Spring 5-3-2024

Final Master's Portfolio

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FINAL MASTER’S PORTFOLIO

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A Final Portfolio

Submitted to the English Department of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts in the field of English
with specialization in Literary &Textual Studies

April 2024

Dr. Rachel Walsh, First Reader
Dr. Bill Albertini, Second Reader
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Analytical Narrative

As I cast my mind to the academic journey that began in the fall of 2022, I recall like yesterday that my initial motivation for pursuing my master’s degree at BGSU, all the way from Nigeria, was to enrich my educational experience in a different clime and to deepen my knowledge base in literary studies within a global context, with the intention of transferring these insights into the classroom setting as I had taught in a high school before my relocation. My undergraduate background in English and International Studies, where I explored a broad range of courses from English syntax to global history was without a specific focus. This all seemed quite unfocused until I started the master’s program in Literary and Textual Studies under the introductory guidance of Dr. Bill Albertini in ENG 6010, “Introduction to English Studies.” On our first day, as is customary, we were asked to introduce ourselves along with our areas of specialization. At that moment, I found myself intrigued by African diasporic and Black literature, yet my academic interests were still formulating. However, listening to my cohorts discuss their specialized interests in the program sparked a realization about my own academic inclinations. I discovered that I have always been drawn to themes of identity, representation, and agency in literature, particularly as they relate to marginalized bodies and communities. This realization was crucial as it helped me articulate my proposed area of focus in the program. This epiphany has directed the trajectory of my academic journey, influencing the seminar courses I selected throughout the program, thereafter, shaping the common threads found in all my works. This portfolio comprises of three revised papers from my seminar coursework over the two years duration, with an ongoing work to convert the first paper on Steph Cha novel into an article manuscript, which I will submit to *MELUS* in the summer of 2024 for publication. Throughout my time at BGSU, my writings have
consistently explored themes and dynamics of gender and race, identity representation and agency in various literary texts.

The first paper in my portfolio was developed during the Spring of 2023 for Dr. Walsh's class, ENG 6800: Trespassing Borders: Archives of Implication and Coalitional Resistance. The paper, titled ""You've got nothing to feel guilty about": The Implications of Minor Feelings and the Genre of Memory in Steph Cha's *Your House Will Pay*", explores the complex racial tensions between Asian and African Americans as depicted in the novel. Authored by Asian-American writer Steph Cha, the narrative is set against the backdrop of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising, revisiting the aftermath of these racial conflicts between Asian and African Americans as presented in 2019. In the initial submission, I explored the model minority myth and the muting impact on Korean American expressions as embodied in the Park family. Upon selecting the paper for a revision, Dr. Walsh suggested and gave feedback that I should recenter the focus of the paper to include Micheal Rothberg’s theory of implication and how this affects racial tensions between Asian and African American. Additionally, she advised refining the paper to situate the narrative within the political and cultural context prevalent at the time of its writing, notably around the emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. This revision enhanced the paper’s engagement with contemporary socio-political dynamics, improving my analysis by connecting historical events to ongoing racial discourse in America.

I wrote the second piece in my portfolio as a final paper for ENG 6200: “Feminist Theories”, taught by Dr. Kimberly Coates in the Spring of 2023. In the class, we examined different feminist theories and their applicability to modern-day issues. As one of the choices presented to us for final projects, I picked the traditional seminar paper and used *Everything Good Will Come* by Sefi Atta as my primary text for analysis, resulting in the essay “Defiant Characters:
Rejecting Heteronormative Cultural Context in Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come.*” In my analysis, I explored Atta’s portrayal of defiant characters like Enitan and how they resist heteronormative and patriarchal norms in Africa. As part of my argument, I put the text in contestation and as a counter argument to Obioma Nnaemeka’s theorization of “Nego-feminism,” which proposes that African women should both negotiate her space and desist from any form of ego in her interactions with the African man. My focus in the paper was to show how Atta’s characters were defiant. After receiving Dr. Coates constructive feedback and my discussion with Dr. Walsh, I refocused the paper by changing the title as well as depicting the place of women in Black nationalism. I delved into the genre of the text as a bildungsroman and the place of women in politics and activism during the era during which the book is set.

The third paper I selected as an artifact for my portfolio was the final seminar paper submitted in Dr Jolie Sheffer’s class ENG 6750: “The 1960 in Contemporary American Culture.” In the class, we looked back at the 1960s as a foundational moment and traced the evolution that had happened overtime in America’s culture and politics. I wrote my final paper for this class on Katori Hall’s *The Mountaintop* and focused on the character of Camae as a symbol of Black femininity who challenges the societal stereotypes around the narrative of women’s role in the Civil Rights Movement, thereby illuminating the often overlooked yet important contributions of African American women in shaping historical and social discourse. Based on the feedback from Dr. Sheffer, I had to further explain the context of the play and not conflate the representations mentioned by Hall with the life and times of the actual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. As an addition to the feedback, Dr. Walsh also suggested that I integrate the political situation at the time which the play was produced which was during Obama’s presidency and contextualize the significance of this to my analysis.
In looking back to that first day in Dr. Albertini’s class to the completion of this portfolio, I see a clear trajectory of personal and intellectual growth. This portfolio not only marks a significant phase of academic achievement but also embodies my evolution as a scholar deeply engaged with the narratives of identity, agency, gender, and representation in marginalized communities. It represents a synthesis of my expanded knowledge and the refined focus I developed through critical engagement with global literary perspectives. Throughout the process of revising the works included in this portfolio, I benefited immensely from the guidance and insightful suggestions of the professors who taught the courses. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Rachel Walsh for her invaluable feedback and for recommending additional scholarship that helped me frame my arguments more effectively and deepen my analysis of the texts selected.

During this revision process, I have become more familiar with key scholarships and scholars in Black studies, encompassing both African and African American works. This exposure has significantly enhanced my skills in crafting well-structured papers, organizing content effectively, and formulating solid arguments.

With the completion of my master’s degree and as I transit for a PhD in English with a specialization in African Diasporic studies, I will say my years of study in BGSU has been really eventful. I appreciate the intellectual support from my professors, cohort members and the English Department at large for giving me the platform. I am confident that as I leave BGSU, I carry with me a greater assurance in my scholarly writing and a readiness to contribute meaningfully to academic discussions in my field.
"You've got nothing to feel guilty about": The Implications of Minor Feelings and the Genre of Memory in Steph Cha's *Your House Will Pay*

**Introduction**

Steph Cha's crime novel *Your House Will Pay* (2019) explores the historiography and enduring aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, a tumultuous event precipitated by the acquittal of the four LAPD officers involved in the brutalization of Rodney King. This novel examines the interconnected events that intensified racial tensions in Los Angeles by re-imagining and centering the shooting of Latasha Harlin, a fifteen-year-old Black girl who was killed by Korean-American store owner Soon Ja Du. Du's trial, which Cha adopts to tell her story, brings to the forefront a critical yet often overlooked element of the racial and judicial landscape that contributed to the uprising. Brendan Stevenson's analysis of the trial highlights how the sentencing of Du, who received probation, community service, and a $500 fine instead of prison time or a stiffer penalty, further increasing the tension this period. These dual instances of judicial leniency — the pardon of the four officers and Du's mild punishment — were perceived by the African American community as a blatant miscarriage of justice, thereby igniting widespread unrest, which was especially pronounced in the Korean district of Los Angeles in 1992.

Cha's novel fictionalizes the 1992 L.A. uprising as it alternates between the perspectives of Grace Park, a young Korean American woman whose family harbors a painful secret, and Shawn Matthews, an African American man grappling with the impact of past violence on his family. As the story unfolds, it reveals the lasting scars of the riot and the ongoing struggle of a multiracial demography in a city marked by its divisive past. In this paper, I argue that Cha—choosing the crime genre — revisits the narrative of the 1992 Los Angeles uprising within her novel to establish an archive and perpetuate public memory for generational reference.
Significantly, Cha said in a NPR interview that she commenced writing the novel in 2014, against the backdrop of the 1992 riots and drawing parallels with the Ferguson unrest, which burgeoned the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement after the shooting and death of Micheal Brown.\(^1\) Black Lives Matter was championed as an advocacy for the rights and identity of African Americans against continual violence and brutality in the hands of police, vigilantes, and white supremacists, as exemplified in the death of Alfonso in the opening chapter of the novel. Through her storytelling, Cha crafts a narrative that reflects past injustices and police brutality and provides a commentary on the contemporary struggle for racial equality. This paper explores the meaning of true justice and posits that Cha makes a deliberate political statement underscoring the persistent racial tensions, police brutality, and stereotypes that plague racial relations affecting African Americans in the U.S., echoing Viet Nguyen's assertion that "an individual crime committed against one is a manifestation of a society that has committed a wholesale crime" (3).

Furthermore, I propose an alternative reading of Your House Will Pay as the novel critiques the model minority myth that services racial hierarchies and divisions, underscoring the need for solidarity among these minorities. Cha uses Grace, the youngest of the Park family, to deconstruct the pervasive "model minority" myth that attempts to constrain and mute their expressions and desire for identity. Hence, Grace's revolt alludes to Cathy Park Hong's definition of minor feelings "as what we are accused of when we attempt to be difficult" (57). Grace's attempt to vocalize and express her feelings of irritation after the shooting of her mother is deemed antagonistic and belligerent, contradicting the white hegemonic conception and traditional representations of Asian Americans. She is perceived in the world of the novel to be violent and non-conforming even when

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\(^1\) In an interview with NPR, Steph Cha makes the assertion that she started writing this novel in 2014 which was after the death of Micheal Brown that ignited the campaign for Black Lives Matter that condemned police brutality and violence against Blacks.
she confronts her father on how Blacks are being treated. Therefore, it is worth noting that Grace's journey reflects a resistance to these stereotypes as she advances racial solidarity and seeks authentic self-expression. In contrast, Paul, her father, represents the struggles of an older generation, feeling stifled and entrapped within an unfair racial system, illustrating the myth's detrimental impact across generations.

To frame this argument, I adopt Cathy Park Hong's concept of "Minor Feelings" and Micheal Rothberg's theorization of implication\(^2\) to demonstrate how historical injustices and racial tensions are not isolated but interconnected. Cha's novel reflects Rothberg's idea that diverse communities are implicated in each other's histories, as seen in the intertwined lives of the Korean American and African American characters. Hence, exploring the manifestations of these sentiments in the narrative helps draw parallels with the contemporary experiences of the Asian American community. In offering a link to Rothberg's construct, Grace Park becomes an "implicated subject who occupies a position aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm" (Rothberg 1). Grace, unlike Shawn comes from a privileged status, being able to have a family who moves on despite being perpetrators of violence and a crime that unsettles Shawn's family in the novel. The leniency given to Yvonne, Grace's mother associates her with the white hegemony that considers Asian Americans as exemplary citizens on the one hand and vilifies the African American community on the other.

