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# The Language of Trauma in Roxane Gay's *Hunger*: A Memoir of (My) Body

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THE LANGUAGE OF TRAUMA IN ROXANE

GAY'S *HUNGER: A MEMOIR OF (MY) BODY*

by

CYDNEY PRICE

(Under the Direction of Kendra R. Parker)

ABSTRACT

This thesis uses the language and structure of Roxane Gay's *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*, in tandem with other works of literature, to examine the relationship between Blackness, fatness, womanhood, and trauma. Among other things, this thesis attempts to draw a connection between Deborah King's concept of multiple jeopardy and the lived experiences of several different traumas. Also, this these works to highlight the usefulness of the memoir genre as teaching tool in classrooms with students of all ages. I argue that Gay's memoir is a subversion of the typical weight-loss memoir and is instead a social commentary on the ways trauma lives and manifests in the body, as well as the way American society dictates what trauma is and how Black women, specifically, should handle it. Literary scholars may be able to use the findings of this thesis to further interrogate the troubling systems America has created and upheld for women who are both fat and Black by analyzing other memoirs for their language and structure in addition to their content. Pedagogical scholars may be able to find use in one of the arguments I make in this thesis: that memoir is a useful teaching tool because it is both hyper-personal and universal.

INDEX WORDS: Trauma, Blackness, Roxane Gay, Hunger, Fatness, Memoir, Teaching, Womanhood, Strong Black woman stereotype, Healing.

THE LANGUAGE OF TRAUMA IN ROXANE GAY'S

*HUNGER: A MEMOIR OF (MY) BODY*

by

CYDNEY PRICE

B.A., Georgia Southern University, 2019

M.A., Georgia Southern University, 2021

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

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## CHAPTER 1.

## BEGINNING THE CONVERSATION

**Monochrome Curriculum: An Overview**

Studying Black memoir is essential for all students, but it holds special value for me. I grew up in several homes throughout my childhood after a grease fire charred the first apartment I knew to an irreparable crisp. Then, my father acted on his decision to be the live-in dad to someone else's family, and my mother set herself, my 9-year-old brother, and 5-year-old me, on a decade-and-a-half long journey from one house, apartment, or hotel room to another across North Georgia. We slowly crept up the middle of the state from the predominantly Black area we inhabited in Riverside to the almost exclusively white areas north of there. 14 moves later, my then three-person family loaded the free cereal-branded boxes my mother had gotten from Walmart after midnight into the U-HAUL, we landed in Kennesaw. All this moving away from people who looked like us left my brother and me to fend for ourselves, culturally. As a result, we both still feel that we lack a certain cultural Blackness that grants us access to what feels like an exclusive cultural club for "real" Black people.

Kennesaw was (and still is) a white city. Whiter are its public schools. I attended Etowah, Woodstock, and North Cobb high schools before spending the majority of my high school career at Harrison High School, home of the Hoyas. As one might expect of a school located in a white part of the south, the curriculum was sparkling white. In the 10th grade, I learned about Langston Hughes's "I, Too" and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* during the 3-day-long lesson on The Harlem Renaissance in my Honors American Literature class, but the next weeks were filled with lessons on Henry David Thoreau and Chris McCandles before completing our final projects, which were essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.



This trend continued in college at Georgia Southern University. I did not consider the curriculum that the professors would teach me upon my arrival into the English program at Georgia Southern when I applied. I am thankful for the education I have received in both my undergraduate and graduate careers in Georgia Southern University's English program, but it is difficult not to take note of the way Black literature is treated. I was in the second semester of my sophomore year before I even learned who Frederick Douglass was. Our class spent one week (or two class days) on his 1845 *Narrative*, and we learned only that Douglass was enslaved and treated horribly before his escape to the North, and nothing of his expert use of diction and literary devices. I have since learned about Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* twice more, and about *Huckleberry Finn*'s "Jim" twice. There have been a few other texts written by and about Black people sprinkled through the program and taught with special attention to enslavement or racism, but by that time I had learned Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Shakespeare several times over, each time with an emphasis on different themes and lenses. I did not study anything written by Alice Dunbar Nelson, Amiri Baraka, or Harriet Jacobs until my graduate career began and I had the option to take the new African American Literature course offered by a new Black woman professor. I learned about the horrors of enslavement, yes, but this professor also taught the class several different themes, literary techniques, genres, and topics spanning years of African American history. I was 22. I had already graduated from the institution with a bachelor's degree in the subject without having learned more than 5 memorable lessons on Black writers and texts.

The next semester of my graduate program, I took a class offered by the same Black professor on Black Memoir. Here, I learned about Assata Shakur, Malcolm X, and Frederick Douglass, and I learned about more than just enslavement. I learned new concepts, themes, literary terms, writing styles, and experiences from a Black person about Black authors and texts.

I learned of the existence of medical mistreatment of hospitalized Black women, the definitions and uses for anaphora and metacommentary, and the integration of poetry in autobiography and autoethnography. I also learned what autoethnography is and that it is an appropriate genre to use in an educational setting. In addition to these classic examples of Black life writings, I learned about more contemporary ones. I learned about fashion, education, fatness, clothing, sexuality, and inequality by studying memoirs written by Kiese Laymon, Tanisha C. Ford, Janet Mock, and Roxane Gay. I learned about disability and illness. I learned about Blackness and how others are navigating life with Black bodies in 21st century America. These themes were new to me and they taught me about myself.

Given my race, gender, and childhood, finally seeing myself represented in literature was monumental. As a child, I was ridiculed for my excessive weight by family and classmates; I was sexually abused for half of my 6th year on the planet, and I spent the majority of my time not belonging. For these reasons, Gay's *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017) resonated with me and is the focus of my master's thesis. My fascination with Gay's text (and the ways I see myself in her work) led me to start inquiring what I was taught and how it was taught to me. Gay's text includes the trauma of her rape, her subsequent descent into an unhealthy relationship with food, and thus her extreme weight-gain. Like the canonical Black autobiographies that are ordinarily taught, Gay's memoir can teach about race because she is a Black woman in America, but it can also teach us other concepts as they relate to being Black, fat, and woman in America. Memoirs, especially Black memoirs, are useful teaching tools. This thesis will discuss Gay's *Hunger* while focusing especially on her use of trauma language as a way to explore the traumas of a fat Black woman's lived experience.

### **Why Fat Black Women? / What's Fat Got to Do with It?**

I want to write about fat Black women because Black women are treated poorly, inducing trauma in our lives. Black feminist studies show up in literary research projects, and Fat Studies which focuses, in part, on the traumatic, damaging, and long-lasting effects fat phobia can have is also a popular discourse, and it deserves more attention in literary studies. When fatness, Blackness, and womanhood are combined, the trauma is compounded, which allows me as a literary scholar to use Gay's *Hunger* as a literary map to track where trauma stems from, analyze how the multiplicity of it affects her, and interrogate the societal norms that work against her body.

