“FEELING MYSELF”: MASTURBATION IN WOMEN’S COMING OF AGE NOVELS

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By

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 1

“Healing Pleasure”: Masturbation and Silence-Breaking in Alice Walker’s  
*The Color Purple* ........................................................................................................................................ 30

“Masturbatory Pleasure and Orgasmic Rage”: Coming of Age in Bastard  
*Out of Carolina* ......................................................................................................................................... 65

“Lady Sex Adventurers”: Masturbatory Sexuality in *How to Build a Girl*  
...................................................................................................................................................................... 98

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................................... 135

Bibliography ................................................................................................................................................ 139
Introduction

Masturbation is great. It’s as simple as that.

Well, actually, it’s not nearly as simple as that, or I wouldn’t have written an entire thesis on it. But overarchingly, if you take one thing from this project, I hope it’s that masturbation is great. Masturbation is potential. Masturbation is endorphin rush. Masturbation is the first blush of sexual self-discovery. Masturbation is catharsis. Masturbation is safety and risk in the same stroke. Masturbation enables women’s coming of age. Masturbation is our own intimate, searching hands.

The prevailing cultural attitudes toward masturbation when I was growing up were expressed in whispers and giggles, dismissal and jokes, noses scrunched in disgust while eyebrows raised curiously. If you were a boy who masturbated, you were maybe a little desperate, maybe a little pathetic, the butt of the joke, but also maybe a little intriguing. To masturbate meant you were sexual. If you were a girl who masturbated, you kept quiet, offended at even the accusation. It was gross, it was weird, it was more than a little scary. It was mysterious and intimidating and shameful.

(Nonbinary and/or queer people barely even entered the social equation. A perpetually parenthetical existence in my hostile high school.)

I’ll never forget the moment during a quintessential drunken game of “Never Have I Ever” senior year, when I found out that more of my friends masturbated than didn’t. I was shocked. I hadn’t yet explored south of my waistline, so to hear friends openly admitting it, shy and nervous and blushing, really made me reconsider why I hadn’t.
Masturbation undoubtedly enabled my sexual coming of age, and my coming of age in
general. It gave me hard-fought self-assurance and self-knowledge. It also provoked more than
enough frustration. But over time, I’ve found the resilience and the confidence to speak.

The Scope of this Project

This project will center around how masturbation influences coming of age in The Color
Purple (1982) by Alice Walker, Bastard Out of Carolina (1992) by Dorothy Allison, and How to
Build a Girl (2014) by Caitlin Moran. The Color Purple tells the story of Celie, a Black girl
growing up in the American South in the early twentieth century. Celie suffers extreme abuse as
a child and in marriage, as her care work is repeatedly exploited. Her existence becomes an
exercise in self-containment, until she meets Shug, an aspirational queer figure who awakens her
sexuality through guided masturbation. Through masturbation, Celie expresses pent up emotions,
combats long-imposed silencing, and ultimately redirects her own care work toward herself,
ensuring her coming of age. Bastard Out of Carolina recounts pre-teen protagonist Bone
Boatwright’s experiences of abuse at the hands of her stepfather in 1950s South Carolina. Bone’s
masturbatory fantasies, and masturbation itself, generate spaces through which she can
renegotiate scenes of her abuse while maintaining control. Masturbation allows Bone to channel
internalized emotions, combat shame, and regain agency over her body, facilitating her transition
from “bastard” girl to Boatwright woman. Finally, How to Build a Girl, set in 1990s
Wolverhampton, England, follows 14-year-old protagonist Johanna Morrigan as she becomes a
London music reviewer. Initially, Johanna masturbates to relieve stress and as a substitute for a
sexual partner, but over time, she dives headfirst into the realm of partnered sexuality, where her
masturbation morphs from literal self-stimulation to figurative masturbation via bodily
displacement and masturbation as compensation for unsatisfying sexual encounters. Johanna
comes of age when she rejects the patriarchal influences that have co-opted her masturbatory practice and recenters her erotic energy toward herself. Mirroring the ways that female masturbation has become much less stigmatized over the years due to changes in the medical community, increasing secularization, and targeted feminist movements, masturbation in these texts moves from the margins to the center of our protagonists’ lives as they more openly embrace it.

Each novel’s representation of masturbation is distinct, as I will explore further later in this introduction. However, in all three novels, masturbation enables the discovery of feminist self-knowledge necessary to come of age. Masturbation provides a cathartic outlet for the release of pent up emotions, enabling our three protagonists to process abuse and trauma, combat imposed silences, and relieve anxiety. Through masturbation, our three girls build themselves, assert control over their identities, and self-direct their sexuality. My examination of these texts has revealed that the erotic self-knowledge produced by masturbation exceeds cultural scripts and mandates, opening up antinormative future possibilities. Celie, Bone, and Johanna, because they masturbate, are better equipped to resist, to shape their future selves. Masturbation facilitates coming of age.

Central to my analysis is the way all three protagonists enact alternate models of futurity, defined through reworking the familial model, reconceptualizing imposed domesticity, and ultimately writing their own lives, not circumscribed by their relationships with men. Growing up is a process of shedding the constraints that channel their sexuality in a particular direction, generally a direction that serves a normative ideal of sexual regulation. However, antinormativity on principle is not the aim. Instead, the key to my argument is that masturbation illuminates oppressive societal forces. Once masturbation makes these forces visible, palpable, the
protagonists’ new awareness prompts them to more comprehensively choose to shape their lives in accordance with or refutation of them. Masturbatory practices drive the three protagonists’ recognition of how power operates in their lives and on their bodies.

**Differences Among the Texts**

Differences in the characters’ racial, geographic, sexual, and temporal identities distinguish their coming of age processes. Johanna and Bone are both white, while Celie is Black. Bone and Celie grow up in the American South, while Johanna grows up in the industrial town of Wolverhampton, England. Celie is an explicitly queer character, and Bone’s queerness is implied. Johanna is ostensibly not attracted to women, though she does take a nonnormative approach to sexuality. Significantly, the three also grow up in very different time periods, Celie from the beginning of the 20th century to around the 1950s, Bone in the 1950s, and Johanna in the 1990s. Johanna is the only protagonist who comes of age following second wave feminist discourse on the value of masturbation, and her adolescence is clearly informed by it in a way the others are not. Along with that, each protagonist comes of age at a different chronological age. Celie is well into her twenties before she even meets Shug, so she comes of age technically as an adult. Bone is a pre-teen, and Johanna is around seventeen as she comes of age.

Both Celie and Bone are survivors of sexual abuse at the hands of their stepfathers. In contrast, Johanna’s father is a frustrating but genial presence, not regarded as a threat. In fact, he encourages her to pursue her writing career. Men in general figure very differently in each novel. For Celie, men are a source of abuse and pain, a symbol of the exploitation of care work. She instead finds solace with Shug, and only after she comes of age can she intentionally craft a family composed of men and women, where oppressive, patriarchal dynamics no longer dominate. For Bone, she idolizes and models herself after many of the men in her family,
perpetually wondering about the mysterious origins of her biological father, though she suffers severe abuse at the hands of her stepfather. Ultimately, she finds a queer mentor in her aunt Raylene, whose masculinity and independence are attractive to Bone. Johanna loves men. She loves her father and her brother, and at the novel’s opening, one of her most urgent goals is to have sex with a man. However, at the same time, men shape her adolescence and her sexual identity in often overbearing ways. It’s ultimately Johanna’s rejection of male scripts and reorientation of her desire toward herself that marks her coming of age.

These differences are undoubtedly significant in each protagonist’s individual narrative arc, but they did make it difficult at first to develop a coherent, unifying argument about all three together. However, each character’s distinct identity expands the scope of my project. I didn’t want to try to examine a singular image of womanhood because there is no singular image. There is no one story of masturbation and coming of age. For me, it was important that my chosen texts be diverse and complex and varied and, in some ways, defy easy categorization. Because, ultimately, isn’t this expansiveness and intricacy the point?

**My Argument**

That being said, on a basic level, I chose to examine *The Color Purple*, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and *How to Build a Girl* because I love all three texts. I feel deeply connected to each protagonist for a range of reasons. But in a larger sense, drawing these texts together revealed the ways in which masturbation facilitates coming of age. Each provides a distinct account of gaining access to a body knowledge which fundamentally alters the protagonists’ self-definition and identity.
Masturbation enables each protagonist to communicate interiority externally. Voice (both written and spoken) and power are deeply linked in all three texts. The Color Purple is an epistolary novel, told entirely through letters, and the diary space opens up opportunities for Celie to voice feelings she otherwise keeps silent, even to an audience of one. And notably, Shug introduces Celie to sexuality through guided masturbation, directing her hands with her voice. A major marker of Celie’s coming of age is when she is able to vocalize her anger at her husband, claiming her name and her humanity. Bone’s story is characterized by a similar dynamic of silence versus speech, and her coming of age is marked by an assertion of her ability to control when and how she responds to abuse, whether she exclaims vocally or not. Bone asserts her identity by claiming her Boatwright name, albeit on her own, queer terms. Her sexuality is also influenced by books, much like Johanna’s. Johanna herself becomes a writer in an attempt at mobility, rechristens herself Dolly Wilde, and through writing crafts an entirely new identity. However, masturbation is deeply linked to heterosexuality in Johanna’s story, while the same cannot be said of the other two novels. Each protagonist’s story reflects a move toward self-ownership through generative sexuality.

For Celie, Bone, and Johanna, the process of self-ownership through generative sexuality is complicated and sometimes impeded by sexual shame and stigma. Celie and Bone’s shame stems from their experiences as incest and sexual assault survivors. For Johanna, her shame is rooted in pejorative cultural messages about her weight and her sexual promiscuity. The experience of touch and self-pleasure allows them to push back against prescriptive ideas of

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1 As Professor Amanda Phillips put it, Virginia Woolf’s concept of “a room of one’s own” takes on a whole new meaning when considered in this context: a room of one’s own both to write and to masturbate, a room one constructs for themselves that enables them the privacy and space to explore and craft their own identity.
body image and by extension challenges the idea that the way others see you is what matters. Each protagonist ultimately turns from external validation and toward self-affirmation. This psychological process mirrors the physical act of masturbation, and both impulses are essential to the protagonists’ coming of age narratives.

**Onward and Upward, or Outward, or Forward**

*(Or, Challenging the Vertical Model of Growth)*

Male coming of age stories have historically been structured around a linear, vertical model of growth. Boy (generally upper- or middle-class and white) receives an education, goes out into the world, has a sexual misadventure or two, moves on from those ill-fated dalliances with ever-so-distracting women in order to achieve professional success, and thus comes of age. But this formula has never rung true for the women protagonists whose stories have been defined by an idyllic, domestic model of womanhood necessitating sexual propriety and ultimately marriage. As the genre of the women’s coming of age novel has evolved over time, this narrative model has been increasingly problematized. First, it’s a deeply straight, cis-, white, middle- or upper-class Western model of adolescent girlhood. It’s also constrained by patriarchal forces that limit the mobility and opportunities of women. And ultimately, it does not acknowledge or consider the intersectional identities that influence the way women come of age. The three novels I’ve chosen to explore in this thesis each represent alternate modes of coming of age for women. In *The Color Purple*, Celie comes of age after traditional markers such as marriage and motherhood; in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Bone’s coming of age is marked by the way in which she is able to assert herself in moments of assault; and in *How to Build a Girl*, Johanna grapples with patriarchal forces as she ostensibly comes of age through accumulating heterosexual experience.
Theorists such as Fraiman, Felski, and Rishoi have provided the framework for my argument about how coming of age operates in these three texts. In *Unbecoming Women*, Fraiman rephrases questions of “How does the hero of this novel come of age?” and “What are the stages that mark his passage to maturity?” to a line of inquiry more reflective of women’s coming of age processes: “What are the several developmental narratives at work in this novel and what can they tell us about competing ideologies of the feminine?” (12). Fraiman conceives of a “plural formation” of identity that challenges an “integrated selfhood,” instead positioning identity as a “clashing, patchwork product of numerous social determinations… acknowledging that formation is differentiated in terms of, say, class, country, race, and time, as well as gender, so that in this sense, too, it is no longer possible to speak of a uniform fiction of female development” (12-13). Though Fraiman focuses on nineteenth century British fiction, her argument is helpful to me in expanding my formulation of coming of age to accommodate conflictual forces, destabilizing singular modes of selfhood, and emphasizing intersectionality.

In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Felski asserts that women’s coming of age in feminist writing (what she terms “the narrative of female self-discovery”) has increasingly become characterized by a rejection of traditional markers. The narrative of female self-discovery is identifiable by its assertion that “access to self-knowledge is seen to require an explicit refusal of the heterosexual romance plot, the framework which has traditionally defined the meaning and direction of women’s lives” (122). Published in 1989, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* argues that over the past twenty years, “a distinctive new narrative structure for women” has emerged, positioning “a process of separation as the essential precondition for any path to self-knowledge,” a separation from a “male-defined environment” that has historically estranged women, and “at least a partial individual liberation from existing ideological and social
constraints” (124). Her argument is a development shaped by second wave feminism. Narratives from this era traversed new terrain for female coming of age stories, expanding models during the second wave and beyond. This text is important to my argument because none of the protagonists I focus on ascribe to the traditional markers of life-definition for women. In fact, they actively reject these markers. The heterosexual romance plot is nowhere to be found in these novels. Felski’s emphasis on self-knowledge applies directly to my argument that masturbation enables self-discovery. Celie, Bone, and Johanna all undergo periods of separation from masculine forces, whether that be from the home, a husband, an abuser, or even their own bodies (as sites of patriarchal control), and these separations undoubtedly influence their coming of age.

In “Identity and the Coming of Age Narrative,” Rishoi argues against what she terms “the master narrative of womanhood in Western society,” the idea that “woman is an uncomplicated being whose life course is dictated by biology and nature” (6-7). She asserts that, in the last forty years (this text was published in 2003), American women have radically re-imagined their social landscape and have taken action to combat “white patriarchal capitalist hegemony” (7). This action has impacted women’s coming of age narratives that imagine “alternate ways of being,… resist negative constructions of womanhood, and actively create oppositional identities for themselves” (7-8). Rishoi also emphasizes the importance of an intersectional analysis of women’s coming of age narratives, one that rejects the claim that there is some “monolithic femininity” (15). The idea of an “oppositional identity” is prominent in the three texts I analyze. Celie constructs an identity that rejects masculine marital abuse in favor of a communal, chosen family structure. Bone rebels fiercely against her stepfather’s assaults, in the process rejecting the state-sanctioned and imposed “bastard” identity which threatens to constrain her as she comes of age, and instead reconceptualizing Boatwright womanhood on her own terms, with
guidance from a queer mentor. And Johanna writes herself an entirely new persona as a “Lady Sex Adventurer,” defined in opposition to patriarchal sexual standards, and ultimately recenters her own desires as she comes of age. Whether or not these three characters think of their identity construction as an explicit rejection of these constraints, they nonetheless build oppositional identities for themselves as they come of age.

The physical body, and its embodiment by the three protagonists, is an essential theme of my work. One text that has helped me conceive of the role of the body in these three novels is Boudreau’s “The Battleground of the Adolescent Girl’s Body.” Boudreau acknowledges that of course, adolescence is not the first time girls become aware of their own bodies, but at this stage their self-identities become closely linked to the physical body… At the same time, the body becomes an obstacle to autonomy and self-agency as the girl tries to reconcile her body to the demands of a socially proscribed gender identity, leading, paradoxically, to feelings of disembodiment (43).

Feelings of disembodiment pervade all three of my chosen texts, as abuse and patriarchal forces prompt the protagonists to dissociate from their physical forms as a mode of self-protection. But at the same time, the three protagonists at times effect disembodiment in a way that enables the gathering of self-knowledge, as detaching from their bodies either in fantasy or through transferred subjectivity allows space for discovery. More prominently, though, each character asserts embodiment through masturbation, which leads to their coming of age. As Boudreau argues, contemporary coming of age novels, by “foregrounding the adolescent girl’s body,” “effect a re-embodiment, one in which the body is not simply a negative obstacle to be overcome” but rather a “site of contestation, a ‘battleground,’ as autobiographical critic Sidonie Smith suggests, ‘upon which the struggle for cultural meaning is waged’” (43-44). Boudreau argues that asserting bodily control can also enable greater exercise of self-agency, as well as self-representation in opposition to “cultural objectification and containment” (45). This
argument clearly aligns with the claims I make about the strategic efficacy of masturbation in prompting greater bodily control.

In “Girlfriends and Girl Power,” Kearney writes,

It is the girl who is the most profound site of patriarchal investment, her unconstrained freedom representing the most fearsome threat to male control. That her capabilities are unexplored and her potentialities as an adult female are undeveloped are therefore values in themselves, to be appropriated and colonized at any expense of spirit and some considerable expense of capital (13).

It’s no wonder, then, that men in all three texts exert so much effort to curtail the comings of age of the protagonists.

Change Over Time

In “Shaming and Reclaiming Women’s Sexuality through Cinematic Depictions of Masturbation,” Adams writes that “autoerotic misadventures” figure prominently in boys’ coming of age stories, but even so, “masturbation is largely accepted as a central component of men’s sexuality and development.” The same cannot be said for women’s masturbation: “Whereas a man’s admission of self-stimulation is rather mundane, a woman’s is notable at best and downright scandalous at worst” (230). Adams asserts that Western culture remains invested in shaming women’s masturbation, “a stigmatization that suppresses authentic and varied expressions of women’s sexual self-actualization and identity formation” (230). This stigma, still present today, stretches back through the periods in which each of these texts were set. And these three novels contest this cultural silence and stigma, by making the furtive apparent, making the shameful shameless, and making the embarrassing integral, paralleling the ways in which attitudes toward female masturbation have changed over time.

I chose three texts set and written in disparate time periods to be able to observe change over time. I’m interested in exploring the ways in which the eras of each novel’s setting and
publication influence how masturbation is depicted. The Color Purple was set in 1982. As will be further developed in the historical summary section of this introduction, masturbation was becoming more widely accepted. Feminists such as Betty Dodson had begun to advocate for the importance of masturbation as a form of empowerment. However, the novel is set at the beginning of the twentieth century. As such, sexuality is treated less frankly than it is in, say, Johanna’s narrative. The depiction of masturbation directly, and in a positive way, is undoubtedly due to the time period in which it is written. If it were written in the era in which it is set, it is likely that masturbation would have been portrayed much more negatively, or not at all. Bastard Out of Carolina was published in 1992, after the feminist Sex Wars, in which author Dorothy Allison figured prominently as an advocate of the acceptance of S&M sexuality. Allison was a divisive figure in a conflict which pitted anti-pornography feminists against those who valued freer sexual expression. The text is set in the 1950s, and Bone feels a degree of shame toward her masturbation. However, as she states in the novel, the shame stems more specifically from the fact that she masturbates to scenes of her abuse, rather than the fact that she masturbates at all. That being said, masturbation is a kind of open secret between her and her sister, as each protects the other’s privacy, allowing them to express their sexuality safely. Masochistic sexuality plays a significant role in Bone’s narrative, which is undoubtedly enabled by the time period in which it is written. Allison’s novel is also semi-autobiographical, demonstrating the ways in which depictions of sexuality are informed by greater consciousness gained over time. Finally, Johanna’s story, also a semi-autobiographical novel, was published in 2014 and set in the early 1990s. Johanna comes of age in the Riot Grrrl era, and the way her masturbation and sexuality figures so prominently in the text is characteristic of the third and fourth wave feminist discourse that precedes the text’s publication.
This project clearly shows the impact of the second-wave feminist movement on cultural attitudes toward masturbation. Each text is published in its aftermath, and as such, its aftershocks are apparent. Placing these texts together allowed me to track the increasing acceptance of masturbation over time. By the final text, masturbation is totally accepted. That is not to say it is uncontested, but it is accepted as a component of women’s sexuality.

Let’s dive into some historical context.

A Brief Cultural History of Masturbation in Western Society

Some ancient Greek mythology considers masturbation a “gift from the gods,” a way of relieving misery, grief, and heartache (Planned Parenthood, 2). However, Hippocrates, now considered to be the “father of medicine,” warned against the “loss of excessive amounts of semen,” which could result in “physical damage, such as spinal cord deterioration” (Planned Parenthood, 2). It was common for ancient Athenian women to purchase leather or wooden dildos imported from the city of Miletus. However, for men of this period, masturbation was a marker of poverty, as men of means would hire sex workers to gratify their desires (Planned Parenthood, 2).

While early Christian teachings underlie much of the modern masturbation stigma, “the Bible makes no mention of masturbation” (Planned Parenthood, 2). The story of Onan is often regarded as an anti-masturbation tale and has been weaponized by Christian institutions as such, but is more accurately about the so-called pull-out method, as Onan, commanded to “impregnate his widowed sister-in-law...withdrew before ejaculating and ‘spilled his seed’ outside of her body” (Planned Parenthood, 2). In the 16th century, Martin Luther drew a connection between this tale and masturbation, generating a stigma with far-reaching effects. Early Christians opposed masturbation because it was non-procreative, and Augustine of Hippo conceived of it as
an “unnatural” sin, a form of contraception. Masturbation also became a crime in many European countries, with a penalty of exile or even death. A 1676 treatise titled *Letters of Advice from Two Reverend Divines to a Young Gentleman, about a Weighty Case of Conscience, and by Him Recommended to the Serious Perusal of All those that may Fall into the Same Condition* told of a young man who “ruined himself through masturbation and saved himself through penance” (Planned Parenthood, 3).

Eighteenth century medical practitioners claimed that masturbation caused negative physical symptoms, or “loathsome relicts of their odious vices,” such as “scabs and blotches,” and feebleness, “when they should by nature be most hail and vigorous” (Planned Parenthood, 3). The 1716 publication of *Onania, or the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution* compounded this way of thinking. *Onania* “combined traditional religious and moralist arguments against masturbation with misinformed medical notions that masturbation resulted from dysfunction and caused disease and physical disfigurement” (Planned Parenthood, 3). It claimed the consequences of masturbation include “persistent erection, infertility, impotence, gonorrhea… frequent nocturnal emission, yeast infections, inability to hold semen in the uterus, and malformed offspring” (Planned Parenthood, 3). In particular, women who masturbated were said to be susceptible to “disease of the womb, hysteria, infertility and deflowering” (Reay, “The Body as Amusement Park”). *Onania* also claimed that masturbation could be prevented by the spread of Christian teachings, and if that failed, masturbators could buy curative tinctures and powders, for a fee. As they became increasingly aware of the potential for profit, others published similar pamphlets throughout the early 18th century:

The desire by unscrupulous quacks and charlatans to make easy money, which was the motive for all this purple prose, led to a profoundly powerful social phenomenon—the stigmatizing of a normal and healthy sexual activity among all social classes in the western world (Planned Parenthood, 4).
In 1759, Swiss doctor Samuel Tissot published *L’Onanisme*, another anti-masturbation treatise, which prompted prominent figures of the Enlightenment, such as Rousseau, Voltaire, and Kant, to denounce the “asocial and solipsistic nature of the act” (Cocks, “Modernity and the Self,” 1215). The Enlightenment prized the autonomous individual above imposed moral or religious hierarchies. Masturbation, to its critics, represented all the potential pitfalls of this reconceptualization of selfhood: it was “secretive and asocial,” and “potentially illimitable” (Cocks, “Modernity and the Self,” 1215). The concept of a “private vice” was newly worrisome, especially in a society embracing capitalism (Brooks, “Discovering the Self in Self-Pleasuring,” 93). Masturbators would supposedly come to realize that they had the capacity to satisfy themselves entirely, and thus the outside world would become unnecessary: “This is, of course, dangerously unproductive in an age of nascent capitalism, where the imperative to productive work of all sorts includes the channeling of sexuality to disciplined reproduction” (Brooks, “Discovering the Self in Self-Pleasuring, 93). Later editions of *Onania* included many accounts of girls and women, demonstrating that the issue of female masturbation was considered as seriously, if not more so, than male masturbation. While concerns around male masturbation often included arguments about waste and semen loss, women’s masturbation was feared for its excess, for its uncontrollability: “Masturbation, as a solitary sexual behavior, was not only non-reproductive, but it could be engaged in frequently and secretly, and was therefore impossible to regulate and utterly excessive” (Bowman, “Persistent Pleasures,” 19). So-called sexual excess was incompatible with an economy based on “savings, self-control, and forethought” (Bowman, “Persistent Pleasures,” 19).

In the 1800s, religious and medical objections to masturbation fused, producing a new and pervasive stigma: “The idea that the soul was present in semen led to thinking that it was
very important to retain the vital fluid. Its spilling became, then, both immoral and dangerous (medicine believed in female semen at the time)” (Reay, “The Body as Amusement Park”). Others cited the principle of self-control to justify their opposition, claiming that a woman’s sexual virtue could be proved through restraint. Medical authorities strongly urged parents to prevent their daughters from masturbating, implying that “if left to their own devices, women’s innate sexual desires could be easily roused—a clear contradiction to the notion that women were ‘naturally’ pure and asexual” (Vause, “Doing it Ourselves”). Concerns about masturbation were also rooted in worries about heredity and inheritance. Marriage supposedly guaranteed descendants to inherit both material property and genes. As colonial, eugenically motivated society prized racial preservation, healthy and vibrant marital sexuality was paramount, and worries about the “protection of sperm” were used to justify anti-masturbation campaigns (Brooks, “Discovering the Self in Self-Pleasuring,” 115).

Victorian Britain was “the golden age of anti-masturbation writing” (Cocks, “Modernity and the Self,” 1214). Some felt intense moral panic, while others analogized the emission of sperm to the exchange of capital. The “strict regimes of saving and spending” imposed by industrial capitalism on the middle class were used to support assertions that “the vital fluid had to be accumulated and distributed as carefully as its fiscal analogue” (Cocks, “Modernity and the Self,” 1214). To a large degree, the anti-masturbation panic that characterized this era focused on middle- and upper-class teenage boys attending boarding schools, though female masturbation was also targeted, particularly with the rise of sexual purity movements. In this era, female masturbators were supposedly rendered distinct by their pale faces, dull eyes, clammy hands, and smelly feet, according to author Priscilla Barker. According to Barker, “the inroads of
self-abuse leave the citadel of womanhood unprotected and at the mercy of the enemy” (Hunt, “The Great Masturbation Panic,” 597).

The development of the vibrator by Joseph Mortimer Granville in the early 1880s was initially marked as a medical advancement, a “means of quickly inducing therapeutic ‘paroxysms’ (orgasms) as a cure for hysteria in female patients” (Schwyzer, “Masturbation is at the Root of the Culture Wars”). However, at this time, Granville insisted these “treatments” occur only under medical supervision, in order to ensure the continued male regulation and control over female sexuality and pleasure: “The early medical monopoly on the device was explicitly designed to make solitary self-stimulation with the hand seem unsatisfying by comparison” (Schwyzer, “Masturbation is at the Root of the Culture Wars”). Doctors also did not believe it appropriate for women to masturbate, using a vibrator or otherwise, because it represented marital sexual dissatisfaction or the potential for “marital aversion” in unmarried women. Married women masturbators were “considered the most treacherous, since these women threw into question the long-held belief that sexual intercourse was mutually satisfying” (Bowman, “Persistent Pleasures,” 20-21). Doctors condemned solitary masturbation, even while lauding the positive medical effects of “pelvic massage,” due to fear that widespread acknowledgement that women could provide themselves with pleasure would lead to an upheaval of the hegemonic heterosexual order (Maines, “The Technology of Orgasm”). “Simply put, doctors and moralists feared that masturbation made men more dependent—and women less so” (Schwyzer, “Masturbation is at the Root of the Culture Wars”). Men who masturbated as boys and teenagers would, in essence, be easier for women to dominate and manipulate, as their masturbation belied their weak wills. For women, masturbation might open the door to a pursuit of greater self-sufficiency in general: “At a time of rising male anxiety about feminist demands
for suffrage, female masturbation became an unsettling symbol of women's independence” (Schwyzer, “Masturbation is at the Root of the Culture Wars”).

The 19th century saw doctors continually involved in the treatment of supposedly masturbation-related conditions, inventing curative food products and devices intended to prevent arousal:

> In his book, *Plain Facts* (1888), J.H. Kellogg, M.D., cautioned readers that... the causes of masturbation included idleness, abnormal sexual passions, gluttony, sedentary employment, and exciting and irritating food. Kellogg’s recommendations for preventing masturbation in children included serving cold instead of hot cereals for breakfast, bandaging their genitals, and/or tying their hands to the bedposts at night (Planned Parenthood, 5).