As Rothberg asserts, "these implicated subjects are neither victim nor perpetrators, but they are participants in histories and social formations that generate the position of victims and

\[\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{2}}\] Micheal Rothberg's argument around the concept of the "implicated subject" particularly engages with the historical contexts of the Holocaust and slavery to illustrate how individuals and groups can be implicated in systemic violence and historical injustices beyond clear-cut roles of victims and perpetrators. While Rothberg's work is broad and addresses multiple forms of historical and systemic violence, the Holocaust and slavery serve as pivotal examples for discussing the complexities of implication.
perpetrator” (1). This position of victimhood and perpetrator comes up during the dialogue between Shawn and Grace when she visits him uninvited, he tells her: "You've got nothing to feel guilty about. You know that you weren't even born" (190). The dialogue here closely follows that Grace has to confront her role within this history, whether through acts of remembrance, engagement with the pain of others, or the pursuit of justice and reconciliation. Grace's unsolicited appearance at Shawn's house to ask for forgiveness is complicated because it encapsulates the novel's exploration of reconciliation and accountability. For Grace, this act represents a step towards confronting her family's role in the broader narrative of racial tensions in Los Angeles and how she is bound in this web of shared history, not as a direct agent but as an inheritor of its consequences, navigating the personal and collective trauma that arises from a legacy of racial injustice. For Shawn, it brings the past's unresolved pain and injustice directly to his doorstep. Hence, *Your House Will Pay* steps towards racial solidarity and unity, which becomes prominent by the end of the novel rather than the assumption that one group is well favored based on the model minority status.

In conversation with Ruth Gilmore and Nan Ma in his dissertation details he static implications of the model minority stereotype on Asian bodies in the U.S., highlighting its dual-edged nature. Ma notes that this myth seemingly praises Asian Americans for their success and Western cultural assimilation while muting their voices against injustice (12). This stereotype, as Ma describes in conversation with Gilmore, demands that Asian Americans suppress their grievances and maintain their "exemplary" status. Ma further describes the assimilation of Asian Americans into mainstream Western culture as a "self-reliant, political move and an affective investment" (13). Ma's argument depicts a strategic political and emotional act, emphasizing how such stereotyping is a Western tactic to profile not only Asian Americans but other racial groups
in the U.S. This results in contrasting stereotypes as Asian Americans are put on edge and pitted against other races. Thus, as Ma notes, "the Black man is conceived and painted as violent and angry and of extreme precarity, the Latino is portrayed as a gangster, and the Asian American as submissive and accommodating, all constructed by the dominant cultural narrative" (3). These sentiments are similarly explored in Hong' book, *Minor Feeling: An Asian American Reckoning*, which is fundamental in explicating the issues of implication. As a Korean American woman and writer, she mentions, "My shame is not a cultural one but a political one" (60). Park Hong's reflections make us aware of the complex positionality of people of color in American society. Her insights emphasize the power dynamics that dictate one's assigned status – whether as an "afflicted" or an "afflicter," to borrow Rothberg's framework of victims and perpetrators.

Park Hong, drawing from her own experience of the L.A. uprising, candidly acknowledges that her family's "privileged" status within the Korean American community did not absolve them of a web of guilt, shame, and complicity tied to the pervasive racial tensions and injustices of the time. As she reflects, "I am ashamed that Du got off with a light sentence, [of] the store clerks who followed Black customers around, expecting them to steal… I am ashamed of the antiblackness in that Korean community, which is why I constantly emphasize that Asians are both victims and perpetrators of racism" (Hong 60). These references illustrate a sense of shame, guilt, and responsibility that exists in the racial discord, which Cha accentuates in the novel by having Grace and Miriam seek forgiveness from the Mathews’ family for the death of Ava. Therefore, Hong's assertion buttresses the argument above that the model minority status attached to the dominant and cultural norms of Asian Americans both restricts and constricts them from freely expressing their true emotions. Consequently, the subdued and assimilated image of Asian Americans projected as good becomes fraught because any attempt to repel either personally or communally
is portrayed as a defect, with even younger generations of Asian Americans implicated in this image.

The stereotypes, and performativity expected of all racial minorities, become evident in Cha's *Your House Will Pay* as it unfolds the narrative threads of historical injustice, racial animosity, and the quest for reconciliation through the lens of these families trapped within the cycle of violence and misunderstanding that epitomized the era. It is significant to stress that Cha focuses on Harlin's story instead of Rodney King's because it shifts the narrative from the common thread of police brutality on black bodies to the complexities of interracial tensions, particularly between the African American and Korean American communities in L.A. This perspective highlights how racial discord among minorities can escalate and inadvertently serve the interests of white hegemonic institutions. Furthermore, Cha's choice of Harlin's story allows her probe into the subtleties of racial stereotypes and their impacts on young African American females, challenging the monolithic narrative of racial victimization that often centers on male experiences. This choice shows how they cut across various facets of identity, not just race but also age and gender, highlighting the vulnerability of black youth in racially charged environments.

Brenda Stevenson elucidates this angle of vulnerability in her book *Latasha Harlins, Soon Ja Du and Joyce Karlin: A Case of Multicultural Female Violence and Justice on the Urban Frontier* (2013), as she discusses how justice is served based on proximity to being white. Stevenson analyzes the verdict given by the White female judge to Soon Ja Du against Latasha Harlin and argues that "the framework of hierarchy exists in the relationship of Western women to other women of color"(153). Stevenson's focus on the intersectionality of race, gender, and class interrogates societal biases concerning female violence and victimhood with these key figures — Harlins, Soon Ja Du, and Judge Joyce Karlin—and how their race and class influenced the
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unfolding of events and reception by the public and the judiciary giving the fact that Judge Karlin granted Soon Ja Du leniency because she is a mother and how close she is to being white. In other words, Stevenson meticulously delineates how these racial tensions were not only a backdrop but actively shaped by the actions and reactions of the individuals and communities involved. As Cha revealed in her interview with *Los Angeles Daily News*, her reliance on Stevenson's findings allows readers to revisit the past not for mere historical recounting but to uncover the layers of complicity and historical amnesia that have shaped and continue to influence racial discourse in the United States. This approach aligns with Michael Rothberg's "implicated subject" concept, which posits that individuals and communities are entwined in histories of injustice, even if not directly participating in them (1). Therefore, *Your House Will Pay* can be read as a revisitation of the political and national crisis, illustrating how the legacies of the past implicate present identities and social dynamics, thereby challenging readers to consider their positions within these historical narratives through remembrance, engagement with others' pain or reconciliation.

**Suppressed Feelings: Angst and The Desire to be Heard in Steph Cha's *Your House Will Pay***

The notion of suppressed angst is well reflected in the stories of the two families portrayed in Cha's *Your House Will Pay*. The novel chronicles, through an alternating lens, the experiences of the bi-protagonists Grace Park's and Shawn Mathew's families as an offshoot of the racial tension between Korean Americans and African Americans. The novel, set in 2019, depicts how the memory of the 1992 L.A. uprisings reverberates into the present and tells a compelling story of two communities. Grace Park has a privileged status of education and becoming a pharmacist, with her family being able to retreat and build a fresh start in Northridge, affording them a degree of insulation at the beginning of the novel. This veneer of privilege and assimilation is shattered when Grace's mother is shot, forcing Grace to confront the unresolved trauma that have been
simmering beneath the surface despite her family's attempts to distance themselves outwardly. Shawn Mathew, on the other hand, has a displaced sense of his identity after the death of his sister Ava Mathew and becomes an ex-convict. His anger is based on the injustice of Yvonne Park shooting his sister and facing no meaningful legal consequences, "Shawn [has] been able to think of her [as he did of himself] as a fugitive and a vagabond, marked for life in an unknown hell… She {Yvonne} has lived in Shawn city free while he was imprisoned, prosperous while he struggled" (Cha 95). This sense of dissonance irritates him as he feels estranged in a world he does not belong to. While the Parks can go about their everyday lives, assume new identities, and provide their daughters with an upper-middle-class lifestyle, Shawn's multi-year prison sentence robs him of time with his family. Thus, the fact that Grace and her family can move on and reside elsewhere signifies a form of escape and renewal that is denied to Shawn. Their mobility highlights a privilege that comes from their relative detachment from the cycle of violence and retribution that ensnares Shawn.

Despite the vast difference in privileged status between these two families, Cha highlights both families' deep-seated emotions and unresolved grievances, particularly the Parks’ struggle with their suppressed feelings. Cha utilizes the motif of riots at different points as a metaphor to point to the simmering anger and tension in the African American community on how they are racially profiled. As Cha indicates about the cause of the riot at the beginning of the novel after the show was cancelled "they scared of us, they see ten black people, and they think we bring the hood, (8)” speaks to the racial profiling and unjust assumptions made about black individuals, which contribute to a heightened sense of alienation. This specific incident of exclusion and stereotyping amplifies the feeling of being perpetually misunderstood and vilified, fueling the community's anger and contributing to the volatile atmosphere that leads to the riot.
Also, the riot at the book's end emphasizes the novel's message about the enduring consequences of unresolved historical traumas and the need for a collective reckoning with the past. It suggests that, while individuals may strive for personal redemption and understanding, better societal and systemic changes are necessary to prevent the recurrence of such violence. Hence, Cha foregrounds the need for racial solidarity in race relations in America and how historical injustices can still reverberate decades later through these minor communities if not solved.

Commenting on the significance of Los Angeles and the multiculturalism present with the contemporary residents of Los Angeles, Lisa Lowe, in her book *Immigrant Acts on Asian American Cultural Politics* notes that "the city [is] a living museum; the Chicano/Latino, Chinese, Japanese, African American, Thai, and Korean neighborhoods were opened up as locations…these connections foregrounded new contrasts, invented new hierarchies, and suggested new cultural mixtures and constellations" (88). This interpreted means that L.A serves as a contact zone for Black, Hispanic, and Asian-American communities where culture meets, clashes, and grapples with each other, often in the contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power. The symbolic status of L.A. becomes a confluence but with an extreme level of power dynamics among the different communities of color. These communities are largely affected by this power dynamics; a clear instance in the novel is when Alfonso is shot by a police officer after he is mistaken as a burglar while he attempts to get into his parents’ house after forgetting his keys. This incident makes the African American community in the novel lament about the injustice and how the stereotypes profile them as subjects of violence. The voice of the Pastor at Alfonso’s funeral reminds us “See, it don't matter what you do if you're black in America. You can stay in your neighborhood, on your street. Some cop can find you in your own backyard and kill you with the
full blessing of the law" (18). Cha's narrative decision to echo these themes in 2019 through Curiel's funeral demonstrates the apparent continuities between the 1992 L.A. uprising and the BLM movement.

Concurrent to this lament is how this systemic injustice has an intergenerational effect on the younger generation. As Shawn Matthews struggles with the weight of his family's history and the emotions it brings for him, his anger passes down to his nephew and his niece, "Daryl and Dasha were angry, sure, but their anger was inherited, abstract and bearable. They could not indulge it without getting burned" (69). Darryl, in particular, grapples with this legacy of anger and injustice after hearing how Ava was killed with no stiff penalty meted to the killer, feeling a pressing need to seek justice for his family, to right the wrongs of the past in a way that his elders could not. His actions are driven by a desire to connect with and honor his family's history, yet this pursuit is fraught with risk, which eventually mars his image. Shawn notes, "Maybe Darryl wouldn't have tried so hard to plug in and share the family traumas, the family mistake. But those mistakes were old and irreversible, and Shawn had made his share of them" (279). The desire to protect his cousins from these experiences fails, as Darryl eventually gets scarred from this suppressed angst and takes the label as a killer in a desire to be heard.