Deborah H. King, Patricia Hill Collins, and Sabrina Strings each come to important conclusions regarding what it might mean to live in a fat, Black and woman body. When fatness, Blackness, and womanhood are combined into one person's identity, the trauma is compounded. Since Gay embodies all of these characteristics, she is a victim of multiple jeopardy, a concept King coins. Multiple jeopardy takes the long-established definition of "double jeopardy" (the "dual and systematic discrimination of racism and sexism" [43]) and expands it to include several other "dynamics of multiple forms of discrimination" (47). While the combination of Gay's identity characteristics affects her in more compounded way than they would if she identified with either being Black, fat, *or* a woman, her Blackness alone still has a large effect on the way she is able to move through life while living in her body. Collins explains some of the traumas Black women face in *Black Feminist Thought*. In describing the relationship between Black women and otherness, Collins describes African American women's "status as outsiders [as] the point from which other groups define normality" (70), and it becomes clear that fat peoples' status is used in the same way. Both fat people and Black people are "strangers" (70) who Collins reveals, "threaten the moral and social order of our society" and by not belonging,

they “emphasize the importance of belonging” (70). Strings agrees with Collins and furthers this line of thinking by questioning how fatness became inherently “menacing” and “immoral” (4), how it became “linked to “Africanity” or blackness” (5), and how “fatness, especially among Black women [became viewed] as the greater threat to public health” (5). These questions clearly draw a connection between two of Gay’s minority statuses. Further, Strings’ later exploration of these questions sheds light on the breeding ground for systemic trauma created by the link between fatness and Blackness. She illuminates this problem by explaining that “the fear of the imagined “fat black woman” was created by racial and religious ideologies that have been used to both degrade black women and discipline white women” (6). The connection between fatness and Blackness affects Gay’s day-to-day life by creating an inherently traumatic foundation on which new traumatic events can easily occur and compound.

### **Why Black Memoir and Trauma?**

As I look back at my own educational experiences at Georgia Southern, I wonder why memoirs and other autobiographical texts are so often overlooked. One of the many conclusions I considered for this truth of my own academic experience was that they were frequently neglected as learning tools because they are deeply personal, and are thus, mistakenly viewed to be unfit to either prove certain points about society or to potentially teach an educator’s more general audience. David Carless and Katrina Douglass suggest that “something is missing” (85) in the research and discussion of humans and social sciences. They later find that “personal and subjective experience” is not exactly missing, but “has instead been systematically removed from human and social science research,” and that “this absence or gap can usefully be construed as a “problem” for which autoethnography offers a solution” (89). While Carless and Douglass speak of autoethnography rather than autobiography, the two genres are largely similar as they both include the telling of personal experiences. Carless, Douglass, and Susan Greenhalgh dispel the

belief that these texts are too personal and specific to be used as a vehicle to explore and study several meaningful subjects. Parts of Greenhalgh's discussion of the war on fat bodies work to support the claim that personal narratives are necessary tools to study. Memoirs provide readers with an account of an individual's experiences, and how that individual views and copes with their own experiences. When using autobiographical texts as learning tools, readers can see how certain traumas affect "individuals, bodies, and lives" (17) and connect those effects to more expansive societal themes. These are the kinds of narratives that open doors for empathy and a more meaningful understanding of topics spanning from something as simple as food, all the way to complexities like abuse and addiction.

Noting that the use of writing that "tries to capture and reflect human subjects' own views of their lives and the larger context that shapes them" (16) and "captures a wide range of the often quirky, unmeasurable things that make [subjects] human" (17), Greenhalgh's observation supports the study of first-person literary texts like Gay's *Hunger*. It is these "unmeasurable things" that are most beneficial in studying an array of issues and make memoirs ideal teaching tools to use to understand and grapple with not only an individual person's life but also with larger societal matters. Memoirs, autobiographies, and other forms of life writing bring to light "the causal links between individual lives and their wider historical and cultural contexts," and they allow readers "to trace the connections between broader structural forces and personal experience" (17). These connections from individual histories or more specific experiences to wider historical contexts provide a logical and arguably more helpful way to lead to an understanding of the many topics presented in memoirs. As stated before, memoirs are excellent tools to learn and teach from because they relate to audiences on a deeply personal level and on a larger and more general scale. As a literary scholar, I am connecting themes from

Gay's individual history to other Black women's individual histories as well as to broader concepts like multiple jeopardy, deeply rooted systemic racism, and trauma studies. Gay's *Hunger* can transcend across topics, literary themes, and literary discourses *because* it is so personal and thus, filled with "quirky, unmeasurable things" (17).

There is, of course, already a catalog of scholarship on Black life writing. A quick search on many literary databases will yield pages of scholarly articles on Douglass's artful use of pathos and logos, Harriet Jacobs's several instances of sexual abuse, Assata Shakur's wrongful imprisonment, and Malcolm X's endless fight for freedom.<sup>1</sup> These works, in addition to their styles and descriptions of their authors' lives, are full of trauma and trauma language. When these works are analyzed, the trauma and trauma language within them are often lumped in with the rest of the text and left without the same kind of focused analysis that is given to the other important parts of the autobiography or memoir. Some kind of trauma lies in almost every example of life writing, but it is especially prevalent in Black life writing, and it is an important concept to analyze. The trauma in these writings can have several different definitions and connotations, but in this project, trauma is defined using its Ancient Greek origins. Simply put, the word trauma originates from the Greek word for "wound," and it can refer to physical wounds to the body, emotional wounds to the psyche, or any event that causes distress. By using the word "event," I mean to communicate more than just any "significant occurrence," which may be the preliminary definition to come to mind. Here, the word "event" refers to any physical

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<sup>1</sup> For example, a 2016 study titled "To Narrate and Denounce: Frederick Douglass and the Politics of Personal Narrative" focuses on the political power of Douglass's first and second published autobiographies; A 2011 publication on Shakur entitled "Black Women's Prison Narratives and the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in US Prisons" discusses the imprisonment of Black women as depicted in personal narratives, and a 2012 article called "The Civil and the Human" looks at the way Malcolm X's challenged civil rights.

happenings that may elicit trauma, which could be something as tumultuous as being raped, and it could be something as seemingly minuscule as having no other option but to squeeze your body into a chair with narrow arms.<sup>2</sup> Cathy Caruth illustrates my point when she notes that “in its later usage... the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3). She goes on to argue that the “wound of the mind... is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that... is experienced... too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4). This understanding of trauma is precisely the one I mean to communicate when I use the word throughout this thesis.

Trauma is a common feature in Black life-writing, and the trauma these authors experience is wide-ranging. In *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* (1861), Jacobs experiences trauma physically when she received a “stunning blow” (49) from her white enslaver and she experiences trauma emotionally when she understands that she is treated no better than “chattel” (71) as an enslaved Black woman. In his 1845 *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass undergoes physical trauma when his white enslavers start beating him whether he has done something wrong or not and he meets a moment of emotional trauma when he has reason to suspect that his father is the white man enslaving him and his family. In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), Malcolm X experiences physical trauma when he is jailed and forced to go through an abrupt withdrawal from drugs, and an instance of emotional trauma comes early in his life when he understands that his family is now the welfare family in the neighborhood. In *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987),

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<sup>2</sup> Gay discusses her anxiety regarding chairs in Chapter 59: “Anytime I enter a room where I might be expected to sit, I am overcome with anxiety. What kind of chairs will I find? Will they have arms? Will they be sturdy? How long will I have to sit in them? If I do manage to wedge myself between a chair’s narrow arms, will I be able to stand up on my own?” (176).

