

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Cristina Stanciu for the Master of Arts in English, presented on 16 July 2002.

Title: The Mother's Burial, the Daughter's Burden: Disintegrated and Dismembered Bodies in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*

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(Thesis Advisor Signature)

The female body has been eulogized, idealized, and sanctified throughout history, while being preserved in a state of comfortable muteness, bearing the stigma of materiality. The roles commonly attributed to women, as Luce Irigaray has demonstrated, were those of “virgin, mother, and prostitute” (186). The woman’s body has been scribbled for her by patriarchy, constructed and manufactured in accordance with dominant cultural standards. This paper attempts to re-read the subversive and transgressive bodily manifestations of the “woman as body of the woman” (Wright, The Outsider 393), and to demonstrate how the corpse — “the utmost of abjection” (Kristeva 4), “the grotesque body” (Bakhtin 316) — becomes the only signifier of the female body and voice, both black and white. By discussing the works of two male American authors, William Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying and Richard Wright’s Native Son, I demonstrate that the writing of woman’s body becomes possible after the body has entered the realm of abjection and has become a meaningful corpse, rather than an idealized body. Both Faulkner and Wright exhibit a similar propensity towards the representation of the female body as dead, mute, and powerless, in order to revive it through meaningful deaths that trigger the beginning of female body writing. As feminist critics have repeatedly underlined, the woman’s body is not only a text of culture, but also a direct locus of social control. However, no longer a “docile body” (Foucault, Discipline 135), the female body is re-written — ironically — in death, and the female discourse emerges after the sacrificial cultural death has been performed.

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THE MOTHER'S BURIAL, THE DAUGHTER'S BURDEN: DISINTEGRATED AND
DISMEMBERED BODIES IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S AS I LAY DYING AND
RICHARD WRIGHT'S NATIVE SON

A Thesis

Presented to

The Department of English

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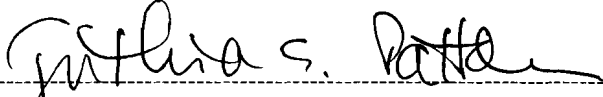
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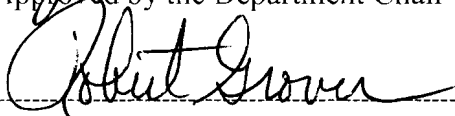
by Cristina Stanciu

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Chapter I

Writing the Body of the Woman

Amidst the hub of laughter coming from the rear of the café, his senses dreamily seized upon woman as body of the woman, not the girl standing by the steam table, but just woman as an image of a body and he drifted toward a state of desire, his consciousness stirring vaguely with desire for desire. [. . .] An intractable bitch, he thought. He sighed as the girl's too-solid reality eroded his deepening mood of desire for the desirable: woman as body of woman. (Wright, The Outsider 393) [my emphasis]

I would think: The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a and I couldn't think Anse, couldn't remember Anse. (Faulkner, As I Lay Dying 173) [Faulkner's emphasis]

I would be I; I would let him be the shape and echo of his word. [...] My children were of me alone, of the wild blood boiling along the earth, of me and of all that lived; of none and of all. (Faulkner, As I Lay Dying 174-75)¹

The challenges of studying representations of female characters/voices as “bodies” in works by male writers are inherent, particularly when such writers belong -- literally and artistically -- to patriarchy. As Hélène Cixous posits, almost the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason (2043); and reason has been associated by the Western tradition with the male intellect, while the female was attributed the burden of the body and the stigma of materiality. If language itself is the logos of the biblical father (translated in poststructuralist terms into phallogocentrism), the female access to language and voice is mediated, as she has always functioned within the discourse of men.² The present discussion of William Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying (1930) and Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940) aims at opening another perspective on how subversive (female) bodily acts and manifestations can “speak” for women, particularly in death. This analysis of the female character in terms of “woman as body of woman” starts from the assumption that a woman’s identity is inescapably inscribed in her body, is culturally manufactured and imposed on her body, the only signifier she possesses and controls. In order to define herself (woman as a voice) or to be defined by the One (woman as voiced), she has to “write her body” and produce what Cixous has termed écriture féminine, the writing of the female body, so as to transcend a masculine libidinal economy that governs Western thought and literature:

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies. [...] By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display. [...] Censor the body and you censor breath

and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard.

(2039-43)

The French feminist writers of the mid-1970s, including Cixous, Kristeva, Irigaray, and Wittig, became advocates of écriture féminine, a refusal to accept the traditional Western separation of mind and body. Woman, linked with the body, was supposed to be antithetical to writing, an activity said to be restricted to the intellect. The French feminist philosophers' challenge of these traditional norms were manifested in a celebration of the woman's association with the body, by refusing to accept the subordination of body to mind and by deconstructing the binary opposition mind/body. Consequently, in their view, "writing the body" or "letting the body be heard" is an attempt at refusing to perceive writing as a strictly mental process.³

How do Faulkner and Wright fit into the pattern of écriture féminine? A Joyce scholar, Cixous claims that écriture féminine is an assertion of the female body but this kind of writing can be produced by both men and women writers. The affirmation of the feminine in Joyce's famous novel, Ulysses, through Molly Bloom's final words, demonstrates Cixous's theory that male writers can produce a text of the female body: "...And yes,' says Molly, carrying Ulysses off beyond any book and toward the new writing; 'I said yes, I will Yes'" (2048). Faulkner claimed in an interview in 1932 that he had never read Ulysses: "Until recently I had never seen a copy" (Meriwether, Lion 30)⁴. However, critics have noticed striking similarities between Faulkner's writing, particularly in the highly modernist novels The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying, and Joyce's stream of consciousness novels.⁵ Moreover, as Ilse Duso Lind suggests, Faulkner was the first to "put the biological facts of female life into fiction" and "the only

major American fiction writer of the 1920s and 1930s who incorporates in his depiction of women the functioning of the organs of reproduction” (qtd. in Parker 74-75).⁶ Lind cites Faulkner’s references to menstruation, menopause, and the uterus, but fails to mention Temple Drake’s or Addie Bundren’s “descriptions of their own genitalia” (Parker 75).

Faulkner writes the “body of the woman” using both her voice and the voices of the other fourteen characters in fifty-nine distinct interior monologues that structure As I Lay Dying, thus becoming both the present and absent authorial voice. Significantly enough, the voice of Addie Bundren, the present-absent mother-corpse, is heard in only one narrative segment.⁷ Despite the fact that the reader’s perspective becomes, thus, limited, as her body is (re)constructed successively by her family and community, Addie’s voice remains the central discourse in the novel and becomes a source of female power in the book. The title itself establishes an uncanny identity of a woman apparently speaking from her deathbed (or death?), a detail that bothered many readers and caused many negative reviews. As Minrose Gwin skillfully explains, “From inside the coffin in which patriarchy has sealed her, Addie rethinks subjectivity as a female space. Her woman’s voice and woman’s desire emerge out of that space, resisting the image of the phallus, the language of the father and its appropriative gestures, the symbolic authority of the word” (154). Indeed, Addie Bundren’s woman’s voice and desire emerge out of a blank space in the novel which challenges the meaning of the “language of the Father” and the symbolic authority of the word, and uses her body as the main signifier: “The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a ” (AILD 173). The blank space gives Addie the opportunity to move freely within the limits of a

linguistically-bound patriarchy and to signify with her unuttered words more than with empty words, since “I had been tricked by words older than Anse or love” (172). Addie’s mistrust and rejection of language coincides with her rejection of her father’s predicament: “[. . .] that the reason for [woman’s ?] living was to get ready to stay dead [silent?] a long time” (169). Moreover, Addie uses language for her own purpose. She speaks the forbidden, the taboo, and she speaks her body in claiming that language is irrelevant: “That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don’t ever fit even what they are trying to say at” (171).

Addie’s denied cultural access to language/voice is translated in Faulkner’s novel in her rejection of this language, as it does not name her own experience. Consequently, the author gives Addie the chance to “speak her self” from the still uninterred coffin. In this respect, one may argue that Faulkner’s text reveals a certain affinity with the fundamental Western cultural associations of women with death and illness. However, it seems to be Faulkner’s own trick to open, with Addie’s celebrated monologue, the realm of the “abject.” Reading Addie through Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, concerned with figures that are in a state of transition and transformation, will help in understanding this character’s marginality. According to Kristeva, the corpse “is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject” (4). Besides being abject, Addie’s corpse becomes object, in-coffined, no more mother, but dead-mother-subject becoming simply object, both visibly and olfactively, in that buzzards start following the wagon, and people turn their noses around, in disgust, as the wagon moves to the appointed graveyard in Jefferson. Moreover, Bakhtin’s theory of the “grotesque body” is instrumental in pinpointing the importance of this character’s death in order to gain a meaningful voice.

According to Bakhtin, the biological body only repeats itself in the new generations. The historical, progressive body (the generic female body, in this case) is meaningful. The grotesque body, according to Bakhtin, “is the body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (316). Addie’s grotesque body is so fascinating because it represents the transgression of cultural taboos, the becoming, the change, and inscribes the message of her non-conforming body into the other characters.

If one examines the other female characters who also “speak” their own bodies in the novel, one immediately notices their entrapment in the norm and a language foreign to them, an ultimate lack of “voice,” despite being literally “alive.” Rachel, Samson’s wife, sympathizes with the woman-in-the-coffin (and her own entrapment, ultimately), but she expresses her tearful exasperation in a sentence that, unfortunately, is never completed: “I just wish that you and him and all the men in the world that torture us alive and flout us dead, dragging us up and down the country...” (AILD 117)⁸. Cora Tull, the good Christian neighbor, the “spokeswoman for patriarchy” (Roberts 198), embodies the female norm, fulfilling her destiny through a mixture of biology and theology: “I have tried to live right in the sight of God and man, for the honor and comfort of my Christian husband and the love and respect of my Christian children” (AILD 23). Dewey Dell, Addie’s only daughter, attempts to rid herself of the patriarchal stigma, as well biology is destiny -- by looking for an abortion and trying to open a new chapter in the Bundren female destiny. Her resentment of maternity (intuitively political?) mirrors Addie’s own horrors of child-bearing and childbirth: “I gave Anse the children. I did not ask for them” (174). However, lacking the adequate language to ask for a solution to “the female

trouble” (200), Dewey Dell fails to negotiate her own terms of maternity. The novel ends with Dewey Dell, her abortion denied, sitting in the family’s wagon, eating bananas, thus “emerging as the representation of maternal culture” (Wood 110), and going back home. Addie, the mother, is dead and finally buried; the new mother awaits, resigned, the fulfilment of her destiny. The mother is dead, long live the mother!

While Faulkner’s mothers and daughters “speak” their own bodies, Richard Wright’s female character is represented as bearing the multiple burdens inscribed in her bodies: of gender, race, and class. As a product of white bourgeois society, Faulkner reworks in his fiction the body of the woman compliant with the dominant ideology, even though Addie Bundren, the poor white farmer’s wife, is at the antipode of the (lost) ideal of the Southern lady. Furthermore, while Faulkner is more concerned with his female character’s inner life and self-assertion (the interior body), Wright marks his female character’s body with the ideology of a racist society she (and he) lives in, writing her exterior body -- the only one he knows, since the self-asserting voice of a black female in a racist society is not even marginal, but non-existent. Thus, the emphasis is transferred from within to without, from the inner struggle of a white female to assert herself through the body to the mark of exteriority, the burden of the colored body. The binary opposition white/black is hard to deconstruct in Wright’s world. It is not only black women’s corporeality he is concerned with -- if, indeed, they become aware of their bodily identity. The African American writer reduces all the black characters in Native Son to the status of racialized bodies, both male and female. Paradoxically, the short-lived assertion/writing of the male black body requires the sacrificial death of both black

(Bessie) and white (Mary) bodies, and a return of the tired (Mrs. Thomas) and scared (Vera) bodies of his own “kind” to the status quo.

Bodies are everywhere in Wright’s novel.⁹ Mary Dalton has a white, socialist, idolized, sexualized, threatening, drunken, struggling, chopped, grotesquely dismembered dead body. Bessie Mears has a black, working-class, used, tired, drunk, raped, devalued, crushed, rotting dead body. Mrs. Dalton has a white, aristocratic, frail, blind, powerless, ghostlike body. Mrs. Thomas and Vera have black, worn-out, demanding, nagging, submissive, religious bodies waiting for a salvation in heaven. Ultimately, the angry Bigger Thomas has a body: a black, young, embarrassed, hungry, desiring, hunted, and silenced dead body. What is really problematic here is not simply Wright’s misogyny and denigration of the black woman (Williams 397), nor his “hostility toward black people” and “his contempt for Black women” (DeCosta-Willis 541). The Wright scholarship is rich in such accusations. Rather, what is problematic is his use of both black and white female bodies as instruments in the male character’s short-lived self-assertion. Once Mary Douglas transcends the symbolism of American fruit forbidden the black man by becoming interested in “his race” and showing her friendliness through an unusual physical closeness, she becomes a “victim.” She becomes a victim not of Bigger’s criminal impulses, but of an entire ideology that has informed Bigger’s attitude toward white women, an attitude created by what Angela Y. Davis has called “the myth of the Black rapist” in the United States.¹⁰ According to Davis, “the myth of the Black rapist was a distinctly political invention” (184) used to terrorize the black community with the threat of lynching, in this way keeping the white and black working classes at odds. While white womanhood was being “protected,” the sexual victimization of the black

woman was concealed. In Native Son the scant attention paid to Bessie's black, raped, and murdered body -- used as evidence to prove the rape and murder of Mary Dalton -- underscores the violence of the world that creates Biggers and Bessies, a world that inscribes their identities onto their black bodies and reduces them to sexual stereotypes: rapists and whores.

In a sense, Bigger's and Bessie's attitudes towards bodies are similar, as they "have been made to devalue their own bodies and the bodies of others by the environment that warps them" (Guttman 181). Moreover, I suggest that Wright's portrayal of his female characters primarily as "bitches, whores, and woman haters" (Mootry 117) is meant to sanction the compulsory racist ideology of his time -- one that tries Bigger for the murder of a white woman by completely neglecting his black victim -- and not to translate it accurately in his work. Ultimately, both the white and black female bodies are reduced to objects, and the narrator makes no attempt at suggesting a recuperation of their subjectivity. Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears have to die -- like Faulkner's Addie Bundren -- to gain meaningful voices in death, voices denied them while alive.

Another ideological preoccupation of Wright in Native Son is to expose what Susan Bordo calls "the triple burden of negative bodily associations" throughout history of the black woman:

By virtue of her sex, she represents the temptations of the flesh and the source of man's moral downfall. By virtue of her race, she is an instinctual animal, undeserving of privacy and undemanding of respect. [By virtue of her class] her body is not only treated as an animal body, but is property, to be "taken" and used at will. Such a body is denied even the

dignity accorded a wild animal; its status approaches that of mere matter, thing-hood. (11) [my emphasis]

More preoccupied with the “race problem” than with “gender trouble,” Wright opposes in his novel the bodies of both black and white women in order to reveal their contribution to the fear, flight, and fate of the black urban male living in the south side of Chicago.¹¹ Structurally, the female characters are marginal and episodic. Besides, the use of the omniscient point of view limits the reader’s perception and the possibility to reconstruct the female characters, since the only one who has a “voice” in the novel is Bigger Thomas. The pressures that both black and white body typologies exert on him, particularly female bodies – the forbidden, white bourgeois body of Mary Dalton; the ghostly and blind body of her mother, Mrs. Dalton, the embodiment of the aristocratic white ladyhood; the “old body” of Mrs. Thomas, the defeated, nagging black mother; the submissive, scared body of Vera Thomas, “an echo of Mrs. Thomas” (Harris 72); the tired and abused body of Bessie Mears, Bigger’s female friend – are translated in the special attention the narrator pays to color and color symbolism in order to illustrate a certain ideology. The black and white bodies, converging towards or running from the centrality of the “Dalton” home set -- governed by the white and literally blind body of Mrs. Dalton – become all participants in Bigger’s drama.¹² He searches for a life whose meaning is “bigger” than the black body he is imprisoned in, reduced to a mere “docile body,” and controlled by the “disciplinary gaze” of the white people.¹³

Discussing the “matter of bodies” in Native Son, Katherine Fishburn proposes that Wright’s novel itself is “a bodily projection, born of his desire to overcome the pain of living as a back man in a white racist society,” peopled with “marked bodies, regimented

bodies, suffering bodies, dead bodies” (202). This overwhelming concern with materiality, the grotesque, the abject of human bodies – Mary Dalton’s dismembered and burned body, Mrs. Dalton’s blind body, Bessie Mears’s raped, murdered, and rotten body – demonstrates Wright’s concern with the centrality of bodies to human experience, and particularly his challenging of the racist society that keeps black bodies segregated from white bodies.

