of the Signe parents to provide a peaceful and safe home for their daughters connects Consuelo and Mili to not only Gibbons's Ellen, but also Allison's Bone and Douglas's Tweet. All five endure physical and emotional hardship due to their parents' (or step-parents') nefarious and self-centered ways, and all five will instinctively respond by turning to the arts, a testament to humanity's innate capacity for resilience.

Several especially traumatic events occur in front of the already chaotic backdrop of Mami and Papi's perpetual fighting. Consuelo's disappointment at losing her virginity to Wilhelm in something "like a painful wrestling match" and her ensuing fallen social status at school are certainly difficult trials (112-113). In addition, Mili's sudden butchering of a hen stands out for its violence. Consuelo "vividly recall[s] the gory scene: [her] sister covered in blood, holding a huge knife in her hand" and says the image "horrif[ies]" her, guiltily admitting

she had momentarily forgotten her relentless job of looking after Mili (90). Here, Consuelo's failure to watch over her sister causes her to witness an upsetting act of violence that will lead to yet another fight between Mami and Papi. Through shocking episodes such as these, Ortiz Cofer crafts a plot that moves quickly from one distressing scene to another.

While taking the knife from Mili's grasp, Consuelo cuts her own finger, and the resulting blood points to an earlier scene in the novel, the most indicative of trauma experienced by Consuelo and Mili alike. During a stay at Abuela's, the sisters and their cousins visit the annual fiesta with its vibrant music, delicious candy, and unexpected danger. While enjoying her "new privilege" of riding the Ferris wheel, Consuelo loses track of Mili, whom she left below on the ground (33). Eventually, spotting her sister "on the way down past the dark area behind the rides" throws Consuelo into a panic (34). Readers, too, are troubled as they learn Mili is "sitting on Néstor's lap" (34). Néstor, introduced on the previous page as a neighborhood bully known for underage drinking and violence against his own mother, instantly appears as a threat (34). Portraying Mili with an ice-cream cone and Néstor with a cigarette, Ortiz Cofer accentuates Mili's frail innocence in comparison with Néstor's hardened demeanor (35). Consuelo even describes her sister as looking "like a large doll" on his lap, reinforcing Mili's vulnerability (35).

In comparison to Allison's vivid realism when describing Bone's sexual molestation and later rape, Ortiz Cofer creates a more coded reference to the sexual trauma Mili experiences at the hands of the older boy. The shadowy and suspicious nature of the scene intensifies when Consuelo tells us that one of Néstor's hands is "hidden behind [Mili's] back" (35). The illicit connotations conjured by the obscurity of the scene, Néstor's possession of the phallic burning cigarette, and his handling Mili as if she were an inanimate object all support reading the scene as one of sexual misconduct. The most convincing signal of molestation, though, is Consuelo's

misreading of her sister's dress. Mili "wave[s] back [to Consuelo] with her ice-cream cone, spilling the chocolate all over the front of her white dress" (34). "From where I was," Consuelo remembers, "it looked like a blood stain, and my head throbbed as I felt myself getting sick to my stomach" (34). Mili's stained white dress arouses connotations of lost purity, while Consuelo's mistaking the chocolate for blood speaks to her own lost innocence. The sexual activity suggested by a bloodstained dress would be lost on most children. For Consuelo, though, the chocolate mistaken for blood leads to a visceral reaction, indicating she detects an act significantly grimmer than a child's dress dirtied by a summer treat. As a result, the carnival scene with Néstor documents a pivotal trauma for both sisters.

The suggestive, rather than graphic, depiction of Néstor's abuse bolsters the novel's emerging theme of silence in the face of tragedy and creates a realistic depiction of the self-doubt often plaguing sexual abuse survivors. Within the scene above, Ortiz Cofer's stylistic choices suggest a writer familiar with the brain's struggle to interpret and respond to trauma. Consuelo fails to articulate exactly what she witnesses: "When I saw—or did I just think I saw?—what [Néstor] was doing to my sister, I yelled out her name as loud as I could. The girl next to me said harshly, '¿Estás loca? What are you doing? Do you want to get us killed?' But I kept on yelling Mili's name until finally she looked up" (34). Though Consuelo will tell us so many of her secrets—from her day spent skipping school to her first sexual encounter—in this passage she holds back. The interrupting dashes of "When I saw—or did I just think I saw?—what he was doing to my sister" create a sense of urgent confusion, especially since the punctuation marks are rarely used elsewhere in the narrative. Furthermore, Consuelo feels compelled to scream at full capacity but only tells us Néstor holds Mili in his lap. The reader anticipates the coming sentences to be full of dreadful images, but Consuelo provides no further description of Néstor's