Assata Shakur is physically traumatized when her hand hangs from her wrist connected by just a few bloody tendons after a run-in with the police, and she, along with her family, are emotionally traumatized when Shakur is forced to flee the country. In *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More* (2014), Janet Mock recounts her experiences of emotional trauma when she realizes her father's crack addiction is no longer a secret to her peers, and she undergoes physical trauma when she is molested by her stepbrother. In *Dressed in Dreams: A Black Girl's Love Letter to the Power of Fashion* (2019), Tanisha C. Ford encounters emotional trauma when she learns that her current style was unacceptable and that she will need to start dressing in the same clothes as her white peers in order to look "polished" (100), and In *Heavy: An American Memoir* (2018), Kiese Laymon faces emotional trauma in his childhood when he learns that as a Black man, he will have to speak to police officers in a certain way and he is physically traumatized when he has to drive his intoxicated uncle to the hospital to watch a doctor cut into his grandmother's head as she screams to the Lord for mercy. Even Mary Prince, who was not American but certainly affected by racist and white power systems, participates in this trope of Black people experiencing and writing about trauma with her autobiographical piece entitled *The History of Mary Prince*. Each of these Black life writings includes a plethora of traumatic events and adds to the already existing literary tradition of trauma in Black life writing. Black authors have had to experience trauma in the white-dominated and racist societies they were born into and the writing that comes from these people clearly reflects the conditions they were forced into. Gay's 2017 memoir widens this tradition by adding an additional layer of trauma to it, providing a different angle for Black writers to continue the tradition with.



### “When and Where I Enter”<sup>3</sup>: Literature Review

When it comes to discussions of Gay’s fiction and non-fiction, scholars all seem to come to the consensus that the author’s word choice and style are purposeful and of notable importance. Norrell Edwards uses Gay’s words, colored by trauma, to “create an eerie, frightening, and dangerous sense in her novel *An Untamed State* (2014) but in my estimation, they do the same thing in her memoir. While describing her own sexual abuse in *Hunger*, Gay’s words work to make readers feel uncomfortable. I argue that throughout the memoir, Gay employs the words she uses to describe her initial trauma as a way to describe the rest of her life experience. As a result, she creates trauma language that draws attention to several social issues in America while also illuminating how trauma affects people. Scholars also note that the writing style Gay uses in her fiction, briefly highlighted by Edwards, appears in her non-fiction as well. Marlowe Daly-Galeano’s “Louisa May Alcott’s Unruly Medical Women,” uses Gay’s writing to build on the concept of unruly women. Daly-Galeano’s article does not detail Gay’s language, but it does bring Gay’s nonfiction into a conversation about women’s bodies. The connection between Gay’s nonfiction and “unregulated bodies” (61) allows for a subtle comparison between bodies that are “too strong, too fat, too shrill, and too pregnant” (61) and Gay’s body, which is not only deemed too fat, but also too tall, too Black, and at times, too queer. Gay’s body, as well as the aforementioned women’s bodies, are unruly, and thus are grounds for discrimination and trauma.

Bringing Gay’s fiction work into the scholarly conversation around her memoir may seem irrelevant; however, the importance of her fiction work in this thesis presents itself in the similarities between it and the narratives she writes regarding her own life. Themes of rape, fear, and grief are weaved throughout several of her fiction pieces. It is no coincidence that her memoir tackles some of the same things. Of her memoir, Gay argues that setting out to write this

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<sup>3</sup> This quote comes from Anna Julia Cooper’s *A Voice From the South*.

memoir was the “most difficult writing experience” of her life (302). It could be said that confronting these themes in works of fiction before doing so in her own memoir is a form of protection or a way to explore the pain that comes with covering these themes before publicly applying them to herself. Her fiction and non-fiction share similar themes because they are written by the same person, yes, but also because writing something traumatic about a fictional character is different and less painful than writing the same thing about oneself for the public to see. I include references to scholarship on Gay’s fiction at this moment in my opening chapter because her fiction serves as a point of connection between the scholarly conversation of the Roxane Gay as presented in her memoir and the conversation of understandably similar her fiction.

In discussions of Gay’s nonfiction, her specific word usage becomes an important point of focus. It is safe to assume that an author’s words are important when analyzing their work but Gay’s diction and tone in *Hunger* are especially important for Natasha Behl. In “Mapping Movements and Motivations: An Autoethnographic Analysis of Racial, Gendered, and Epistemic Violence in Academia,” Behl details her own ethnographic experience in which she leans “into [her] own brokenness” in hopes to “reveal multiple forms of violence - racial, gendered, and epistemic - within political science... [and provide] some insight in the difficulty of diversifying the discipline (86). While on this autoethnographic journey, she uses Gay’s language to give words to a feeling she cannot alone describe. To comment on sexual assault and rape, she says, “In the words of Roxane Gay (2016), ‘I don’t know how to believe that change is possible when there is so much evidence to the contrary. I don’t know how to feel that my life matters when there is so much evidence to the contrary’” (94) to describe other peoples’ trauma. This quotation, along with one more from Gay’s 2016 “Alton Sterling and When Black Lives Stop

Mattering” that reads “horrified and brought to tears” (94) are the only words from Gay that appear in Behl’s article. In an area where her own trauma language was not enough, Behl uses Gays. Behl’s reliance on Gay’s words instead of her own in one very specific part of her article reveals the traumatic nature and power of Gay’s language.

While what I have discussed thus far is in reference to Gay’s fiction and non-fiction that is not *Hunger*, scholars have engaged in discussions of *Hunger* and Gay’s use of language. For example, Tracy Strauss discusses Gay’s *Hunger* directly, if very briefly. She uses an excerpt from Gay’s text describing her rape to highlight the “safety net” (33) Gay installs for herself and for her readers before having to write and read the specific nature of her rape. Strauss then says, “sometimes the adage “less is more” is key. Showering readers with graphic details can flood their minds; it can feel like too much to bear, too painful or horrifying to read further” (33). Strauss seems to applaud Gay’s description of her sexual trauma for being conservative and gentle so as not to deter the reader. While Gay’s description of her trauma is powerful and careful, it is not gentle. The words she uses explicitly explain the details of her rape, and they color the remainder of her text. Her language here is important; it works to interrogate the way the specifics of rape or sexual abuse are often tip-toed around as a means to coddle the reader, effectively serving her readers more than deploying a “safety net” would.

Gay’s language does serve as a reminder of the horrible commonality of rape, but it does much more than that. It positions her memoir, as well as others like it, as teaching tools while also serving as x’s on a map of the trauma experienced by a fat Black woman in America. Coming closer to the significance of Gay’s language, Leigh Gilmore writes about *Hunger* and its connection with trauma and grief, and the words and structure Gay uses in her memoir. Beginning with the memoir’s title, Gilmore describes the parenthesis in the title as “[visual]

signals [of] the fortress around the self that her body represents” (682). Gilmore explains that the wording and formation of the book before the narrative begins is especially important before detailing some of the language between the books’ covers. She says, “these words [those describing Gay’s body as a cage and a fortress] recur throughout the short memoir and the repetition begins to feel purposeful. It feels insistent, but it also feels helpless” (683). Gilmore posits that Gay’s helpless repetition within her memoir serves as a reminder that “something terrible happened to Gay and continues to happen to women and girls every day” (683), and Gilmore is correct.

While this scholarship has helpful insight when it comes to researching the effects of Gay’s sexual abuse, I enter the academic conversation using a different approach by focusing on Gay’s use of trauma language and structure in her memoir and take it into meaningful consideration when analyzing her writing. Analyzing the language is important when looking at several of Gay’s othering characteristics. With this approach, I will be able to decipher Gay’s feelings and commentary on more than just her sexual abuse. I will be able to analyze the words she uses to describe her sexual trauma *and* grapple with why those same words, phrases, and tones occur when she writes about other moments that seem less traditionally traumatic. In *Hunger* specifically, the words Gay uses expose peoples’ fat biases and reveal cultural tensions when multiple oppressions intersect. Her words compounded with the structure of her memoir work to explain the effect trauma has had on her as a fat Black woman, and this project illuminates their power and significance. Ultimately, Gay’s “trauma language” reinforces connections, textually and structurally, between a trauma event (rape) and the everyday lived trauma of living in the world with her body as a fat Black immigrant woman.

