

**“I’M NOT YOUR SUPERWOMAN”: HOW JEWELLE GOMEZ’S  
VAMPIRE GILDA CAN HELP BLACK WOMEN RECOVER  
FROM STRONG BLACK WOMANHOOD**

**A THESIS**

**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
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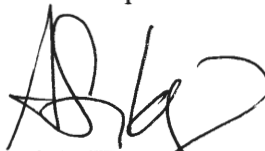
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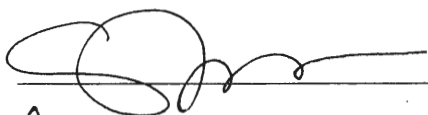
To the Dean of the Graduate School:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Shamethia Webb entitled "'I'm Not Your Superwoman': How Jewelle Gomez's Vampire Gilda Can Help Black Women Recover From Strong Black Womanhood." I have examined this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Women's Studies.



AnaLouise Keating, Ph. D., Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:



Claire L. Sahlin

Claire L. Sahlin

Department Chair

Accepted:



Dean of the Graduate School

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my mother and my Ma'dear, who have continuously blessed me with their words, time, love, and prayers. Both of you have *always* worked tirelessly for others even when you received little compensation or gratitude. Thank you for everything that you have done and continue to do.

I dedicate this thesis also to my Aunt Queen: my memories and thoughts are filled with you. Your nieces and nephews will forever remember and cherish you. Thank you for visiting me in dreams.

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I wish to thank my extended family, who teased me about being in school for such a long time but supported me all the same. Thanks especially to my bro, Lil' Stevie, for hippping me to the best writing spots in Denton.

To my Dad(s): *Daddy*: thank you for *always* being enthusiastic about even the slightest thesis progress and for professing such interest in reading the thesis. *Pops*: thank you for checking on me and for always encouraging me in my scholastic and life pursuits.

Memaw, I think you would have been the one to actually agree with the assertions I make in this thesis. 😊

To the aunt referenced in the thesis Preface: thank you for asking the question that changed everything.

I must acknowledge Nina Auerbach, whose critique of Gilda in *Our Vampires, Ourselves* incited me to consider Gilda in relation to the Strong Black Woman in the first place.

I wish to thank all of the scholars whose works I cited and consulted. Your scholarship has enriched my own. Thanks especially to Jewelle Gomez who presented Gilda. And to Gilda who seemed to come to life as I read and wrote.

Thank you God for bringing me to this point and for making me aware that this experience encompasses more than this degree.

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## PREFACE

So what you tryna say? Black women aren't strong?  
Lena Ellis<sup>1</sup>

The above epigraph is my Aunt Lena's response to my bold declaration during dinner that the idea of the Strong Black Woman was more lie than truth, more outdated legend than oral history, more assignment than choice. The Strong Black Woman is presented as the Black “everywoman” who can juggle family, work, and community roles without sweat, tears, or assistance, who performs as mother, daughter, wife—and occasionally superwoman—and needs no break, no help, and no thank yous. The myth of the Strong Black Woman, whose origin can be approximated to the nineteenth century during the American South's racialized slavery, has been nurtured by iconic images of historical and fictional strong black women—Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, interchangeable Mammies and Ma'dears, to name a few—and kept alive by contemporary Black women who wish to validate their identities with the seemingly positive role and counter other equally pervasive stereotypes about Black women that cast us as unfeminine, lazy, hyper-sexed, mannish, and altogether “bad women.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Lena Ellis” is a pseudonym.

<sup>2</sup> See Patricia Hills Collins’ *Black Sexual Politics* where she discusses negative characterizations of Black women



My aunt shot me a sidelong glance and repeated her question, "What you tryna say? Black women aren't strong?" I watched her eyes return to their normal size as she waited for me to explain, and I grappled with my words. What *was* I trying to say? By denouncing the Strong Black Woman myth was I suggesting that Black women were weak? Undeserving of the implied praise in the title of "Strong Black Woman?" I lobbed statistics at my aunt to prove Black women were not invincible. Did she know how many Black women were affected by heart disease, poverty, single parenting, and physical and sexual violence?<sup>3</sup> She rolled her eyes at the unprovoked lesson. I rattled off more statistics (she sighed), listed the experiences of several female relatives as proof of Black women's vulnerability (she glared), before I realized what I wanted to say. I turned to my aunt, one of the strongest women I know—Black or not—and explained that I was not saying that Black women should concede that they are weak, only that they admit that they are *human*—that they sometimes need help and days off; that they are not invulnerable to physical or emotional pain; that they, the women whom everyone seemed to need, have needs as well.

What I also wanted to say but did not (I was intimidated by my aunt's sudden scowl) was that I believe Black women—who are considered by default Strong Black Women—need to reclaim their bodies from a myth that has subtly co-opted them. The

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<sup>3</sup> Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant details many of the health and social issues that plague the Black female community, noting that these problems (diseases like diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease in particular) "may reflect a consistent level of abuse in social relations that treat Black women, in their communities as well as in the larger society, as literal beasts (*Behind the Mask*, 69).

Strong Black Woman role controls Black women's bodies in several ways. It overemphasizes Black women's physical strength, suggesting that they are naturally suited for physical labor and pain; the role confines Black women to heterosexuality and extols selfless motherhood, implying that Black women are suited for *reproductive* labor and are natural companions to men; the Strong Black Woman role tyrannically governs Black women's bodies, securing their labor for others, muting their gender and erotic desire, disallowing them erotic relationships with other Black women, and relegating them to a superhuman status that is humanly impossible to sustain.<sup>4</sup> Ironically enough, I turn to a *superhuman*—a vampire—to prove that Black women can live more humanly. I examine the protagonist in Jewelle Gomez's novel, *Gilda*—a former runaway slave turned lesbian vampire—and argue that her experience(s) as lesbian, vampire, and Black woman demonstrate that Black women can sweat, cry, express desire, and have autonomy over their own bodies. By analyzing Gilda in this way I hope to expose the incongruity in an immortal vampire allowing herself a humanness that a Black woman attempting to embody Strong Black Womanhood will not.

In this thesis, I will analyze and critique the Strong Black Women myth, emphasizing how the Strong Black Woman role regulates and punishes Black women's bodies. Contrasting the de-gendered/de-eroticized heterosexual body of the model Strong Black Woman to the erotic, queer body of Gilda, I offer Gilda as an alternative to Strong

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<sup>4</sup> For summaries and critiques of the Strong Black Woman role see Beauboeuf-Lafontant's *Behind the Mask*, Morgan's *When Chickenhead's Come to Roost* and Wallace's *Black Macho*.

Black Womanhood. In Chapter One I will argue that the Strong Black Woman's body is regulated by several assumptions: 1) her body is physically strong, conditioned for labor; 2) her body is heterosexual, suited for reproduction and male companionship; and 3) her body contains little gender and practically no erotic desire. In Chapter Two I will discuss the ways Gilda shows Black women how to reclaim their physical bodies from forced labor, compulsory heterosexuality, and socially prescribed gender roles. In Chapter Three I review the negative impacts of Strong Black Womanhood on Black women and offer suggestions for those Black women seeking to recover from the exacting role, emphasizing, again, the alternatives Gilda points towards which include expressing erotic desire, participating in loving (even sexual) relationships with other women, forming families that do not center men or rely on heterosexual reproduction, and expressing gender freely not simply accepting the muted gender of the Strong Black Woman.

Although I will focus on the characteristics of the contemporary Strong Black Woman, I cannot interrogate the Strong Black Woman myth without considering how American slavery influenced the development of the myth. I limit my discussion of the historical context of the myth to the period of slavery existing in the U.S. American south during the 1800s, relying on two texts in particular to provide background: Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* and Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Super-Woman*. Both White and Wallace agree that the idea of the super-strong Black Woman was birthed during southern slavery when slaveholders' demands for female slaves who could labor continuously (labor in work

production *and* reproduction) necessitated creating the mythologized super Black woman who could work tirelessly and suffer physical and sexual abuse with little to no physical or emotional injury.

Michele Wallace insists that the Black superwoman myth developed in 1808 when the slave trade was banned in America. Slaveholders, who, before the ban, relied on the inexhaustible source of enslaved bodies from the market, begin to rely on female slave's fertility for replenishing the labor force. Wallace writes that "it was at this point that the black woman gained her reputation for invulnerability" (138). The myth of the super-strong Black woman, then, was an unwelcome assignment that solidified enslaved Black women's subjugated status.

Deborah Gray White adds that enslaved Black women were expected to endure childbirth with little pain or need for recovery, to overcome illness quickly and quietly with little or no medical care, to perform heavy labor while pregnant or ill, to care for their children and the slaveholder's, and, although it is commonly believed that there was a distinct separation between house slaves and field slaves, White notes that enslaved women were forced to shuffle between both spaces. As White points out, "these conflicting demands required more acrobatics than an individual woman could perform" (114). Enslaved Black women were expected to be house servant, cook, field hand, and mother simultaneously. Speaking of the Strong Black Woman who existed in slaveholders' cultural imaginary during slavery, Trudier Harris notes:

Whether in the fields or in the big house, black women were perceived as working beyond endurance, always giving, and capable of protecting others, but never themselves needing protection. . . This combination of hardness and physical ability to work, combined with the pliability that allowed for picking cotton or changing baby diapers, yielded a black female body that could be transformed, managed, contained, or discarded at the whims of the controllers of black women's lives and images. (4)

It was demanded of enslaved Black women to be superwomen, so they obeyed as best they could, adopting the super-strong Black woman persona as a concession not choice. As White reminds us, Black women's supposed strength was not natural but was "cultivated" by exacting circumstances (119).

Two-hundred odd years following America's racialized slavery and the myth of the super-strong Black woman remains virtually uninterrupted. On the contrary, the myth appears to have become re-entrenched as the image of the indomitable Black woman is popularized in media and literature<sup>5</sup> and as tales of historical Strong Black Women such as Truth and Tubman are retold less for history lessons than lessons for teaching proper Strong Black Woman behavior.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Parks who discusses how popular culture uses the images of the Strong Black Woman and the Sacred Dark Feminine

<sup>6</sup> Michele Wallace, Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, and Joan Morgan agree that Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman serve as examples of proper Strong Black Woman conduct.

Contemporary Black women, my aunt included, assume a Strong Black Woman identity that was imposed upon their enslaved foremothers, that was imposed upon the beloved role models Truth and Tubman. I use the term ‘role model’ specifically because Black women are expected to model the antiquated Strong Black Woman role; still, I also hope to expose the problems inherent in expecting contemporary Black women to behave in ways similar to enslaved Black women 200 years ago.

Before I can interrogate how Gilda disrupts the myth of the Black superwoman, I must first define the archetypal Strong Black Woman. Marica Ann Gillespie poses the question I seek to answer, asking “What’s a good or a strong Black woman anyway? What’s the myth, the prevailing image?” (32). Michele Wallace answers this question, providing the most useful definition of the Strong Black Woman—one that recognizes the super-strong Black woman’s origins in slavery while also acknowledging her physical, gender, and sexual characteristics. Wallace explains:

From the intricate web of mythology which surrounds the black woman, a fundamental image emerges. It is of a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities, as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men. Less of a woman in that she is less “feminine” and helpless, she is really more of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite

sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman. (107)

Aspects of Wallace's definition of the Strong Black Woman mirror my own. We both recognize that the Strong Black Woman is expected to be physically strong and to perform as mother to her progeny, men, and society at large. Whereas Wallace understands the Strong Black Woman to possess little femininity, I expand Wallace's assertion and contend that the typical Strong Black Woman also possesses little to no gender.

Penning her Strong Black Woman critique twenty-one years after Wallace, Joan Morgan's definition of the Strong Black Woman combines Wallace's feminist undertones with a hip-hop sensibility. Speaking bluntly in what could be considered an anti-Strong Black Woman manifesto *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life As a Hip-Hop Feminist*, Morgan shares her own understandings of the Strong Black Woman demand, remarking: "By the sole virtues of my race and gender I was supposed to be the consummate professional, handle any life crisis, be the dependable rock for every soul who needed me, and, yes, the classic—require less from my lovers than they did from me because after all, I was a STRONGBLACKWOMAN" (87, author's emphasis).

A hip-hop feminist and self-avowed former Strong Black Woman, Morgan's definition offers a good look at the contemporary Strong Black Woman who has to apply

her superwomanhood<sup>7</sup> to the professional sphere as well as the domestic. Melissa Harris-Lacewell also provides a useful definition of the modern Strong Black Woman who functions as the ultimate “working mother,” explaining:

In her contemporary form, the strong black woman is a motivated, hardworking breadwinner. She is always prepared “to do what needs to be done” for her family and her people. She is sacrificial and smart. She suppresses her own emotional needs while anticipating those of others. She has a seemingly irrepressible spirit unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection. (3)

Although the vernacular used to define the model Strong Black Woman has changed somewhat, the expected qualities remain constant. She is the super worker, the super mother, the super lover—in short, a superwoman. Still, what exactly is expected of the typical Strong Black Woman? I recognize several distinct demands: she should possess a strong, invulnerable body; she should perform heterosexuality dutifully; she should ignore her gender while prioritizing men; she should ignore and suppress her eroticism; finally, the model Strong Black Woman should neglect her own humanness, checking her emotions and discounting her personal needs for rest and comfort.

It may seem farfetched to insist that an abstract, fabricated woman could influence millions of Black women, could survive two centuries that included

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<sup>7</sup> I will use the terms superwomanhood and Strong Black Womanhood interchangeably throughout the thesis.



emancipation, women's rights, civil rights, and Black Power movements. And yet as I previously noted, the mythologized Strong Black Woman *is* real in the fact that her persona has become an identity prescription for many Black woman.

I wanted to resume my conversation with my aunt, to convince her to admit her frailty and discontent with Strong Black Womanhood but the tension had grown thick between us and she'd settled her mantle of Strong Black Womanhood securely around herself. Frustrated, and a bit hurt by her sudden aloofness, I could nonetheless understand why she was so unsettled. By criticizing Strong Black Womanhood and implying that Strong Black Women did not exist, I was challenging my aunt's womanhood. I was insinuating that *she* was a bad woman. Therein lies the crux of the Strong Black Woman discussion, for Black women who endeavor to be Strong Black Women are not only trying to be strong and black, they are also attempting to be *good* Black women. Marcia Ann Gillespie corroborates my assertion that Strong Black Womanhood doubles as good black womanhood in her germinal essay "The Myth of the Strong Black Woman":

The pressures we women are under are intense. We are bombarded from all sides with all manner of things we gotta do: Gotta make ways for lasting meaningful social, economic and political change. . . Gotta do well on our jobs, gotta keep 'em or get better ones or make the ones we have pay off. Gotta keep our relationships thriving or get some going. Gotta look good and stay healthy. Told that we gotta be in control of our lives and our destinies. Gotta be past, present and future women all at the same

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time. Gotta keep our spirits and our sanity. Most important, or so it often seems, is that we Black women gotta be good women, gotta be strong.