actions. Markedly different from her usually vivid details, Consuelo's withholding does not suggest self-censorship. Instead, Ortiz Cofer uses Consuelo's silence to construct an accurate portrayal of experiencing trauma. Though witnessing her sister's molestation alone could be enough to cause Consuelo to enter a state of trauma, her location on the Ferris wheel also inhibits her ability to rescue Mili, making her brain and body even more likely to enter a state of shock due to her helplessness. Because the left side of the brain shuts down when entering a traumatized state, Consuelo is unable to access language to describe the scene she witnesses. As van der Kolk and others report, this lack of language means trauma survivors are often unable to create linear narratives of what happened to them. Instead, they possess only sensory impressions and flashes of images. The neuroscience of trauma thus explains Consuelo's vivid memory of an otherwise mundane ice-cream stain and her ability to recall her fellow passenger's words but not the actual scene she has witnessed. Ortiz Cofer's more subdued description of molestation in comparison to other writers may partly stem from her envisioning a young adult audience for the novel, but her veiled meanings also work as a stylistic choice creating greater coherency within the novel.

Most scholarship on *The Meaning of Consuelo* makes only passing references to Mili's schizophrenia, and only a few critics briefly mention the scene examined above. Méndez, for example, does refer to "this incident of sexual molestation," but her allegorical reading focuses on how the act "portrays the commonwealth [of Puerto Rico]'s vulnerability," whereas I would like to focus on the significance of the scene taken for what it depicts—a traumatic incident of physical transgression towards a young girl (40). I argue the trauma Mili and Consuelo experience at the fiesta is imperative to the novel as the event leaves both girls with a tragic secret, leading to a numbing or dissociative effect, which explains later scenes in which Mili fails

to interact with the world around her. As past traumas go unaddressed, survivors often experience flashbacks, repeatedly reliving the sensations related to their trauma. This repetition means:

the accompanying stress hormones engrave those memories ever more deeply in the mind [of survivors]. Ordinary, day-to-day events become less and less compelling. Not being able to deeply take in what is going on around them makes it impossible to feel fully alive. It becomes harder to feel the joys and aggravations of ordinary life, harder to concentrate on the tasks at hand. (van der Kolk 67)

Such symptoms of long-held trauma mirror the catatonic symptoms of schizophrenia; as such, when Mili begins her habit of entering unresponsive states, Mili's psychiatrist believes the episodes are caused by schizophrenia. Though the medical community agrees genetics play a large role in the development of schizophrenia, the exact cause is still unknown and many researchers question the extent to which environmental factors play a role ("Schizophrenia" 524). Multiple studies report a higher incidence of childhood trauma, including sexual abuse, among patients with schizophrenia than among patients with other mental health disorders, suggesting the fictional Mili's experience represents the reality of certain survivors of abuse (Mørkved, N., et al and Mrizak, J., et al). Before the incident with Néstor, Mili's family has already noticed her unusual ability "of turning herself into a self-contained, fully automated doll," but Néstor's actions almost certainly help accelerate the progression of Mili's psychosis (Ortiz Cofer 10). As a result, Mili's story encourages us to remember the complex nature of mental health and the fact there is rarely one, clear cause of any mental illness. Instead, Mili's deterioration results from multiple forces, and I argue Néstor's predatory actions are a significant factor.

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, van der Kolk shares the example of Tom, a Vietnam Marine veteran, who struggled to feel anything after returning from war. Tom “felt emotionally distant from everybody,” including his wife and children (van der Kolk 14). A lawyer, he would “observe himself from a distance” when in the courtroom, unable to feel he was the one delivering the arguments he prepared (14). Riding his Harley was one of few activities Tom could enjoy in order to feel like himself again. Though van der Kolk suggests the vibrations of Tom’s motorcycle were partly responsible for the bike’s therapeutic impact, Tom also belongs to the group of patients van der Kolk mentions who engage in “highly dangerous situations” to feel some sense of control or connection to their bodies (67). Hence, Mili’s slaughtering of a hen and disappearing into the ocean, as well as Consuelo’s initiating unprotected sex with Wilhelm and offering her naked body to her cousin Miguel, emerge as impulsive and risky behaviors meant to offer the girls some semblance of control over their respective bodies, emotions, and overall lives. These two characters so painfully afflicted by multiple forces—both genetics and a childhood dotted with traumas—allow *The Meaning of Consuelo* to be read as a story not just of mental illness but also of the detrimental impact of unrestrained parental conflict and childhood sexual abuse on their survivors. Further, Ortiz Cofer reminds us that not just those directly experiencing abuse suffer its consequences; witnesses like Consuelo, helpless in their inability to intervene, withstand devastating effects after observing trauma, and feelings of guilt and grief mark them as secondhand survivors of abuse.

