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“...reveling in that freedom”:
Roxane Gay’s *Hunger* as 21st-Century
Freedom Narrative¹

Kendra R. Parker

In *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*, Roxane Gay takes readers on a journey of her body, describing her gang rape at twelve-years-old, the subsequent over-eating it caused, and her life as a victimized fat Black woman. The memoir ends with a declaration of freedom: “Here I am, finally freeing myself to be vulnerable and terribly human. Here I am, reveling in that freedom. Here” (304). Though the memoir ends with her declaration of freedom, *Hunger* emphasizes Gay’s bondage by using variations of the term “freedom,” “bondage,” and “cage.” There are, for example, seventy-eight references to freedom and bondage throughout the memoir: nine references to “cage” (17, 19, 187, 265); three references to “prison” (196);² three references to “trapped” (17, 22); twenty-five references to “free,” “freedom,” or “freed”;³ and thirty-eight references to “safe” or “safety.”⁴ At first glance, it might seem that Gay’s thirty-eight references to safety are incongruous with freedom. However, in *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (2020), Jessica Marie Johnson comments that Black women across the Black Diaspora have long understood “freedom as centered around safety and security for themselves and their progeny,” especially, Johnson notes, “safety from intimate violence” (3). Gay characterizes her pre-rape, twelve-year-old, skinny-girl body as traitorous—“a small, weak vessel that betrayed me” (63), and that she held a “determination to keep making [her] body into what [she] needed it to be—a safe harbor” (63). Gay eats to make her body bigger, safer, and seemingly free-er, participating in a historical tradition of Black women who “engaged in a range of practices meant to safeguard their bodies” (Johnson 3). Whereas overeating is *not* one of the ranges of practices Johnson discusses, it is the way Gay meant to safeguard herself by making her body a “safe harbor” (Gay 63) and “a fortress” (16). Further, if we accept Wendy Brown’s understanding of freedom as “a relational and contextual practice that takes shape in opposition to whatever is locally and ideologically conceived as unfreedom” (qtd. in

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Li 4) and place it within Johnson's contextual framework, then we can better understand Gay's desire for safety as rooted in freedom.

My brief assessment of Gay's word choice necessitates a reading of her memoir in the context of emancipatory narratives. *Hunger* bears resemblance to nineteenth-century emancipatory narratives in terms of structure, content, and motive. To be clear, Gay's gang rape and the ripple effects it causes are not the same as chattel enslavement; however, *Hunger*—consciously or not—borrows conventions from nineteenth-century emancipatory narratives, placing the memoir within the African American literary tradition of freedom writing specifically through *Hunger's* signifyin(g) on the structure of nineteenth-century emancipatory narratives and its intergenerational bonds with Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself* (1861).

Unmotivated Signifyin(g): *Hunger* and Nineteenth-Century Emancipatory Narratives

Hunger participates in unmotivated signifyin(g)⁵ as it pays homage to the *format* of nineteenth-century emancipatory narratives.⁶ First, Gay authenticates her own memoir, much like Olaudah Equiano does in his 1789 autobiography⁷ with his inclusion of a self-portrait (Gallego 144-145).⁸ In *Hunger*, authentication appears first as a rhetorical question: "when I tell you about my body, do I tell you how much I weighed at my heaviest?" and it follows with an immediate answer: "At my heaviest I weighed 577 pounds" (6). Gay's weight at her heaviest functions as authentication because it is a quantitative assessment, a verifiable fact. It is an admission many would consider a source of shame, and in revealing the number, Gay allows herself to be cleaved open, exposed to the world so the world will read what she has to say. By revealing her weight at its heaviest, Gay authenticates her own story. In the same way that formerly enslaved Black people needed authenticators to certify them as a "truth-teller" by using "corroborating evidence presented by a white source" (Pierce 1082), Gay uses weight at her heaviest to function as "corroborating evidence." Gay's choice to share the doctor's confirmation that her 577-pound body makes her the ideal candidate for weight loss surgery not only functions as authentication but also ensures that she has a readership. Fat people are required to confess their sins (being fat) in the same way HIV positive individuals are supposed to recount their sexual history and participate in a "confessional paradigm" that admits they "lived incorrectly" and that "HIV infection is the cost" (Lyle 161).⁹ Thus, Gay's inclusion of her weight at its heaviest authenticates her narrative beyond acting as proof that what will

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follow in her memoir is true. It also presents her as a socially acceptable fat person who “accept[s] the dominant obesity narrative” (Greenhalgh 12) and presents herself as “‘fat and ashamed’ and working desperately to lose weight” (Greenhalgh 13), thereby ensuring a captive thin audience who may assume that they can expect to be titillated and repulsed by tales of Gay’s fatness but will instead find themselves repulsed at *their* actions that berate and harm fat people.