(32)

Beauboeuf-Lafontant makes a similar point, noting in *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance* that the “defining quality of Black womanhood is strength” (1) and that “to become a strong Black woman is to follow a well-worn and distinguished path of hard work, caring, faithfulness, and generosity—the most tangible and revered example of Black womanhood” (72). An authentic Black woman is a Strong Black Woman. A *good* Black woman is a Strong Black Woman. Gillespie elaborates:

It seems that being a good woman has come to mean that we be all things to all people, be women other people feel free to bring their troubles to. Hard work—shucks, that ain’t nothing. Complain and you get labeled evil...so good women don’t . . . Good women may at times react or respond, but they don’t make waves. They usually settle for less—in relationships, in the workplace, in social involvements and in what they accept and demand as their political rights . . . Good women wait and look for men to lead them and then work endlessly behind the scenes propping them up. A good woman accepts the assumption that women’s work is never done and she’s only too willing to let others add to the pile. (33)

No wonder my aunt scowled so severely at my criticisms. By lambasting the Strong Black Woman identity, I was just another in a long line of people calling Black women bad. My intention, however, was not to attack my aunt's pride, self-esteem, or identity. I only wanted to explain that she—and other Black women venturing to be Strong Black Women—could be good, strong, and black without sacrificing their bodies, their sanity, or their humanity.

## CHAPTER I

### “AM I MY BROTHAS’ KEEPER?” ROLES AND RULES OF STRONG BLACK WOMANHOOD

I’m not your superwoman/ I’m not the kind of girl that you can let down/  
And think everything’s okay/ . . . I am only human  
Karyn White<sup>1</sup>

Although the contemporary Strong Black Woman does not perform the same duties as her enslaved foremothers, the demands made of the Strong Black Woman’s body remains constant. Like enslaved Black women, imagined to be superhuman, current Black women are assumed to possess a super strength, to be able to work tirelessly with little rest. Their bodies are assumed to be always accessible, always available, and perversely invulnerable to pain or fatigue. In relation to the demand for a stalwart body, the Strong Black Woman role not only demands specific attitudes and behaviors, it also demands a specific body—a large one. This is a point that few scholars have made.

Trudier Harris, one of few scholars to note this size expectation, explains in *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* that the strength Strong Black Women are assumed to possess is often attributed to their large

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<sup>1</sup> Special nod to Karyn White’s 1988 hit “Superwoman” for inspiring the thesis title

size. As Harris notes, in literary texts Strong Black Women are often depicted as statuesque, their larger size indicating strength and propensity for heavy labor (4). Drawing on popular fictional Strong Black Women like Florida Evans from *Good Times* and Mama Lena Younger from Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Harris argues that the Strong Black Woman is typically presented with a large body, an equally large (loud) voice, and an innate ability to survive even when she is not experiencing "good times." According to Harris, these large Black women are desirable to audience members—across race and sex categories—because their large size exudes comfort and safety. Large hands, big legs, and an ample bosom—stripped of its erotic dimensions—appear to offer warmth and comfort. Criticizing Hollywood's unceasing knack of casting heavysset Black women, Harris comments that the "larger they look, the more comforting they seem. They are literally perceived as being able to open their arms and comfort the world" (6-7).

Arguing that the typical Strong Black Woman is assumed to be "more body than mind" (66), Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant worries that this subtle demand for Black women to possess robust bodies encourages Black women to overeat<sup>2</sup> in order to achieve this large, strong body (68). In "Strong And Large Black Women?: Exploring Relationships between Deviant Womanhood and Weight," Beauboeuf-Lafontant explains

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<sup>2</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant insists Black women binge as a means to cope with Strong Black Woman demands. In "Strong and Large Black Women? Exploring Relationships between Deviant Womanhood and Weight," Beauboeuf-Lafontant links overeating and bingeing with the "weight-related diseases that plague the Black female community (adult-onset diabetes, heart disease, hypertension) (116).

that Black women face “societal and cultural expectations to be emotionally large and physically strong,” and she deplores the lengths Black women go to “embody their womanhood in particular physical forms” (119).

The typical Strong Black Woman is allowed her body but nothing else, not even a basic humanity, and this disallowance of humanness appears to be centuries old. Echoing my argument in the Preface, Harris notes that enslaved Black women were contradictorily considered both subhuman and suprahuman during American slavery: subhuman because they were imagined to be naturally suited for heavy labor, physical and sexual abuse, and effortless reproduction and suprahuman since they were considered physically and emotionally strong enough to withstand such gross treatment (3).

The Strong Black Woman is denied fundamental human expression: forbidden to cry, express anger and pain, or demonstrate need. Assumed to be absent emotions and sentience, the Strong Black Woman’s body is emphasized while her humanness is steadily diminished—so much so that, eventually, the Strong Black Woman forgets her own humanness.

This denial severely impacts real, flesh-and-blood women. Joan Morgan, for instance, shares that her Strong Black Womanhood made it difficult for her to recognize her depression. Unable to suppress her pain any longer, Morgan finally succumbs to her tears and was surprised that she could still produce such basic human expression:

The first ones felt foreign, like the forgotten reflex of an activity  
abandoned long ago, a ritual I’d reevaluated and determined useless

somewhere along the line. I rarely shed tears for myself in those days. Not only because I was an invulnerable superdiva incapable of pain (although there was much of that in the mix), but the endless masking I did from one day to the next was so convincing, I feared becoming confused. It is an unnatural act for masks to cry. (89)

As Beauboeuf-Lafontant explains, this disavowal of Black women's emotional state denies their humanity; that Black women are allowed a "lesser humanity" (42) that makes their emotional needs inconsequential and the suffering they endure natural. Thus, Beauboeuf-Lafontant passionately decrees, the strength narrative not only threatens Black women's humanity, it ultimately displaces it (135).

Emotions are deemed unnecessary for Strong Black Women. Internalizing such a decree, some Black women are unable to articulate their needs and concerns, thus participating in their own dehumanization. Beauboeuf-Lafontant claims that many Black women do not even possess a "vocabulary for examining their obligations to others, their limited resources for meeting those demands, and their needs for comfort" (54). Reduced to their physical strength, many Black women may find themselves unable to express their humanness or forbidden to do so by fellow Strong Black Women or those who benefit from Strong Black Womanhood.

I spent a lot of time with my maternal grandmother when I was a child, sliding down the wood banister in her home, distracting her as she cooked in the kitchen, spinning for hours on the forty-year old merry-go-round in her front yard. And I



remember that whenever I hurt myself when I was with my grandmother, when I fell off of that wood banister, or when I strayed too close to the stove against my grandmother's warnings and was popped by hot grease, or when I was hurled from the rapidly spinning merry-go-round, my grandmother would always draw me close and use her fingertips to blot away my tears, murmuring "No tears. No tears." I always saw this gesture as my grandmother's attempt to comfort me, to forestall the tears and keep the slow trickle from developing into full-blown bawling. But perhaps she was doing less comforting than *correcting*. A Strong Black Woman since the 1920s—who had endured overt racism, patriarchal rule in and outside of her home, and a sexist brand of religion—perhaps my grandmother would repeat her refrain "No tears" because she was reminding me that I was not allowed such soft expression. Strong Black Women—even the budding adolescent versions—did not cry.

I argue that all Black women, at least those groomed to be Strong Black Women, are similarly trained. Our tears are checked, our anger suppressed, our humanness arrested. Morgan enters the conversation, recalling a time when the SBW credo—"No matter how bad shit gets, handle it alone, quietly, and with dignity" (90)—was ineffective in countering her misery, her burgeoning rage, and her fatigue. Morgan admits that she did not know how to ask for help, lacking, I'm sure, the vocabulary Beauboeuf-Lafontant claims is necessary for communicating one's pain. Morgan shares:

Like most SBWs, I'd developed a real fear of vulnerability or imperfection. The few times I tried it, it seemed like I could barely get the

words out before somebody reminded me I was a  
STRONGBLACKWOMAN. So I listened to the SBW in me and retreated  
in angry silence. . . And nightly I was plagued by that absence of air,  
because I'd fall asleep drowning in tears. (90-91, author's emphasis)

The model Strong Black Woman has been reduced to a hollowed body. She is a  
Black superwoman who dismisses emotion as a "frivolity" (Gillespie 33) and who  
considers the loss of her humanity as par for the course.

Although no scholar extensively discusses the Strong Black Woman's sexuality,  
Trudier Harris recognizes that Strong Black Women depicted in popular culture lack "a  
sexual dimension" or are asexualized (16). While I worry that some Black women may  
project asexuality or subdue their sexuality in an attempt to counter enduring stereotypes  
that cast Black women as hypersexual,<sup>3</sup> I posit that the model Strong Black Woman is  
expected to be loyally heterosexual, a natural partner to Black men, and an enthusiastic  
mother to her children, especially sons.

Although no scholar directly connects the Strong Black Woman with compulsory  
heterosexuality,<sup>4</sup> I use two texts by Patricia Hills Collins to support my claim that the

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<sup>3</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Sexual Politics* for a discussion of stereotypes of  
hypersexualized Black women

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Hills Collins comes closest to linking the Strong Black Woman to compulsory  
heterosexuality with her discussion of Black's naturalized sexuality in *Black Sexual Politics*.  
Collins adds in *Black Feminist Thought* that white women are considered the only repositories of  
normal heterosexuality while Black women are expected to perform "deviant female  
heterosexuality" (83).

proper Strong Black Woman is expected to be heterosexual. Although Collins does not discuss the sexuality of the Strong Black Woman specifically, she does contend in *Black Sexual Politics* that the U.S. culture of racism, which demonizes Black sexualities, compels Black people to be “hyper-heterosexual”<sup>5</sup> since heterosexuality normalizes Blacks’ presumed deviant sexualities (106). Collins further contends that hyper-heterosexuality authenticates Blacks’ blackness since homosexuality is widely considered by the Black community to be a white phenomenon. Stating that homosexuality is viewed by the Black community as a “white disease” (108), Collins argues that queer Blacks may be viewed as “less authentically Black” (106). Compulsory heterosexuality, then, is solidified by the view that Blacks are naturally heterosexual. In order to be good Black women, Black women are expected to not only be Strong Black Women but also *heterosexual* Black women. Queerness jeopardizes their good black womanhood.

Not only is the Strong Black Woman expected to partner with men, she is also expected to prioritize men in all of her doings. As Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant states in *Behind the Mask*, the Strong Black Woman myth teaches Black women to be responsible for Black men, be they husband, son, or brother (83). This imposed responsibility, I believe, reinforces the Strong Black Woman’s heterosexuality. Collins also explains that Strong Black Women prioritize men, noting in *Black Feminist Thought* that the “superstrong Black mother” is unabashedly son-oriented (174). I would go one step

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<sup>5</sup> Collins defines Black hyper-heterosexuality as the assumption that Blacks are naturally heterosexual (always heterosexual) and are invulnerable to homosexuality.

further and declare that the Strong Black Woman role itself is not only son-oriented but, more generally, is male-oriented. Although the Strong Black Woman is supposed to labor for the entire family, she especially attends to the men in her life, assuming that other Black women (be they daughter, mother, or sister) are also Strong Black Women, capable of taking care of themselves.

The Strong Black Woman role, then, has much to do with Black *men*. Joan Morgan contributes greatly to this discussion, maintaining that the Strong Black Woman centers Black men because the Strong Black Woman myth cannot exist without its "mythological counterpart," the Endangered Black Man (119), a man whose survival is under constant threat and who, therefore, requires uninterrupted protection, validation, and attention from Black women. Morgan explains that Strong Black Womanhood may be so male-oriented because "centuries of being rendered helpless while racism, crime, drugs, poverty, depression, and violence robbed us of our men has left us misguidedly over-protective, hopelessly male-identified, and all too often self-sacrificing (54-55). While Morgan indicates that Black women's male-centeredness may be a result of external issues such as racism and poverty, she still acknowledges that Black women's commitment to Black men is also a result of "STRONGBLACK WOMAN conditioning" that "[convinces] us it's our righteous sista duty to help a black man reach his potential" (144-45, author's emphasis).

The "bad" Black woman appears to be the one who is not heterosexual or "hopelessly male-identified." Beauboeuf-Lafontant intimates that Black women are

compelled to be heterosexual and male-centered when she notes that an improper Black woman is self-interested and not male-oriented, explaining that “women who run the risk of incurring indictments for their non-strong or selfish behavior are those who do not adequately concern themselves with male desires, are not demonstrably heterosexual, or are simply cognizant of their own needs outside the care of others” (85).

This external pressure and ongoing demand to be male-oriented and a companion to men undoubtedly compels many Black women to practice heterosexuality. I agree with Collins that some Black women find social validation in heterosexuality but would add that since Black heterosexuality has been so naturalized, some Black women may be unable to imagine the possibilities of alternative sexual expression. For those Black women who *would* challenge compulsory heterosexuality, they may find that “heroic motherhood”<sup>6</sup> (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Mask*, 35)—the Strong Black Woman’s version of motherhood—necessitates that they remain heterosexual.

The Strong Black Woman role conflates good Black womanhood with motherhood which, in turn, bolsters many Black women’s heterosexuality. I conjecture that highly praised “natural motherhood” of Strong Black Womanhood entrenches heterosexuality especially since motherhood appears to be necessary for any Black woman aspiring to be a proper Strong Black Woman. Since Black womanhood, in general, is so male-oriented and the definition of Black motherhood has not been

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<sup>6</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant states in *Behind the Mask* that such selfless motherhood includes the belief that Black women mother naturally and can tolerate “inequitable care responsibilities, lack of reciprocity in relationships, and abuses suffered” (32).

expanded to include lesbian motherhood, one could argue that Black motherhood is itself heterosexualized and any Black woman who desires to be a mother is expected to also be heterosexual.

A Black woman, attempting to perform “proper” Strong Black Womanhood, may reason that a Black male partner and children legitimizes her good black womanhood and, consequently, embrace heterosexuality and motherhood. Critiquing the social mandating of motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality, Beauboeuf-Lafontant suggests that Black womanhood’s emphasis on rearing children (reproduction) and providing for men (heterosexuality) convinces Black women that a *real* Black woman or good Black woman is a mother and heterosexual wife (84). Gillespie concurs, noting that the ‘good’ Black woman is the one who marries, has children, and maintains the marriage regardless of difficulties (33).<sup>7</sup> Kesho Yvonne Scott also connects the Strong Black Woman with motherhood and heterosexual marriage, claiming that “regardless of class, black women are doubly socialized to maintain the illusion that motherhood is both mandatory and a privileged duty” (159). Scott reemphasizes her claim later, stating that the “definition of black womanhood . . . includes marriage, motherhood, and the tradition of ‘fixing up men’” (179).

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<sup>7</sup> In *Black Sexual Politics* Collins notes that motherhood is highly valuable to Strong Black Women who finally find a site where they enjoy power and authority (208). Motherhood’s significance may compel many Black women to remain faithful to marriage and heterosexuality. As aforementioned, Collins suggests that some Black women express their femininity via heterosexuality. Marrying and having children, as well, may offer other ways for Black women to express their femininity. One of Kesho Yvonne Scott’s interviewees, Marilyn, confesses that her desire *not* to have children made her feel unfeminine (157).