Yes, Kellogg like the Corn Flakes. Other such prevention techniques included straightjackets, leeches applied to the genitals, chastity belts, medicinal teas to cause fatigue, burning genitals with hot irons, metal vulva guards, castration, clitoridectomies, and, ultimately, marriage. Parents were also encouraged to exhaust their children with excessive exercise like boxing and gymnastics so they wouldn’t have the energy to masturbate (although sports such as horseback riding were strictly discouraged). In an 1893 speech, physician Alvin Eyer asserted that “the only cure for masturbation was either marriage or amputation of the clitoris” (Rodriguez, “Children, Masturbation, and Clitoral Surgery since 1890,” 31).

In 1899, British sexologist Havelock Ellis spoke out against the rampant anti-masturbation anxiety. He criticized the

> mistaken notions of many medical authorities, carried on by tradition, even down to our own time; the powerful lever which has been put into the hand of unscrupulous quacks; the suffering, dread, and remorse experienced in silence by many thousands of ignorant and often innocent young people (Planned Parenthood, 6).

Ellis believed that masturbation could be a stress reliever, though he did warn that “‘excessive’ masturbation led to neurasthenia—a generalized psychological, emotional, and physical
weakness” (Planned Parenthood, 7). This view was shared and carried forward by psychologist Sigmund Freud. Freud objected to masturbation not solely because of its supposed potential to induce neurasthenia but also its other “harmful psychic effects” such as antisocial tendencies, excessive fantasizing which renders reality incomparable and perpetually inadequate, “preservation of the infantile condition,” and “the general debasement of sexual life” (Planned Parenthood, 7). Throughout the 20th century, most authorities began disregarding supposed physical consequences of masturbation but retained a belief in masturbation’s negative mental effects. Freud was particularly concerned about masturbation’s infantilizing effects, as he believed that women’s masturbation was “a stunted version of mature sexuality; whereas sexually mature women would have abandoned their childhood clitoral masturbation in favor of mature vaginal intercourse, women who continued to masturbate had failed to mature” (Bowman, “Persistent Pleasures,” 22). In his view, female masturbation led to an “over-reliance on (and perhaps even an addiction to) self-stimulation that would produce anxious frustration and less-than-satisfying partnered sex” (Bowman, “Persistent Pleasures,” 22).

Some parents even went so far as to, at physicians’ recommendation, pursue clitoral removal surgeries (clitoridectomies) to prevent their daughters from masturbating. Such parents were motivated by the prevailing views that dictated that masturbation could lead to serious physical and mental problems, even affecting their daughters’ future sexual functioning. Physicians’ treatments were intended to “surgically redirect sexual instinct to what was considered physically healthy and socially acceptable: vaginal sex, prompted by a husband” (Rodriguez, “Children Masturbation, and Clitoral Surgery since 1890,” 32). A medical diagnosis “gave the woman (and her family) a medical explanation, a medical out, for her socially
inappropriate and unhealthy sexual behavior” (Rodriguez, “Rethinking the History of Female Circumcision and Clitoridectomy,” 347).

By the early 20th century, such procedures were declining in frequency in the Western world, but the stigmatizing attitudes that motivated them remained strong. In 1937, “82 percent of college freshmen believed that masturbation was dangerous” (Planned Parenthood, 8). The Encyclopedia of Sexual Knowledge (1937) advised that trying to prevent masturbation at all costs only led “patients” to want nothing more than to masturbate (the principle of wanting all the more intensely that which you cannot have in action). The text advised that it “is much better to explain to the patient that masturbation will not do him any harm at all, and that he can masturbate as often as he wants to,” in order to normalize it and remove the mystique of the forbidden (Planned Parenthood, 8). In the 1930s and 1940s, physicians tried to combat parents’ undue alarm about childhood masturbation through education. However, though they asserted that masturbation was common, they also propped up a narrative that it is not masturbation that causes “neuroses, hysteria, mental deficiency, and sexual perversions,” but the other way around (Rodriguez, “Children, Masturbation, and Clitoral Surgery since 1890,” 46). “Children most likely to masturbate were ‘mentally defective or neurotic,’ according to a 1947 pediatric textbook” (Rodriguez, “Children, Masturbation, and Clitoral Surgery since 1890,” 47).

Alfred Kinsey’s sexual behavior studies marked a stark transition in cultural knowledge about masturbation. His research found that “more people had masturbated than had not,” including 92-97 percent of men in 1948 and 62% of women in 1953: “Although masturbation was the second most frequently practiced sexual behavior among women, married or single, it was the behavior in which orgasm was most frequently achieved” (Planned Parenthood, 8). Kinsey also found that more than half and possibly even as many as 70% of women “don’t
regularly reach orgasm by penetration alone” (Maines, “The Technology of Orgasm,” 5). Medical authorities believed and regularly informed men that a woman who didn’t orgasm was somehow flawed, damaged, or physically or psychologically impaired. They insisted she was to blame. The historical positioning of the failure to orgasm as “queer, sexually immature, or afflicted” often led to the pathological diagnosis of hysteria. As Kinsey found, “most women, like most men, can masturbate to orgasm in a little over four minutes, even though they rarely or never reach orgasm during intercourse” (Maines, “The Technology of Orgasm,” 49). Placing all the blame on women for their lack of orgasms during heterosexual, penetrative sex meant that men did not have to adjust their perspective or technique at all to accommodate for the possibility that they might actually be ineffective in pleasuring their partner: “While the act of masturbation itself may well be regarded as deviant and shameful, that judgment is as much about the women themselves for even wanting or needing to use alternative means to achieve orgasm” (Adams, “Shaming and Reclaiming Women’s Sexuality,” 231). The medicalization of the anorgasmic woman “obviated the need to question either the exalted status of the penis or the efficacy of coitus as a stimulus to female orgasm” (Maines, “The Technology of Orgasm,” 7).

In the 1972 American Medical Association publication, Human Sexuality, “the American medical community pronounced masturbation as normal” (Planned Parenthood, 9). And a 1975 study of American college students found that “84 percent did not believe that masturbation caused emotional or mental instability—a total reversal of attitudes that prevailed in U.S. colleges in 1937” (Planned Parenthood, 9). Organized feminist activism was instrumental in dramatically shifting these cultural conceptions. In the 1970s, Betty Dodson took up the mantle of masturbatory freedom with the publication of her book, Liberating Masturbation (1974), which was later republished as Sex for One in 1996. Dodson also held a series of Bodysex
Workshops where women learned to masturbate together. In addition, in 1973, the Boston Women’s Health Collective published *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which includes a section teaching readers how to masturbate. Many feminists like Dodson espoused the idea that women’s masturbation is key to political liberation. Beyond that, it could also be a means of enabling more satisfying sex: “Not only can women enjoy sexual pleasure through masturbation, but they can also learn more about their bodies for the sake of improving their partnered sexual encounters” (Bowman, “Persistent Pleasures,” 24). Interestingly, the same practice previously thought to stunt or impede healthy partnered sexuality was now being touted as a method to improve it. Despite this change in attitude, religious institutions still refused to reassess their stigmatizing views. In 1976, the Vatican declared masturbation to be an “intrinsically and seriously disordered act,” a position which it reiterated in 1992 (Planned Parenthood, 9).

In a 1983 study commissioned by *Playgirl*, Diane Grosskopf found that “masturbation was shown to be the most reliably orgasmic sexual practice” (Maines, “The Technology of Orgasm,” 64). That said, many of the women interviewed appeared defensive or dishonest when asked about their orgasms. The same study found that three quarters of women prioritized their partner’s pleasure above their own. These results are indicative of the complicated relationship many women had with masturbation despite its greater normalization. *The Color Purple* came to be in this era, an era of complicated acceptance.

As of 1994, around 50 percent of men and women who masturbate felt “guilty about it,” and these feelings of guilt could “threaten one’s individual health and well-being” (Planned Parenthood, 10). The country’s conflicting views around masturbation came to a head in 1994, when Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders was fired for advocating that masturbation be taught in school sex education programs in order to curb the spread of HIV and other STIs: “Even by the
end of the twentieth century, masturbation was still so culturally taboo that the idea that children could ‘perhaps’ be told about it was too dangerous to bear” (Bowman, “Persistent Pleasures,” 26). Elders’ position as the first Black U.S. surgeon general was likely a factor in her swift condemnation: “It is also possible that cultural stereotypes that construct Black women as hypersexual and wild—the Jezebel construction of Black womanhood—could have played a role in her forced resignation” (Bowman, “Persistent Pleasures,” 26). The sex shop Good Vibrations organized a National Masturbation Month (May, in case you were wondering) in 1995 in protest of Elders’ firing. The month included nationwide educational events, as well as a charity Masturbate-a-Thon in San Francisco. According to Good Vibrations, National Masturbation Month was intended to remind the public that “self-satisfaction is a healthy, accessible form of pleasure engaged in by almost everyone” (Schwyzer, “Masturbation is at the Root of the Culture Wars”). Bastard Out of Carolina’s author, Dorothy Allison, was mired in debates around sexuality in this era, as a vocal advocate for S&M sexuality. Bone’s story stands in repudiation to oppressive, silencing cultural discourses that acted as a backlash to the normalization of masturbation.

In Betty Dodson’s 1996 publication of Sex For One, she writes, “Masturbation is a way for all of us to learn about sexual response. It’s an opportunity for us to explore our bodies and minds for all those sexual secrets we’ve been taught to hide, even from ourselves” (Dodson, Sex For One, 4). By the late 20th century, Cocks argues, “instead of representing the descent into solipsism, masturbation was now an arena for joyous self-making,” a change sparked by the feminist movement’s claim that “the enjoyment of one’s body was crucial to the rejection of patriarchy” (Cocks, “Modernity and the Self,” 1216). Further, in contrast to the medical community’s earlier pathologization of masturbation, sexual health authorities touted the benefits
of masturbation as a stress reducer, a safer alternative to penetrative sex, a sexual outlet, a way to “provide individuals with the opportunity to learn how they like to be touched and stimulated,” an endorphin release, “a sense of well-being,” “higher self-esteem,” “higher levels of marital and sexual satisfaction,” and “treatment for sexual dysfunction” (Planned Parenthood, 11). In The Ethical Slut, Easton and Hardy argue that “the fundamental sexual unit is one person; adding more people to that unit may be intimate, fun, and companionable, but it does not complete anybody.” Rather, masturbation is important not simply for how it can inform partnered sex but moreover because it helps bring “your locus of control into yourself” (Schwyzer, “Masturbation is at the Root of the Culture Wars”).

In 1998, Australian urologist Helen O’Connell discovered and published the full structure of the clitoris, in response to the fact that it had been deeply under-examined and was “barely mentioned in medical texts until the 1980s,” in favor of instead focusing on the vagina and its role in reproduction (Harvey, “Masturbation for Self Care”). Also in 1998, author Jane Juffer asserted masturbation was a “mainstream pastime,” a “therapeutic device in female self-realisation” (Pietrzak-Franger and Voigts, “Good Vibrations”). However, despite these notable advances,

Women are less likely to have fulfilling sex than men, women are less likely to achieve orgasm while masturbating than are men, and, perhaps most surprising of all, most women engage in sex before ever learning (perhaps "figuring out" is a better term) how to masturbate (Vause, “Doing It Ourselves”).

In 2009, film scholar Greg Tuck “observed a phenomenon of the ‘mainstreaming of masturbation.’” Depictions of masturbation have become increasingly common in television and movies such as Black Swan, American Pie, and The 40-Year-Old Virgin. Good Vibrations has even created an online “Masturbation Hall of Fame.” However, “autoeroticism might be mainstreamed but that does not mean it is totally accepted” (Reay, “The Body as Amusement
Teens remain uncomfortable talking about masturbation, as it remains a shameful, taboo practice, the subject of ridicule. As of 2010, over 90 percent of males have masturbated to orgasm by age 20, compared to around 60 percent of women (with some studies suggesting an even larger gap). The discrepancy with regard to masturbation is doubly problematic because masturbation, it turns out, is a particularly important predictor of sexual health and happiness for women, more so than for men. One of the best predictors of whether a woman will be able to achieve orgasm in her sexual relations is a history of masturbation in adolescence. (Shpancer, “The Masturbation Gap”)

In a 2012 study of young adult novels, Stein found that female masturbation is rare, and when it is depicted “it generally remains situated within traditional, adult-centered values intended to contain and ultimately control teenage sexuality” (Stein, “My Slippery Place”). For example, characters in the texts Stein examined generally “learn about masturbation through authority figures such as parents, teachers, and older siblings, with the intention of preparing for sex—notably, with a male partner. Such ‘transgressions’ are thus permissible, as these characters are training for and acting out of a desire to fit into current patriarchies” (Stein, “My Slippery Place”). In addition, masturbation is also sometimes portrayed through what Thomas Hine terms “teen mystique” characters, “marginal, unacceptable characters” to whom masturbation is attributed, subconsciously “encod[ing] the behavior as deviant” (Stein, “My Slippery Place”). Attributing masturbation to solely teen mystique characters enables it to be dismissed as “a product of their presumed delinquency,” rather than a normal component of girls’ sexuality. How to Build a Girl came to be in this era, an era of supposed ubiquity but no less complexity.

In a 2017 dissertation titled “Persistent Pleasures,” Bowman conducted interviews with thirty adult women, gathering stories about their masturbation experiences, stories that encompass “the complicated braiding of oppressive social discourses, embodied sensations, and willful subjectivities.” (Bowman, “Persistent Pleasures,” v). Her findings suggest that “women
are often agentic and determined explorers of their own bodies and experiences; even in the midst of social stigma, women consistently maintain their curiosity, and listen to the embodied wisdom within” (Bowman, “Persistent Pleasures,” vi). Bowman also observes that recent statistics that report more and more women masturbating may be indicative of rising numbers but could also be attributed to greater comfort with being open about it. Bowman also recounts greater representation of masturbation in magazines targeted at teenage girls and young women. For example, she cites Teen Vogue’s “Vag-atomy 101” website page, masturbation technique tips published in Cosmopolitan and Woman’s Day, and advice in Glamour that “encourages women to keep masturbating ‘even when you’re in a relationship’ by suggesting that women should ‘own’ their sexuality” (Bowman, 34).

A 2020 Glamour magazine article by Lisa Harvey found that 36% of readers masturbate 2-5 times per week. Harvey also discusses the sex-positive feminist movement’s catalyzation of the destigmatization of masturbation, as well as the rapidly expanding global sexual wellness industry, which is on track to be worth $39 billion in 2024. She cites audio sex app Ferly, “a digital space for women to explore what pleasure means to them,” the Pink Protest’s #GirlsWankToo campaign, feminist porn websites like Lust Cinema, a Goop Lab episode on the female orgasm, and depictions of masturbation in television shows like Fleabag and movies like Booksmart as examples of this destigmatization. “Seeing these moments of solo sex honesty in the mainstream media feels exciting and profound because female pleasure has rarely been dealt with so centrally without some sort of shame” (Harvey, “Masturbation for Self Care”). Harvey concludes,

Whether it’s aiding your mental health or giving you that confident glow, this shifting view of masturbation shows it’s a wellness pillar we need to stop being ashamed of—and start owning. So let’s stop whispering it in hushed tones and say it loud and proud.
Women masturbate. It’s fun. It’s good for us. And it’s nothing to keep quiet about (Harvey, “Masturbation for Self Care”).

At its heart, this thesis is itself an exercise in self-knowledge. Writing during the COVID-19 pandemic was a necessarily isolated exercise, and I did my best to make it a solitary pleasure. Throughout the process, I have placed myself in relation to Celie, Bone, and Johanna, comparing their stories to my own, gleaning advice and insight from their narratives. The long writing journey has revealed the essentiality of this very act, the intentional seizing of space and time and care, in coming of age. Through an exploration of each distinct character’s narrative, I began to center my own. In so doing, I learned to appreciate the revelatory capabilities of masturbation, both mental and otherwise. Every highlighted article, every finessed footnote, every deleted line, every piece of feedback, every discarded draft brought me one step closer. And with that, at the end of this year-long endeavor, I can say that I’m finally satisfied.

**A Few Disclaimers Before We Begin**

I acknowledge that the dynamic of sexual pleasure as freely and uncomplicatedly accessible becomes fraught in the case of abuse survivors. Many sex therapists advocate masturbation as a tactic to help work through post-traumatic stress as a result of assault, and I do my best to convey that sexual pleasure is not just something that our protagonists can access whenever and however they want. While masturbation is positioned as a free form of emotional release in these texts, that doesn’t mean that our protagonists take to it necessarily with ease. Sexual pleasure is complicated.

I acknowledge the barriers that many women face to orgasm. While I do argue that masturbation is essential to coming of age, and at times that orgasm specifically has empowering

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2 As Professor Amanda Phillips remarked, all academic work is an exercise in masturbatory pleasure.
effects, there are cultural and social blocks that prevent many women from orgasming both in partnered sex and while masturbating. Shame, guilt, stigma, and embarrassment may all play a role. And at a physical level, women are not taught to masturbate, and penetrative partnered sex is often not sufficient to bring a woman to orgasm, even though it is propped up as the heteronormative sexual ideal and women historically have been regarded as deficient if unable to reach orgasm through penetrative sex alone.

I want to be clear that I do not believe that queerness is a “lifestyle choice” one can make, or that queerness should be employed as a resistance strategy against patriarchy, as some second-wave feminists believed (such as Martha Shelly in Notes of a Radical Lesbian, who advocated assuming a lesbian identity to resist male oppression). Instead, I argue that coming into your own sexual identity in opposition to heterosexist norms opens greater possibilities for unconstrained identity formation, however that may manifest.

I am also very aware that masturbation has been historically medicalized as a cure for so-called “hysteria” through physical and emotional release. Making an argument about sexual desire and emotional release is complex. The difference between me advocating masturbation as a mode of catharsis and Victorian doctors bringing patients to orgasm to cure a fabricated mental disorder is that I believe masturbation should, quite literally, be placed in the hands of individuals, not the medical establishment. I believe women, and all people, should have the opportunity to control their own sexuality. Orgasm is not a cure for emotional distress; rather, it creates a space through which trauma can be reworked, bodily autonomy can be expressed, and sexual self-knowledge can be found.

There was also a subset of second-wave feminists who believed that women only want sex for the emotional fulfillment aspect. Even now, we are all familiar with the classic
misogynistic stereotype of the woman who gets “too attached” after sex. By focusing on the emotional and psychological benefits of masturbation, I don’t want to imply that masturbation is somehow not also simply a source of pleasure, simply a way of expressing sexual desire. Girls may masturbate for a range of complicated reasons, but they also, frankly, masturbate because they’re horny.

And with that, we’re ready to begin.
“Healing Pleasure”: Masturbation and Silence-Breaking in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*

In a *CNN* interview in 1998, Alice Walker remarked on the link between sexuality and spirituality: “Sexuality is one of the ways that we become enlightened, actually, because it leads us to self-knowledge.” This interview, conducted sixteen years after the release of *The Color Purple*, signals the key element of how sexuality, particularly masturbation, operates in the novel. Sexuality is essential to Celie’s arc of developing self-knowledge. Celie’s connection to her sexuality is prompted by masturbation guided by Shug, an aspirational queer figure. She ultimately uses masturbation to release and express pent up emotions. This connection helps Celie combat long-imposed silencing, to the point where her inner thoughts match her outward speech and she is able to take charge of the direction of her life. But the novel at large is a case study in the exploitation of Black women’s care work. Celie is essentially given in marriage to an older man in order to care for his children. She suffers extreme abuse throughout her teenage years, often sacrificing herself to protect her mother and sister, and throughout her marriage, her husband subjects her to physical and emotional violence. He systematically tears down her confidence, to the point where her existence is an exercise in self-containment. However, through the introduction of masturbation, Walker demonstrates how Celie is able to redirect and retain the care she has performed for others for years back toward herself.

Walker’s famous term “womanist,” referring to feminists of color, derives from “womanish,” as in the expression conveyed from mothers to daughters, “You’re acting womanish” (like a woman). It usually refers to “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown-up. Being grown-up” (Smith, *Home Girls*, xxvi).
As such, womanism, an ideology which informs Walker’s writing and permeates the novel, is defined by coming of age. Celie embodies womanism as she begins masturbating, moving from silent suffering to ensure survival to a more audacious, willful expression of her emotions.

In masturbating, Celie comes of age, notably long after she experiences traditional markers of “coming of age” such as marriage and children. Celie’s coming of age is in line with the theory Abel, Hirsch, and Langland develop in *The Voyage In*, subverting the typical Bildungsroman formulation, claiming that “the protagonists [of female Bildungsromans] grow significantly only after fulfilling the fairy-tale expectation that they marry and live ‘happily ever after.’” Abel argues that women’s development “must be realized in a culture pervaded by male norms,” which generates “distinctive narrative tensions—between autonomy and relationship, separation and community, loyalty to women and attraction to men” (12). This dynamic is clearly at play in Celie’s story. Despite the fact that she has met traditional markers of “coming of age” such as motherhood and marriage, she cannot be said to have come of age just for having met them. Abel provides a more flexible framework that creates space for Celie’s coming of age narrative, a narrative that begins only after Celie is able to connect with her body and her sexuality. Ultimately, through Shug’s erotic mentorship and their sustained, loving relationship, Celie comes of age by crafting her own queer future.

**Black Lesbians and Literature**

*The Color Purple*’s appeal to sisterhood reflects the cultural moment of the 1980s in which Black women and feminists were searching for and prizing sisterhood. However, the Black lesbian is a distinct figure in American literary history, often distinct by her absence. Initially, white writers generally ignored Black lesbians as literary subjects, while Black women writers feared being labeled as queer and so also avoided writing about lesbian characters (Ann
Allen Shockley, “The Black Lesbian in American Literature,” 83). A prevailing idea even developed that lesbianism was acquired from and only available to white women (Shockley 85). This idea dovetailed with the thought that Black lesbianism threatened Black masculinity. Lesbian identity was even thought of as genocidal because it was non-reproductive (Cheryl Clarke, “The Failure to Transform”).

When Black lesbian literary figures finally began to emerge, they were often accompanied by an undercurrent of homophobia, hostility, and hesitation. As of 1979, mainstream publications shied away from publishing works with even peripheral Black lesbian characters, and if such characters did make it into published works, writers were reluctant to review them. As a result, Black lesbians existed in the shadows of literary history. In “No More Buried Lives,” Christian writes that Black lesbians, while they certainly had written before the 1980s, seldom “identified themselves as lesbian, or overtly [wrote] from a lesbian perspective.” As Patricia H. Collins writes in Black Feminist Thought, Black women have not historically felt comfortable expressing issues with sexuality because others force them to choose between loyalty to their race or their gender. Black lesbian theorists have targeted the pervasive, detrimental impact of homophobia, but despite the increasing visibility of Black lesbians in society, many Black people in general have ignored or dismissed homosexuality and homophobia in Black communities. Particularly, Black heterosexual women have been reluctant to acknowledge Black lesbians because, Christian writes, straightness is one of the only privileges they can claim. However, with the development of Black feminist criticism, the 1980s, along with the publication of The Color Purple, marked a turning point in the representation of Black lesbians in literature. Christian argues that 1980s novels such as Audre Lorde’s Zami and
Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* explored sexual relationships between women as “an important aspect of black womanhood.”

*The Color Purple, Silences, and Silencing*

*The Color Purple* emerges amidst this cultural context, part of a wave of new Black lesbian novels yet still contending with cultural hostility around same-sex relationships. Indicative of the cultural silences surrounding lesbianism, the novel begins as an exercise in intentional silence and silencing. *The Color Purple* opens with a directive: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (1). It is never directly specified who commands Celie to silence, though the reader can assume it is her stepfather. Much of what follows is the direct fallout from that command. Celie’s letters to God, telling Him everything, even that which she refuses to express to the people around her, compose the bulk of the novel. What Celie’s stepfather directs her not to confess are the facts of her sexual abuse and violation at his hands. Celie stays silent because she is ashamed, afraid, indeed, of hurting her mother with the truth. Another potential factor enforcing Celie’s silence is the specific cultural stigma around incest in Black families. In *Telling Incest*, Doane writes how in the nineteenth century, the culturally dominant white majority positioned incest as “a problem of the poor and black,” that poor Black families were “doing it to themselves,” in response to incest narratives from those who were already positioned as sexually deviant, namely “young girls, the poor, and racialized others” (31). The cultural myth of the “incestuous black family” made it difficult for Black incest survivors to come forward for fear of “confirming myths of black deviance… This form of silence, silence as social discretion, is one that tacitly supports racialized, patriarchal prerogatives” (32). These dynamics undoubtedly compound Celie’s silence.
Celie’s adolescent abuse is punctuated with commands to keep silent, to “shut up and git used to it,” which influence her behavior for years to come. In “Speaking in Tongues,” Mae G. Henderson writes that Black women’s literature has historically been characterized by silence, not because “black women, in the past, have had nothing to say, but rather that they have had no say” (emphasis mine). The systematic disempowerment of Black women throughout history has led to a society in which their perspectives and voices are discounted and devalued. But Black women have also been engaging in strategic, historically influenced self-silencing since the slavery era. In *Sisters of the Yam*, bell hooks writes that during slavery, Black women were socialized to contain their emotions in response to the daily ordeal of “all manner of physical abuse, the pain of over-work, the pain of brutal punishment, the pain of near-starvation” (99). Any kind of reaction in sympathy or solidarity could risk brutal reprisal. This strategy persisted long after the legal abolition of slavery, with Black strength coming to be defined by an ability to disguise or contain emotions. As such, in order to cope with her abuse, trauma, and exploitation, in which expressions of emotion are unbeneﬁcial at best and actively detrimental or dangerous at worst, Celie remains silent.  

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3 In “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” Evelynn Hammonds writes, “Black women’s sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision, as a ‘void’ or empty space that is simultaneously ever visible (exposed) and invisible and where black women's bodies are always already colonized.”

4 In “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” Hine theorizes a “culture of dissemblance among Black women,” enacted as an “appearance of openness and disclosure” which in reality “shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.” Over decades and even centuries, Black women have developed this culture “to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives” in a society whose relationship to Black women is foundationally adversarial. Hine clarifies that the development of this culture was an self-protective imperative that guarded “private, empowering definitions of self” from “pervasive stereotypes and negative estimations of the sexuality of Black women.”
Celie “speaks” through her letters to God. In these letters, she directly details the abuse that she suppresses and hides from those around her. These letters are a space which she has created for herself to talk to God, where she confides that which she will otherwise not speak into existence. Through this act, Celie’s writing becomes an exercise in self-expression, a medium by which she can release these feelings and experiences, a precursor to her masturbatory sexuality. Through writing, Celie intimately accesses herself, generating thoughts and words and tying together experiences. In “Piecing the Patchwork Self,” Shanyn Fiske argues that Celie’s writing about her suffering becomes her “chief survival tactic” and characterizes it as “a form of release,” unconsciously analogizing it to the act of masturbation itself (151). By expressing these thoughts, by coming into her voice, she finds emotional release. And in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” Naess argues that Celie’s letters allow her to “tell ‘someone’ in her own words about the abuse she is subjected to, thus gradually increasing her confidence to speak up” (18). However, I argue that the “someone” Celie tells is herself. Her letters are a self-created space with an imagined audience, which she really uses as an outlet for self-confidence, or confiding in herself. But this openness does not translate outside of Celie’s private, cultivated, written life into her external, interpersonal life until she actually learns to masturbate. The letters create a space for her to interpret, analyze, and cope with the trauma she experiences, much the same way that masturbation later provides her a medium for processing her emotions. This acknowledging and reconnecting with her body, a body that has been abused, violated, and exploited, allows Celie to express her emotions, to come of age, to speak her mind rather than stay silent.

Celie’s Early Experiences with Sexuality

The novel begins when Celie is fourteen years old. She insists that she has “always been a good girl” (1) but nonetheless exists in a state of confusion and turmoil. She recounts scenes of
her father badgering her mother for sex, with her mother responding that she is too exhausted, that she has too many children already. Eventually, her mother is quite literally worked to death, her physical and sexual labor wearing out her body as she struggles to meet her husband’s sexual demands and the demands of forced motherhood in an era before the invention of birth control. Walker depicts forced sex and motherhood within marriage as examples of the remnants of slavery. Celie’s stepfather’s total control over her mother, her childhood sexuality, and eventually even her children, evokes slavery’s hold on and exploitation of Black motherhood.