The suppressed frustration felt by the African American community parallels the Asian American experience. While African Americans may respond to their oppression with more visible and sometimes radical actions, Asian Americans, as represented in the novel, often internalize their anguish and injustice. This internalization is illustrated through Paul's interaction with Grace, particularly when she criticizes the police shooting of Alfonso Curiel. Paul's retort, "You don't know the whole story,"(29) encapsulates the theme of minor feelings and the deep-seated, yet concealed, distress. Paul's attempt to leave his family's troubled past behind becomes a source of
tension, especially when Detective Maxwell arrives to question Grace and get a description of the shooting incident involving Yvonne. Paul perceives the detective's visit not as an opportunity for justice but as an unwelcome dredging up of a history he has tried to forget for nearly three decades, showcasing the layers of fear, mistrust, and unresolved trauma within the community. Paul laments:

The LAPD chose our story; they called a big conference and made speeches about justice. They promised to get your mother charged with first-degree murder. Do you think they did that every time a black teenager was killed?... It was the police who made us villains and then abandoned us. They let us take the fall. All [through] the rioting, they were nowhere… They are not on our side; they won't protect us. (228)

Paul's statement reflects Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory, which suggests that memories of different historical events and traumas are not isolated but intersect and influence each other. Rothberg explains it as "implication emerging from the ongoing, uneven and destabilizing intrusion of irrevocable past into an unredeemed present" (9). In Paul's view, the consequences faced by his family—the prosecution of his wife, the destruction of their family business, and their attempt at a new beginning—were supposed to distance them from their past traumas. Instead, these events haunt their unredeemed present, failing to provide the redemption they seek. Moreover, Paul’s sentiments depict how the systemic institutions vilified his family and maligned the Asian-American community at large when those institutions were most needed during the riot. Thus, Paul's anger and minor feelings are entrenched in the fact that he considers the intervention of Detective Maxwell in finding the shooter of Yvonne an act of utmost deception. Although the LAPD scapegoated them as a deflection from its own-inadequacies and the flawed
state of justice, asserting that the police "made us villains and then abandoned us” allows Paul to externalize the guilt associated with his wife's crime, positioning his family as victims of a larger, flawed system.

The matriarch of Park's family – Yvonne— also suffers from a sense of isolation and suppressed feelings. She finds interacting difficult, and her experiences are poorly understood, even within her immediate family. While she regrets her actions, she cannot undo the effects, even as it traumatizes her. Yvonne's grief is captured here, "it was a mistake. I wish every day I could undo what happened. But I can't. How much do I have to pay for it? For that one mistake? Do I have to lose my daughters? Will it make it right?" (181). These questions encapsulate Yvonne's grief and the fact that she is not heard. Just like Shawn, she feels estranged. Although free and given some form of leniency, she does not get the happiness she deserves as she continually hits her face against the walls of racial tension. The parallel between Yvonne's fictional experience and Du's real-life ordeal highlights the complexity of addressing such incidents within a societal framework that often fails to fully comprehend or reconcile the intersecting layers of guilt and racial tension. While Yvonne's lamentation reveals her internal struggle with the consequences of her actions, Soon Ja Du's legal team established and continually echoed Du's claim of self-defense as necessary in that racially charged atmosphere (Stevenson 161). In other words, Stevenson records that Soon Ja Du was read as a vulnerable and elderly Asian woman who had no will to commit harm and had never been violent. At the same time, Harlin's vulnerability was never admitted and debated because she had a history of violent outbursts. Stevenson documents this in her book of how Latasha’s temperament, even within her immediate family, led her to mistakenly blind her sister during a fight.
Returning to the discourse of angst and suppressed desires in the novel, Grace's attempts to be heard are fraught due to the expectation that she mutes her dissent on the label of the model minority class. Grace is a "second generation daughter of two quiet, hardworking Korean immigrants" (141). Unlike Shawn, Grace grows up in a sheltered environment; although, this sheltered environment ends abruptly upon realizing her family's past. Grace's discovery forces her to become an "implicated subject," linking her as the embodiment of those indirectly tied to historical or ongoing injustices. Despite not being directly responsible for her family's past actions and coming into this knowledge rather late, Grace inherits the consequences and public judgment, embodying the role of an implicated subject. Her struggle to reconcile her identity and family history with the public's perception underscores Rothberg's assertion that individuals can be entangled in the legacies of actions they did not commit but from which they cannot entirely disentangle themselves (3). Unlike other Asian Americans, her outburst and anger in her attempt to defend her mother's action is judged as racist. Despite her reconciliatory action with Shawn's family, she learns regretfully that her emotions must be suppressed, and she must be willing to forgive her mother's killer regardless of her desire to get justice. These lessons reinforce the significance of the title *Your House Will Pay* and the idea that the actions of one generation will have consequences for the next, emphasizing a sense of inherited responsibility and the inescapable nature of the past. Cha highlights:

Grace hated him, this fragile, pathetic, sobbing boy who'd had the strength to shoot to kill... Shawn moved towards her, afraid she was planning to hurt Darryl. Her eyes shimmered with a hard, wild light. But then her face softened, and she closed her eyes and bowed her head. They stood there locked together in the shape of a prayer. (Cha 295)
Grace's intention to forgive Darryl is what Brian Willems terms "politicized anger" (57). He asserts that rather than vent the anger on Darryl, she must move beyond the racial tension and shift it to the dominant narrative of stereotypes that constrict them. This is particularly expressed in the scene where Grace comments that "Shawn had to do something… Back off, the power in his voice surprised him. They fell silent, and he could read their confusion as they tried to make sense of him, a black man … brother of Ava Mathews, coming to defend the daughters of Jung-Ja Han" (298) The scene reveals a solidarity that show the racial solidarity that the new generations are trying to forge against a backdrop of hate. Although Grace reckons with her mother’s actions, she must be willing to let go in order to stall future dissent among these races. This final part of the novel advances what Cha seeks to advocate that beyond racial tension, there is the need for racial solidarity and the need to stand up against the dominant stereotypes labelled against other people of color in America.

**Intersecting Race and Gender in Dispensing of Justice**

In the novel, another narrative, Cha engages with is the construct of justice: what should be termed as true justice? Throughout the novel, Cha questions the true definition of justice and examines how systemic institutions perpetuate injustice. From the fictional refusal of the grand jury to indict Officer Trevor Warren for shooting Alfonso Curiel to a revisiting of the real-life leniency granted to Soon Ja Du and ultimately to the exoneration of the officers who beat Rodney King, Cha critiques the judicial system in the U.S as racially biased.

This quest for true justice and its implications for race bolsters King-Kok Cheung's interrogation of the ties between representation and justice. Cheung poses a critical question: "How can we avoid the burden of representation… how can we avoid unfairly judging or being judged based on skin color, gender, class, or language?" (4). This query goes to the heart of the judicial
decisions surrounding Soon Ja Du's case involving the killing of 15-year-old Latasha Harlin before the 1992 L.A. riots. Cheung suggests that these decisions are often based on the gender and race of those involved. In the novel, this point is illustrated when Jung Ja Han [Yvonne] receives a lighter sentence, whereas a week later, the same judge sentences a man to thirty days in jail for abusing a dog (110). This disparity in sentencing starkly highlights the societal and judicial inequalities that Cheung criticizes.

Similarly, Stevenson offers an analysis of the verdict delivered by the white female judge in Soon Ja Du's case against Latasha Harlin, arguing that Judge Joyce Karlins' decision to favor Soon Ja Du was an act of maintaining elite white hegemony. This assertion highlights how deeply racial and gender biases are woven into the fabric of societal structures, affecting the dispensation of justice and perpetuating inequality. Together, Cheung's inquiries and Stevenson's analysis paint a picture of how representation and societal frameworks can influence judicial outcomes which is reflected in how Cha portrays Soon Ja Du in the novel:

Nothing Jung Ja Han could ever do would neutralize the shield of her fragile little Asian lady persona. She had the stamp of a victim, someone needing heroism and protection. This was true when she murdered Ava and sobbed and blubbered… When she sold her story of self-defense, testifying in tearful, shaky English, her dome of stomach on full display. Unless she murdered a white girl, it would always be true. (94)

Cha’s description of Yvonne (Jung Ja Han) mirrors the descriptions of Du, showing how the perception of both the real-life person and the fictional character might have influenced real-life of others about her, as a sympathetic figure and a victim of circumstance. The hierarchical notion of race and gender ultimately affected and effected the placement of justice in society. In other
words, the closer your race is to the institutions of authority, the higher the possibility of concessions for justice and penalty.

The Post-Trump Literature and The Genre of a Just Memory

The post-Trump era ushered a new wave of literature published in the past four to six years that reflects and critiques the changing political and social landscape of America, particularly in response to the policies of the Trumps administration. Among these works, Steph Cha’s “Your House Will Pay emerges as a significant piece, aligning with other literary efforts that scrutinize and advocate for societal change. This alignment is highlighted by Pulitzer Prize winner Viet Thanh Nguyen’s 2020 op-ed essay in the New York Times when he describes Cha’s book as “approach[ing] the Los Angeles riots through a murder mystery that focuses on the relations between Blacks and Koreans” (3). Nguyen emphasis denotes the social relevance of Cha's crime noir to current events in the United States, particularly pointing out that the racial tensions among minorities are largely due to their relations to the white power structure that set them up for conflict. He further explains that Cha, like other smart crime writers, adopts the genre because it allows the exploration of how individual crimes are manifestations of a society that has committed wholesale crimes, thereby extending the discourse on racial dynamics. This view of using writing as a tool to critique political agenda is also mirrored by Cathy Park Hong in her interview with the Yale Review, where she states that, "At first, the book was just about institutional racism in the arts, but after Trump's election, I thought the subject had to be broader that it had to speak directly to U.S race relations now" (O’ Rourke). These illustrations and many others show how different authors use different genres to project a justifiable cause for talking about race and race relations in the U.S, each adding a layer to the ongoing national conversation about identity, justice, and historical accountability. Therefore, Cha's novel demonstrates that crime fiction is not being
written to support the status quo but to become-part of an expansive move to present a radical and effective change to a society still wallowing in a high level of injustice. This assertion implies that Cha, in referring to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, seeks to illustrate both a system that imposes stereotypes on communities of color and the repetitive nature of the systematic injustice still prevalent in the society, which includes issues of police brutality, systemic racism, and the lasting impact of historical events. Furthermore, as David Schmid describes, “the peculiarities of crime fiction place temporality and spatiality in focus, with a defined location to pinpoint not only the murderer and his motive but also the very place where the ingenious circumstance happens” (7). This description fulfils the temporality of Your House Will Pay as it keeps true to the exact location (Los Angeles) and provides an inkling into the motive of the shooter.

In choosing the crime genre, Cha attempts to make a political move by using her novel as an archive and a source of public memory. As Cha claims in an NPR interview, “this novel build on the 1992 L.A. uprising and the 2014 Ferguson crisis to establish that police brutality has not come to its [terminable] end” (qtd in Chang). Hence, writers like Cha see writing as a model for presenting a response to the divisive rhetoric and politics that exacerbates existing tensions and divisions within American society.

In this regard, Your House Will Pay serves as a source and genre of ‘just memory’ as it recalls past occurrences that impact personal and community identities and the social and cultural processes that create these memories. Throughout the novel, Cha examines how memories of past events can shape and define the present and how different people can have vastly different experiences and interpretations of the same historical events; a communal remembrance occurs at Alfonso Curiel’s funeral when the Pastor declares "Remember Ava Mathews, right here in L. A." (18), suggestive of a communal consciousness and remembrance, what Jane L. Twomey calls
"collective memory changes to meet the present needs of those who invoke it" (77). Stating and using the Pastor to vocalize those words brings a social consciousness of an event that happened in the past. Cha's attempt at reigniting memory, in Twomey's words, activates a "processual and social activity, one in which the remembrances of societal events [transcend] beyond the individual and becomes the collective" (77).