This naturalized heterosexuality and male-centeredness make it that much easier for the Strong Black Woman to disavow her gender. Instructed early on to prioritize Black men and maleness in general, Black women become so separated from gender issues and their own gendered needs that they could be almost considered “anti-woman”: a condition that makes heterosexuality appear all the more preferable and natural and that makes creating love and support relationships with other Black women nearly impossible. In “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving” Lorde claims that Black men forbid Black women “woman-identified interests” (47). Such restriction, coupled with the male-centeredness Black women adopt, compel Black women to isolate from one another and, in the words of Lorde, “avoid each other politically and emotionally” (47). So, not only are Black women assumed to be natural companions to men but, as Lorde suggests, Black women’s proper place is assumed to be away from other Black women (48). Lorde insists that Black women long for one another—as sisters *and* lovers—but have been trained so long to value Black men and despise Black women that the desire for other Black women is quickly squelched and redirected into contempt. Lorde writes:

While a piece of each Black woman remembers the old ways of another place—when we enjoyed each other in a sisterhood of work and play and power—other pieces of us, less functional, eye one another with suspicion. In the interests of separation, Black women have been taught to view each

other as always suspect, heartless competitors for the scarce male, the all-important prize that could legitimize our existence. (50)

If Lorde is correct and Black women assume that Black men “legitimize” their Black womanhood—their proper Strong Black Womanhood—then heterosexuality becomes all the more important. Especially since, as Lorde asserts later in “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” Black women, although taught to love and center men, have not been taught to love other Black women or even value them. Lorde argues that Black women have been reared in “an environment that consistently encourages nonlove and cover-up, an environment that warns us to be quiet about our need of each other,” an environment that normalizes heterosexuality, male-centeredness, and a disassociation with women *and* women’s issues (175). Lorde adds: “There has been little that taught us how to be kind to each other. To the rest of the world, yes, but not to ourselves. There have been few external examples of how to treat another Black woman with kindness, deference, tenderness or an appreciative smile in passing, just because she IS” (175, author’s emphasis).

Essentially Black women, in their attempt to be good and strong, cling to heterosexuality, prioritize men, avoid other Black women, and neglect gender issues. Strong Black Women do the latter so effectively that they practically lose their gender altogether, focusing on the *strong* and *Black* in their esteemed titles while disregarding the *woman*. I claim that the Strong Black Woman has been de-gendered since she is expected to center race and ignore gender issues such as sexism. Additionally, since the



Strong Black Woman *is* so male-oriented, gender issues are assumed to be not only negligible but counterproductive to the Strong Black Woman's responsibilities. Michele Wallace's text is useful here, although her tone is scathing as she accuses Black women of being politically impotent since they prioritize race over gender. Criticizing Black women for avoiding feminism, Wallace claims that Black women assume race issues are more important than gender issues and falsely assume that they are liberated from gender oppression. Connecting Black women's gender insensitivity to male-centeredness, Wallace writes: "As for racism being more important than sexism, [the black woman] is only saying that she can't afford to work on her oppression as woman because the black man's oppression is greater. I get an image of a Herculean woman who with one long muscular arm is holding the dogs that are nipping at her heels at bay, while the other arm is helping a fragile, tiny little man over the fence of racism" (124).

Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant agrees that Black women center race issues, conceding that Black women "have been expected to place a commitment to the race, as defined by men focused solely on their own enfranchisement, over attention to gender, which is often viewed by those men as a divisive, private matter"(35). Beauboeuf-Lafontant remarks on the "gender silence" (31) that exists in the Black community and that casts Black women as mothers or helpmates for Black men while making them ill-equipped to challenge sexism and acknowledge gender disparities.

Arguing that Black women fear that their personal empowerment will jeopardize their standing in the Black community, Morgan admits:

Acknowledging the rampant sexism in our community, for example, means relinquishing the comforting illusion that black men and women are a unified front. Accepting that black men do not always reciprocate our need to love and protect is a terrifying thing, because it means that we are truly out there, *assed out* in a world rife with sexism and racism. And who the hell wants to deal with that? (55, author's emphasis)

Morgan's words suggest that some Strong Black Women may ignore their gender in an attempt to ignore something even larger: the disturbing possibility that not only are they as Black women *not* liberated from race *or* gender issues, but that they are actually consistently violated by both. Black women use Strong Black Womanhood to cloak the alarming reality that they *are* truly "assed out" in the world, but Strong Black Womanhood extinguishes gender without eliminating sexism thereby exacerbating Black women's problems.

Gillespie harshly criticizes the Strong Black Woman role for ignoring Black women's gender, claiming that a Black woman's womanhood is removed by the strength narrative. Gillespie states that a "SBW is automatically a neuter. She's supposed to be above and beyond the earthly pleasures, to do without or sublimate much of her femininity and her womanhood while accomplishing incredible feats. After all, is there anything that a SBW *can't* bear?" (34, author's emphasis). Gillespie's words suggest that

gender is simply another piece of herself the Strong Black Woman is supposed to sacrifice for the good of her partner, family, and race. I conclude, then, that the Strong Black Woman role, performed correctly, deactivates the performer's gender, amplifying the *strong* and *Black* to minimize gender all the more.

If the extinguishment of her gender is not enough, the Strong Black Woman also has her eroticism<sup>8</sup> subdued. Her physical body is stripped of its desire as her breasts, thighs, hands, and womb transition from sites of personal autonomy and pleasure to tools for public and familial work. Trudier Harris is one of the only critics to discuss in detail the expectations of the Strong Black Woman's body, arguing that Strong Black Women have been purposefully imagined as asexual so that their bodies can emanate always available comfort and safety instead of dangerous sexuality. Citing images of Black women from popular magazines, film, and television, Harris claims that one reason Black women's large size was so emphasized in popular culture was to mute their sensuality all the more. Harris writes: "Those excessively large bosoms of black women were never photographed to imply sexuality; they were instead tied to nurturing. To highlight

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<sup>8</sup> I define eroticism as a woman's power over her own sexuality, sensuality, and sexual expression. Still, like Audre Lorde, I recognize that the erotic does not have to be sexual and its expressions are not limited to one's body. Lynda Hall points out in "Passionate Plays 'Wherever We Found Space': Lorde and Gomez Queer(y)ing Boundaries and Acting In" that multiple scenes between Gilda and platonic female acquaintances (her birth mother, friends, and beauty shop customers) that involved seemingly innocuous activities such as bathing and styling hair were nevertheless brimming with sensuality. My definition of the erotic, then, recognizes that the erotic can activate, develop, and suddenly appear even with/during the mundane.

strength over sexuality, large size was contained in clothing designed to efface the very body that size suggested was there" (4).

Gillespie also argues the typical Strong Black Woman has been de-eroticized, going so far as to claim that the Strong Black Woman has been neutered (34). Explaining that Black mothers teach their daughters at an early age to subdue their eroticism, Gillespie exclaims: "Mama passed this message on to us; ... that male sexuality was praiseworthy while we were to keep ours in check. That good women kept their ankles crossed and their skirts down" (33). Gillespie proceeds to criticize this double standard when she somberly states that "we expect great men to be whole people who champion life and also enjoy theirs fully. We applaud their sexuality, yet it's almost heretical to think of a SBW as a person who enjoys snuggling in bed or as a woman who writhes in sexual joy and release" (34).

While Harris and Gillespie contend that Strong Black Women have not been permitted desire, Audre Lorde worries that Black women deny *themselves* their erotic power. Lorde extols the benefits of the erotic in her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" but fears that many Black women deny the erotic, assuming that this self-denial will produce strength (53). Lorde differentiates the erotic from the simply sexual and pornographic by claiming that the erotic involves strong feelings and can influence all aspects of women's lives from work to creative engagements. If the Strong Black Woman is disallowed emotions and "frivolous" pursuits like dancing and laughing, then utilizing one's eroticism (which Lorde claims involves intense feelings) may seem

insignificant to Strong Black Women—irresponsible even. Lorde suggests that Black women fear that the erotic will upset their carefully constructed lives, will force them to feel and to question their safe, somewhat sanitized lives. Lorde explains:

This is one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all. For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe. (57)

Strong Black Women have had their eroticism extinguished—and have abetted its removal—because of the possibilities it promises; because the erotic can empower Black women in ways that the empty strength narrative cannot, reconnecting them to their feelings and other Black women, disrupting the asexualized and heterosexualized bodies allowed them, and, as Lorde suggests, animating every aspect of their sanitized, prescribed lives.

The word “statuesque” is bandied about often when describing the typical Strong Black Woman and the word choice is made even more significant when one realizes that

the model Strong Black Woman is indeed a statue—a hard woman whose personhood has been carved externally. The model Strong Black Woman is large, indomitable, male-centric, heterosexual, de-eroticized, and barely human. At the feet of this statuesque woman one finds her voice, her gender, her eroticism, her choice, her self-definitions, and her humanity. In Chapter II I discuss the ways Gilda shows Strong Black Women have to recover those severed pieces of themselves.

## CHAPTER II

### GILDA'S ALTERNATIVE(S) TO STRONG BLACK WOMANHOOD

"I had a friend, a brilliant woman who devoted her life to a little black company, doing the scut work, the kind that's just got to get done and nobody's willing to pay for it. She figured the brothers would be ready when nation time came. She worked like crazy: grant applications, giving advice backstage when directors got stuck, and housecleaning when they said they were too busy to get to the theater on time. But when nation time came she might as well have been wearing a sheet! Grant money went to every brother in the place but not to her. A row of cotton is a row of cotton . . ."

Gilda, *The Gilda Stories*

My central argument is that Black women must reclaim their physical bodies from the Strong Black Woman role that endangers their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. My view mirrors that of Michelle Wallace (the earliest and perhaps most vocal critic of the superwoman role) who is baffled that Black women, of all people, could be "duped" into believing they are superwomen (176). Whereas Wallace wants Black women to acknowledge that they are actually victims of racism and sexism and unwitting pawns to the black superwoman identity that racism and sexism created, I understand that the Strong Black Woman role is a complex one that praises Black women just as much as it harms them. I advocate that Black women find a balance between the two extremes of superwoman and victim—acknowledging their physical and emotional strengths while also admitting their physical and emotional *needs*. Gilda demonstrates how Black women

can achieve that balance because her *actual* superhuman strength neither diminishes her need for love, family, and security nor makes her invulnerable to physical and emotional pain or death. In this chapter I will discuss the ways Gilda, a former runaway slave turned lesbian vampire, shows Black women how to reclaim their physical bodies from forced labor, compulsory heterosexuality, and socially prescribed gender roles.

As my epigraph to this chapter suggests, Gilda is dismayed by Black women who work tirelessly for race issues and Black men while receiving little or no gratitude or compensation. By comparing the labor required of modern-day Black women to that of nineteenth-century enslaved Black women in cotton fields, Gilda not only exposes the disturbing similarities between contemporary Strong Black Women and their enslaved foremothers, but she also intimates that the metaphorical cotton fields contemporary Strong Black Women toil in can be escaped, much like the actual cotton field she escapes in 1850.

Before she was Gilda, she was The Girl, an unnamed slave picking cotton alongside her mother and sisters on a Mississippi plantation, working so hard and for so long that she left pinpricks of blood on the cotton. Her mother's sudden death reminded The Girl that her body did not belong to her and that she could be sold at the slaveholder's whim. The fear of being sold choking her, The Girl fled the Mississippi plantation, traveling fifteen hours straight, removing her body from the plantation and slavery, reclaiming her body. The Girl's successful reclamation of her body from slavery



provides proof to Strong Black Women that one's body can be reclaimed from a role that has appropriated it.

There are disturbing similarities between The Girl and supposedly liberated Strong Black Women; similarities I note to highlight The Girl's lesson of a multi-faceted *self-recovery*. The most obvious similarity between The Girl and today's Strong Black Woman is that of forced labor, of having one's body appropriated for the use of others, of not owning the fruits of one's labor. My intention is not to compare the lives of enslaved Black women to that of Black women in the twenty-first century; the atrocities that occurred during America's racialized slavery are unparalleled.<sup>9</sup> However, as aforementioned, I would like to point out the problems inherent in expecting contemporary Black women to behave in ways comparable to those of their enslaved foremothers. Similar to 19<sup>th</sup> century enslaved Black—to the The Girl—today's Strong Black Woman is expected to toil endlessly, to push her body beyond its level of comfort and human capacity, to work on even if she's tired, even when she's wounded and bleeding. Like The Girl, the Strong Black Woman does not own her body. Also, like The Girl, the Strong Black Woman has no name, only a title—one she did not create or agree to but eventually accepted, resignedly.

Yet, The Girl flees. She reclaims her body from slavery, removes it from dangerous conditions, and pushes it towards freedom and autonomy. The Strong Black

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<sup>9</sup> See Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* for a detailed account of enslaved Blacks' experiences during America's racialized slavery.

Woman can do the same. Of course the Strong Black Woman does not face a row of cotton or an overseer's whip; she does not have to contend with lifelong enslavement; but many Strong Black Women do face a life of unappreciated drudgery, seemingly unending uncompensated labor that benefits others while harming them. By escaping slavery, The Girl shows Strong Black Women how to reclaim their physical bodies from such harmful labor.

The Girl further demonstrates how Black women can reclaim their bodies when she becomes Gilda and manages to control her own labor. Over the course of 200 years, Gilda finds work as a housekeeper in a brothel, a gardener, a beautician, a singer, a theater stage manager, and a novelist. In each of these varied jobs, Gilda is her own boss, committed to the work only because she actually enjoys it, using the fruits of that labor—her wages, her influence, actual fruits and vegetables when she was a gardener—as she sees fit. Gilda refuses to commit herself to any undesired job or social activity.

In complete command of her own body, whenever the longing for travel and new experience overtakes her, Gilda picks up and leaves, settling temporarily in Louisiana, California, New York, and Massachusetts. In 1921, seventy-one years after she'd escaped slavery and become vampire, Gilda relocates to Rosebud, Missouri, purports to be widowed to escape speculation about her relationship status and financial independence, purchases a farmhouse and regularly gardens, and ignores all social obligations except weekly church service. Gilda's uncharacteristic behavior—driving, having independent income, being educated, and being antisocial—make her “a bit of an oddity” to Black and

white townspeople alike (106). Gilda is expected to behave in a manner befitting a woman, a Black woman no less, and a widower. She dresses in widow's clothes for church and dons women's clothing in public so as not to offend the townspeople's sensibilities, but other than that, Gilda's body belongs to herself. She continues to drive her motor car; she attends church events but participates only as much as she desires; she gardens even though, being vampire, she does not need the harvest.

Gilda also reclaims her body from compulsory heterosexuality,<sup>10</sup> refusing proffered heterosexual encounters and opting to participate in erotic and sexual relationships with women. Gilda was undoubtedly expected to partner with men, being a Black woman in a racist culture and a runaway slave whose body was assumed to be violable by white men. The Girl was sexually assaulted not even a day after escaping the Mississippi plantation and threatened with rape on two more occasions in the years subsequent to the first violent encounter. I discuss the sexual assaults attempted on Gilda not to suggest that Gilda's resistance to the violent attacks was a result of her lesbianism and certainly not to suggest that compulsory heterosexuality and rape are identical. I only wish to show that Gilda (still The Girl during the first two encounters), as a former slave and Black woman in the nineteenth century, was assumed to possess not only a heterosexual body but also a body immediately accessible and acquiescent for sexual

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<sup>10</sup> I use the term "heterosexuality" in this analysis of Gilda's sexuality but acknowledge that the term was not coined at the time or even used during the early part of *The Gilda Stories*. I only wish to emphasize that, even absent the term heterosexual, Gilda was undoubtedly expected to partner with men.

encounters with white men. As I argued in Chapter One, the Strong Black Woman's body is also assumed to be heterosexual and naturally suited for Black male desire.