Her mother’s closure as a sexual option places Celie in peril, as her father commands her: “You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t” (1). Celie describes his assaults in juvenile terms: “First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my tittie. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it” (1). The description of this assault is simultaneously childlike and mature. Celie knows the word “pussy” but refers to his penis as his “thing.” She doesn’t have a full understanding of what is happening to her, or what sex or assault are, but she knows what he’s doing is deeply wrong. Her first introduction to sexuality is assault. As such, Celie formulates her conception of sex around these moments because, at this point, this is all she knows.

Celie’s life at this time is rife with sexual policing. Her father beats her for winking at a boy in church, which Celie vehemently denies because “I don’t even look at mens” (5). This moment sets up church as a space of sexual regulation, control, and propriety. Her father punishes her because of her presumed sexuality, the idea that she could openly, brazenly, offer her sexuality to any boy. Black women have historically been marked as hypersexual, a stereotype which influences the directives Celie receives regarding her sexuality. In *Private
Lives, Jenkins elaborates on the Jezebel stereotype, which had its genesis in the antebellum era. This stereotype cast Black women as sexually licentious, separating them further from white women’s standards of sexual propriety and associating them with deviancy and sexual excess. In The Changing Same, McDowell writes, “It is well known that during slavery the white slave master helped to construct an image of black female sexuality that shifted responsibility for his own sexual passions onto his female slaves. They, not he, had wanton, insatiable desires that he was powerless to resist” (37). Because of the pervasive nature of these stereotypes which associate Black female sexuality with excess, McDowell writes, Black women writers in particular treated sexuality cautiously in their writing, often overcorrecting by “insisting fiercely on their chastity” (38). This insistence on chastity, imposed by Celie’s stepfather, is made all the more disturbing by the fact that he is the one physically abusing her. However, it is essential that she not appear sexually open or available, particularly in a public space such as church, because to do so would confirm detrimental stereotypes about Black women. As such, the culturally imposed silences around both abuse and desire merge and compound each other.

In this moment in church, Celie shuts down the possibility that she would be interested in men at all, possibly an early sign of her coding as queer: “I look at women, tho, cause I’m not scared of them” (5). This likely stems from the basic fact that the primary male figure in Celie’s life has caused her horrific pain, but by directly juxtaposing these two things, Walker analogizes the type of looking that Celie’s father believes she would be doing toward men with the type of looking that Celie is doing toward women. This demonstrates the first emergence of her subliminal queerness. However, writers such as Jenkins have observed that Black lesbian

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5 Walker's portrayal can be considered slightly problematic here, as it could be seen to imply that Celie’s lesbianism is a product of male abuse.
writers have used sexual propriety as “a shield,” limiting “queer sexual exploration” to “protect black communities from accusations of sexual deviance” (Lewis, “Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness,” 160). So Celie’s imposition of propriety assumes the dual role of refuting sexual stereotypes and sublimating her queerness.

Celie puts herself in the way of her sister when their father begins to target her, and she takes the brunt of his assaults in place of her mother as well. She even encourages her sister to marry in order to get her out of the house. Eventually, Celie reveals that she “don’t bleed no more” (5). She learned from a girl at church that you “git big if you bleed every month” positioning church again as a furtive space of sexuality and sexual knowledge or obscuration (5). Celie’s sexual knowledge comes from external sources, conjecture, and mystery, but she knows that the absence of blood signals the presence of new life, borne at the hands of her stepfather’s abuse. All of these signals and experiences combine to form Celie’s conception of sexuality in what would otherwise be considered her adolescent years. Interestingly, Celie’s traditional adolescent years are covered in only eight pages of text, demonstrating that her coming of age is not based on her age but rather her sexual and emotional development.

When a suitor, referred to as Mr. ____, comes in pursuit of Celie’s sister, Nettie, Celie volunteers herself in her sister’s stead, offering to “fix herself up for him” putting on “horsehair, feathers,” and high heel shoes (7). Celie’s father’s response demonstrates the hypocrisy of his ideology: “He beat me for dressing trampy but he do it to me anyway” (7). He enforces rules about female sexuality upon her, but assaults her anyway—punishing and taking pleasure from her in the same moment. He denies Mr. ____’s appeal, saying Nettie is too young and that he wants her to continue her education to become a teacher, demonstrating a clear regard for her future. “But I can let you have Celie,” he concedes, the whole interaction a transaction. However,
he warns her, “she ain’t fresh, tho… she spoiled. Twice” (7). Her father’s agreement upholds the ideology that women are spoiled if they have sex or children before marriage, disregarding the fact that he is the one who “spoiled” her. He continues to say that she is ugly but a hard worker, emphasizing the value of her labor above all else. Her father says that he has to get rid of her, that she’s too old to be at home, that she’s a bad influence, placing the blame on her while trying to protect himself from her “corrupting” influence. Her burgeoning adolescent sexuality threatens to disrupt the home, exemplified by his abuse. The almost 20-year-old Celie is deemed ugly and stupid, hardworking like a man, but she will “make the better wife” (8). In this passage, she is both queer (man-like, ugly, not ascribing to proper standards of womanhood) and sufficiently domestic. Celie’s father offers a last warning to Mr. ___: “She tell lies,” positioning her as dangerous, unstable, her words—whenever she rarely offers them—not to be trusted (8). Here, her father deems the speech she does produce as illegitimate, to be disregarded, so it is no wonder Celie stops speaking her truths out loud, confining them only to a private realm.

Celie’s new husband is shrouded in scandal from a previous marriage. His wife was killed mysteriously, and he had extramarital relations with Shug Avery (the woman who later becomes Celie’s lover). Celie has a difficult time adjusting to the role of wife; she throws herself into the housework expected of her, despite fervent resistance from her stepchildren. Celie’s new husband’s sisters outline the proscribed role of a wife: “When a woman marry she spose to keep a decent house and a clean family” (20). After Celie marries Mr. ___, she describes the experience of trying to be a replacement mother for his children. Her new twelve-year-old stepson throws a rock at her, gashing her head, and her husband barely scolds him. Celie works all day, cooks dinner, and tries to care for the four deeply misbehaved children, but they cry, scream, and “cuse me of murder” (12). By each day’s end, she is exhausted. This constant
drudgery represents the normalized conditions of Celie’s marriage, in which she is overworked, exploited, and physically abused. All of her energy is placed into caring for others, despite not receiving any warmth or sympathy in return.

**Celie’s Introduction to Shug**

Celie’s life changes when she is introduced to Shug. Her first encounter comes through a portrait photograph. Celie has never seen a photo of a person before, so this image represents the first way that Shug opens a previously shut or undiscovered door in Celie’s life. Celie’s first thoughts were: “Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier than me” (6). Celie is immediately struck by Shug’s physical beauty, comparing her first to her mother, the previous paragon of beauty in her eyes, and then to herself. This negative comparison reveals Celie’s own lack of self-esteem. She asks to keep the picture, and, “All night long I stare at it. And now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery” (6). Shug has become imprinted in Celie’s mind, an image of glamour, an ephemeral, attractive figure. Shug is a presence in Celie’s life before she even meets her, before she fully understands the queer implications of her attraction. Shug represents an idyllic future, an aspiration.

Shug as figure of pleasure and possibility also exerts her influence in a moment of sex between Celie and her husband: “I think bout Shug Avery. I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him” (12). Celie doesn’t explicitly imagine Shug as a desirable figure in this scene, rather she envisions Shug as a stand-in for herself, considering that Shug likely took sexual pleasure from this same act, otherwise she wouldn’t have performed it without the obligation of marriage. So here, Shug acts as an aspirational erotic ideal, re-motivating Celie to place her arm around her husband, draw him
closer in search of pleasure. Thoughts of Shug help her be more present in this sexual interaction, more engaged with her body. This moment is a precursor to Celie’s introduction to guided masturbation by Shug, as Shug acts as a surrogate, an erotic role model who Celie simultaneously identifies with and desires.

When Celie goes shopping with her husband Albert’s sister, she “think what color Shug Avery would wear” because “She like a queen to me” (21). She requests something purple, but they are unable to find it, so she must settle for navy blue instead. The color purple comes to represent Shug, Celie’s queer desire, and her desire for full, embodied selfhood. At this point, these aspirations are thwarted by lack of access. But at this point, Celie is overwhelmed simply to have a dress that is all her own anyway. Kate, her sister-in-law, tries to tell her she “deserve more than this,” but Celie demurs: “Maybe so” (22). When Kate encourages her to escape her situation, she balks: “I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive” (22). At this point, Celie is not yet in a place in which she is ready to come of age, to define her own life. Instead, she prioritizes survival over her own desires, over anything else, existing only in a mode in which she can keep herself alive, if not safe or happy.

Celie’s ardent desire to see Shug perform solidifies a dynamic of contrast between Celie’s silencing and Shug’s insistent vocalization. While helping her husband dress and prepare to go to one of Shug’s shows, Celie looks at Shug’s image on the advertisement for the event: “Lord, I wants to go so bad. Not to dance. Not to drink. Not to play card. Not even to hear Shug Avery sing. I just be thankful to lay eyes on her,” Celie writes (26). The significance of this desire is not solely in Shug’s performance itself, but rather her embodied presence and Celie’s potential proximity to it. Celie experiences her life in silence, either silenced or silencing herself,
whereas Shug, a blues singer, makes a living off her voice. This culture of silence, particularly around sexuality, undoubtedly increases Celie’s need and desire for a vocal erotic mentor.

**Shug as Transgressive Figure**

Shug is described as a transgressive, societally unacceptable figure, defined in opposition to the proper womanhood Celie attempts to emulate. First and foremost, she is a blues singer. In “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime,” Hazel Carby writes women’s blues in the twenties and early thirties “articulates a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women’s bodies as the sexual and sensuous subjects of women’s song” (474). Shug’s blues embodiment and exercise of her voice takes on this duality, both resistance against the control of men, as well as a display of sensual expression. Shug’s blues career also provides her the financial freedom to make more autonomous decisions (Naess, “The Life You Save May Be Your Own”). In this way, she is able to be independent of men, though constrained by the sexual stigma that marks her. Further, in “Black Women’s Post-Slavery Silence Syndrome,” Patricia Broussard writes that female Blues singers used songs to “speak truth to power and to sing what they could not say.” This characterization correlates with Celie’s silences and suppressions, formulating the blues, and Shug herself as a performer, as an outlet through which to express the inexpressible.

But her career as a blues singer notwithstanding, Shug has experienced a long history of sexualization and stigmatization. Albert’s sisters disparage both Shug and Annie Julia (his first wife) for being “too black” and “black as my shoe,” positioning Blackness as a pejorative (21). The women object to Shug because of her blues singing career and her flashy outfits that “look like window dressing” (21). At church, the preacher delivers a sermon anonymously about Shug,
calling her “a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and
taking other women mens. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner” (44). Albert’s father
comes to visit to implore his son to see sense, disparaging Shug at every opportunity. “She black
as tar, she nappy headed. She got legs like baseball bats… she ain’t even clean. I hear she got the
nasty woman disease” (54). Shug describes her own mother’s low opinion of her: “One thing my
mama hated me for was how much I love to fuck” (123). Here, Shug identifies herself as
explicitly sexual, claiming a love of sex and sexuality which is uncommon for the time and
unexpected to Celie. Her mother rejected all forms of physical affection, but “My daddy love me
to kiss and hug him, but she didn’t like the looks of that. So when I met Albert, and once I got in
his arms, nothing could git me out” (123). Shug’s relationship with Albert presumably began as a
way to protect or shield her from the same kind of abuse Celie suffered at the hands of her father.
Shug had three children by Albert, but she could never marry him because his parents did not
permit it: “How daddy told him I’m trash, my mama trash before me” (124). They even cast
doubt on whether Shug’s children were really Albert’s. Here, Shug is again positioned as a
sexually transgressive figure who violates the strict norms of sexual respectability outlined by
both the Black community and the church community, to which Celie tries her hardest to ascribe.
Shug is described as too rebellious, too showy, too unconventional, too much on display. Shug is
a queer figure, not acceptable enough to be legitimized by the bounds of marriage, her sexuality
refusing to be contained or regulated.

The Beginning of Celie and Shug’s Relationship

Celic first meets Shug when Albert brings her to their home, very sick and with nowhere
else to go, in need of care. Her mother blames her for her circumstances, her father calls her a
“tramp,” and one woman speculates that she may have “some kind of nasty woman disease”
(43). Celie wants to ask what this could be, but she does not, silencing her own impulse for the sake of propriety. When Celie realizes they are going to take Shug in, her reaction resembles that which one might have to a childish crush: “I don’t know what to do, I’m so beside myself. I stand there in the middle of the kitchen. Mind whirling” (44). Notably, in this instant, Celie’s body is still, while her mind is active. When Celie first lays eyes on Shug in the flesh, she remarks, “Come on in, I want to cry. To shout. Come on in. With God help, Celie going to make you well. But I don’t say nothing. It not my house” (45). Celie’s internal monologue is an exaltation, but she stifles the expression of her real desires, beholden to her husband’s patriarchal control and familial norms. She expresses a desire to care for Shug, a voluntary impulse distinct from the care she is forced to perform for her new family. When Celie finally asks her husband what’s wrong with Shug, he prompts her to tell him if she doesn’t want Shug here: “Won’t do no good. But if that the way you feel…” (47). In this moment, he attempts to provoke an expression of emotion from Celie, to which she immediately protests, “I want her here, I say, too quick” (48). In this moment, she has no problem expressing her emotions because she knows they are in accord with what he already wants. It is when her desires may conflict with what is acceptable or expected of her that she has difficulty expressing herself.

Celia’s desire for Shug is made explicit (at least internally) when she is tasked with bathing Shug. Albert is reluctant to do it, so the responsibility passes to Celie: “First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man” (49). She is placed in that position because no one would suspect that she would have the same desires her husband does. Her desire is also filtered through a heteronormative lens, as she remarks that she assumed the role of the man in desiring the woman, rather than simply allowing her desire to exist on its own or accepting that a woman
could desire another woman. As Celie washes Shug’s body, “It feel like I’m praying. My hands
tremble and my breath short” (49). These strong physical indications, conveyed in religious
language, of Celie’s desire for Shug very nearly defy concealment, straining against the silence
and stillness she imposes on them.

Shug is coded as a queer character well before she and Celie become lovers. Celie
describes Shug as “halfway tween sick and well. Halfway tween good and evil, too” (57). With
these lines, Shug is presented as a liminal figure, dangerous because she does not ascribe easily
to either category, unsettling and unpredictable. At one point, Celie tries to teach her to sew:
“She sew long crooked stitches, remind me of that little crooked tune she sing” (57). Describing
the stitches as crooked not only makes clear that Shug is not skilled in the “proper” domestic
obligations of a married woman, but comparing her crooked stitches to her crooked songs imbue
both with a sense of queerness.

Celie’s desire for Shug is described in terms analogous to Kathryn Bond Stockton’s
theory of “growing sideways.” When Celie watches Shug smoke a cigarette she lit for her, she
remarks that the image of her hand “looks just right. Something bout it, maybe the little tender
veins I see and the big ones I try not to, make me scared. I feel like something pushing me
forward. If I don’t watch out I’ll have hold of her hand, tasting her fingers in my mouth” (51).
Shug stirs within Celie emotions begging to be expressed. Notably, these emotions, these desires,
are described as forward potential (not upward, but onward). As such, Celie’s growth is less
about a linear, vertical mode of progress, but more about the increasingly intricate and intimate
relationship that she builds with Shug and the ways in which that relationship contrasts with the
others in her life. In particular, these scenes, like the ones in which Celie bathes Shug and
teaches her to sew, assume an overlying element of reciprocity. They bond, as care for one feeds
into care for the other. In discussing lesbian relationships in women’s coming of age novels of the twentieth century in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Felski writes, “The other woman provides a mirror in which the protagonist discovers herself, finding her own female identity reflected” (131-132).

Notably, Celie and Shug’s relationship is built on a foundation of care, as Celie nurses Shug back to health following her unnamed illness. However, this care is motivated by Celie’s intrinsic desire, distinguishing it from the care she is expected and obligated to perform for her new family. As a result, their relationship assumes a mother-daughter dimension at times, with the pair alternating between each role. This dynamic first becomes apparent when Celie is combing out Shug’s hair, an inherently intimate act:

> She got the nottiest, shortest, kinkiest hair I ever saw, and I loves every strand of it… I work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia—or like she mama. I comb and pat, comb and pat. First she say, hurry up and git finish. Then she melt down a little and lean back gainst my knees. That feel just right, she say. That feel like mama used to do (53).

Here, Celie describes the sensation as analogous to combing out her mother’s hair, while Shug remarks that the act feels like when her own mother combed her hair. This scene takes on an added significance when one considers that Celie’s stepfather often used haircuts as a pretext to abuse her. In this scene, Celie and Shug reverse this dynamic, turning caring for hair into a space of comfort and warmth rather than danger and violence. Both parties feel the heightened sense of intimacy, a sense of fostering growth, that a prototypical mother provides. These reciprocal acts of care are the first steps in reclaiming and reframing Celie’s existing formulation of carework as exploitation, as they are performed willingly, intimately, and tenderly. This re-incorporation of motherhood also works to assuage some of the trauma Celie has experienced at the severing of the mother-child bond between her and her own children.
Shug and Celie’s queer desire becomes palpable, publicly acknowledgeable, at one of Shug’s blues shows, further solidifying the blues as a space of sexual expression and communication. Shug persuades Albert to allow Celie to attend the show despite his protestations and attempts to keep her locked into the position of proper wife, under his control. Shug begins her performance with a song by Bessie Smith, linking her even further to the historical Black women’s blues tradition. “I look at Shug and I feel my heart begin to cramp. It hurt me so, I cover it with my hand. I think I might as well be under the table, for all they care” (74). Observing the way Albert and Shug look at each other causes Celie physical pain, pain which she tries to contain inside her, to suppress, to cover with her hand. This interaction makes Celie also turn her pain and her hatred inward toward herself: “I hate the way I look, I hate the way I’m dress. Nothing but churchgoing clothes in my chifferobe” (74). She believes that she, herself, and her physical body, are not good enough, not desirable enough, literally constrained by the outfit of churchgoing respectability. “Before I know it, tears meet under my chin. And I’m confuse. He love looking at Shug. I love looking at Shug. but Shug don’t love looking at but one of us. Him. But that’s the way it spose to be. I know that. But if that so, why my heart hurt me so?” (74). Celie begins to cry, even though she knows that Shug is “supposed” to look at Albert, not her, with desire. Even though she acknowledges this heteronormative truth, it does not mean the acknowledgement causes her any less pain. Then, Shug calls her name:

She say this song I’m bout to sing is call Miss Celie’s song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick… It all about some no count man doing her wrong, again. But I don’t listen to that part. I look at her and I hum along a little with the tune. First time somebody made something and name it after me (74).

Here, Shug makes public what had previously been a private, intimate moment between them, making queer desire palpable between the two. The song hides queerness in plain sight, ostensibly about a two-timing man but really an expression of the creative production Celie’s
intimacy with Shug helped induce, foster, grow. Celie willfully disregards the heteronormative trappings placed on the song, choosing to see through them, to the essential fact that Shug named this song after her, constructed something in her image, gave something her name. This collaboration demonstrates the ways in which they bring each other to life, Shug restored to the height of her desirability and power after her long illness and Celie beginning to awaken into her sexuality.

The Mirror Scene

In “Celie in the Looking Glass,” Daniel Ross writes that “the discovery that must necessarily precede Celie’s discovery of speech” is “the discovery of desire—for selfhood, for other, for community, and for a meaningful place in the Creation” (70). Here, Ross confirms the dynamic I outline, in which Celie comes of age through her awareness of desire. But further, Celie’s sexual awakening merges both the discovery of desire with the strategic implementation of speech.

Celie confides in Shug that she does not enjoy sex with her husband. She asks Shug if she enjoys having sex with Albert, to which she replies, “I just love it. Don’t you?” (78). Celie responds, “He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep” (78). Shug laughs and remarks, “You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you,” to which Celie replies, “That what it feel like” (78). This interaction highlights the lack of sexual pleasure in Celie’s life, the ways in which sexual experiences can vary based on the relationship, interest, and intent of the participants. Here, Celie presents sexual pleasure as not to be taken for granted, not a given. She highlights Albert’s disregard for her feelings, and importantly, the silence that marks the interaction. Shug concludes that because
Celie has never enjoyed sex, never had an orgasm, “You still a virgin,” (78). She defines sex based on orgasm rather than penetration, a notably queer formulation of sex.\(^6\)

But most significant is what follows, when Shug explains to Celie how to elicit pleasure from herself:

Right down here in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It git hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. But other parts good too, she say. Lots of sucking go on, here and there, she say. Lot of finger and tongue work (78).

Here, Shug educates Celie about foreplay, about the pleasures of sexuality beyond penetration, in somewhat euphemistic but still more intensely explicit terms than Celie has ever heard. Celie is embarrassed in response, but Shug persists, placing language to previously unspoken and unexperienced sensations. By directly instructing Celie as to the hidden, obscured aspects of her own anatomy, she gives Celie the tools to access her own pleasure. This is the first step toward fostering a self-directed, self-centered sexuality. She then challenges Celie to take a mirror and look at her own vagina, asking, “I bet you never seen it, have you?” When Celie is reluctant to point the mirror toward herself, Shug encourages, “What, too shame even to go off and look at yourself?” (79). Here, Shug invokes shame in a teasing way but gets to the heart of the real shame that surrounds claiming sexuality. Celie boldly requests, “You come with me while I look, I say. And us run off to my room like two little prankish girls” (79). Celie characterizes the moment as firmly located in girlhood, in the giddy headiness of budding adolescent sexuality rather than a moment between two grown women who have experienced years of sex and abuse. In this moment, by Shug’s presence and instruction, Celie is made a girl again.

\(^6\) In “Romance, Marginality, and Matrilineage,” Hite writes that Shug’s conception of virginity threatens patriarchy because it deprioritizes a phallocentric mode of sexuality and forefronts female pleasure and responsiveness. I argue that that is exactly Shug’s point.
When Shug confirms that the coast is clear, Celie lies on her back and points the mirror at herself: “Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose. It a lot prettier than you thought, ain’t it? she say from the door. It mine, I say” (79). At first, Celie expresses disgust at what she has been taught to believe is ugly, too black, too hairy, too shameful. This gut reaction is also likely a response to the sight of something unfamiliar, something which she has been taught to fear, to reject, or to associate with pain or abuse. But internally, she remarks that she looks like a rose, expressing that inside there is beauty, is flourishing, is blooming, is the potential for growth, even if outside there is (culturally conditioned) ugliness. Shug tries to get her to admit that it is pretty, to which Celie does not strictly agree, instead asserting, “It mine.” However, this assertion is even more significant, as it represents the first moment in which Celie claims her sexuality, her vagina as her own, a part of herself which she alone has the power to control, thanks to Shug’s guidance and encouragement. She continues with curiosity, asking Shug where the button, her clitoris, is. “Right up near the top, she say. The part that stick out a little. I look at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me. Nothing much. But just enough to tell me this the right butt on to mash. Maybe” (79). Here, Celie locks eyes on Shug while masturbating for the first time. At Shug’s direction, Celie begins to understand the theory and practice behind claiming pleasure from herself, a moment of tentative and foretelling exploration. Celie exercises self-ownership, coming to realize that her body is hers and hers alone. This moment of asserting control, of discovery, was made possible by Shug’s presence, her words, her willingness to vocalize that which Celie has learned is often unspoken.

Shug’s subsequent encouragement for Celie to examine her breasts links this moment of sexual discovery and adolescence to her dual role as a mother: “I haul up my dress and look at
my titties. Think bout my babies sucking them. Remember the little shiver I felt then too. Sometimes a big shiver. Best part about having the babies was feeding ‘em” (79). This link firmly roots Celie’s coming of age not in some teenage moment but instead in a far more complex, post-marital and post-motherhood coming of age. Remarking that she takes sexual pleasure from breastfeeding also eroticizes the act of motherhood, associating it with the feeling of touching her clitoris. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich writes, “The act of suckling a child, like a sexual act, may be tense, physically painful, charged with cultural feelings of inadequacy and guilt; or, like a sexual act, it can be a physically delicious, elementally soothing experience, filled with a tender sensuality” (36). Here, Rich links an act of mothering to erotic touch. The moment ends when Shug warns Celie that Albert and Harpo are approaching: “I yank up my drawers and yank down my dress. I feel like us been doing something wrong” (79). Although the scene concludes with the re-entry of shame, a door has been unlocked, a window has been opened, and Celie’s coming of age process has definitively begun.

**Masturbation and Externalization of Emotions**

Learning how to masturbate enables Celie to access and express a reserve of emotions which she has suppressed. By redirecting care and focus on her physicality and pleasure toward herself, she is better able to process the trauma which marks her past and intervene in the patriarchal relations that dictate her family structure. Despite telling Shug she has no problem with her having sex with Albert, and convincing herself that is the truth, masturbation reveals Celie’s true feelings: “When I hear them together all I can do is pull the quilt over my head and finger my little button and titties and cry” (79-80). The masturbation helps reveal what Celie really thinks about their relationship, the emotions that simple verbal expression will not allow. When she masturbates, she finally allows herself to cry, to express an emotion that is important
and personal, not simply maintaining the shield of calm acceptance and permission that she projects for others’ benefit. Instead of engaging in the emotional masquerade which is expected of her in a society and a family which does not permit her the emotional space for self-expression, and a culture which actively encourages silence both as a way of preserving the status quo and as a strategic self-protection tactic, she uses masturbation as a vehicle, an enabler, a tool for both sexual and emotional self-discovery. This moment marks Celie’s first step toward coming of age.⁷

In “Too Shame to Look,” Kimberly S. Love writes:

The letter that describes Celie’s masturbation is commonly used to theorize Celie’s sexual awakening, but it is important to consider that Celie’s sexual liberation ends with Celie crying at the sound of Mister and Shug copulating in the next room. The letter reveals that Celie’s awakening—to sexuality as well as to self—cannot be separated from histories of pain and suffering; in fact, her development relies on these abject experiences (529).

While it is true that the letter detailing Celie’s mirror moment culminates with her crying, I argue that that scene does not represent the end of her sexual awakening, but rather the beginning, the jumping off point. It is less about her sadness itself and more about the fact that she is finally able to express it to herself. I do not argue that sexuality and historical suffering can be unentangled—instead, I believe that the ultimate acknowledgement of these experiences, giving them the space to breathe and be felt rather than pushed down in service of others, represents an opportunity for growth. Previously, Celie suppressed this pain, unable to see the structures at

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⁷ In Private Lives, Jenkins establishes the dangerous vulnerability of intimacy, positioning sexual desire as “an experience which overwhelsms,” and derives this overwhelmingness from its “ability to break through indifference, to encourage corporal and emotional vulnerability” (16). Further, “sexual excitement… shatters the will and disintegrates the constructed self” (17). As such, Jenkins positions sexual desire as destabilizing of identity through its capacity to generate greater connection with previously unexpressed emotion. This dynamic clearly plays out in Celie’s first masturbatory experience, as she accesses vulnerability, by extension destabilizing her sense of self, leaving it open to be reconstructed.
play, but this masturbatory moment represents the first step toward making them more visible, as Celie begins to acknowledge the truth of her desires.

This moment of guided masturbation does not mark the beginning of Shug and Celie’s romantic relationship. However, it does place Celie’s identity in a destabilized state. When Shug arrives for a Christmas visit, Celie is frustrated by her physical appearance: “I stand in front the glass trying to make something out my hair. It too short to be long, too long to be short. Too nappy to be kinky, too kinky to be nappy. No set color to it either. I give up, tie on a head rag” (109). In this moment, Celie’s physical form exists in a liminal space, between two descriptors, a space of potential. Notably, this liminality takes place again in front of a mirror, the object which was previously used to reveal her sexuality to her. Celie beginning to more fully claim her sexuality does not represent an immediate moment of coming of age. Instead, it is a protracted process which first involves existing in this space of liminality, gradually growing and moving toward full-fledged adulthood with every step she takes to define her own life.