Both Wright and Faulkner write the body of the woman. The bodies they create are not ideal or comfortable, but transgressive and problematic, abject and grotesque, non-conformist and threatening. The interest in the potential of the corpse, the only body the woman can freely signify with, is striking in both Native Son and As I Lay Dying. Coming from different cultural and social backgrounds, both writers share the concern with the human being’s reduction to its basest form and silencing through the social body’s emphasis on corporeality, materiality. Source of both human life and death, the female body constitutes simultaneously the source of life and the threat of death. As the infant has to separate from the body of the mother in order to enter the symbolic realm and the law of the father, to define its identity, so the mother’s body has to separate itself from a life that reduces her identity to the body in order to gain a meaningful voice. The mother’s metaphorical death is important, in psychoanalytical interpretations, for the child to find his/her own voice and identity. Moreover, the mother’s death is her only opportunity to “speak” and signify with her body, once a source of life, now an image of decay and disintegration, but free to speak the taboo. The mother’s burial does not mean her ultimate death, as she is perpetuated in her offsprings’ life. Particularly the daughter will perpetuate the mother’s burden and ultimately appropriate it. While in As I Lay

Dying the mother's burial opens the mother's discourse, the daughter's burden is perpetuated in a denied abortion and re-intergration in the law of the father. In Native Son, however, the (white) daughter's unusual death and uncanny burial adds to the mother's death-in-life burden, while the black mother and daughter await, patiently, the sweet call of death.

Notes to Chapter I:

¹ In the first quotation, the emphasis is mine. Although the novel The Outsider (1953) is only briefly discussed in this paper, Wright's concept of "woman as body of the woman" is vital for the discussion of his female characters in Native Son (1940). Moreover, the idea of woman as outsider also informs my discussion of peripheral bodies. The title of Faulkner's novel, As I Lay Dying, will appear henceforth as AILD in parenthetical citations and notes.

² "Phallogocentrism" is Jacques Derrida's term for the masculine power at the origin of the Law. See Jacques Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, pp. ix-xxix.

³ For a discussion of the four French theoreticians, Cixous, Kristeva, Irigaray, and Wittig, see Ann Rosalind Jones's article, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *L'écriture féminine*" in Feminisms. An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism, pp. 357-70.

⁴ I.e., two years after the publication of As I Lay Dying (1930). Ulysses was published in 1924. From July to December 1925 Faulkner visited Europe, where he continued writing. At that time he was working on a novel, Elmer, which was never finished. His biographer notices a striking similarity between this piece and Ulysses: "Elmer's drunken stream of consciousness suggested a blend of The Marionettes and the 'Circe' episode of Joyce's Ulysses" (Blotner, Biography 163).

⁵ Blotner also suggests that Faulkner clearly borrowed from his contemporaries, particularly Joyce: "He was learning from the man he would call one of the two 'great writers' of his time" (144). The other "great writer," as we learn from an interview with Jean Stein vanden Heuvel in 1956, was Thomas Mann. In the same interview, Faulkner

also suggests an important way of approaching Joyce's masterpiece: "The two great men in my time were Mann and Joyce. You should approach Joyce's Ulysses as the illiterate Baptist preacher approaches the Old Testament: with faith" (Meriwether, Lion 250). I believe this caution may apply to Faulkner's writings, as well.

⁶ See Ilse Dusoir Lind, "Faulkner's Women," in The Maker and the Myth: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, pp. 92-94.

⁷ This is arguably the best chapter in the book, and it will be instrumental in our discussion of Addie's subjectivity and language use. For extensive discussions of Addie's monologue, see Paul S. Nielsen, "What Does Addie Bundren Mean, and How Does She Mean it?" pp. 33-39. See also Karen R. Saas, "At a Loss for Words: Addie and Language in As I Lay Dying," pp. 9-21. The most comprehensive recent article I have come across during my research on this topic is Harriet Hustis's exhaustive study, "The Tangled Webs We Weave: Faulkner Scholarship and the Significance of Addie Bundren's Monologue," pp. 3-21.

⁸ Rachel's voice is only heard in Samson's monologue (AILD 112-19), so it becomes mediated. Lula, another "wife" in the novel, whose outrage appears in Armstid's section (184-93), also condones patriarchy: "It's a [sic] outrage. He [Anse Bundren] should be lawed for treating her so" (187). Except for Addie, her daughter Dewey Dell, and neighbor Cora Tull, none of the other female characters in AILD speak independently of male-mediated discourses.

⁹ I am indebted for this discussion of the bodies to Katherine Fishburn's essay, "The Delinquent's Sabbath or the Return of the Repressed: The Matter of Bodies in Native Son," p. 202.

¹⁰ See Angela Y. Davis. “Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Rapist” in Women, Race, and Class, pp. 172-201.

¹¹ For a book-length definition of the term, see Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.

¹² For a discussion of color-blindness and its implications in Wright’s novel, see Seymour L. Gross’s article, “‘Dalton’ and Color-Blindness in Native Son,” pp. 75-77. See also Lloyd W. Brown’s article, “Stereotypes in Black and White. The Nature of Perception in Wright’s Native Son,” pp. 35-44. A discussion of blindness and color symbolism is also provided by Willene P. Taylor’s article, “The Blindness Motif in Richard Wright’s Native Son,” 44-58. The authors of these articles suggest that Wright uses the pattern of sight and blindness imagery to expose either the limited vision, or the distortion of vision(s), and ultimately the “agonizing permutations of color in America” (Gross 75).

¹³ Two of Michel Foucault’s key terms in Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison. For a discussion of “docile bodies,” see Part III.1, 135-170. The “disciplinary gaze” is, according to Foucault, an agent of power. One may argue that in Native Son it is not the white gaze that disciplines and punishes Bigger, but also his own environment, and the disciplinary daily vituperations of his own mother: “Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life” (NS 12). From now on, I will refer to the novel as NS in parenthetical citations and final notes.

Chapter II

Reading the Body: A Few Theoretical Considerations

Historians long ago began to write the history of the body. They have studied the body in the field of historical demography or pathology; they have considered it as the seat of the needs and appetites, as the locus of physiological processes and metabolisms, as a target for the attacks of germs or viruses; they have shown to what extent historical processes were involved in what might seem to be the purely biological “events” such as the circulation of bacilli, or the extension of the lifespan. But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. (Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish 25) [my emphasis]

... for whoever is encumbered with the phallus, what is a woman? A woman is a symptom. (Jacques Lacan, “Seminar of 21 January 1975,” Feminine Sexuality) [my emphasis]

Taught from their infancy that beauty is a woman’s sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison. (Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman 82) [my emphasis]

O woman arise! [...] But the burden of white men bore her back, / And the white world stifled her sighs. (W.E.B. DuBois, The Burden of Black Women)

Human experience is incarnated. Our life philosophy and religion is based on the Christic incarnation and the crucified body. The body has played an important part in defining identities, causing conflicts, determining social positions and hierarchies. Complementing the self (conceived as mind, soul, spirit), the body has always been assigned a secondary role to reason, the immaterial mind being trapped inside an alien and transient body. For centuries, the body as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul has been regarded as a force of negativity, an obstacle to the soul's attempt to acquire knowledge, virtue, eternal life. As Drew Leder argues, three images of embodiment have played a central role in the Western tradition: the body understood as the scene of epistemological error, the body as the site of moral error (hence the distrust of bodily passions, especially sexuality), and the body as indicative of mortality (the identification of the body with disease and death) (127).¹ Consequently, the philosophical, theological, and scientific "constructions" and readings of the body have been influential in our (de)valuation of the body. While these images of embodiment still influence our cultural understanding of the body, poststructuralist theorists have proposed a reading of the body as a social construct and site of ideology and power relations, focusing particularly on the female body, the Other body, the marginal body, associated for many centuries with temptation, lust, matter, procreation, maternity, nurturing, and decay. The disintegrated, dismembered, and racialized female bodies this paper attempts to explore, "living" in the thirties and forties in the American South or Midwestern city, represent the most marginal and neglected category of female body readings. Neither subjects nor objects, living an in-between life, these "abject" and "grotesque" bodies signify more with their corpses than the voices they are allowed to have. The recovery of these bodies

through the poststructuralist theories of the body (Foucault, Bordo, Kristeva) seems imperative. Not only is disintegration vital for a reintegration of the body in a meaningful reading, but also the dismemberment or deconstruction of the female body seems important in attempting to erase the binaries mind/body, male/female, black/white.

Examining the mythological construction of the body, we immediately notice its abundant references to natural elements, an important detail in establishing man's communion with nature (and materiality) at the beginning of civilization. For instance, as Bakhtin proposes, Adam's body is composed of flesh from the earth, bones from the stones, blood from the sea, hair from plants, and thoughts from clouds.² Eve springs right from Adam's rib, becoming a "side issue," a supplement to Adam's unity, and is usually associated with materiality, temporality, difference, body, sin, the Other.³ While the female paradigms of the Western world shift from the image of the Virgin Mary to that of Eve – the two mothers of our civilization – a stronger emphasis has been laid on the negative part of the binary purity/temptation or spirit/body. The mythological references to woman as temptress (Eve, Salome, Delilah) are abundant in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, thus imposing a paradigmatic norm: either angel or prostitute. The in-between body or the non-conformist body, the abject or the grotesque body, threatens the stability of the manufactured image of the body that regulates the society's perception (and "reading") of the body at a particular time. But, whatever roles biology may impose on them, because our bodies interact with culture all the time they become "necessarily cultural forms," as Susan Bordo has so aptly articulated (16) [my emphasis]. They respond to and reflect ideology by conforming to it. However, Bordo cautions:

The cost of such projections to women is obvious. For if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, the body is the negative term, and if woman is the body, then women are that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death. (5)

[Bordo's emphasis]

And if such ideology emphasizes male activity over female passivity, thus gendering the body, how can one escape such categorizations? This is not an easy question, but one may start looking for an answer by examining the readings of gender itself.⁴ First, the Freudian model of reading sexual difference acknowledges human sexuality as a question, not a given; however, Freud's celebrated dictum, "Anatomy is destiny" (sex determines and equals gender, hence female=woman and male=man) essentializes gender into a stable certainty that Freud himself had questioned. Second, according to the feminist analyses of the 1970s and 1980s, females and males are born, whereas women and men are made. With her famous remark, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," Simone de Beauvoir inaugurates the social constructionist critique of essentialism that influenced feminist literary theory in the 1980s and 1990s.⁵ According to this model, "sex" refers to the biological, including the female and male, while gender refers to "more variable arenas of cultural and discursive, including feminine and masculine" (Parker 73). The third model of sex/gender definition is based on the assumption that both sex and gender are socially constructed, since biology is part of culture rather than its antecedent. The most famous theorist of this model is Judith

Butler, whose influential study, Gender Trouble (1990), posits that nothing is natural, not even sexual identity, since even what we may see as “natural” is socially constructed.⁶ As Thomas Laqueur has envisioned this model of analysis, “Destiny is anatomy” in this case (qtd. in Parker 73). This brief examination of so complex a topic reveals the relaxation of the binary boundaries in recent decades, as well as the role played by culture in defining and ascribing identities, reinforcing Susan Bordo’s theory of gendered body.

Assuming the role of the Other, the “second sex” in de Beauvoir’s terms, the woman’s response to society’s norms of beauty and femininity has been, for centuries, the “ideal body,”⁷ an image conforming to the cultural norms and becoming a controlled image at the same time. In trying to show her body differently, however, the woman’s body becomes dismembered and disintegrated as the lens through which it is perceived is now distorted and no longer belongs to an acceptable category. Moreover, the cultural pressures on female bodies to acquire an ideal body sometimes result in biological and psychological dysfunction (eating disorders, agoraphobia, hysteria). This cultural control of the body has been examined extensively; Michel Foucault’s vision of the control of the body – a political act of power, in his view – is best described in his book Discipline and Punish. According to Foucault, the body is the setting of a “micro-physics of power” (139). Modern power, in his view, although non-authoritarian and non-orchestrated, produces and normalizes bodies to serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination. Punishment is defined as both a “complex social function” and “a political tactic,” an exercise of power (23). If in a slave economy, the punitive mechanisms served to provide additional labor force (through an “appropriation of

bodies” 137), in our society the systems of punishment must be situated, in Foucault’s view, “in a certain ‘political economy’ of the body” since “it is always the body that is at issue – the body and its forces, their utility and docility, their distribution and their submission” (25). Disciplinary methods have been used for a long time, “in monasteries, armies, workshops,” but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, according to Foucault, they became “general formulas of domination” (137). Subordinating the body to its utility becomes, in the case of the female body, subordinating the subordinate – a double subordination and control -- and emphasizing its biological capacities over the subjective ones.

While discussing a non-gendered body, Foucault creates a concept that seems vital to our discussion of culturally determined and created (female) bodies: “the docile body.”⁸ According to Foucault, a body is “docile” if it “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved.” In every society, the body has been “in the grip of very strict powers, which have imposed on it constraints, prohibitions, and obligations” (136). The forces that act on bodies and meticulously control their operations, imposing on them a relation of “docility-utility,” are called “disciplines” by Foucault (137). Discipline is “a political anatomy of detail” (139). The disciplinary and punitive methods and regulations of the body by various social institutions (school, army, prison) represent the power of the social body in controlling and correcting the operations of the body. Moreover, “discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience),” and the body undergoes -- simultaneously -- “an increased aptitude and an increased domination” (138).⁹ If Plato

and Descartes referred to the body as a prison of the soul (mind, knowledge, intellect), in the light of the above theories (Bordo and Foucault), it is the body that is imprisoned not only by the dominant ideology, but an interdependence of ideology-culture-power relations, and one might argue, inverting the Platonic and Cartesian dictum, that the soul (mind, knowledge, ideology) has become the prison of the body. [my emphasis]

Another important transition and change in metaphorical order has been done in the conversion, by feminism, of the old metaphor of the Body Politic to a new metaphor, the politics of the body. In the old metaphor of the Body Politic, the society was imagined as a human body, with different organs and parts with different functions, needs, forces: the head was attributed to the sovereign, the blood to the will of the people, and the nerves symbolizing the system of rewards and punishments.¹⁰ The new politics of the body, according to Bordo, shifts the emphasis from the female body as the socially-shaped and historically-colonized territory to the body as a site of individual self-determination. As Bordo insightfully posits,

Feminism imagined as itself a politically inscribed identity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control – from foot-binding and corseting to rape and battering to compulsory heterosexuality, forced sterilization, unwanted pregnancy and (in the case of the African American slave woman) explicit commodification. (21-22) [Bordo's emphasis]

An example of the production of socially trained female “docile bodies” is provided by Mary Wollstonecraft’s description of the “genteel women” in late eighteenth

century, women imprisoned in social and cultural conventions governing their lives and bodies, unable to take control over the politics of their bodies:

Genteel women are, literally speaking, slaves to their bodies. Women are everywhere in this deplorable state; for, in order to preserve their innocence, as ignorance is courteously termed, truth is hidden from them, and they are made to assume an artificial character before their faculties have acquired any strength. Taught from their infancy that beauty is a woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison. (82-83) [my emphasis]

As this example shows, besides gender, class also plays an important part in reading the body. Marx argued that a person's economic class affected his or her experience and definition of the body (qtd. in Bordo 16). Drew Leder's reading of Foucault's docile and disciplined bodies belonging to the marginal (i.e., Other) classes is highly significant to this discussion: "The prostitute, the tortured man, the assembly line worker, may each regard his or her own body as if it were a thing. Their bodies have been taken away from them through the alienating projects of the Other" (98-99). The marginal body is thus denied subjectivity and perceives his/her body in terms of thinghood. This dehumanizing emphasis on the materiality of the body stresses the powerlessness of such social characters, entrapped in prescribed social roles and manufactured bodies (hence identities) created by the social body. In this marginal category, women, associated with the body and confined historically to a life centered on the body, become more conscious of their bodies -- either because of the physical

weakness, beauty requirements, or menstruation and pregnancy -- and transcend this entrapment through subversive bodily acts and what I would like to call “non-conformist bodies.”