One of The Girl's greatest lessons for Strong Black Woman is that another's desire should not supersede one's own, a lesson The Girl imparts when she is accosted by a bounty hunter intent on raping her before returning her to slavery. The Girl staves off the rape, barely, by killing the bounty hunter with a knife hidden in her clothes. In "Passionate Plays 'Wherever We Found Space': Lorde and Gomez Queer(y)ing Boundaries and Acting In," Lynda Hall explains that Jewelle Gomez queers the act of sex by "reversing penetration power," by having the white heterosexual bounty hunter seeking to penetrate his Black female victim penetrated by her instead. Hall recognizes that The Girl's knife, "an unmistakably phallic symbol, cuts into several misogynistic scripts" (418), one being that "the sexual act, and penetrative act, normally one of procreation, becomes an act of death and murder" (418). Gilda's staving off rape and her penetration of a male figure also queers the notion of heterosexuality, disrupts the notion of the passive female and penetrating male. The paragraph describing the attempted rape reads almost like a bad romance novel, complete with the vanquishing male figure and passive female figure, illuminating all the more the way Gomez disrupts heterosexuality:

[The Girl] looked up at the beast from the other land, as he dragged her by her leg from the concealing straw. His face lost the laugh that had split it and became creased with lust. He untied the length of rope holding his pants, and his smile returned as he became thick with anticipation of

her submission to him, his head swelling with power at the thought of invading her. . . He bent forward on his knees, stiff for conquest . . . He felt a warmth at the pit of his belly. The Girl was young, probably a virgin he thought, and she didn't appear able to resist him. He smiled at her open, unseeing eyes, interpreting their unswerving gaze as neither resignation nor loathing but desire. The flash-fire in him became hotter.

His center was bright and blinding as he placed his arms—one on each side of The Girl's head—and lowered himself. She closed her eyes. He rubbed his body against her brown skin and imagined the closing of her eyes was a need for him and his power. (11)

The bounty hunter misinterprets The Girl's body as heterosexual, available, and agreeable to his attentions. The Girl, a former slave, arguably conditioned to submit to white male desire, herself enters the bounty hunter, overriding his desire for sex with her desire for survival. The Girl is assaulted during her stint as housekeeper at the brothel, Woodards, by another white man, a customer accustomed to having female bodies immediately available to him. Worth noting in The Girl's and the customer's exchange is The Girl's adamant refusal to engage in an undesirable sexual relationship, a refusal highlighted by The Girl's environment at Woodards: a brothel where sex absent personal desire was frequently exchanged and where an almost resigned heterosexuality and sexual promiscuity was normal.

Seventy-one years following the incident at Woodards, the Girl—now Gilda—demonstrates again that she will not tolerate unwanted male advances. This time Gilda fends off two white nightriders prowling for Blacks to harass. As the nightriders clench their bloodied whips in their hands and agree to teach another Black a lesson, Gilda vows to give her own lesson to the nightriders. Gilda's lesson—manifested as a murder of one nightrider and a brief whipping and loss of blood for the other nightrider and a complete interruption of both men's plans to rape and perhaps murder a Black woman—could be interpreted as a message not to menace Blacks. Gilda's lesson could also be that white men not assume that Blacks are easy targets and Black women the easiest. Still, there is more to be examined in Gilda's exchange with the nightriders, especially since Gilda realizes that the nightriders targeted her not only because she was Black but also because she was a Black woman. Upon spying Gilda, Gomez writes, one of the nightriders "swung down from the saddle immediately. He stood before her with an angry glare that quickly turned into a leer when he realized she was not a man" (113). Since Gilda recognizes that her race and gender precipitated the attack, perhaps Gilda's ultimate lesson is to not violently foist male desire upon Black women's bodies.

Even when male desire for her was not violent or exclusively sexual but gentle and loving, Gilda still rejects sexual relationships with men. We see this rejection in Gilda's interactions with Julius, a young Black man who works with her during her stint as a stage manager in Manhattan. Admitting to herself that Julius intrigued her, Gilda still recognizes that her attraction to him differed from the "overwhelming rush of desire"

(176) she felt towards Eleanor, and she refuses to allow Julius's fierce desire for her and her unexpected fascination with him to persuade her into a heterosexual relationship.

Although Gomez describes Gilda as a lesbian,<sup>11</sup> Gilda does not use such specific language to describe her denunciation of heterosexuality or her attraction to women. Still, her desire for women—which externalizes as sexual relationships as well as deep friendships—is evident throughout the novel. Somewhat puzzled by her disinterest in Julius, Gilda admits that she “found her comfort with women. That was just the way it was” (174). Throughout two hundred years of her life as human and vampire, Gilda's desire for women never wavers. At each stage, she develops erotic relationships and passionate friendships<sup>12</sup> with women, showing Strong Black Women how to care for the beloved Black men in their lives without prioritizing them and without neglecting other Black women. Gilda challenges the Strong Black Woman's concept of family, which prioritizes Black men and relies on heterosexual reproduction, and creates families that consists primarily of other women and which recognizes love and desire between women. Ultimately, Gilda shows Strong Black Women how to love other Black women as sister, friend, and lover and how to view other Black women as allies not competitors.

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<sup>11</sup> See Gomez's “Recasting the Mythology: Writing Vampire Fiction” in *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture*

<sup>12</sup> Special thanks is due Barbara Smith who introduced the term “passionate friendship” in her essay “Toward A Black Feminist Criticism” that explored the deep relationship between Toni Morrison's characters Sula and Nell in her novel *Sula*.

Repeatedly in *The Gilda Stories* we see Gilda use her body and her resources (her wealth, strength, immortality, and wisdom) to aid other Black women.

Gilda even teaches Aurelia—a woman bound by religious customs, gender expectations, and propriety, a woman expected to eventually remarry whether she wants to or not—that desire exists right at the edge of love, that the loneliness and longing that she feels can be assuaged by another woman. Gomez describes Aurelia unexpected attraction to Gilda:

Aurelia turned to Gilda because she was solicitous without exuding the condescension customary from those who had known her since childhood. Gilda talked easily of places and customs Aurelia had never heard of before, speaking as if they were just around the bend in the road. Tonight was the first social event she organized on her own, and it was Gilda who made her think she could manage it. . . . The death of her parents and then her husband left Aurelia financially comfortable but with little direction . . . Gilda's steely calm made these shadows less frightening. While she looked not much older than Aurelia's twenty-five years, the way she moved, the seriousness in her eyes, spoke of great wisdom. Their mutual enjoyment of small pleasures rekindled Aurelia's hope. (107)

Gilda also reflects on how perfectly she and Aurelia seem to fit together, companionably and physically. After Aurelia tentatively questions the unspoken attraction between them, "Gilda pull[s] Aurelia into her arms. . . . Aurelia fit into the bend



of her arm, under the curve of her breast, as if their bodies were cut from a pattern” (125). Gilda distinguishes her feelings for Aurelia as a combination of “love *and* desire” (127, emphasis added), showing Strong Black Women that love between Black women can be more nuanced than the either/or choice between platonic familiar friendship and daunting unfamiliar lesbianism.

We see several other instances where Gilda provides other Black women with friendship, support, and protection. In 1955, Gilda lives in Boston and operates a beauty shop—an establishment long recognized as a site of female community and which Gilda herself describes as a “woman’s place” (136)—and the shop attracts not only customers and friends but prostitutes who work the avenues outside the shop and find solace in the shop’s and Gilda’s warmth. Gilda, too, realizes the comfort and community her shop offers and the opportunity to create deep friendships with other women. Gomez writes that “over the years Gilda had enjoyed her relationships with the women on the avenue. In many ways they were like the women at Woodards . . . Their comradeship and energy always strengthened her” (133). Miriam Jones also recognizes the social and political relevance of Gilda’s beauty shop, explaining that “the importance of the small neighborhood shops such as Gilda’s, in their roles as cultural and informational clearing houses, should not be minimized” (157). While Jones emphasizes the cultural significance of Gilda’s hair salon, I insist that Gilda’s shop functions as a symbol of the love and desire that can exist between Black women. Female customers, acquaintances, and strangers are attracted to the beauty shop and the woman who runs it. Gilda herself

recognizes that her shop is distinctly female and she muses: "Women came here to be massaged by other women, made beautiful by other women" (136).

Gilda's relationship with Bird best illustrates the complexity of woman love—how it can blend eroticism, love *and* love-making, family, and friendship. Bird symbolizes Gilda's perfect family: an amalgamation of mother, friend, lifetime companion, and lover. Shannon Winnubst makes a similar point, noting that Bird occupies multiple roles for Gilda, describing Bird as a member of Gilda's family, her "lover/mother/sister" (9). Reminding readers, again, that love and desire coalesce and that family, friendship, and the erotic intersect, Gilda remembers her birth mother, long dead, as she and Bird exchange blood and make love. Gilda reflects: "The soft touch of Bird's hand on her brow, felt, for a moment, as if it were her mother's. Bird then stroked her neck, slipping softly to her back and rubbing the tender spot just below the hairline where the nerves came together, sparking a tingle inside her thighs" (139). The mutual desire between her and Bird, Gilda recognizes, contains love and lust:

This was a desire not unlike their need for the blood . . . It was not unlike lust but less single-minded. She felt the love almost as motherly affection, yet there was more. As the blood flowed from Gilda's body into Bird's they both understood the need—it was for completion. They had come together but never taken each other in as fully as they could, cementing their family bond. (139)

As Bird continues to drink blood from a cut drawn below Gilda's breast and Gilda swoons from the resulting weightlessness, images of her mother and sisters fill her thoughts. Gilda hears her mother's voice in song, sees her sister's smiling face, smells her own rich blood, and feels the tug of Bird's teeth below her breast. Here, Gilda blurs the line between the erotic and love, between the roles of family and lover. After Bird is full on Gilda's blood, Gilda reciprocates, drinking from Bird's breast, stroking her breasts and nipples as she suckles like a child nursing from her mother. Gilda makes the comparison to mother/child herself, noting that afterwards Bird "lingered over her as she would a child. She whispered sweet words to her as she might a lover" (140).

This scene demonstrates that the love between women can be passionate and tender whether the participating women are relatives, friends, or lovers. The absence of a male presence in Gilda's lovemaking, bloodletting, and recollections of her mother and sisters upsets the heterosexual script all the more, proving to Strong Black Women that satisfying love relationships can exist outside obligatory heterosexuality.

The typical Strong Black Woman fears that admitting erotic desire for other women, practicing lesbianism, or even being cognizant of women's issues may jeopardize her racial identity and make her appear to be anti-male. Gilda shows Black women how to enjoy erotic relationships and deep friendships with other women without endangering their racial identity.

Being vampire, a separate race in itself, Gilda could have easily disavowed her blackness and considered herself beyond such human social categories. Gilda was, in

fact, encouraged by two of her vampire mentors/brothers, Sorel and Anthony, to relinquish her connections to the mortal world and cease being so pathetically human. In one instance, Anthony chastises Gilda for continuing to reason like a human. He gently admonishes Gilda:

You've searched admirably for your humanity. Indeed, this is the key to the joy found in our lives, maintaining our link to the chain of living things. But we are no longer the same as they. We are no longer the same as we once were ourselves. You know this when you are with your friends. Don't ignore it. It's not wrong to look to them for their humanity, but your life is with us. (210)

Of course, Anthony is not commanding Gilda give up race specifically. Rather, he wants her to disavow *all* of her human attachments, to accept her rightful place in a different race—the race of vampires. Even Bird worries about Gilda's attachment to humans, especially her connection to other Black women. When Gilda determines to save Toya from Fox, Bird initially balks at Gilda's interference, exclaiming: "Dear girl, the mortal ones will settle their own worries. To connect with them, yes, but you must live as what you are. Listen to the world from your own powers" (157). When Gilda recoils from Bird's words, Bird continues: "It is a good thing to love and care for others . . . But we are as we are. Our world is separate from theirs" (157). Despite Anthony's and Bird's admonishments, Gilda refuses to relinquish her humanity or her blackness. Memories of slavery, whippings, and the attempted rapes haunt her, reminding her of the consequences

of being Black and female in a race-conscious society. As the years pass, Gilda's race consciousness is uninterrupted and her musings often reflect her concerns about the Black community. Gilda avidly supports Aurelia's political and social work in Rosebud's poor Black community, and the only reason Gilda refrains from transforming Aurelia into a vampire is because she recognizes Aurelia's importance to this community.

Gilda carries her Black identity with her through time and across space just as she carries the Mississippi soil that connects her to the earth and ensures her survival. In the '60s Gilda works with a Black theater company that is heavily involved in the Black liberation movement. In 1981 Gilda surrounds herself with friends who are markedly Afro-centric. Gilda explains her unwavering commitment to her race:

The inattention of some of her contemporaries to some mortal questions, like race, didn't suit her. She didn't believe a past could, or should, be so easily discarded. Her connection to the daylight world came from her blackness. The memories of her master's lash as well as her mother's face, legends of the Middle Passage, lynchings she had not been able to prevent, images of black women bent over scouring brushes—all fueled her ambition. She had been attacked more than once by men determined that she die, but of course she had not. She felt their hatred as personally as any mortal. The energy of the struggles of those times sustained her, somehow. (180)

they do not have to accept the binaries inherent in their title that forces them to choose strength over humanity, blackness over gender, and men over women.

As I argued in Chapter One, the typical Strong Black Woman is disallowed eroticism<sup>13</sup> partly, because, like Lorde suggests in "Uses of the Erotic," the erotic can empower Black women (55) and encourage them to challenge the superwoman role assigned them. Many Strong Black Women also deny or diminish their own erotic, considering eroticism trivial, a distraction from their true work which involves prioritizing men, their families, and their race.

The Strong Black Woman deserves the opportunity to reclaim her eroticism and reject, if she so chooses, the asexuality and hyper-heterosexuality she has been limited to by Strong Black Womanhood. I encourage Black women to expand their understandings of love and the erotic to include other Black women.<sup>14</sup> Gilda continuously shows Black

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<sup>13</sup> As noted in Chapter One, I define eroticism as a woman's power over her own sexuality, sensuality, and sexual expression. Still, I recognize that the erotic does not have to be sexual and its expressions are not limited to one's body.

<sup>14</sup> I focus on loving Black women in particular because, as Audre Lorde notes in her essay "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger," Black women have internalized the racism and sexism of American culture and are vulnerable to self-hatred and the hatred of other Black women. No scholar directly connects the Strong Black Woman role with self-hatred; still, Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant notes that the stress of the SBW role forces many Black women to self-soothe by overeating, self-medicating with alcohol and prescription drugs and practicing "other compensatory behaviors" (109). Joan Morgan suggests that the suffering inherent in following the SBW "credo" (90) contributes to Black women's internalized rage, low self-esteem, and depression. Sheri Parks states plainly that "the role of the Strong Black Woman as many women live it requires a measure of physical self-abuse" (167).

women how to enjoy erotic relationships with other Black women. As I mentioned above, Gilda engaged in multiple love/sexual relationships with other Black women. Even when her relationships with other Black women did not become sexual, the relationships were still highly erotic. Gilda and Aurelia limited their physical exchanges to friendly embraces, hand-holding, and chaste kisses on the cheek, yet they were both aware of the simmering energy that existed between and blurred their status as simply friends. Still, the most erotic components of Gilda and Aurelia's relationship may very well be those things that are not traditionally considered sexual: their easy laughter with one another, the silences that neither would or could breach as they shared tea or rode in Gilda's motor car, the warm flushes that would overtake Aurelia whenever Gilda paid her a compliment, the mutual teasing they employed in every one of their encounters. Gilda demonstrates that the erotic is not limited to sexual encounters but can manifest via laughter or through the touch of another's hair.