**Celie and Shug’s Sexual Relationship**

When Celie and Shug’s relationship finally turns sexual, the moment is characterized by confession, emotional release, and vocalization that parallels that which masturbation has enabled. Shug, newly married, comes to visit Celie and Albert, and the pair end up spending the night together under the pretense of keeping each other company while their husbands are out. Shug innocently asks Celie how her sex life was with the father of her children. An atmosphere of girlish confidence, Celie’s desire for Shug, and her sexual awakening prompt Celie’s confession that her stepfather assaulted her. “It hurt me, you know, I say. I was just going on fourteen. I never even thought bout men having nothing down there so big. It scare me just to see it. And the way it poke itself and grow,” she writes (113). Here, Celie’s recollection of the
horrors of her abuse is punctuated by a girlish innocence; she was fourteen, on the cusp of conventional adolescence herself, when she was abused by her father, awakened to male sexuality. After he was done, “he make me finish trimming his hair,” an ultimate exploitation of her carework (113). As she recounts the story, Shug is silent, in marked contrast from her regular boisterous personality. Shug comforts her with an embrace and cries, and

I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug arms. How it hurt and how much I was surprise. How it stung while I finish trimming his hair. How the blood drip down my leg and mess up my stocking. How he don’t never look at me straight after that (114).

This confession prompted by their relationship provokes an expulsive expression of emotion.8

In the course of her confession, Celie laments that no one has ever truly loved or cared about her—her mother died, her sister ran away, her husband just uses her as labor to raise his children: “He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged” (114). With this, she presents a singular view of her marriage as one in which she is used for her husband’s pleasure, in which her pleasure does not matter and she is not prompted or encouraged to speak like she is with Shug. These lines further compound Celie’s positionality as perpetually and forcibly selfless, feeling as though no one cares for her and so not caring for herself. However, both Shug’s masturbatory guidance as well as her queer desire work together to flip this perception. Shug says, “I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth” (114). In this moment of vulnerability, characterized by an externalization of emotion, queer desire is finally physically expressed:

Us kiss and kiss till us can’t hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other. I don’t know nothing bout it, I say to Shug. I don’t know much, she say. Then I feels something real

8 As Patricia H. Collins writes in Black Feminist Thought, “For African-American women the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by Black women’s objectification is another Black woman… If we will not listen to one another, then who will?” (ch 5)
soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while I act like a little lost baby too (115).

In this moment, Celie and Shug oscillate between mother and child roles. Shug has limited experience where Celie has none, so neither are firmly placed in a more powerful role than the other, despite the fact that Shug initiates the contact. At first, Celie describes Shug’s touch as similar to that of her child’s when breastfeeding, placing herself in the role of mother. But then, the two switch, with Celie assuming the role of infant instead. In doing so, their relationship is more egalitarian, with neither firmly locked into one role but rather versatile and able to inhabit both. However, ending the scene with Celie in the position of vulnerable child places her in a role full of potential and promise, open to change and presumably no longer a “virgin.”

In “Too Shame To Look,” Love sheds light on the themes of infancy in Celie and Shug’s scenes of intimacy by employing Sylvan Tompkins theory that “denying the shame response fosters love”: “This love is romantic because it is continuous with the period before the individual lovers knew shame. They not only return to baby talk, but even more importantly they return to baby looking” (529). Here, Tompkins envisions infancy as a shameless space, and as such, infantile sexuality as powerful in combating shame. Love continues, “I contend that The Color Purple redefines love through the characters’ childlike wonder and feelings of youth” (530). While it is undeniable that Celie and Shug’s sex scenes are characterized by natal imagery, I argue that the redefinition of love through childlike experience that Love posits is not

9 In “Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness,” Christopher S. Lewis argues that in Walker’s work, sexual relationships between Black women represent “an alternative to being subjected to masculinist and domimative ideas of sex” (162). Lewis argues that Celie’s Black shamelessness is positioned as “a particularly black queer survival mechanism” (164). The Black lesbian shamelessness that Lewis theorizes centers around the celebration of nurturing lesbian relationships between Black women, relationships that accommodate “vulnerability and mutual dependence” (159). I argue that the significance of the implementation of Black lesbian shamelessness takes Celie a step even further beyond survival and into life and growth.
an end in itself but rather an opening for a reset, a return to a coming of age period even years beyond the traditional time frame. This moment of coming of age, free of shame, represents a liminal space of potential development.

In “Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women’s Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery,” Farah Jasmine Griffin conceives of the female orgasm as “a site of agency in that it is a moment of self-immersion for the slave—a space beyond the control of the master” (528). Because the master’s control of the enslaved woman’s body is “so-overdetermined,” to the point where he controls even and particularly “procreative sex between black men and women,” Griffin argues that orgasm, the body’s total loss of control, subsequently “eschews control of any kind” (528). Using this framework to interpret the significance of Celie’s first orgasm adds a more complex dimension to her sexual awakening, emphasizing her connection to her sexuality’s capacity to enable her to buck the oppressive influences that have shaped her life both in the immediate moment and also historically.10

Bell hooks’s *Sisters of the Yam* provides a framework for analyzing the importance of self-directed sexuality and pleasure in Celie’s life. In emphasizing the importance of healthy personal habits for Black women, hooks writes,

> Living as we do in a racist/sexist society that has, from slavery on, perpetuated the belief that the primary role black women should play in this society is that of servant, it logically follows that many of us internist the assumption that we/our bodies do not need care, not from ourselves or from others… Black women often neglect our bodies. When I first suggested to a group of black women that it was important for us to be able to stand naked in front of mirrors and look at our bodies, express our care for them, and our recognition of their beauty, many of the individuals thought this was just nonsense (66).

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10 I want to be explicitly clear that my intention is not to equate lesbian identity *necessarily* with greater experiences of sexual pleasure. It’s not that Celie has negative sexual experiences when participating in heterosexual relationships because she can *choose* to be gay, but rather those experiences are negative because they are fundamentally disconnected from her self-identity and her sexual desires.
Ironically, hooks directly references the utility of mirrors in this quote, highlighting the historically constructed, adverse reaction many Black women possess to the expression of self-care. I argue that hooks’s theorization of care is applicable not only to personal health but also to sexual health and masturbation. Hooks borrows philosopher Sam Keen’s term, “an erotic metaphysics” to describe a linkage between community and Black women’s sense of self. This link is “based on the assumption that we become more fully who we are in the act of loving” (86). In a racist, sexist, homophobic world, hooks writes, Black women have learned to manipulate the sexual by using sexuality as a commodity (by extension creating an unintentional estrangement from erotic power) or have suppressed erotic energy as protection from objectification. But by looking at the erotic as distinct from the sexual, it becomes clear that, “black women will not be able to heal the wounded dimensions of our erotic lives until we assert our right to healing pleasure” (87). Ultimately, hooks distinguishes surviving from living based on the presence or absence of love: “When we love ourselves, we know that we must do more than survive… To live fully, black women can no longer deny our need to know love” (103). And further, moving from surviving to living also means coming of age and personal growth rather than survival mode stagnation.11

**Celie’s Relationship with God**

Celie’s sexual coming of age, as enacted through masturbation and her relationship with Shug, enables her to take control of her life, vocalizing her desires and opinions in a way she never has. This is first exemplified through a reconceptualization of her relationship with God.

11 In “Textual Healing,” Griffin argues that while “affirmative sexual relations” are essential to “self-love and self care,” they in and of themselves do not “constitute acts of resistance; in and of themselves they do not alter the conditions that oppress black women.” These tactics may not combat Black women’s oppression at large, but they certainly alter the material and physical conditions and structures of Celie’s life.
Previously, God was the addressee of all her letters, and church was a space of sexual policing and respectability politics. But after her frustrations build to a breaking point, she decries God, asking “What God do for me?... He give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won’t see again” (193). Her fundamental problem with God at this point is that she views him as a man just like all the other men in her life, “Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (193). When Shug tries to stop her, to suppress her speech for fear that God will hear her, she replies, “Let ‘im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you… I blaspheme much as I want to” (193). In this moment, Celie finally speaks up, emboldened and unafraid, unabashedly voicing her objections. Celie has moved beyond simply Shug’s guidance and into her own independent identity.

Instead of rejecting God entirely, Shug encourages Celie to reassess her image of God itself, stating that it’s no surprise Celie has trouble identifying with God when she envisions God as “big and old and tall and graybearded and white” (195). Shug punctures Celie’s illusion that God is the God constructed by the predominately white church. In contrast, Shug believes “God is inside you and inside everybody else,” a being that exists internally, which only those who seek within may find (196). God is not a man or a woman, Shug thinks, but an “It,” “Everything that is or ever was or ever will be” (197). In this moment, Shug encourages Celie to construct a world in which she does not model her beliefs after white people’s prescriptions, a world that is inclusive of her identity.

Shug describes this alternative view of religion in blatantly sexual terms. Through her reconceptualization of God, Shug eventually came to feel like she was part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact,
when it happen, you can’t miss it. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh (197).

Shug describes this ultimate height of religious ecstasy as akin to sexual pleasure or orgasm. As such, one may find a way to reconceptualize the markers through which they construct their lives by reaching a sexual height, as Celie does when she masturbates. Celie initially objects to this conceptualization, questioning whether God thinks sex is dirty, to which Shug replies, “Naw, she say. God made it” (197). Here, Shug constructs an entirely new worldview for Celie that is separate from manmade, white structures and more attune with her own personal, individual desires and preferences, a world that condones this desire not as dirty but rather as natural, as sacred. Shug exposes the forces that undergird systems of power and encourages Celie to subvert them by constructing her own world, her own values, her own God. Ultimately, after Celie discovers that her biological father was lynched, she goes looking for her mother and father’s unmarked graves with Shug. When they find them, Shug says, “Us each other’s peoples now, and kiss me” (184). With this remark, Shug asserts that they have made their own queer family together, apart from the families that raised either of them. Celie’s introduction to sexuality through masturbation has allowed her the power to separate herself from abusive circumstances, to take steps to construct her own life.

Celie’s Coming of Age

An example of a major one of those steps comes when Celie decides to leave her husband and move to Memphis with Shug. When Albert objects to Celie’s departure by asking her what’s wrong with her current life, she replies: “You a lowdown dog is what’s wrong, I say. It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need” (202). These lines represent a stark contrast to Celie’s earlier silence or reluctance to express her emotions. Albert tries to slap her, but she jabs a knife at him, refusing to back down. The
confidence she has now obtained, beginning with the moment of her sexual awakening, affords her the ability to speak, to say what she has suppressed, unable to access, for years. Albert tries to knock her down, to destroy her confidence:

You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do in Memphis is be Shug’s maid… You not that good a cook either. And this house ain’t been clean good since my first wife died. Ain’t nobody crazy or backward enough to want to marry you, neither (208).

With this, he attempts to disparage her as inadequate at all the things a woman should be. He insults her abilities as a wife, as well as her physical appearance and even her silence. Celie leaves him with a curse, the power of her words palpable: “Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble… everything you even dream about will fail” (209). She does not mediate her speech or her thoughts, instead expressing them, channeling them without restraint or barriers. Significantly, this curse is conveyed verbally, a vocalized conviction and condemnation. She finally turns his own words on their head, turns the insults to assertions: “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here” (210). These lines are an exercise in self-affirmation; she will assert her identity and presence, even and especially if no one else will.

Ultimately, Celie’s story is not about simply transferring to a new, idyllic life with Shug; instead, it is about intentionally crafting her own life and vocalizing her feelings, in particular her disagreements, when they arise. In Memphis, encouraged by Shug, Celie starts a flourishing pants-making business. For a time, they live in companionable domesticity. But eventually, Shug goes on tour, returning with a nineteen-year-old boyfriend. When Shug tells Celie of her new love, rambling on in her excitement, Celie interrupts her: “Hold it, I say. Shug, you killing me” (252). In this instant, Celie concretely demonstrates the growth she has exhibited over the course of the novel vocalizing her distress and even asking Shug to be silent, to consider the impact of
her words on Celie. However, this moment is complicated. Shug questions why this affair would upset Celie if she was never jealous of her husband, and Celie contains her emotions.

Grady never bring no sparkle to your eye, I think. But I don’t say nothing, I’m too far away… I don’t say nothing… I don’t say nothing. Stillness, coolness. Nothingness. Coming fast.. I don’t say nothing. I pray to die, just so I don’t never have to speak… I went and got a piece of paper that I was using for cutting patterns. I wrote her a note. It said, Shut up (253).

Here, Celie takes a transgressive step, adapting and pushing the boundaries of speech and communication to suit her needs and capabilities, reverting to writing to Shug instead of speaking. This demonstrates that it’s not all simply about speech but rather about facilitating communication, about adapting to express her voice on her own terms. Through this, she is able to communicate that despite the fact that she loves Shug, “I can’t stay here” (255).

Celia’s coming of age is not defined by her separation from Albert or from her family; instead, it’s characterized by her increasing ability to make her own family, her own community, as she defines it. After leaving Shug, Celie returns to live with Albert, where the pair eventually reconcile. Albert asks, “Celia, tell me the truth. You don’t like me cause I’m a man?” to which she replies, “Take off they pants, I say, and men look like frogs to me. No matter how you kiss ‘em, as far as I’m concern, frogs is what they stay” (258). This exchange demonstrates the significance of queerness, coupled with and analogized to masturbatory sexuality, in awakening her to the capacity to make her own decisions, to protect herself, to take charge of her circumstances. But this change isn’t simple or uncomplicated. While Celie is still grieving her relationship with Shug, her self-confidence spirals. Looking at herself naked in a mirror, a reprise of the earlier mirror scene, she wonders if Shug ever loved her at all: “What would she love? I ast myself” (263). She proceeds to systematically critique every aspect of her physical form. She looks at herself and rather than seeing beauty, seeing herself through the eyes of
someone who loves her, she sees ugliness instead. However, she still talks to herself, still externalizes her feelings and engages in self-reflection, demonstrating her retention of the lessons masturbatory sexuality has taught her. And ultimately, through extended contemplation, Celie realizes: “Shug got a right to live too… Just cause I love her don’t take away none of her rights…. Who am I to tell her who to love? My job just to love her good and true myself” (273). Here, Celie demonstrates her complete reconceptualization of romantic relationships, as disentangled from a bond of possession that echoes that of slavery. Where previously, her experiences with her stepfather and with Albert embodied a definition of love as constraining one’s rights, Celie’s relationship with Shug is not marred by that idea. In fact, it is formed in complete opposition to it.

Eventually, Celie creates her own home, moving into the house her stepfather left her when he passed away. She envisions it as a place where her family, chosen and biological, can live together: “Oh, Nettie, us have a house! A house big enough for us and our children, for your husband and Shug. Now you can come home cause you have a home to come to!” (250). Over time, Celie starts running her own business, no longer dependent on anyone for support. She even rejects a second marriage proposal from Albert—and with it, the stability and promise of a normative heterosexual life. When she learns that Shug plans to come home, she resolves herself: “I be so calm. If she come, I be happy. If she don’t, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn” (288-289). She is content with her own life as it is, not dependent on another’s presence or guidance to support or make her happy. This culminating statement marks an exemplification of Celie’s coming of age, catalyzed by Shug’s introduction of masturbatory sexuality.
In “Reading and Resistance: The Color Purple,” hooks takes issue with the fact that sexual desire in the novel is “a means to an end but not an end in itself,” a “subversive transformative force” that is ultimately “suppressed and finally absent” (286). Hooks bases this argument on the fact that Celie does not end up with Shug at the end of the novel, that she discovers her lesbian identity but is not afforded a life of affirmed, domestic, lesbian stability. I argue, instead, that lesbianism is not simply a means to an end for Celie, and just because she does not end up with Shug does not mean that her lesbian desire is ultimately discounted or diminished (in fact, her love for Shug is affirmed by her inclusion in her new queer family, even despite the end of their romantic relationship). Her discovery of her sexuality alters the entire course of her life, enabling her to craft a life that is her own, in which she exercises control over her decisions. Her lesbian desire, while idealized and less than transgressive, is vital to her development as a person and to her coming of age. I do not believe, like hooks does, that Celie is forced to “deny the primacy of this sexual awakening.” Instead, the sexual awakening is what allows her to reconcile and teach her ex-husband, to deny marriage when it is offered to her again, and to maintain her independence. Celie is not, as hooks argues, only affirmed in life by her intimate relationship with a man, but rather can develop those relationships with autonomy, self-direction, and self-possession.

Celie’s last letter is addressed: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.” (291). This demonstrates that with Shug’s help, she has created a

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12 Hooks also observes that The Color Purple exposes and denounces Black male patriarchy, yet patriarchy “does not influence and control sexual desire and sexual expression… Homophobia does not exist in the novel.” Hooks is correct in saying that Celie and Shug never experience any homophobia throughout the novel, making their relationship a fundamentally unrealistic one. However, patriarchal structures undoubtedly influence the construction of sexuality in the novel given that Celie, an adult woman with two biological children, a husband, and a brood of step-children, has never masturbated.
God that feels authentic to her and her own life. In this letter, she unites with the sister she was separated from for decades. Shug and Albert support her, and she and Nettie embrace. Jenkins argues that in *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker “engages in a project of ‘queering’ the black family” by reconceptualizing the patriarchal family structure and often reconfiguring power away from Black men in the novel. (92) By the end of the novel, Celie ends up in an “unruly and unregulated jumble of intimacies, many of which begin as sexual dyads but end up as more platonic kinship relations” (107). Jenkins argues that the Black patriarchal family structure emerged as a response to the destabilizing influence of slavery on families, so Walker’s move toward queer family relations works to dismantle this patriarchal influence. Celie inhabits family differently now, more grounded in the self she has constructed. Now, when Celie cares for others, it’s of her own volition, in a way that’s not about domination but rather about love, power, and liberation.

Her new family celebrates each other on July 4. Harpo remarks that “White people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th… so most black folks don’t have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other” (293). This observation characterizes the mood of the day, a celebration of family and reunification, rather than some arbitrary form of distant liberty. Instead, Celie’s liberty is more personal, more individualized, which she forges on her own.
“Masturbatory Pleasure and Orgasmic Rage”: Coming of Age in *Bastard Out of Carolina*

In Dorothy Allison’s semi-autobiographical novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, pre-teen protagonist Bone Boatwright lives in a constant state of fear. Her stepfather, Glen, molest and beats her on a regular basis. Her home is not a safe place, and she is plagued by dreams of his hands creeping over her. In her masturbatory fantasies, she directly confronts his terrifying violence, but instead of feeling powerless and trapped, she maintains control. In these moments, masturbation is a form of self-protection and self-preservation. Both Bone’s sexual fantasies and moments of rage revolve around intense heat, linking her masturbation with her expressions of anger. As such, masturbation is also a way for Bone to channel the emotions she is often forced to internalize, giving her the opportunity to externalize them and take back agency over her body. The same way masturbation allows Bone to express that which she previously repressed due to shame, stigmatization, and fear, expressions of rage also enable Bone to rebel against the class shame imposed on her. Linked by images of heat and fire, Bone’s masturbatory fantasies and expressions of rage both act as a combatant against shame, an orgasmic catharsis. These orgasmic, masturbatory expressions, one literal and one figurative, lead Bone to make realizations about herself and who she wants to be as an adult. Masturbatory pleasure and orgasmic rage awaken Bone to the fact that she wants and needs to separate herself from the heteropatriarchal nuclear family structure and instead pursue a non-normative social and economic future in order to transition from “bastard,” outcast girl to Boatwright woman, on her own terms.

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Bastard Out of Carolina is not just Bone’s coming of age story, it’s her coming of age as queer story. In this novel, coming of age is an act of both survival and reclamation. In “Dorothy Allison’s Topography of Resistance,” Moira P. Baker writes, “Bastard enacts the shaping of a lesbian identity as an act of resistance to mutually reinforcing systems of oppression based on class, gender, and sexual orientation” (23). Baker emphasizes Bone’s queerness, literal and figurative, in opposition to oppressive norms. Throughout the novel, Bone’s queerness, which is apparent before she comes of age, moves from something to be grown out of to something she will grow into instead.

From the beginning, Bone is positioned as a potentially queer character due to her bastard status, her Boatwright name, and the “white trash” label ascribed to her. Bone’s given name is “Ruth Anne,” derived from her mother, Anney, and her aunt, Ruth. The nickname “Bone” has its origins in her Uncle Earle’s remark that she is “no bigger than a knucklebone” (2). This represents the masculine influence on Bone even from infancy, especially significant in her biological father’s absence. Anney and Bone’s grandmother do not put a father’s name on Bone’s birth certificate, designating her officially a “bastard.” But Bone’s father maintains a spectral presence, haunting her shifting sense of identity throughout the book, as she attempts to discover who she is while missing half of her point of reference. She doesn’t fit easily or

\[\text{13} \quad \text{In Allison’s “A Question of Class,” she defines queer: “I use the word queer to mean more than lesbian. Since I first used it in 1980 I have always meant it to imply that I am not only a lesbian but a transgressive lesbian-femme, masochistic, as sexually aggressive as the women I seek out” (Skin, 23). Additionally, in a preface to Amber Hollibaugh’s My Dangerous Desires, Allison defines perverse: “To be disobedient to the rule of fear and hatred and shame, to seek one’s own definitions and ideals regardless of what others insist are the limits to what you may want or have” (xi). These definitions inform my analysis of Bone’s queerness.}\]

\[\text{14} \quad \text{This idea of “growing into” is informed by Bond Stockton’s concept of growing sideways, defined as “something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive” (“The Queer Child,” 13).}\]
comfortably into the Boatwright clan because of this perpetual sense of mystery. She doesn’t have any photos of her father, and her mother won’t discuss him. Her grandmother fills in the blanks with lurid details and speculation, calling him “a sorry excuse for a man” (25). He left when Bone was a baby, but he marked Bone with his “midnight-black hair” and “Cherokee eyes,” visible, racialized signs that differentiate her from the rest of the Boatwrights (26). Bone is often distressed that she does not physically resemble the family members closest to her: “I don’t look like Mama. I don’t look like you. I don’t look like nobody,” she wails (30). Bone’s beloved uncle Earle calls her “the strangest girl child we got,” meaning that despite her belonging to the family, she remains queer within it (27).

In addition to the ways her bastard status unsettles her sense of belonging within her family, the label carries a deeply classed and sexualized stigma. The word “illegitimate” on Bone’s birth certificate “burned her like the stamp she knew they’d tried to put on her. No-good, lazy, shiftless,” (3), Anney thinks, already linking shame, anger, and burning. Bone’s designation as bastard marks Anney by the state as sexually promiscuous, irresponsible, and unworthy of respect. Stigmatization positions its subject as deviant, non-normative, queer. Anney is stigmatized from the moment she gives birth to Bone at the age of fifteen. This stigma transfers to Bone, who grows up under its yoke. In “The Politics of They,” Baker elaborates on the link between the patriarchal nuclear family and the construction of illegitimacy. Baker writes that illegitimacy is “not a moral blight endemic to the lower classes but a conceptual tool for regulating them” (119). Bone’s designation as a bastard disrupts her family’s potential to ascribe to the normative ideal. She serves as a constant reminder to Anney and Glen of Anney’s past, their history, and the impossibility of state-sanctioned legitimacy. This undoubtedly influences Bone’s feelings of lack of belonging or security as a child.
The label “bastard” has inextricable links to the explicitly classed, pejorative ascription: “white trash.” “White trash” is a “classist slur” that otherizes poor white people from a larger, collective, middle-class, heteropatriarchal, white whole (Bouson, “You Nothing But Trash,” 101). This stereotype carries the connotation of sexual promiscuity, incest, and violence, and it constructs poor women’s sexuality in particular as shamefully out of control. The white trash stereotype was first defined as an identity in eugenic studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Newitz and Wray’s introduction to White Trash, they describe how the U.S. Eugenics Records office conducted fifteen “Eugenic Family Studies,” “wherein the researchers sought to demonstrate scientifically that large numbers of rural poor whites were ‘genetic defectives’” (2). This led to public imaginings of “the degenerate hillbilly family, dwelling in filthy shacks, and spawning endless generations of paupers, criminals, and imbeciles” (2). The identity categories “bastard” and “white trash” become queer themselves—what Cvetkovich terms “the queer category white trash”—because of their definitions in opposition to the patriarchal nuclear family structure, as well as their use in regulation and control (An Archive of Feelings, 115). Masturbation, an expression of non-normative, non-reproductive, and often dismissed as illegitimate sexuality, also inhabits this queer space. Bone struggles with identification with and ascription to this illegitimate, bastard, white trash stereotype throughout the novel.

As much uneasiness as Bone wrestles with regarding her “bastard” identity, she also struggles with a simultaneous discomfort and hopeful identification with the name “Boatwright.”

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15 Newitz and Wray also write that Jillian Sandell’s reading of Allison argues that her “life history as ‘queer white trash’ from South Carolina… has enabled her to elude objectification as a specific stereotype in the cultural imaginary, hence freeing her to explore the fluidity of self and memory.”
The Boatwright family is infamous. They possess a sort of mystique, a notoriety, and a conspicuous bond. Bone’s family do not care about her bastard status the way the rest of society does, so they shield her in part from its consequences. The Boatwrights, branded white trash outcasts, represent a non-normative family structure, with Bone’s male relatives continually in and out of prison, and her female family members living almost communally. Bone models herself in adherence to and resistance against these examples.

Bone’s male cousin Butch defines the identity category “Boatwright woman,” telling Bone,

Boatwright women got caustic pussy. Kills off or messes up everything goes in or out their legs, except purebread Boatwright babies and rock-hard Boatwright men. And even with us, it burns off anything looks the least bit unusual, polishes babies up so they all pretty much look alike, like we been rinsed in bleach as we’re born. ‘Cept you, of course, all black-headed and strange… But that’s because you got a man-type part of you. Rock-hard and nasty and immune to harm. But hell, Boatwright women come out that way sometimes (54).

With these lines, Butch solidifies in part what it means to be a “Boatwright woman,” the elusive descriptor Bone chases. He claims that Boatwright women’s vaginas are corrosive, purifying, only compatible with “purebread Boatwright babies.” Bone’s position as dark and strange distinguishes her from the otherwise “bleached” Boatwright clan, both a queer and a racialized other. Butch attributes this in part to the outside influence of her father that marks her, but also, significantly to what he calls the “man-type part” of Bone. Within the Boatwright clan, Bone is not only different, she is also considered masculine, a liminal figure somewhere between girl child and man. At one point, Bone describes how she emulates her male cousins, often wishing that she could stand in their shoes. “Some days I would grind my teeth, wishing I had been born a boy,” Bone thinks (23). She wears their work shirts and covets the knives they carry.
Importantly, this queerness is not unprecedented. As Butch says, “Boatwright women come out that way sometimes,” suggesting that there may be others within the family who are like her.

Scholars read the relationship between Bone’s identification with the category of “Boatwright woman” and her experiences of abuse in conflicting ways. Baker claims that Bone’s identification with strong, Boatwright woman role models “is one factor that allows her to survive the abuse she eventually endures” (“Topography of Resistance,” 24). On the other hand, in “Chosen Identities,” Cooper theorizes that Bone’s abuse, because it “problematises her identity in the Boatwright family,” nearly shatters her self-identity (53). In contrast, I believe that for Bone, when “Boatwright” and “woman” are separated, a liminal space opens up in which she can craft her own self-identity. As such, for Bone, these categories are, and must be, significantly distinct. The abuse represents a destabilizing of Bone’s identity, but also an opening for a necessary reconceptualization of her identity in adolescence. When Boatwright and woman merge in the traditional sense, self-destruction ensues. Bone spends much of the book nurturing a closely held desire to belong, to discover who she is, and to feel secure and at ease within her family, as she encounters other queer Boatwright women like her Aunt Raylene. Much of the story is an embattled exercise in renaming, a symbolic reshaping of her identity, which ultimately involves a rejection of the inscription “bastard” and an embrace of the label “Boatwright,” albeit on her own terms.