Silencio: Lessons Learned

Mili and Consuelo’s silence in response to Néstor’s molestation portrays a common response to sexual assault and begs us to examine the text’s theme of silence more closely. While many readers, including Ann Marie Smith and Keith H. Johnson recognize *The Meaning of*

Consuelo as a story of a young woman who “must negotiate strict gender boundaries in 1950s Puerto Rican culture” (19), I explore how Mami’s lessons in secrecy exemplify the damaging confines of a patriarchal society, aligning her with the character of Ellen’s mother, who succumbs to depression after years spent with an abusive husband. Mili is by no means unique in her silence as a trauma survivor. However, her sexual molestation serves as only one of many secrets driving the narrative’s plot. I suggest a close reading of silence throughout *The Meaning of Consuelo* unveils how Mili and Consuelo (like Ellen) learn the complex survival tactic of silence through watching their mother’s interactions with others, their father in particular.

I apply Pantuso’s understanding of silence to Ortiz Cofer’s work in order to read Mami’s, Mili’s, and Consuelo’s respective silences as examples of rhetorical choices with complicated and dangerous consequences. Most likely Pantuso would situate Consuelo at the beginning of her journey to create a new story for herself, which the ending of the novel supports with Consuelo’s setting out for a new life on the American mainland. Such a reading finds support in Maya Socolovsky’s argument that Consuelo’s writing of stories and letters allows her a form of silent transgression (123). Her letters to “Patty Swan,” for example, allow her to continue correspondence with her outcast cousin, Patricio, without her parents’ detection (Socolovsky 123). While I appreciate Pantuso’s and Socolovsky’s respective arguments for silence as a means of resistance, I believe Consuelo’s and Mili’s stories serve as important reminders that silence can also be a harmfully passive practice in many narratives, especially those involving abuse.

Even before the #MeToo movement, sexual assaults were well-known for going unreported due to a number of factors, including social stigma and meager resources for complainants, but it is a mistake to think survivors of sexual abuse are the only trauma victims

linked to silence. Many war veterans and survivors of other traumas find it difficult to come forward with their stories. As van der Kolk explains:

One of the hardest things for traumatized people is to confront their shame about the way they behaved during a traumatic episode....deep down many traumatized people are...haunted by the shame they feel about what they themselves did or did not do under the circumstances. They despise themselves for how terrified, dependent, excited, or enraged they felt. (13)

Certainly, the guilt Consuelo feels over leaving Mili unsupervised as she rode the Ferris wheel partially explains her silence. Consuelo tells us, “Mili ran to get Mami and by the time they all got there Néstor had vanished—and so had my courage. I could not tell my mother about what I had allowed to happen” (35). Despite Néstor’s status as perpetrator and Consuelo’s as only a witness, the older sister takes the blame upon herself, a common trait among survivors of sexual assault who feel responsible for their victimization. Consuelo continues, “The *pueblo chiquito* system of adult supervision had failed. I had failed. I convinced myself that Néstor had just bought Mili a cone, and that he was Abuela’s neighbor, practically family. Mili seemed to have forgotten the incident; at least she didn’t say anything about it” (35). Here, Consuelo’s having to “convince” herself of the innocence of Néstor’s actions gives us final assurance that something reprehensible did occur. Consuelo’s belief she has “failed” also attests to her feelings of shame, an emotion that at least one recent study has tied to an increased rate of dissociation in trauma survivors (Platt et al.) Further, Consuelo’s believing her sister has “forgotten the incident” provides another example of silence in the novel. The sharp contrast between Consuelo’s active inner monologue and quiet outward demeanor provides an unsettling but realistic depiction of the conflicted feelings many trauma survivors experience. While reactions of silence are both

normal and understandable, this does not negate the fact that such silence does more to protect the patriarchal society threatening to shame and punish survivors than it does to challenge and improve society's prevention of and reaction to sexual abuse and other traumas. As such, Mili's and Conseulo's respective choices to remain silent emerge as both unfortunate and realistic as they demonstrate the decision to follow their mother's example of passive silence.