### The Sounds and Shapes of Trauma: Chapter Previews

In my thesis, the word “trauma” will refer to both physical and emotional trauma throughout this project. With this specific definition of trauma in mind, in chapter one, I will track the words Gay uses to describe each of her traumas, as well as her everyday life. These words will be referred to as “trauma language” from this point forward, and in chapter two, I will use trauma language in conjunction with the structure of Gay’s memoir to reveal how traumas can affect fat Black women, how Gay rejects the purpose of the traditional weight-loss memoir, and why her rejection of a healing journey is powerful. Dissecting the structure and trauma language of *Hunger* will allow me to also track the physical and emotional traumas, or wounds, Gay is left with as a result of the childhood rape she experiences, the emotional trauma she inflicts on herself from her eating disorders, and excessive weight gain, the lasting effects of racism, and the trauma of several events caused by these larger wounds that she experiences.

I argue that Gay’s use of trauma language in *Hunger* critiques America’s deeply rooted negative biases toward heavy people by dispelling cultural myths about fatness. Her language reveals the unspoken cultural tensions that occur when fatness, Blackness, womanhood, and sometimes, queerness, intersect. Lastly, the trauma language and structure in Gay’s memoir exemplify the difficulties of moving through life while experiencing a “matrix of oppression” (Ward 82) after having already gone through a more traditional<sup>4</sup> traumatic experience in her childhood. More generally, considering the concepts that the language and structure of *Hunger* highlight will allow me to uncover each of the following: how trauma can consume a person, the traumatic experience of living in a fat Black body in 21st-century America, and the significance of a Black woman’s slow and disputed healing journey, which are findings a casual reading of

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<sup>4</sup> By the word “traditional,” I am referring to the experiences that people can see and therefore, accept. Traditional traumas include but are not limited to rape, the witnessing of a murder, and car accidents.

the memoir could not uncover. Analyzing the structure and language with literary analysis will allow me to draw parallels between Gay's trauma and the way she handles it, as well as why memoirs are both ultra-personal and universal texts.

This thesis consists of four chapters, the second and third being the body of my argument while the first and fourth functioning as bookends. Chapter two, "Trauma Talks: The Way Trauma Lives in Language," examines Gay's traumas specifically using the language she employs throughout her memoir. I detail the different kinds of traumas she experiences, define trauma, and label Gay's emotional and physical trauma. This chapter also organizes several of her responses to her rape as physical, emotional, or systemic trauma—or a combination of the three. In doing all this, the chapter analyzes several of Gay's traumas while arguing that each trauma communicates something larger to the conversation around rape victims and fat Black women than just Gay's personal experiences, especially when placed in conversation with Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Gay's short story "I Will Follow You," and E.L. James's *Fifty Shades Freed*.

The third chapter, "Trauma Takes Shape: The Structure of *Hunger*," focuses on the structure of Gay's memoir. I use the 88 chapters within the memoir as a focal point and argue that the structure of the memoir and the 88 chapters serve as a commentary on mainstream weight loss programs and books. The chapter also asserts that the 88 chapters could suggest a number of other things, including the fallacies of 90-day weight-loss programs as well as the dangers of them. Using the 88 chapters as a foundation, this chapter also teases out Gay's relationship with her own healing journey and positions it as a powerful commentary on the way Black women's strength and healing is regarded in America.

The final chapter, “The Conclusion,” provides background information on the reasons and inspirations of this project, reinforcing that memoirs are useful tools for classrooms because they have the potential to allow students to see themselves reflected in the texts they are assigned. The final chapter of this thesis summarizes the key points of my thesis, providing a brief summary of the arguments detailed throughout the project. Lastly, it details other ways Gay’s memoir can be taught, as well as how the information presented in this project could be expanded for further educational purposes.

Gay’s *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* details the story of her trauma, and perhaps inadvertently, her healing journey. Gay was a Black girl in America during the end of the 20th century who was already experiencing trauma because of her Blackness before she goes through several other traumas and because of her memoir, we have the opportunity to observe how her unique body goes through every part of life that a person typically goes through. We see how she has grown with and from her traumatic experience, and we see how it affects the way she eats, loves, copes, speaks, shops, and altogether moves through life. The language in this narrative will allow me to reveal the unfortunate realities of living as a fat Black woman in America through one woman's unique and deeply personal experience. More specifically and among other things, my analysis of Gay’s *Hunger* will use illuminate the long-lasting effects of several different kinds of trauma on a fat, Black, and female body, the unfair pain that comes with being on the wrong end of fat-bias, and the fallacy that health and thinness are equitable.

## CHAPTER 2

## TRAUMA TALKS: THE WAY TRAUMA LIVES IN LANGUAGE.

Trauma manifests itself in language. It creeps through the body and seeps out into the syllables we speak aloud and the words we write down. I have always been a writer. As a woman who was born into a Black body, who has experienced sexual abuse a year after a house fire, who has moved from one living situation to another around fourteen separate times, who grew up in a white town, who was dragged out of the closet, who ate herself fat, and who starved herself skinny, I am no stranger to trauma, and I know multiple jeopardy quite well. Ever since I can remember, I have kept a journal either electronically or physically. During my last year of high school, I used to write in a mauve journal with flowers on it. The patchwork on the cover says “Make a wish. Believe life is sweet,” and the inside of the journal is a classic example of the age-old phrase: do not judge a book by its cover. The words that fill the sweet, flowery book are doused with trauma. Whatever I was feeling at the end of my senior year in high school was anything but sweet.

Somewhere in the Amazon Photos app on my phone, there exists a picture of my morning activities from a day in the middle of July. In this picture, there is a blue sheet folded into quarters laid out across my driveway. On this denim-colored sheet are my shoes, a plastic cup of cheese crackers, my tablet, a copy of *The Great Gatsby*, my mauve journal, and a pink pen. That day, I wrote the following in my journal:

*“I am so fucking good at being sad. And so good at being alone.*

*I’m not suicidal, right? But everytime I’m left alone I find myself aching for a blade.*

*I can’t be that person anymore. I keep crying and I’m so tired of crying.*

*Just. Uhg.*



The only reason I don't cut myself is so I don't have to explain to people when they ask why. Isn't that sad? Or am I just looking for pity from myself.

Jonathan hasn't texted me back yet.

I can't tell if he's important to me or not."

The pain I must have been feeling at age 18 is evident in this journal entry. There seems to be a combination of different factors affecting what I wrote and the way I wrote it. I remember being alone so often in the last home I lived in before I moved to college. My mother was away at work or with her partner; my father was only at my home once a month during his most frequent spurts of visitation; my brother was away at college, and my boyfriend at the time had recently broken up with me but revealed that he still wanted to use my body for his own pleasure. Additionally, no one would teach me to drive until I was 21 so I had no way to get anywhere. I had just graduated from high school, and all of my extracurricular activities were over. I was always home alone with nothing but my thoughts, my dog, and my mom's medical-grade scalpels. As evidenced by my journal entry, I was experiencing both physical and emotional traumas. My short, sometimes fragmented sentence structure, simple word choice, and blatant self-depreciation work together to reveal that I was suffering, in one way or another, from emotional and physical trauma. The way I expressed myself in writing is part of a larger pattern of trauma language. The same is true of Gay's language and writing in *Hunger*.