In addition to authentication, nineteenth-century emancipatory narrative narrators offer a personal crisis that precipitates their decision to escape (Andrews), and in *Hunger*, the personal crisis that sparks her quest for safety and freedom is Gay’s gang rape in the woods. That rape leads to her own form of escape from her trauma: she creates her body to be a “fortress” (16, 186) because her skinny girl body “was a small, weak vessel that betrayed” her (63). Paradoxically, she describes her fat body as a “cage of her own making” (19) and something she longs to be free from. Whereas nineteenth-century freedom writers detail their linear quest for liberation (Jacobs hides in an attic for seven years and Frederick Douglass learns to read and longs for freedom because of it), Gay’s quest for freedom is not linear: “My body is a cage. My body is a cage of my own making. I am still trying to figure my way out of it. I have been trying to figure a way out of it for more than twenty years” (Gay 19). Gay provides an account of that girl she was before she was raped, the girl and then young woman she was after she was raped, and the woman she has slowly become. After her rape, Gay revels in her power to control her body to make it bigger and safer in the earliest years after her rape, and as an adult, her quest is to remove herself from her unhealthy relationship with food, trauma, and poor relationships.

Whereas antebellum writers relied on their faith in God to help them endure their depraved circumstances, Gay does not. “I went to church even though I had no faith,” she writes. “Guilt consumed me. I no longer believed in God because surely if there were a God, he would have saved me from Christopher and those boys in the woods. I no longer believed in God because I had sinned” (Gay 48). Gay’s *rejection* of her faith is a key revision to the emancipatory narrative tradition that *Hunger* participates in. Formerly enslaved Black narrators articulated their faith in God to appeal to the moral sensibilities of their readers,¹⁰ but Gay’s rejection of faith as an appeal to one’s moral sensibilities suggests that there is no moral sensibility to appeal to, that to use Assata Shakur’s own words, “Nobody in the world, nobody in history, has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of the people who were oppressing them” (139).

In addition to writing about their lives in bondage, most formerly enslaved narrators explain how they learned to read and write (Pierce

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1085), and *Hunger* is no exception. Gay was already a voracious reader, but after her rape, she became consumed with reading: “Because I read so much, I was a romantic in my heart of hearts, but my desire to be part of a romantic story was a very intellectual, detached one” (91). Beyond reading books to escape from her world, Gay’s quest for literacy also includes learning the language to understand her rape. Gay reflects on her time spent in online communities, revealing her growing literacy:

In IRC chat rooms I talked to people in the BDSM community, and I learned about safe, sane, and consensual sexual encounters, where power was exchanged . . . I had a more expansive vocabulary, now, for what happened in the woods. At twelve years old, I had no such words. I just knew that these boys had forced me to have sex with them . . . Thanks to books and therapy and my new online friends, I knew ever more clearly that there was a thing called rape. (91-92)

Gay’s foray into online chatrooms can be likened to “scenes of instruction”—the scenes in emancipatory narratives where the narrator learns to read and write (Davis and Gates xxvii).¹⁸ Gay’s quest for literacy is not about the act of learning to read; Gay’s literacy is rooted in learning the language, vocabulary, and grammar of consent and rape to help her understand and explain what happened to her at twelve-years-old. For enslaved Black people, learning to read and write “facilitate[d] individual and psychic liberation” (Perkins 27), and many depicted “their achievements of literacy as their moment of true freedom, even if they are still legally slaves when they become literate” (Pierce 1085).

Although there “was a quiet thrill to having this new vocabulary” (Gay 92), Gay did not think the terminology applied to her, noting that she was “too damaged, too weak to deserve absolution” (92). Gay’s choice to use “absolution,” which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “the formal release from guilt, obligation, or punishment” (“absolution”), suggests that literacy was not enough for Gay. In fact, scholars “problematize the literacy = freedom equation” for formerly enslaved Black narrators, noting that formerly enslaved Black authors (like Frederick Douglass) struggled for independence from their abolitionist patrons “who promoted the slave narratives, and controlled their dissemination, in the political fight for emancipation” (Leroy-Frazier 153). Gay’s literacy—the vocabulary, grammar, and language of consent and rape—helped her to know that “there was a thing called rape” (Gay 92) and may indeed bear resemblance to “scenes of instruction” (Davis and Gates xxvii); however, her belief that she does not deserve absolu-

tion also points to a turn in literary scholarship that complicates the oversimplified literacy equals freedom equation.