Besides gender and class, race contributes meaningfully to our reading of the body. If the white disciplinary gaze is the lens through which the black body – both male and female – is scrutinized, then such a body becomes automatically an object of control. From the maternal, desexualized Mammy as the prototype of black womanhood to the desiring, threatening body of the young African American woman, the black body, more than any other perhaps, bears the scars and branding that history has inscribed on it. The role of the mother’s body is particularly significant in its ambivalent role. On the one hand, the black mother’s body, the site of history, provides the connection with an atrocious past, of slavery and a subjugating position one may not be willing to connect with as racial memory. On the other hand, it is the mother’s body that creates and nourishes the link with the future, both physically and spiritually. Ironically, this glorification of black motherhood is directed towards the controllable, unthreatening black body governing the “honored” domestic realm.

The rape of the mother’s black body (I use mother as a generic term here) has been, historically, an act of asserting white masculinity and power. As La Vinia Delois Jennings notes in her study on violence in the works of Wright and Baldwin, “the claim of psychologists and criminologists [is] that rape is a sociologically motivated act of power and dominance that males [...] often commit to express their masculinity” (ix). Moreover, as the institution of African American fatherhood has been quite blurred

during a period of cultural humiliation, the mother's role has been central in preserving the race. As Adrienne Rich has underlined in Of Women Born, "in non-white families, mothers and other female ancestors are the role models and transmitters of culture, including oral literature" (qtd. in Grimes 61). However, racist attitudes against this plight have emerged sometimes from among African Americans, and their dominant note is the immorality and bestiality associated with the black female body. Anne Stavney gives an example of a mulatto teacher, William Hannibal Thomas, who advanced this thesis at the beginning of the twentieth century: "The moral status of a race is fixed by the character of its women, but, as moral rectitude is not a predominant trait in Negro nature, female chastity is not one of its endowments" (535).¹¹ The black female body is thus policed by its own race, and enslaved in both white and black prejudices. Eleanor Tayleur, a Southern white woman, expressed her pity for her contemporary black woman in 1904: "No other woman among civilized people is so little protected, so little cherished, and evokes so little chivalry from the men of her race. All the hardships that other men endure she bears and more" (qtd. in Stavney 535-36).¹²

An attempt at recovering the African American's female body from the stereotypical image of victim and sex object is the recuperative work of W.E.B. Dubois, who, in his 1920 essay on "The Damnation of Women," sanctions the white sexual exploitation of black women's bodies, persistent in the second decade of the twentieth century: "I shall forgive the white South much in its final judgement day. But the one thing I shall never forgive [is] its wanton and continued persistent insulting of black womanhood which is sought and seeks to prostitute to its lust." Besides, he links the

condition of the black woman in the South with that of the Northern, black, urban woman who, in his opinion, encounters many of the same dangers the Southern woman has. Consequently, he promotes an image of a strong woman, reborn from the very hardships she had endured, becoming a model of “efficient” and strong womanhood: “I have known the women of many lands... but none have I known more sweetly feminine, more unswervingly loyal, more desperately earnest, and more instinctively pure in body and soul than the daughters of my black mothers” (qtd. in Stavney 536-37).¹³ This is, nevertheless, an idealized image of the black female body, and a reminiscent image of the True Woman ideal of the nineteenth century that male writers had eulogized. The black woman’s body is thus constructed/read by a mixture of conflicting ideologies. On the one hand, the whites assert its promiscuity and incompetence; on the other hand, leaders in the black community assert its chastity and motherly virtues.

Written by males of both races, how can such a body assert itself? Richard Wright’s solutions to this question are still debatable. While he was repeatedly accused of promoting women’s victimized bodies in extremely violent circumstances, I would like to propose that this very “conformity” to the racist ideology of his time is subversive in that it sanctions rather than promotes such stereotypes. Moreover, Wright’s emphasis on the body may be read in terms of protest to an ideology which has inscribed a whole race’s identity on the submissive, enslaved body. To make such a dangerous plight in the 1940s’ United States was Wright’s courageous act to sanction rather than to promote promiscuity, materiality, bestiality, and humiliation. Also, by entering the realm of the abject, of “non-acceptable” dismembered and disintegrated bodies, Wright demonstrates the precarious status the black woman’s body had as an “in-between,” transitional image

in search of an identity long denied her. The dismembered parts of Mary Dalton's physical body in Native Son resonate the dismembered and disintegrated psychological body of her black counterpart, Bessie Mears, and all the other "native daughters" Wright represents through her body. It is only by going through this stage of dismemberment and disintegration that the black women can recuperate their lost bodies. The grotesque, abject, rotten dead body of Bessie Mears writes a new stage in the black women's bodyhood; the dead black woman's body or the dysfunctional body can signify more than the silent living black body.

Barbara Omolade describes the commodification of the black female body's in a master-slave world and deconstructs the female slave's body in such a way that her living body parts ultimately come to signify her identity. In a sense, she speaks through her dismembered body centuries before Bessie Mears:

Her head and her heart were separated from her back and her hands and divided from her womb and vagina. Her back and muscle were pressed into field labor where she was forced to work with men and work like men. Her hands were demanded to nurse and nurture the white man and his family as domestic servant whether she was technically enslaved or legally free. Her vagina, used for his sexual pleasure, was gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment – the capital investment being the sex act and the resulting child the accumulated surplus, worth money on the slave market. (qtd. in Bordo 22)¹⁴ [my emphasis]

The above commentary on the deconstructed and dismembered female slave body brings a new perspective into the readings of the body this chapter suggests. An

important instance of body representation is the dysfunctional body, the in-between, the problematic body that escapes categorization, or, in its ultimate material condition, the corpse. Drew Leder suggests that the painful body is relevant to our understanding of the body's cultural representations, since, at a strictly biological level, "we are made aware of our bodies particularly at times of dysfunction" (130).¹⁵ It is true that the painful body is a disturbing reality that foretells the coming of death and the body's (and our) transience in the world – and one may immediately remember Emily Dickinson's poems of pain and bodily disintegration. J.P. Vernand notes the striking association of the body with death, etymologically speaking:

The word "soma," translated as "body" [in Greek], originally designated a corpse, that is to say, what remains of an individual after his incarnated life and physical vitality have left him, reducing him to a pure inert figure, an effigy. He becomes an object of exhibition and lamentation for the others, burned or buried, into invisibility. (qtd. in Bronfen 76) [my emphasis]

If for Descartes, the corpse, as object of dissection, provided the key to scientific knowledge (res cogitas), for Elisabeth Bronfen, the corpse occupies a double, in-between position, "in that it is neither in its social existence nor in its new, spiritual existence" (103). The spiritual existence of the corpse is something to be questioned, given its pervasive historical association with materiality in the Western world. But the in-between position the corpse occupies is very relevant to our discussion of dismembered female bodies; a non-fixed entity, neither alive nor interred (and forgotten), the corpse is the evidence that life existed (and how it was lived) and life will be continued on a different level from that point on. The corpse, as Bronfen suggests,

[S]imultaneously occupies two places, the here and the nowhere. Neither of this world nor entirely absent from it, the corpse stages a relation between these two incompatible positions. Strangeness emerges because the corpse, resembling the deceased person, is in a sense doubled. It has no relation to the world in which it appears except that of an image, of a shadow, constantly living behind the living form even as this living form is about to transform in a shadow. (104)

Bronfen's study, Over Her Dead Body, is an extensive documentation of the long history of representations of dead women, with a strong concentration on the Victorian obsessions with female dead bodies. A central argument in Bronfen's work is that the recurrent appearance of the feminine corpse in literature is part of long-standing cultural association of women with alterity and death, and the "materiality-maternity-mortality matrix":

By virtue of her secondary nature, her alterity, Woman is conceived as an ornament, artifice or decoration, so that death as corruption, division or duplication presides in two opposed realms which are both associated with the feminine. [...] Paradoxically, Woman is linked to nature and the material body as it endangers stable, eternal, cultural forms because it lies outside semiosis. She serves as signifier and signified before a disruptive fall to earth, birth (womb), body (soma), and language (sema). At the same time she is also linked, by virtue of her derivative nature, to figural representation and artifice, to the break between signifier and signified (sema/tomb). (68-69)

The Orthodox tradition of ritualistic deshumation of dead bodies seven years after death is a tribute paid to the body and to the body's materiality as the only reality known as participant in the religious ritual. In this tradition, decay and dismemberment are part of life.

Julia Kristeva, on the other hand, proposes the theory of the corpse as the "utmost of abjection." In Powers of Horror, Kristeva identifies that abjection represents a revolt against "that which gave us our own existence." In her view, we first experience abjection at the point of separation from the mother, hence when we become independent bodies.¹⁶ Kristeva's theory of abjection is concerned with figures that are in a state of transition or transformation and, in her view, the abject is located in a liminal state that is on the margins of two positions:

[The abject is] not me. Not that. But not nothing either. A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture. (2)¹⁷

Besides, Kristeva posits that the corpse (or cadaver, derived from the Latin cadere, to fall), "seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject" (4). In her view, it is not the lack of cleanliness that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, what does not abide by rules and borders, what is "in-between, ambiguous, composite" (4).

Unlike Kristeva's image of the corpse as a subversive, transgressive body, and her notion of the abject body, Bakhtin's description of the grotesque body is constructive and embodies hope. Although Bakhtin's grotesque body is also in an in-between state, "in the act of becoming," "is never finished," and is "continually built and builds and creates another body," it is, however, "cosmic and universal" (317-18). The grotesque body has the potentiality to display both outer and inner features of the body (blood, bowels, heart, and other organs), and the grotesque imagery may, according to Bakhtin, construct a "double body" in the "endless chain of bodily life that it retains the parts in which one link joins the other, in which the life of one body is born from the death of the preceding, older one" (318). Death is not abject to the grotesque body. On the contrary,

In the grotesque body, death brings nothing to the end, for it does not concern the ancestral body, which is renewed in the next generation. The events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other and, as it were, at their points of intersection. One body offers its death, the other its birth, but they are merged in a two-bodied image. (322)

Bakhtin's discussion of grotesque bodies focuses on Rabelais's work, who depicted the body as the most nearly perfect form of organization of matter and, therefore, key to all matter. The Renaissance emphasis on the human body as microcosm, opposed to the dismembered body of the Medieval period, praised the body in its abjection.

The following chapters will discuss – in the light of the theoretical readings proposed here – such instances of abject and grotesque bodies and corpses in the central texts of William Faulkner and Richard Wright, As I Lay Dying and Native Son,

respectively, focusing primarily on representations of the female body. The centrality of the female body in these writers' works attests the centrality of the body and its materiality in representations of female identity. However, the questions about the dismembered and disintegrated female bodies this paper raises aims at signalling a disintegration of the very tradition which associates femininity with beautiful bodies and the care of the body. Through their subversive and abject voices of the body – spoken by Addie Bundren, Mary Dalton, and Bessie Mears – Faulkner's and Wright's studied works reveal striking similarities. Although these characters "speak" more or less from death – not having access to the language of the Father, or any language at all, in their lifetime -- their voices speak the forbidden, the taboo, and the impossible. Faulkner's and Wright's use of such daring signifying corpses – whom I would like to term the sacrificial bodies of the culture -- render their constant preoccupation with the representation of the female body in their writing.

Notes to Chapter II:

¹ See Drew Leder, The Absent Body. For a discussion of the negativity of the body, see Part II, Chapter 5, “The Threatening Body,” 126-149. The “epistemological error” is an allusion to the Cartesian idea of the body as “prison” of the soul, exerting “an obstructive effect on the soul... always a hindrance to the mind in its thinking” (Descartes, Letters, 111, qtd. in Leder 130). Descartes borrows here Plato’s idea of the body as epistemological deceiver: our body’s unreliable senses and passions trick us into mistaking the transient and the illusory for the permanent and the real. Moreover, Descartes believed that with the right philosophical method (res cogitas) we can transcend the epistemological limitations of the body (res extensa) (qtd. in Bordo 3-4).

² This is Bakhtin’s interpretation of the Adamic myth. See Rabelais and His Time, 351.

³ I am indebted for this remarkable reading to R. Howard Bloch’s study, “Medieval Misogyny,” 1-24. Bloch refers to Philo Judaeus’ reading of Genesis 2.21: “These words in their literal sense are of the nature of a myth. For how could anyone admit that a woman, or human being at all, came into existence out of a man’s side?” p. 11.

⁴ My discussion of the three models of “sex” and “gender” difference and definition is based on Robert Dale Parker’s article, “Sex and Gender, Feminine and Masculine: Faulkner and the Polymorphous Exchange of Cultural Binaries” in Faulkner and Gender pp. 73-97.

⁵ This is the opening sentence of the second volume of Beauvoir’s highly influential study, The Second Sex.

⁶ Gender Trouble has been considered one of the most influential theoretical texts of the 1990s and it is a founding document of queer theory. Butler stresses that modern culture sees sexuality as a fundamental constituent of identity. However, the categories and norms that define our understanding of sexuality may contradict “the natural,” in its turn a socially constructed category, according to the theorist. That’s why Butler’s study opens the “field of possibility for gender,” aiming for a feminism that avoids “exclusionary gender norms” in the way it views “acceptable” identities. Moreover, Butler believes that identity is a trap, a hardening into rigid binarized categories, and she calls for actions that will “resignify” our received meanings [my emphasis].

⁷ See Susan Bordo, “Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathy as the Crystalization of the Culture” in Unbearable Weight, 139-64.

⁸ For a discussion of the “docile body,” see Discipline and Punish, III.1., 135-170. Foucault acknowledges the influence of La Metrie’s L’Homme-machine and his theory of dressage at the center of the notion of docility.

⁹ For a discussion of the “anatomy-politics of the human body” see Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, vol. I, Part 5, “Right of Death and Power over Life,” 135-59, particularly pp. 139-41. Here Foucault distinguishes between “the body as a machine” (with its disciplining and optimization capabilities) and “the species body” serving the basis of the biological processes, and becoming an important element in “the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes” (141) (i.e. demographic control).

¹⁰ Susan Bordo, Unbearable Weight, Introduction, p. 21.

¹¹ See William Hannibal Thomas, The American Negro: What He Was, What He Is, and What He May Become, 183-184. When his racist views were attacked by prominent black writers of the time such as Charles Chestnutt and W.E.B. DuBois, Thomas claimed that his views were those of an insider: “Innate modesty is not a characteristic of the African American woman. [...] Even married black women unresistingly betray their wifely honor to satisfy a bestial instinct” (qtd. in Stavney 534-35).

¹² See Eleanor Tayleur, “The Negro Woman: Social and Moral Decadence.” Outlook 76 (30 January 1904): 269.

¹³ See W.E.B. Dubois, “The Damnation of Women” in Darkwater: Voices fom Within the Veil, 164-66.

¹⁴ Bordo refers to Barbara Omolade’s article, “Hearts of Darkness,” 354.

¹⁵ The significance of the Greek prefix “dys-“ is “bad,” “hard,” or “ill” (Leder 83).

¹⁶ Kristeva draws this idea from Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory. For his discussion of the child’s separation from the mother and entrance into the Symbolic stage, the “Law of the Father,” see “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” in The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, pp. 1278-90.

¹⁷ See Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection” in Powers of Horror, pp.1-32.

¹⁸ Kristeva looks specifically at types of corporeal exclusions a subject undertakes, more specifically the things he/she must “ab-ject” in order to constitute his or her “clean and proper” body. According to Lacan’s theory of subject formation (See note 16), the infant is unable to reconcile the experience of the fragmented body with the visual (and

coherent) image he/she sees in the mirror. Hence the baby is alienated from his lived body and “sees” an imaginary body mainly created by the symbolic and physical acts of the caregivers, usually of the mother. (We should note here Nancy Chodorow’s important remark that caregiver doesn’t necessarily mean “mother” but whoever attends to the infant’s needs. See Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering.) The mother’s body, besides giving birth to the infant, also mediates the transition of the baby’s body from the real into the symbolic phase. Hence, for the baby to become a subject, the mother must become an object. Kristeva is interested in the interplay between the real body and the imaginary body insofar as the subject defines himself/herself by excluding the lived body as abject. [my emphasis]

Chapter III

Working out the Context: William Faulkner and Richard Wright.