In the introduction of this project, I define trauma language as the words used to describe trauma, and trauma can be defined as wounds to the physical body or mental state, and in this chapter, I discuss the language of trauma in *Hunger*. In order to discuss the language of trauma in Gay's *Hunger*, it is first necessary to simply identify each of the traumas she details. Identifying these traumas will allow for an in-depth look at what traumas can be and how they

can manifest in the body, thus creating an understanding that, less obvious traumas are often overlooked but still very present. By validating each of Gay's traumas, even the invisible ones, the extent of many of her hardships becomes clearer. Because she must experience daily traumas in addition to the unforgettable suffering from the trauma of her childhood gang rape, the language she uses to describe these happenings is deeply influenced by the revolving door of trauma she routinely walks through. To understand the reason for and power behind her language, naming and categorizing each of her traumas is essential. This task must start at the beginning of the memoir, where Gay chooses to introduce her body's "story and... history" (1).

Among other reasons, Gay's struggle with weight is significant because of its introductory position in the memoir. Given her choice to write a cyclical memoir rather than a linear autobiography, her remaining traumas detailed in the narrative are better explained categorically and in sections rather than chronologically. The categories that best align with the experiences depicted in *Hunger* are emotional trauma, systematic trauma, and physical trauma. Using my own definitions, these categories can be defined, respectively, as wounds<sup>5</sup> affecting the psyche or the mind, wounds affecting the physical body, and wounds stemming from the social system Gay lives in. Using these categories to organize and analyze Gay's traumas allows me to explain the long-lasting effects these traumas have on Gay's life. Additionally, separating her wounds into different sections will help make clear the way each event compounds or multiplies the pain of the next.

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed definition of the word "wound" as it will be used in this thesis, see the first chapter of this thesis.

This distinction between categories of trauma allows readers and literary scholars to use the telling of one woman's story to challenge American ideals, expectations, and biases in regard to trauma experienced by fat Black women.

### **Methodology**

Using trauma theorists, the concept of multiple jeopardy, and fiction and nonfiction by Black authors, this chapter explores Gay's trauma and use of trauma language to comment on considerations of what is "natural" or "normal" regarding life after sexual abuse and weight gain, while simultaneously revealing cultural biases against Black women, fat people, and victims of sexual abuse. Additionally, this chapter illuminates the specific traumas and types of traumas Gay faces and decides to share with the public in order to criticize how trauma victims are expected to navigate through life. First, I will review scientific studies on betrayal trauma to invite trauma experts into the life-writing academic conversation. Second, I will discuss psychological research on victims' different responses to sexual and/or betrayal trauma to underscore Gay's interesting but not completely uncommon response to her sexual trauma as well as some of the other traumas she faces. Third, I will discuss genre and form to highlight the differences between memoir and autobiography while arguing that Gay's choice to write a memoir was both an intentional and essential course of action to take to effectively communicate her particular narrative. Following, I categorize Gay's traumas to underline the way she suffers from multiple jeopardy before using Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to further discuss a common response to trauma: silence. I argue that such a response stems from different origins but always has a negative impact on an individual's life. Finally, I review Gay's own fiction work to compare their language to *Hunger* and to and interrogate why the causes for the way she chooses to write about violent sex or sexual abuse regardless of genre.

### Literature Review: Behavior & Being Broken by Betrayal

When discussing trauma, many scholars readily agree that trauma is an ongoing issue that people acknowledge but never fully confront throughout their lives. Where the agreement usually ends is on the question of a concrete definition of the term or on one universal kind of trauma. Some scholars argue that trauma lives in a space between the mind and the physical body, and others position trauma as a concept that can exist in several different forms and in several different parts of the body.<sup>6</sup> As a result of this ambiguity, the word “trauma” has taken on an array of different meanings and has been broken up into several sub-sections and categories. For this reason, the following section will focus on the stories and ideas of Black women who have explained their lived experiences of trauma in literature as a way to create a clear idea of what the concept of trauma is for this chapter.

Black feminist trauma theorists all agree that Blackness itself is trauma. Christina Sharpe believes that Black people “are already experiencing trauma from *their material, lived violence*” (Sharpe 89). Trauma, according to Christina Sharpe, is the lived condition of Black people in America. She argues that Black people are doubly impacted each time they experience trauma, effectively giving a definition to the word. With this argument, Sharpe makes clear that to be Black is to have trauma. Any other traumatic experience only “offers *more* trauma” (89, emphasis added) to a Black person’s life. Sharpe’s definition explains the foundation of Deborah King’s concept of multiple jeopardy. Any trauma added to the mix in addition to being Black does not just add to the pain, it multiplies it. Saidiya Hartman agrees with Sharpe by tracing the relationship between Blackness and trauma back to slavery, noting that she experiences “slavery as a wound” (215). By using the word “wound,” Hartman reveals Sharpe’s ideas about trauma:

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on these views of trauma, see *Does Stress Damage the Brain?: Understanding Trauma-related Disorders from a Mind-Body Perspective* by J. Douglass Bremner and *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel A. Van der Kolk.

that being Black, coming from slavery, is a traumatic experience in itself.<sup>7</sup> Sharpe and Hartman's stances on trauma as it relates to Blackness informs my reading of Gay's memoir. Their stance reveals the multiplicity of Gay's trauma by positioning her Blackness as a foundation that lives beneath her other wounds. Gay's gang rape happened to her when she was a child, and it was committed by a young boy who she trusted enough to keep a secret they harbored together. Instead of holding on to the secret Gay expected him to keep, he "brag[ged] to [his friends] about the [private and sexual] things he and [Gay] had done" together (42) before proceeding to rape her with his friends. The trauma stemming from Gay's childhood sexual assault is traumatic enough on its own, but it is compounded because Gay is a Black person. Later, her fatness and womanhood will multiply the already existing trauma of her Blackness and sexual assault.

### **Part One: Genre Matters**

*Hunger* is a book focused on trauma, and the trauma Gay suffers from most is the first trauma to be uncovered in her memoir: living in this world with excessive weight to carry. Gay's choice to introduce her almost life-long struggle with weight lies in life writing conventions and thus, the differences between autobiography and memoir. Memoirs are a subgenre of autobiography; they share similarities: first-person point of view; a story about one individual; a person retelling stories of their lives. Where these two genres diverge are with their origin points: autobiographies tell the whole story of an individual from birth until death, or until the moment

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<sup>7</sup> In the same chapter, Hartman details a moment where she was persuaded into silence. Silence, as will be later discussed, can be both a trauma in itself and a side effect from a separate trauma. When she wants to speak up about the "frequent clashes" (216) regarding slavery she had experienced with her colleagues, her professors inform her that she should "keep [her] mouth shut" because "no one will listen to [her]" (216). They continued by telling her that she would "learn even more by simply taking it in and writing" (217). Here, Hartman, who is doubly affected by the trauma that comes with her Blackness and that comes with her erased history, is encouraged to stay silent about seemingly small "clashes" (216) that cause her more trauma. This silence, along with the suggestion to write about her troubles instead, plants Hartman in the Black women's writing tradition.

in which they are writing their autobiography, and they progress chronologically through their lives.<sup>8</sup> Memoirs, on the other hand, do not necessarily begin with the author's birth and do not progress chronologically. These genres are similar, but they serve different purposes: memoir's purpose is to explain a certain part of an author's life, as the genre allows for an author to begin their narrative using a specific memory or moment that appropriately communicates the story they wish to tell, which may not always be the one from the start of their lives. In the case of Roxane Gay's *Hunger*, the story and the trauma of her body do not begin with her birth. It instead begins as she enters adolescence, and continues in a cyclical, rather than linear, way.