Consuelo's mother, Angelica, serves as an example of conflicted feelings, as, despite her love of sound, she is consistently paired with silence. When Consuelo first introduces readers to her parents, she describes her father as a "silent, brooding" man and claims Papi's "silences were the vacuum Mami abhorred, having grown up around laughter, shouts, and angry cries—noise meant life for her" (12). Consuelo describes Mami as a "vivacious young woman" who expresses happiness through dancing to mambo records, yet we repeatedly see her communicating with her daughters in clandestine ways (12, 22). "We had a silent agreement, [Mami] and I," Consuelo confides to readers, "We humored Papi in exchange for other privileges we exacted from each other. Mili had not yet caught on to these tactics; she seemed impervious to the family negotiations that went on constantly as we circled one another trying to figure out how to gain the most territory without starting a war" (22). Here, Consuelo's observation that Mili "had not yet caught on to these tactics" establishes the act of silence as something each woman must learn from the women who came before her as she comes of age. In the passage that follows, shared secrets act as a form of mother-child bonding:

"I'm trying to see if the cane is ready to eat," Mami whispered, bending down to look us in the eyes. "There is nothing sweeter than *la caña* of this part of our *isla, hijas. Es pura azúcar.*" Then she crossed her lips with her finger for silence. I knew why she was speaking low. Papi did not allow us to eat anything that had not been "processed"—

meaning either it bore a seal from some U.S. government inspector or he had examined the product for worms, decay, pits, bone, or fibers that would choke his little girls; of course that meant depriving us of much of the island's bounty on which Mami had grown into the healthy woman he had married. (23)

Repeated references to the body—the eye contact between mother and daughters, Mami's bent posture, and her finger on her lips, along with the reference to a growing female body—pair with the imposed secrecy to make for an intimate scene between mother and children. The following reference to the communal sharing of a “forbidden fruit” forms a clear allusion to Eve's fall in the Garden of Eden, implying Mami invites Consuelo and Mili into a history of matriarchs stretching much further back than Consuelo's *abuela* (23). Consuelo consents to join the lineage of women but not without realizing its cost of secrecy: “accepting these indulgences meant I had to pay the price of keeping secrets—about this and other forbidden things, such as María Sereno's manicures” (23). With this final phrase, Consuelo reminds readers of the novel's opening scene and her being “sworn to secrecy about” the transgender woman's visits to her family's house while Papi is away (4). Mami's later plea that there be no possibility of Consuelo's father seeing his daughter's bloody underwear in the laundry, along with her mostly silent reactions to Papi's infidelity, Patricio's sexuality, and Mili's illness, further highlight Consuelo learning from her mother that furtiveness must accompany womanhood (127). If Consuelo truly believes that “noise mean[s] life” for her mother, then she must also recognize the lethal potential of the silence and whispers her mother insists upon (12).

Consuelo proves her indoctrination to a world of secrecy by, ironically, keeping the truth from her mother. When Mami asks Consuelo if she has seen anyone visiting Patricio, she lies, justifying the transgression by telling herself, “I had simply chosen not to tell about the person I

thought I saw slipping into Patricio's house by the back door" (44). Consuelo's skipping school to visit Old San Juan and her veiled relationship with Wilhelm confirm her inheritance of secrecy. Though her parents would be angry with Consuelo for concealing these truths, her actions only prove she has been watching her mother and learning the art of purposeful silence and a woman's obligation to secrecy. Even Consuelo's pointing out that "No one praised" her for being able to "hold" her vomit until the Ferris wheel stopped suggests an honoring of pushing the unsavory down, concealing one's pain or sickness (35). Ortiz Cofer's story of Mami's passing down silence as a survival skill creates an unsettling but realistic depiction of how women in patriarchal societies internalize misogynistic practices. Simply because silence manifests as an expected and even biologically based response to trauma does not make it a healthy or necessary one. Of course, we cannot know how Mili's and Consuelo's truths would have been received by the adults in their lives, and there are certainly many survivors who experience more traumatizing episodes due to speaking out about abuse. However, we cannot discount the benefits that speaking about one's trauma in a safe space may afford. Perhaps if Consuelo had not been so well versed in the female code of secrecy, she and Mili would have been able to speak the truth of Néstor's abuse, creating the possibility for justice or at least a sense of agency, something sexual trauma so brutally robs from victims.