The Southern Woman in Black and White

[The Southern writer] has, figuratively speaking, taken the artist in him in one hand and his milieu in the other and thrust the one into the other like a clawing and spitting cat into a crocker sack. (William Faulkner, “An Introduction to The Sound and the Fury [1929])

“... being a mother is the cruellest thing in the world” (Clare Kendry in Nella Larsen’s Passing [1929])

“Vera, sometimes I just want to lay down and quit” (Mrs. Thomas, NS [1940])

Deep down I knew that I could never really leave the South, for my feelings had already been formed by the South, for there had been slowly instilled into my personality and consciousness, black though I was, the culture of the South. So, in leaving, I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil. (Richard Wright, Black Boy [1945])

For woman is traditionally a use value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity. [...] Women are marked phallicly by their fathers, husbands, procurers. And this branding determines their value in sexual commerce. (Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which Is Not One” [1981]) [my emphasis]

The previous chapters have examined ways in which two male writers can produce écriture féminine and inscribe women's bodies in their cultural locus. Moreover, they have attempted at proposing some ways in which the (re)construction of such bodies can be made, suggesting a recurring pattern in both Faulkner and Wright's representation of the woman: the dead woman/corpse, the disintegrated and dismembered body -- both black and white -- as the only accessible voice in a male-dominated society, both inter- and intra-racially oppressive. This chapter tries to establish the common ground from which the two Southern writers' imaginative works originate. While the general critical tendency is to dissociate Wright's work with the South, as well as to overlook any possible connection with the proclaimed Southern writer, William Faulkner, a comparative study of their work may be useful in our understanding of the woman "as body of the woman," both black and white.¹ This is, definitely, an ambitious and exhaustive project beyond the scope of this paper. However, a close examination of Faulkner's As I Lay Dying and Wright's Native Son will help our understanding of their portrayal of the Southern woman who, regardless the color of her skin, was reduced to either an ideal, statuesque body to be admired and worshipped or to a usable, commodified, disciplined body silenced by patriarchy. Since Wright and Faulkner bring into their work different cultural and racial memories of the South, it is important to underscore the part that the female character plays in their work -- arguably a central character, though portrayed in its marginality.

Mississippi, the magnolia state, and "one of the most destitute and racist parts of the US" (Fabre77), was home to Faulkner and Wright and source of inspiration for both Faulkner's apocryphal Yoknapatawpha county and Wright's non-urban short stories and

novels.² The state's uniqueness also lies in its economic rise by 1860 – a slave-based economy-- and decline after the Civil War. In 1817, when Mississippi became a state, two-thirds of the land belonged to Native Americans, but between 1835 and 1860, the state became a leading producer of cotton. By the beginning of the Civil War, Mississippi was the fifth richest state in the Union, and this wealth was based also on the 218-million-dollar value of its slave population. After the Civil War, Mississippi was ranked last, and the state's reversal of fortune was blamed on its black population. It should also be added that by the end of the nineteenth century this state was one of the most committed in preserving the caste distinctions between whites and blacks.³ Besides, the state was predominantly rural, populated with backward-looking whites and impoverished black people. In 1900 Mississippi was 92.3 percent rural; in 1940, 80.2 percent rural; and in 1960, 62.3 percent rural (T. Davis 471).

Wright and Faulkner were born in this rural, segregated state, a world that Wright's character in "The Man Who Killed a Shadow" describes as "split in two, a white world and a black one, the white one being separated from the black by a million psychological miles" (185). Like Saul Saunders, the hero of the story, Wright, "looking out from his black world, saw the shadowy outlines of a white world that was unreal to him and not his own" (185-86). In Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha county, two thirds of the population are black, the writer acknowledging the discrepancy and difference within the same world. Race is thus the differentiating element in Mississippi's history and memory, along with traditional gender roles and the caste system in one of the most non-feminist, regressive states in the U.S. Thus writing about blacks and women becomes extremely problematic, especially when the writer, as Wright

has asserted, wants “to tell the truth” (T. Davis 475). Consequently, in the line proposed by Diane Roberts, “women, along with blacks, are the objects of the South’s most careful defining and categorizing” (xiv).

Born to a white comfortable family in New Albany, Mississippi, Faulkner decided to spend his whole life in the South, writing about the “deep indestructible bond [that] still exists between man and his environment [in the South]” (Meriwether, Lion in the Garden 72). Like Wright, Faulkner was largely self-educated; nevertheless, he benefited from the privileges of his class and race. At a young age, Faulkner traveled to Canada and Europe, Memphis, New York, and New Orleans, but returned to Oxford, Mississippi, to write throughout his whole life. Although he had an ambivalent and relatively short relationship with Hollywood, being attracted by the financial security that his occasional odd jobs could not ensure, Faulkner remained in the South where, as a white man, he was not physically endangered, and as a writer he could be different. As he confessed in an interview in Japan, his relationship with the South was ambivalent and unsettled: “Well, I love it and hate it. Some of the things there I don’t like at all, but I was born there, and that’s my home, and I will still defend it even if I hate it” (101).⁴ This ambivalence also characterizes his young male characters (Ike McCaslin, Quentin Compson) in search of meaningful lives in a meaningless environment of backward-looking ghosts and people paralyzed in memories, mythologizing the past, unable to change.

Wright, on the other hand, racially determined to have a different vision of the “white South” as a prison (Fabre 9), found “flight” the necessary act for survival, both physically and artistically, away from a world where the color of the body was the defining element of a person’s identity. However, both writers reconstruct their concrete

pasts in stories that simultaneously wrestle with and idolize the South. Wright's South is characterized by prejudice, race violence, and segregation codes that are inscribed permanently in his racial memory; consequently, his mainly male characters try to find refuge in more human imaginary landscapes.⁵ As his French biographer aptly remarks, there is a strong resemblance of such characters to his own life: "born in a poor Natchez family, he would cast himself in the persona of a man forever seeking a place where he could be more fully human, moving from Mississippi to Memphis, to Chicago, to New York and Paris" (Fabre 77). This peripeteic life in search of a place that would terminate the "fear" governing his life – rendered so well in the "fear," "flight," and "fate" episodes of Native Son – constitutes, on a biographical level, the root of his creative imagination.

Consequently, while Faulkner found his stay in the South imperative for the development of his artistic vision and the saga he created, Wright had to distance himself from an oppressive environment and find, in his reminiscences, a way of coming to terms with the past. While Faulkner's Quentin Compson in Absalom, Absalom! concludes, "The past is never dead; it is not even past," and wrestles with his own ghosts and torments, trying to find a meaningful present out of the sins, shame and guilt of his race's past, Wright's perception of the South is that of a dehumanized and threatening milieu. Whereas Faulkner idealizes and sanctions, at the same time, the traditional (white) family, with its system of hierarchies and values, Wright recurrently depicts a fatherless family, whose mother takes over both parental roles and is crushed by the burden of economic impoverishment and racial injustice. His autobiography, Black Boy, is an attempt at coming to terms with the South and the past after a twenty-five-year separation. While Faulkner's Quentin Compson reaches a temporary pact with the South, mixed with love

and hatred for it, Wright's reconciliation with his South/father is not possible, though he uses the South as setting in some of his major writings:

That day a quarter of a century later when I visited him on the plantation – he was standing against the sky, smiling toothlessly, his hair whitened, his body bent, his eyes glazed with dim recollection [...] – I was overwhelmed to realize that he could never understand me. [...] I stood before him, poised, [...] feeling how fastened were his memories to a crude and raw past, how chained were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body.” (Black Boy, 35) [my emphasis]

Wright's portrayal of his father sanctions the reduction of the African American population in the South to an “animalistic” condition, reduced to a body doomed to wither and disappear. The image of the “bent body” is a good example of Foucault's “docile body,” the disciplined and controlled body, but Wright's portrayal encompasses the black population as a whole in this description.⁶

Wright's attitude towards the South's “white terror” (Fabre 52) must be also interpreted in terms of the African American Great Migration (1915-1940). The Southern blacks' migration to the North during and after World War I was motivated by their search of a life denied them in the South, where the poor economic conditions and the lynching threats made life unbearable. Making the leap “from field to factory,” the exodus known as the Great Migration determined people to leave the agrarian South in search of higher wages, better educational facilities, and the right to vote and to run for office (Crew 5). Like Wright, Bigger Thomas is part of this migration to the North, carrying with him the racial memory of the Dixie as a wasteland, his father having been

lynched in Jackson, Mississippi, the very place where Faulkner's Bundrends are taking Addie's body to be buried.

Given this historic and socio-political context, what are the possibilities for the Southern women? What place do they have in the patriarchal structure of the South? How are they represented and how do they present themselves? In a traditional world where family roles are clearly defined, how can, as Spivak asks, the "subaltern" speak (2197)? Faulkner's female characters are confined, spatially and ideologically, to Yoknapatawpha county, living thus in an isolated, closed, and traditional world, feeding on its own norms and codes. Faulkner's representation of the female character has often been criticized, considered misogynistic and degrading, but, as Sally Page remarks, "[I]t is impossible to judge adequately the effectiveness of Faulkner's women characters apart from the import of the works in which they appear" (xxi). The black woman in the South, often the object of sexual gratification in the slave economy, is also often portrayed as surrogate mother in white families, the Mammy. Faulkner's Dilsey in The Sound and the Fury (1929) is a consecrated example in this respect, and a largely abused stereotype, particularly when one looks at the portrayal of African Americans in mainstream American movies, important cultural texts read by various audiences.⁷ Dilsey's role in the white family is thus more important than in her own family, but this does not necessarily have a negative connotation. One finds that Faulkner often portrays the white mother as completely ineffectual in the economy of the white aristocratic family; in order for the children to be nourished, the surrogate black mother is brought on stage, and she takes over the responsibility of the household. In The Sound and the Fury, Caroline Compson's ineffectual maternal attributes -- Quentin Compson confesses at one

point, “I never had a mother”-- are compensated by Dilsey’s warmth and humanity. Of course, this parenthetical citation can be extrapolated as the loss of the mother (i.e., the Old South) and the inability to grow in a different historical reality (the post-bellum South), but the white family’s survival depends, ironically, on the black servant. The surrogate black mother’s role is, however, minimalized.

The critical tradition to reduce “Faulkner’s women” to “creative” or “destructive” (Page xxiv), “earthmothers” and “goddesses” (Gladstein 101), has been long and unsettled. Leslie Fiedler’s reductionist categorization of Faulkner’s female characters is also worth mentioning here, as he drew feminists’ attention as well as the interest of the Brooksonian school – according to which Faulkner “admired women who did what they were supposed to do” (Gwin, n. 16, 157) -- with his view of Faulkner as a misogynist. According to Fiedler, Faulkner’s “women,” “pubescent or nubile,” fall into two terrifying categories: “the great, sluggish, mindless daughters of peasants, whose fertility and allure are scarcely distinguishable from those of a beast in heat” and “the febrile, almost fleshless but sexually insatiable daughters of the aristocracy” (310). Thus the female subjects have been “read” as stereotypes, archetypes, and the projections of their creator’s gender-based conflicts. Such reductions are not to be blamed if one reads Faulkner’s frequent cunning interviews and letters literally. For instance, in an interview with L. Bouvard, Faulkner states: “[M]en make art, women make babies” (qtd. in Roberts 193). Also, in a letter to Anita Loos, in February 1926, Faulkner confesses: “I am still rather Victorian in my prejudices regarding the intelligence of women, despite Elinor Wylie and Willa Cather and all the balance of them” (Blotner, Letters 32). The following year, writing to Horace Liveright, Faulkner makes quite an opposite confession when he asks

his editor to dedicate his novel Mosquitoes to Helen Bairn, one of his muses: “[...] you can lie to women, you know, but you cant [sic!] break promises you make’em. That infringes on their own province. And, besides, you don’t dare” (34). Such controversial opinions, coupled with Faulkner’s recurrent public reinforcement that “women can stand everyting; they are stronger than men” (qtd. in Werlock 31), inform the critical trend that dismisses Faulkner as misogynist.

Wright’s female characters have more mobility than Faulkner’s. Inside and outside the South, they are acquainted with both the rural and metropolitan racism. Despite this freedom to move in space, in terms of ideology they are mute and serve, as it has often been noticed, to underscore the male characters’ dominance over them. Nagueyaltz Warren, for instance, posits that Wright’s black woman rarely develops “beyond the level of a black girl”: “On his artistic landscape, Wright creates castrating mothers; whorish, morally depraved lovers; hysterical, weeping black girls” (60). Critics have repeatedly noticed that Wright’s female characters are “uni-dimensional, flat, portrayed mainly in terms of their relationships with the male characters” (De-Costa Willis 540), “childlike, whimpering, and stupid, [...] at the bottom of the scale of human intelligence” (Keady 124), “passive, [...] acquiescent mammies rather than tricksters or potential militants” (Harris 64), “supporting players with bit parts, [...] cardboard figures” (Williams 397).⁸

If we accept such theories, then the conclusion is quite simple: both Faulkner and Wright, having access to the language of the Father, have inscribed their female characters in stereotypical roles and postures that silence them and outrage the (post)modern audience and fire up feminist discourses. Moreover, we can go on and

sympathize with the “victims” of such patriarchal authors, and condemn their narrow-mindedness. But this interpretation simplifies greatly the quality of the characters Wright and Faulkner have created and, analyzing such figures out of their historical and social context may diminish the quality of the “message” of a certain historical period the author conveys: the beginning of the Depression era in the American South and its impact on the tenant farmer, women’s sexuality and the reproductive control dictated by an ideology that defines woman by her reproductive function (hence body value, exchange value) in Faulkner.⁹ Similarly, Wright’s ideological achievement, “to carry the rage of Joe Christmas¹⁰ in the North” (Cox 19), is more explicit in terms of showing the violence toward the racial other, the hardships of the Great Migration, the sexualization of racism, the racial and sexual violence towards women, both inter- and intra-racially.

Bigger Thomas, the urban proletarian black hero, has an inescapable fate in a racist Chicago of the 1940s.¹¹ His fate is foreshadowed by the very environment he lives in with his four-member family: a rat-infested room, a grotesque and disintegrated world, reminiscent of the naturalist overtones of Stephen Crane -- one of Wright’s favorite authors. The “black body of the rat” that Bigger kills and deposits in a box at the beginning of the novel foreshadows his own body’s destiny at the end: the electric chair (NS 10). Moreover, his mother’s immediate predicament, after having seen the dead body of the rat, is also prophetic: “And the gallows is at the end of the road you traveling, boy. Just remember that!” (13).

The female characters that Faulkner and Wright create – particularly in their central texts, As I Lay Dying and Native Son – are illustrative of the social and economic context in which the novels appear, in 1930 and 1940, respectively. Both authors

approach the economically marginal family – the white tenant farmers in the South and the poor black in the South side of Chicago -- and portray their female characters in the light of such oppressive economic and social circumstances, by inverting traditional patterns and forcing the symbolism of “acceptability” beyond its limits. For instance, Faulkner questions the institution of motherhood in As I Lay Dying, when Addie Bundren, the main (dead) character, concludes from her coffin that “motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn’t care whether there was a word for it or not” (171-72).

The “misogynist” Faulkner proposes thus a different reading of the term “motherhood,” and imagines a mother of five and wife of a lazy Southern farmer as extremely articulate (the semantic use in the “Addie” section is parallel in complexity only to the “Darl” sections), powerful in her relationship with her children, reasonable in her approach of God. Diane Roberts sees in Addie Bundren “a refutation of sentimental motherhood,” and signals Addie’s reaction to language and motherhood as male constructs, thus proposing a reading of Addie’s subversive acts as liberating from the Law of the Father, the symbolic stage a child enters after the separation from the mother:¹³

Addie’s subversive act in appropriating language while at the same time distancing herself from it marks another bid for freedom from the Law of the Father. Her sexual rebellion attacks the Law of the Father through its opposite, the Law of Desire. As she usurps the male privilege of self-expression, she removes her body from the male economy that would control it as “wife” and “mother” and commits adultery. (201)

Indeed, such a non-conformist character jeopardizes the tradition of the asexual mother in literature, and Faulkner “kills” Addie Bundren and, using the retrospective interior monologue, recreates the story of her life through a collage of fifteen voices, hers included. The “Addie” chapter, however, and Faulkner’s daring reversal of traditional family patterns, should be read as an attempt to write the body of the woman in her own voice by defying the Law of the Father, that Faulkner introduces literally: “My father said that the reason for living is getting ready to stay dead” (175). Although forced to “get ready” to die – symbolically to be submissive, silent -- Addie chooses to live life on her own terms. First fulfilling her maternal role, Addie gives “Anse the children. I did not ask for them. [...] That was my duty to him, to not ask that, and that duty I fulfilled” (AILD 174) [my emphasis]. “Cleaning the house” is another gender-oriented task, and Addie performs it to compensate for her rebellious nature that nobody knows of; she is so meticulous in her “duty to the alive” that she even decides to have children that would compensate for the illegitimate child only she (and possibly Darl) knows about: “I gave Anse Dewey Dell to negative Jewel. Then I gave him Vardaman to replace the child I had robbed him of. [...] And then I could get ready to die” (AILD 176).