Finally, *Hunger* ends in the way many emancipatory narratives do: with a commitment to antislavery activism (Andrews). Gay writes, "I am increasingly committed to challenging the toxic cultural norms that dictate far too much of how women live their lives and treat their bodies. I am using my voice, not just for myself but for people whose lives demand being seen and heard" (303). Here, Gay articulates a stated commitment to fighting against violence which is inextricable from womanhood, trauma, fatphobia, queerness, and disability. Her words echo Douglass's and Henry Bibb's, both of whom offer written declarations to their commitment to anti-slavery activism.¹²

The Feminine Tradition: Roxane Gay and Harriet Jacobs

Beyond structural similarities and unmotivated signifyin(g) between *Hunger* and nineteenth-century emancipatory narratives broadly, there are four key intertextual moments between Gay's memoir and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: their focus on the rape of Black girls; their selection of the agent of their own violation; their desire to forge an interracial bond of sisterhood; their desire to transform themselves and others. *Hunger's* shared intergenerational bonds with Jacobs's *Incidents* are standard according to David L. Dudley, who writes "we find intergenerational bonding between the female autobiographer and . . . her literary forebears writing in the feminine tradition" (8). Furthermore, in terms of motive and feminist emancipatory narratives, *Hunger* participates in intertextuality, specifically as it "interrogates the dynamics and dialectics of bondage and freedom" (Mitchell 14).¹³

The first point of bonding is their discussion of the rape of Black girls and specifically their emphasis on girlhood. Whereas Jacobs elides key details about the sexual oppression she endures, Gay provides a vivid description of her rape; while their methods may differ, the reason is the same: to highlight the degradation of Black girls' bodies. Jacobs obscures the details of her sexual violation because of the conventions of the time period, but Gay begins with two matter of fact statements: "When I was twelve years old, I was raped" (41) and "I was raped by Christopher and several of his friends in an abandoned hunting cabin in the woods where no one but those boys could hear me scream" (41). Then, she provides, in imagistic detail, the rape:

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Christopher pushed me down in front of his laughing friends, so many bodies larger than mine [. . .] When Christopher lay on top of me, he didn't take off his clothes. [. . .] He just unzipped his jeans and knelt between my legs and shoved himself inside. Those other boys stared down at me, leered really, and egged Christopher on [. . .] After Christopher came, he switched places with the boy who was holding my arms down. I fought, but my fighting didn't do much more than make those boys laugh. The friend held me down, his lips shiny, his beer breath in my face [. . .] I was already so sore. Christopher refused to look at me. He just held my wrists, spat on my face [. . .] I did not stop hurting. (42-43)

Gay recalls her rape in several pages, detailing her emotions, the setting, the stage, the players. She uses sensory language to bring her rape back to life: readers hear the unzipping of Christopher's pants, smell the beer on the breath of one of his friends, feel the saliva and spit on Gay's face; readers experience Christopher's "shoving" his penis inside Gay and ejaculating inside her. Li suggests that Jacobs (and others like Louisa Picquet) hide or deflect the details of her sexual oppression as a way of reclaiming agency (13).¹⁴ Conversely, Gay refuses to redirect her narrative away from her rape. Unlike Jacobs, Gay does not redirect the narrative to assert her agency; instead, she embraces the label of victim and rejects the Strong Black Woman stereotype, a rejection that is an assertion of agency. Farrah Jasmine Griffith suggests that Jacobs's refusal to provide details is a form of discursive resistance and a form of textual healing. Gay's embrace of the label "victim" is also a form of discursive control and textual healing. At stake here are narratives and conventions that routinely deny Black women and girls their vulnerability and assailability. Prominent cultural narratives (from pop culture to religion to literature) of Strong Black women necessitate that experiences of violence (sexual, ideological, psychological, self-inflicted) are neglected and unworthy of concern, leading to increased health concerns for Black women.¹⁵

Instead of taking on the Strong Black Woman persona that is grafted onto many Black women's bodies, Gay remarks,

Over the years, I have learned the importance of survival and claiming the label of 'survivor,' but I don't mind the label of 'victim.' I also don't think there's any shame in saying that when I was raped, I became a victim, and to this day, while I am also many other things, I am still a victim.