Consolar: Comfort through the Expressive Arts

Understanding how Consuelo becomes entrenched in the habit of silence creates an important contrast to other scenes in which members of the Signe family respond to the tumultuous events unfolding around and between them, each member turning to their preferred mode of expression. Undoubtedly, most artists would readily agree to the belabored idea that the arts are therapeutic. However, dissatisfaction with pharmaceutical approaches and increased

interest in holistic health, along with neurological insights, have led to a growth in expressive art therapies in the U.S. and around the world. The number of accredited music therapists alone has risen steadily over past decades to reach a current estimate of 7,000 (Greene). As discussed in previous chapters, the discovery that the language center of the brain shuts down in response to trauma necessitates development of healing practices beyond traditional talk therapy. In 1950, the American Music Therapy Association formed, and, thus, most sources point to the mid-twentieth century as when expressive art therapy became professionalized (Sonke et al. 108). In 2020, professional training and organizations exist not just for music and art therapies, but also for “dance therapy, drama therapy, poetry therapy, and psychodrama” (van Westrhenen and Fritz 527). The amount of academic literature surrounding these fields grows each year, but a need for greater attention to scientific scholarship on expressive art therapy still exists. However, literature such as Ortiz Cofer’s already suggests that individuals and communities have long accessed the therapeutic benefits of the arts.

As Mili’s condition worsens, the Signe family increasingly turns to art for respite. During what Consuelo calls “the eye of the storm,” she tells us, “music returned to our house and my mother seemed to regain some of her sense of fun....Mami turned on the radio again, as if to drown out any disturbing thoughts” (146). Mami, whom readers already know enjoys dancing to music when she is happy, instinctively turns to the radio during a time of distress. Papi, too, returns to an old pastime. Consuelo observes, “Papi brought out his old guitar and began playing it again at night. But there were no words to the melodies he played. I could hear them from my room, where I spent a lot of time reading, and the way he lingered over some chords, it seemed that he wanted the guitar to speak” (146). The intuitive Consuelo notices what music therapists would immediately recognize: creating music allows Papi to express emotions he cannot access

through language. For example, music therapist Heidi Ahonen uses music to help clients recreate and express unspeakable emotions felt at the time of the traumatic event. After having clients improvise a musical piece—much like Papi might strum out a new tune—Ahonen helps her clients to analyze and verbalize the emotions portrayed. Though readers do not gain access to Papi's inner-world, we know enough about his strained relationships with his wife, homeland, and daughters to realize he must face emotional turmoil. Through the guitar, it seems, he finds a way to calm himself and connect with Mili, “whose eyes turn[...] up in that look of religious ecstasy” when he plays the guitar for her (146). Though Mami and Papi lack access to professional music therapists to help them verbalize and reflect on their emotions, both parents use music to help them achieve moments of relaxation amid a stressful time.

Consuelo also notices music coming from her sister's room more often and tells us she hears Mili “humming a popular merengue” one day (109, 161); however, Mili's interest in the visual arts becomes most intriguing for Consuelo. Ortiz Cofer establishes Mili as an artistic child from the beginning. In the first chapter, Consuelo tells us Mili “want[s] to be a nail-painter like [their neighbor María],” builds mud homes for chameleons, and makes “herself costumes from assorted pieces of [the family's] wardrobe” (5, 8, 10). Mili's reputation as an imaginative child lends to Mami's insistence that Mili's odd speech only proves her penchant for creativity. Consuelo, on the other hand, labels Mili's invented language as “alarming,” describing it as “tonal like Chinese and involv[ing] clicks of the tongue” (51-52). Mili's incomprehensible speech proves to be symptomatic of her worsening schizophrenia that will eventually result in a trip to a psychiatrist. Though we do not learn much about Mili's visit, we are told, “Her counselor had suggested that drawing might keep Mili focused and calm, and so Papi had bought her a sketch pad and pencils....She sat on the floor drawing amazingly accurate pencil

caricatures of us, never saying a word” (169). Here, art’s therapeutic abilities are explicitly stated, even though Mili’s counselor does not, to our knowledge, facilitate or engage with Mili’s creative process. The scene also recalls the similar, though less somber, image of Ellen, Roy, and Julia laughing as they lie on the floor, drawing silly faces. Through Consuelo’s eyes, we see how Mili utilizes her art: Mili “studied her drawings, like a psychologist reading her notes after a session with a patient, and then set them aside as soon as she made whatever discovery it was she was after” (169). Mili’s art, like Papi’s songs and Ellen’s “brooding oceans”, allows her to express emotions and explore ideas when words have failed her, aligning her with the growing numbers of trauma survivors who find hope through art therapy. We cannot know if or how Mili would respond to exercises with a professional art therapist, but Consuelo’s insightful observations testify to the calming benefits drawing affords Mili and the potential respite such activity had to offer Mili if she were encouraged by a more involved role model.