Building on this notion of remembrance and memory, Twomey queries, “whose past should be remembered, and how? What is forgotten and why?” (77). These questions align with Nguyen's question of ‘just memory’ and how to remember the dead who cannot speak for themselves (4). Drawing extensively from the Vietnamese War and other military occupations in Cambodia and South Korea, Nguyen questions what constitutes a ‘just memory’, its ethics, and how it should be documented. He argues that "a just memory constantly tries to recall what might be forgotten, accidentally or deliberately, through self-serving interests, the debilitating effects of trauma, or the distraction offered by excessively remembering something" (17). In light of Nguyen's statement, should we consider Cha's recollection of the event as self-serving or the debilitating effects of trauma? While this is a rhetorical question, I argue that Cha's action of keeping memory, albeit fictional, is not some self-serving interest but guilt by association. Having come to know the history of the 1992 L.A riots, Cha sees herself as a reparative figure who must write the wrong, thereby bolstering Nguyen's claim that "A just memory demands …not just the movement between an ethics of remembering one's own and remembering others but also a shift towards the ethics of recognition, of seeing and remembering how the inhuman inhabits the human” (19). The remembering of the inhuman inhabiting the human can be likened to the racial standoffs and stereotypes that polarize minorities in the United States.
Similarly, Cha's effort at keeping memory is reinforced in an interview with Victoria Namkung when she is asked why she stayed true to Latasha Harlin's part despite fictionalizing the story. She notes: "{rather} than bother them and try to write a true to life biography of the people left behind: I was {more} interested in the people who are stuck with these memories and legacy." (Namkung). In other words, this paper interprets this intergenerational memory as it serves not only the memory of the dead or those who have been slain but also the memories borne from scars of racial tension and injustice, both personally and communally. For example, Aunty Sheila reminds Shawn when he probes why Jules Searcey keeps revisiting his family's history that, "It's been twenty-eight years. People are forgetting her. I don't want them to forget her. I want them to remember her and honor her. Jules let everyone know Ava's name, so I really don't care what you think of him. We can't let Ava be forgotten" (73). Aunty Sheila's desire to keep Ava’s memory alive and the legacies of the 1992 LA riots shows the wish to be heard, particularly for those living with the scars of police brutality and systemic injustices. Although Shawn construes the action of Jules' writing as what I term in Nguyen words as keeping “a just memory through self-serving interest” (17). The self-serving interest comes as Jules uses Ava’s story to make a name for himself after publishing the book *Farewell Waltz*. Jules's motivation can be read as morally complex, as he walks a fine line between exploiting a personal and communal tragedy for professional gain and leveraging literary exposure to amplify a narrative that might otherwise remain obscured. The act of chronicling Ava's story, therefore, becomes a site of ethical tension, balancing the imperative to bear witness and memorialize against the risk of commodifying grief.

Furthermore, the inclusion of Jules’s active role within the novel of documenting events and memories justifies the novel's inclusion as an archive. For example, in a meeting with Mariam during her confrontation with the Western Boys, Jules tells her, "I'm writing about them for a
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project about white supremacy and racial violence in California" (Cha 24). Further on, Jules mentions during his meeting with Aunty Sheila that he gets to write about Southern California, an area many people believe “is an egalitarian wonderland but there is so much violence and injustice right here that no one wants to talk about” (Cha 71). Each instance reinforces Cha's insistence through this novel in keeping memory alive and writing about social issues as other post-Trump literary writers have done. To this end, Your House Will Pay is a compelling novel that explores the complex interplay between personal history, cultural memory, and social justice issues. By delving into her characters' memories, Cha sheds light on the lingering effects of past injustices and offers a succinct portrayal of the struggles and triumphs of those seeking to come to terms with their past and forge a better future.

Conclusion

This paper has closely discussed and explored the instances of minor feelings in Steph Cha's Your House Will Pay by arguing that the subdued silence of (the Parks in the novel) in the aftermath of the 1992 LA riots is due to the model minor myth that constricts them from expressing their feelings. Additionally, this paper establishes the genre and role of this novel as both an archive and a source of public memory by recapitulating events of the past and their flickering presence into the present, albeit in a fictional way. Expanding upon this premise, I interpret both Steph Cha and Cathy Park Hong like Grace, as implicated subjects, bound in this web of shared history, not as direct agents but as inheritors of its consequences. As Park Hong has commented about the aftermath of the 1992 L.A uprising, "Even if I wasn't involved, I regard that time with equal parts guilt and rage" (61). Therefore, just like the characters in the novel, Cha and Park-Hong are compelled to confront their roles within this history, whether through acts of remembrance, engagement with the pain of others, or the pursuit of justice and reconciliation.
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"I Only Remember Ever Calling Out to My Voice": Black Feminism and Visions of Justice in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*

**Introduction**

In contemporary African feminist literature, Sefi Atta's debut novel, *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), stands out as one of the pivotal works that examine women's lived experiences in postcolonial Nigeria. The story centers on Enitan and Sheri, two childhood friends in a homosocial relationship that starts with Enitan, a product of a dysfunctional family structure, and offers a window into the personal and political arenas of a nation marked by its colonial history and post-independence tribulations. *Everything Good Will Come*, quintessentially a bildungsroman, charts Enitan’s personal growth from a young girl into adulthood revealing her increasing awareness of her own agency amidst societal pressures. Atta employs the bildungsroman as a genre to navigate Enitan’s identity against the backdrop of a rapidly transforming society grappling with the legacies of colonialism, political instability, and the challenges of modernity. Set in Lagos, Nigeria, and spanning from the early 1970s through the mid-1990s, the temporal setting captures the essence of Nigeria’s political struggles post-independence and the impact of military dictatorships on this newly birthed nation.

Through Enitan's narrative lens, Atta captures the dual oppression faced by women—as citizens in this postcolonial state and as individuals within a patriarchal society. This portrayal underlines the complexities of navigating womanhood within a patriarchal African space. Enitan’s experiences and reflections, as well as those of the other women in the novel, mirror the significant contribution of the novel to African feminist discourse, which articulates the diverse and often challenging experiences of women. This emphasis on the layered challenges faced by women sets the stage for understanding Enitan’s personal evolution in maintaining her agency.
and autonomy within the constricted space of patriarchy that shapes womanhood. As Enitan mentions, "People say I was hot-headed in my twenties. I don't ever remember being hot-headed. I only ever remember calling out to my voice. In my country, women are praised the more they surrender their right to protest" (179). Enitan’s voice here indicates a repudiation of the widespread expectation of women being only passive and not having an agency to speak and protest their rights.

While scholars such as Asante Mtenje, Jonas Akung, and James Otoburu Okpiliya have extensively explored themes of gender, identity, and feminism in Everything Good Will Come, the value of exploring alternative interpretations of the novel becomes evident. Solomon Edebor in “Image of the Male Gender in Everything Good Will Come” offers one of such perspectives, arguing that the novel "impacts the psyche of African wo/man and children" (2), suggesting it portrays male figures within the family negatively. Although Edebor's analysis is insightful and underscores the novel’s radical critique of patriarchy and masculinity, I argue that Everything Good Will Come functions not as a critique but a reconstructive narrative of resistance and hope for African women. It counters the stereotypes and expectations typically associated with African women negotiating their spaces with men as encapsuled in Obioma Nnaemeka's construct of "Nego-feminism.”

Nnaemeka’s theorization of Nego-feminism, first introduced in 1999 and elaborated in her 2004 essay "Nego-feminism: Theorizing, Practicing and Pruning Africa's Way," posits negofeminism as a uniquely African feminist approach characterized by negotiation and a lack of ego. Nnaemeka further refines this concept in her 2015 essay "Captured in Translation: Africa and Feminism in the Age of Globalization," where she emphasizes the need for a local and indigenous framework that still maintains connections to global feminist movements. Here, she
redefines nego-feminism as a strategy that involves negotiating with men and patriarchal structures to achieve set goals, portraying African women as collaborators who work within existing systems to carve out their niches (2015:244). Although, Nnaemeka’s assertion is credible, I am of the claim that the trajectory of contemporary African feminism, as illustrated in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, suggests a shift beyond merely negotiating with patriarchal structures. This novel and other modern narratives showcase African women not just working within the confines of patriarchy but actively challenging and dismantling these systems. Drawing from Flora Nwapa’s provocative question in her article "Women and Creative Writing in Africa," where she challenges the acceptance of traditional gender roles and inquires "Are there no women in Africa today who can say to hell with men and marriage… children and freely do as they please?" (97). I pitch Atta's novel in contestation with negofeminism and respond that there are women who can say to hell with all things masculine, hegemonic, and patriarchal, and who can refuse to negotiate like Nnaemeka’s ‘negofeminism’ proposes. Therefore, through Enitan and her interactions with other women, notably Sheri and Grace Ameh, the narrative resists these stereotypes and highlights the strength of female solidarity and agency within a restrictive society. Both Enitan and Sheri reject the conventional marriage plot that seeks to domesticate them, instead chose to pursue their autonomy and agency, thereby becoming beacons of hope for other women.

In addition, *Everything Good Will Come*, functions as a medium for examining the dynamics of gender, identity, and resistance within postcolonial Nigeria. Specifically, it portrays how personal and societal conflicts interweave. In this regard, characters such as Enitan, Sheri, and Grace Ameh are emblematic of defiance against the heteronormative and patriarchal constraints of Nigerian society. Enitan, the protagonist, evolves from a constrained
young girl into a self-aware woman who challenges societal norms through her career in law and personal choices, such as leaving an oppressive marriage. Sheri, characterized by her radical feminism, confronts sexual and moral codes with her bold sexuality and entrepreneurial ventures, advocating for women’s economic independence and sexual autonomy. Grace Ameh, in solidarity with Enitan leverages her journalistic skills to critique the ills of military dictatorship, adding a layer of political resistance to the narrative. These portrayals by Atta contribute significantly to the conversations surrounding the complexities of navigating womanhood in contemporary African societies as the story not only deepens comprehension of individual struggles faced by women but also positions these experiences within the larger framework of African feminist discourses, while simultaneously connecting them to universal themes in global feminism.

Historically, feminist discourses in Africa gained traction from the early 19th century, with scholarship focusing more on issues about gender and femininity, especially those concerning the expectations for women within various African societies. As Lansari Hadjer and Yanina Keltoum note, these discourses have been carved out to rescue women from the grip of patriarchy and masculine hegemony (2). Yet, it is important to stress that most African states' sociocultural norms and institutions have encouraged the normative by disempowering women and depriving them of opportunities due to strict cultural codes. These strict cultural codes are often tied to notions of nationalism, where traditional roles and values are promoted as essential components of the national identity. In many cases, the preservation of these cultural codes and the enforcement of traditional gender roles are seen as crucial to maintaining the social fabric and unity of the nation. Hence, any challenge to these entrenched gender roles can be portrayed as an attack on national identity and cultural heritage. In *Everything Good Will Come*, this
dynamic is vividly illustrated when young Enitan expresses her ambition “I want to become a president when I grow up” (30), only to be reminded by Sheri that “Eh.. Women are not presidents” (30). This exchange echoes the assertion by Hadjer and Keltoum, who argue that "the position of authority and power over the years has been the sole privilege of men, giving them the right to reproduce hegemony and strict social boundaries for women” (4). This narrative underscores how African women have internalized various forms of oppression and subjugation, including unflinching support for patriarchal leaders, reflecting societal expectations that confine women to roles of domestic caretakers and objects of sensual pleasure. Consequently, any resistance to these sociocultural constructs is often met with hostility, considered defiant, and leads to the ostracization of the woman involved as patriarchal figures like Niyi and Sunny go to different lengths to ensure conformity with the heteronormative.