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It took me a long time, but I prefer ‘victim’ to ‘survivor’ now. I don’t want to diminish the gravity of what happened. I don’t want to pretend I’m on some triumphant, uplifting journey. I don’t want to pretend everything is okay. I’m living with what happened, moving forward without forgetting, moving forward without pretending I am unscarred. (20-21)

The significance of calling herself a victim who does not “want to pretend [she’s] on some triumphant, uplifting journey” (21) re-imagines the strength that Black women are thought to inherently possess. In *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*, Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden offer the following observation: “Black women are told that they are tough, pushy, and in charge rather than soft, feminine, and vulnerable [. . .] render[ing] Black women as caricatures instead of whole people with strengths and weaknesses, tender sides and tough edges,” ultimately noting that because this “myth of unshakability” becomes deeply rooted “in the collective psyche of the Black community, African American women often find that they are not allowed to be vulnerable or needy” (18-19). Gay’s memoir wrestles with the myth of unshakability; in *Hunger*, her Black girl body is fragile, victimized, “broken” and “splintered” (21). In fact, she remarks that using food to protect herself and make herself bigger “buried the girl I had been . . . [but] she is still small and scared and ashamed, and perhaps I am writing my way back to her, trying to tell her everything she needs to hear” (21). Through it all, Gay resists the label of Strong Black Woman. She creates an image of herself not predicated on strength. In rejecting the controlling image of the Strong Black Woman, Gay embodies what Mary Helen Washington calls the “emergent woman” (22), or Black women who are “more fully conscious of their political and psychological oppression and more capable of creating new options for themselves” (Washington 23). By claiming frailty, fragility, victimization—attributes historically denied to Black women—Gay claims a space historically reserved for white women: the damsel, the victim, the harmed.

In addition to describing her trauma, Gay gives innocence back to herself and to all Black girls who are routinely sexualized and not allowed to be considered little girls. Immediately before and after the passage detailing her rape, Gay indicates that she “was a good Catholic girl” (42), a “thing, flesh and girl bones” (42),¹⁶ a “sheltered, good Catholic girl” (43, emphasis Gay’s), and “the good girl” (44). In fact, in this chapter, Gay uses “girl” seven times. Gay’s emphasis on her girlhood immediately calls to mind Jacobs’s *Incidents*. Certainly, Gay’s repetition of “girl” calls to mind Jacobs’s oft-cited observation: “But I

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now entered on my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl” (Jacobs 44); however, it also calls to mind Ellen, Jacobs’s daughter. After Jacobs escapes to New York, she visits Ellen who is employed by Mrs. Hobbs, and Jacobs learns that Mrs. Hobbs’ brother, Mr. Thorne, “though he professed too much gratitude to my grandmother to injure any of her descendants, he had poured foul language into the ears of her innocent great-grandchild” (Jacobs 269). Johnnie M. Stover, who cites this same passage, notes that Jacobs’s “discovery is particularly disturbing because it shows that for a young black girl, being ‘free’ and living in the North do not protect her from attacks on her virtue” (143). Stover’s observations highlight the sad truth Gay underscores with her repetition of girl: even though she is “free” in the 20th century, she is not free enough from the threat of sexual violation by men.

Gay’s emphasis on “girl” also calls to mind Elaine Brown’s poem at the end of her political autobiography, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman’s Story* (1992), in which Brown dreams of a better life for her daughter:

One night just before bed
She shocked me when she said
What would happen if I died
‘Cause no one cared
When black girls cried—
Oh, Erika, my little baby,
Erika, my little child,
Erika, there is no maybe
I’ll change the world for you
In just a little while... (450)

Combined with Brown’s dream of making the world a better place for “Erika,” the emphasis on Gay as a girl again de-emphasizes the Strong Black Woman trope but also bestows girlhood, innocence, and frailty on the twelve-year-old Gay and other Black girls who have been—and continue to be—long denied the right.

Furthermore, Gay’s emphasis on “girl” comments on the adultification of Black girls. Scholars use “adultification of Black girls” to refer to perceptions of “Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than white girls of the same age” (Epstein, et al. 1). The adultification of Black children in the United States has its roots in enslavement, as enslaved Black children worked as early as two years of age (King). It should come as no surprise that enslaved Black children were “rarely perceived as being worthy of playtime and were severely punished for exhibiting normal childlike behaviors” (Dumas and Nelson 33). Such

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punishment extends to the twenty-first century, particularly to Black girls in academic settings. Monique W. Morris observes the effects of assigning “adult-like characteristics” to Black girls:

The assignment of more adult-like characteristics to the expressions of young Black girls is a form of age compression. Along this truncated age continuum, Black girls are likened more to adults than to children and are treated as if they are willfully engaging in behaviors typically expected of Black women. This compression [has] stripped Black girls of their childhood freedoms [and] renders Black girlhood interchangeable with Black womanhood. (34)

Given this persisting history that denies Black girls their girlhood, Gay’s emphasis on “girl” is telling. Through using “girl” and claiming “victim” Gay bestows girlhood, innocence, and frailty on the twelve-year-old Gay and other Black girls who have been (and continue to be) denied the right to be viewed as innocent, as victims—much like Jacobs does in *Incidents*. Gay’s memoir and the deliberate choices she makes in writing (in terms of language and claiming labels) open a door of possibility for Black girls with similar experiences; they, too, can see themselves as fragile, as victims, and as persons deserving of love, care, respect, and justice.

A second intertextual link between Jacobs and Gay is their selection of the agent of their violation. If we take Amartya Sen’s definition of freedom, the capacity to make choices (Li 6), then Gay is akin to Jacobs in that they both select the agent of their violation. Jacobs addresses her reader, explaining:

With all these thoughts revolving in my mind, and seeing no other way of escaping the doom I so much dreaded, I made a headlong plunge. Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another... (86)

Here, Jacobs details her mindset for getting pregnant by Mr. Sands—to avoid the advances of Mr. Flint. She indicates that her pregnancy was a calculated plan (86). Despite Jacobs’s apparent reticence—“it seem[ed] less degrading to give one’s self than to submit to compulsion” (84-85)—she makes as free a choice as she can given Mr. Sands’s position of

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power, privilege, and authority, Mr. Sands remains an agent of Jacobs's violation. Similarly, after her gang rape, Gay addresses her readers:

I wish I could tell you I never spoke to Christopher again, but I did. That may be what shames me most, that after everything he did to me, I went back, and allowed him to continue using me until my family moved a few months later. I allowed him to continue using me because I didn't know what else to do. Or I let him use me because after what happened in the woods, I felt so worthless. I believed I didn't deserve any better. (Gay 51)

Gay's revelation—that she returned to Christopher—is like that of Jacobs's, who chose premarital sex and children out of wedlock—twice! Both of their circumstances demonstrate how freedom and bondage are not fixed; instead, as Stephanie Li observes, “they represent shifting negotiations of power and control that are mediated by personal desires and connections to others” (5). Gay cannot undo her gang-rape any more than Jacobs can undo the advances of her enslaver, but Gay can, like Jacobs, “select the agent of her [continued] violation” (Li 6) and maintain a sort of facile control until she moves away.

A third intertextual link is Jacobs's and Gay's need to establish a bond of sisterhood that transcends race and class, and in Gay's case, body type. Jacobs details her “sexual oppression, the dissociation of black families, and her fight for flight and freedom” to “build a bond of sisterhood between herself and these white women readers” in hopes of inspiring “Northern white women to take action against the supposedly ‘patriarchal’ institution of Southern slavery” (Stover 134). Gay does something similar, though Blackness takes a back seat in *Hunger*. Gay does not elide race or ethnicity in her memoir, but they are also not at the forefront. For example, out of the eighty-eight chapters in her memoir, only ten chapters¹⁷ reference her Blackness or her Haitian heritage. Gay refers to her parents' immigrant background (Gay 53-54), the Haitian respectability politics concerning weight, sexuality, education, and occupations (55, 83), her mother's cooking and her love of Haitian food (56, 228-229), casual racism (85, 105, 293), “assumed narratives of blackness” (62), and her femininity rendered invisible by her Blackness (91, 256).

Instead of foregrounding race and ethnicity, Gay frames her “I” as an “Everywoman.” Initially, this “Everywoman” is in terms of women who experience sexual violence, and then Gay shifts her “Everywoman” experiences to fat women generally. Based on the similarities between *Hunger* and *Incidents*, I believe Gay shies away from references to her Blackness to maximize her readership. Just as Jacobs “anticipated a

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hostile and incredulous reception to her narrative” (Smith 72 qtd. in Stover 135), so does Gay. In fact, like Jacobs, Gay “created a transcultural text that begged, borrowed, stole, and devised the techniques that would allow her maximum freedom to tell her story in her own way and to her own ends” (Smith 72 qtd. in Stover 135). In other words, Gay’s de-emphasis on her Blackness as a fat woman allowed her to build up a different type of fortress in anticipation of misogynoir that would have accompanied her fat shaming.