The first attempts to read Faulkner’s novel as a sociological commentary were dismissed by the author himself who, claiming not to read the reviews of his books, said, “[I]t does sort of amuse me when I hear ‘em talking about the sociological picture that I present in something like As I Lay Dying” (Meriwether, Lion in the Garden 220).¹² Critics like André Bleikasten -- who wrote a book-length analysis of the novel in 1973 -- have followed this tradition and considered the novel “a tale of madness told by a madman,” “an almost timeless fable,” while underlining that “the historical, social, and

racial context of the South [...] is hardly perceptible here” (Bleikasten, Faulkner’s AILD 123, 132). More recent studies of the novel, however, though offering valuable insights on the characters’ psychology and relationship with language, have placed the novel out of its historical context.¹⁴ Diane Roberts’ book, Faulkner and the Southern Womanhood (1994) has provided a clever rebuttal of this recurrent emphasis, by placing Addie Bundren in the context of Southern motherhood. Roberts has also noted that as a southerner, Faulkner “inherited the [...] demons of his culture. They are part of the matter of the region with which he engages, sometimes accepting, sometimes rejecting” (xi). However, motherhood is a reductive category of womanhood, and it seems more meaningful to see Addie Bundren as representative of the hardships that women in the rural South of the 1920s and 1930s went through.

Jill Bergman’s study on “Sexuality and Maternity” in the novel opens a new perspective in contextualizing As I Lay Dying: “Dehistoricizing the novel [...] risks the danger of assuming that Addie’s condition, and by extension, the condition of other rural Southern women whom Addie reflects, is natural rather than contingent on its particular historical moment” (394).¹⁵ Bergman suggests a reading of the text in the light of the controversy over women’s sexuality and reproductive control generated by the debates over birth control in the early 1900s in the U.S. that caused the awareness that woman was ideologically defined through her reproductive function. She suggests that “life for women in the rural South in the 1920s and 1930s was particularly difficult due to the inability of birth control or contraceptive information and education” (397).

In 1929, the year when As I Lay Dying was written, Margaret Sanger -- the key figure in the birth control movement in the US between 1920 and 1930 -- brought the

issue of birth control to the Congress and formed the National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control. In the decade before Faulkner wrote the novel, the issue of birth control was strongly contested, and it eventually became a nationally known debate. As John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman explain in their book on the history of sexuality in America, the lack of information and education was the most common among the urban working-class women and especially women living in rural areas, both black and white. The proliferation of contraception in the South came, ironically, also as a measure of preventing “black population growth during the hard times of the Depression.”

D’Emilio and Freedman emphasize that,

The lack of contraception was especially pronounced among whites and blacks in the South, where fertility rates remained the highest in the nation. One Southern doctor reported that in the mountain areas of the region frequent pregnancies made marriage “nothing but a dreadful burden” for many women. (246-47)¹⁶

Similar studies reflect the hard life of women in the South. Vernon Tull, the pertinent alter ego of Faulkner in the novel, has learned from his mother, “It’s a hard life for women, for a fact” (AILD 30). Mosley, the druggist whom Dewey Dell asks for help, is sympathetic to her “trouble,” by admitting “it’s a hard life they have” (202). Peabody, the doctor, blames Anse Bundren for letting his wife die without medical intervention: “He [Anse] has wore her out at last” (41). However, despite their importance for a minority, such inaudible male voices are too powerless to change the existing ideology. Margaret J. Hagood’s study on women in the rural South in the late 1930s is an important sociological document that describes the everyday life of women in the “Deep South”

states, including Mississippi. Hagood discovered that women were mostly ignorant about their bodies and the reproductive system: one in seven women was illiterate and the mean educational level was five grades (68). However, they showed an emotional maturity that evidenced “their acceptance of economic hardship” (75). The women she interviewed expressed their anger at repeated pregnancies that weakened their bodies and strengthened the family’s economic problems: “The knowledge of each new pregnancy often results in a period of inner rebellion before there is an acceptance” (122). The resentment of contraception was motivated, according to Hagood, by people’s inertia in changing established habits, insufficient knowledge of contraceptive methods, expenses, the partner’s lack of co-operation, as well as by religious prejudice. However, most women interviewed indicated a wish to have no more children, not being “that way again.” Addie Bundren discovers her pregnancies with the same despair and helplessness:

Then I found that I had Darl. At first I would not believe it. Then I believed that I could kill Anse. It was as though he had tricked me. [...] But then I realized that I had been tricked by words older than Anse or love. [...] And when Darl was born I asked Anse to promise to take me back to Jefferson when I died, because I knew that father had been right.
(ALD 172-73)

Addie’s “compulsory” maternity and her daughter’s pregnancy and inability to have an abortion “in the city,” Jefferson, attest that Faulkner may have been familiar with the abortion movements in the country. The novel thus reflects the conditions that facilitated the debates on women’s sexuality. Faulkner’s portayal of Dewey Dell Bundren

as an ignorant “bovine type” -- literally presented in the company of a cow to whom she talks -- trying to persuade the druggist to sell her a “cure” for the “female trouble” is an example of despair and tragic fate of Southern women. Dewey Dell is thus the epitome of Southern women forced into motherhood by an ideology that promotes the beautiful, bovine, healthy faces that Faulkner himself has ironically sanctioned throughout his work: Lena Grove in Light in August, Milly Jones in Absalom, Absalom!.

Dewey Dell is “a tub of guts” (58), forced into the stereotype “Anatomy is destiny,” and has a deep perception of the material and an exquisite perception of her body and the foetus forming inside: “I feel my body, my bones and flesh beginning to part and open upon the alone, and the process of coming unalone is terrible” (61-62). Alone in her realization, her mother being dead without bequeathing her daughter the secrets of maternity, Dewey Dell imagines the “coming unalone” and realizes the risks of her body transformation and, ultimately, birth. Such an ideology which inscribes woman’s identity in her womb is sanctioned by Faulkner. The novel ends with Dewey Dell munching on bananas, while the wagon silently returns home, her abortion denied, and the new Mrs. Bundren, the “duck-shaped” wife, replacing Addie Bundren. The mother thus becomes a commodity, a use value for man. No longer instrumental in the family’s economy, a simulacrum of the mother replaces the dead one, ensuring the material survival of the species.¹⁷ The Mother is dead, long live the Father! Symbolically, the mother’s death represents a loss of stability, certainty, link with the past. John Matthews suggests that Addie Bundren’s death is a synecdoche for the disintegration of the world Faulkner re-creates in this novel:¹⁸

The New South's partial rejection of the ways of antebellum gentility; the ruptures induced by emancipatory movements among formerly subjugated populations like blacks, poor whites and women; the economic endangerment of the small farmer [...] – all these create the sensation of disintegration, dissolution, disembodiment. (84) [my emphasis]

In her 1928 novel, Quicksand, Nella Larsen addressed the topic of birth control and its relevance for African American women. After migrating from the South to Harlem, Helga Crane discusses the importance of marriage in terms of childbearing and child-rearing: “Marriage – that means children, to me. And why add more suffering to the world? Why add any more unwanted, tortured Negroes to America? Why do Negroes have children?” (103). Zora Neale Hurston's Janie Crawford, the protagonist of Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), proposes a new way to imagine the Southern woman who no longer gives meaning to her life through her children, but through her own voice and non-conformity to a world that evaluates and values women in terms of their body “production.”

At the beginning of Wright's Native Son, Mrs. Thomas ponders: “Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you” (11). The mother can find no answer to this question, as the same culture which denied contraception knowledge to Addie and Dewey Dell Bundren has also prevented Bigger's mother from gaining control over her sexuality.¹⁹ Consequently, Wright depicts her as a nagging, unloving, distant mother whose only joy in life is the opium of religion and her spirituals. “Rubbing clothes on the metal washboard” (NS 43), Mrs. Thomas dreams of salvation and invokes a resignation

Bigger is unwilling to accept: “Tha’s whut life is, son. Sufferin’” (265). In a sense, the mother’s warning in Native Son parallels the father’s dictum in As I Lay Dying – “the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time” (169) -- and reaffirms the religious and repressive establishment of paternal (respectively maternal, in NS) moralism. Consequently, Addie Bundren and Bigger Thomas share many common features and exemplify how gender, race, and class can position an individual’s struggle towards individuality in a world that regulates bodies, both culturally, socially, politically, and literally. These two characters’ death-drives thus connote a radical redefinition of their gendered and racialized bodies, a refusal to conform to the requirements of an ideology that inscribes their identity in their bodies and then controls and regulates them.

The urban setting of Native Son is also illustrative of the social and economic conditions of the poor black family in the 1940s Chicago. The black mother’s denied personal life and femininity comes from her own “duty to the alive,” in Addie Bundren’s terms, an attempt to survive and find meaning in a world that forces the individual to sub-human living conditions. The rat-infested room the Thomas family lives in, coupled with the mother’s and sister’s daily struggles to make a living, illustrate Tolnay’s conclusion that “the female hardship among blacks was actually lower in the rural South than in the urban North” (1221). This also accounts for the disintegration of many families, resistance to marriage, and resort to contraception especially in the aftermath of the Great Depression. As Jamie Hart skilfully emphasizes,

In the 1930s issues of economic and health were in the forefront. [...]

Low-paying jobs, bad housing, overcrowding, malnutrition, inferior medical care, tuberculosis, venereal disease, maternal and infant mortality,

alcoholism and crime plagued all Americans but seemed to hit African Americans especially hard. [...] Again, birth control offered enlightenment for the working class; science meant salvation for the race. (77)

One may argue that in Native Son it is Bessie Mears who represents the “retreat” from marriage by black women, as she lives a solitary life, dulled by hard work and drowned in alcohol. Bessie functions primarily as “Bigger’s girl,” a usable and worn out body that Bigger will not hesitate to throw down an air-shaft once her use value dwindles and her body is no longer object of desire, nay a threat: “I wasn’t in love with Bessie,” Bigger Thomas confesses. “She was just my girl. I don’t reckon I was ever in love with nobody. You have to have a girl, so I had Bessie” (326). A servant for “white folks,” Bessie’s short life is a fast punishment and consummation of her body, either through hard work, sex, or alcohol. In Bigger’s economy, Bessie Mears becomes an exchange value:

He felt the narrow orbit of her life: from her room to the kitchen of the white folks was the farthest she ever moved. She worked long hours, hard and hot hours seven days a week, with only Sunday afternoons off; and when she did get off she wanted fun, hard and fast fun, something to make her feel that she was making up for the starved life she led. [...] She wanted liquor and he wanted her. So he would give her the liquor and she would give him herself. (132-33) [my emphasis]

Although the novel lacks references to music or dancing, the allusion to the blues singer Bessie Smith is striking through the character of Bessie Mears. Moreover, critics have associated Bessie Mears’s life-style and language with the spirit of the blues.

Working as a maid in a white neighborhood, easily charmed by the scent of money, loving her “no-good” man who batters her, Bessie Mears’s speech reveals what Watson has aptly termed “the incredulous, searching pessimism of the forlorn heroine whom the blues apotheosizes” (65).²⁰ While Mrs. Thomas’s hopeful song is an extension of her religious faith -- “Lord I want to be a Christian / In my heart, in my heart” (37) – Bessie’s “song” is about broken hearts and broken dreams. The short sentences she utters, dramatized by their repetitive pattern, may be read as blues lyrics, although Bessie doesn’t literally “sing”: “All I do is work, work like a dog. / From morning till night I ain’t got no happiness. / I ain’t never ain’t none. / I ain’t got nothing and you do this to me. / After how good I been to you. / [...] I just work! / I ain’t had no happiness, no nothing. / I just work. / I’m black and I work and don’t bother nobody” (170).

Bessie’s escape into alcohol is similar to Mrs. Thomas’s escape into religion, the only thing she can bequeath Bigger – a gift, which, ironically, has continually failed her. Bigger sanctions both these illusory escapes: “He hated his mother for that way of hers which was like Bessie’s. What his mother had was Bessie’s whiskey, and Bessie’s whiskey was his mother’s religion” (226). Both Mrs. Thomas and Bessie Mears fit into the two (arguably narrow) classes of women which Warren distinguishes in Wright’s fiction, “the non-feminine” female characters (60) and the “depreciated sex objects” (66). Some see in Mrs. Thomas a castrating, insensitive black mother who continually humiliates her son: “We wouldn’t have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you” (12). Indeed, unable to change his family’s dramatic economic situation, Bigger distances himself both from the mother and the home, in an attempt to

find meaning, again ironically, in his work for the white Dalton family. While the Bundren “children” in Faulkner’s novel can still derive meaning from the mother’s dead body, Bigger Thomas finds the proximity to his mother ineffectual. What Mrs. Dalton, the white literally blind mother, offers him for the first time is a maternal alternative, an opening toward an individuality whose development contradicts the values of the world he comes from:

He had a feeling toward her that was akin to that which he held toward his mother. The difference in his feelings toward Mrs. Dalton and his mother was that he felt that his mother wanted him to do the things she wanted him to do, and he felt that Mrs. Dalton wanted him to do the things she felt that he should have wanted to do. (62) [Wright’s emphasis]

The relationships mother-daughter, mother-son, sister-brother(s) are common structural elements of both novels under discussion. While the son distances himself from the mother in Native Son in order to find a different order for his life, the black daughter perpetuates the mother’s destiny through a mute acceptance of her fate. Vera, Bigger’s only sister, displays a bodily tiredness and a physical shrinkage of her body caused by an invisible burden she bears: “[T]he beginning of the same tiredness was already there. [...] She seemed to be shrinking from life in every gesture she made” (104). Unlike Bessie Mears and Mary Dalton, whose bodies signify in death the outcome of a racist ideology, Vera is a feeble reproduction of Mrs. Thomas on a smaller scale. Incapable of Bessie’s spirit of adventure or Mary’s intellectual sophistication, Vera is reduced to a helpless body, afraid of the rat, afraid of Bigger, afraid of the world she lives

in, expressing her body mainly through tears: “She seemed so little and helpless. She should not have come here. Her sorrow accused him” (276).

With Mary Dalton, Wright destroys the myth of the threat the white woman poses to a black man’s identity by portraying her as a friendly human towards Bigger Thomas. Mary tries to “know” his world -- but knowing is a relative term in this context -- despite the racial barriers of the Black Belt, taking a sociologic approach of his life, examining the “distance” between their bodies/races:

I’ve been to England, France, and Mexico, but I don’t know how people live ten blocks from me. We know so little about each other. I just want to see. I want to know these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. They must live like we live. They’re human... There are twelve million of them... They live in our country... In the same city with us. (NS 70) [Wright’s emphasis]

Eventually, Wright has to “kill” Mary Dalton in an attempt to let her dismembered body speak of the “horrors of abjection” Bigger’s race has been subjected to throughout history, and let Bessie Mears’s disintegrated body speak of a rotting life and blessed death. The white daughter’s impossible burial in Native Son — the white bones only testify to the body’s dismemberment and burning — opens a new definition of death in the racist United States of the 1940s. The power of horror such a death elicits from the dominant audience that condemns the “murderer and rapist” — “Kill that black ape!” (NS 252) — gives the racialized body a new meaning. The final trial in Native Son revolves around an inexistent (white) body, while the “bloody and black” body (307) of “one

Bessie Mears” (306) is displayed as mere evidence, and Bigger’s body awaits the sentence to the electric chair. The novel thus displays different instances of the corpse: the necessary one, the vanished one, the abject one, or the corpse-to-be – a reflection on death as a pervasive element governing this (fictional?) world. Its powerful significance is summed up by Max at the end of the novel; his corpse metaphor sanctions deeper historical crimes that need to be acknowledged and repaired:

Obsessed with guilt, we have sought to thrust a corpse from before our eyes. We have marked off a little plot of ground and buried it. We tell our souls in the deep of the black night that it is dead and that we have no reason for fear or uneasiness. But the corpse returns and raids our homes! We find our daughters murdered and burnt! And we say, ‘Kill! Kill!’ [...] For the corpse is not dead. It still lives! It has made itself a home in the wild forest of our great cities. (361-62) [my emphasis]

Notes to Chapter III:

¹ Richard Wright's French biographer, Michel Fabre, remarks in the chapter "Wright's South": "Richard Wright is as much son of Mississippi as William Faulkner, yet many of his readers do not think of him as a southern writer. This is because of Native Son [1940], which depicts black life in the ghettos of the North, or The Outsider [1953], which is steeped in existential and ideological controversy. [...] Most readers, however, cannot escape associating Wright with the South because the tremendous impact of his autobiography, Black Boy, lies in his having managed to survive in Mississippi" (77).