Aurelia never articulates her desire for Gilda in words; still Gomez provides ample evidence that Gilda and Aurelia enjoy an erotic relationship. It is a piece of furniture in Aurelia's living room that prompts Aurelia's first erotically tinged assessment of Gilda. As a social event in her house draws to a close, Aurelia realizes that Gilda has exited the room and Aurelia *feels* Gilda's absence:

And there was Gilda. She wasn't in the room at the moment, yet she was everywhere. Her favorite chair was angled in the corner next to its ornate

and felt their friendship strengthen. And while her fingers pressed into Savannah's scalp, Gilda recalled the touch of other women she loved: her mother and Bird:

Gilda closed her eyes and felt her mother's hands combing and braiding her hair. She remembered the sharp tugs and the pull of her scalp as the hair was caught back in the thick raids running like rows of corn across her scalp. Then the touch was Bird's, who had unbraided the rows and brushed the thick dark mass into one long, tight braid ending at the back of her neck. Their hands had been hard, worker hands; self-sufficient hands that still knew how to be tender. (131)

Gilda reemphasizes that the erotic can be communicated by simple touch as she reflects on her new career as a nightclub singer in Harlem in 1981. Gilda acknowledges that songwriting and singing energize her, but she admits that it is her friends' responses to her singing that truly satisfies her:

She cherished singing for those enchanting women who were so full of ideas and plans. It fulfilled her in a way that was different from the nights of singing on a bandstand amidst clouds of smoke and noisy ice cubes. The checks from the clubs in the Village or across the river in New Jersey never enriched her as much as the women's tender hands on her back or the dazzling smiles they showered on her as they had done tonight. (195)



reading lamp where she sat many evenings, first as Aurelia's comforting neighbor, later as a special friend . . . Aurelia was suddenly anxious that the women leave so she could have her home and friend to herself again.

(104)

Strong Black Woman who are repulsed by same-sex desire, or who are simply not interested, yet still long to reclaim their eroticism and to experience it in the company of other Black women, can be reassured that the erotic can manifest outside of sexual encounters, like Gilda and Aurelia prove. Strong Black Women can discover eroticism in the places they frequent most, with the women they engage with most often. As Lynda Hall notes, eroticism is not limited to a sex act; one of *The Gilda Stories*' most erotic encounters occurs in Gilda's hair salon. Hall explains that Gomez imbues common actions such as tending hair with sensuality, transforming simple acts of braiding or washing one's hair into a surprisingly sensuous experience involving women (408). Hall writes: "When Gilda works on Savannah's hair, she recalls Bird braiding her hair, and before that her mother, forming a continuum of women touching and caring for women" (408). As Gilda's experience with Savannah indicates, the erotic can be activated by mere touch, a reaching out for another Black woman in love, desire, or passionate friendship. The Strong Black Woman does not have to touch another woman's breasts or thighs to discover the erotic; she can touch another woman's scalp, her hand, her hair to communicate and experience eroticism. Gilda massaged and shampooed Savannah's hair

erotic is accessible, available, and probably nearer than many Strong Black Women suspect, concealed within our hands and the hands of our sisters/friends—a lesson Gilda herself learns from one of her Harlem friends, Effie.

Gilda, at once intrigued and alarmed by the energy between herself and Effie, initially resists Effie's attentions. It is only when Effie reveals that she is also a vampire that Gilda acknowledges that her loneliness and desire can be assuaged by someone she saw as simply a friend. Gomez narrates Gilda's acceptance: "There was no reason for Gilda to run from her. That this woman was as she was, had lived the same way for so many more years, was miraculous and familiar. Gilda was stunned that she had not been able to see it" (213). Although Gilda and Effie eventually express their desire via lovemaking, what is particularly noteworthy is Gilda's realization that the erotic can involve the familiar, that someone who "was as she was" could offer more than friendship if so desired. Strong Black Women, too, should acknowledge that other Black women are possible sources of love and comfort.

The model Strong Black Woman is so male-oriented that her own gender is backgrounded, deemed undeserving of her own or anyone else's attention. Hyper-focused on maleness and blackness, many Strong Black Women ignore women-specific issues such as sexism and inequitable power relations between men and women. The Strong Black Woman is unable to define and perform her own understandings of gender primarily because she rarely acknowledges her gender and also because she readily accepts that the mantle of Strong Black Womanhood, which emphasizes race at the

expense of gender, is her correct gender performance.<sup>16</sup> Gilda has to navigate her gender expression over a two-hundred year period, a time during which many women were not allowed to read, vote, drive, or even travel without male guardianship and when Black women were subject to enslavement, harassment, and sexual assault. It may be because Gilda recognizes that her race *and* gender make her susceptible to such gross violence that she is unable to ignore her gender. As aforementioned, Gilda was attacked in 1921 by two nightriders intent on raping and killing her. Gilda instantly realizes that she's being targeted because she is Black and female and notes that the most aggressive night rider "swung down from the saddle immediately. He stood before her with an angry glare that quickly turned into a leer when he realized she was not a man" (113).

Gilda was aware that her femaleness made her vulnerable to assault—a lesson reaffirmed, obviously, by three separate sexual attacks by men—and Gilda chooses to hide her femininity in masculine attire since the clothing projected maleness, granting her gender security if not racial security. Even as a superhuman vampire blessed with indomitable strength, Gilda is conscious that her racialized femaleness compromises her safety. When asked why she dresses in men's clothing, she answers, "I realized before I left home there would be no place for me on the road, alone. Even with my advantages I'd be fair game for every male passerby" (66). So, in 1890, when many women still wore corsets and heavy gowns, Gilda dons male breeches and boots, cloaking her

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<sup>16</sup> See Morgan, Beauboeuf-Lafontant, and Wallace for critiques of the Strong Black Woman's gender neglect.

femininity with superficial masculinity. Still, Gilda does not wear male clothing just to avoid male assault; she actually delights in breaching gender roles and abandoning the restricted womanhood allowed at the time, and she remarks that she was “comfortable returning to the guise of boyhood that had cloaked her during her travels west, releasing her from the pretenses and constrictions of womanhood” (66).

Gilda recognized that her race already situated her well outside of “proper” femininity and she shrugged off societal demands to perform femininity, reasoning that “most would only see her as a former slave, so why should she force herself to emulate them unnecessarily”(72). Whereas Miriam Jones praises Gilda’s fearlessness at being so visibly “butch” at a time when her race and sex already subjected her to harassment and violence (159), I disagree with Jones that Gilda cross-dresses partly to accentuate her race and sexual identity while diverting attention away from her vampirism (159). Instead, I concur with Hall who asserts that Gilda “queer[s] and challenges[s] gender stereotypes and interrogate[s] appropriate performance of ‘femininity’”(398). Also identifying Gilda as a cross-dresser, Hall avers that Gilda’s rejection of dresses and skirts is not simply a denunciation of restrictive feminine garb but an outright rejection of restrictive traditional femininity (399). Gilda does not simply disrupt traditional femininity; she tramples it.

One of Gilda’s new Yerba Buena acquaintances, a dignified vampire named Eleanor, insists on taking Gilda shopping and outfitting her in the ostentatious gowns that were the fashion at the time. Gilda declines Eleanor’s offer, stating “I’ll do whatever you ask except wear skirts everyday” (72). Gilda realizes that she’s disrupting gender

expectations but she is nonplussed. In response to Eleanor's consternation at Gilda's refusal to dress womanly, Gilda acknowledges that "she didn't want to offend her new and intriguing friend but recognized immediately what she would feel most comfortable in: pants—whatever effect that had on the society that Sorel proposed to introduce her into. She decided she was already outside of it (72). In that instance, Gilda refuses to conform to Eleanor's and society's expectations, refuses to suspend her preferred gender expression. I will extend Hall's above metaphor that Gilda's rejection of feminine clothing is a rejection of traditional femininity and point out that Gilda does not simply discard feminine clothing for masculine; rather, when presented with the opportunity in Yerba Buena, she designs a wardrobe that contains elements of feminine *and* masculine dress, a style that thoroughly satisfies her. Gilda describes her experience at the tailor shop:

Gilda had conceded to a design that from a distance looked like a skirt but was, in fact, split like pants and afforded Gilda the freedom of movement she would not forego. Atop the yards of cloth draping softly at her hips and down her long legs would be a tight bodice much like those worn by most women in town. Gilda insisted, however, that they all button down the front like jackets. She added soft shirts beneath them, and in some cases ordered matching ties to complement the fabric of the skirt/pants.

(72)

Gilda literally and figuratively fashions her own gender expression and tolerates no interference or intimidation from friend, tailor, or society.

Gilda was deeply invested in race issues, supporting Aurelia's political work in 1921 Missouri and participating in Black social movements during the 1960s; still, she refuses to let her commitment to her race usurp her commitment to gender issues, an approach which the model Strong Black Woman has yet to adopt. Gilda recalls the black theater movement she was involved in during the 1960s and harshly criticizes the sexism she encountered (a veiled critique of the Black Power movements that were notoriously sexist and male-identified).<sup>17</sup> Infuriated that rampant sexism in the movement forestalled meaningful social transformation, Gilda exclaims:

Most of the men we marched with ran out of liberation ideas. They had a big dream about black men being free, but that's as fair as it went. They really didn't have a full vision—you know, women being free, Puerto Ricans being free, homosexuals being free. So things kind of folded in on top of themselves. (170)

Overcome by her frustration and disappointment at such flawed understandings of freedom and equality, Gilda argues that Black women in the Black social movement were little different than female slaves in a cotton field, using their bodies and labor for the benefit of others, notably men. "A row of cotton is a row of cotton," Gilda surmises

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<sup>17</sup> For a criticism sexism in Black Power Movements of the '60s, see Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and The Myth of the Superwoman*

glumly, “surprised at the depth of her own feelings, about the disappointment she had seen on the faces of black women over the years” (170).

Gilda’s gender lesson for Strong Black Women is manifold. First, Gilda recognizes that she *is* gendered and does not assume that her identity is limited to her race or vampirism. Also, Gilda defines her own gender—an incredible feat considering the time period and the quick and violent reprisals one could incur for breaching social norms—abandoning at will the socially prescribed and limited womanhood allowed other women and fashioning a gender identity that allows her to be Black, female, lesbian, and vampire. Most importantly, Gilda refuses to ignore gender issues and allow sexism and gender expectations to govern her life, as marked by her incensed denunciation of the Black liberation movement and her heated encounter with her bodyguard, Houston, in 2050. In the mid twenty-first century, when America has deteriorated to wasteland, people use hovercrafts for transportation, and humans have finally uncovered the existence of vampires and hunt them for their immortal blood, sexism still thrives. Houston, who has been employed to guard the caves Gilda hides in to escape detection from human hunters, grabs Gilda when he assumes that she is fainting. When Gilda explains that vampires do not faint, Houston responds patronizingly that “All women faint” (240). Gilda is aghast, retorting “No, Houston, all women do not faint. They haven’t in some time!” (240). Whether she is a newly turned vampire in 1890 Yerba Buena or a seasoned vampire in 2050 new America, Gilda refuses to have her gender ignored, diminished, or controlled.

The most consistent way Gilda disrupts gender roles is her seizing what Halls refers to as “penetration power” (417) and penetrating those from whom she seeks blood. In “Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams: Race and Sex in the Contemporary United States,” Shannon Winnubst explains that classical vampire literature typically subscribes to traditional gender roles, showcasing male vampire predators who subdue their passive female victims (9-10). Winnubst states that Gomez “interrupts the classic vampire narrative” (11) with Gilda, a Black lesbian character that upsets the heterosexuality and whiteness that marks classical texts, what Winnubst refers to as narratives of “straight white male mythology” (9). Winnubst pays less attention to Gilda’s disruption of gender than her interruption of race and sexuality; still, Winnubst demonstrates, perhaps unknowingly, that Gilda is not only aware of her gender, but she also forces readers to become aware of gender as well as they briefly embody femaleness while reading *The Gilda Stories*. Winnubst argues that straight white male readers of classical vampire narratives usually identify with the male vampire, the “penetrator,” while other readers cannot help but to identify with the female victim (10). With Gilda as penetrator, femaleness is foregrounded and male *and* female readers are presented with the “unusual possibilities” of identifying with someone who is Black, lesbian, and female (11). Whereas Winnubst claims that straight white male readers of *The Gilda Stories* may resist such problematic identification, Strong Black Women reading the novel may become cognizant of their *own* gender as they temporarily identify with Gilda. Additionally, not only is a Strong Black Woman reading *The Gilda Stories* presented



with the opportunity to be vampire, lesbian, and woman, but she is also allowed to be a woman who challenges gender roles and who ultimately crafts a definition of gender that suits her. *The Gilda Stories*, then, stops being a simple work of fiction and operates as a sort of guide book for de-gendered Strong Black Women.

Gilda shows Strong Black Women how to reclaim their physical bodies from forced labor and compulsory heterosexuality, how to love women as sisters/friends *and* lovers, how to attend to race and gender, and how to utilize their erotic. Still, Gilda's most helpful lesson for the silently suffering Strong Black Woman may be how to live more humanely as a complete woman with emotions, fears, and needs—an ironic lesson to learn from a superhuman vampire.

As a vampire, Gilda was privileged to enjoy a strength and immortality that humans did not possess. Within minutes of Gilda's transformation from human to vampire, Bird details the newfound powers she would enjoy, explaining: "Already your body sheds its mortal softness. You'll move faster than anyone, have the strength of many" (50). Gilda's vampiric powers allow her to enter humans' and vampires' thoughts; to give "energy, dreams, ideas" to humans (45); and to be invulnerable to all death except the "truth death" that results at the hand of another vampire or at the behest of a vampire ready to end her own life. Yet, the superhuman Gilda still has weaknesses. She must carry stashes of home soil wherever she goes as a means of protection and as a connection to the earth; she must avoid direct sunlight and water—water being a vampire's greatest threat since it can sap a vampire's powers and life. Gilda

acknowledges all of her vulnerabilities and does not let her superpowers or immortality make her careless, arrogant, or needlessly masochistic.

Gilda shows Strong Black Women how to resist the supplantation of their humanity. A vampire reputed to be above such human frivolity as tears and pain cannot help but weep and admit that her vampirism did not depose her human nature. Gilda is a vampire who no longer has the ability to produce tears—no doubt one of the losses of “mortal softness” Bird mentions above; still, in several instances throughout the text Gilda cries. When she severs her relationship with Eleanor after learning of Eleanor’s manipulative and violent nature, Gilda sobs at the lost friendship that seemed to echo her loss of the still missing Bird and the original Gilda. Gomez narrates Gilda’s grief:

She began to moan. There were no tears to come to her eyes now—  
something she had become accustomed to once she was taken into the life.  
But she moaned as its equivalent, a high, keening sound of anguish . . .  
She moaned for the loss of the one who had made her, for the loss of Bird,  
and for the loss of Eleanor. She moaned for the desperation of her need  
and desire, for the magnitude of her ignorance of the world. (99-100)

Gilda was fearful, needy, in desperate search of a companion who would not leave her or die, and Gilda was unafraid to voice that loneliness and emptiness, confiding early to Sorel and Anthony that she felt alone. Responding to her voiced distress, Anthony assures Gilda: “To be alone can be very frightening in a strange place. I didn’t want you to be frightened” (70). Gilda replies honestly: “I was, Anthony. I didn’t realize

it until you knocked at the door. It reminded me of past times when I've been completely open and uncertain which direction was my true way. And there was no one here to say the soothing things" (70). Gilda admits what Strong Black Women often do not or are unable to: that even those purported to be self-sufficient need comfort; that one's human frailties and needs are not so easily disavowed.