Whereas Papi and Consuelo encourage Mili’s art, Mami finds the sketches upsetting. Even though Abuela recommends that Mami encourage Mili to find a creative outlet, Angelica remains unenthusiastic about Mili’s art (89). “Mami could not stand to look at [the drawings],” telling Consuelo, “I don’t know what good it does her to make these silly doodlings” as Consuelo stops her from throwing one away (170). Consuelo explains, “It helps Mili to have something to do that she likes” (171). Consuelo “keep[s] the discarded pages in a folder,” sensing that “the drawings were another medium of communication for Mili, that she was learning something about people’s minds from her study of their exteriors. I envied her gift” (170). In sharp contrast to Mami, Consuelo finds valuable meaning in the artwork, seeing the same potential art therapists would for reflection and improved communication with the outside world. At least one study focused on art therapy offered to patients with schizophrenia found

“engagement in the artistic process and...reflections on the painted images” helped patients by “boosting their self-esteem and thereby improving their social competences” (Teglbjaerg 314). Though Mami harbors the best of intentions, selflessly seeking help for Mili, her inability to see drawing as a therapeutic practice limits her chances of successful communication with her daughter. In contrast, Consuelo’s clear interest and respect for Mili’s artistic expression mark her as much like the many other amateur counselors seen throughout this dissertation, including Edna’s Mlle. Reisz, Bone’s Aunt Ruth, and Tweet’s grandfather. Repeatedly, we see that simply having someone with whom to enjoy or share our self-expression reinforces the healing potential of art. However, Consuelo’s status as a young woman sharing in Mili’s trauma means she can never adequately serve as an artistic counselor or surrogate mother figure for Mili.

Consuelo confesses envy of Mili’s drawing abilities, but the narrator has developed her own artistic gift as means of self-soothing. She reflects, “My own alternate life of plotting vengeance against my enemies was less lyrical than my parents’ retreat into their musical fantasies. It was the narrative poem of war I was composing, in the style of Homer, adding stanzas each day” (149). Like Bone, Consuelo practices scriptotherapy, Suzette Henke’s term for the therapeutic act of creating a sense of agency and resistance through storytelling. Within the novel, Consuelo trice interrupts her narration with stories from her family’s history: “*The Angel of Death*,” “*A Cuento and the Serenade in Nine Innings*,” “*Cuentos for La Lucha*” (25, 60, 84). The short narratives, with their respective titles that move from English to Spanish and their italicization stand out from the rest of the text, making them feel as if Consuelo has shared an excerpt from her writer’s notebook with us. Once again, Ortiz Cofer chooses to give Consuelo great awareness of the therapeutic practices within the story: before leaving for New York, Consuelo acknowledges that her family may know how to help Mami heal after the loss of a

child but insists she must “find other ways to survive” as she grieves her sister (184). By the end of the novel, Consuelo tells us, “I believe that language is more powerful than chemistry...And how you remember words, how you tell a story to yourself, makes *you* up. You tell yourself as you live your life” (181). Consuelo does not find her greatest talents in music or art, as her other family members do. Rather, as Judith Ortiz Cofer admitted of herself, she finds writing to be the most rewarding and therapeutic act. Like Ellen Foster, Consuelo refuses to continue her mother’s tradition of choosing silence, choosing to seek out and enjoy therapeutic activities.

Though writing serves as Consuelo’s most helpful tool in reflecting on the world around her, the novel suggests Mami and Papi’s preferred medium of music as a more integral part of Puerto Rican life. At one point, Consuelo asks the rhetorical question, “When had there ever been a Puerto Rican who did not enjoy music?” (144). Music, she asserts, “was in our national soul” (144). A native of Puerto Rico and Professor of Spanish, Ortiz Cofer’s friend Rafael Ocasio provides insight to this characteristic of the island: “because of the political restrictions that the Spaniards had over Puerto Ricans, including...[restriction] of the press...Puerto Ricans had to find other ways in which to produce creatively” (Ocasio, Personal interview). This knowledge illuminates the entire Signe family as symbolic of Puerto Ricans: silenced by various factors, they do not vocalize their pain via purely linguistic means but turn to different art forms to express their pain and access a sense of joy and agency.