**Bone’s Abuse**

Glen first molests Bone in a hospital parking lot as they wait for her mother to give birth. At first, Bone’s fear immobilizes her, and she “looked straight ahead through the windshield, too afraid to cry, or shake, or wiggle, too afraid to move at all” (47). Throughout the assault, while Bone’s mouth is forced shut by shock, Glen provides narration, whispering over and over that he
loves her and that they will be a happy family. Here, he tries to *will* a bright future into existence while perverting its very possibility. He envisions an image of a future which in this moment, to the reader, seems absurd. The baby is stillborn; Glen disintegrates; the abuse escalates. At one point, Glen reprimands Bone: “Don’t run like that. You’re a girl, not a racehorse” (106). At first, Bone and Reese make a joke of this, but eventually, Glen snaps, shouting, “What did I tell you?” and slamming Bone against a wall (106). In that moment, Bone does not occupy the correct space of “girl,” rather, she is racehorse, she is queer, strange, disruptive. To justify the beating to Anney, Glen claims that Bone called him a bastard, that she ran through the house causing destruction. He positions Bone as a figure who threatens the possibility of their happy family, her bastard status denying easy categorization or settlement into a simple, nuclear family.

In contrast to this first moment of silent sexual abuse, when Glen beats Bone he forces sound from her. The reader hears the swinging of his belt and the hopeless chorus of Bone’s screams. In both situations, Bone’s control over her own self-expression is stripped from her, the choice to stay silent or to scream made for her, compounding the abuse’s disempowering effect. After she is first abused, when she is reunited with Anney after her miscarriage, she describes wanting “to be locked with Reese in the safe circle of their arms… I held on to Mama with fingers as hard and cold as iron” (52). Living in such a state of perpetual peril and uncertainty, all Bone wants is security and safety for herself and her sister, Reese. But more than that, she also desires strength, iron hands, in contrast to Glen’s moving, searching, invading ones.

Bone’s attempts to mitigate Glen’s abuse involve controlling her every action, policing her bodily responses and interactions with the world to make them unobtrusive and inoffensive. Anney tries to tell Bone that she didn’t provoke the abuse, but even after one of Glen’s beatings puts Bone in the hospital, they are back living with him only two weeks later. Steeling herself
against his abuse, Bone’s suppressed emotions have physical effects: “I woke up so angry my throat hurt. My teeth felt ground down to the nerves. I would go look in the mirror, expecting to see blood in my mouth but there was nothing, only my teeth small, white, and sharp” (118). This suppression places Bone in a state of constant internal conflict and distress.

**Bone’s Shame at Her Abuse**

This abuse, on top of Bone’s existing conflict over her identity, generates sexual and class shame which reinforces Bone’s containment of her emotions. That shame permeates how she moves through the world on a daily basis, shame about her class, shame about her abuse, and shame about her masturbation. “More terrified of hurting her than of anything that might happen to me, I would work as hard as he did to make sure she never knew,” Bone writes of concealing her abuse from Anney (117-118). The secrecy and shame around the subject of sexual abuse in general impedes Bone’s ability to disclose her assault: “Many children do not tell anyone about the abuse because they feel responsible for holding their families together…. So too children protect their communities. They don't want to add fuel to the fire of prejudice” (Jacobs, “Victimized Daughters,” 130). Fear of shame pervades whether one chooses to disclose their story or not, for fear of experiencing even more shame. Bone knows that to admit her abuse would be to reify the white trash stereotype her mother has battled with and her family has lived under for years, which is part of the reason why she conceals her abuse for so long. Bone feels a responsibility to protect her identity and her family, even the unrealistic, patriarchal family unit Glen and Anney attempt to forge.

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16 This resonates with Allison’s own life experience. She writes in *Skin*: “I had been repeatedly warned throughout my childhood that if I ever revealed what went on in our house, they would take me away… It did not matter that what was being done to me was rape and that I had never asked for it. It did not matter because I was who I was, the child of my family, poor and notorious in the county where we lived” (52).
In some ways, the Boatwrights’ class shame is highly public, as the family often appears in the newspaper as a symbol of white trash lawlessness. Bone herself has her photograph in a local paper in the aftermath of one of Glen’s attacks. In An Archive of Feelings, Cvetkovich writes that “It is no longer useful to presume that sexuality, intimacy, affect, and other categories of experience typically assigned to the private sphere do not also pervade public life” (32). The Boatwright men are able to claim a kind of pride in Boatwright identity, even reveling in their violence, their many extra-marital affairs, and their outcast identity, fighting back physically against the social forces which attempt to shame and constrain them. In contrast, Bone describes the women in her family as long-suffering, bearers of the sexual stigma that the Boatwright men elude, internalizing their pain, while the men feel the freedom to externalize their emotions. For this reason, Bone’s externalization of her emotions is essentially a non-normative, queer act because it defies the feminine prescriptions set out for her by her family members. Through the implementation of non-normative sexuality, Bone is able to both momentarily and in the long term combat these instances of shaming, disrupting its reproduction and its generational passage. When masturbating, she reconceptualizes this shame and externalizes her emotions in defiance of it.

In “Recomposing the Self,” Walerstein writes that shame “forces one to be looked at, to be seen in one’s body with all its flaws, while at the same time permitting the one shamed to turn away from oneself” (173). In essence, she claims that shame unsettles identity; it makes one’s physical self painfully apparent, and contrastingly, because it is so visible, the subject can then distance themselves from it and consciously examine it. Shame renders the self able to be critically assessed and even altered. Alternatively, in Blush, Elspeth Probyn theorizes shame as “positive and productive” precisely because it insists on intense, inescapable embodiment:
“Shame lingers deep within the self… the world is revealed anew and the skin feels raw. Shame makes us quiver” (35, 2). Walerstein writes that scholar Silvan Tomkins models the key to self-consciousness… not just as a repressed, narcissistic, libidinous attraction to the self, but as having a necessarily exteriorizing effect: one that “speaks to the ways shame, as an affect, erupts not just in the space between one version of self and another … but also in the space where one wants another self, and more acutely, wants to give up the self one has (173-174).

Self-consciousness, or existence in a space in which one’s identity is available for renegotiation, is achieved not solely through a repressed “attraction to the self,” but rather with a necessary added component of exteriorization. Probyn agrees with the idea that shame prompts fragility of identity: “That acknowledgement of fragility may serve as a basis from which to reevaluate one’s existence… the viscerality of the feeling body shakes up our habitus, causing us to question at various levels its seemingly static nature” (64). Combining the work of these two theorists creates a framework in which shame is generative for the reevaluation of identity, as well as itself a somewhat sexual sensation. Probyn’s lines about shame making us quiver, about the intensity of the feeling body, take on an explicitly sexual dimension. Additionally, Walerstein reads the orgasm produced by Bone’s flame-filled masturbatory fantasy as a moment of vulnerability, “to either cohere with or disappear within the object of desire” (176). In other words, Walerstein views orgasm as potentially destabilizing of one’s identity, that there is “nothing safe” about this fantasy (176). I argue more specifically that the intensity, the viscerality, in Probyn’s terms, of orgasm provides not a shattering, an absorption, or an assumption, but the momentary safety to allow a reworking of identity.

**Bone’s Masturbatory Fantasies**

In Bone’s first fantasy, she describes being tied up and tossed into a flaming haystack. As the fire encroaches, she struggles to free herself. This fantasy forces Bone to directly confront
danger, linking sexual pleasure and terror. “I am not sure if I came when the fire reached me or after I had imagined escaping it. But I came. I orgasmed on my hand to the dream of fire,” Bone wonders (63). Bone is uncertain whether the thrill of escape or the release of surrender is what prompts her to climax. It’s not as important which of these is ultimately true, but rather that Bone takes pleasure in dictating the terms of her confrontations with danger, the kind of pleasure that brings empowerment and exaltation. Through this fantasy, Bone’s otherwise terrifying reality of constant abuse morphs into something thrilling, a scenario in which she has control. By writing that she orgasmed on her hand, she by extension claims responsibility and agency. The same way Glen’s hands systematically disempower Bone, her own hands are a source of empowerment. And importantly, it’s not fire itself that causes her orgasm, but rather the dream of fire, the safe, one-step-removed realm of her fantasy. Bone’s masturbatory fantasy brings on feelings of terror, forcing her to confront the danger that plagues her everyday life. And when she climaxes, she finds power in the face of this terror, in defiance of it and also because of it. Masturbation is a vehicle for direct confrontation and ultimate release.

In another fantasy, Bone imagines a group of people watching her as she is beaten. When Glen beats Bone in reality, she screams and cries uncontrollably in response. But in her fantasy, she is able to remain “proud and defiant” for the spectators (112). In this scenario, she retains control over her reaction to the abuse she endures. The presence of the spectators is a supportive one; the audience, despite taking no action to prevent the abuse, bolsters her morale. “Those who watched me, loved me. It was as if I was being beaten for them. I was wonderful in their eyes,” Bone explains (112). Buoyed by the love she feels from the spectators, Bone remains strong. Masturbation brings her directly to the site of her powerlessness, but rather than succumbing to it, she reimagines the dynamics, taking pride in herself despite the forces working to strip her of
her dignity. In this fantasy, Bone is filled with the love she rarely feels in her daily life.

Masturbation and her fantasy foster these emotions inside her, which allow her to reconceive scenarios of her abuse.17

Years later, when Bone is further along in her discovery of sexual pleasure and masturbation, and also by extension further down the path of abuse, trauma, and shame, she lays claim to a metal trawling hook that she and her cousins drag out of the river by their Aunt Raylene’s house. At first, Raylene forbids her from playing with it, asserting that it is dangerous: “You go down in the river and they’ll use something like this to pull you up in chunks. Pull you loose from the junk in that deep mud. Pull you up in pieces, you hear me?” (186). Here, Raylene positions the hook as an object with the potential to deconstruct one’s identity, one’s personhood, through slicing their physical form. Bone begins to fantasize and tell stories about the hook, stories which cause her young cousin to have nightmares in which she is discovered shredded in the river, and “the morticians had to sew pieces of her back together to look like somebody” (186-187). Allison explicitly positions the hook as an object which creates a potential space through which a new identity can be constructed. While the hook may dissolve one’s coherent identity, it creates the opportunity for reconstruction, as does Bone’s masturbation.

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17 In *Between the Body and the Flesh*, Hart argues that “The popular understanding of fantasy as an escape from reality is inaccurate.” She critiques the idea that women “should seek to make their sexual fantasies and their ‘reality’ consonant.” Further, “the notion that the place of fantasy has no relation to the changing of reality is what is most problematic” (18). Hart believes that “Sexuality that embraces the erotics of power moves toward a precarious, delicate borderline that tests and transgresses the line between fantasy and reality. For those women whose ‘selves’ have been constituted in large part by a traumatic history of sexual abuse, this borderline is often not a place to which they travel in order to risk the repetition of oppressive social structures; rather, it is the place where they find themselves located in order to repeat and transform their histories with a difference” (202).
Before she takes possession of the hook, she dreams of it: “I wanted one of those hooks, wanted it for my own, that cold sharp metal where I could put out my hand and touch it at any time” (187). To possess the hook would be to control when and how she could touch it, a right she does not always possess over her own body due to Glen’s frequent assaults. Later on, Bone sneaks back and steals the hook. She polishes it until it is clean and glistening, and then begins to masturbate with it. Significantly, Bone locks the chain attached to the hook around her hips as she masturbates: “I was locked away and safe” (193). In this passage, Bone describes the sense of safety that masturbation can bring. Using the chain, she forms a metal boundary around herself. This act harkens back to the scene of her first abuse when she desires the embrace of her mother and sister, and the strength of her own two iron hands, as protection from Glen’s violence. Masturbating with the hook—placing an object of power between her legs—offers that feeling of peace in safety. She knows no one can touch her, so she is able to relax. Being able to hold that object between her legs and use it to find pleasure is an act of resistance against the danger she is constantly placed in.

As Bone masturbates, she contemplates the images of women she has encountered in Glen’s porn magazines, women who “pushed stuff up inside them” (193). She considers this idea, but then concludes, “I wasn’t like the women in those books, but it felt good to hold that metal, to let those links slip back and forth until they were slippery” (193). This conclusion may be read as a queer denial of so-called normative images of sexuality. In this moment, Bone considers what she believes to be the sexual norm, present in media and condoned and supported by Glen, and consciously rejects it. While giving herself pleasure, she interprets her own sexual desires and preferences. It is also significant that she specifically denies identification with penetrative sex, clinging instead to the non-normative act of non-procreative masturbation,
specifically with an otherwise dangerous object. Bone then locks the hook’s chain around her hips:

It was mine. It was safe. Every link on that chain was magic in my hand. I put my head back and smiled. The chain moved under the sheet. I was locked away and safe. What I really was could not be touched. What I really wanted was not yet imagined. Somewhere far away a child was screaming, but right then, it was not me. (193).

In this scene, Bone claims ownership over the hook and the safety, pleasure, and protection it provides. This otherwise dangerous, phallic object which has infinite potential to provoke pain instead becomes an object of comfort. Bone finds pleasure in the danger of the hook, despite the hard, sharp metal, as she, for once, controls the danger she is in. Bone repurposes its danger to serve as a defender against unwanted violation, allowing her instead to revel in the sensations of her own manipulations. This scene also represents a moment of potential, desires that were “not yet imagined,” a moment of growth and possibility for change and development. The masturbation bursts Bone’s conception of her own desires wide open, allowing her to consider potential non-normative possibilities through the sense of safety and catharsis this protected masturbation brings. She also temporarily distances herself from her abuse, acknowledging that somewhere there was a child in peril, a child screaming, but for that moment, that child was not her. Importantly, she does not deny the existence of the horror or even pretend that the horror ceases solely because she herself is momentarily not experiencing it. Abuse provides a backdrop even for this moment of pleasure. However, Bone is able to hold it at bay, to keep it in the distance, for that moment.

In "Trauma and Survival in Dorothy Allison's Bastard Out of Carolina," Melanie Grué analyzes the role of storytelling and sexual fantasy in Bones experience of trauma. Grué states that Bone’s sexual fantasies “allow her to exert a form of control over her life and to express a certain sense of agency” (83). In these lines, Grué develops a theory that positions masturbation,
guided by pleasure-danger fantasies, as an act of survival. According to Grué, Bone’s fantasies allow her to survive her abuse, work through her trauma, and subsequently exercise greater control over her body.\textsuperscript{18} Though Bone struggles with feelings of shame, she uses masturbation to bring herself—if only—momentary pleasure and control over her body and those who abuse it.

Cvetkovich elaborates on a scene at a Tribe 8 concert in which a mosh pit forms, initially appearing to be very physically dangerous. However, this appearance is “deceptive,” and instead turns out to be pleasurable because of its “power to work with this fear”: “Mosh pits provide an arena for exploring the physical and psychic dimensions of safe space—a process that includes the solicitation of fear and danger” (\textit{Archive of Feelings}, 85). Rather than conceptualizing a safe space as a space free from difficult emotions of fear and danger, Cvetkovich flips this term on its head as a space that may necessarily include controlled prompting of danger. Cvetkovich argues that the mosh pit enabled a “physical release,” which “can be understood as a ritualized repetition that transforms earlier scenes of violence” (87). In this way, Bone’s masturbation functions as a “safe space” by providing “both a space free of conflict and a space in which conflict and anger can emerge as a necessary component of psychic resolution” (87).

\textbf{Bone’s Empowerment is Not Uncomplicated}

The empowerment that Bone finds through masturbation is not uncomplicated. She is “more ashamed for masturbating to the fantasy of being beaten than for being beaten in the first place” (113). The idea that she feels empowered and gains agency from her masturbation is tempered by the fact that these crucial developmental experiences are still mediated through

\textsuperscript{18} Grué does acknowledge the significance of Bone’s fantasies to the “elaboration of [her] identity.” However, she places greater emphasis on the importance of storytelling than masturbation to Bone’s emergent selfhood: “The moments when Bone tells herself or others stories are moments when her sense of self is restored.” While I do agree, I believe that Bone’s masturbation is not solely a survival strategy but a coming of age strategy.
experiences of trauma and abuse. Allison herself embraces these supposedly contradicting poles of empowerment and oppression, shame and pride, pain and pleasure:

Two or three things I know, but this is one I am not supposed to talk about, how it comes together—sex and violence, love and hatred. I’m not ever supposed to put together the two halves of my life—the man who walked across my childhood and the life I have made for myself. I am not supposed to talk about hating that man when I grew up to be a lesbian, a dyke, stubborn, competitive, and perversely lustful (Two or Three Things I Know For Sure, 45).

It is incredibly fraught that Bone’s experiences with Glen, her fantasies, and self-understanding, leading to her sexual awakening, are mediated through experiences of abuse. But agency and coercion are not mutually exclusive. In fact, essentially within Bone’s narrative, agency is eminently possible within moments of coercion and constraint. Exercising agency is not necessarily about finding freedom but rather seizing power wherever possible.

While Bone is ashamed of her abuse, she is more ashamed of finding eroticism in it. As the severity of the beatings increases, so does the violence of the fantasies. Bone begins to fetishize the belts used as weapons against her. “Oiled, smooth, and supple,” she describes them, as she sneaks into Glen’s closet to “see them and smell them,” to “touch the leather, feel it warm under my palms,” a kind of sexual caress (112). She acknowledges that her beatings are inevitable, but feels ashamed over the agency she exerts over her masturbation: “I couldn’t stop my stepfather from beating me, but I was the one who masturbated. I did that, and how could I explain to anyone that I hated being beaten but still masturbated to the story I told myself about it?” (113) It’s not only the masturbation she is ashamed of but the agency in performing it. She is ashamed of her “self-centered” fantasies, despite the fact that they were the only place she “was able to defy Daddy Glen. Only there that I had any pride” (113).

The distinction between her beatings and her fantasies is a question of agency, as well as the potential for her to imagine her own desire and pleasure. When she is beaten, she is a passive
receiver of her stepfather’s violent outbursts, but while she masturbates, she maintains agency over her own pleasure. The sensations her body feels are entirely within her grasp, provoked by her own two hands, a right Glen strips from her with his abuse. It is not that in her fantasies she takes pleasure in the beatings but rather that she reappropriates and repurposes the violence. “There was no heroism possible in the real beatings,” so she makes her own heroism through her fantasies, escaping (or jumping into) flames and proudly performing for a spectating crowd (113). In most of her life, Bone’s mental and physical sensations occur under the control of others, as her bodily autonomy is repeatedly violated both by her abuser and the apologists who fail to protect her. Through masturbation, Bone can redraw her bodily boundaries, controlling how, what, and when she feels. Most importantly, she has the power to make herself feel good, if even for a few moments, and for her, feeling pleasure is intrinsically linked to seizing the power she lacks in her everyday reality. Masturbation does not entirely relieve the shame Bone feels, but it provides a momentary mental respite, which is sometimes enough to survive on.

Cvetkovich theorizes that Bone’s “dream of fire” “articulates the fusion of fear and pleasure, shame and anger, that fuels Bone’s queer childhood sexuality” (Archive of Feelings, 102). Bone is unable to separate the beatings from the fantasies, that which she hates from that which she loves, and because she concocts the fantasies herself, Cvetkovich theorizes that this causes Bone to blame herself for her abuse as well. This demand for passivity prompts Bone’s silence, as she refuses to confess her abuse because of the shame she feels about her fantasies and her supposed part in provoking the abuse. However, despite this, “Bone recognizes that the agency that gives rise to her shame is also her salvation,” Cvetkovich writes (103). Bone’s sexual fantasies are “indistinguishably both” a source of shame and a source of pride.
Orgasm is the place where Bone seizes her power. This is contrasted against the fact that orgasm is generally conceived as a moment of powerlessness and lack of control. Rage is also often regarded as a loss of control, and Bone identifies a sense of power in her rage as well as her masturbation. What is it about these moments of loss of control that Bone finds empowering? Bone is always policing herself and controlling her own body to appease Glen. But eventually, she accepts that he will always be angry and that policing herself is futile, so she takes control over her body in a new way through allowing it to lose control under safe circumstances. In these moments, she directs her bodily sensations, whatever those may be, even if those sensations lead her to lose control, in contrast to when she lets out involuntary sounds and reactions during her abuse.

In “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Audre Lorde conceives of the erotic as “the lifeforce of women,” “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (89, 87). This conceptualization of the erotic aligns with my argument that there is power in the expression of previously unexpressed feeling. Lorde elaborates that historical oppression has forced women to suppress their erotic energy as a source of power. In Lorde’s view, when women recognize and release the erotic, living “from within outward,” “we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation” (90). Thus, when women consciously recognize and channel the erotic, they become better able to fight oppression. In this way, when Bone begins to channel her erotic energy, she becomes more able to assert power in moments of abuse.

**How is Bone’s Masturbation Distinct From “Normal” Masturbation?**

In “Childhood Trauma and Masturbation,” Alexandra Katehakis explains the link between childhood abuse or trauma and masturbation. She writes that a child may not have
“sufficient outlets for all the rage, despair, and grief that results from the betrayal,” and sometimes societal rules enforce silence and repression of one’s experiences in order not to “rock the boat.” In response, such children may “self-medicate” through masturbation because it releases “intoxicating chemicals that soothe the pain. In that sense, it is a unique kind of high that money can’t buy.” Here, Katehakis not only develops a framework of self-centered production regarding masturbation, but also positions pleasure as free, as generated within oneself, as existing outside of capitalistic structures of external demand and exchange. Instead, masturbation is a tool for eliciting pleasure which is accessible whenever necessary. Masturbation has also been employed as a tactic of recovery for sexual trauma survivors. Sexual trauma survivors are encouraged to create “body awareness” in order to heal from their trauma. In “Using Masturbation to Reclaim Power and Pleasure after Sexual Trauma,” Scott writes that “Masturbation is a way to reclaim your own sense of your body and own ability to bring pleasure to your body that is totally within your control.”

Crucially, even though masturbation has a historical connection with abuse, Bone’s masturbation is not a product of her abuse. As Gilmore theorizes in “Bastard Testimony,” “Allison does not present Bone’s masturbation fantasies as simply the detritus of abuse; rather, Bone’s hunger, desire for the power to destroy, and neediness all contribute to a developing imaginary around sex, violence, and class” (60). Even though Bone learns throughout her childhood that sex and violence are inextricably intermingled, “The violence with which Bone’s imagine resonates when she masturbates is not the same as the violence Daddy Glen visits upon her” (60). She does not fantasize about inflicting violence on the vulnerable; instead, she dreams of fire, of revenge. What is significant about Bone’s case is not that she masturbates but the
reasons why she does it: to take momentary pleasure, control, and respite, and to make external
the emotions she is otherwise forced to repress.

**Bone’s Class-Based Shame**

The impact of Bone’s sexual shame on her coming of age process is compounded by and
analogized to the shame Bone feels about her family’s class positionality. Bone can almost never
afford the things the others she goes to school with have. Despite Mama’s repeated assurances in
the face of aggressive debt collectors, overdue bills, and humiliation in front of their neighbors
that, “We’re not bad people. And we pay our way. We just can’t always pay when people want”
(82), Bone and Reese “didn’t believe her. We knew what the neighbors called us, what Mama
wanted to protect us from. We knew who we were” (82). Here, Bone’s identity is shaped by her
class status, her queer, outcast, bastard Boatwright status.

Whenever Anney, Reese, and Bone interact with Glen’s more middle-class, traditional
family members, Allison writes, “they were never happy to see us” (99). Glen’s father scolds
him, ingraining in Glen a sense of disappointment, shame, and failure. All the while, Glen’s
family members gawk, and Bone gazes at what she considers the wealth of the Waddell home
and wonders, “How could Reese and I be worthy of all that, the roses in their garden, the
sunlight on those polished windows and flowered drapes, the china plates gleaming behind glass
cabinets?” (102). Here, the perfect, picturesque roses are positioned as an emblem of class status,
of aspirational luxury, of an idealized family. At one point, Bone overhears the Waddell family
disparaging the Boatwrights by ridiculing their old car. She takes note of her cousin’s judgmental
gaze fixed on Bone as though she is “some elephant in a zoo—something dumb and ugly and
impervious to hurt” (102). In response to these repeated slights and simmering sense of shame,
Bone destroys her Aunt Madeline’s rose bush, shearing and shredding the feminine, domestic symbol of pride that adorns the family’s yard.

Bone is also shamed by the Woolworth’s store owner upon returning to pay for a bag of Tootsie rolls she stole. Anney forces Bone to admit her wrongdoing to the salesgirl, but Bone bursts out sobbing instead, attracting the attention of the store owner. “He looked like he was swallowing an urge to laugh at us,” Bone thinks, and shoves the bag of candy at him (97). In that instant, Bone transitions from shame to rage, containing her impulse to “kick him or throw up on him or scream his name on the street,” all images of expulsive expression (97). He temporarily bans her from the store, claiming that it’s a favor to help Anney teach Bone the consequences of her actions. Whenever Anney deems Bone has “learned [her] lesson,” she can return to the store and request that the ban be revoked, but until then, the store owner asserts, they will remember her name and her face, in an instant branding her criminal and denying her the potential for the simple pleasures that Woolworth’s provides (97). With this one gesture, the store owner polices Bone’s access to pleasure based on her class, acting as a gatekeeper to inclusion in mainstream, idyllic, middle-class consumer society. “I could feel the heat from my mama’s hand through my blouse, and I knew she was never going to come near this place again” Bone thinks (98). Mama’s anger, coded as heat, transfers to Bone, the anger at the shame and indignity of the situation.19

A few years later, Bone’s cousin Grey discovers her in possession of the forbidden hook, and she then reveals her further plans for revenge: “Got a plan to use that hook for something

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19 Probyn cites Skeggs’s ethnographic research on shame in working class women to present the claim that “the women Skeggs writes about have had shame ingrained in their bodies. The shame of not having enough, of making do, of being judged by state authorities, bosses, and middle-class women means that they move uneasily outside their habitual social spaces” (62-63).
nobody else would have ever thought of” (191). It is easy to read a sexual innuendo there, especially because Bone *does* use the hook as a sex toy, another purpose which others may not have considered. She wants to break into Woolworth’s, to infiltrate this site of pleasure and claim ownership and access to it, as retribution for the exclusion and shame she faced there. In this moment, Bone confronts an alternate abuser, one who inflicted shame upon her through violating her right to participate in consumer society and access simple material pleasure, and using the implement of her own masturbation to do so.

When Bone and her cousin do break into the Woolworth’s, the language she uses to describe her implementation of the hook mirrors the framing of her earlier masturbation:

> I swung the hook back and forth, back and forth, letting the loose part of the rope slip through my fingers, back and forth—and let go, right into the nuts case. The glass shattered and the nuts poured out. I felt a shock of electricity shoot up my arm to my shoulder; a river of nuts was flooding out of the case, a tide of nuts, an avalanche (223-224).

The language of repeated back and forth motion, slipping the rope through her fingers, is reminiscent of her pulling the hook back and forth between her legs. Ultimately, she releases the rope, provoking a penetration of the glass nuts case and an eventual release, “a tide,” “an avalanche” (234). The sexual language here is apparent. This tool of her masturbation then by extension reveals the illusion of the case, that it is only partially filled and otherwise artificially made to look full with cardboard. In sharp contrast, the “rows of canned vegetables and fruit at Aunt Raylene’s place” represent actual sustenance: “That was worth something. All this stuff seemed tawdry and useless.” (224-225). With this comparison, Bone begins to reject the capitalist, consumerist structures that keep her bound to her family, to others, to class shame.

The same way that Bone masturbates with the hook and externalizes her emotions, she then uses it to take revenge against Woolworth’s for the disrespect the store owner showed her
and her mother. Through this action, Bone exposes the artificiality of the store owner’s sense of superiority, dismantling and destroying a symbolically fraught center of consumption. It is significant that the instrument with which Bone extracted pleasure and enabled an expression of her own sexuality is also the implement she uses to claim the right to extract pleasure from Woolworth’s and express her rage at the class-based denial of her will. During their first confrontation, she was forced to suppress her emotions as the store owner inflicted verbal violence upon her. But now, upon her return, the phallic object she previously used to draw pleasure from her own body becomes a weapon she uses to externalize her rage and rebel against class-based shame. For that singular moment, she asserts that the store owner is, in actuality, no more powerful than she is, before returning to the reality of her everyday life and its constrictions.