This marginalization and frantic search for identity and agency among African women is further explored by Florence Orabueze in her book *Society: Women and Literature*. According to Orabueze, she describes the status of womanhood in Africa, particularly in the Western region, as one marked by severe constraints: "barren, fainting with a dwindling voice…[who] forfeits a dream of love and respect because [she] fails to fill the dreams of multiple sons to succeed the man" (85), terming the African woman's condition as a "prison," denoting both metaphorical and literal confinements that stifle women’s voices and aspirations. This metaphor critiques not only the physical and psychological barriers imposed on women but also the passive representation often prevalent in male-authored narratives.

In response to these portrayals, Hadjer and Keltoum have recognized the indelible impact of female writers in the African literary space, celebrating the transformative work of pioneers like Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta alongside contemporary voices such as Amma Darko,
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Sefi Atta. Hadjer and Keltoum note that these writers have been instrumental in “placing women at the forefront of their narratives” (2), showcasing a remarkable evolution in literary portrayals over generations. Jane Bryce notes this generational divide in her article “Half and Half Children”: Third Generation Women Writers and the New Nigeria Novel” by stating,

the forms of feminine identity evident in earlier women’s writing constrained by nationalist priorities that privileged masculinity, have given way to a challenging reconfiguration of nationalist realities in which the feminine is neither mythologized or marginalized but unapologetically central to the realist representation of a recognizable social world. (50)

In other words, forerunners female writers like Emecheta, who often explored themes of the mother figure, portraying African women primarily in their roles as mothers and caregivers, which resonated deeply within the post-colonial era's societal norms. Her narratives are reflective of women grappling with the socio-economic constraints of patriarchal societies yet affirming their identity and resilience through motherhood. In contrast, contemporary authors like Adichie and Atta offer a more radical and expansive examination of women's lives. Atta’s novels like Adiche, for example, inject a potent mix of feminism that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, challenging not only local patriarchal structures but also engaging with global feminist issues such as racial identity and immigration. Her characters are often complex women navigating multiple identities, striving for personal fulfillment beyond traditional roles. This shift in narrative focus reflects a broader transformation in the portrayal of African women in literature, moving from the early feminist concerns with survival and resilience within patriarchal constraints to more audacious explorations of female autonomy and self-actualization.
Nonetheless, these authors have significantly altered the literary landscape, countering the traditional and dominant depictions of African women as passive figures devoid of agency in male-authored texts. Their narratives foster a richer understanding of the female experience in Africa, highlighting the myriad ways women navigate and challenge their circumstances. This evolution in storytelling not only illuminates the diverse experiences of African women but also contributes to a more inclusive and dynamic discourse on gender and power in literature.

In this context, my contribution to the ongoing discourse about the novel is to juxtapose Atta's portrayal of women in the novel with Nnaemeka's Negofeminism theory, highlighting a divergence in their approaches to addressing patriarchal norms. Atta recounts in her interview about the novel, "I didn't like Niyi Franco, Enitan's husband. I didn't like her mother as well" (Collins 4). This aversion, as I interpret it, signifies Atta's repudiation of the patriarchal embodiment in Niyi Franco and the complicit and domesticated female seen in Arionla, who tried to negotiate her space with men but ended up with a psychological burden till she died. As Enitan writes about her mother,

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I knew that she [Arinola] was hurt because of the sacrifices she'd made in marriage. I finally understood why she turned her mind to church with such enthusiasm. Had she turned to wine or beer, people would have called her a drunkard. Had she sought other men, they would have called her a slut. But to turn to God? Who will quarrel with her?... they would say 'she is religious.' (179)
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Enitan's description of her mother reifies the obedient wife and the burden that women carry and go through in their attempt to negotiate with patriarchy, which ultimately makes them unhappy and lack a definite sense of happiness. Moreso, Arinola’s deep engagement with the
church is a response to the pain and sacrifices she endured in her marriage. Her decision to turn to the church allows Arinola a place of refuge. Although the church can be read as complicit in Arinola’s docility as it preaches that the woman’s role is to take care of the home and be available for her husband, on the flip side, it provided a platform where she can assert herself and perhaps influence others. In this regard, although both Atta’s novel and Nnaemeka’s theory are cultural artefacts rejecting patriarchal norms and the subjugation of women, both works remarkably present distinct narratives on female agency and interaction with patriarchy because the ideas they pitch are varied and parallel in discourse. Hence, I read Atta's depiction of female characters like Enitan, Sheri, and Grace as revolutionary, reactionary, and radical, contrasting Nnaemeka's construct of compromise and concessional relations with patriarchy embedded in her theorization of negofeminism.

**Speaking to Patriarchy: Temporalities in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come***

As a cultural artefact, Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, written in a first-person narrative, leads us into the novel's plot—a four-part story of Enitan. The first part, captioned "1971," introduces readers to Enitan when she is eleven years old, a period that explains the cruel and unhappy moments in her family. At this stage, she meets Sheri Bakare, her friend with whom misfortune binds her. In the next section of the story, "1975," Sheri is raped after going to a party with Enitan. Enitan considers this Sheri’s fault because of her indecent play and actions of being careless with the boys by smoking at the party. Enitan recalls the incident, "Yes, I blamed her. If she hadn't smoked hemp, it would never have happened. If she hadn't stayed as long as she did at the party, it would certainly not have happened. Bad girls got raped" (65). Her portrayal challenges readers to confront the deeply ingrained stereotypes and prejudices contributing to the victim-blaming culture. When Sheri becomes a victim of rape, the immediate societal reaction, as
internalized by Enitan, is to scrutinize Sheri’s behavior rather than hold the perpetrator accountable. Sheri, characterized as bold and sexually liberated, contrasts the conservative expectations placed on female children and women in Nigerian society. Hence, Enitan blames Sheri for her own victimization, attributing the tragedy to Sheri’s bold and liberated demeanor. Enitan’s viewpoint, “Bad girls get raped” illustrates her internalized misogyny. This perspective mirrors the broader patriarchal attitude that women must adhere to conservative behavioral codes, and any deviation from these norms justifies or explains male aggression. As Mtenje notes, “Sheri is responsible in the very fact of her being, a being which does not conform to female codes” (81) suggesting that her bold demeanor does not conform to traditional female expectations. Hence, the belief system like Enitan vocalized not only blames women for the violence committed against them but also reinforces the restrictive and dangerous standards that govern women’s behavior, effectively policing their autonomy and expression.

After the incident, the two friends separate as Enitan proceeds to study law in England, where she is also a victim of rape. Enitan’s sexual assault in England by her boyfriend signifies the pervasive and universal nature of gender-based violence, showing that such atrocities are not confined to any one culture or society. Rather the novel emphasizes that the threat to women’s safety and autonomy are global issues, transcending geographic and cultural boundaries. While she is in England, Enitan’s parents end their marriage. Returning to Nigeria in the part of the story marked "1985," Enitan discovers that her mother does not legally own the house she gets from the divorce settlement. She insists that her father, who does not consider alimony, legally transfers the property to her mother. She later realizes that her father has a child outside of marriage named Debayo, which breaks her heart and makes her leave the house to stay with her boyfriend. Her boyfriend is also a cheat, making her leave his home to reunite with Sheri in her apartment provided
by her man-lover, Brigadier Hassan. Towards the end of 1985, she meets Niyi Franco, who marries her. The last part, captioned "1995", chronicles the detainment of Enitan's father for his alleged activism against the autocratic government. The anxiety over her father's detainment strains her marriage to her husband, Niyi, who wants her to be a doting wife and mother. Niyi tells Enitan, "You are not a domesticated woman. You just don't have that… that loving quality" (214). Rather than accepting a position of being an obedient wife, Enitan divorces Niyi, and takes up activism alongside Grace Ameh by writing and protesting against the ills of the dictatorial government which eventually led to her father's release from prison, the emancipation of Sheri from being objectified and bankrolled by men, and Enitan's support to other women. Thus, Enitan and Sheri defy all patriarchal and paternal structures as they move toward the shores of endless possibilities.

**Navigating Defiance in the Face of Patriarchy**

*Everything Good Will Come* interrogates the theme of defiance through the characterization of Enitan and Sheri, who embody divergent reactions to the patriarchal structures that govern their lives. Enitan emerges as a figure of radical opposition, actively challenging the entrenched norms, whereas Sheri initially embodies a more conservative response, evidenced by her hesitancy to sever ties with Brigadier Hassan. Through the female characters in the novel, Atta epitomizes the spectrum of female engagement with patriarchy, ranging from acquiescence to active resistance. In other words, while some of the women were complicit and negotiating with patriarchy like Arinola and Toro Franco as Nnaemeka proposes, others are radicalized against patriarchy.

As I stated earlier, Arinola—Enitan's mother, typifies one of the complicit females who attempted to negotiate around patriarchy. She embodies a definite example of complicity within patriarchal constraints. Subjected to maltreatment, psychological distress, and emotional abuse,
Arinola clings to the entrenched belief that departure from a marital union is not a viable option for an African woman. Her internal conflict and despair are vividly captured in her dialogue with Enitan: "Why should I stand next to him? For any reason? The man [Sunny] gave me nothing. Nothing for all his education, he's as typical as they come" (94). This statement reflects Arinola's disillusionment and the dawning recognition of her unreciprocated efforts and sacrifices during her union and her attempt to build a legacy and fortune for her husband, Enitan’s father. She also assumes that with his level of education, he might be more enlightened rather than chauvinistic in ideas. Despite Arinola's persistent attempts to salvage her marriage and uphold societal expectations to avoid the stigma of a failed marriage, Arinola's efforts culminate in abandonment, as Sunny divorces her without providing any alimony or support. The accumulation of these adversities leads to profound psychological repercussions and her eventual demise. Through the tragic arc of Arinola's life, Atta elucidates the detrimental effects of rigid patriarchal norms, prompting readers to reflect the dynamics of compliance and negotiation within a patriarchal milieu.

Conversely, Enitan differs from her mother, actively asserting her rights and serving as a vocal critic of patriarchy. Atta leverages Enitan's perspective to challenge societal norms. Enitan’s vocality and defiance is not just personal but a statement against the broader societal constraints of women expected to be silent. As an illustration, Enitan’s intense reaction to Mike, her boyfriend’s infidelity symbolizes her rebellion against oppressive structures. Her response to Mike’s illicit affair and the subsequent judgmental gaze she gets from Mike’s landlord when she goes to his house to express her displeasure albeit violently highlights the societal expectation for women to be passive and accommodating even if the man was cheating. Enitan, in recognition of the landlord’s gaze, says, “I could read his thoughts: good women didn’t shout in somebody’s
house, didn’t fight in the streets, didn’t confront men. Good women remained invisible, confined to their homes” (155). Witnessing her mother’s suffering and lack of agency, Enitan resolves not to succumb to similar suppression. She resists the pressures to conform, advocating for autonomy and challenging the expectations that seek to domesticate her, driven by a determination not to inherit her mother’s fate of muted existence and unfulfilled aspirations.