² Black Boy (1945), Wright's autobiographical novel, written after his major "urban" novel, Native Son (1940), is a return – in both subject matter and setting – to the racial South of his childhood.

³ I am indebted for these figures to Thadious M. Davis's article, "Wright, Faulkner, and Mississippi as Racial Memory," pp. 470-71.

⁴ See "Interviews in Japan" in Meriwether, Lion in the Garden, pp. 84-198.

⁵ It is worth mentioning here Teresa de Lauretis's feminist argument that all stories construct their acting subjects as masculine, as mirrors of Oedipus questing for answers to riddles through a text-space inexorably gendered feminine (qtd. in Yaeger 209-10).

While Wright's "acting subject" in NS is masculine, Faulkner's main character in AILD defines herself through her own (feminine-gendered) text: "I would be I" (AILD 174). Addie Bundren is alive and active in her voice, but dead in reality, and this is the price she has to pay to become an "acting subject." [my emphasis]

⁶ Faulkner complimented Wright for the artistic quality of Native Son, but cautioned his diminished artistry in Black Boy, as compared to his previous masterpiece, in a letter to Wright on September 11, 1945: “Dear Richard Wright, I have just read Black Boy. It needed to be said and you said it well. Though I am afraid (I am speaking from the point of view of one who believes that the man who wrote Native Son is potentially an artist) it will accomplish little of what it should accomplish, since only they will be moved and grieved by it who already know and grieve over this situation. You said it well, as well as it could have been said in this form. Because I think you said it much better in Native Son, I hope you will keep on saying it, but I hope you will say it as an artist, as in Native Son. I think you will agree that the good lasting stuff comes out of one individual’s imagination and sensitivity and comprehension of the suffering of Anyman, not out of the memory of his own grief. Yours Sincerely, William Faulkner” (Blotner, Selected Letters of William Faulkner 201). Here Faulkner may have sanctioned the autobiographical element as diminishing a writer’s artistry, while encouraging a more universal message a writer’s work should carry. (The same letter is also quoted in Cox 20.) Unfortunately, this is the only letter to Wright that Joseph Blotner records in his collection of Faulkner’s letters. Ten years later, when asked about his opinion on “Negro writers” in an interview in Japan, Faulkner condescendingly asserted: “He [Wright] wrote one good book and then he went astray, he got too concerned in the difference between the Negro man and the white man and he stopped being a writer and became a Negro” (Meriwether, Lion in the Garden, “Interviews in Japan” 185). Wright, on the other hand, admired Faulkner for his courage to “tell the truth” in his work. In a letter to Paul Reynolds, on November 6, 1958, Wright wrote: “There is no better Southerner than an

honest one for he has a lot to face and accept” (qtd. in T. Davis 475). James Cox, however, posits that the “elevation” of Faulkner in the ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s was related to the “obscuration” of Wright, who was “on the wrong political side of the tracks” (20). Sybil Dunbar has also compared Faulkner and Wright in her dissertation, noting that the two writers were born eleven years apart, and that the distance between Faulkner’s Oxford and Wright’s Natchez was just about two hundred miles (139).

⁷ For the sanctioning of such stereotypes and many others, see Spike Lee’s 2000 movie, Bamboozled.

⁸ For individual studies of Wright’s treatment of black women, see Miriam DeCosta-Willis, “Avenging Angels and Mute Mothers: Black Southern Women in Wright’s Fictional World,” 540-51. Also see Trudier Harris, “Native Sons and Foreign Daughters,” 63-84; Sylvia H. Keady, “Richard Wright’s Women Characters and Inequality,” 124-28; Jane Davis, “More Force than Human: Richard Wright’s Female Characters,” 68-83; Shirley Ann Williams, “Papa Dick and Sister-Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright,” 394-417.

⁹ According to Joseph Blotner, Faulkner started writing As I Lay Dying on October 25, 1929, “the day after panic had broken out on Wall Street,” while working as night supervisor in a powerhouse (Biography, 248). The economic circumstances under which the book was produced “as a tour de force,” in six weeks, as Faulkner would mention over and over again (Gwynn 113), are also relevant. Faulkner himself was under strenuous financial difficulties, being newly-married and expecting a baby at the time. A crucial economic crisis may have determined the author to take a more engaged stance on the poor white topography of Yoknapatawpha, and to put the aristocratic milieu aside for

a while. (This is the novel where the name “Yoknapatawpha” appears for the first time: “They came from some place out in Yoknapatawpha county” 193.) The Bundrens, heroes of the burial journey in AILD, are tenant farmers, struggling with both emotional, physical, and economic troubles. Cora Tull, for instance, the “wifely” and “motherly” Christian neighbor, sells eggs to make money. Moreover, she cannot recall better times.

¹⁰ Joe Christmas is Faulkner’s mulatto character in Light in August (1932).

¹¹ The sources of the character Bigger Thomas are explained by Wright in the essay preceding this edition of the novel, “How Bigger Was Born” (vii-xxxiv). “Bigger No. 1” comes from Wright’s Southern childhood, and “his life was a continuous challenge to others” (ix). “Bigger No. 2” comes also from the South, and his hardness is “directed towards the whites who ruled the South.” Wright underlines his exceptional features: “We were Southern Negroes and we were hungry and we wanted to live, but we were more willing to tighten our belts than risk conflict. Bigger No. 2 wanted to live and he did; he was in prison the last time I heard from him” (ix). “Bigger No. 3” is “what people call ‘bad nigger.’ [...] He was killed during the days of Prohibition” (ix-x). “Bigger No. 4” violates all taboos and “is sent to the asylum,” much like Darl Bundren at the end of AILD (x). Lastly, “Bigger No. 5,” “always rode the Jim Crow street-cars without paying and sat wherever he pleased,” eventually paying the price. These are the Bigger Thomases that contributed to the ideological information of the central character in Native Son. As Wright concludes the genesis of Bigger Thomases, the keynote is their tragic destiny: “They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken” (xi).

¹² This opinion was expressed in an interview with Cynthia Grenier, in 1955. See Meriwether, Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, pp. 213-27.

¹³ For Lacan's discussion of the child's separation from the mother and entrance into the Symbolic stage, the "Law of the father," see "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" in The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, pp. 1278-90.

¹⁴ The scholarship on As I Lay Dying has been very fruitful in recent decades. Most of the studies I have come across during my research raise the "language" problem in the "Addie" section and examine her struggle with words. It is worth mentioning the following articles: Karen R. Saas, "At a Loss for Words: Addie and Language in AILD (1991); Paul S. Nielsen, "What Does Addie Bundren Mean and How Does She Mean It?" (1992); Harriet Hustis, "The Tangled Webs We Weave: Faulkner Scholarship and the Significance of Addie Bundren's Monologue" (1996) -- arguably the most complex evaluation of scholarship on Addie's central monologue in AILD.

¹⁵ See Jill Bergman, "This Was the Answer to It: Sexuality and Maternity in As I Lay Dying," pp. 393-407.

¹⁶ See John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman's book, Intimate Matters. A History of Sexuality in America, particularly the chapter on "The Rise and Fall of Sexual Liberalism, 1920 to the Present," pp. 239-361.

¹⁷ According to Hagood's study, "the median age of the mothers in the South" in the 1930s was thirty-nine, and the mean of children borne per woman was 6.3. Dying early, with only five children borne, Addie Bundren fits into this pattern. See Margaret J. Hagood, pp. 63-199. Although she is not a tenant farmer's wife, the economic situation

of Addie and the Bundren family is not better than that of the families described by Hagood.

¹⁸ Matthews also suggests a contextualization of the novel, speculating perhaps too much on the significance of Cash Bundren's name and his craft (carpentry) in a consumer society: "The Bundrens have already been constituted by the dialectical history of capitalist agriculture, commodified economic and social relations (74). See John Matthews, "As I Lay Dying in the Machine Age," 69-94.

¹⁹ See also Jamie Hart's article, "Who Should Have the Children? Discussion of Birth Control among African American Intellectuals, 1920-1939," 71-84.

²⁰ See Edward A. Watson, "Bessie's Blues," 64-70.

Chapter IV

The Mother's Burial, The Daughter's Burden:

Disintegrated Bodies in As I Lay Dying

She [Addie] watches me: I can feel her eyes. It's like she was shoving at me with them. I have seen it before in women, . . . clinging to some trifling animal to whom they were never more than pack-horses. That's what they mean by the love that passeth understanding: that pride, that furious desire to hide that abject nakedness which we bring here with us, carry with us into operating rooms, carry stubbornly and furiously with us into the earth again. (AILD 45-46)

I heard that my mother is dead. I wish I had time to let her die. [...] It's not that I wouldn't and will not; it's that it is too soon too soon too soon. (Dewey Dell, AILD 120)

... she [Dewey Dell] flings herself across Addie Bundren's knees, clutching her, shaking her with the furious strength of the young before sprawling across the handful of rotten bones that Addie Bundren left. (49)

My mother is a fish. (Vardaman, AILD 84)

I cannot love my mother because I have no mother. Jewel's mother is a horse (Darl, AILD 95). [my emphasis]

Faulkner's As I Lay Dying (1930) has received an overwhelming amount of critical attention in recent decades, particularly through the interpretations of Addie Bundren's interior monologue, the representation of the female characters' subjectivity, and the author's challenges of conventional maternal and patriarchal stereotypes.¹ One of "Faulkner's women," Addie Bundren has been repeatedly read as "an inverted Demeter" (Gladstein 103), "the wicked mother," and "the Magna Mater of archaic religions," or "a mother in flesh and father in spirit" (Bleikasten, Faulkner's AILD 76, 84), "a revengeful mother" (Fowler 119) who "rejects her children" (Sass 9), "a metaphorical woman" (Blaine 419) who manipulates the roles of mother and adulteress (Wood 100), and the examples are countless. Minrose Gwin suggests that it is the critical tradition and not the "author" or the text which produces such unidimensional interpretations and, despite revisionist studies that rethink "Faulkner's women" in the light of feminist readings, old archetypes do not die easily (22). The centrality of the body in the novel, however, deserves special scrutiny, in that it is illustrative of both the historical and social context in which this "body" was produced, its relationship with the "body" of Faulkner's works, and the role of gender definition and ideology in the representation of the female body.

Of particular interest is the disintegrated body, the abject or the grotesque body, whose problematic appearance signals not only the perishable nature of human life, but also the danger of succumbing to the absolute grounding of human life in the body. Significantly, Addie Bundren is not the only disintegrated body in the novel, though she is the major one – and this is a detail that has been overlooked by critics so far. The bodies of the other characters involved in the ritual journey to "bury the dead" undergo important transformations as well. At the end of the journey, a sense of bodily

disintegration prevails: Dewey Dells's burden of pregnancy grows; Cash's gangrenous leg has to be cut off; Jewel's back is burnt; Darl's sensitive body has to be imprisoned, docilized; Anse's false "new teeth" are hideous proof of his "sweatless" bodily degradation; while Vardaman, the youngest son, tries to adjust his body to the requirements of the adult world, after having been violently separated from the mother.

Faulker's previous novel, The Sound and the Fury (1929), grew out of Caddy Compson's maternity and its impact on her family, a concern represented only through male discourses (Quentin, Jason, Benjy, and the omniscient narrator). In As I Lay Dying, Faulkner steps forward by assigning the female – though dead -- character the main interior monologue – hence voice – and power over both her family and her own definitions of womanhood, maternity, sexuality, and death. By placing the mother's literal dead body at the center of the text, as Deborah Clarke has so aptly suggested, Faulkner "grants greater power to the physical, while at the same time erasing its boundaries as the decaying corpse disperses its odor and its influence throughout the novel" (36). Indeed, the association of the dead body with the living language of corpse and voice -- Addie is a speaking corpse -- is uncanny, and the Bundrens' attempts to fill her place with words and symbols (imagining her as a "horse," a "fish," or a "coffin") ultimately fail. Addie's distrust of the use of language as conventional, imposed, prescribed is rendered in a highly poststructuralist utterance: "[Words are] just a shape to fill a lack" (172). Paradoxically, she speaks from death a language she despises, but which constructs meanings and established roles: "And I would think then when Cora talked to me, of how the high dead words in time seemed to lose even the significance of their dead sound" (175) [my emphasis]. Seeing in Cora Tull the traditional embodiment of motherhood -- a concept

invented itself “by someone who had to have a word for it because that ones that had the children didn’t care whether there was a word for it or not” (172) -- Addie Bundren positions herself beyond words and uses language from death as a mere instrument to tell a story which cannot be told otherwise. She distrusts the ideology that created these “docile bodies,” controlled by society by means of reproduction and work force value. Foucault’s concept of the “docile body” is brilliantly exemplified by Cora, whose name recalls the Greek’s ideal of “kôre,” meaning “virgin” or “maiden.” A Greek proverb says that a woman knew two great moments in her life: her marriage and her death (Powell 33). In this respect, Cora is not far from the mythological register of docile female characters, defined by marriage and children production and awaiting, hopefully, the sweet call of death. Cora’s literal reading of the biblical Word and conformity to the roles of motherhood and wifeness, expecting, in return, the “reward” in death (AILD 23), represents the norm of the female body in her community. To this “normalcy,” Addie replies: “My children were of me alone” (175), and rethinks the idea of marriage and motherhood on her own terms, symbolically “killing” Anse Bundren when she realizes that the gap between her inner reality and the words that govern the society’s actions is too deep: “And then he died. He did not know he was dead. I would lie by him in the dark, hearing the dark land talking of God’s word and His beauty and His sin” (174). Hence, Addie’s mistrust of words and people’s hypocrisy of living by norms they do not believe in is also informed by her religious scepticism and a direct challenge of the biblical word of the father. In this respect, her father’s saying, “the reason for living is getting ready to stay dead” (175), may well mimic the biblical predicament and the promise of a better life, through a reinforcement of the idea that the language/ideology

she has access to does not name her own experience, her own subjectivity, her own life. She dies realizing that her access to language (voice, power, femininity, sexuality, etc.) is impossible because of its rigidity:

I knew that [...] we had had to use one another by words like spiders dangling by their mouths from a beam, swinging and twisting and never touching, and that only through the blows of the switch could my blood and their blood flow as one stream.[...] But then I realized that I had been tricked by words older than Anse or love... (172) [my emphasis]

The whole novel revolves around the unburied remains of Addie Bundren, the element that centers the apparently decentered novel.² The title itself, As I Lay Dying, establishes the main voice of the novel as feminine. Its posthumous nature is yet debatable, given the ambiguity of the verbal form “lay.” André Bleikasten distinguishes between its use in Standard English, as the past tense of the verb “to lie,” and its dialectal use by Faulkner’s characters, where the verb is “often used as its present tense.” In more than one instance, the verb appears in the present tense, hence in dialectal use. Cora Tull, imagining her own death, uses the verb in its dialectal form: “So that when I lay me down in the consciousness of my duty and reward I will be surrounded by loving faces . . .” (AILD 23). But this example is misleading, since, on the same page, Faulkner makes Cora use the correct form of the verb in the infinitive form: “. . . to let her lie in the same earth with those Bundrens” (23). Vernon Tull, too, seems to be aware of “correct” grammar when he refers to Addie’s positioning in the coffin: “They had lain her in it reversed” (88). Whether this grammatical trick was the rendering of a dialectal use or of a higher significance, Bleikasten’s conclusion of this argument seems to be the best

interpretation given so far: “. . . there is just no way to determine the title’s tense: perhaps [it is] a way of suggesting that death is a fracture in time which cannot be conjugated in our grammars” (“A Dying Life” 164).³ Moreover, in terms of intertextual use, the novel’s title uses a line from the speech of the ghost of Agamemnon to Odysseus in the Eleventh Book of the Odyssey: “As I lay dying the woman with the dog’s eyes would not close my eyelids for me as I descended into Hades” (Blotner, Faulkner. A Biography 249). In this Homeric framework, the novel thus becomes, as Daniel Ferrer has put it, the odyssey of the dead mother’s body (24). Agamemnon’s words are uttered after his death, but this does not necessarily suggest a similarity to the temporality of Addie’s words. Moreover, the replacement of the traditional heroic male character with a female voice in Faulkner’s text infirms Teresa de Lauretis’s argument that “all stories construct their acting subjects as masculine, as mirrors of Oedipus questing for answers to riddles through a text-space inexorably gendered feminine” (qtd. in Yaeger 209-10). Addie Bundren defines herself through her own feminine-gendered text: “I would be I” (AILD 174), thus becoming an “acting subject.” But Faulkner also anticipates the limitations of such a daring character and its reception, so he “kills” Addie Bundren from the start. [my emphasis]

The mother’s body does not give up control over language even after her physical death, thus “mimicking” the constructions of femininity and finally appropriating the “Language of the Father.”⁴ Addie’s reversed position in the coffin -- like a foetus in the mother’s womb, a position imposed by “them durn women” (80) -- also proves Addie’s non-conformist body and suggests, as Doreen Fowler has noted, “that the father’s law is always on the brink of collapsing back into the world” (118). According to Luce Irigaray, femininity is a role, an image imposed on women by male systems of representation. In

this respect, women become commodities, having value in their worth as exchanges between men. The second Mrs. Bundren fits this pattern perfectly. Not only does she substitute the dead mother's body, but she conforms to the role of femininity imposed on her. "A kind of duck-shaped woman all dressed up, with them kind of hardlooking pop eyes" (260), the new Mrs. Bundren takes on the role of the mother in the economy of the farmer family when Anse proudly announces: "meet Mrs. Bundren" (261). She has no voice in the narrative and her episodic appearance attests to the conformity to the "role" she embodies. Moreover, in This Sex Which Is Not One, Irigaray names three social roles imposed on women, "mother, virgin, prostitute," and underscores that "neither as a mother nor as virgin nor as prostitute has woman any right to her own pleasure" (186-87). Addie Bundren is primarily defined as mother, and, consequently, expected to conform to this role. In Irigaray's view, motherhood is "politically, economically, and culturally valorized" (64). However, if this role grants motherhood a sense of social power, it reduces her, in Irigaray's view, to sexual impotence, because of the mythologized role of the virgin mother (30). Addie not only creates a different vision of motherhood, but she mimics the patriarchal tradition that Irigaray has sanctioned, and embodies, simultaneously, the three distinct roles, virgin, mother, and prostitute. Undoubtedly, these roles also connote the female body's sexuality and inscribe the virgin's, mother's, and prostitute's identity – once more – onto the body. Moreover, they establish the prevailing dissociation in Western culture of motherhood and sexuality.