Despite this moment of expressive destruction, Bone is still left searching for the true target of her rage: “I swung my hook back and forth, trying to think what it was that I really wanted, who I really wanted to hurt” (226). Bone ultimately runs out of the store, peeling off the black paint that her cousin used to besmirch the hook’s silver exterior: “Maybe when the metal was clean and pure and shiny, I would take off one night. Maybe I would go all the way over to uncle James’s house and pull up my mama a rosebush or two,” Bone thinks (226). Here, Bone directly references her previous rosebush rampage, her heat-fueled rage paralleled with her fire-related masturbatory fantasy. This connection solidifies the hook as a tool for externalizing anger, for expressing emotion, and for protection against violence.

**Links Between Masturbation and Orgasmic Rage**

For Bone, the emotion of rage is closely linked to the sensations of heat. Allison herself believes that “Anger is the healthy feeling [in response to sexual trauma]. The peak of the story
is that Bone gets angry” (Bouson, “You Nothing But Trash,” 118). Here, Allison herself describes Bone’s anger in orgasmic terms, as a peak, a climax in the story.\(^\text{20}\) In the aftermath of the rosebush massacre, Bone describes her rage:

> I could feel a kind of heat behind my eyes that lit up everything I glanced at. It was dangerous, that heat. It wanted to pour out and burn everything up, everything they had that we couldn’t have, everything that made them think they were better than us. I stood in the garden and spun myself around and around, pouring out heat and rage and the sweet stink of broken flowers (103).

Allison links expressions of class-based rage—rage at the stark disparity between Bone’s family and the Waddells, rage at the Waddells’ condescension and sense of superiority, and rage at her own sense of powerlessness and forced politeness—to images of fire and burning. Bone’s rage is not often allowed an outlet, as she is coached out of expressing her rage in transgressive ways in order to appease Glen’s anger and protect herself from further abuse.\(^\text{21}\) But in this moment, when she destroys the roses, her rage overflows, burns. Similarly, in her flame-filled masturbatory fantasy, Bone is forced to feel the heat, unable to avoid the emotion of the situation, but this forced sensation is cathartic and ends in orgasm.

In this passage, Allison directly furthers this link between heat, rage, and sexuality. She characterizes Bone’s rage as “an aching lust to hurt somebody back,” a starkly sexual claim. This

\(^{20}\) In *Two Or Three Things I Know For Sure*, Allison furthers this link between sexuality and anger when she describes fending off an assault: “And oh! the joy of it, the power to say, ‘No, you son of a bitch, this time, no!’ His fear was sexual and marvelous—hateful and scary but wonderful, like orgasm, like waiting a whole lifetime and finally coming. I know, I’m not supposed to talk about sex like that, not about weapons or hatred or violence, and never to put them in the context of sexual desire. Is it male? Is it mean? Did you get off on it? I’m not supposed to talk about how good anger can feel—righteous, justified, and completely satisfying.” (47)

\(^{21}\) In *Trash*, Allison writes of her own experiences, “My uncles were sudden, violent, and daunting. My aunts wore you down without ever seeming to fight at all. It was my anger that my aunts thought queer, my wild raging temper they respected in a boy and discouraged in a girl” (96-97). In this way, Allison’s rage is explicitly queered, solidifying the link between masculine expulsions of emotion and feminine suppression.
rage was a “hunger” that “ached for the release of screaming,” a hunger that would “throb and swell behind my tongue” (98). The image of suppressed rage in these lines is erotic and sensual, akin to how one would describe a desire to climax. The orgasmic peak in sensation is similar: an explosion of feeling as a result of building emotional or physical pressure. The link between a desire to express rage and a feeling of hunger (characterized as lust) is also a clearly class-based metaphor. Allison makes the connection between rage and sexuality even more clearly when Bone places the shredded rose petals inside her dress: “I even pulled up my skirt and tucked some in my panties, walking more slowly then to feel the damp, silky flowers moving against my skin” (103). In a certain sense, this expression of rage is also an act of masturbation, of self-centered, luxurious claiming of bodily sensation. She doesn’t just rip the buds off the bushes, she pulls them apart, taking the deconstruction of this feminine symbol a step further. In this scene, Bone both embraces this feminine sexuality, exemplified by the rosebuds, but also destroys it. She seizes this symbol from its owner, its arbiter, and reappropriates it to fit her own desire. She spins and spins, luxuriating in the smell of the “broken flowers” (103). Not only does she take pleasure from this act of destruction, of rebellion against imposed class-based shame and idealized femininity, she revels in it, savoring the sensation.

The link between fire, rage, and masturbation is also exemplified when Bone experiences conflict over her thoughts about her abuse. She wonders whether Glen gets sexual pleasure out of abusing her: “Had he been beating me until he came in his trousers? The thought made me gag. I pushed my wrists harder and harder against my own sex until I was hurting myself” (252). In this way, Bone’s disgust merges with a masochistic expression of sexuality. At one point, Bone has a dream in which she is five years old again, luxuriating safely in her mother’s loving embrace. “She held me and I knew who I was,” Bone reflects on a time in which her identity was more
stable and secure, before the abuse, in particular, a time in which her masturbation was not shameful (252-254). “When I put my hand down between my legs, it was not a sin. It was like her murmur, like music, like a prayer in the dark. It was meant to be, and it was a good thing” (252-254). Masturbation was not always considered shameful or perverse, rather it is the abuse that has perverted it and the abuse’s influence upon it which Bone attempts to resist. Bone wakes up crying, reflecting on the “sweet good feeling between my legs, almost hurting me, but comforting too” (252-254). Bone examines her hands and thinks about fire, “purifying, raging, sweeping through Greenville and clearing the hearth” (254). “Burn it all,” Bone thinks as she begins to masturbate, “seeing the blaze in my head” as the “fire roar[s] closer” (254).

When the violence against her escalates, Bone uses masturbation as a momentary release of the perpetual tension she feels. When those around her inflict verbal violence and shame her and her family, Bone also externalizes her emotions through orgasmic outbursts of anger. This way, she expresses what she can’t vocalize when being abused. Bone’s expressions of class rage and sexual rage are both experienced as heat. This links her masturbation to her ability to combat her sexual and class-based shame through expressions of rage.22

**How Masturbation Facilitates Bone’s Coming of Age**

Over time, through the renegotiation of the power dynamics in Bone’s life as enabled through masturbation, and through the emotional catharsis that masturbation brings her, Bone comes to the subconscious realization that the conventional nuclear family is not her goal after all. Instead, she will define her own coming of age outside of the Boatwright family’s and state-imposed prescriptions set out for her—having a child while a young teen, spending her life

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22 In *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*, Allison writes of her own experiences, “Getting past the anger, getting to the release, I become someone else, and the story changes” (43).
married and caring for children, and aging prematurely. She ultimately rebels against these standards through her discovery of sexual independence, the ability to provide herself sexual pleasure apart from dependence on a man. As Saxey writes in “Lesbian Bastard Heroes,” “For the bastard lesbian protagonist, the choice often arises between aligning herself with a higher authority—her parents, dominant social discourses such as religion or biology—or, alternatively, critiquing and overturning such authority” (35). Bone chooses the latter.

In response to Anney and Glen’s active sex life, Reese remarks to their Aunt Alma, “They sure like to do it a lot,” to which Alma replies, “Love is just about the best thing we’ve got that don’t cost money or make you sick to your stomach.” (62) Reese disgustedly calls it “mushy stuff,” but it gets Bone thinking: “It was mushy. Mama and Daddy Glen always hugging and rubbing on each other, but it was powerful too. Sex. Was that what Daddy Glen had been doing to me in the parking lot? Was it what I had started doing to myself whenever I was alone in the afternoons?” (63). In these lines, Bone ties together sex, abuse, and masturbation in an attempt to conceptualize and define each individually. By drawing these connections, Bone learns that sexual pleasure can exist independently of the familial structure. When Anney referred to sex, she likely intended that to mean sex with another person. However, that is not necessarily the case. Sexual pleasure is one form of entertainment that is free, one form of pleasure that one can provide oneself, independent of others. This dynamic, of course, becomes fraught when one is an abuse survivor, who has a more complicated relationship with sex. However, if we take this portrayal of sex to extend to sex with oneself, then the same principles hold true. When Bone discovers that she can produce this pleasure within herself, she gets one step closer to acknowledging that she does not need to participate in the typical nuclear family structure after
all. Instead, she can take herself out of this economy of exchange and dependence, renegotiating her sexuality in the face of her abuse, on her own terms.

**Aunt Raylene as Queer Mentor**

Another example of non-normative sexuality—of possibilities for life outside the economy of financial or sexual exchange—comes from Bone’s Aunt Raylene. Anney decides to send Bone to Raylene’s to stay so that she can temporarily avoid Glen’s abuse, already positioning Raylene’s house as a space of protection and safety. Raylene lives on her own and supports herself by selling her own goods, home-canned vegetables and fruit. As a result, she is not as beholden to the economic structures that regulate and police the Boatwright family, sometimes literally, and which hold them in poverty. Raylene, instead, gets by on what she needs and nothing more, living physically and financially apart from this system.

Raylene is distinctly coded as a queer character:

For all she was a Boatwright woman, there were ways Raylene had always been different from her sisters. She was quieter, more private, living alone with her dogs and fishing lines, and seemingly happy that way…Raylene was probably the only person any of us would ever meet who was completely satisfied with her own company (178-179).

According to family mythology, Raylene had run off to work at a carnival when she was seventeen. At the carnival, she cut her hair short, dressed as a man, and called herself Ray. Bone views Raylene’s past with “wistful longing,” wondering whether she could cut her hair, learn to “smoke and talk rough,” and follow in Raylene’s footsteps (179). However, she acknowledges this path to be potentially fraught with danger, noting the “couple of ugly scars” behind one of Raylene’s ears that she “wouldn’t talk about” and wondering, “If I followed her lead I might come back with worse scars, or not come back at all” (179). Toward the end of the book, Raylene divulges that at the carnival, she pursued a relationship with another woman, rather than
a man, like the family mythology dictated. After Raylene returned from the carnival, she worked at the local textile mill for the next twenty years, before quitting to sell her own goods.

When Bone is caught in the throes of her own irrepressible anger, Raylene helps her channel that anger into a productive lesson in her coming of age process. Masturbation allows Bone to externalize the anger, which is the first step, while Raylene’s guidance is the next step in channelling that expressive anger. “I made my life, the same way it looks like you’re gonna make yours—out of pride and stubbornness and too much anger. You better think hard, Ruth Anne, about what you want and who you’re mad at. You better think hard,” Raylene counsels, instilling in Bone the importance of agency over the trajectory of her life and where she wants to direct her anger (163). Raylene encourages Bone to direct her “anger away from herself and her mother and toward not only the man who actually abused her, but also toward the class system that stigmatized her,” shifting her focus from her individual circumstances toward larger, more structural constraints (Baker, “Topography of Resistance,” 25). If and when she is able to re-route this self-destructive anger, Baker argues, she then becomes able to “refuse the subject-position of victimized girl-child,” instead becoming a “resister, like her Aunt Raylene, of the compulsory heteropatriarchal family structure” (Baker, “The Politics of They,” 125). This represents a significant shift between anger as destructive and anger as productive and enabling coming of age as queer, as guided by Raylene.

Raylene also explicitly encourages Bone’s queerness, telling her that, “Trash rises… Out here where no one can mess with it, trash rises all the time” (180), demonstrating that it is possible for her to grow up and advance in the world, despite the shame and conflict Bone feels about her social positionality. At one point, Raylene encourages Bone to be live an unconventional life:
I am so tired of people whining about what might happen to them, never taking no chances or doing anything new. I’m glad you an’t gonna be like that, Bone. I’m counting on you to get out there and do things, girl. Make people nervous and make your old aunt glad (182).

Here, Raylene fosters Bone’s potential to generate “nervousness,” to destabilize order, and to follow in her non-normative footsteps and craft a queer path, an alternative future for herself. Aunt Raylene further illuminates possibilities for life outside capitalist exchange and patriarchal domesticity. Baker theorizes that the novel presents a “lesbian space of resistance” that both “provides a locus for opposing the violence visited upon the working poor by an abusive class system; and it affords a site for beginning the process of surviving childhood sexual abuse” (“Topography of Resistance,” 23). This space, carved out by Raylene, is fertile for identity formation. Throughout the novel, Bone moves away from a heterosexual family structure toward a queer kinship with Raylene. Home is represented as a heterosexual destination, so much of Bone’s project as she comes of age is finding new queer homes. By Raylene’s example, Bone learns that sexuality can exist outside male patriarchal and capitalist economic structures. If sex and pleasure are free, and one can support oneself economically, then one can live self-sufficiently like Raylene, queerly outside the conventional nuclear family structure. Through masturbation, the queering of sex into sex for one, Bone learns that she can be sexually independent, and through Raylene, Bone learns that her sexuality can exist outside of marriage, that she does not need to have children to have a sustainable life, that she can exist independently of the strictures outlined for her by her family’s standards. This is not to say that Raylene’s mode of living or role as a mentor represents some “utopian lesbian site or a conception of lesbian subjectivity essentially outside dominant binary categories of gender and sexuality, beyond culture and discourse, or outside the mechanisms of power” (Baker, “The Politics of They,” 122). Such binaries “essentialize the lesbian subject.” However, she does
illuminate alternative possibilities which will not necessarily be free of violence but may be safer and more authentic for Bone: “Together on the margins of hegemonic institutions, Bone and Raylene carve out a space in the fissures and cracks, and there they preserve the oppositional discourse of Boatwright women that is muffled or silenced in the mainstream” (Baker, “The Politics of They,” 125).

**How Bone Ultimately Comes of Age**

Crucially, while it is a source of security, empowerment, and emotional release, masturbation does not protect Bone from assault. Instead, it allows her to find her voice and resist Glen’s abuses, and most critically, masturbation puts her in momentary control over her body and her pleasure. At the end of the novel, Glen rapes her for the first time. In this scene, she not only fights back against the assault but also combats the patriarchal ideal that imposes him as her father. He comes looking for her mother, attempting to convince Bone to allow Anney to reconcile with him and reunite the family. Then, he begins to comment on her adolescent state: “You’re getting bigger. Gonna be ready to start dating boys any day now. Getting married, maybe, starting your own family. Breaking some man’s heart just ‘cause you can” (281). Here, he emphasizes the potential her body holds, the normative future pathway outlined for her. At one point, he literally commands her to make him a sandwich, the ultimate symbol of patriarchal domesticity. Although Bone acknowledges Anney is free to return to Glen, Bone refuses to agree to live with him again. Glen becomes incensed: “You’re not even thirteen years old, girl. You don’t say what you do. I’m your daddy. I say what you do.” (282), presenting an interesting tension between being on the cusp of adulthood as he says and being under his control.

As Glen becomes more physical, Bone remembers past instances of his violence, conjuring up visions and narratives of her past experiences, only to then resist and subvert them.
“I had always felt like it was my fault, but now it didn’t matter. I didn’t care anymore what might happen. I wouldn’t hold still anymore” (282). This represents a stark transition in tactic. This transition is a mark of her coming of age, signified as away from the home and the immediate threat of abuse. Previously, Glen had stripped Bone’s control over her reactions from her. Either silence was imposed upon her, or screams were wrenched from her. In this scene, however, Bone determines to fight back, a change possibly influenced by the way she has been able to tap into her emotions through masturbation, to acknowledge her ability to exercise autonomy in the face of his assaults. She stabs him with a butter knife and screams with all her strength. Ultimately, though, after an intense physical tussle, he traps her: “You’re not going anywhere. You think you’re so grown-up. You think you’re so big and bad, saying no to me. Let’s see how big you are, how grown” (284). Here, Glen directly acknowledges this as a coming of age moment, framing his assault as an attempt to undermine her growth, a growth which threatens him. Glen victimizes Bone in order to push her back into a childhood in which she remains fully under his control. Throughout the entire, prolonged assault, Bone continues to fight, to curse, to try to scream. By fighting back so vigorously, Bone fights not only to protect herself or to cause Glen pain but also for her right to adulthood against his oppressive influence. Glen views women and children as figures to be subjugated, bent to his will, but Bone, alternatively, conceives of womanhood as daring to resist. When Mama finally discovers Glen and Bone in the aftermath of his attack, she beats Glen harshly. But when Glen dissolves into a pitiful figure, banging his head against the car door repeatedly, she goes to him, cradling his head in her lap. Mama comforts him, despite discovering him raping her 12-year-old daughter. Bone is never fully protected, even and especially by those closest to her, but masturbation makes her feel momentarily secure.
It doesn’t save her from this ultimate escalation in violence, but through the self-discovery that masturbation provides she gains the will and the ability to scream.

Raylene is the one who nurses Bone back to health after the assault, and she moves in with her, solidifying Raylene’s role as a queer mentor. Anney visits Bone in the last pages of the book, and Bone realizes that she and her mother are strangers, that she has separated from that family permanently: “I wanted my life back, my mama, but I knew I would never have that. The child I had been was gone with the child she had been. We were new people, and we didn’t know each other anymore,” Bone thinks, decisively representing her coming of age as a queer separation from her nuclear family (307). Anney presents Bone with a new birth certificate with the “illegitimate” stamp expunged, leaving Bone’s sense of identity wide open at the end of the book. Bone considers who she will be in the future, wondering what she would be like when she was “fifteen, twenty, thirty” (309). At the cusp of thirteen, she wonders whether she’ll be as strong, “as hungry for love, as desperate, determined, and ashamed” as her mother (309). Ultimately, as she leans into Raylene’s touch, “trusting her arm, and her love” (309), she determines that she will be some unique combination of the two: “I was who I was going to be, someone like her, like Mama, a Boatwright woman” (309). Bone has come of age. She has separated herself from the patriarchal family structure enforced by Glen and can now independently forge her own identity, as enabled by her masturbatory catharsis and reconceptualization of sexual independence. At this point, the future opens up in front of Bone, as she comes of age as a queer, bastard, Boatwright woman, on her own terms.
“Lady Sex Adventurers”: Masturbatory Sexuality in *How to Build a Girl*

Johanna Morrigan loves to masturbate. *How to Build a Girl* even opens on a masturbation scene. Johanna, exhausted from a stressful day, masturbates to relax, to relieve tension. As a fat, working-class teenager from Wolverhampton, Johanna simultaneously doubts she will ever have a fulfilling sex life and craves nothing more than to be kissed. Confronted with the intense precarity of her family’s financial situation, Johanna decides to construct an entirely new persona for herself, a London music reviewer with the power and mobility to support herself and her family. She rechristens herself Dolly Wilde after Oscar Wilde’s niece (though I will refer to her as Johanna throughout for consistency), drops out of high school, and lands a job at *Disc & Music Echo*, a music magazine. She quite literally writes herself into a new life. Johanna’s entry into partnered sexuality coincides with her rise as a writer. A relationship with an older coworker kicks off what Johanna terms her time as a “Lady Sex Adventurer,” pursuing sex whenever and wherever she can find it, often with interview subjects or men she encounters at concerts. As Johanna crafts her writerly persona, she engages in less-than-satisfying sex, often describing feelings of detachment intermingled with otherwise humorous and bizarre encounters. In these moments of detachment, Johanna leaves her own body and enters the body of her partner, making his sensations her own, focusing on how much pleasure she must be giving him rather than the pleasure she is not receiving. Ultimately, Johanna realizes that she only began having sex with her coworker for the review, to hear what he thought of her, to, in essence, have sex with herself. I argue that these experiences represent an impulse toward masturbation, a desire to discover her own sexuality, albeit through the body of another (possibly the only mode of discovery she considers to be available to her).
While literal masturbation is intensely present in the beginning of *How to Build a Girl*, it fades into the background as the story progresses, and particularly as Johanna begins having partnered sex. By the end of the book, the only place that Johanna’s masturbation appears is during partnered sex, after she refuses to allow her partner to try to bring her to climax and thus takes matters into her own hands, literally. Solitary masturbation for stress relief and pleasure is displaced by masturbation for a more practical purpose, to assist in detaching from unsatisfactory experiences, to help her discover more about her own sexuality, and simply to satisfy herself. The act of masturbation itself does not mark Johanna’s coming of age. After Johanna ultimately rejects the masturbatory impulses driving her sexuality, I struggled to reconcile whether this represented a condemnation of masturbation, a relegation of masturbation to immature, childhood sexuality akin to that of Freud’s theories, a turn which would be surprising for a book so openly feminist. However, I believe that, by rejecting the writerly persona she has crafted for herself (a persona which she comes to realize is overly cynical), as well as the detached, just-for-the-review sex, she recenters her own desires. She divests herself from the patriarchal influences that have co-opted her masturbatory practice, and though it is not literally depicted in the novel, I argue that Johanna’s driving impulse and erotic energy are ultimately redirected toward herself, catalyzing a true coming of age based on self-fulfillment.

**Where Johanna Begins**

Caitlin Moran’s *How to Build a Girl* (2014) is a semi-autobiographical novel. Moran writes that her and her friend’s salacious, daring tales of teenage sexuality inspired the book. “They were not shy, or tremulous, or scared, but bright, witty, horny girls going out and absolutely choosing to get about a bit, having sex with a man who made balloon animals, masturbating dementedly, trying out every perversion under the sun, and exploring the world
through their genitals” (Moran, “My Sex Quest Years”). Se as exploration is a prominent theme in the novel. It was the dissonance between the vivid color and agency of her friends’ tales and the surging popularity of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series that really struck Moran:

> What I found in the book was a very niche corner of female sexuality being presented as an everywoman coming-of-age fantasy… It's the opposite of independence, rebellion, curiosity, rock'n'roll and the carefully attended forming of your own desires (Moran, “My Sex Quest Years”).

To confront this disconnect, and to tell what she feels is a more comprehensive story of teen girl sexuality, Moran wrote *How to Build a Girl*. The novel tracks Johanna’s coming of age, from age fourteen to seventeen. When the novel begins, Johanna feels confined, stuck in a cramped house as one of five siblings. She is awkward, out of place, and not yet fully formed. But then, she starts listening to music, incubating in the intense Riot Grrrl ethos of the early ‘90s, which “reshap[ed] of girlhood as a powerful position of social, political, and cultural agency” (Kearney, “Girlfriends and Girl Power,” 133). It is this exposure to music, punk in particular, that facilitates her newly embodied, expressive persona and inspires her coming-to-voice as a writer. Over the course of these three years, Johanna drops out of high school, becomes a renowned and reviled music reviewer, has a lot of sex, and ultimately begins to come of age.

In “Girl Power Discourse,” Šnircová outlines Anita Harris’s theory of the two models of Western girlhood that have emerged following the surge of “Girl Power” media: the “can-do” girl—generally white and middle class, committed to career and consumerism, and assured of her own capacity to succeed—and the “at-risk” girl—generally from a marginalized background, tending to embody supposedly masculine behaviors such as substance abuse, violence, and promiscuity. The “at-risk” girl is seen as a warning sign, as “evidence that Girl Power can be taken ‘too far’” (Šnircová, “Girl Power Discourse,” 8). Šnircová argues that Johanna Morrigan embodies “the conundrum of the postfeminist Girl Power discourse,” as she rejects proscribed
feminine ideals while simultaneously reifying patriarchal gender roles (Šnircová, 8). According to Šnircová, Morrigan is in many ways a prototypical “at-risk” girl, raised on a council estate in a family supported by state benefits. But while her coming of age process is marked by heavy substance use and liberal sexuality, her ultimate trajectory reflects that of the can-do girl:

By simultaneously presenting the heroine of her novel as both a younger version of the chick lit heroine – the attractive, middle-class and well-off prototype of the can-do girl – and as a working-class, poor, fat teenager, the author explores the possibilities that Girl Power discourse opens to those whose attributes do not conform to this image of success. (Šnircová, 9)

As such, Moran’s portrayal of Johanna opens new and complicated doors for how we think of girlhood in the era of third- and fourth-wave feminism.

Johanna begins the novel feeling entirely stuck in her circumstances. On the very first page, she masturbates following a long, stressful day in which “The Old Man didn’t get famous, again” (4). The Old Man Johanna refers to is her father, perpetually drunk and vaguely in pursuit of musical fame. Her father’s aspirations represent a fleeting, unreliable promise of escape, but Johanna dreams of living in London, of wealth, and most importantly, of a sense of belonging. So far, this is nothing more than an abstract, though ardent, aspiration: “God, we have to get out of here soon. We cannot hold on, being poor and not-famous, much longer” (5). It is both their lack of resources and their lack of cultural significance that, in Johanna’s view, prevent them from upward mobility. To Johanna, the keys to power and potential can be found in money and fame.

For Johanna, a prospective move to London represents the key to the idyllic future she envisions: “‘When I get to London, that is when I will start being me.’ Quite what that is, I have no idea. There isn’t a word for what I want to be yet… The thing I want to be hasn’t been invented” (29). With these lines, Johanna expresses the beginnings of desire, the hope for a
future in which her identity can be fully actualized. Pre-coming-of-age, she echoes what many women, literary or otherwise, have felt before, the sense that there is no model, no example to base her future on, that she will have to craft it entirely for herself, will quite literally have to invent the language to bring it into existence.

**Masturbation as Stress Reliever**

In the book’s opening scene, Johanna masturbates next to her sleeping brother: “I am lying in bed next to my brother, Lupin. He is six years old. He is asleep. I am fourteen. I am not asleep. I am masturbating,” Johanna conveys frankly (3). As she masturbates, she ponders what her brother would think, were he awake: “This is what he would want. He would want me to be happy.” (3). These lines establish the tongue in cheek, humorous, even glib tone that persists throughout the text, along with Johanna’s underlying consciousness of the desires and evaluations of others, even her sleeping brother. Johanna later elaborates that her “tiny, quiet wank” is “half from stress, half from pleasure” (11). These lines reveal that Johanna uses masturbation as a stress reliever, a way of eliciting pleasure, a largely positive tool. Johanna’s attitude is reflective of the cultural era in which Moran writes. Contemporary women value masturbation because it is devoted personal time, a component of a wellness routine, an excuse to slow down and “cherish” oneself. According to a *Glamour* magazine survey of over 1,000 women, 79% saw masturbation as self-care (Harvey, “Masturbation as Self Care”). A 2009 study found that 16 to 18-year-old British women view masturbation as “something special and validating—a means of feeling good about oneself” (Bowman, “Persistent Pleasures,” 57). One woman even said, “It was as if I had at last done something just for me… It was mine and no one else’s” (Bowman, “Persistent Pleasures,” 57). Contemporary women are claiming ownership over masturbation as a positive, affirming act. Compounding this point, Johanna then considers
that it “feels wrong” for her to be thinking about her brother in any way while masturbating, so she puts a pillow between them to create some privacy. In doing so, she asserts her independence, marking masturbation as a solitary activity.

At one point, Johanna accidentally tells a neighbor her dad is collecting disability checks. Wracked with anxiety and guilt over the prospect of the neighbor reporting them and the potential disruption of her family’s financial stability, she swears to Jesus that she won’t masturbate for a month if he protects her family. This declaration primarily demonstrates the extremely high value Johanna places on masturbation, that when grasping at whatever she can do to save her family, it is the most precious thing to her to sacrifice. However Johanna only lasted nine days, nine days which she recounts were punctuated by extreme sexual frustration:

At fourteen, I was in the first devout flush of my relationship with my sexuality. It was the first limitless pleasure I had ever experienced. Food ran out, books ended, albums fell into the run-out groove, clothes fell apart, and the TV went black at 1:00 a.m.—but with wanking, I could lock myself in my room and come over and over, thinking of a million different people, and never stop, save for snacks and small, refreshing naps, when necessary. For a few seconds, you could be utterly gone—outside time and space and thought. Behind the clocks and above the sun and before words began. Nothing but white light and joy (38).

Johanna describes masturbation as part of her “relationship” with her sexuality, analogizing sex with herself to a sort of first love, a “devout flush.” Masturbation represents “limitless pleasure.” When constantly confronted with finite resources, self-stimulation is one which never depletes, a source of comfort and escape limited only by her physical capacity. It’s a source of entertainment more absorbing than books or albums, more lasting than clothes or food. Further, Johanna values masturbation because it allows her to temporarily exist “outside time and space and thought” (38). Away from everything: her family, her body, the social forces acting on her. Even before language, “before words began.” Through masturbation, she can joyfully transcend. For Johanna,
masturbation seems to be just as much, if not more, about escaping her body than connecting with it.