I scold Black women for accepting the Strong Black Woman myth and suggest that, if Black women are going to look to fiction for instruction as to how to comport themselves, why not then look to Gilda for a more holistic and gentle guidance? Gilda does not have it all together. She is needy, fearful, occasionally depressed, and always vulnerable to her human emotions. Still, Gilda is not a woman to be pitied. On the contrary, Gilda is someone to be admired and modeled. Gilda shows Strong Black Woman that living in pieces—as a Strong Black Woman with no gender, eroticism, or humanity; as a vampire with no race or humanity—although demanded, is *not* necessary. Gilda proves that Black women do not have to compromise themselves—their manifold identities—to satisfy others. There is room for race *and* gender, love for men *and* love for women. There is enough room for the whole Black woman to show up, not just the fragmented Black woman that is preferred by the Strong Black Woman narrative. Open to guidance herself, Gilda takes some advice Sorel gives her during a particularly difficult time—advice, I hope, that Strong Black Women will consider. Sorel encourages a distraught Gilda with these words: "I think the most important thing for you to do in the meantime is live. It is a very involving job, which takes much concentration and practice"

(80). Strong Black Women are not accustomed to living as complete women. Beauboeuf-Lafontant claims that many Black women lack the vocabulary to question their fragmented selves. I would add that many Black women are without proof that such holistic living is possible. To such uncertain women, I would reiterate Sorel's reminder that full living will indeed require much concentration and practice. In Chapter Three I offer suggestions for those Black women seeking to recover from Strong Black Womanhood.

### CHAPTER III

#### SAVING *OURSELVES*: ENTERING STRONG-BLACK-WOMAN RECOVERY

Black women could not exist consciously until we began to name ourselves.

Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith<sup>18</sup>

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. . .  
Mary Oliver<sup>19</sup>

Lemme love you just like I am/ A colored girl/ I'm finally bein real/ No  
longer symmetrical and impervious to pain

*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the  
Rainbow Is Enuf*

In this chapter I review the negative impacts of Strong Black Womanhood on Black women and offer suggestions for those Black women seeking to recover from the exacting role, emphasizing, again, the alternatives Gilda points towards which include expressing erotic desire, participating in loving relationships with other women, being aware of one's gendered needs, and recognizing one's humanity.

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<sup>18</sup> *All The Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*

<sup>19</sup> *Wild Geese* (Poem)

As should be clear by now, the Strong Black Woman role is not one that Black women created. It is, rather, one that some Black women adopted willingly and others resignedly. As the above statement by Barbara Smith and Gloria Hull indicates, it is imperative that Black women recognize Strong Black Womanhood as the assignment it is and begin to name themselves. Otherwise, their complex personhoods will continue to be obscured by Strong Black Womanhood, and the Strong Black Woman *role* will be pronounced while the actual Black woman schlepping the role will, as Smith and Hull suggests, cease to exist. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant makes a similar point, noting that “showing strength necessitates the creation of an extensive psychological backstage that leaves much of the texture and nuance of Black women’s existence out of view” (106). I recognize that strength is important to Black women and the Black community at large; still, Strong Black Womanhood has overemphasized strength to the point that Black women are allowed little else and their gender, eroticism, self-definitions, and humanity are discarded in their attempts to comply with the identity’s demands.

For all the Strong Black Women who resist such an extensive overhaul; whose chins have jutted out in defiance; who have rolled their eyes at my blasphemy; whose lips curl in a scowl frighteningly similar to my Aunt Lena’s, I add this: the Strong Black Woman may reason that she can live without gender, eroticism, the love of other Black women (including herself), and her humanity. Perhaps she has functioned, however poorly, for so long without the above that she assumes that those self-losses are inconsequential. Still, I entreat those Strong Black Women unaffected by my plea to at

least acknowledge what Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant asserts: that embodying Strong Black Womanhood is a “costly performance,” and that Black women are paying dearly for the assigned role.

Michele Wallace details the shortcomings of Strong Black Womanhood, warning that the Strong Black Woman role, instead of praising Black women’s resilience, actually threatens their survival since it does not allow Black women the opportunity to admit their vulnerabilities, fallibilities, and mortality. Wallace cautions:

Just imagine, for a moment, that you had a little girl and circumstances dictated that she be released in a jungle for a period of time to get along the best way she could. Would you want her to think she was invulnerable to the sting of the snake, the claws of the panther? Would you like her to believe that she could go without sleep and food indefinitely and that she needed no shelter? Or would you want her to know something of her actual capabilities and human weaknesses, not enough to make her want to give up before she had begun, but just enough to make her want to protect herself? How long do you think she would survive if you deceived her? And, more importantly, in what state would she survive? Imagine further that she believed her wounds were just another proof of her strength and invulnerability. (107-08)

Black women, purported to be superwomen, are expected to suffer. And to do so silently and proudly, exhibiting their wounds, like Wallace notes, as emblems of pride. Some

Black women are unable to manage the costly role. One of Kesho Yvonne Scott's interviewees, Marilyn, shares that she got so tired of her ten-hour work days, the blatant racism and sexism she experienced in her church, and unsatisfying love relationships that she swallowed twenty-seven sleeping pills and lay down in the middle of the street to die. Marilyn buckled under the Strong Black Woman demand. Unfortunately, it was Marilyn's unflagging Strong Black Womanhood that soon revitalized her in the psychiatric ward she was assigned to after the suicide attempt. It was Strong Black Womanhood that convinced her to dismiss the proffered therapy and respond to the doctor's entreaties with: "I don't have time to go to therapy. I gotta work. I have older parents and children and I have this and that . . . to do" (55).

Strong Black Womanhood has convinced many Black women that pain is unavoidable and so ordinary that it is no longer noteworthy. Listing the high rates of disease and death in the Black female community, Sheri Parks avers that "The role of the Strong Black Woman as many women live it requires a measure of physical self-abuse" and to perform the role correctly "Black women pay with their health" (167). Beauboeuf-Lafontant agrees that the strength narrative's requirements push Black women into self-abuse. Whereas Marilyn's depression and fatigue compelled her to attempt suicide, Beauboeuf-Lafontant shares that many Strong Black Women binge on food as a way to manage their depression and cope with the strength demand, utilizing overeating as a coping method in particular because "bingeing allows them a temporary respite without disturbing their responsibilities to others" (52). Scott does not limit her analysis of Strong



Black Womanhood to her four interviewees but confesses her own struggles as a Strong Black Woman juggling motherhood and the pursuit of a Ph.D. Scott shares that she, too, began overeating when she found herself unable to express her turmoil. Scott writes: “I began to buy large amounts of food. I began to sneak food and, of course, I gained twenty pounds. I lost twenty pounds. I entered counseling for bulimia, because I was turning my anger inwards . . . I could not understand why I was eating so destructively” (184).

Scott’s reasons for eating destructively may have eluded *her*, but Beauboeuf-Lafontant notes that “as an activity, eating enables Black women to register and attend to some of their needs without disrupting the fiction of their strength” (114). Since overeating can grant some Black women the large body that the Strong Black Woman narrative demands, bingeing actually satisfies the strength narrative all the more. The Strong Black Woman role, then, not only forces many Black women to adopt destructive coping strategies, but it also determines the methods that they will utilize to cope, making those methods that do not conflict with the strength narrative (like overeating or avoiding medical treatment) preferable. Beauboeuf-Lafontant makes an important connection between Strong Black Women, overeating, and health issues that are prevalent in the Black community, noting:

Consequently, the weight-related diseases that plague the Black female community (e.g., adult-onset diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension) may not be symptoms of the “lifestyle” problems of overeating, lack of exercise, or unhealthy diet. Instead, they may reflect a consistent level of

abuse in social relations that treat Black women, in their communities as well as in the larger society, as literal beasts of burden. (68-9)

Strong Black Womanhood compels many Black women to “sacrifice health and sanity” (Harris-Lacewell 10) in order to effectively comply with the role’s demands. Joan Morgan agrees, sharing that the self-harm the Strong Black Woman identity commanded ultimately forced her to abandon the role. Morgan writes: “Retirement was ultimately an act of salvation. Being an SBW was killing me slowly. Cutting off my air supply” (87).

Not only does the strength narrative erase Strong Black Women’s personhoods and threaten their physical and mental health, it also invisibilizes those social conditions that force them to be so resilient in the first place. Michele Wallace argues that the Strong Black Woman is led to believe that her pain and fatigue demonstrate her strength since she has not yet capitulated under such suffering. The social realities that create the suffering are erased as the Strong Black Woman is conditioned to believe that her “wounds were just another proof of her strength and invulnerability” (108). Similarly, Beauboeuf-Lafontant notes that the strength narrative overlooks social inequities such as poverty, racism, and sexism that force Black women to labor beyond their human capacity. Arguing that the strength narrative is an “incomplete narrative” that obscures “Black women’s experiences of suffering, acts of desperation, and anger” (2), Beauboeuf-Lafontant writes that “strength celebrates Black women’s heroic actions and deflects attention from their circumstances. In the process, the social interactions and conventions that create the defining struggle and labor in Black women’s lives are

rendered invisible” (42-43). The Strong Black Woman who is already taught to dismiss her gender is doubly fooled by the strength narrative as “invocations and practices of strength overlook the fact that Black women are subordinated within race, class, and gender hierarchies; that abuses both material and relational occur given such entrenched structural imbalances in power; and that many Black women respond to such duress through their bodies” (7).

Marcia Gillespie, proffering her Strong Black Woman critique in 1982, explains how the Strong Black Woman myth worsens the lives of already struggling Black Women, using words that are similar to the ones Patricia Hills Collins would use in *Black Sexual Politics* twenty-two years later:

Women are the primary victims of Black America’s pain. We’re locked into poverty, heading households where children are inadequately educated, can’t find work and too often turn to crime. Our daughters and sisters are the one who become mothers at 14; we’re the people on welfare unto the fifth generation, needing some means to get out from under. . . . Giving this bleak landscape, our continuing acceptance of the myths and our striving to achieve the idealized standards of Black American womanhood only compound the problems we face. We women for too long have taken the weight and thought it our due. We make the mistake of thinking that our legendary strength is automatically synonymous with power. (34-35)

What makes the Strong Black Woman myth even more problematic is that the superhuman abilities Black women supposedly possess are considered natural—not concentrated responses to racism, sexism, and classism. Beauboeuf-Lafontant reminds Black women that the Strong Black Woman role is a resigned concession to external demands. She clarifies:

The constant association of Black women with strength comes from the extent of the consensus—within families, communities, and society—that it is the one social role that Black women should play well and faithfully. It arises not out of Black women’s innate or essential qualities but from persistent demands placed on them to be included in an American social drama primarily as the stock character of the selfish, stoic, silent, and therefore “strong” Black woman. (104)

In sum, Strong Black Womanhood exacts from Black women their health, their complexities, and their choice(s). If that is not enough, Strong Black Womanhood also fails Black women because it forces them to live fragmented lives, emphasizing their physical and emotional strength while minimizing their gender, eroticism, and humanness. Strong Black Women may be able to identify with Audre Lorde when she shares how some preferred that she live in pieces:

As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to

pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. (120-21)

Strong Black women, too, are compelled to “pluck out some one aspect” of themselves—their strength—and accentuate it while discarding the rest of their identity.

Strong Black Womanhood demands a high price: it costs Black women their gender identity, their eroticism, their humanity, their tears *and* laughter, their wholeness, and their health. If Marilyn is an indication of the extreme lengths one would go to escape Strong Black Womanhood, one could argue that Strong Black Womanhood costs some women their lives. Retired Strong Black Woman, Joan Morgan questions why the Strong Black Woman role still exists if it’s so destructive, exclaiming “If the original STRONGBLACKWOMAN was really the creation of some fucked-up slave owners, why do contemporary SBWs flaunt the identity like a badge of honor?” (99, author’s emphasis).

Like Morgan, I am confused by Black women’s dedication to such an exacting role. Still, even as I acknowledge how penalizing this role can be, I cannot help but understand those Black women who are loathe to renounce it. I recall my aunt’s sidelong

glance, the cutting scowl and veiled accusation that I doubted Black women's fortitude. With Black women being cast as unattractive, mannish, hypersexual, and the anti-woman,<sup>20</sup> I understand how difficult it may be to relinquish the one compliment they may consistently receive.

Although she is the most severe critic of the Strong Black Woman myth, Michele Wallace also recognizes that it is difficult for Black women, and those who are not Black women but who benefit from Strong Black Womanhood, to let the myth go. Black women in particular, Wallace avers—herself included—want desperately to believe that they are superwomen capable of surviving anything, even when their current circumstances prove otherwise. Wallace admits: “Even for me, it continues to be difficult to let the myth go. Naturally black women want very much to believe it; in a way, it is all we have” (107). Cynical as she is, Morgan, too, conjectures that Black women accept the Strong Black Woman myth because it is one of the lone acclamations a Black woman can enjoy. Morgan explains:

As racist and sexist in origin as it may be, contemporary black women perpetuate the myth of the SBW for reasons very similar to our antebellum counterparts: It boosts our fractured self-esteems. As the granddaughters of the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Feminist movements, this is a difficult thing to admit. Most of us want to believe that we're finally over

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<sup>20</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Sexual Politics* and K. Sue Jewell's *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy*

some shit—that our egos are finally immune to daily assaults of racism and sexism. . . . (109-10)

Embodying Strong Black Womanhood becomes a way for many Black women to insulate themselves from other negative characterizations. The Strong Black Woman who is supposed to be invulnerable to any attack ironically enough uses Strong Black Womanhood as a shield against derision. Melissa Harris-Lacewell explains that many Black women proudly adopt the title of Strong Black Woman, viewing it as positive self-naming that counters the negative name-calling Black women endure. Harris-Lacewell clarifies:

Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, Matriarch, Welfare Queen, Babymama, Chickenhead: this is the language of myth surrounding black women in America. Reduced by a racist and patriarchal society to caricatures of their true selves, African American women have consistently fought to define their actual existences within the constraints imposed by these external images. Self-naming has been an integral part of this process. In struggling to redefine black womanhood, African Americans have developed alternative symbols to understand the lives of black women. Foremost among these alternative symbols is the “strong black woman.” (2)

I couple Harris-Lacewell’s conclusions with K. Sue Jewell’s assertion that Black women’s and children’s lower socioeconomic status is often attributed to Black women’s assumed lack of work ethic (21) and question whether some Black women morph into the

Strong Black Woman, the woman who *overworks*, to compensate for this stereotype. We are presented with the Strong Black Woman's Catch-22: she accepts one image to counter another and yet only exacerbates her situation rather than improves it. Patricia Hill Collins allows that some images of Black women, particularly the Strong Black Woman image, appear to be an improvement from derogatory stereotypes that castigate Black women. Still, Collins cautions that "replacing negative images with positive ones can be equally problematic if the function of stereotypes as controlling images remains unrecognized" (114). Collins adds that "it makes little sense in the long run for Black women to exchange one set of controlling images for another even if the positive stereotypes bring better treatment in the short run" (114).