Gay’s position as Everywoman is reinforced further by her “reasonable-well off” family (Gay 62). For example, she comments:

During my twenties, I was broke [. . .] This is not a sad story because I am lucky. This is just life, and frankly, I’ve had it easy in terms of material comfort. I am privileged. I always have been. I had a safety net because my parents would never have let me starve or be homeless, but I was on my own, as an adult should be, and I was often very, very broke. (269)

After dropping out of Yale and disconnecting from her family Gay reveals, “My parents eventually found me with the help, I assume, of a private investigator [. . .] I learned that my father had gone to New Haven and packed up my apartment [. . .] He paid my outstanding bills” (96). Later when Gay realized she “had nothing, no money, nowhere to live, no job,” she “broke down and called [her] parents” (97) and her father told her to “to go to the Minneapolis airport and I did and there was a plane ticket waiting for me” (97). In these glimpses of her memoir, Gay admits that she could travel from place to place and expect that her parent(s) would appear with money or a plane ticket—without hesitation—to save her. Gay’s announcement of her economic privilege informs her (economically privileged white) readers know she’s “just like them”—or at least *kin* to them.¹⁸ Gay acknowledges that she “was in no position to face [her] privilege or how [she] took that privilege for granted” (86), and announcing her privilege places her firmly on the side of “whiteness.”

Gay’s position as Everywoman or *Hunger* as a universal text is also evident in the pop culture examples she includes—both in terms of praise and in terms of critique. Gay’s cooking heroes (aside from her mother) are white women. She remarks how these fat white women like Ina Garten gave her “permission to love food . . . to acknowledge [her] hungers and to try to satisfy them in healthy ways” (218). When Gay critiques the weight loss industry, she cites the example of Rachel Frederickson, a white woman and the 2014 “The Biggest Loser” champion who received backlash because she “disciplined her body too much”

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(129). Gay could have included other references that centered Black women—Tyra Banks’s “kiss my fat ass” proclamation in 2007 (Schnurr) or America’s Next Top Model (ANTM) contestant Tocarra Jones (“The Evolution”)—whose bodies were also policed for being unruly, undisciplined. Jones, in fact, would have been a key choice. Because after being on ANTM in 2005, Jones joined Celebrity Fit Club in 2008, lost 80 pounds, and received praise for her weight loss.

Practically speaking, Gay’s critique of the weight loss industry necessitates the inclusion of Frederickson because the backlash of her weight loss results was so insidious, whereas Banks and Jones were shamed for being perceived as fat. Further, Banks’s history of fat-shaming women coupled with the fact that Banks would not be considered super morbidly obese by any standards, may also be factored in her exclusion from Gay’s commentary. Simply, Gay’s inclusion of Frederickson functions to show the other side of policing women’s bodies. But, perhaps an additional reason for including Frederickson could be to universalize the weight loss experience for those considered obese or super morbidly obese (terms Gay loathes and critiques in her memoir). If readers have sympathy for Frederickson’s scrutiny and the backlash afterward, perhaps that same sympathy will be extended to Gay and other fat Black women who are routinely invisible yet hyper-visible when it comes to body policing.

A fourth intertextual connection between Jacobs and Gay is their political aim; both are concerned with transforming the consciousness and the culture that is harmful to marginalized women. At the end of her narrative, Jacobs aspires “toward a freedom that merges independence with commitments to others” (Li 18). Whereas Jacobs depicts the hardships enslaved Black women experience, Gay depicts the challenges faced by fat women, fat Black women, queer women, and female rape victims. Whereas Jacobs challenges Northern white women, Gay challenges thin people, white people, men, and heterosexual people. As Jacobs denounces slavery, Gay denounces fatphobia, oppression, racism, and sexual exploitation. Jacobs and Gay implore those in positions of privilege to exert their privilege to rectify the damaging cultural institutions that contribute to the discourses that make it acceptable to harm women in multiple ways. For example, in terms of denouncing fatphobia, Gay writes,

Doctors generally adhere to the Hippocratic oath, where they swear to abide by an ethical code, where they swear to act, always, in their patients’ best interest. Unless the patient is overweight. I hate going to the doctor because they seem wholly unwilling to follow the Hippocratic oath when it comes

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to treating obese patients. The words 'first do no harm' do not apply to unruly bodies. (273)

Gay later writes, "I am increasingly committed to challenging the toxic cultural norms that dictate far too much of how women live their lives and treat their bodies. I am using my voice, not just for myself but for people whose lives demand being seen and heard" (303). We see such a commitment in *Hunger*, too. The best example is Gay's commitment to and solidarity with a young girl in the dressing room. As Gay recalls the mother shaming her daughter who, stricken, returned to her dressing room with "tears streaming down her face" (181), not only does Gay display empathy in wanting to "sob right there with her because it was just too much to see such a familiar and painful scene" (181), but Gay also has the urge to shield the young girl:

I am not a hugger, but I wanted to wrap my arms around this girl. I wanted to protect her from this world that is so unbelievably cruel to overweight people. There was nothing I could really do because I know this world. I live in it too. There's no shelter or safety or escape from the cruel stares and comments, the too-small seats, the too-small everything for your too-big body. (181)

Gay's desire to act as a "shelter," "safety," and "escape" for the girl by enfolding her in her arms and offering protection demonstrates Gay's commitment to others *and* locates Gay herself as a site of freedom. Gay's desire to be a safety net for someone else links back to what she did not have as a twelve-year-old; she wants to act as a haven, a site of freedom (even as she writes herself into freedom). Gay then reveals, "But I followed her to the dressing room and told her she was beautiful" (181). Though small, Gay's act of kindness towards the girl moves beyond empathy into solidarity, and as her memoir progresses, Gay recalls small moments of advocacy for those who are often invisibilized. In fact, it is this moment of empathy that propels Gay to "be more considerate of the realities of the bodies of others" (299). Gay recalls an event where she was speaking with Gloria Steinem, and audience members "wanted the interpreter to move so they could better see Gloria and [Roxane]" (298): "The interpreter stood and looked around the stage, clearly confused and distressed. I told her to sit right where she was, and that others being able to see us was not as important as her being seen" (298).

In the tradition of Jacobs's *Incidents*, Gay's *Hunger* interrogates sexism, racism, and exploitation to expose and explore their structur-

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al and cultural causes. Thus, these intertextual connections to nineteenth-century emancipatory narratives in general help readers take the historical experience of chattel enslavement and translate it into a twenty first-century context to interrogate the ways systemic oppression has changed, appearing in new and different forms, and also remained frighteningly the same.

What Do We Hunger For? Freedom

Viewing *Hunger* within a nineteenth-century emancipatory narrative tradition lends the memoir a fresh complexity, especially if we consider the offspring of these narratives: twentieth-century Black women's political autobiographies. Margo V. Perkins invites us to consider the political autobiographies written by Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Elaine Brown as existing "along a continuum of African American resistance writing that begins with the emancipation narratives" (26). Perkins identifies four characteristics of Black emancipatory narratives that appear in mid-twentieth-century Black women's political autobiographies: both nineteenth-century and mid-twentieth-century narrators embark on a quest for literacy (27); both write as a way to move toward subjectivity (29); both experience a cultural alienation or displacement that leads to a search for community (30); and both experience violence whether literal or figurative (31). In discussing *Assata*, Perkins observes that writing her autobiography provided Shakur the opportunity to "refashion an identity against disparaging images of themselves propagated in the popular press" (29). Arguably, *Hunger* offers Roxane Gay a similar opportunity. Unlike Shakur, Gay has never been on the FBI's Most Wanted List, nor is she vilified in the popular press as a murderous monster. However, at the turn of the twentieth century, to be fat meant to be associated with people of "the lowest social order" (Stoll 423), and at the turn of the twenty first-century, fat people were linked with terrorism (Greenhalgh 8), suggesting they were either un-American or anti-American. Just as the popular press and public officials vilified Shakur as public enemy number one, popular press, public officials, and health gurus vilify fat people in the United States, branding them as public health enemy number one. Gay's memoir writes back against disparaging images, beliefs, and treatments of fat women in popular culture and popular consciousness. Although Gay is not a formerly enslaved Black person nor is she a Black political activist in exile, she is a Black woman bound by widespread weight stigma, size discrimination, and fat phobia and who seeks freedom through writing and public advocacy. In the same

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way that Black women's political autobiographies "advance the cause of black liberation, to bear witness, to offer analysis, provide direction, to help create a better world, and, ultimately, to save their own lives" (Braxton, "Autobiography" 142), in the same way that nineteenth-century emancipatory narratives "provoke reflection and debate among their readers" (Andrews), so too does *Hunger*. *Hunger* advances the cause of fat liberation, bears witness to the violence that caused Gay to make her body bigger and safer, and offers analysis on weight-loss industries, hegemonic masculinity, the (in)accessibility of public spaces, the social construction of gender, the male gaze, and allyship. Like its nineteenth-century literary forbears and their offspring, Gay's *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* aims to help create a better world, and in many ways, she writes to save her own life, one where she unequivocally proclaims: "Here I am, reveling in that freedom" (304).