At the beginning of her interior monologue, Addie recalls her life as a young school teacher, trying to gain a voice and assert herself in front of her students. Her use of physical violence is motivated by both her wish to discipline their bodies as well as her

own, a self-instilled suffering coming from her impossibility to make her voice heard otherwise:

I would look forward to the times they faulted, so I could whip them.

When the switch fell, I could feel it upon my flesh. [...] Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever. (170) [my emphasis]

Addie Bundren's acts of violence against the school-children are, paradoxically, the only ways to become aware of her own blood and body, and to validate the meaning of her own life, especially in "the early spring, for it was worst then" (169). Addie's unnurturing attitude toward the children, coupled with her bitterness and inability to connect with the others, results in a desperate action of seeing marriage as the answer to the frustrations of "the spring" and virginity, which is devoid of its normative connotations in Addie's experience: "So I took Anse" (171). Anse is thus the answer to her violent attempts to connect with the world through her body, despite Addie's rejection of her own father and life: "I would hate my father for having ever planted me" (170). Consequently, Addie Bundren imagines marriage as mainly a physical experience. But this is not "the answer to it," and Addie realizes that "not-Anse" (174) would be the answer to her quest of subjectivity and, ultimately, sexuality. Her "aloneness" is only violated, however, when the first child is born, and what comes is the bitter realization that "motherhood" is a concept invented by people with no direct life experience. In this respect, Paul Nielsen's reading of Addie's pregnancies as meaningful – "her story as she tells it is a narrative of pregnancies, times when she grew round and full with life and

with meaning” (37) – is decontextualized and poorly supported. Motherhood is not a “duty” for Addie, as it is for Cora Tull, but a violation of her will, an imposition that changes the understanding of her role: “I gave Anse the children. I did not ask for them” (AILD 174). By declaring, “My children were of me alone” (175), Addie Bundren denies Anse the paternity of the children, and re-thinks the ideal of Virgin Mary by seeing her illegitimate child, Jewel, as the savior of her “sin.” In a mock-religious prophecy, Addie anticipates the ordeals Jewel will be subjected to in order to save his mother’s corpse during the burial journey: “He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and from the fire. Even I have laid down my life, he will save me” (168).

Faulkner’s ironic use of the biblical references and the trap of their literal reading is even more relevant when one parallels As I Lay Dying with another American novel dealing with adultery and expiation of the sin through the illegitimate child, The Scarlet Letter.⁵ While Pearl saves her mother’s soul, Jewel, the other “gem,” saves only his mother’s rotting corpse. Addie’s “adulterous” relationship with minister Whitfield – which remains unknown to the community or family, hence he is not judged -- is her ultimate attempt to find “the reason for living” in sexuality, in the taming of “the terrible blood,” after the other two roles, of virgin and mother, have failed her. However, her choice of an “instrument ordained by God” problematizes both her relation to sexuality and the religious letter, in an attempt to liberate the former from the latter through a defying gesture:

I believed that I had found it. I believed that the reason was the duty to the alive, to the terrible blood, the red bitter flood boiling through the land. I would think of sin as I would think of the clothes we both wore in the

world's face [...]; the sin the more utter and terrible since he was the instrument ordained by God who created the sin, to sanctify that sin He had created. (174) [my emphasis]

Both before and after Addie Bundren's death, her withering body is reconstructed by the other characters and thus kept "alive" in their memory, in an attempt to refigure the mother and to substitute the mourning which is not even addressed during the burial procession and ritual. According to Cora Tull, Addie's "face is wasted away so that the bones draw just under the skin in white lines. Her eyes are like two candles when you watch them gutter down into the sockets of iron candle-sticks" (8). Darl reconstructs the image of his mother as a "pole-thin body" (97). Although he recurrently emphasizes "I have no mother" (95) and refers to her by her full name, Darl is the only "child" who perceives the death of his mother in its accurate detail and captures the very moment of her extinction, though his body is far from her death-bed: "Her failing life appears to drain into her eyes [...]; her eyes, the life in them, rushing suddenly upon them; the two flames glare up for a steady instant. Then they go out as though someone had leaned down and blown upon them" (47-48).

There is a sense of decay and disintegration in the still-alive body of Addie Bundren. Jewel's description focuses on Addie's hands, "laying on the quilt like two of them roots dug up and tried to wash and you couldn't get them clean" (15). As his mother dies about the same time he kills the fish to be cooked for dinner – a symbol, possibly, of the archaic totemic meal – Vardaman is unable to distinguish between the two separate deaths, concluding, "My mother is a fish" (84). Moreover, his description of the disintegration of the fish's body further anticipates the very disintegration of his mother's

body, a literal representation of a concept he is still unable to grapple with – death, which causes the decay of the body: “I see him [the fish] dissolve – legs, a rolling eye, a gaudy splotching like cold flames” (56). Later on, after the fish is cooked, Dewey Dell feeds the family the pieces of the dismembered fish: “The fish, cut into jagged pieces, bleeds quietly in the pan” (59). This is the only manifest mourning of Addie Bundren’s death. The youngest son, still connected to the mother through invisible blood ties, remembers her “terrible blood” and mourns her loss through a mixture of tears and blood, both literal and metaphorical. Cash, the eldest son, too busy crafting the coffin, has no time to imagine his mother. After the burial journey starts, Cash only remarks “the animal magnetism of a dead body” (84), thus establishing the essential connection, even in death, of the mother to her offspring.

Dewey Dell’s reconstructing of her mother’s body also overlaps her struggle to understand the transformations of her own body, marked by accidental pregnancy: the exponent of Southern women forced into motherhood by an ideology that transforms “country girls” into victims of a perpetuated ignorance. Significantly, Addie doesn’t mention her mother’s name, and neither is her relationship with Dewey Dell more enlightening in terms of bequeathing knowledge of the body along with the burden of compulsory motherhood and muteness. Moreover, the name “Bundren” phonically resembles “burden,” thus anticipating both the physical and moral heritage of Dewey Dell Bundren. The mother is literally dead, but motherhood as a burden lives on in the daughter. Hence, the mother’s burial doesn’t end the burden of prescribed life and “compulsory” motherhood; on the contrary, the mother’s dead body is a warning and a memento mori. Unable to understand her mother’s non-verbal language spoken from

death – unlike Darl, for instance, whose double-consciousness facilitates his simultaneous presence in two temporal registers -- Dewey Dell belongs to the terrestrial and the literal, while Darl and Addie both enter the Symbolic. Dewey Dell's first reaction to the mother's death is bodily violence in a desperate attempt to bring Addie's body back to life: "... she flings herself across Addie Bundren's knees, clutching her, shaking her with the furious strength of the young before sprawling across the handful of rotten bones that Addie Bundren left" (49). [my emphasis]

The doctor's remembrance of Addie's still alive body opens the realm of abjection: "Beneath the quilt she is no more than a bundle of rotten sticks" (44), a herald of the corpse which is, in Julia Kristeva's definition, "the utmost of abjection" (4). Doctor Peabody examines Addie's disintegrating body and condemns her husband's belated appeal to the doctor, extending his sanction of people's ignorance of the care of the body to a social critique: "That's the trouble with this country: everything, weather, all, hangs on too long" (45). Peabody – whose suggestive name also alludes to the smallness of the human body faced with the vastness of science – also reflects on death as a "function of the mind" before being "a phenomenon of the body" (42), and takes a scientific approach of death, seeing Addie's corpse as an integral part of her body's life cycle.

Nevertheless, during the corpse's odyssey to Jefferson, it produces a polluting effect in its relationship with the world, and is "abjected" by the people around: "[T]he folks backed off with handkerchiefs to their faces" (213). According to Kristeva, the corpse represents "fundamental pollution. A body without a soul, a non-body, it is to be excluded from God's territory as from his speech... It must not be displayed but immediately buried so as not to pollute the divine earth" (109). [Kristeva's emphasis] It is

also the doctor who describes Addie's own horror of abjection, bodily disintegration, and fear of succumbing to materiality, to corporeality:

She watches me: I can feel her eyes. It's like she was shoving at me with them. I have seen before in women... that pride, that furious desire to hide that abject nakedness which we bring here with us, carry with us into operating rooms, carry stubbornly and furiously with us into the earth again. (45-46) [my emphasis]

Moreover, Kristeva underlines that a woman is never free from this fear, since maternity reinforces her materiality and motherhood defines her as abject.⁶ The same argument also appears in Elisabeth Bronfen's work, whose important conclusion is that the recurrent appearance of the feminine corpse in literature is part of long-standing cultural association of women with alterity and death, and the "materiality-maternity-mortality matrix" (68). There are instances in Faulkner's work, however, to infirm this pervasive conclusion. One of his most anthologized works, "A Rose for Emily" is also the story of a "poor woman [who] had had no life at all" (Faulkner in the University, 87). Still, the rotting corpse here is a man's body subjected to sheer materiality, but the death is imposed and the "pollution" can be interpreted as accidental.

In As I Lay Dying, both the mother and the daughter's bodies are marked by materiality-maternity. Dewey Dell's name suggests fertility and has been usually associated by most critics with her main reference to her gestating body: "I feel like a wet seed in the hot blind earth" (62-63).⁷ Darl's reconstruction of Dewey Dell's (alive) body consists of a series of female body parts that are both life-supporting and abject. Her leg is "that lever which moves the world; one of that calliper which measures the length and

breadth of life” (104), and her breasts are “those mammalian ludicrosities which are the horizons and the valleys of the earth” (164) [my emphasis]. The sister’s nurturing attributes substitute the mother’s, and try to keep the disintegrated family together during the ten-day journey to bury Addie. All this time, the mother’s body, which undergoes the trials of fire and water, controls and “infects” the life of the ones she encounters, becoming the embodiment of “abjection without purification” (Kristeva 185): “The corpse ... is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. [It] is cesspool, and death ... the most sickening of wastes, a border that has encroached on everything” (3-4).

While Addie’s body presents features that integrate it in the category of the abject, Dewey Dell’s body, with her “mammalian ludicrosities” belongs rather to the grotesque. Bakhtin’s reading of the grotesque body may be applied to Dewey Dell’s pregnant body whose change of shape and state of becoming signal a way out from Anse’s stasis and a reintegration in the cosmic cycle of life. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body is an in-between state, “in the act of becoming.” It “is never finished,” and “is continually built and builds and creates another body.” Moreover, it “is cosmic and universal” (317-18). In her attempt to have an abortion, Dewey Dell takes more control over her maternity and imposed fate than Addie, whose mute acceptance has made her die, little by little. Her failure, however, to have “the female trouble” solved, and her return home munching on bananas, make her perpetuate Addie Bundren’s burden of compulsory maternity.

The journey to bury the dead is not only the structural element in the novel, but also the pretext to introduce change in a world confined to its norms. Anse, for instance, hasn’t been to Jefferson for twelve years (cyclical time?), as Peabody remarks (42). This fear of change is also reflected by his toothless and sweatless body. The doctor has

allegedly forbidden work, as sweat might cause his death (84). This parasitic body takes an opportunity in Addie's death to get both a new wife and new teeth, thus weighing them both on the same scale of commodity. As Addie dies, Anse awkwardly tries to caress her face, but his hand moves like a "claw." After this ritual is performed, he concludes: "Now I can get them teeth" (52). Consequently, Addie's funeral journey becomes a good opportunity for other sorts of enterprises: Dewey Dell needs an abortion; Cash wants a gramophone; Vardaman would like a toy-train. None of these fantasies is accomplished in the end, after Addie's corpse is buried in a short and anti-climactic procession, with borrowed shovels – except Anse's new teeth, bought with the girl's abortion money. The father thus does not experience direct, physical degradation, but moral disintegration. The most perceptive and bright of his sons, Darl, has to be taken to an asylum. After Darl has tried to make the coffin disappear, in apparently natural catastrophes -- water and fire -- Jewel rescues the coffin, risking his own body. During this ordeal, Jewel's body burns severely and Cash's body starts to disintegrate his "wooden-faced," "pale rigid eyes," high sullen face" (209) announce his gangrenous leg and predict his unavoidable crippling. Ultimately, Dewey Dell's pregnancy seems to be the only hope that the end of the novel offers, after the family's disintegration which culminates in Darl's madness. Darl's grotesque laughter sets him apart from the world he is no longer willing to inhabit mentally. His understanding of the Bundren's journey and the journey of life in general is summed up in a memorable Faulknerian aphorism:

Life was created in the valleys. It blew up unto the hills on the old terrors, the old lusts, the old despairs. That's why you must walk up the hills so you can ride down. (227)

Notes to Chapter IV:

¹ For a recent article on the AILD scholarship and the critical trends the novel has been scrutinized under, see Harriet Hustis's 1996 article, "The Tangled Webs We Weave: Faulkner Scholarship and the Significance of Addie Bundren's Monologue," 3-21.

² The novel may be interpreted, in terms of structure and vision, as one of the most "postmodern" novels written in the most "modern" period. In Barthean terms, the author is dead, and his voice cannot be recreated in any of the characters' discourses. Moreover, this superimposition of the death of the author with the death of the mother has -- besides eschatological (death of the world) and sociological (the "death" of the traditional Southern way of life) implications -- an aesthetic significance. The shift from the omniscient and omnipresent narrator to the omnipresent cadaver which structures the text is relevant in terms of multiple interpretations this text allows.

³ See André Bleikasten, The Ink of Melancholy, particularly the chapter "A Dying Life, a Living Death," 163-83.

⁴ For an extensive study of mimicry, see Amy Louise Wood's excellent article, "Feminine Rebellion and Mimicry in Faulkner's As I Lay Dying," 99-112.

⁵ Faulkner has denied having used Hawthorne as a model for the illegitimate child. (See Faulkner in the University, p. 115.) However, the similarities are striking. For an extensive parallel, see André Bleikasten's chapter, "Genesis and Sources," in Faulkner's As I Lay Dying, 10-20. Here Bleikasten suggests another puzzling parallel, between AILD and TS Eliot's The Waste Land (1922): "the same obsession with death in its two forms of physical decay and spiritual aridity (one of the sections of the poem is

entitled “The Burial of the Dead”), the same atmosphere of cosmic desolation and exhaustion” (17).

⁶ Kristeva, Desire In Language, 241, qtd. in Woodbery 28.