Still, the myth of the Strong Black Woman operates like the ultimate sweet nothing, a well-placed compliment that is nevertheless hollow and proffered partly to secure a desired result for the flatterer. Beauboeuf-Lafontant concisely summarizes how conflicting Strong Black Womanhood is. Proclaiming that the strength narrative has a "double purpose," Beauboeuf-Lafontant explains that the narrative has the "dual status of a tool of exploitation and a marker of virtue" (42), and she encourages Black women to look past the shallow praise and recognize the veiled costs of the strength narrative, cautioning:

Because the idea of strength *appears* to honestly reflect Black women's extensive work and family demands, as well as their accomplishments under far from favorable conditions, the concept *seems* to provide a simple



and in fact honorable recognition of their lives. However, appearances are often deceiving, and much of the acclaim that the concept of strength provides for Black women is undermined by what I argue is its real function: to defend and maintain a stratified social order by obscuring Black women's experiences of suffering, acts of desperation, and anger. (2, author's emphasis)

Rather than flush with pride at being called a Strong Black Woman, it may behoove Black women on the receiving end of this "compliment" to be concerned. Citing Marcia Gillespie's essay, Beauboeuf-Lafontant eloquently explains that Strong Black Women are placed upon a "pedestal of strength" (33). Impressed by such adoration, these women do not realize that the height of the pedestal puts them out of reach of assistance and comfort. Beauboeuf-Lafontant adds that Black women's prominent positions on pedestals of strength make them more "spectacle" than woman or human (34). Gillespie concurs, stating that Black women are placed on the pedestal to be "admired rather than helped" (33).

Still, as toxic as I have established Strong Black Womanhood to be, I still acknowledge that it is difficult to let the role go. I join Wallace and Morgan, alternately despising the role's demands and appreciating its positive connotation. Even in my fervor for the Strong Black Woman myth's demise, I can admit that choosing to maintain or relinquish Strong Black Womanhood is a dilemma. Some Black women will be reluctant to leave the relative comfort and familiarity of the role. Others, who sincerely believe that

Strong Black Womanhood grants them actual superpowers, will be loathe to surrender their Strong Black Woman armor.<sup>21</sup>

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins lists several other reason why Black women are reluctant to challenge the strength narrative, citing as reasons that Black women fear that questioning Black male-female relationships threatens racial solidarity, that Black women are reluctant to confront Black men publicly and embarrass or emasculate them, and that Black women accept the claim that the Strong Black Woman role is a compliment paid them by Black men (175). Kesho Yvonne Scott in turn reasons that Black women are unable to give up the Strong Black Woman role, a habit of survival, because, historically, the habit seems to have ensured the survival of the Black community (8). Considered tested and effective, Strong Black Womanhood is recycled in subsequent generations—deemed an invaluable inheritance.

Trudier Harris offers perhaps the most conclusive reason that Black women and larger society find Strong Black Womanhood so attractive. Discussing the myth of the Strong Black Woman primarily in relation to its use by African-American authors and white-controlled media, Harris reasons that some Black authors recycle the Strong Black

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<sup>21</sup> Morgan claims that Black women cloak themselves in Strong Black Womanhood as a form of protection against men, other women, society, and prevailing stereotypes. Recalling her own Strong Black Woman performance, Morgan notes: “We practice the deadly art of attitude—rollin’ eyes, necks, and hips in mesmerizing synchronization, taking out imaginary violators with razor-sharp tongues. Perhaps to our ingenuous eyes transforming ourselves into invincible Miss Thangs is the black woman’s only armature against the evils of the world” (29-30).

Woman character so consistently because they assume that strength is a “safe characteristic, safe in the sense that it could not be used to attack the morality of black women, their sexuality (or lack thereof), or their commitment to their families and to the American democratic ideal” (19). Harris reemphasizes an earlier claim that, historically, “strength was frequently the only virtue available to black women” (11). Similar to Collin’s recognition that some Black women need the social security that heterosexuality provides, Harris’s claim suggests that some Black women may accept the strength narrative (and some author’s recycle the strength narrative—*literally*), because they appreciate strength’s seeming innocuousness; the strength narrative(s) allow Black women and writers a positive visibility not present in other narratives. Sadly enough, Black authors’ inability to retire their fictional heroine mirrors Black women’s inability to question and discard their own fictional characterizations.

Still, Harris explains, it is not difficult to understand why Black women *and* men assign such importance to the image of the Strong Black Woman when the mythologized Black superwoman has become a cultural symbol for the entire Black community. Harris states:

Historically, African American women have been viewed as balm bearers, the ones who held a people against assaults from outside as well as from within the community. They were towers of strength against the degradation of slavery. They were towers of strength against the abuse of husbands and the demands of children. They were towers of strength in

taking care of their families, usually through domestic work. And they formed the pillars that supported the black churches that in turn demanded a tremendous strength from them. Indeed, historical African American communities could be viewed as having been in various states of ill health, having numerous diseases inflicted upon them by the ugly manifestations of racism. Black women were the spiritual as well as the physical healers, putting hearth, home, and family back together . . . Black women provided the bandages for wounds, the solace for the stricken. We have applauded this strength—and certainly not without justification. (9-10)

Black women who desire fuller and kinder lives outside of Strong Black Womanhood may conclude that they are breaking a tradition of strength that their foremothers established; that they are jeopardizing the Black community's wellbeing by refusing to be those "towers of strength" Harris references above. For those Strong Black Women willing to take the risk, who *are* ready to enter what Joan Morgan refers to as "Strong Black Woman Recovery" (104), again Gilda points to alternative possibilities for fuller living—a sort of living that counts one's gendered and erotic body as assets not disadvantages. I encourage recovering Strong Black Women to claim their erotic power, to become gender conscious if not woman-oriented, to embrace woman love,<sup>22</sup> to self-define, and to recognize their own and other Black women's humanity.

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<sup>22</sup> I define "woman love" as a conscious effort between women to love and support one another. Woman love is not limited to romantic relationships or sexual acts but can be the love that

The Strong Black Woman deserves the opportunity to reclaim her eroticism<sup>23</sup> and reject, if she so chooses, the asexuality and hyper-heterosexuality she has been limited to by Strong Black Womanhood. I encourage Black women to expand their understandings of love and the erotic to include other Black women.<sup>24</sup> One of Collins' most important contributions to the discussion is her charge in *Black Feminist Thought* that Black women "develop erotic autonomy" (166), part of which means loving other Black women intensely and practicing "deep love" (170)—a love that finds physical expression, perhaps even sexual expression, with other Black women, a deep love that is not "circumscribed in biological motherhood, biological sisterhood, sorority ties, and other similar socially approved relationships (170).

Engaging with the erotic allows Black women the opportunity to rediscover those emotions the strength narrative disallows and that some Black women, themselves,

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develops between mothers and daughters, between sisters, or between friends. Gilda relationships with Aurelia, Savannah, and Bird indicate the various manifestations woman love can take.

<sup>23</sup> As noted in Chapter One, I define eroticism as a woman's power over her own sexuality, sensuality, and sexual expression. Still, like Audre Lorde, I recognize that the erotic does not have to be sexual and its expressions are not limited to one's body.

<sup>24</sup> I focus on loving Black women in particular because, as Audre Lorde notes in her essay "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger," Black women have internalized the racism and sexism of American culture and are especially vulnerable to self-hatred and the hatred of other Black women. No scholar directly connects the Strong Black Woman role with self-hatred; still, Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant notes in *Behind the Mask* that the stress of the SBW role forces many Black women to self-soothe by overeating, self-medicating with alcohol and prescription drugs and practicing other compensatory behaviors" (109). Joan Morgan suggests that the suffering inherent in following the SBW "credo" (90) contributes to Black women's internalized rage, low self-esteem, and depression. Sheri Parks states plainly that "the role of the Strong Black Woman as many women live it requires a measure of physical self-abuse" (167).

suppress or disregard as Audre Lorde intimates when she explains that the erotic reminds us that we have a “capacity for feeling” (57). The removal and repression of eroticism is “profoundly cruel” (Lorde 55) to all women but particularly to Strong Black Women since its suppression and removal robs Strong Black Women of yet another integral aspect of their identity and eliminates an avenue to their neglected emotions.

How ironic that the Strong Black Woman, whose strength is emphasized and oftentimes over-exaggerated, is denied an actual, unending source of power like the erotic? The Strong Black Woman’s erotic, like an underused muscle, has atrophied, but recovery is possible. In a powerful statement that bears repeating at length, Lorde shares:

When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering, and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like the only alternative in our society. . . .

In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial. (58)

The erotic can help Strong Black Women self-actualize and live fuller lives. As Lorde professes, it can reintroduce them to their feelings. Ultimately, the erotic can empower Black Women much more than a well-intentioned yet empty narrative of strength.

The typical Strong Black Woman is so male-oriented that she neglects her own gender and other women's issues like sexism or inequitable interpersonal and social relationships with men. I encourage recovering Strong Black Women to reorient themselves to their gender and to attend to women's issues. I am not directing Strong Black Women to become feminists and/or womanists, but I do encourage Black women to acknowledge that they are not beyond gender issues and certainly not "liberated" from women's issues such as sexism.<sup>25</sup>

I also encourage Black women to *express* their womanhood and no longer accept the almost "genderlessness" Strong Black Womanhood demands. Furthermore, Black women should express their womanhood in ways that satisfy *them*. As discussed in Chapter One, the womanhood that is allotted Strong Black Women is conflated with Black motherhood and heterosexuality. One of Scott's interviewees, Marilyn, admits that her disinterest in having children made her womanhood suspect and made her feel

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<sup>25</sup> See Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* where she expresses dismay that Black women assume that they are liberated from gender issues.

“unfeminine” (157). Marilyn’s gender script—in accordance with Strong Black Womanhood—disallowed sex without marriage, lesbian relationships, and childlessness. A recovering Strong Black Woman, unwilling to have her gender neutralized or compartmentalized, will behave like Marilyn and opt out of gender-intolerant Strong Black Womanhood. At forty-six years of age, after deciding to return to college and take her writing seriously, Marilyn realizes what I hope other Strong Black Woman will ultimately realize: that the woman within her, eclipsed by her strength and blackness, is not a stranger or enemy, but a vital part of her identity. Marilyn shares: “I never really tested myself against myself. I never really had a chance to take a challenge without the babies’ wants and the ‘mens’ wants and the parents’ wants and the bill collectors’ wants. Just for me” (58). Marilyn, whose gender expression, like many Strong Black Women, had been limited to being a wife and mother, rejects Strong Black Womanhood’s mandates, moves to another state, and finds employment in a woman’s resource center.

Strong Black Woman recovery is a two-fold process. Not only must the Strong Black Woman relinquish the Strong Black Woman identity, but she must also define herself; she must reclaim those pieces of herself that the strength narrative severed and name them—finally name herself. While the Strong Black Woman has been led to believe that her physical and emotional strength ensures her survival, as well of that of her family, Patricia Hill Collins explains in *Black Feminist Thought* that “creating independent self-definitions becomes essential to that survival” (112) since self-definition requires self-reflection and a scrutiny of the social and political realities that oppress



Black women, and since self-defining “validates Black women’s power as human subjects” (114). Morgan agrees that Black women will only be truly strong when they self-reflect and name what they discover. Morgan elaborates: “I honestly believe that the only way sistas can begin to experience empowerment on all levels—spiritual, emotional, financial, and political—is to understand who we are. We have to be willing to take an honest look at ourselves—and then tell the truth about it” (23).

For those Black women who fear the Strong Black Woman image is too firmly entrenched in the cultural imaginary and their personal lives, K. Sue Jewell reminds us that Black women have rejected the Mammy image, a deeply entrenched image that had retained its popularity all the way into the 1970s (43). Jewell explains that Black women looked to one another to define a more satisfying and authentic Black womanhood, one that included “assuming the primary responsibility for nurturing children, spouses, relatives and friends and ensuring the survival and progress of the race” (43) and sounds, ironically enough, very much like Strong Black Womanhood. Still, I want to emphasize that Black women are capable of rejecting undesirable identities and forging their own.

Admittedly, self-definition can be off-putting, especially for those women who have grown accustomed to an assigned identity. Marilyn shares that quitting her job of twenty years, going back to college at forty-six years of age, and moving to a different state frightened her, but what truly terrified her was the idea of meeting herself for the first time. After decades of self-denial, of submerging her multiple identities under her role as mother and wife, she was terrified that her true self would demand recognition.

Marilyn comments on her new life and new self: “I’ve got a job. I’ve got my own space. I’ve got my books and I’m working with women. And it’s all happening at once. I mean all of it, it’s coming together. I’m scared because school might really work. I’m scared because I’m writing my ministry. And I’m really, really scared that I might really be me” (qtd. in Scott 59).

Marilyn’s words illustrate that Black women can view self-definition and self-recognition with unease; still, Marilyn’s words also assuage Black women’s fear that losing Strong Black Womanhood will be like losing themselves. On the contrary, Black women who relinquish the Strong Black Woman role have the opportunity to meet themselves again. Another of Scott’s interviewees, Elaine, shares that it was only after she stopped suppressing her emotions and began expressing herself openly that she began to “feel” herself (103).

The Strong Black Woman who wishes to self-define faces censure, of course, not only because she is rejecting a role that benefits so many others, but also because so often our self-definitions are only relevant in relation to someone else’s. The Strong Black Woman’s *re*-defining will undoubtedly upset those people who understand themselves in relation to Strong Black Womanhood like self-professed ENDANGEREDBLACKMEN or Strong Black Women’s children. Elaine shares that her daughter is so accustomed to viewing her as simply ‘mother’ that she cannot fathom that her mother is a woman (qtd. in Scott 101). Black women, and their families and communities, have been so saturated with the myth of the Strong Black Woman that many Black women are not recognized as

anything else. As Lorde remarks in “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” “we have not been allowed to experience each other freely as Black women in america; we come to each other coated in myths, stereotypes, and expectations from the outside, definitions not our own” (169-70).

Michele Wallace worries, too, that Black women are externally defined, and she claims that Black women have yet to establish a personal or collective identity and lack the resources or community support to develop one. Wallace states:

I am inclined to believe it is because the black woman has no legitimate way of coming together with other black women, no means of self-affirmation—in other words, no women’s movement, therefore no collective ideology. Career and success are still the social and emotional disadvantages to her that they were to white women in the fifties. There is little in the black community to reinforce a young black woman who does not have a man or child and who wishes to pursue a career. She is still considered against nature. It is extremely difficult to assert oneself when there remains some question of one’s basic identity. (172-73)

Wallace goes on to say that Black women will struggle to self-define since they cannot even acknowledge that the myth of the Strong Black Woman is fiction and not a natural identity. Wallace states frankly that “the black woman needs an analysis. She belongs to the only group in the country which has not asserted its identity” (176). The Black woman, Wallace continues, “has yet to become what she is” (176). I find Wallace’s

choice of words significant, for they suggest that Black women *do* possess not only basic but complex identities that have simply been displaced by the strength narrative. Perhaps the Black woman *has* “yet to become what she is,” has yet to express her complex personhood, but she *can*. Self-defining is how the Strong Black Woman begins to become what she is.<sup>26</sup>

Purported to be a natural heterosexual and companion to Black men and a mother especially devoted to her sons, the typical Strong Black Woman may be adverse to woman love, viewing deep relationships between women as unnecessary, anti-male, or a violation of male-centric Strong Black Womanhood. By limiting her attentions, affections, and allegiances to men, however, the Strong Black Woman denies herself invaluable sources of comfort and support.

Some Strong Black Women may deny themselves the inherent desire to reach out to another woman in love—a desire that may very well have begun with their mothers and yet was repressed as they acclimated to not only a male-centric Strong Black Womanhood but also a male-centric American culture.<sup>27</sup> Gilda’s relationships with her birth mother and her vampire mother/lover Bird suggest that women are introduced to

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<sup>26</sup> Of course, Wallace proffers this critique in 1975, so some could find her claim that Black women do not even possess a “basic identity” dated. Still, if the strength narrative is what supplants Black women’s personal identities and the strength narrative persists uninterrupted at present, then Wallace’s critique remains, unfortunately, relevant.