Notes

1. I would like to thank the Georgia Southern students enrolled in my spring 2020 "I'ma Keep Runnin' / Cause a Winner Don't Quit on Themselves": Black Autobiography and Memoir course for generously listening to my conference-style presentation on *Hunger* as my class opener, for offering me salient feedback, and for thinking alongside me that semester.
2. It would make for an interesting article to juxtapose Gay's revelation—that her body is a prison of her own making—with the letters and literary submissions she received from prisoners who "were just as lonely as I was, who had found their voices in their prison cells and wanted their voices to be heard" (101). Such a comparison is beyond the scope of this study.
3. Freedom in terms of being liberated and not confined (not the idiom for free as in gratis). For "freedom" see chapters 16, 21, 27, 28, 88; for "free" see chapters 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 22, 26, 27, 28, 36, 42, 43, 44, 46, 57, 83, 88; for "freed" see chapter 83.
4. See chapters 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16, 18, 23, 25, 27, 29, 51, 52, 54, 75, 80, 82, 85.
5. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. offers "signifyin(g)" to characterize the intertextual connections to canonical African American literary texts, dividing signifyin(g) into two categories: motivated and unmotivated (*Signifying Monkey*). Angelyn Mitchell explains that unmotivated signifyin(g) "employs pastiche and engages in 'refiguration as an act of homage'" (14) whereas motivated signifyin(g) "employs parody proper and seeks to erase previous texts through revision" (14).

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6. Nineteenth-century emancipatory narratives follow a specific structure: authentication (the material that precedes the body of the work, validating the narrative as truthful and verifying the writer's credibility), an account of the formerly enslaved person's life in bondage, an emphasis on faith in God, gaining literacy, and achieving freedom. See William L. Andrews's "An Introduction to the Slave Narrative" for a detailed description of the general format of antebellum slave narratives.

7. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano Or Gustavus Vassa, The African: Written by Himself*.

8. "The importance of this picture lies in the fact that it acknowledges both his race and his existence as an actual human being" (Gallego 144). Yolanda Pierce writes, "many slave narratives contain documents, prefaces, supporting letters, or introductions written by prominent white citizens" (1082). It is important to note that these sources not only "authenticate" that enslaved and formerly enslaved Black persons were literate but also that "the horrific stories they revealed about slavery in their narratives were true" (Pierce 1082). Lydia Maria Childs authenticates Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and William Lloyd Garrison authenticates Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845).

9. In "Tryin' to Scrub that 'Death Pussy' Clean Again: The Pleasures of Domesticating HIV/AIDS in Pearl Cleage's Fiction," Timothy Lyle observes that an HIV-positive Black woman character must offer a confession for her sexual promiscuity to assuage readers. A confessional paradigm exists in Gay's memoir regarding her weight at her heaviest.

10. Formerly enslaved narrators' appeals to morality did not prevent them from pointing out Christian hypocrisy among white enslavers.

11. *The Slave's Narrative*, edited by Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

12. At the end of his 1845 narrative, Douglass commits to "solemnly [pledge] [him] self anew to the sacred cause [of abolition]" (125) At the end of his 1849 narrative, Henry Bibb makes a similar pledge: "And I here pledge myself, God being my helper, ever to contend for the natural equality of the human family, without regard to color, which is but fading matter, while mind makes the man" (Bibb 204).

13. Angelyn Mitchell observes "In the liberatory narrative, intertextuality is a strategy used to highlight the primary concerns of bondage and freedom. Intertextuality facilitates an examination and discussion of slavery and its legacy, interrogates the dynamics and dialectics of bondage and freedom, and posits a usable past" (14).

14. Louisa Picquet's series of answers to her interviewer, Reverend Hiram Mattison, were published as *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon, or, Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* in 1861.

15. For some readings on how weathering, or "early health deterioration as a consequence of the cumulative impact of repeated experience with social or

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economic adversity and political marginalization” (Geronimus, et al. 826), leads to increased health concerns for Black women, see Geronimus, et al. and Khazan.

16. Gay’s reference to her twelve-year-old body as “thing” indicates that her rapists did more than objectify twelve-year-old Gay; she was a victim of thingification, which signals that Gay’s rapists reduced twelve-year-old Gay to something nonhuman.

17. See Gay chapters 14, 15, 16, 23, 25, 28, 29, 66, 75, and 85.

18. In the United States, generational wealth is associated with whiteness; therefore, the economic security that Gay has is often associated with whiteness (even though we know that white people are not all economically advantaged).

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