Gay introduces her trauma on the second page and second chapter of the memoir. With this chapter, Gay forces her readers to understand that *Hunger* is a story of "what [Gay's] body has endured, the weight [she] gained, and how hard it has been to both live with and lose that weight" (5). She begins by discussing her body and how the book readers are about to embark on "is not a weight-loss memoir" (4). Choosing to start the memoir of her body highlighting her weight reveals that the rape she details later in the story has arguably less present-day effect on her than her weight does. The entirety of her second chapter, which only fills about one-and-a-half pages, details what *Hunger* is going to be about. Some might describe Gay's memoir as the story of the childhood gang rape that broke her. That story is included, but it is far from the overall subject matter of the text. In fact, two chapters later, Gay reminds readers that this book is not about rape: "This book, *Hunger*, is a book about living in the world when you are not a few or even forty pounds over-weight. This is a book about living in the world when you are

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<sup>8</sup> Frederick Douglass's *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* all follow this format.

three or four hundred pounds overweight, when you are not obese or morbidly obese, but super morbidly obese” (11).

Though not the focus of the memoir, Gay’s mention of her gang rape is significant because of its placement within the memoir. While the rape happened before her weight gain, Gay exercises her liberty to manipulate form within the memoir genre and chooses to mention it afterward. This choice in placement does not communicate that one trauma is more important than the other, but that one trauma that happened in the past is the catalyst for another trauma actively affecting Gay’s day-to-day life. Since *Hunger* is not the story of her rape, it is not the trauma that is most illuminated. Several pages before detailing the rape, Gay briefly alludes to it as an explanation for her body. After telling readers that she is unsure how “things got so out of control” (13), she backtracks and realizes that she does. She says, “losing control of my body was a matter of accretion.... Some boys destroyed me.... so I ate because I thought that if my body became repulsive, I could keep men away” (13). Her rape is a physical and emotional trauma that sets the tone for much of the rest of her life and the entirety of her memoir. It is worth mentioning that Gay’s loss of control over her body is also a form of emotional trauma. Control of her body was taken from her when she was eleven years old, and she was never able to take hold of it again. The mention of her rape is brief, direct, and without any detail<sup>9</sup>: “Some boys had destroyed me [Gay]” (13), but its brevity allows the reader to assume what must have happened. Although it is equally as important as Gay’s traumatic experiences regarding her weight, her rape does not yet need to be further explained. Gay’s childhood rape may be where her body’s trauma begins, but her subsequent weight-gain is the epicenter of it.

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<sup>9</sup> The direct language Gay uses to describe rape is further discussed in the next chapter.

In addition to granting the author freedom in choosing where to start what they believe to be a story worth telling, memoirs allow for distinct changes in form. Unlike autobiographies which take a linear form from birth until death or adulthood, memoirs can move back and forth, cyclically, or linearly. In fact, memoirs are widely confused with novels because they share “many literary techniques and devices with the novel - so much so that sometimes the two are indistinguishable on the basis of internal evidence alone” (Couser 9). Gay is no stranger to this fact. She was purposeful in her choice to write a memoir rather than an autobiography because she knew the genre would allow her to begin her story where she believed it necessary to start. In an interview with John Freeman, Gay reveals her purposeful manipulation of form when she writes. In response to the question: “Who gave you permission to scramble so much with form?” (Freeman and Gay 106), Gay writes that she “gave herself permission but [she doesn’t] think permission is necessary” (106). When the interviewer reminded her that she has written “essays as lists, stories... as ledgers... essays that feel like myth [and] stories like fact” (106), Gay follows up by telling her interviewer that “each piece sort of tells [her] what form it needs to take” (106). Her knowledge of form and its potential to be manipulated points to Gay’s intentional and well-informed decision to tell the story of her body and its nearly life-long hardships as a memoir instead of an autobiography. Telling this story in a more cyclical manner allows for its happenings to be uniquely analyzed as causes, effects, or inciting moments for other traumatic events in Gay’s life. Telling the story in a linear way would force Gay’s trauma and the “problem of [her] body” (75) to be explained chronologically, which does not best describe the way her life has progressed.

### **The Black Girl Body: A Triad of Trauma**

Gay discusses the horrors of what happens to the girl body in several different places throughout her memoir. As a Black girl, Gay experiences certain traumas just because she is a



Black girl. Sexism, misogyny, and racism are constant forces that are woven through her life experiences and that compound Gay's already existing traumatic experiences. The traumas I explain and analyze under this section are categorized as physical, emotional, and systematic because of their foundation in racism and sexism.

One of the most prevalent traumas Gay mentions is her rape, which unlike her fatness, is immediately recognizable as both physical and emotional trauma to most American people. It does not need to be brought to light or identified as both an emotional and physical trauma, as it is widely understood to be inherently painful in several ways. In Gay's case specifically, the gang rape is also traumatic in a systemic way. Gay was born into a Black girl body, and Black girls are routinely adultified or affected by the "extent to which race and gender, taken together, influence our perception of Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers" (Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez 2). Even though Gay and her rapist, Christopher, were children, the fact that 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" (Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez 4) cannot be overlooked. Child or not, Christopher saw her as someone who would engage in activities meant for older women. When she did not cooperate with his narrative of her, he forced himself inside of her. This erasure of Gay's childhood is not uncommon for girls who look like her. Black girls have had their youths stripped away from them for centuries in a variety of different ways, and they do not end with rape. Further, the story of a loss of her girlhood as told by the adult Gay adds an interesting layer to the way scholars are able to read the memoir. Like when Frederick Douglass explains seeing the beating and lashing of his Aunt Hester through his childhood eyes in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Gay tells her readers a heart-wrenching story of her childhood as an adult. This pushes readers to recall

their own childhoods and engage with the story as if it is being experienced by a child (as it is), and to consider the effect the traumatic event still has on her as an adult narrator, who is telling the story in painful sensory details decades after it has occurred.

Gay's second run-in with systemic trauma comes in the form of medical inequity. Medical inequity is introduced fairly early within the memoir and persists as the memoir continues, compounding the trauma she experiences when she is a child at Exeter High School. She begins to experience severe discomfort in her lower abdomen, so she goes to the campus infirmary for help. It is important to note that because Exeter is a boarding school, student health care would have been provided to all students equally at no extra cost. Upon arriving at the campus's health center with these abdominal pains, the staff there asked her "over and over, if [she] might be pregnant" (68), a false and ultimately, insincere, conclusion for a medical professional to come to, given the information Gay presented them with. To them, pregnancy was "the most likely problem a teenage girl could have" (68). After being raped and having her girlhood stolen from her, Gay loses her credibility when this doctor chooses not to believe her. Here, her fears of not being believed about the gangrape are recalled. She tells the truth of her body to someone who is supposed to help her, and she is rejected. Through no fault of her own but instead, the fault of a system built against her, Gay's truth is deemed false. With this moment, she is greeted with another wound stemming from centuries-old systemic theories about Black women. In *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to The Present*, Harriet A. Washington details the unjust medical treatment and medical experimentation on Black people. Washington opens with a detailed description of an artistic depiction of "powerless" (1) enslaved Black women undergoing surgery without anesthesia. Washington later mentions that problems stemming from medical inequity

between Black people and white people are still present today, revealing that the “racial health gap is not a gap, but a chasm wider and deeper than a mass grave” (20) and effectively communicating that Gay’s personal experience is a reflection of a larger and deeply rooted history of the mistreatment of Black women.