<sup>27</sup> See *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance* where Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s argues that American society itself is male-centered

woman love via mother love. Lynda Hall praises Jewelle Gomez for using Gilda's sensual experiences with her birth mother and vampire mothers to indicate that young girls' first understandings of desire begin with women, namely their mothers. Hall explains that Gomez's novel "dismantle[s] Lacanian notions that require the loss and abandonment of the territory of first love and desire connected with the mother" (407). Hall intimates that girls only reluctantly transfer their love for women to men in accordance with social norms, explaining that the "changes that 'normally' happen to 'girls' through time—the transition from original love of the mother to directing desire to the father as love object, to husband, and the trajectory into marriage and motherhood—are notably absent" in Gomez's novel. *The Gilda Stories* is replete with mother-daughter sensuality that begs critical analysis, but I focus on Hall's assertion that girls experience their transfer of female love to male love as a loss, and I encourage Black women to rediscover their love for women.

Echoing Hall's discussion of mother love and remarking that there is a certain "romance" that exists "between Black women and our mommas" (158), Lorde worries that Black women assume that their mothers are the only Black women who will ever truly see them and love them and, thus, discount other Black women as sources of love (159). I insert the image of Gilda, lovingly pressing her fingers into Savannah's scalp while recalling her own mother's ministrations in her hair. It was Gilda's love for her mother that fueled her love for Savannah. In the same way, Strong Black Women can

refuse to “transfer” their mother love—their woman love—to men exclusively and can, instead, allow themselves to love any person whom they desire.

In *Black Feminist Thought* Patricia Hill Collins explains that some Black women avoid loving other Black women because they fear the “possible eroticization of such love” (167). Collins adds that many “avowedly heterosexual Black women may suppress their own strong feelings for other Black women for fear of being stigmatized as lesbians” (167), and she states that Black women must commit themselves to moving beyond the “isms”—heterosexism and fear of lesbianism—that make creating loving relationships between Black women impossible (168). While the model Strong Black Woman assumes that loving Black men is fundamental to her proper womanhood, Collins insists that loving other Black women is integral to Black women’s political survival; it is “fundamental to resisting oppression” (170). Collins explains that Black women loving one another “politicizes love and reclaims it from the individualized and trivialized place that it now occupies. Self-defined and publicly expressed Black women’s love relationships, whether such relationships find sexual expression or not, constitute resistance. If members of the group on the bottom love one another and affirm one another’s worth, then the entire system that assigns that group to the bottoms becomes suspect” (170). Politically, it behooves Black women to love each other, to refrain from what has become commonplace—the easy dismissal of Black women as unlovable. Still, loving other Black women has more than just political significance. Loving other Black women may remind Strong Black Women how to love themselves,

and self-love will, ultimately, make the acceptance of dangerous Strong Black Womanhood impossible.

The mutual distancing Black women engage in is compounded by the fact that the interactions that *do* occur between Black women are often characterized by contempt, acts of hate instead of love. Lorde suggests that this mutual disdain is manufactured—a lifelong conditioning that makes other Black women competitors not allies (50). Lorde avers also that the separation and contempt between Black women could be a result of the ambiguous feelings that Black women have for one another, a combination of practiced antipathy for other Black women and intense longings for woman love that, instead of being examined, is redirected into anger. Lorde explains that “when we do not attempt to name the confusion of feelings which exist between sisters, we act them out in hundreds of hurtful and unproductive ways” (170). She insists that Black women are not really angry with one another but actually yearn for one another and yet are unable to articulate that longing. The anger masks the longing:

The anger with which I meet another Black woman’s slightest deviation from my immediate need or desire or concept of a proper response is a deep and hurtful anger, chosen only in the sense of a choice of desperation—reckless through despair. That anger which masks my pain that we are so separate who should most be together—my pain—that she could perhaps not need me as much as I need her or see me through the

blunted eye of the haters, that eye I know so well from my own distorted images of her. Erase or be erased! (154)

The distaste we hold for other Black women conceal our longing as we “try to obliterate what we most desire to love and touch” (159). Strong Black Woman assume that their natural counterparts are Black men even as they “hunger” for one another (167) and are acutely aware of their “particular Black woman’s need for one another” (164). Worried that Black women resign themselves to separation from one another, Lorde asks: “Do we settle for that secret isolation which is the learned tolerance of deprivation of each other—that longing for each other’s laughter, dark ease, sharing, and permission to be ourselves that we do not admit to feeling, usually, because then we would have to admit the lack; and the pain of that lacking, persistent as a low-grade fever and as debilitating?” (164). Unfortunately, the model Strong Black Woman would answer Lorde with a resounding “Yes!” since she cannot express her personal needs let alone express her desire for other Black women. For that reason, Black Women endeavoring to be Strong Black Women will continue to suppress their longings for one another and “evade each other on the deepest levels” (Lorde 153).

Still, I have hope that Black woman love is possible. If Lorde is correct when she claims that Black women secretly long for one another—and I believe that she is—then Black women would simply be acting on feelings that already exist; their dormant woman love would find expression. Lorde understands that expressing woman love may be difficult for Black women after so many years of abstention and she instructs that “we



have to consciously study how to be tender with each other until it becomes a habit because what has been native has been stolen from us, the love of Black women for each other” (175).

For those Black Women who cling to Strong Black Womanhood because they assume that they are following in the footsteps of their beloved foremothers, Deborah Gray White reminds us that we often misunderstand the strength of our enslaved foremothers. White dismisses claims that enslaved Black women were naturally strong and argues that “strength had to be cultivated. It came no more naturally to them than to anyone, slave or free, male or female, black or white” (119). White attributes enslaved Black women’s strength to their commitment to group work and female networking and argues that enslaved Black women did not survive slavery and subsequent violations following emancipation because they possessed an unfathomable strength but because they were sustained by other Black women. White notes that “few women who knew the pain of childbirth or who understood the agony and depression that flowed from sexual harassment and exploitation survived without friends, without female company. Few lacked female companions to share escapades and courtship or older women to consult about the vicissitudes of life and marriage” (141). If Strong Black Women truly wanted to emulate their foremothers, they would recognize that woman love is integral to Black women’s personal and social well-being—that our proper place is *not* away from other Black women but beside them.

A recovering Strong Black Woman is one who admits that she is human and sees her human vulnerabilities as acceptable not abhorrent. Black women do not have to proclaim that they are victims (as Michele Wallace recommends); still, as Patricia Hill Collins notes in *Black Feminist Thought*, Black women should not profess either that they are superheroes who brave oppression effortlessly (287). I encourage Strong Black Women to find a balance between victim and heroine, a balance that acknowledges Black women's resiliency but also their victimization at the hands of racism, sexism, and an uncompromising strength narrative that exacerbates the former two. Strong Black Women can achieve the balance between victim and heroine by recognizing their humanness and expressing it at will. As I have argued in this thesis, Jewelle Gomez's protagonist, Gilda, offers one model for what this balance could look like.

When I state that Black women must *recognize* their humanity, I mean that they must retire the mindset that they are invincible, that tears are unnatural and unnecessary, that pain and fatigue is evidence of properly performed Strong Black Womanhood. Part of this recognition involves a Strong Black Woman admitting that happiness, rest, laughter, pleasure—all of which have been discounted as trivial by Strong Black Womanhood—is not only permissible but necessary for her well-being. As aforementioned, Kesho Yvonne Scott's attempts to be a superwoman resulted in her "eating destructively" (184), receiving treatment for bulimia, and vacillating between feelings of anger and helplessness. All the while, Scott shares, "In the back of my mind, I was not sure people like me were allowed to be happy" (184). I assume that other Black

women toiling under Strong Black Womanhood hear a similar internal chorus, rebuking their need for human expression. Strong Black Women have been tricked into believing that emotions threaten their strength; that a display of emotion is evidence that they are not true Strong Black Women and, thus, subject to the harshest slur a Strong Black Woman could face: being called weak. Remarking that acknowledging one's emotion is a luxury that many Blacks cannot afford, Audre Lorde argues nevertheless in "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," that exploring emotions does not threaten one's survival but ensures it. Lorde avers:

Black people in this country have always had to attend closely to the hard and continuous work of survival in the most material and immediate planes. But it is a temptation to move from this face to the belief that Black people do not need to examine our feelings; or that they are unimportant, since they have so often been used to stereotype and infantilize us; or that these feelings are not vital to our survival; or, worse, that there is some acquired virtue in not feeling them deeply. (171)

Joan Morgan connects humanity with a display of emotions as well as she entreats Black women to enter Strong Black Woman recovery, admit that they are sick *and* tired, and reclaim their humanity. As a former Strong Black Woman, Morgan's concluding remarks are made all the more compelling: "Perhaps one of the most loving things sistas can do for themselves is to erase this tired obligation of superstrength. Instead, let's claim

our God/dess-given right to imperfections and vulnerability. As black women it's time to grant ourselves our humanity" (110).

Melissa Harris-Lacewell states also that Black women will recover their humanity when they are able to express their human vulnerabilities. Harris-Lacewell argues that Black women can disrupt the invincible Strong Black Woman myth by depicting Black women more holistically, as fragile, suffering, and abused as well as resilient. Remarking that Ntozake's Shange's *For Colored Girls* interrupts the strength narrative by portraying the "fragility of black women's emotional lives," Harris-Lacewell encourages other Black women to write and live their lives in ways that challenge the "notion that black women's strength always trumps their anguish"(8). Jewelle Gomez, of course, does just that with *The Gilda Stories* and, in the same way, recovering Strong Black Women can author their own narratives, being sure to depict their anguish as well as their strength. Here I will insert myself into the text and encourage other Black women and myself: Let us speak our humanity; write it; and live it. Strong Black Womanhood does not permit Black women to express their distress, but Black Women must allow themselves that right. The Lady in Orange communicates her decision to allow herself sorrow in Shange's *For Colored Girls*. The Lady in Orange admits: "I don't know anymore / how to avoid my own face wet wit my tears / Cuz I had convinced myself colored girls had no right to sorrow / and I lived and loved that way and kept sorrow on the curb" (43).

Regardless of which form we use to communicate our humanity, the point is that we must *express* it. Beauboeuf-Lafontant reasons that many Strong Black Woman silence

themselves, muting those internal voices that wish to tell their truths, express their pain and anger, and give voice to their Black woman experiences (132). Recognizing that the strength narrative promotes self-silencing and makes it “synonymous with [Black women’s] lives as good women” (138), Beauboeuf-Lafontant encourages Black women to “work toward new traditions of expressiveness” that allow Black women to voice their needs, pain, and exhaustion, and thus reveal their humanity (133). Echoing Beauboeuf-Lafontant, I advocate that Black women “honor their vulnerabilities” (138) and reject the conflation of humanness with weakness.

Part of Black women reclaiming their humanness lies in our being kind to ourselves, cognizant of our physical, emotional, and mental needs and willing to show the care that we offer others to ourselves. In “Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface,” Audre Lorde explains that Black women are unaccustomed to treating themselves kindly. Lorde writes: “In this country, Black women traditionally had compassion for everybody else but ourselves. We have cared for whites because we had to for pay or survival; we have cared for our children and our fathers and our brothers and our lovers. . . We need to learn to have care and compassion for ourselves, also” (62). Lorde recommends that Black women practice self-love. I would add that Black women should practice self-care which would accompany any real attempt to exercise self-love.

Ultimately, Black women—tasked with saving their families, their race, and the world—must save themselves from a strength narrative that is surreptitiously destroying them, that is dislocating their humanity. I agree with Beauboeuf-Lafontant who reminds

Strong Black Women that “claims of strength are not proxy for any woman’s humanity” (144), and I urge Strong Black Women to stand no longer the loss of their humanity and contribute no longer to the loss of other Black women’s humanity.

When *The Girl* was too exhausted to pick another stalk of cotton, her sisters would lift her from between the rows where she had fallen and impel her to resume working. In a similar manner, Black Women evaluate one another’s Strong Black Womanhood and cajole (or chastise) other Strong Black Women into compliance. Sheri Parks describes a certain Strong Black Woman etiquette that Black women demand from one another, and she remarks that “Black women expect other black women to work hard and suffer in stoic silence” (148). If Black women demand strict adherence to Strong Black Womanhood from other Black women, then we are complicit in each other’s dehumanization. Recovering Strong Black Women, then, must not only acknowledge their own humanity, but they must also recognize the humanity of other Black women and *allow* those women to express their humanness.

It is important that we display our humanity so that other Black women, especially young Black women—Strong Black Women in-training—can witness it and be reminded of their own. We can no longer transmit the SBW credo and its attendant “No tears” refrain. We must heed Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s suggestion and “make [our] humanity visible” (150) so that others can recognize our humanness and respond accordingly and so that other Black women laboring under Strong Black Womanhood can witness that fuller living is possible. Instead of displaying our wounds like badges of

honor we must instead exhibit our humanness until we have made it acceptable for Black women to cry, until it is “safe for [B]lack women to talk about the full range of their lives” (Scott 145).

Strong Black Women must relinquish the superwoman myth in its *entirety*. I sincerely doubt that modifications or amendments will be possible or effective enough to counter what Black women have lost in their attempt to model good Strong Black Womanhood. Black women’s efforts to compensate for Strong Black Womanhood prove ineffective as well. Beauboeuf-Lafontant notes that many Black women adopt “internalization strategies” such as “increasing their workloads to take on obligations that others have cast off or failed to honor, or engaging in compensatory behaviors such as excesses in eating, drinking, or shopping” to offset the demands of the strength narrative (109). Calling such strategies “muted protests” (132), Beauboeuf-Lafontant admonishes Black women for practicing such techniques when they not only fail to work but also fail to challenge the strength narrative. Coping mechanisms and other muted protests that leave superwomanhood intact will not do. No part of Strong Black Womanhood can be spared; the superwoman myth cannot be couched in more euphemistic term or retooled so that its connotation is disrupted but its demands remain intact. Scott declares that “we must reject *outright* the evolution from ‘tuff sister’ to superwoman to bionic woman. It is not our true birthright. It is a slow death sentence from within” (190, emphasis added). Scott likening Strong Black Womanhood to a death sentence is bleak, seemingly exaggerated. Still, I recall Marilyn swallowing twenty-seven sleeping pills and lying

down in the middle of the street to die, and I realize that Scott's comparison, however troubling, is fitting. Black women are *not* superwomen. It's high time we all admitted it.

Am I trying to say that Black women aren't strong? No. Still, I want to emphasize that Black women are *not* superwomen. We are *not* invincible. We must admit that the Strong Black Woman identity—familiar and beloved as it may be—operates as a form of social control when we are unable to modify the role, when we do not control its definition or the responsibilities assigned. Joan Morgan assures Black women that we *can* be strong, Black, and women, *but* she counters, and I agree, Black women do not have to assume the role of the Strong Black Woman. We can express ourselves in ways other than demonstrating physical strength and exuding stoicism. We can laugh, cry, and reach for other women in love and desire. We can be erotic, fallible, lesbian, *human*, using Gilda as a guide if we should ever get lost or forget how. Practicing these unfamiliar actions does not undermine our strength or our blackness. Rather, securing our bodies and labor for ourselves, developing our erotic autonomy, and permitting ourselves (and each other) to love ourselves and other women may be what actually strengthens us—sustains us—as individuals and as a community.



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