One such example of unique Puerto Rican modes of expression serves as the center of a remarkable scene Consuelo captures for readers. When the neighborhood outcast, María Sereno, begins exchanging words with the *piraguero*, Consuelo tells us, “This kind of vulgar musical play...had always been around in Puerto Rico” (134). Consuelo further informs us that, as part of the tradition, participants aim to best their opponent by composing “*bombas* and *plenas*, off-

color verses singsonged to the accompaniment of clapping or drumming on any available surface” (Ortiz Cofer 134). María, often disregarded by her neighbors, participates in this communal tradition as she calls out in response to the *piraguero*. Even “Doña Fifi, a seventy-year-old woman who still led the hymns at church with her powerful alto” joins the spectacle (134). Yes, some lyrics mock María, but the tradition itself calls for playful jabs. Ocasio reports that the tradition acts “like a fight of the wittiest,” suggesting, “Whoever has the last word wins” (Personal interview). Consuelo tells us the “show went on for several weeks,” so her recounting of the scene only gives us a small portion of the dialogue exchanged. However, María sings the last verse Consuelo transcribes, marking her as the winner of the battle of wits, if only in the eyes of the narrator and readers (135). Though the neighborhood returns to ignoring María, for a few moments the island’s musical traditions allow her to become part of a chorus larger than herself. By unashamedly adding her own verses to the community’s playful song, María serves as a triumphant example for Consuelo as she writes her own story while still maintaining the expected submissive position of a young girl in Puerto Rico.

Music proves central to another pivotal scene near the close of the novel, one in which Consuelo herself will raise her voice in song. While visiting the town of La Perla with Miss Vélez, Consuelo once again takes note of the sounds surrounding her: “I heard several radios blasting out the same song, a merengue that kept urging, ‘Shake it, baby, shake it, ’cause the sugar is at the bottom.’ A heavy woman was sweeping piles of sand out of her *cuartel* and moving her large hips to the wild rhythms of the music” (164). The traditional Puerto Rican music accompanies playful, suggestive language and inspires physical movement, the multiple radios symbolizing a strong sense of community. Consuelo notes, “The music from doorways and windows blended into a sort of engine hum. I felt as though the entire barrio might rise like a

giant spaceship and take off over the water” (166). Communal music appears again through the town’s radios, and the image of the town in flight suggests music possesses a transcendent power that will soon affect the narrator. Consuelo’s conversation with her classmate Lucila enables her to see a different side of Puerto Rican life, one far removed from the modern amenities of Consuelo’s home, though just as beautiful and possibly livelier. Consuelo recalls, “Lucila took my hand as we walked back to her house. She began singing a verse of ‘Verde Luz’ that I knew, and I joined her. Even in this place made ugly by poverty, our island could not stop being praised for its beauty” (168). Through her song choice, Ortiz Cofer again signifies music’s ability to solidify communal bonds on a national level. As Ocasio reports, “‘Verde Luz’ is a highly patriotic song....a song that any Puerto Rican regardless of political preferences knows by heart” (Personal communication). The patriotic verses allow two teenage women from divergent socioeconomic backgrounds to share an intimate moment. Like María adding her voice to the neighborhood song, Consuelo now sings in praise of the island even as she prepares to leave. Her reflection on the ability to sing of the island’s beauty even in the most destitute of towns attests to music’s ability to lift the spirit, even if only momentarily, above its current troubles. Consuelo’s insight prompts us to note how throughout the novel expressive arts have allowed survival and healing to occur amid the normal pangs of adolescence and more violent incidents of trauma.

Like most coming of age stories, *The Meaning of Consuelo* features its main character struggling to create an identity for herself. Though Consuelo seems to see her given name as a reminder that she must always protect her sister, for readers the name “Consuelo” invites consideration of how the narrator and others find consolation amid life’s toughest trials. Smith and Johnson read Consuelo’s leaving Puerto Rico for New York as her “reject[ing] the Catholic

religion that seemed to provide both solace and limitation for her mother” (25). I agree that Consuelo’s move suggests her setting out to forge her own identity, even if it means living among the colonizer, but I would also suggest that Consuelo’s narrative has already proven she sees the world differently from those around her when she carefully studies and preserves the art created by Mili.