This narrative of defiance and personal revolt in Enitan resonates with the broader discourse on women’s quest for identity and voice in Nigerian society. Scholars like S. Umarani and S. Kumaran elucidate this, stating that *Everything Good Will Come* “deals with the predicament of modern women and their struggles in search of identity and voice in contemporary Nigerian society” (442). Echoing Umarani and Kumaran, I posit that Enitan’s initial act of defiance—distancing herself from her father’s domineering influence—signifies her rejection of the patriarchal dictates pervasive in African settings, where daughters are traditionally under their father’s authority until marriage. Mr. Sunny Taiwo, Enitan’s father, embodies this position of absolute patriarchy, displaying affection and providing for Enitan while simultaneously neglecting and being insensitive to his wife, Arinola’s, needs. Arinola’s despair, as she says—"Your father won’t forgive me; [he] keeps talking about the hospital; why didn’t you take him to the hospital… There isn’t a mother in this world who would not believe faith can heal after medicine has failed” (EGWC 163)—reflect the profound implications of his patriarchal stance. The dissolution of his marriage, propelled by his indifference, stirs Enitan’s resolve to defy the patriarchal legacy that beleaguered her mother, fueling Enitan’s determination to carve a different path for herself.

Transitioning from this perspective, it is crucial to scrutinize the contrasting views presented by James Okpiliyia, Anthony Eyang, and Steve Omagu in their article. They employ Nnaemeka’s concept of “negofeminism,” to suggest that characters like Sunny Taiwo aid women
in navigating patriarchal challenges and help “women negotiate patriarchal landmines” (131). Their assertion stands on the basis of Sunny’s encouragement of Enitan’s liberation from traditional domestic roles, as he asserts that “Young girls do not do this anymore… [and] if they ask you where you learnt such nonsense, tell [them] from your father, and he is for the liberation of women” (EGWC 21). Drawing from their reference, they suggest Sunny exemplifies his role as a steadfast ally in women’s struggle against patriarchy. However, I diverge from their viewpoint that Sunny genuinely supports women’s emancipation. I argue that while he appears to champion his daughter’s freedom from domestic constraints, his treatment of Arinola tells a different story. Arinola’s retort about how Sunny treats her, “All women except your wife, my mother said” (21), exposes Sunny’s hypocrisy, revealing his neglect and emotional abuse toward his wife, especially in the aftermath of their son’s death. Sunny is unforgiving and continual blames Arinola for her obsession with religion which led to the death of the son. His unfair treatment of his wife and abandoning her even while she was grieving indicates a contradiction and questions the authenticity of Sunny’s advocacy for women’s liberation, illustrating that his progressive beliefs for his daughter do not extend to his wife, thereby challenging the notion of Sunny as a benevolent patriarchal figure and deepening the complexity of Enitan’s defiance against such conflicting models of patriarchy in her quest for autonomy and voice.

Furthermore, the duplicitous character of Sunny becomes known to Enitan after she discovers that her father had a son out of wedlock named Debayo, one year after the death of his son with Arinola. Enitan is embittered by this discovery that her father was a cheat after all, despite wearing the pretentious cloak of a great father. She articulates her shock, "Debayo was his son, four years younger than me. He lived in Ibadan. So did his mother. No, they were never married … He was born a year after my brother died" (Atta 151). This revelation reifies my argument of
Sunny as pretentious and patriarchal, wanting a son after all. Enitan's reaction to her father's infidelity and his refusal to secure property rights for her mother post-divorce drives her to distance herself and leave his house, accentuating her pursuit of independence and her challenge against the conflicting patriarchal standards she faces.

Similarly, Enitan defies the cultural codes of domesticity in marriage as the novel hints on intimacy as well. Enitan refuses to be complicit in the way women are used as mere door mats, sexual objects, or home keepers. She challenges the conventional expectations of domesticity imposed on women. She vehemently rejects the notion of subjugation to men, questioning the absurdity of deference and subservience: "How could I defer to a man whose naked buttocks I had seen? Touched? Obey him without choking on my humility, like a fish bone down my throat" (187). Her husband, Niyi, epitomizes the traditional patriarchal mindset, which Edebor elucidates as an entrenched belief in the strict demarcation of gender roles, particularly the confinement of women to the kitchen (8). Niyi's character aligns with archetypical patriarchal figures, like Sunny, who endorse male supremacy. Niyi premises Enitan's love only through domestication, which Enitan questions. Because she refuses to be dominated and domesticated, Niyi becomes rather hostile to Enitan and cares less about her, even when she is in a delicate stage of pregnancy. Expanding on this theme of resistance, it is imperative also to consider Enitan's apathy toward Niyi's preoccupation with offspring. This echoes Judith Butler's essay “Performative Act and Gender Constitution” as it underscores how societal norms within a heteronormative marriage framework are designed to perpetuate gendered roles and, by extension, the kinship structure itself (Butler 356). This paradigm is also mirrored in Sunny's actions following his son's demise with Arinola, as he fathers another son, underscoring a relentless pursuit of male lineage. The desire for an offspring makes Niyi restrict Enitan's freedoms during her pregnancy, further illustrating the
gendered expectations embedded within their societal context. Therefore, both Niyi and Sunny are emblematic of societal pressures to conform to prescribed gender roles and expectations, particularly in the context of lineage and progeny.

Therefore, Enitan's decision to divorce Niyi and take their child to embark on a journey of social activism—eventually contributing to her father's liberation from political imprisonment—marks a significant departure from the path of silent endurance epitomized by her mother to a viable point of agency that denotes that women can actively participate in political reformation. Through Enitan's lens, Atta confronts and dismantles the stereotypical portrayal of African women, portraying Enitan as a figure who vehemently rejects the binary of being either "strong [and/but] silent, chatterbox but cheerful, weak and kindhearted," thus defying the conventional labels affixed to women (EGWC 200). Enitan's narrative is not just a personal saga of emancipation; she retorts emphatically: "I! am! Not! satisfied with these options, I was ready to tear every notion they had about women like one of those little dogs with trousers in their teeth…I would not let go until I am heard" (200). Here, Enitan expresses a vehement rejection of the conventional roles assigned to women, which often oscillate between being perceived as merely 'strong' yet silent bearers of burdens or dismissed as inconsequential chatterboxes. Her imagery of a relentless dog tearing at trousers vividly symbolizes her determination to dismantle these stereotypes. Enitan's fervent declaration is not merely a personal rebellion against her circumscribed role, rather, she wants to claim authority for herself. Therefore, her assertion for independence and being heard is a clarion call that challenges societal constructs, advocating for a reevaluation of the roles and expectations of women in their cultural milieu.

Sheri serves as another paradigm of defiance, actively challenging the restrictive cultural norms imposed upon girls from an early age. She is depicted as an "omo-ita" or street child,
embodying a spirit of rebellion: "There was a name my mother had for children like Sheri. They were omo-Ita, street children, if they had homes, they didn't like staying in them…instead they liked going around causing mischief" (43). Her relationship with Enitan is homosocial extending beyond friendship and representing the liberty that Enitan desires. Despite encountering significant adversity, including a harrowing experience of rape, Sheri redefines her identity, eschewing the conventional role of Brigadier Hassan's wife. This stance challenges the deeply ingrained cultural expectations of marriage in African societies.

It is worth mentioning that Sheri's narrative arc is emblematic of a resolute journey toward autonomy, characterized by her deliberate severance from Brigadier Hassan. This act is a poignant denunciation of subordination and maltreatment. As noted by Okpiliya, Eyang, and Omagu, "Sheri, though barren, rejects polygamy, concubinage, and domestic violence to become free and happy" (134). I read her confrontation with the Brigadier as not merely a personal victory but a symbolic act of resistance against patriarchal oppression, eliciting astonishment from Enitan: "Sheri you beat up the Brigadier?... She beat him for every person who had crossed her path in life" (170). Atta employs Sheri's character like Enitan to champion female autonomy and resilience, thereby critiquing the concept of 'negofeminism'—which posits that women should subtly maneuver within patriarchal structures to attain their objectives. Sheri's evolution into an entrepreneur, owning and operating a restaurant, signifies her independence and repudiation of patriarchal constraints, presenting an empowering narrative that challenges traditional gender roles.

Scholars such as Edebor have raised critical questions about Sefi Atta's depiction of women in the novel, pondering whether Atta's narrative is a call to arms for female writers to vilify men and "to raise a clarion call for other female writers to demonize men in their writings?" (11).
Contrary to this interpretation of Atta's portrayal of women, I contend that Atta's depiction of women should not be narrowly interpreted as endorsing "violent confrontation or blatant chauvinism," as Edebor depicts (14). Instead, Atta aspires to uplift and empower women beyond the confines of 'negotiation' that characterizes negofeminism. In these negotiations, which are prevalent in African societies, women often find themselves ensnared within subtle yet stringent boundaries, as illustrated when Enitan dreams of a political role, only to be reminded by Sheri that "women are not president… our men won't stand it. Who will cook for your husband?" (30). These narrative challenges the notion that women’s empowerment should hinge on subdued negotiations or the suppression of ego, advocating instead for emancipation that liberates African women.

Transitioning from this question, my focus here is to submit what vision of the African woman Atta crafts in her novel. As a response, I argue that Atta's vision of the African woman as portrayed in the novel only critiques the shackles of patriarchy but also celebrates the power of female camaraderie and mutual support. I infer this assertion from the scholarly submission of Hudson-Weems, Okpiliya, Eyang, and Omagu among others that highlight that "female friendship and female bonding refer to the non-sexual relationships between women [that provide] emotional and moral support through the sharing of stories and experiences, and the offering of care and nurture" (134). Thus, Atta constructs a vision of the African woman who engages in these empowering bonds, as seen in the resilient friendship between Sheri and Enitan, who, against formidable challenges, steadfastly support one another.

Moreover, the solidarity between Grace Ameh, a journalist, and Enitan stresses another dimension of female bonding. Both figures are activists who confront not only patriarchal norms but also governmental institutions, facing intimidation yet persevering which justifies the women can take capacious roles in governance and social retribution. Their alliance sheds light on the
grim realities of Nigerian prisons, particularly for women, and their combined efforts lead to tangible changes, including the release of Enitan's father, Sunny Taiwo. Through these narratives, Atta illustrates the transformative potential of women supporting each other, challenging oppressive structures, and fostering an environment where they can aspire to and achieve emancipation and empowerment.