Johanna’s masturbation also hides in plain sight, as she masturbates both with a communal family hairbrush and a conveniently shaped deodorant bottle, both tools for the preservation and assurance of femininity. Johanna prides herself on “doubling [the hairbrush’s] functionalities at a stroke. It was a bit like Bruce Wayne and Batman, in that regard. Bruce Wank. Multitasking” (39). Here, she describes the thrill she feels at her sexual double life. She is not ashamed but rather revels in its covertness, viewing the brush (and by extension herself) as a hero on par with Batman. There’s a certain mythology to it, a jarring, unexpected connection to an iconic cultural image, as Moran links a masturbating teenage girl to a stoic, brawny comic book hero. Johanna’s next masturbatory implement is a bottle of pink Mum roll-on deodorant, a popular brand with British teenage girls during the 1980s, and another example of the truth hiding in plain sight: “It was shaped—astonishingly, usefully, blatantly—like a cheerful, chunky cock” (39). Johanna shudders at the Oedipal implications of masturbating with a product called “Mum,” the uncomfortable connotations and associations with her own mom and motherhood that this masturbatory implement evokes. However, she simultaneously offers a deft, even whimsical corporate critique, while commenting on a cultural touchstone of girls’ sexuality.

**Masturbation as Relationship Substitute**

Despite Johanna’s openness about and enthusiasm for masturbation, it is also clear that she views it as a substitute for the partnered sexual encounters she feels she’s precluded from due to her circumstances. She muses that if she can’t go on a date with a boy (which she has never done before), “then at least I can go on a date with me” (11). By describing masturbation in terms of a relationship, she substitutes romantic or sexual contact with another person for the
same with herself. Johanna later describes herself as a “compulsive masturbator,” “totally sexually faithful to my Mum for nearly three years” (40). But on that fateful day, nine days into her vow of abstinence, “I put on a sundress and accidentally seduced myself” (40). The language of self-seduction demonstrates Johanna’s non-heteronormative relationship with herself, with her masturbating. Masturbation holds a deeper significance than just eliciting pleasure but rather is indicative of how she views herself. It also highlights the relationship between control and the lack thereof, in which masturbation is at once regulated through a sustained relationship with one implement, and also compulsive, uncontrollable. As sex educator Betty Dodson writes in Sex For One, “Masturbation is the ongoing love affair that each of us has with ourselves throughout our lifetime” (3). In contrast, in a piece titled “Orgasm Girl,” an anonymous blog contributor writes: “My relationship to masturbating has grown from secrecy to celebration… Giving myself an orgasm is a reminder of my strong sense of intuition and a reminder that I am all I need to feel complete.” Additionally, Our Bodies Our Selves, a seminal 1970 sex education collection, describes masturbation:

Masturbation is not something to do just when you don’t have a man. It’s different from, not inferior to, sex for two. It’s also the first, easiest, and most convenient way to experiment with your body… The more you know about your body, the easier it is to show someone else what gives you pleasure (22).

Interestingly, this excerpt seems to combine the two ideologies, asserting that masturbation exists independent from partnered sexuality while also arguing that it is a tool to facilitate more pleasurable partnered interactions. The Dodson quote seemingly embodies Johanna’s ideology, that masturbation represents a relationship with oneself, while the “Orgasm Girl” quote takes it a step further than Johanna does, as she doesn’t quite reach that level of full satisfaction through masturbation, always seeking and desiring something elusive, something more. The idea that the knowledge she gains of her own body through masturbation could play a part in enhancing her
partnered sexuality does not come into play in the text at all. Instead, it is something of a necessity that she performs on herself if she wants to achieve pleasure during sex. Even though she views masturbation as a way of having a relationship with herself, throughout most of the text, that relationship is always and essentially a substitute for a man.

**Johanna as Both Prematurely Sexualized and Deeply Desirous**

Fourteen-year-old Johanna confronts the sexual turmoil that plagues many girls like her—sexually curious and desiring, sexually inexperienced yet sexualized by society. Early on, Johanna is mistaken for her mother, which she attributes to her weight: “If you’re going to be a fat teenage girl, it becomes hard for people to guess how old you are. By the time you’re in a 38DD bra, people are just going to presume you’re sexually active,” Johanna writes (21). With these lines, Johanna deftly explicates the sexualization of fatness, particularly among young girls, the presumption of sexuality, the way a sexualized body is perceived as womanly, as already come of age, despite the fact that Johanna has never even been kissed before. Class also likely comes into play in this interaction. Her lack of experience notwithstanding, Johanna’s deepest and most intense desire at this point is to be kissed: “When I start kissing, the world is going to know about it. My kissing is going to change everything. I’m going to be the Beatles of kissing” (21). With these lines and no small dose of drama, Johanna demonstrates her ambition. She doesn’t just want to be kissed, she wants to be the best at kissing, believes her kissing will “change everything.” This expression belies a proclivity for upward mobility, a sense of potential within herself waiting to be unleashed, harkening again to Lorde’s theory of the erotic as power. The only thing that surpasses Johanna’s desire to be kissed is her desire to lose her virginity: “The matter of losing my virginity is far more pressing than Wolverhampton’s industrial decline. It has gone beyond urgent: it is essentially dragging the whole family down” (28). Clearly,
Johanna’s tone is humorous, but her remark takes on a new light because she has already established that she views her own sexuality as imbued with potential. Johanna acknowledges her goal is a formidable challenge given her circumstances, as an isolated, working class young girl. These lines belie her lack of self-confidence but also her determination to defy odds, to confront challenges. However, it’s impossible to ignore the fact that these sentiments are rooted in a need to be desired by an external other.

**Johanna’s Aspirations**

This dependence on external validation is exemplified by Johanna’s two primary goals: “Move to London, and be hot.” This assertion demonstrates a belief that geographical mobility and physical “improvement” will lead to increased opportunity (29). Sexual attractiveness is paramount to Johanna: “I want everyone… to want to have absolute, total sex with me, right in my sex places, in the most sexual way possible” (29-30). Because of what Johanna describes as her “sexmergency,” she is “wanking my hands down to the bone,” masturbating desperately to compensate for the lack of sexual gratification (30). Johanna confronts the question of whether “hotness” originates from internal power or if its pursuit is always inherently tied to gendered norms. On the one hand, Johanna believes physical attractiveness, as defined by conventional beauty norms, is a key to power. But on the other hand, she wishes to be hot to gratify her rampant adolescent sexual desires. She aspires to hotness because of the power it will provide her; if she can attract everyone, she can then discern for herself who she is attracted to.

In addition to her physical and sexual goals, Johanna has another objective. Her secondary goal is to be “profoundly noble”:

As soon as I actually find something to believe in, I’m going to believe in it more than anyone else has ever believed in anything, ever. I am going to be devout. But I don’t want to be noble and committed like most women in history were—which invariably seems to involve being burned at the stake, dying of sadness, or being bricked up in a tower by an
early. I don’t want to sacrifice myself for something. I don’t want to die for something… I want to live for something, instead—as men do (30).

Ultimately, she hopes this pursuit will culminate in respect and recognition by the people she admires. In Willful Girls, Jeremiah highlights Johanna’s subversion of the “traditional female tendency toward martyrdom and self-sacrifice” (58). She argues that Johanna’s adolescence is hedonistic, and that her “commitment to vitalism and pleasure” make her distinct (58). I argue that Johanna’s primary physical and sexual goals are intertwined with this secondary objective. As part of her primary goal, Johanna wishes to be sexually attractive to everyone, to make her sexuality undeniable. She believes sexuality is equivalent to power, a third-wave feminist assumption that has since been troubled by critics who wonder if sexiness can ever truly bestow power if it necessitates sustained capitulation to patriarchal beauty standards.23 Essentially, Johanna wants her own merit to be so formidable that others can’t help but be dependent on her (however, she is dependent on them to make this happen). As a secondary goal, Johanna wants to devote herself to a cause, but not to be a martyr. She wants to live and have fun while taking action. But essentially, her ultimate goal in this pursuit is also to be universally beloved. This demonstrates a tendency within Johanna to seek validation from others, believing that the way to escape her current circumstances—her class status limiting her economic opportunities and her weight, she believes, limiting her sexual ones—is to give herself, through her sexuality, to others. Sexuality becomes a means through which she can gain approval, even as she seeks to

23“As Rosalind Gill has observed, post-feminist ‘women are offered particular kinds of freedom, empowerment and choice in exchange or as a kind of substitute for real feminist politics and transformation.’” (Nash and Grant, “Twenty-Something Girls v. Thirty-Something Sex And The City Women,” 978)
subvert the traditional female paradigm of submission and martyrdom in favor of vibrancy and dedication.\textsuperscript{24}

In order to pursue these goals, though, Johanna is painfully aware that she needs money. In the months following her accidental disclosure about her family’s financial situation, Johanna is wracked with guilt. She feels like the fate of her family’s future is in her hands. She has lived her entire life in a vulnerable position, always on the financial edge. The welfare state has provided some support, but never sustained security, as Johanna learns just how easily benefits can be revoked. Johanna resolves herself to learn from the crushing, perpetual fear: “I will never tell anyone when I feel bad again. I will never confide a weakness… Growing up is about keeping secrets, and pretending everything is fine” (43). Johanna’s perception of coming of age at this point can be framed in terms of growing inward, of turning toward herself, of confining her emotions. Johanna turns to her trusted library for answers. She learns about Paul Tillich’s three types of anxiety, ontic, moral, or spiritual. However, ultimately, she concludes that her anxiety doesn’t fit into any of those categories: “If I were rich, none of this would matter. I just need some money” (45). These lines demonstrate the ways in which Johanna’s class intervenes in her perceptions of coming of age. The anxiety she feels about the precarity of her family’s situation literally prompts her to grow inward toward herself.

\textsuperscript{24} In \textit{Postfeminism}, Genz and Brabon describe a “highly sexualised version of power feminism” called “do-me feminism,” which lays the mantle of female emancipation on the embodied principle of sexual freedom (139). “Do-me feminists” retain both their femininity and their feminism, creating an equivalency between sexuality and personal empowerment. This reconceptualization is also intended to sever the connection between sexuality and patriarchal subjugation and provide an alternative to “sex-critical” feminism. But Gill suggests that “the shift from sexual object to desiring sexual subject represents a move to ‘a new ‘higher’ form of exploitation’: ‘a shift from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze’” (151). In this way, women can be seen as choosing sexual objectification rather than having it imposed on them. Can the normative imperative of sexiness ever be empowering when it is compulsory?
At one point, Johanna’s discontentment reaches a peak, and she feels like her aspirations are out of reach: “I just don’t have the resources” (66). Johanna then contemplates the phrase “self-made man.” She conceives of the self-made man as someone mage-like, who had stitched themselves together out of silver, gauze, and ambition, and magic… not of woman born but alchemized, through sheer force of will, by the man himself. This is what I want to be. I want to be a self-made woman. I want to conjure myself out of every sparkling, fast-moving thing I can see. I want to be the creator of me. I’m gonna begat myself (66).

In this moment, Johanna resolves to construct herself, to literally build her own identity. If she doesn’t have the resources to achieve her dreams, she will generate them. The terror of not belonging, along with her family’s economic marginalization, energize this determination. As a voracious reader and frequent visitor to her public library, Johanna determines that writing will be her avenue for self-building.

At this point, Johanna views masturbation as a stress reliever and a relationship substitute, while she views partnered sexuality as an aspirational ideal, painfully desired yet out of reach, much like the financial security her family needs. Partnered sexuality is potential. To Johanna, it represents mobility, possibility, change, an untapped resource. If she can access it, she can make herself someone, someone notorious, someone respected, someone not to be denied. And that someone would certainly have the power to change her family’s circumstances. Or so she believes. Johanna’s determination to become a writer is tied to her determination to access her sexual potential; each enables the other.

**Johanna Becomes Dolly**

The first thing Johanna changes is her name. She exchanges it for one that’s “thin, and light and powerful,” one that will “work in print” but also “sound cheerful when shouted across a bar” (65). Here, Johanna considers the multiple purposes her name will serve, the ways in which
a name can influence perception and identity. She eventually settles on Dolly Wilde after Oscar Wilde’s niece: “She was, like, this amazing alcoholic lesbian who was dead scandalous, and died really young” (68). This re-naming of herself is the first active step she takes toward altering her identity. Johanna chooses a queer figure to model herself after, representing the anti-normativity of this approach. Jeremiah argues that Johanna’s new identity “shows both how the self constructs itself through processes of appropriation, interpellation, and identification, and how that construction is contingent upon particular cultural contexts and resources” (Jeremiah, Willful Girls, 59). Johanna writes that she is “collaging” herself, as she changes her clothes, her makeup, and her hair color, using whatever resources she can gather to craft a new image. Beyond changing her name, Johanna resolves that she will use her writing as a tool to facilitate her coming of age. Part of fashioning herself a new identity as Dolly Wilde is becoming a music journalist so she can craft herself through words as well as persona: “I can write, because writing… is a thing you can do when you’re lonely and poor, and have no infrastructure... It’s one of the few things poverty, and lack of connections, cannot stop you doing” (31). Writing, like masturbation, is free, something you can do to bring yourself pleasure and opportunity that is dependent solely on your own drive, skill, and determination.

**Writing as Masturbatory**

Johanna uses writing and masturbation to both facilitate self-knowledge and enable disembodiment. When Johanna sees herself in the mirror for the first time (as there are no mirrors in her home), it disrupts her illusions about her appearance:

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25 “For Gill, post-feminist ‘femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than a social, structural or psychological one ... In today’s media, possession of a ‘sexy body’ is presented as a woman’s key source of identity’” (Nash and Grant, “Twenty-Something Girls v. Thirty-Something Sex And The City Women,” 986).
I look at me in the mirror, and I can see me very quickly looking down at the poem in my hands and reading it very intently—because I don’t care what I look like. I am a poet, and a writer, and I deal with hearts and souls and words, and not meat and vanity and a dress that would have made me look better. It doesn’t matter that I am ugly (57).

With these lines, Johanna uses her identity as a writer to separate herself from the world of “meat and vanity,” from her concrete, physical form. Instead, she claims that she operates in the world of words, of souls, of the abstract and figurative. Through writing, she can divorce herself from her physical appearance, much the same way that later on she will use masturbatory tactics to dissociate during sex. But writing and masturbation also represent identity construction. Johanna crafts an identity as a writer through a vivid, distinct literary voice, and she uses masturbation to gain insight into her own sexuality. Johanna finds agency and cultural mobility through her writing, as well as sexuality. “Writing means Johanna is recognized and acknowledged as existing” (Jeremiah, Willful Girls, 61).

In “Coming Unstrung,” Winnett quotes Scholes’s argument that fiction is connected to sex by the “fundamental orgastic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and consummation” (506). Scholes asserts that both sex and fiction are reciprocal relationships: “It takes two” (507). He concedes that writers (notably referred to using the masculine pronoun) can write purely for their own entertainment, but “these are acts of mental masturbation, with all the limitations that are involved in narcissistic gratification of the self” (507). Here, Scholes denigrates masturbation as limited and narcissistic. Winnett argues that Scholes’s framework renders women “neither an independent subjectivity nor a desiring agent, but, rather, an enabling position organizing the social fiction of heterosexuality” (507). Winnett asserts instead that what we now know of women’s sexual responses opens up new opportunities for narrative construction:
Without defying the conventions dictating that sex be experienced more or less together, she can begin and end her pleasure according to a logic of fantasy and arousal that is totally unrelated to the functioning and representation of the "conventional" heterosexual sex act. Moreover, she can do so again. Immediately. And, we are told, again after that (507).

Winnett, too, remains within the framework of partnered sexuality, but her argument can easily be applied to masturbation. Because women’s sexual response is not governed by a phallic, heterosexual structure of rising action and climax, the masturbing girl, and the masturbatory writer, can explore new possibilities of pleasure and narrative form, new modes of storytelling and self-discovery.

By pursuing and generating pleasure for its own sake, Johanna subsequently crafts herself as a text. She becomes an analogy to her writing, and her writerly persona and her real-life self blur and merge. In “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” Sedgwick theorizes that “Masturbation can seem to offer—not least as an analogy to writing—a reservoir of potentially utopian metaphors and energies for independence, self-possession, and a rapture that may owe relatively little to political or interpersonal abjection” (821). The more Johanna develops her writing, the more she develops her sexuality and self-knowledge, pushing boundaries of form and content.

In “Coming into the Self,” Cucurella describes Gloria Anzaldúa's relationship to writing as being “peeled naked by her own hand… as pleasurable as risky and wicked is the repetition of this act” (168). She views writing as inherently intimate and exposing, “like spreading your legs,” opening yourself up to be penetrated, and exercise in “becom[ing] more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself” (168, 174). However, Cucurella writes specifically of autobiography, asserting that writing both reveals and simultaneously obscures the writer’s identity. She claims that the autobiographical writer is always “separated, alienated” from their identity (174). Johanna does not write autobiography.
However, she does formulate her own identity through the development of a writerly voice in response to others. Thus, she places herself in the narrative through her reaction, her interpretation, her mediation. This challenges the dynamic of her sexuality, which is mediated through an external, desiring gaze even as Johanna believes she controls it. It’s no wonder when she grounds her own subjectivity in response to others. Johanna’s writing is essentially not intimate; it is carefully constructed. It contains the truth of her experiences, but always and perpetually crafted through Dolly, an exaggerated caricature of power and independence. Johanna eventually constructs a version of herself which she realizes is false, but her writing remains a productive, generative outlet for identity production.

**Johanna’s First Kiss**

Johanna’s first almost-kiss comes from her musical idol, interview subject, and real-life crush, John Kite. He pecks her goodbye, and she is overtaken with desire. Then, she notices her coworker, Tony Rich, across the bar, and begins to see how attractive she finds him. She wonders at the possibilities open before her, calling John Kite her future husband and Rich her second future husband. She speculates that maybe she’ll cheat on John with Rich, or maybe she’ll just sleep with both of them and marry someone else. “I am full of potential right now” (202). This whimsical, forward-thinking speculation solidifies Johanna’s conception of sexuality as gateway to the future. Her encounter with John leaves her full of potential waiting to be expressed, and Rich is treated as a willing and available vessel for that expression. This interaction is enabled by her transformation into Dolly and the opportunities it brings her.

Johanna and Rich talk with a group of their coworkers from *D&ME*, when someone brings up the Eurythmics, a band Rich has previously described as “the sound of approximately nothing, masturbating while watching itself in the mirror” (203). Here, masturbating in a mirror
is described as a negative, a narcissistic and shameful act. Johanna, a Eurythmics fan, thinks to herself that she has also masturbated while watching herself in a mirror: “Well, the back of a CD. The CD’s hole kept lining up with my hole. It was very annoying” (203). The moment is not treated as particularly momentous, not eye-opening or revealing. Instead, it is simply a less-than-perfect memory, a technical annoyance. The erotic embodiment of music broached here first appears earlier in the text, as the awakening of Johanna’s passion for music and the empowerment it brings is likened to masturbation. She describes how the first time she hears the Stone Roses’ “I am the Resurrection,” she lies horizontal in her bed, “arms cast out wide, feeling excited, for the first time, to come from a battered industrial town” (88). As she listens, she thinks, “I can see we are not wrong. We are not just poor people who have not yet evolved into something else—i.e., people with money. We are something else—just as we are. The working classes do it differently. We are the next thing” (88). Here, Johanna links her working class identity with futurity, with potential, with possibility, with cultural force. Punk itself emerged from Johanna’s birth place in northern England. Eventually, Krissi scolds Johanna, “Stop wriggling,” to which Johanna replies that she’s not wriggling, she’s dancing. The setting of the bed sexualizes the event, as well as Krissi’s loaded implication that she is “having a fit,” or “wriggling” in the bed above him. This empowering scene of musical exposure is likened to sexual expression. Further, the gig space itself is a site of sexual potential.

When Rich remarks, “People become aware of their own legends pretty quickly,” Johanna asks, “What’s my legend?” (203) Rich replies, “‘Well, you’re still making it,’ he says, looking me right in the eye. ‘But I suspect it includes trouble’ (203). With these lines, Rich demonstrates the potential in Johanna, acknowledging that she is still in the process of building herself, of coming of age. On the train home, she contemplates the day: “I am trouble. I must
be—Rich has reviewed me, and he’s the cleverest critic I know” (205). This preliminary review of Johanna is a precursor to the sexual dynamic between the two, the dynamic of performance for review that parallels that between Johanna and the bands she writes about. Based on Rich’s review, Johanna constructs herself around the concept of “being trouble,” characterizing her drunken attempt to write a review on the train home as an act of “being trouble.” She has taken Rich’s definition of her and connected it to her own expression of identity, much the same way her childhood identity was shaped by her dad’s encouragement to become a music critic, another instance of male influence.

Johanna eventually does have her first kiss with a man her cousin deems “The Kisser,” but it’s more an arrangement made out of utility than any particular attraction. Johanna wonders how to facilitate the interaction, and her mind jumps from proclamations of “You may now kiss the bride,” to Princess Leia and Han Solo’s first kiss, to Christopher Plummer and Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. Johanna draws on her own cultural touchstones for guidance but comes up short. Finally, The Kisser lives up to his name: “If I needed sheep moving from one field to another, I would have called a shepherd. If I’d lost my wedding ring down the U-bend, I would have called a plumber. And as I needed my first kiss before I got another day older, I used The Kisser. I feel better now” (212). While this first encounter is not a storybook romantic moment, it is described in terms of utility, a practical exchange for services. Johanna’s first truly pleasurable kiss comes when she and Rich kiss at a bar in front of their coworkers:

Rich’s mouth is so huge and billowy—it’s like an endless feast, a banquet of man that I have finally been invited to...I’m pretty sure there can’t ever have been any kissing better than this. There can’t ever have been *any* kissing before. We are inventing it, in these last ten minutes. If you follow all the kissing in the world upstream, you will, eventually, end up here (224).
Here, she describes their sexual chemistry as generative, as essential, as originating, as productive, and as nourishing.

**Johanna Loses Her Virginity**

Johanna loses her virginity to Rich, which she describes as “an odd thing, when you’ve thought about it for years” (225). She recounts that the sex wasn’t surprising, that the basic mechanics were what she had expected, as she has already masturbated extensively. She also said she wasn’t surprised that she didn’t orgasm. She hadn’t expected to; she had just wanted to have sex, any sex at all.

And that was losing my virginity, to Tony Rich, who had once been just words in a magazine, but had now left bruise marks on my thighs, where his fingers had gripped when he called out my name. I made him call out my name—“Dolly!”—loud, like the first word ever. And when he said it, I was momentarily and unexpectedly sad he wasn’t saying “Johanna!”—but I ignored that feeling, for now. I could finally see myself appearing in the world. Having sex, and printing words. I was slowly assembling into vision, at the end of a telescope (225).

With these lines, she likens Rich to words on a page, made real through physical, sexual contact. Having sex with him brought him from abstract words to imprints on her body, tangible marks of their encounter. Speech and identity also come into play in this scene, as she elicits a vocal reaction from him but is briefly disappointed by his calling out her pen name, rather than her given name. She has constructed this elaborate identity for herself, but in the moment of her first sexual experience, that identity precludes her from true identification with the person she grew up as. Maybe that is her intention, as she likely believes Johanna wouldn’t be able to have sex at all the way Dolly can, but it doesn’t overshadow the moment’s bittersweetness. After she has sex, she recounts that she can feel herself emerging. Losing her virginity and beginning to publish her writing are both acts of creation, generation, that shape her identity as she comes of age.
What Johanna is surprised about when it comes to sex is that “you get… someone who is looking at you—just you—and thinking about you, and wanting you, and you haven’t even had to lie at the bottom of the stairs and pretend you’re dead to get them to do it” (225). Here, she writes of sex as self-centered and dependent, fully in the thrall of another person, a person whose attention you possess. Given that Johanna grew up in a hectic, cramped household, in which she was constantly competing for attention, it is not surprising that she values the captivation that sex can bring. She also remarks that she feels adult when taking off Rich’s shirt, that “only women do this” (225). They have privacy; no one can interrupt them. To Johanna, these are markers of adulthood, of the future she aspired to as a young teenager that is now enabled by her writing career.

As Rich and Johanna are lying in bed together, Rich remarks on the bite marks on the inside of Johanna’s arm (“from when I was unhappy,” she writes (226)). He asks, “Have you been giving yourself love bites? Have you been getting off with yourself?” to which she replies, “Yes, but it’s a pretty open arrangement. We’re seeing other people too” (226). In this moment, Johanna plays it off as a joke and mask the scars with humor. Masturbation is treated glibly, as humorous and not abnormal, something Rich wouldn’t be surprised to learn Johanna engages in. Interestingly, Johanna describes her masturbation as a component of an open relationship; her primary relationship is with herself, with whom she has agreed to see other people. So all of her subsequent sex is positioned as an offshoot of the relationship she has first and foremost with herself.

After she loses her virginity, Johanna writes numerous letters to John Kite recounting the experience in extensive, graphic detail. “I basically lost my virginity at John. When I wrote to him about it, I wanted him to imagine himself in the fuck. I wanted these letters to disturb him—
to make him come and get me” (232). Johanna has sex with Rich as a proxy for the man she really wants. She directs her sexuality at John through her words, hoping to prompt him to envision himself in Rich’s shoes, to engage in the same displacement Johanna does in her later sexual experiences. But Kite does not respond as Johanna desires. Rather than having his interest in her stoked, he instead replies with compliments about the writing itself, saying she’s “wasted on music criticism” and that she could submit her letters to Playboy and meet great success. “It’s definitely five wanks out of five,” he comments, an early masculine review (232). He concludes by asking if he can “pretend it was someone other than Rich” (232). His reasoning is that he strongly dislikes Rich, but this secondary moment of displacement is nonetheless intriguing, especially as it relates to the overarching role of masturbation and disembodiment in the text.

**Johanna/Dolly Becomes “Lady Sex Adventurer”**

Once Johanna starts having partnered sex, she decides to become a “Lady Sex Adventurer,” at one point even describing herself as Christopher Columbus, exploring the sexual world. She goes in search of sexual pleasure, a pursuit not anchored in reproductive futurity, somewhat in the model of the sexual libertine, characterized by “frank sexuality, social autonomy, razor wit, and unregretted pleasure” (Potter, “The Female Libertine of Sentiment”). This pursuit is inherently subversive of the traditional masculine trope. In Willful Girls, Jeremiah writes that “expressions of active female desire may constitute manifestations of willfulness” (117). She recounts Rosi Braidotti’s theory of desire as “outward-directed and forward-looking,” having to do with the “creation of new possibilities of empowerment” (117). In Johanna’s case, Jeremiah writes that her assertion of desire provides a striking contrast to the feminine norms of “pliability and plasticity.” Johanna decides that she wants “everyone to imagine they’re fucking
me” (232). She decides to go on a “massive Shag Quest,” taking James Bond as her role model (232).

Up until I got off with Tony Rich, my understanding of the world had been that, as a fat girl, I might only get laid three or four times in my life—half of those fucks instigated out of pity, all of them drunken and careless—before I settled down with a fat husband and left casual sex once again to the beautiful thin girls for whom this pastime was constructed… But now I’ve discovered the truth of the matter: that any woman can get laid, any time that she wants. *Any woman. Any time* (232-233).

Johanna’s citation of masculine ideal James Bond as a sexual role model more starkly delineates this deviation from feminine norms. This statement represents a reassessment of her relationship with her sexuality. Previously, her ideas of sex were filtered through the fatphobic cultural messages she has received. But once she’s had sex, she realizes that sex, like masturbation, is nearly limitless.

Johanna’s motivations behind this pursuit are twofold: one, she relishes the chance to gather writing material, and two, she craves external validation. Johanna sleeps with interview subjects and men she meets at gigs, where she prompts them to tell her their sexual fantasies so she can recount the stories to her coworkers: “I think of myself as a little drone robot, going off and accumulating samples of sexual behavior, then bringing them back here, to the lab, for everyone to analyze,” she writes (267). She uses her sexuality to generate writing material. After she tests her newest stories on her coworkers, she writes the comedic material that landed best in her articles. “Carefully crafted bitchiness,” she remarks, demonstrating the intentional construction behind not only her writing but her identity itself (268).

Johanna’s additional motivation for her Sex Quest is the external validation it elicits. She wants to be revered for her sexual prowess: “I want to be respected and admired for what a legendary piece of ass I am” (235). However, the only way to gain such a title is through experience, and with experience, Johanna remarks, comes the pitfalls of the label of “slut”:
In a way that feels quite unfair, the only way I can gain any qualifications at this thing—sex—that is seen as so societally important and desirable, is by being a massive slag—which is not seen as societally important and desirable. This often makes me furious (235).