Her Blackness meant that medical professionals could ignore her pain, and her womanhood meant that if she was not willing to take pregnancy as the proper diagnosis, then there was no problem with her body. Ultimately, Gay laments, “the medical community is not particularly interested in taking the pain of women seriously” (68), highlighting the harsh reality regarding the cruelties that happen to girl bodies, regardless of race or skin color. Diane Herndl writes about this long-standing phenomenon in her 1993 book *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940*. When explaining the issues of feminine health, she asserts that physicians’ explanations for women’s declining health “were more than inconsistent; they were downright contradictory” (Herndl 21). Herndl informs readers that many doctors would, in some way or another, position sex as the root of all women’s sicknesses. Later, she writes that “today we are still unsure of the exact causes of women's ill health during the nineteenth century” (Herndl 21). Herndl’s point that sex was often used as the catch-all for all women’s health issues echoes Gay’s assertion that the medical community is not now invested in helping women to be healthy. They were then and are now much more interested in a point of blame that they did not have to deal with. This realization only adds to the trauma Gay experiences several years earlier. It reinforces the truth that she and her body have been, and will likely continue to be, stripped of the respect, care, and compassion she and it deserve.

While still at Exeter where the typical student “came from families who harbored generations of wealth, fame, and/or infamy” (61), Gay experiences yet another systemic trauma

because of her Blackness. The students there “assumed that all black students attended Exeter by the grace of financial aid and white benevolence” (62). Here, Gay highlights systemic racism by pointing out the narrative wealthy white people believe about Black people. She also illuminates how white people’s behavior in these kinds of situations can be traumatic. Her white peers perpetuated the isolation Gay already felt consumed by which becomes clear after Gay details that her peers “only grudgingly accepted [her] into their social circles because [she] didn’t fit their assumed narrative about blackness” (62). The trauma Gay experiences here is rooted in deep-seated beliefs about racism and is something she experiences regardless of her rape and weight. The trauma of her Blackness systemic and is inextricably connected to the physical and emotional trauma of weight-gain because Gay is driven to remedy the pain from being isolated for her race by finding her only friend in food.

### **Emotional Trauma: The Side Effects of Silence**

Though Gay experiences a triad of trauma, it is important to note that a prominent part of Gay’s trauma is her silence. Her silence acts as its own form of emotional trauma as well as an effect from the physical and emotional trauma of her rape. In the context of her life, silence is an emotional trauma that wounds her psyche and has a direct effect on the way she trusts and navigates through the world from the time of her rape until she is well into her adulthood. Like many rape victims, she chooses not to discuss the trauma<sup>10</sup> that comes with it and instead allows the truth of her body to fester, eventually sickening her from the inside out.

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<sup>10</sup> Charlotte Pierce-Baker, in her book *Surviving the Silence: Black Women’s Stories of Rape*, collects and anthologizes the stories of several Black women who were raped and who chose silence for several years following their trauma. Additionally, in their article “Rape Trauma Syndrome,” authors Ann Wolbert Burgess and Lynda Lytle Holmstrom explore the measure needed to help rape victims who choose to stay silent.

Later, Gay details the silence that overcame her after her rape. After being raped, Gay felt that she could not disclose the sexual crime to her parents, writing that the rape stripped her of her goodness, her femininity, and her faith, but she wanted to continue pleasing her parents so they could keep thinking she was “the good girl [her] parents” (47) thought her to be. She “knew, in [her] soul, that what those boys did to [her] had to stay secret” (46), so she decided to stay silent out of “fear of what [her parents] might say and do and think” (47) to her and of her. Here, Gay’s choice to give up her voice as a way to remain “good” in her parent’s eyes actively pains her. It serves as a constant reminder of her violent rape, and of the fear she harbored that her parents “would discard [her] like the trash [she] knew [her]self to be” (47). Gay’s silence not only perpetuates the trauma of her rape, but it acts as a trauma itself. The decision Gay made as a 12-year-old to commit to “fearful silence” is something that “cannot be undone” (47), and that creates an everlasting emotional wound that only begins to heal when she rids herself of her silence and writes a memoir and regains her narrative authority.

For some, the choice to tell people what happened may seem obvious. In fact, many people criticize girls and women for choosing not to tell anyone about their sexual abuse until much later, or sometimes, at all.<sup>11</sup> The events immediately following Gay’s rape led her to believe that the “he said/she said” that routinely stems from sexual abuse cases “is why so many victims... don’t come forward” (45). She explains the reason someone might stay quiet: “all too often, what ‘he said’ matters more. So [victims] just swallow the truth” which “turns rancid... [and] spreads through the body like an infection” (45). Gay’s comparison between the truth and a

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<sup>11</sup> For further reading, see “Deciding Whom to Tell: Expectations and Outcomes of Rape Survivors’ First Disclosures” by Courtney E. Ahrens and Rebecca Campbell; “Assessing the Impact of Acquaintance Rape” by Sara M Guerette and Sandra L. Caron, and “Being Silenced: The Impact of Negative Social Reactions on the Disclosure of Rape” by Courtney E. Ahrens.

rancid disease emphasizes how difficult it can be to come forward after sexual abuse, and it scrutinizes the widely held belief that victims have no reason not to immediately share the truth of their abuse. Tarana Burke, founder of The #MeToo.<sup>12</sup> Movement, details an important experience regarding sharing stories of sexual abuse. She details a time when a young girl wanted to share her story of sexual abuse with an adult she trusted. Burke writes that she listened to the girl's story "until I literally could not take it anymore" and then "right in the middle of Heaven [the young girl] sharing her pain with me, I cut off this little girl's story and directed her to another female counselor who I believed could "help her better"" (Burke). While this moment is the fire that ignites The #MeToo. Movement, it is also a painful example of how difficult it can be to share a story of sexual abuse *and* to hear one. Gay's descriptions in this part of her memoir in tandem with Burke's experience pull back the curtain and push readers to realize that telling parents, peers, teachers, or anyone else is not only difficult, but it is a choice that opens a door for the truth to come out and still not matter.

In order to deepen Gay's memoir in the tradition of Black women's writers, it is essential to discuss another important author of Black life-writing who experiences sexual trauma: Maya Angelou. The two authors are certainly important parts of the same tradition, but Angelou paints a completely different picture than Gay. In her 1969 memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou details the experiences of her encounter with sexual abuse committed by a man she trusted, Mr. Freeman. Like Gay, Angelou decides that she will not tell anyone about her childhood rape out of a combination of fear and shame, but her story differs from Gay's when Angelou's brother finds the stained underwear Angelou was forced to put back on after the rape. He tells her that she has "to tell who did that to [her], or the man would hurt another little girl"

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<sup>12</sup> A movement working to end sexual violence.

(83). She does, and Mr. Freeman is soon arrested. After a trial during which she feels forced to lie at the stand, Mr. Freeman is found “kicked to death” (Angelou 86). Angelou believes that her lie, her words said during the trial are what took Mr. Freeman’s life away. As a result, she chooses to commit to silence, figuring that if she refused to speak, she would not be able to hurt anyone else: “if I talked to anyone else that person might die too. Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they’d curl up and die” (Angelou 87). Gay, on the other hand, stayed “shattered and silent” after her rape (Gay 46) because she knew that her “no did not matter” (56) and figured that all of her other words were useless, too. Here, Angelou and Gay possess a different version of narrative power. Even though she is fearful and consumed with shame, Angelou believes that her words are too strong and chooses to stifle them for a large part of her childhood. She has too much narrative power. Gay, on the other hand, knows that she does not have any. As a result, they both choose silence and avoid any additional shame that might come from the consequences of using their voices.