Conclusion

As I conclude, I return to my initial assertion that the novel stands as a literary counterpoint to the theoretical framework of negofeminism that Obioma Nnaemeka articulates. As discussed, Nnaemeka's theory, although rooted in the African woman's lived experience, suggests that women should strategize within a patriarchal framework often involving negotiation and compromise. However, Atta's narrative diverges from this theoretical stance, offering a portrayal of women who are not merely navigating within the confines of patriarchy but actively challenging and dismantling these structures. Hence, I have read Atta's novel as not just a narrative; it is a clarion call for the reclamation of agency among African women. Therefore, the narrative arc of the novel can be interpreted as a literary manifestation of a burgeoning vision for African women—one that transcends the limitations imposed by patriarchal paradigms. Ultimately, the novel serves as a counter-narrative to the notion of compromise embedded in negofeminism, suggesting that the path to liberation and recognition in cultural spaces is not through accommodation but through assertive self-affirmation and mutual support among women.
Works Cited


From Silence to Strength: Reconstructing Feminine Empowerment in Katori Hall's The Mountaintop

Introduction

The historiography and public memory of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States has predominantly celebrated the achievements and perspectives of its male figures. This prevailing narrative often marginalizes the equally significant roles and voices of women such as Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Anna Julia Cooper and Septima Clark among others, whose contributions were central to the movement's success and direction. As Deborah White writes about this marginalization in Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994, "Black women have had few defenders as steadfast as themselves, whether in slavery, sharecropping or civil rights" (16). This quote highlights the sideline of women's participation, essentializing Black women's roles and, more importantly, how their struggles and triumphs were foundational yet overlooked. Belinda Robnett, in How Long? How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights observes the popularity of the male-centric historiography of the Civil Rights Movement and how it undermined the roles of women during this era. As she writes, "women leadership were primarily channeled into bridge leadership tiers…from a structural and organizational perspective, women lacked positional power within the movement as a whole" (22). Robnett's assertion explains how women during this movement just played supportive roles rather than being recognized leaders and spokespersons for the movements. Despite this sidelining of women, her argument presents a counter-narrative spotlighting the contributions and strategies of African American women within the movement. In
other words, these accounts collectively challenge works that relegate women's contribution in the movement, as they ascribe significance to the place of Black women activists in the trajectory and outcomes of the Civil Rights Movement.

Amidst the varied historical accounts and debates of this movement, efforts to fictionalize key moments and figures of the Civil Rights Movement have brought writers like Katori Hall to the fore, who, in her 2009 play, *The Mountaintop*, focuses on an imagined interaction between Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and a motel maid named Camae on the eve of Dr King's assassination. In this play, Hall humanizes the historic Dr King, considered the revered figure of the Civil Rights Movement and puts him side by side with an ordinary maid depicting the idea that Hall presents in an interview with the *Julliard Journal* that, “[she] wants the audience to come out saying, ‘I can be a King, too. We all can be Kings’” (Jackson). This statement highlights Hall's aim to bridge the gap between the iconic and the everyday, suggesting that the potential for significant societal impact lies within every individual, not just the historically revered. Therefore, Hall's representation of Dr King in the play with the actual life and times of the iconic leader, is what Soyica Colbert mentions, as the play "engages in a tradition of black writing that reimagines historical figures in order to craft revisionary and recuperative narratives to give voices to history that may otherwise be forgotten” (98). Hence, this is a revisionist play of history as Hall makes readers imagine and encounter the humanity and frailty of Dr King the night before his assassination.

In this paper, I argue that Hall significantly elevates the character of Camae, a seemingly ordinary maid, parring her with the iconic Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in *The Mountaintop*. This unique positioning, which has received less attention in previous studies, allows Camae to transcend the role of a mere supporting character to a reckonable figure in the play. Despite
Camae’s lack of social and economic advantages as a low-class maid, she is portrayed as a formidable figure in her own right. Camae embodies a dynamic representation of Black female agency, challenging her era's stereotypes and societal expectations. I maintain that Camae breaks free from the expected quietude and subservience of a low-class Black woman. Therefore, the dramaturgy that Hall presents challenges the conventional portrayal of Black women in literature and interrogates the respectability politics that often govern their representation.

The conventional portrayal of Black women has been that they are depicted through a lens shaped by socio-economic constraints and racial stereotypes, relegating them to roles that emphasize passivity, servility, and the burdens of their racial and economic status. As Britnney Cooper writes in *Beyond Respectability*, “the Black female body was the conduit through which enslavement passed to her descendants and was historically deemed the ground zero site for the propagation of Black [female] inferiority” (20). Cooper’s assertion suggests that the respectability politics ensured conformity and adherence to a restrictive set of social values that often-stripped Black women of their identity and reduced them to mere backdrops in the stories of others, rather than being acknowledged as active participants with their own stories and voices. However, I reiterate that Hall presents Camae, through her insightful dialogues with Dr. King, as transcending these constricted societal roles, by engaging Camae in discussions that reflect on power, liberation, and the role of Black women in the fight for social change. This interaction aligns with Patricia Hill Collins's construct of *Black Feminist Epistemology*, defined as “consist[ing] of specialized knowledge created by African-American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women. In other words, Black feminist thoughts encompass… Black women’s reality by those who live it” (381). Therefore, this framework foregrounds my reading of *The Mountaintop* as a
revisit of the past to reassess the roles and struggles of Black women during the Civil Rights Movement.

Recent scholarship on the Civil Rights Movement, including the works of Janet D. Bell and Colbert, have examined the overlooked contributions of Black women activists. This body of research supports my claim that Hall addresses this marginalization through the character of Camae in *The Mountaintop*. Camae's statement to Dr. King, "I got a plan. But… I'm just a woman. Folk'll never listen to me" (*The Mountaintop* 45), exemplifies the tendency to overlook or underestimate women’s contribution during this crucial era. This underrepresentation, as Colbert articulates in "Black Leadership at the Crossroads: Unfixing Martin Luther King," reflects a broader trend where the Civil Rights Movement predominantly celebrated prominent male figures and “approximate modes of leadership based on masculine, heterosexual norms of propriety but instead on individual’s ability to mobilize” (106). This assertion reveals that with celebrated icons like Dr King, Medgar Evers and Malcolm X at the fore, their prominence might continually overshadow the contributions of lesser-known leaders and voices within the movement, who also played crucial roles in shaping its direction. Thus, this paper extends Colbert’s emphasis to include a reexamination of the Civil Rights Movement's narrative as an acknowledgement of a communal effort of the Black community, rather than attributing its successes to only a handful of notable figures which might lead to the risk of erasing the efforts of the collective and placing on the iris of the movement.

In the broader literary context, Trudier Harris, in his book *Martin Luther King, Jr., Heroism, and African American Literature*, situates Hall among a cohort of writers and playwrights who have prominently featured Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in their works. Harris observes that "between the late 1950s and 2013, nearly fifty African American writers of varying
ages and political persuasions featured Martin Luther King Jr. in their literary creations” (19). This observation highlights how King has served as an influential figure in African American literature, reflecting the wide-ranging impact of his legacy on multiple generations of writers. Also significant to mention is the cultural, political and historical contexts in which the play situates. As Hall acknowledged in her interview with the *Juilliard Journal*, her inspiration was twofold: “it was partly that the 40-year marker of Dr. King’s assassination was coming up and also that this man Obama was interested in becoming president” (Jackson). Thus, the play premiered in 2009, shortly after Obama’s historic election, takes on added depth, reflecting on the progress and enduring challenges of the Civil Rights Movement within the context of such a symbolic presidency. This setting not only highlights the aspirational and inspirational aspects of Obama's presidency, which echoed King’s vision, but also presents the persistent racial inequalities that indicates that the journey towards King's dream of racial equality is still far from complete.

This formulation above implies that Hall’s *The Mountaintop* differs from other works, as it not only humanizes King, it sets precedence to the political context of the production while also elevating Camae, thus offering a fresh perspective that challenges the conventional narrative arcs of subservience and silence afforded to characters like Camae in literature. Camae's assertive declaration, "Well as you can tell… I ain't yo' ordinary ole maid" (*The Mountaintop* 48), serves as a decisive repudiation of the limitations imposed by her class and race, embodying a rejection of the respectability politics that often confine Black women to marginalized roles. The respectability aesthetics at this period involve the expectations of Black women to adhere to certain societal standards to be deemed worthy of respect and upward mobility which includes being heteronormative, church going, and college educated.
Camae on the other hand does not fit into or represent this respectability aesthetics. Hence, Hall’s elevation of Camae from an ordinary maid to par with one of the most renowned activists of the time subverts all of those expectations, showcasing a maid who speaks truth to power and provides guidance and perspective to a historical figure revered for his leadership. This reversal of roles highlights Black women often overlooked but critical contributions to the Civil Rights Movement, what Bell, in *Lighting the Fires of Freedom: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement*, considers as "women who did not have titles or official roles like Georgia Gilmore, a cook, who organized to raise money to support the civil rights movement" (1). Thus, like Georgia Gilmore (the cook mentioned in Bell's illustration), I argue that Hall's use of a maid (Camae) reflects that invisibility to challenge the iconic status of Dr King. Hall's narrative includes a poor Black woman in the centre rather than just at the margins, challenging audience to reconsider the dynamics of leadership and activism as not a one-person activism, but an activism and movement projected from the minds of all involved.

Hall's portrayal of Camae in *The Mountaintop* becomes a counter-narrative to the traditional depictions of Black women, emphasizing their agency and capacity to influence even the most iconic figures. As Colbert suggests, Hall's counter-narrative uses "the play analogously to question how the humanizing of King provides room within the history of the civil rights movement to tell women's stories" (262). While previous scholarships have focused on the play's racial themes and King's humanity, my analysis explores an under-examined aspect: the elevation of feminine agency. Colbert's analysis of women's activism in "Black Leadership at the Crossroads: Unfixing Martin Luther King" argues that Hall redefines leadership to include Black women's activism. However, her discussion does not fully address Camae's defiance of stereotypes associated with Black women. Therefore, in conversation with Colbert, I delve more deeply into
how Hall utilizes Camae to dismantle the stereotype of the Black woman as either a burden-bearer, the hyper-sexual Jezebel, and the angry Black woman stereotypes by elevating her status to a point where her intelligence and insights become indispensable to Dr. King, showcasing a narrative where Black women's voices and contributions are not only recognized but integral to the leadership and legacy of the civil rights movement. Therefore, Hall's revision of history to include feminine participation and representation through the depiction of God and Camae as female and black aligns with Patricia Hill Collins's Black Feminist thought, where I interpret these portrayals "as helping black women learn their ideas and actions, suggesting not only self-definition but [that] their presence has been essential to U.S. black survival, thus promoting empowering images for Black womanhood" (Collins 749). This alignment suggests Hall's intention to elevate and redefine Black female agency within a historical and cultural context, offering a narrative that both challenges traditional roles and celebrates the indispensable contributions of Black women to the fabric of society and the struggle for civil rights.

**Silence to Strength: Defying Stereotypes and Claiming Agency**

At the start of the play, Hall, particularly in the context of Camae, portrays her as a stereotypical background figure—a maid whose voice and story seem secondary. This silence symbolizes the broader societal tendency to overlook and mute the voices of African American women, especially when discussing the Civil Rights Movement. This silenced status emanates from the stereotypes attached to most African American women. As Melissa Harris-Perry outlines in her book *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America*, the pernicious stereotypes used to disempower Black women, such as.
The Mammy, Sapphire and the Jezebel, all represent a channel of shame, whether being shamed for servility (Mammy) or being a Sapphire (an angry black woman) or Jezebel (the hyper-sexual seductress). The black women are constantly facing and internalizing the shame that comes with these perceptions of them (29).

This shame and stereotypical representations of Black women in American society impact their political and social lives, further complicating the complexities of their identities and struggle for recognition and equality. Given this background, I argue that Hall evokes all these stereotypes in *The Mountaintop* and uses Camae to challenge them and grants her agency despite being a low-class maid.