To combat the shame associated with the phrase “massive slag,” Johanna repeats it to herself often. She confronts her struggle with bodily norms, her own attractiveness, and the sexual double standard alongside this pursuit of pleasure for its own sake; if she can have enough sex she can defy the body norms that supposedly constrain her, or possibly prove them wrong, and if she can embrace the role of slut, then its degrading bite won’t be able to hurt her.

**Sex and Utility**

Even though Johanna pursues pleasure for pleasure’s sake, she also describes a desire to use sex in order to feel useful. She often references the satisfaction she takes from providing a sexual service to her partners, from supposedly fulfilling their dreams. She thinks it’s possible she’ll discover something about herself by acquiescing to what her partner assumes about her. This ties into Johanna’s conception of sex as a resource, as she’s using it to elevate herself by meeting a demonstrated need. Before she ever has sex, Johanna recounts a recurring medieval sexual fantasy. After checking out a number of books on witchcraft, she is surprised to find that they are full of pornography in disguise. The pornography in question is comprised of historical reports from nuns who claim to have had sex with the devil: “The wheat fields are parched, and failing, and unless they fuck a virgin in a Black Mass, everyone in the village will starve. Imagine having sex with someone being useful. Everyone needing you. Or else the crops would fail” (179). This scene demonstrates the influence of books and writing on Johanna’s sexuality, as what she reads exposes her to new sexual possibilities and shapes her sexual fantasies. In addition, this fantasy reveals a dynamic of dependence and usefulness at play in Johanna’s sexuality. She wants to be needed by everyone, to have others depend on her. She views her
sexuality as a practical tool, a means to an end, a potential mass salvation. When Rich and Johanna have sex for the second time, Johanna describes feeling “enormously… useful. Men need to come—and I had made it happen. I had a simple purpose” (230). Again, Johanna’s partnered sexuality is positioned as in service of the other, almost as work, an act which gives her purpose.

Sexuality at times takes on a directly economic overtone, notably in a moment in which Johanna expresses a wish to master S&M sex: “Like a small start-up business, I would delight in fulfilling an untended niche market” (236). Again, Johanna wants to be useful, to perform a service described in explicitly economic terms. This economic language extends to Johanna’s thoughts on oral sex, as she states that “blow jobs are, mythically, what all boys want the most—and so, again, as a good student of market forces, I am very interested in them. Margaret Thatcher has basically made me pro-blow job” (237). By mastering S&M and oral sex, Johanna seeks to increase her sexual capital, to make herself an expert at satisfying the demands of the market, by extension positioning herself as a hot commodity, a skilled laborer so to speak. Because she views sexuality as a mode of self-empowerment, this economic framework emphasizes her entrepreneurial, self-made woman status. Further, economizing the language around sex differentiates it from sex as tied to love, rooting it in a depersonalized pursuit of resources, and thus distancing herself emotionally. She has been taught to believe that “girls who don’t swallow are fussy,” and so if she is able to do so, “All my blow jobs will be utterly stress-free in that respect, and no one will feel awkward, or ashamed” (237). In part, this impulse stems from a desire to satisfy men and elevate her own status. But her accommodation, her acquiescence to male desires is also rooted in an instinct to alleviate stigma, stress, and shame. Thus, Johanna acknowledges that sexual stigma exists, yet she places the blame for it on “girls
who don’t swallow” rather than the men who expect them to. She coaches herself into swallowing to reduce male shame, but in doing so, she internalizes harmful prescriptive norms and expectations herself.

**Masturbatory Displacement During Sex**

When Johanna begins having sex, she describes feelings of displacement or dissociation. During sex, she puts herself in her partner’s shoes, imagining how he must be feeling while having sex with her. One of the first examples of Johanna’s dissociative sex comes when she has sex with a man she nicknames “Big Cock Al.” At first, she’s intimidated and afraid, and once they begin, she finds it painfully intense: “In the end, I find what works is to stop thinking about what *I* am thinking about this particular sexual intercourse—mainly, “I am alarmed! This is the biggest penis of all time, surely! Quick! Call the Guinness Book of World Records!”—and start thinking about what *he’s* thinking, instead” (244). She doesn’t focus on the pain she’s in but rather fixates on signs of his passion, how much he must enjoy touching and grabbing her. She thinks about what a great time he seems to be having and commends herself for being a “generous lover.” In doing so, she puts herself in his shoes, transferring her physical embodiment from her own body to his, essentially having sex with herself by concentrating on the physical sensations she provokes in him: “All I know is that his desire is making me desirous” (244). She concludes retrospectively that this phenomenon is called “physical disconnect,” and it is all part and parcel of women having their sexuality mediated through men’s gaze. There is very little female narrative of what it’s like to fuck and be fucked. I will realize that, as a seventeen-year-old girl, I couldn’t really hear my own voice during this sex. I had no idea what my voice was at all (244).

She views this dissociative tactic as a loss of identity and agency. With these lines, Johanna expresses feelings of voicelessness. She considers herself obscured in sex by the male gaze which regulates her experience. Because there is “very little female narrative,” she finds it hard
to conceive of her own sexuality. By focusing on his sensations, she is also symbolically having sex with herself. She occupies the male position of power, in which the sex, which is not catered toward her pleasure, then becomes pleasurable. This depiction positions masturbatory sexuality in a complex and not entirely positive way. By placing herself in her partner’s body, she gets to fantasize about the sensations her own body induces, how it would feel to touch herself. Moran could just say she feels like she leaves her body, or she looks down on her body from above, but she directly states that she enters the body of her partner. This act is ascribed a negative connotation, as a tactic to avoid less-than-pleasurable sex. She paints masturbatory sexuality as immature, as a precursor to sex, that if she could just take pleasure in penetrative sex then she could stop masturbating.

This dissociative sex, sparked by patriarchal influence, is common. In “Orgasm Girl,” an anonymous blog contributor writes that the sex she had when she was seventeen felt similar to the porn she’d been watching for years: “I gained a great sense of satisfaction by being penetrated and making him cum but I did not know how or why it was important to center my own pleasure when having sex.” This sentiment demonstrates an emphasis on catering to male pleasure. Felski elaborates on this dynamic in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, writing that an internalization of a concept of female identity as “supplementary and supportive of a male figure” is “the most disturbing indication of the deep-seated influence of patriarchal ideology; the protagonist is unable to see herself except in relation to the needs and desires of others” (129). Johanna’s desires, so strongly expressed at the beginning of the novel, and through her masturbation and her outward expressions, become sublimated in service of maintaining patriarchal power dynamics during sex.
Johanna’s dissociative impulse is at play once again when Rich initiates S&M sex with her: “It appears I have got me all wrong—as Tony has seen the secret masochist in me. He must have—or why else is he doing what he’s doing now?” (275). Despite a clear acknowledgement that she would prefer to take the dominant role, she assumes the submissive role to please Rich. Again, she uses Rich’s frameworks and desires to shape and regulate her own. During the experience, she is agitated because she believes she could perform Rich’s role better than he can. “I’ve read about it in dirty books, in the library—I’ve read de Sade, and Anais Nin, and Gravity’s Rainbow, and the Story of O. First you have to have pleasure—then pain” (277-278). Based on the knowledge she’s gained from books, though often deeply sexist, she believes she has a greater intuitive understanding of how to perform the role. But her understanding stems from the underlying assumption that her actions would be in service of her partner’s pleasure. As she quickly comes to realize, Rich’s actions are motivated only by his pleasure, only to gratify some suppressed desire of his own: “The thought I can’t have is, ‘I don’t want to do this’—because how do I know if I don’t want to do this? I’m still terra-forming me” (278). She allows Rich to continue because she convinces herself there might be some deep-seated, undiscovered part of herself that will activate if allowed the opportunity. But after a while, she reverts back to her failsafe measure of concentrating on her partner’s enjoyment rather than her own:

I imagine what it’s like to be sexy posh Tony Rich, with a dirty seventeen-year-old girl in his bed. I think how much it must delight him. I think how incredible it must be to put your cock into someone—how magical to have something so hard and full, and to push it, over and over, into this hot, friendly place. To be able to move a girl around a bed and put her in the positions you want. To have someone want you. He must want to do these things very badly. I’m making his dreams come true (278).

By putting herself in his shoes, she not only gains the gratification of fulfilling his desires, but also gets to imagine what it would be like to have sex with herself, to be in the position of power and control in the situation, able to position herself however she wanted and exert dominance.
over her own body. There’s also a queer element of gender transference at play here. After they are done, he tells her she is amazing, and she wonders to what extent that is true. “If I think about it, what happened here tonight was that Tony Rich had sex with someone who was pretending they were Tony Rich. I don’t think I was here at all” (279). Again, Johanna denies her own presence in the act. And that is true, she was not present in her own body. She was present in Rich’s.

**Masturbation During Sex**

On top of the fact that Johanna frequently dissociates during sex, she also routinely refuses her partner’s efforts to bring her to climax:

I can’t decide if it’s because I feel I don’t deserve it—that they wouldn’t enjoy doing it, they’re just being polite, and so the correct thing to do is demur—or whether it’s because I don’t feel they deserve it, instead: that I don’t want these men to see me lose control, and come by their hand, as I do when I’m on my own (239-240).

Johanna’s attitudes are all too common among young women who fear that insisting on their own pleasure will leave them branded a burden, a nuisance, women who refuse, who demur, who downplay their desires to accommodate male comfort. Part of this impulse is due to the fact that, as Johanna points out, she lives in a time before Internet porn. She has only ever seen a woman orgasm while watching *When Harry Met Sally*. “In a way, I would have to invent the female orgasm from scratch before I could do it with someone else in the room” (240). Due to this lack of cultural benchmark, she’s not sure how orgasm fits into conventional heterosexual sex. She doesn’t want to be difficult, to ask or expect too much. But as Johanna elaborates, as much as she’s not sure whether she feels she herself deserves to orgasm, she’s just as, if not more, sure that she doesn’t feel her male partners deserve to see her orgasm either. Orgasming would mean relinquishing control, a dynamic which can be inherently uncomfortable for young women who have been given good reason not to trust men. For Johanna, orgasming would mean giving up the
power she hopes to hold over her male partners and instead acquiescing to their power over her. At one point, Johanna remarks, “No one yet has made me come. I am still the greatest lover of me” (239). Here, Johanna expresses pride in herself, in her ability to know what pleasures her. In “Notes from the Back Room,” Breanne Fahs writes that “masturbation provides a space where women can orgasm without any associated forms of labor (e.g. moaning, groaning, mutual ‘getting off’), shame, or guilt about their pace and speed of orgasm.” This provides an interesting point of contrast to Johanna’s internalization of sex as providing a male-partner-oriented service. For Johanna, partnered sex is a labor she is willing to perform, but the sex which is not labor, the sex she has with herself, she keeps from her partner, separating it from the realm of work.

At one point, after her partner has fallen asleep, Johanna thinks, “I don’t feel sleepy at all. What I feel like is having some more sex. Better sex. Sex with more of me in it” (244). Her identity obscured by the partnered sex she did have, she seeks more of herself, more of her own identity, through sex with herself. “I chat myself up for ten minute and then come—hard, like a car crash, trying to be silent, next to him (247). Again, she writes of masturbation in terms akin to a relationship; she “chats herself up,” as one might flirt with someone they meet. She suppresses her physical reaction when she orgasms. Despite coming “like a car crash,” she tries to keep herself silent even in his company. The presence of a partner prompts her to subdue her physical reactions. Later, Johanna and Rich have sex at his parents’ house: “All his cleverness in his mouth, as I make myself come, because it’s now traditional that he doesn’t even try, and he whispers “Shhhh” again, lest I make a noise. All my sex is done by me, and is silent” (285). At this point, after they have been having sex for a long time, he no longer makes an attempt to focus on her pleasure. Instead, she takes control over it. She is now able to come in front of another person, but he insists it be silent, restrained. Masturbation decidedly plays a role in
Johanna’s partnered sexuality, but it is generally positioned as something she’s forced to do if she wants to achieve satisfaction, a substitute, an act which represents her not-yet-full-fledged sexuality.

**Breaking Up with Rich and Rediscovering Herself**

The moment Johanna recenters her coming of age journey comes at a party at Rich’s parent’s house. At first, she entertains intimidating party guests with her sexcapade stories. In one story, she fabricates a comeback that she really came up with belatedly. “I feel as if I could have said it—and that’s basically the same thing as actually having said it. Little lies do not matter when you are being legendary” (289). Here, Johanna highlights the constructedness of her identity, the writing behind the character she has crafted, where truth is less important than a compelling story. At the party, she learns that Rich is still having sex with an ex-girlfriend. She learns from this ex, Emilia, that Rich considers his relationship with Johanna to be nothing more than sex. Supposedly to salvage her pride, Johanna initiates a threesome, but she can tell immediately that Rich prefers Emilia. She overhears him call her his “bit of rough” (294). She commands herself to be okay with this characterization:

> I will be whoever the situation demands. Fake it till yow make it, kidder. I will be his piece of rough… There is nobility in this! I have triumphed against the odds of society, sexually—simply by being me! I’m two-for-one here! I’m the working-class S&M threesome girl! My sexual CV has all the kinks in it! *Man*, I am well-qualified (295).

When confronted with a challenge to her identity, she determines to lean into her constructed persona, to become exactly who he expects her to be. During the threesome, Rich’s behavior enrages her. She remarks that she had “always previously shied away from anger” because “Anger is like putting acid into already boiling water—it makes things effervesce uncontrollably” (290). But now, she draws power from that which she cannot control. She yells at Rich:
Let’s get one thing very straight. I—am the dirty one here. I—am the sex expert. I have had more fucks than you’ve had hot dinners. I was coming, thinking about talking lions in Narnia while you were doing your fucking A-levels… “I was objectifying you,” I continue… We make our own amusements on the council estates. I’m not your ‘bit of rough’. You’re my bit of posh (297).

Here, Johanna attempts to subvert the class politics of the situation by reversing their roles and placing herself in the dominant position.

The next day, hungover and reeling from the aftermath of the confrontation, Johanna watches her hands as she smokes a cigarette: “Those look like the hands of a grown-up. You have grown-up hands now, Johanna” (298). This demonstrates a moment of coming of age, her physical embodiment influenced by her actions, the hands that enable her writing now somehow changed, matured, by the action they took. Johanna remarks that she feels free, empowered. In the past, she would resign herself to whatever fate awaited her, silently accepting the treatment she received for fear of being deemed “weird or unfuckable” (299). But in that moment, when she embraced anger and emotional expression, she was empowered to make her own decision: “It seems I am now the kind of girl who can instigate a threesome—then cancel a threesome, then order a cab. I am in charge of me” (299).

**Johanna’s Masturbatory Sexuality**

Toward the end of the novel, Johanna realizes that her sexual relationship with Rich actually had an overlying masturbatory element. Johanna remarks, “You know when Princess Diana said there were three people in her relationship? I think there was only one in ours: me. I was not the thing, for him,” to which John Kite replies,

No—I think he is not the thing for you. I would say you’re only interested in him because he’s a writer, and you’re a writer, and you basically want to fuck a writer, because that’s the nearest thing to fucking yourself. You just fancy yourself, darling. As of course you should (302-303).
Here, Kite reframes her entire relationship with Rich as masturbatory, as motivated by an interest in herself, rather than an interest in Rich. Interestingly, he doesn’t position this as a negative, as he asserts that she is justified in “fancying herself.” But at the core, he claims that she was only attracted to Rich because he, like she, is a writer. When Johanna thinks about it, she realizes: “I think about what I like best about Rich: the dirty phone calls, the way he describes sex as we’re having it. I realize something: ‘I think… that I might have only fucked him for the review,’ I say finally. ‘I think I just wanted to be reviewed by Tony Rich. To see what I was like’ (303).

Johanna was attracted to the narrative aspect of their relationship, the words he’d use to describe her. She was motivated by curiosity as to her own sexual performance, as mediated through Rich’s reviewing mind. Again, it was less about being attracted to Rich and more about an attraction to the insight he could potentially provide, mediated through a patriarchal sexual lens, about her own sexuality. By having sex with Rich, Johanna was really in pursuit of the closest approximation of having sex with herself.

Interpreting Johanna’s partnered sexuality as filtered through a lens of masturbation provides insight into Johanna’s overall views on masturbation throughout the text. Instances of literal masturbation, foregrounded at the beginning of the novel, are viewed as normal, humorous, and not shameful. Johanna embraces bold descriptions of these moments. But when she engages in masturbatory practices during partnered sex, it’s viewed as a problem, an issue to be resolved. Good riddance, Tony Rich, right? In some ways, this masturbatory impulse is a problem, as she repeatedly dissociates to get through unsatisfying sex rather than asserting the primacy of her own desires. Moran ties masturbation to a narcissistic, obscuring impulse. Johanna does use masturbatory dissociation as a way of getting in touch with her own sexuality, using her perception of her male partners’ pleasure to inform her own self-knowledge. However,
this self-knowledge is always, inherently, and inextricably mediated through the male gaze and patriarchal sexual norms, so how can it ever provide true insight into Johanna’s sexuality?

Early sex researchers like Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud dismissed or opposed female masturbation. Ellis argued that masturbing after reaching puberty would prevent women from experiencing satisfaction with “normal” partnered sexuality:

Since masturbation was considered a counterfeit pleasure, it could never provide the sort of satisfaction that coitus could. Masturbation was and is so easy to engage in, and so it was feared that hapless young people would unknowingly seek it out excessively and then fall into a nervous state when the pleasures they received fell short (Bowman, “Persistent Pleasures,” 22).

Freud believed masturbation to be an immature version of female sexuality, that mature women would abandon clitoral stimulation in favor of vaginal intercourse. As such, women who masturbated were considered to be caught in a state of arrested development, failing to fully mature. More recently, a 2013 study found that “girls between 14 and 16 years old viewed women’s masturbation as a ‘sad’ substitute for partnered sex, and therefore thought of it as ‘desperate’” (Bowman, “Persistent Pleasures,” 27). I was surprised to identify similar tendencies in Johanna’s story, throughout an ostensibly sex-positive novel. It seemed to me as though masturbation is positioned as an immature precursor to fully realized adult sexuality, and masturbatory partnered sex as something to overcome or outgrow.

**Johanna Comes of Age**

By the end of the story, Johanna has spiraled. Her reviews have become increasingly vitriolic. She initially envisioned her adult life as one big party, at which she’d be surrounded by adoring peers. But in reality, she’s getting beer dumped on her because of bad reviews. “But surely they will know *underneath* it all I’m a good and noble person, in love with the world?” (307). Johanna hopes that, despite the fact that she has done everything she can to construct an
identity out of words, people will somehow disregard them or read between the lines to see her true self. She reads the material she’s written for that week’s paper, trying to discern herself in it. The headline of the piece is “Finally—Wilde Goes Too Far.” Upon reading it, she’s horrified to the point of not recognizing herself anymore. She’s analogized the band to the Nazis: “I’ve trashed a load of working-class kids from the provinces who just love music—kids like me—and tried to make them feel ashamed of wanting to do that glorious thing: write a song” (308).

Johanna draws the line at shaming people who are just like her. “I’m not here—in this bile-filled persona I have gone to all the time and trouble of making” (308). Through her writing, Johanna attempted to craft herself, but in reality, she’s become unrecognizable. Snircova writes that Johanna in part adopts her cynical literary personality because it “gives her a sense of participation in the power structures traditionally dominated by men.” Here, she can exert power not typically available to working-class, fat, teenage girls. However, this cynicism does not ultimately enable her coming of age. Moran writes, “Cynicism is, ultimately, fear… [it] keeps you pinned to the spot, in the same posture, forever” (263). As such, this mean-spirited writerly personality actually impedes her growth.

At the end of the book, there’s a short chapter written entirely in second person, a departure from the rest of the novel. In this chapter, the narrator recounts the process of building herself, of coming of age: “So what do you do when you build yourself—only to realize you built yourself with the wrong things? You rip it up and start again. That is the work of your teenage years—to build up and tear down and build up again, over and over, endlessly” (318). She describes coming of age as a process of perpetual construction and deconstruction, on a loop until you find the version of yourself that suits you. In “About a Girl,” Friedman writes that How to Build a Girl should not simply be labeled a coming of age novel:
While Moran does chronicle the emotional firsts and dramatic assertions of independence most of us associate with our teenage years, she also understands that, especially if you are a girl of limited financial and cultural means, you don't 'come of age,' gliding toward a true, adult version of yourself. Identity isn't something you age into. You have to construct your adult self with the resources at your disposal, pausing occasionally to assess your progress and sometimes tearing it down to start again.

Moran describes the coming of age process as an exercise in trial and error, in going into the world and trying to find “your weapons. Your tools. Your charms” (319). Again, Johanna repeats the language of utility. You will choose models to aspire to, and you will “steal little bits” of others you encounter, “collage yourself” out of whatever you can gather (319). And essentially, throughout this process, you will be alone. There’s no school to teach you, and no manager to guide you. “You are midwife to yourself, and will give birth to yourself, over and over, in dark rooms, alone” (319). The solitary nature and the trial and error aspect of coming of age are analogous to masturbation. Johanna describes coming of age as a repeated, cyclical birth. Some of the identities you bring into the world will fail, while others will succeed temporarily. “Until—slowly, slowly—you make a viable version of you, one you can hum every day” (320).

She describes coming of age like songwriting, “improvis[ing] upon a tiny snatch of melody that worked,” with your eventual identity the perfectly crafted song (320). In retrospect, you’ll realize how amazing the coming of age process is, how you tried to transform while obscuring yourself, thinking you were keeping secrets but really being as obvious as humanly possible. You’ll look back and wonder at how much darkness you kept within, unexpressed.

Johanna ends the book at a crossroads. She’s driving with her dad, on her way to her new apartment in London. “I’m seventeen,” she asserts.

I’ve got my brother, my dog, and a laptop with “John Kite” Wite-Outed on it. I believe in music and gin and joy and talking too much and human kindness. I have warning scars on my arms, a new blank wall to fill with faces and words. I still want to change the world in some way, and I still have to get my dad famous. I’ve eaten drugs off a hanky, had sex with a medically inadvisable penis, confused the Smashing Pumpkins, blew off a
threesome with a quote from *Blade Runner*, and tried to kiss my hero whilst being serenaded by singing gibbons. And, like all the best quests, in the end, I did it all for a girl: me (338).

This series of “I” statements begins with factual assertions about her life, then moves to her beliefs, then the contours of her body. And then she moves toward what she aspires to, what she still wants to do. She sums it up by recounting her past quests, and finally asserts that she did it all for herself. It was all self-serving, in the interest of coming of age.

Eventually, Johanna tries to return to what she herself wants, conceiving of coming of age as building herself. She turns away from cynicism and determines that she’ll write instead about what she loves. Essentially, while the book provides a significantly more frank and open portrayal of masturbation, masturbation is still somewhat kept in the realm of the young, the immature, the not fully formed. Solitary masturbation drops out of the text entirely as the story goes on. Masturbation is viewed as a precursor to coming of age, to be outgrown, not its enabler. Johanna’s coming of age moment arrives when she realizes the negative effects of her partnered masturbatory sexuality with Rich and so vows not to continue engaging in it. But nonetheless, her coming of age is characterized by a turn inward, a return to herself and her needs, a theoretical masturbatory re-orientation. Johanna determines she will focus on herself and not the needs or desires of others, in pursuit of her own sexual embodiment.
Conclusion

This thesis was inspired in part by a poem I wrote and performed a few years ago at an undergraduate open mic. It was held in that misty space of pre-finals stress, on the front lawn of campus. String lights hung on the massive tree behind me, whose branches reach out across the grass in an offering of shade.

I have included a transcript of the poem below:

So, I’ve faked every orgasm I’ve ever had. Scrunched eyes, raised voice, tensed legs, a jerk upward, and then a collapse. Lying on the bed limp and smiling, I would peek a bit through closed eyelids just to check if he bought it. And sometimes I think he did, other times not. That was my tactic to… wrap things up. Not that I didn’t want it or that it didn’t feel good I guess, it was just going on for so long, and I was getting tired of fake moaning and feeling not a whole lot. I figured his hand must have been cramping at that point, and he had already finished, so what was the point?

To be fair, he always really, really tried, always asked me what I liked, selfless and giving and wanting to see me unfold before him. I just didn’t know how to correct him, didn’t know how to redirect his hands. This is what happens when high school sex ed consisted of one eighth grade class, a cucumber, and a condom. A lecture on STDs and pregnancy prevention, and not much else, consent and pleasure conspicuously absent from the curriculum.

So when I grew up and found myself with a boyfriend, I was anxious and terrified and willing, and even more clueless, and slightly unnerved that he seemed to know my anatomy better than I did. I just finished Netflix unlimited series Unorthodox, about a Hasidic Jewish woman who leaves her insular Williamsburg, Brooklyn community for a new life in Berlin. In one scene, a knowledgeable older woman in the community tries to prepare her for what she
should expect on her wedding night. “The man goes inside of the woman,” her friend says, and she exclaims that she must be defective. She does not have two holes down there! Just the one, she insists. Go to the bathroom and see for yourself, her wise guide counsels her. The camera looks upward at her face as she gazes downward, feeling for the first time the opening she hadn’t known existed. I won’t say I was exactly like that, but I wasn’t far off.

I had never masturbated until I met him, which doesn’t sound like a compliment, but it kind of is. I had never really cared to explore the uncharted territory below my waistline until he took an interest in it, until I wanted to tell him what felt good, until I wanted to know myself the way he knew me. So I started doing some exploring, trying to find self-love through self-love, figuring out the functions of all the moving parts, a lot of trial and error and discovery and surprise, a lot of missteps and fumbles and moderate success. But the first time I found it, the first time, my back arched in shock, and my knees locked, and my whole body tensed, and I could feel it coming and coming, but then I stopped. To be honest, I was a little freaked out. It was my, “so that’s what that’s supposed to feel like” moment. And I realized I was afraid of the release, afraid of the openness and the freedom. I wanted my first time experiencing total surrender to be with someone I really cared about, someone who I wanted to be completely vulnerable with. Someone whose touch I wanted to unravel to. Someone who loved me unconditionally. But then, I realized, why couldn’t that someone be me?

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After I finished, I stepped back from the mic and looked out at the crowd of strangers, sweat and mosquitos clinging to my sticky D.C. summer arms. For the past few months, I had been on a sex-writing kick. The topic consumed the leather-bound, rose-imprinted notebook I clutched close to my chest. I was fascinated by the intricate details of this new experience, and I
didn’t think twice about putting it to words. The theme of the evening was self-love, so I thought why not go for it?

The modest crowd huddled close on picnic blankets as the sun began to set. Before I launched into this confessional excavation, I had looked outward, trying to catch my friend’s eye, and noticed a man with his young daughter, about five or six years old, standing at the back of the group. They had stopped to listen as they passed by, drawn to the strange scene, intimate coffee shop transplanted to the center of campus. I briefly wondered if I should warn him about what he was in for, but I dove in before I could convince myself to drop my notebook and run.

The crowd whooped when I finished. The man and his daughter evaporated into the humid distance. I’m not sure exactly when they left, but I felt a pang, wondering if I’d opened up conversations he wasn’t yet prepared to have, feeling guilty that I scared them away from the art. Then, I took a minute to absorb what I’d just done. I made my way back to my seat, peripheral vision obscured by my own self-consciousness.

I thought about that moment a lot in the year it took me to write this. I thought about where I’ve been, where I am, and where I’m going. I thought about myself as a five-year-old, as a daughter, as a teenager steeped in shame disguised as self-deprecation and sarcasm. I thought about myself as an adult with a sex life, and all the experiences, positive and negative and average and unsettling and intimidating and anxiety-provoking and pleasurable, that brought me to this point. I thought about how important self-pleasure has been to me as I’ve come into my own sexually, and how important I see it being for the rest of my life. And I’m glad I spoke out at that open mic. I’m glad that little girl and her dad heard me. Even if she might not understand what I was talking about for years, I hope she heard conflict. I hope she heard exploration and
discovery. I hope she heard pleasure. I hope she heard the pursuit of unconditional self-love. I hope she heard all of it.
Bibliography