⁷ This speculation is valid, but there are also instances to prove that Faulkner didn’t just “invent” this name for the delight of his postmodern readers, but actually “borrowed” it from one of Estelle’s grammar-school classmates: Dewey Dell, Joe Peacock’s sister (Blotner, Faulkner. A Biography, 261). Similarly, Vardaman’s name may be an allusion to the politician James Kimble Vardaman, whom the Faulkners had supported (47).

Chapter V

The Daughter's Burial, the Mother's Burden:

Dismembered Bodies in Native Son

Every movement of his body is an unconscious protest. Every desire, every dream, now matter how intimate or personal, is a plot or conspiracy. (Max about Bigger, NS 367)

She [Mary Dalton] was dead; she was white; she was a woman; he had to kill her; he was black; he might be caught; he did not want to be caught; if he were they would kill him . . . his body trembled. (88)

“He [Bigger] makes me feel like a dog” (Vera to Mrs. Thomas, 99). “You could have just said, ‘Hello, dog!’” (Bessie to Bigger, 125)

[Mrs. Dalton:] Her face and hair were completely white; she seemed to him like a ghost. [...] Bigger saw that she was old and her grey eyes looked stony. [...] She did not move her body or face as she talked. (48)

He felt that there were two Bessies: one, a body that he had just had and wanted badly again; the other was in Bessie's face; it asked questions; it bargained and sold the other Bessie to advantage. (133) [my emphasis]

Richard Wright's Native Son has created an impressive scholarly reaction all over the world, both after the publication of the novel in 1940 and in recent decades.¹ Informed by Wright's "urban-disposed Chicago school sociology [which] crossed with Communist Party theoretizations of the Negro question" (Maxwell 159), the novel has brought African American writing to the forefront of critical attention -- being viewed both as a social document and a work of art² -- and elevating Wright to the arguable position of "father of Black American literature" (Joyce 1). The "shocking tale of a black youth who recreates himself through crime," as Maria K. Mootry has sharply characterized it (123), the novel addresses the racial question from a perspective that makes victims and victimizers both the black and the white agents. The roles that Bessie Mears's and Mary Dalton's bodies play in the novel are worth investigating for several reasons: on the one hand, they connect the (male) hero with the two worlds that he inhabits simultaneously as an ironic "native son," trying to belong, but fearing both; on the other hand, these female bodies threaten Bigger's own body's positioning in a racialized world in which the myth of the rapist is still pervasive. The annihilation of these bodies seems imperative in Bigger's attempt to find a voice of his own. By erasing the female agency in an attempt to ensure the survival of the frightened black male hero -- through murder and rape -- Wright sanctions the racial conflict that motivated such atrocious crimes and underlines the use value of the female bodies, black and white, in late 1930s United States society.

The dismembered and rotting female bodies that Bigger's transgression produces -- a transgression manifest in Wright's deliberate sexualization of racism -- speak, from the realm of the abject, the language of the non-conformist, daring, bodies which become

signifying corpses, sacrificial bodies of their culture(s). Mary Dalton, the white female body, symbol of capitalist power, transgresses her political and racial place – hubris, in the Aristotelian sense of the tragic fault – and is “punished” for her physical closeness to the Other race, that is, Bigger’s body. Bessie Mears’s body becomes even more tragic as Wright represents her as the “sexploited” daughter by her own racial counterpart; no longer instrumental in the hero’s enterprises, Bessie’s body is disposed of, raped, and thrown away. With this, Wright erases the sexual victimization of black women so omnipresent in African American writing. As Sondra Guttman has rightly remarked, “Bessie is literally frozen out of the story [...] to show the invisibility of black women’s rapes and their continuing devaluation in American society” (185). Thus, by entering the realm of the abject, non-acceptable, non-conformist, dismembered, and disintegrated bodies, Wright demonstrates in Native Son the precarious status of “the woman as body of the woman” (The Outsider 393) as an in-between, transgressive, transitional image in search of identity. Both the black and the white daughter’s unusual burial – dismembered body and rotten corpse – reflect the culture’s different ways of “punishing” the mother. The “blind mother,” embodied by Mrs. Dalton, epitomizes the blindness of the motherland or mother-culture, unprepared and unable to see the truth beyond these cadavers, having to live with the burden of racialized bodies. Significantly enough, Bessie’s black mother is not even mentioned in the novel, thus attesting to her (in)significance as a “mute mother” (DeCosta-Willis 540). Although structurally marginal, the female characters in Native Son gain voices as dismembered, decomposed, rotten, and used bodies, becoming more meaningful in death. The corpse becomes thus the only medium through which the women in the novel can signify with.

The pervasiveness of the body in Wright's novel -- particularly the problematic, either racialized or dismembered and rotten female body -- signals the author's concern with the centrality of the body to human experience. The colored body is Wright's main character, and, by using patterns of sight and blindness imagery, the author exposes what Seymour L. Gross has termed as "the agonizing permutations of color in America." As Gross further underlines, "every major figure in the novel, with the exception of Bigger [...] is either blind to or blinded by color" (75). The "Daltons" encapsulate this distortion of vision, this "blindness to black humanity," as Brown has termed it (36), from a triple point of view: Mrs. Dalton is literally blind; Henry Dalton is blind in his hiring of the "boy" who belongs to the class that inhabits his over-priced slums; Mary Dalton is blind to the social relations between the races, manifesting an unusual closeness to a black body whom she admires for his humanity, in the light of the communist ideology of "social equality" she subscribes to.³

The color line dividing the two worlds is sanctioned by Bigger from the very beginning of the novel, when he still "plays white" with his buddies (21). He explains to Gus the distance between the two worlds separated by bodily color: "We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping through a knot-hole in the fence..." (23). Bigger Thomas's first encounter in the novel with the white female body is occasioned by the manufactured cinematic, glamorous, desirable body of "The Gay Woman," the unattainable, white, uninhibited body: "Yeah, she's a hot looking number," Bigger exclaims, completely absorbed by the body on the big screen (33). The references to the sensuous, tempting female bodies are

also abundant – as projections mainly – in Wright’s other writings. The male characters in Lawd Today!, Jake, Slim, and Bob talk about their “first meat” and thus subscribe to the racial stereotyping of black women as instinctual creatures.⁴ Nevertheless, the same idolized, untouchable body of the popular film also covers the walls of Bigger’s room, a legacy bequeathed on him by his predecessor as the black chauffeur of the Dalton family. This “ideal body,” in Susan Bordo’s terms, awakens Bigger’s imagination, as well as his senses: “His entire body hungered for keen sensation, something exciting and violent to relieve the tautness” (38). With the “gay woman,” Wright makes the transition to the other “rich chick,” Mary Dalton, whose predisposition for inter-racial flirtation attract and scare Bigger, at the same time: “She looked like a doll in a show window: black eyes, white face, red lips” (63); “The girl was strange” (64); “Goddamn that woman!” (65); “He felt something in her over and above the fear she inspired in him” (66).

Bigger Thomas’s own body undergoes transformations throughout the novel. Confined to the closed space of the ghetto room, under what Foucault has called “the disciplinary gaze” of his mother and his sister -- “We wouldn’t have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you,” she tells him (12) – Bigger realizes the double entrapment of his body, by both the black and white disciplinary gazes. As Foucault has demonstrated, the aim of punishing, to which he refers as “the regime of disciplinary power” (Discipline and Punish 182), is to compare groups of people, to establish hierarchies of groups, and to homogenize those within a single group. The “normalizing gaze” is “a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, and punish” (184). The white normalizing gaze of Mr. Dalton, Mary, and Jan produce in Bigger an embarrassment of his own body, an ashamed colored body under the scrutiny

of the white power. Consequently, Bigger becomes more and more painfully aware of his body: “He felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused” (NS 68) [my emphasis]. Later on, after he kills Mary Dalton, “his body trembled” (88), and Bigger remembers “how was consumed always with a body hunger.” After exchanging alcohol for Bessie Mears’s body, fulfilling “the desperate call of his body” (232), Bigger’s body “felt free and easy” (142). Confronted with the bones attesting Mary’s atrocious murder, Bigger’s easiness vanishes: his “sweaty” and “hot” body launches itself in a desperate flee for its life. Eventually, after he is captured and imprisoned, Bigger becomes disembodied gradually, until “his weak” (255), docilized body, reaches a complete detachment from its materiality: “He was not conscious of his body now” (251), as he no longer sees himself through white eyes. Facing the lethal penalty of his body, Bigger reaches a state of immateriality that allows him to “project his body into the world,” as Katherine Fishburn has so aptly noticed (207). Finally, he is able to gain a voice by detaching himself from the burden of his body. As Fishburn further emphasizes, by the physical act of killing Mary, “Bigger makes a statement or an artefact out of the work of his body. In Hegelian terms, Bigger has written his body and thus himself into history” (210). As Bigger confesses, “What I killed for, I am! [...] What I killed for must’ve been good” (NS 391-92). Thus Bigger gains an identity and a voice through the destruction of both white and black bodies.

Mary Dalton’s body is sacrificed in an attempt to save the main character’s life, in circumstances that condemn the simple presence of a black male body in a white girl’s room to the stigma of “rapist,” the long-standing stereotyping of black masculinity.

Indeed, Buckley's vituperative depiction of Bigger Thomas as animal reinforces this pervasive ideology, by attributing him characteristics such as "the jungle beast" or "the black ape" (258), "this worthless ape," or "the cunning beast" (377). As these harsh epithets suggest, the white people judging Bigger are, indeed, concerned with the materiality and bestiality associated – historically -- with his body, its appearance, and the stereotypes associated with it. Even if there is no real proof that Bigger has raped Mary Dalton, it is assumed that he is also a rapist by associating his violence over Mary's body with that over Bessie Mears's black body. The circumstantial evidence proving Bessie Mears's rape and murder is invoked against Bigger, in an attempt to incriminate him for similar deeds against Mary's corpse, although a pile of white bones and a remaining ear-ring reconstruct her body. Not only is Bessie Mears's story used as evidence against Bigger in the trial, but her dead, rotting body is brought in court as evidence, as corpus delicti, serving to prove a non-existent crime. The lack of interest in the fate of the dead, female, black body is enhanced by the court's lack of acknowledgement of Bessie as a person, even if dead, as her body is attached a name just "for the record," as "the raped and mutilated body of one Bessie Mears" (306). [my emphasis] Bigger himself realizes the danger of using Bessie's corpse in this way,

To offer the dead body of Bessie as evidence and proof that he had murdered Mary would make him appear a monster. [. . .] Though he had killed a black girl and a white girl, he knew that it would be for the death of the white girl that he would be punished. The black girl was merely

“evidence.” [...] He knew that Bessie, too, though dead, would resent her dead body being used in this way. (306-307) [my emphasis]

Reducing thus the body of the black woman to circumstantial evidence does not constitute a brutal stereotypization of African American women. On the contrary, it is a realistic portrayal of the defenceless, mindless, and insignificant female creatures that Wright presents in this light, throughout his work, deliberately. Whether or not Bessie is “the female suppleant necessary to enhance the tragic mood,” as Joyce has noticed, using one of Northrop Frye’s formulas to define the tragic hero (59), the abuse of Bessie Mears’s body is the message the culture she lives in has inscribe in her body, both alive and dead. Bessie remains, however, the only “marginal companion” Bigger has (Joyce 68). Despite her bodily-inscribed identity, Bessie Mears also attempts to present herself as a reasoning person, but Wright “kills” her immediately after she makes her voice heard, in an episodes when Bessie refuses to submit to Bigger’s sexual needs. In a sense, rebelling against her predetermined “fate” -- that of a silent, “mindless” black “girl,” and prostitute in the common representation of her “kind” – precipitates her death. Bessie’s death likens her destiny, paradoxically, to that of Mary Dalton, who commits another political transgression, by refusing to conform to the general (political) attitude against blacks, and who embraces the communist ideology to escape the capitalist home that predetermines her fate. Just before murdering Bessie, Bigger realizes that inquisitive side of Bessie precipitates the annihilation of both Bessies that Bigger envisions:

[T]here were two Bessies: one a body that he had just had and wanted badly again; the other was in Bessie’s face; it asked questions; it bargained

and sold the other Bessie to advantage. He wished he could clench his first and swing his arm and blot out, kill, sweep away the Bessie on Bessie's face and leave the other helpless and yielding before him. (133)
[my emphasis]

The ways in which the black and white bodies are murdered are, somehow, similar. After accidentally suffocating Mary Dalton with a pillow, for fear he might be "caught" in her room, Bigger Thomas incinerates the body in the Dalton furnace, first chopping off Mary's head with a hatchet. By delaying the cleaning of the furnace, Bigger has contributed to his own death, as the bones are discovered and the white girl's body is easily "reconstructed." Eliminating Mary's body as evidence of his own crime strengthens Bigger Thomas's conviction to take control over his destiny. While Mary's murder may be considered accidental, the murder of Bessie Smith is deliberate and motivated: "A woman was a dangerous burden when a man was running away" (135). After raping Bessie, Bigger batters her face with a brick and kills her, throwing her down an airshaft. As one immediately notices, the disposal of these threatening bodies also depends on their color. Bigger gently pushes Mary Dalton's body into the furnace, "Gently he sawed the blade into the flesh and struck a bone. He gritted his teeth and cut harder" (90). However, he throws Bessie's bleeding body down the air shaft, too concerned about his own body: "The body hit and bumped against the narrow sides of the air-shaft as it went down into blackness. He heard it strike the bottom" (224). Later on, during the trial, the visible mark of the "The sight, bloody and black, made Bigger flinch involuntarily and lift his hands to his eyes." (307). Moreover, while Mary Dalton's

remains of the body are discovered immediately after the crime, Bessie Mears's body is discovered much later, after it enters a state of putrefaction. All these episodes may reflect, in a sense, that, "female sexuality is problematic for Wright," as Warren has noticed (67). But isn't female sexuality problematic, especially for male writers, regardless of their race? Isn't sexuality problematic, anyway? Cixous has rightly underlined that "death and the feminine sex" are the two unrepresentable things for men (2048), and male critics have subscribed to this by hiding under such comfortable "umbrellas" as Warren's.

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, the necessary exposure and elimination of the female body, black and white, is a necessary act in order to re-write female agency. The "woman as body of the woman" has to die in order for her voice to be heard, first as body signifier, then as signifier of the body. The corpse, this abject and grotesque form of the body, in Kristeva's and Bakhtin's terms, shelters the female voice, in the discussed works of Faulkner and Wright, and prepares this in-between stage until, as Cixous proclaimed, she will "throw her trembling body forward" (2044) and will start to write her body,

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse. [. . .] Muffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts. (2049)⁵

Notes to Chapter V:

¹ As Joyce Ann Joyce documents, the novel has been widely translated from English into other languages immediately after publication, demonstrating its impact: Czech, 1947; Danish, 1959; Dutch, 1947; Finnish, 1972; French, 1947; Georgian, 1971; German, 1941; Italian, 1948; Japanese, 1972; Norwegian, 1947; Polish, 1969; Portuguese, 1949; Romanian, 1954; Russian, 1941; Spanish, 1941; Swedish, 1943; Turkish, 1975 (1).

² Edward Kearns was the first to notice Wright's ascension, with Native Son, to the critical attention denied him before, when the "fate" of African American writers was that of social documentators (qtd. in Joyce 1). See "The 'Fate' Section of Native Son." Contemporary Literature 12 (Spring 1971): 146-55. For a substantial list of Native Son scholarship, check "The Critical Background and a New Perspective" in Joyce, 1-28.

³ As Sondra Guttman posits, encouraging social relations between the races was a crucial part of the CPUSA's revolutionary agenda from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s (174). From this perspective, the unusual physical closeness to Bigger that Mary encourages may be interpreted as both ideologically motivated or, simply, experimental.

⁴ As Wright acknowledges in "How Bigger Was Born," he was aware of the risks he took in reinforcing rather than sanctioning and challenging such racial stereotypes, but explains that he "could not write of Bigger convincingly if I did not depict him as he was: that is, resentful towards whites, sullen, angry, ignorant, emotionally unstable, depressed and unaccountably elated at times, and unable even, because of his own lack of inner organization which American oppression has fostered in him..." (xxi). [Wright's emphasis]

⁵ See Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa.” One of the important ideas proposed by Cixous in this famous study is the repression of the female body. In Cixous’s opinion, any transgressive, desiring body – like the body of Addie Bundren, Bessie Mears, and Mary Dalton, discussed in this paper – has been repressed. By writing as if the female body could be asserted, Cixous’s écriture féminine frees it from invisibility and does away with the logic of the One.

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The Mother's Burial, the Daughter's Burden: Dismembered and Disintegrated Bodies in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*

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