One of the stereotypes prevalent in the play is the domestication of black women who should serve as burden bearers, as evident in the dialogue between Camae and Dr King. Camae says: "I sacrificed my flesh so that others might feel whole again. I thought it was my duty. All that I had to offer this world. What else was a poor black woman, the mule of the world, here for?" (Hall 75). The story Camae constructs here is of the subjugated position of a Black woman exploited and living in abject precarity, notwithstanding the requirement of providing succour to others. Going further, the harrowing experience Camae encounters with her assailant reflects some of the many debasing experiences and oppressions Black women face as they serve others. Camae’s recount of her sexual assault to King—“last night in the back of an alley, I breathed my last breath. A man clasped his hands like a necklace round my throat. I stared into his big blue eyes, as my breath got ragged and raw" (75)—provides a representation of the sexual objectification and dehumanization that Black women have faced particularly from white male aggressors.
The historical context of rape and sexual abuse of the Black woman post reconstruction is well-documented in Danielle L. McGuire’s, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance*. McGuire meticulously cites instance of the rape incidents such as “Murdus Dixon, a twelve-year-old black Birmingham girl raped at knife point in the early 1930s by a white man who hired her as a domestic with no arrest made” (12) and the gang rape of Recy Taylor (18) to detail how sexual violence was used as a tool of racial subjugation against Black women, particularly by white men. This pattern of exploitation links directly to the experiences that Camae voices, situating her personal tragedy within a broader historical narrative of systemic abuse and oppression. This portrayal in *The Mountaintop* mirrors the broader socio-historical context of post-Reconstruction America, a period marked by the systematic exploitation of Black women. During this time, as McGuire notes Black women frequently found themselves in vulnerable positions, particularly when employed in domestic roles by white employers. The power dynamics inherent in these roles often led to severe abuse, including sexual assault, with little to no recourse available to the victims. In a similar vein to the objectification of women, McGuire writes that in order to cause mayhem to black neighborhoods, “white supremacist advocates, also employ the charge of rape in order to attack the Negro people” (24). Therefore, Camae's recount of her sexual assault with Dr King and her eventual death in the hands of her assailant fuses the personal into the political and historical, challenging audiences to reconsider the narratives around Black women’s and the brutal realities they have faced.

Another visible illustration of silence and marginality reinforcing the unseen and undervalued place of African American women in the Civil Rights Movement comes with the passive mention of Coretta Scott King. When Camae talk about Coretta, King corrects her:
Camae: She's beautiful. Yo' wife. I seen her on the TV down at Woolsworth's too, Coretta Scott K.

King: (correcting) Mrs. King.

Camae: Oh. Yes. Mrs. King (35).

King's assertion and correction of Camae when she calls her "Corretta Scott" rather than his wife or Mrs. King at the first mention of Coretta's name cast a passive position within the movement. Colbert reads King’s correction as—"truncating Corretta's position as an activist in the movement to his helpmate" (274)— To add, I posits that Dr King prefers Corretta as the Other confined to wifely and motherly duties, including taking care of the home front, packing his bags and toothbrush while he is away on his numerous trips (The Mountaintop 28). Hall highlights how Corretta is reduced to a passive role as just his wife when Camae asks:

Camae: Honey, I hears that. I guess if you was at home you'd be eatin' mo' right.

King: I suppose.

Camae: What do you miss the most she makes?

King: Her egg sandwiches.

Camae: Mmm. I likes them too; make one every day for myself (Hall 32).

Although historical records show Coretta Scott alongside Dr King in different pictures, she was mostly seen and less heard. Jeanne Theoharis alludes to this 'seen but not heard' status of Black women in her essay "Accidental Matriarchs and Beautiful Helpmates: Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King, and the Memorialization of the Civil Rights Movement" in which Coretta Scott King criticized the sexism in the civil rights movement because it gave prominence to only the men and also pushed the notion that Dr. King limited her role in the movement, expecting her to be a housewife or sometimes a supporting player (410). Hence, I interpret Coretta's subjugated position
in the play as bolstering the claim that African American women activists are undervalued and silenced. Coretta Scott King becomes symbolic not only as an individual but also as the collective representation of African American women who are seen but not heard despite performing the bulk of the movement's work.

Given this background of marginality and the subjugated image of Black women, Hall challenges these stereotypes to project the voice of inclusivity and agency. In the opening scene, Camae is just a maid bringing coffee, but, as the narrative unfolds, there is a discernible shift in her character. From the confines of an ordinary maid, she emerges as an angel of God, wielding depth, wisdom, and strength here to prepare King for his sojourn into the world beyond. This transformation is pivotal as Hall uses Camae to break the shadows of stereotypes and marginalization that Black women activists have occupied. Camae rejects the sexualized Jezebel stereotype; despite all of Dr. King's sexual overtures, she maintains her stance of not wanting to be a sexual object of desire but an intelligent character denoting agency. Agency, in this context, refers to Camae's ability to make independent choices and exercise control over her actions and reactions. It signifies her capacity to act according to her own volition, maintain her self-respect, and assert her autonomy without being swayed or diminished by external pressures or expectations. For example, Camae claims to not be in the best position to comment on Dr King’s appearance, yet he is unrelenting, making other sexual advances:

King: Just tryin' to shave some years off. I done got to looking old.

Camae: You have; you look older in person. When women get older, they get ugly. When they men get older, they get ...handsome. Wrinkles look good on man. Especially when they got some money to got wit' they wrinkle.
King: Women like men with wrinkles, don't they?

Camae: I don't. I likes 'em young and wild. Like me (Hall 38).

The dialogue that King and Camae engage in intends to narrow Camae's feminine ideals to just a passive sexual object, which she continually rejects. Rather than conforming to gender roles, Hall uses Camae to project a strong gender identity, which includes reclaiming a self-identified status. Her outspokenness and depth all unsettle King's conception of a black woman. When he berates her and believes he is the only credible and eloquent voice to speak for the rights of Black. Camae’s rebuke to King for this egoistic attitude goes thus:

Camae: You think us po' folks can’t talk? You think we dumb.

King: No that’s not what I said-

Camae: Then what you saying?

King: I am sayin… that most maids don't sound like professors.

Camae: "Well, let me school you, you bougie Negro. I don't need no PhD to give you some knowledge, understand. Divinity school? Huh! You don't know who you messin' wit! (48-49).

Camae's lash-out signifies that she knows her worth and place. Although Dr. King believes he would have performed better, he is awed and agrees with some of Camae's ideas.

Similarly, Camae transcends the Sapphire/'sassy' Black woman stereotype to gain further agency. Far from being a sign of childish flirtation, Camae's anger stems from a profound awareness of the racial and social injustices of this era, which most Black women activists fought against; "Kill the white man! Not with your hands or guns. But with your mind!... We should build our own counter. Our own restaurants. Our own neighborhood. Our own schools" (46). This line exemplifies her voice for Black nationalism. Thus, her anger is rational and directly aimed at
systemic change rather than personal grievance. Hall's depiction of Camae as an intelligent, humorous, vulnerable, and insightful Black woman dismantles the one-dimensional stereotype, presenting her anger as a legitimate response to her circumstances.

Furthermore, the transformation of Camae from a sex worker in her previous life to an angel in the afterlife is a powerful reimagining of strength and offers her a renewed sense of self-worth, positioning her as the pivotal messenger for Dr. King's transition. This change is not framed as condemnation but as an opportunity for redemption, as evidenced by her silent yet profound communication with God: "God was smiling down at me. She opened her mouth, and silence came out. But I heard her loud and clear. I got a special task for you and if you complete it, all your sins will be washed away" (76). This silent communication here denotes her redemption and the redefinition of her identity. It is empowering because although no verbal words came forth, it marks a departure from her past life, imbuing her with a sense of purpose, identity and worth that is not tied to her previous circumstances. Alternatively, I suggest that Hall, through the mentioned excerpt, invites the audience or readers to reassess traditional Judeo-Christian notions of judgment, forgiveness, and transformation as the play also makes commentary on religion. It is imperative to mention that Dr. King initially questions Camae's angelic role, remarking, "she sends you? You're not what I was expecting… you cussin', fuckin', drankin' angel!" indicating his skepticism about her worthiness for this crucial task. Nevertheless, by the play's end, he acknowledges Camae's divine role. As his final moments approach, she inquires, "You ready?" to which King, with a nod and holding back tears, affirms, leading her to guide him to "the mountaintop" (77). Hence, Camae is validated as God's chosen emissary for Dr. King, irrespective of her past actions.

Finally, casting the character of God as a Black woman provides an essential element in reconstructing feminine empowerment and challenges conventional depictions of deity figures.
typically characterized as white and male, thereby offering a radical reimagining that aligns with themes of feminine empowerment and racial equality. This decision by Hall does more than simply subvert traditional expectations; it opens up a space for deeper reflection on the intersections of race, gender, and power in spiritual contexts. In the play, King's belief in his persuasive oratory skills leads him to think he can negotiate his fate with God, whom he encounters as a Black woman. This interaction highlights a crucial shift in the dynamics of power and influence. As noted in Harris's critique, “Indeed, King believes his oratorical skills are so good that he can convince God, portrayed as female, to change Her mind about allowing him to die. Obviously, God very quickly puts the 'voice' in his place” (Harris 123). Here, God's response to King is not just a mere refusal but an assertion of authority, which serves to realign King’s understanding of his own role and limitations. Also, Camae's second chance and fresh start shows a God who reckons with the silenced and subservient position of Black women. Therefore, seeing God depicted as a Black woman can be empowering, particularly for women and, more specifically, African American women, providing a representation often lacking in mainstream religious and cultural narratives.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I reaffirm my argument that Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop* offers a reimagining of Black female representation through the character of Camae, whose interaction with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. propels her beyond the traditional confines imposed on Black women. Hall’s dramaturgy not only elevates Camae from the margins to the center but also imbues her character with agency that defies the passive and servile roles typically ascribed to women of her socioeconomic and racial background. By placing Camae in dialogues about power, liberation, and societal change, Hall challenges and reshapes the respectability politics that have historically
constrained Black women’s roles both within their communities and in the broader social narrative. In addition, Hall’s interpretation of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in *The Mountaintop* is an intuitive exploration into the often overlooked yet crucial role of women in both Dr. King's life and the broader Civil Rights Movement. Harris terms this as: "King would have come to nought but for the women in his life" (129). Although critics of the play have debated and argued that Hall’s portrayal of Dr King risks overshadowing his agency and contributions, I argue that Hall's dramaturgical choices never diminishes Dr King’s legacy rather positions the view that leadership is collective efforts of all including the unseen participants. Hence, Hall hints at the interrelationship of human experiences and the vital support systems that often go unrecognized within historical narratives.

*The Mountaintop* therefore deepens our understanding of the 1960s by presenting the humanity of Dr Martin Luther King Jr.’s in his final hours. Premiered on stage and published in 2009 and 2011 respectively with a setting in 1968, the play addresses themes still relevant today. These include racial inequality, social justice, gender inclusion, and the cost of leadership, which are reflected in Dr King’s mountaintop vision at the end of the play. These issues continue to resonate in society, making the play a conduit for both reflection and needed conversations about these ongoing struggles. Hall’s portrayals of Camae and Dr. King challenge and expand the often-limited narrative scope of the historical accounts of the Civil Rights movement, which have historically marginalized the contributions of women, particularly African American women. Hence *The Mountaintop* reminds us of the agency of women and that there is often an unacknowledged network of supporters and influencers behind every great leader, many of whom are women.
Works Cited


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