Consuelo’s preference for stories and songs over silence promises to serve her as she seeks closure after her sister’s assumed drowning. Ultimately, Ortiz Cofer’s insightful depiction of Mili and the rest of her family turning to the expressive arts during times of crisis provides evidence of phenomenon scientists are only now beginning to understand. Literature has long allowed us to question the extent of human suffering, but works such as Ortiz Cofer’s *The Meaning of Consuelo* also prove the human brain’s long tradition of enabling survival and healing through art.

Conclusion

Both Ellen and Consuelo possess discernment and maturity beyond their years, most likely a result of the difficult homelives they experience as young children. Despite learning the survival strategy of silence from their mothers, Ellen and Consuelo realize they must turn to healthier and more rewarding activities for their ultimate healing. *Bastard Out of Carolina*, *Ellen Foster*, and *The Meaning of Consuelo* all end with their main characters beginning anew in a home rife with possibility because of active engagement in their healing. Each young woman’s engagement with the arts proves crucial as it allows them a sense of independence and accomplishment as they work toward healing after traumatic events. Bone sings songs, Ellen draws oceans, and Consuelo writes fiction, and each of these actions activates areas of the brain vital to the human ability to not just survive but to thrive. As neuroscientists continually work to

understand the brain's functioning, the stories of these young women remind us that, for centuries, human intuition has offered hope and healing well before science could explain why.

When Kate Chopin published her controversial portrayal of a woman dissatisfied with the rewards of motherhood, she initiated the opportunity for American authors to question and problematize the trappings of motherhood, creating more realistic and critical portrayals of women's lives. Over a century later, Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster* and Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Meaning of Consuelo* demonstrate just how significant an impact Chopin would make. Gibbons and Ortiz Cofer depict marginalized, far-from-idyllic mothers whose stories of silence and despair create the possibility for more frank discussions surrounding motherhood and its intersections with class, abuse, and mental health. These imperfect mother figures—which is to say human mother figures—join Edna in resisting societal stereotypes of motherhood as a woman's highest, most honorable, and most natural calling. Edna's and Mili's ultimately deadly desires to return to the comfort of the semiotic, though, also demonstrate the persistent truth that a desire to return to an idyllic and musical maternal space informs many of our lives, no matter how discordant our lived experiences of motherhood.

EPILOGUE

It seems especially fitting that close readings of Edna Pontelier and Mili Signe bookend this dissertation. Both characters connect to the semiotic through the therapeutic acts of listening to music and creating art, but each also fails to find the more pronounced safety and healing other characters read here enjoy: Bone's, Ellen's, and Consuelo's stories each end with hopeful anticipation for the future, and Tweet regains her voice and finds the potential for a genuine ally in Cornelia. Whereas Edna struggles within the confines of nineteenth-century maternity, Mili suffers due to her mother's failure to offer attention and encouragement in the wake of abuse. As a result, both women find their final escape through the ocean: the universal symbolic mother.

In this dissertation, I have attempted to demonstrate how reading literature through the lens of expressive arts therapies provides us with increased insight to the human capacity for self-soothing. Further, I have shown a recurring theme of music's ability to connect us to a semiotic space emerges when examining the works read in the previous chapters. Characters such as Bone's Aunt Raylene and Tweet's Grandpa help demonstrate a conception of maternal nurturance existing outside of the heteronormative female body and their respective authors also choose to represent non-traditional family structures. Future work, then, might further theorize the relationship between an increasingly globalized and technological world and modern to post-modern depictions of maternity in America. In chapter one, Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin's characters interact with live or imagined music, but the contemporary characters examined in chapters two and three find connection to a semiotic space through the power of recorded music emanating from record players and radios. I posit that planned readings of Carson McCullers's

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter (1940) and Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (published in 1993 but set in the 1940s) will offer further insight to how American conceptions of maternity expand alongside increased interactions with sound.

It is my hope that the readings I have offered in this dissertation encourage more inclusive understandings of the therapeutic interventions available to us in our daily lives. In a nation and time where few groups can claim safety from the trauma of violence and oppression, a belief in our ability to find restoration and hope in something as simple as melody and art may seem overly optimistic. However, the compelling narratives and empirical research I have placed side-by-side in the previous chapters suggest that even the most complex of pains can be lightened when we tap into that which reminds us of our shared humanity.

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