After learning how undervalued her girlhood is, Gay spends another part of her childhood gaining knowledge of how undervalued her voice is. During the summer of her sophomore year in high school, Gay’s parents send her to a weight loss camp to remedy the “problem of her body” (75). Gay did not want to go to the deceptively “picturesque” (75) Kingsmont fitness and weight loss camp, but she had also already “learned the lesson that saying no meant nothing” (75), so she went anyway because her parents were “determined to make [her] lose weight by any means necessary” (75). The language used here, “determined to make,” points to a forcefulness that Gay is all too familiar with. While the act of going to a camp to learn what is advertised as a healthy lifestyle change is not necessarily inherently traumatic, this particular moment in Gay’s life serves as a reminder of a sad certainty that she already knew: she “did not

have much say in the matter” (75). Her forced entree into this camp reopens one of her already existing invisible wounds: the fact that there is no power in her voice.

Both Gay and Angelou forfeit their voices to silence, but they do so for different reasons. Gay committed to silence because she knew all too well that her words had no effect on what would happen next. Whether she said yes or no, she knew that the outcome of the following events would not change. Her words had no power, no leverage, so her silence originated from passivity, helplessness, and defeat. Angelou’s commitment to silence came from a place of caution. She believed that her words ended someone’s life and that if she had not used them in the way that she did, no one would have died. The direct contrast between the ways in which Gay and Angelou respond to their traumas both exemplifies that victims of similar traumas can have vastly different and valid responses to said traumas. This comparison points to the power of the voice, which then highlights the dangers of silence and perceived dangers of Black women’s voices.

The dangers of losing the voice and its power are clear in both Gay’s and Angelou’s life writing. Angelou’s refusal to speak sometimes resulted in her physical harm and a lack of societal acceptance and Gay’s silence led to an unhealthy relationship with boundaries across several aspects of her life. Eventually, the silence they each commit to becomes so unbearable that they have to reintroduce the power of their voices into their lives. From a different trusted adult named Mrs. Flowers, Angelou learns why silence is not beneficial to anyone. Mrs. Flowers says to her that “words mean more than what is set out on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning” (Angelou 98). Gay, on the other hand, “chooses no longer to be silent” (Gay 23) because she now knows that her story both “demands to be told and deserves to be heard” (Gay 5). These two authors reclaim their voices, their power, through



their memoirs. They each write their stories and verbally narrate<sup>13</sup> them, effectively setting themselves free from the dangers of silence.

### **Language as A Tool**

Each of the traumas detailed thus far all work together to create the language of trauma Gay uses to describe her life. She experiences painful and damaging experiences before adulthood and before she has the language to give words to her pain. When she is in high school, a combination of online chat groups and her school counselor introduce her to the “vocabulary for what [she] had been through” (70), but by then, her language had already been irretrievably damaged by countless traumatic experiences. From this point forward, Gay will learn how to put language to what she has been feeling recently and to what she experienced as a child, but it will be colored by each of the wounds she must constantly carry with her.

This language of trauma begins at the very start of the memoir. She writes she was “certain the words would come easily” (4) but learns that they would not. Writing this memoir demanded that she “cut [her] self wide open” and share “the ugliest, weakest, barest parts” (5) of herself. Gay could have easily written that writing *Hunger* was difficult because she had to be vulnerable. That is, after all, the message she communicates with the words she does use. Using the phrase “cut... wide open” (5) creates an image in the reader’s mind of Gay, splayed out on a table with her flesh coming apart from the middle. Dissected. Examined. Probed. This imagery sets the tone for the information to come in the rest of the memoir, and it pushes readers to see the memoir for what it is: a self-performed autopsy. The pain the following pages caused as she wrote them and as she experienced them “split” her and her life “in two, cleaved not so neatly”

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<sup>13</sup> *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* are narrated by the authors.

(14). This violent and messy procedure exemplifies Gay's expert writing, but it also forces readers to question the effects of trauma throughout the memoir. Gay's choice to candidly display her insides grants readers access to the misfortune it is to live with a life and in a body that has been infected with traumas in a world that continuously belittles her for her race, weight, and gender, ignoring the story of her body. Much like an autopsy report, which details the victim's cause of death and reveals the results of any post-mortem tests, Gay's memoir combs through each of the traumas that lead to her own metaphorical death (246).

When Gay describes the details of her rape, the use of trauma language is almost overwhelming as it reveals the truth of the emotional, physical, and systemic traumas that happen to girl bodies all too often. When detailing her rape, she writes, "I was splayed out in front of his friends. I wasn't a girl to them. I was a thing, flesh and girl bones" (42). This description of her body further dehumanizes Gay's young Black girl body. It replaces her livelihood with a boy's plaything. Her body was "splayed out" (42) as it would be on a surgeon's table. In some ways, these words compare Christopher, one rapist, to a doctor with a scalpel and the power to split her body wide open. Likening Christopher to a doctor causes the reader to recall Gay's experience with medical professionals thus far, which are almost exclusively filled with medical professionals who never wanted to help her. Referring to medical professionals who have no interest in helping her recalls the long-standing tradition of Black lives being undervalued and mistreated in medical spaces.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Gay's word choice: "splayed out" is also a term used in erotic literature to describe a body during consensual sex, as is the case in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* Trilogy where Ana recalls "'Oh my ... I am sitting up, splayed out on the sofa, legs spread wide.'" Ana's partner, Christian Grey "softly" asks her "[Is this] Okay?," while

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<sup>14</sup> The medical mistreatment of Black people is further discussed earlier in this chapter.

“gazing down at me from behind the sofa,” and Ana “nod[s]” (James 396). The use of this term may ask the reader to consider the power of consent, something she was not given the opportunity to grant. It causes readers to stop and ponder over the power of the word within each of these contexts, as one experience is seemingly consensual, and the other is forced. Here, Gay is pushing readers to realize that similar scenarios could have different outcomes if consent is only present in one of them. While the use of the phrase “splayed out” could push readers to this conclusion, it also brings Gay’s essay “The Trouble with Prince Charming” to mind. In this essay, Gay shares her thoughts on the *Fifty Shades* books, which include E. L. James’ dangerous carelessness in her portrayal of the BDSM lifestyle, as well as the disillusioned relationship Christian and Ana have with each other. In short, she asserts that Christian is controlling over Ana and jealous over any contact she has with another man. She goes on to say that he “uses sex as a weapon” and “takes real pleasure in fucking her into submission when he cannot otherwise will her into submission” (Gay 203). Gay’s reference to this book and therefore, to this essay about it, suggest that like Christian, Christopher (and, perhaps it is no coincidence that Gay’s alias for Christopher is reminiscent of this character she obviously takes issue with) is a selfish and violent boy who hurts his victims and tricks them into returning to him. Recalling the *Fifty Shades* trilogy in her memoir asks the reader to understand the torture she and so many other women endured, as well as the power Christopher had over her helpless body. The way Gay writes about her rapist using the phrase “splayed out” (42) simultaneously calls back to the moment when she writes that her body was “cut... wide open” (5) as she wrote this memoir, and thus, demands that the reader recall how difficult telling the story of her rape was for her and is for so many other victims across the world. Using this phrase to explain the difficulty of her

writing process asks readers to question their own assumptions of how people are to handle the aftermath of being sexually abused.

Gay then uses very direct language to describe the remainder of the rape without metaphors, descriptive language, analogies, or euphemisms. Here, trauma language presents itself in the absence of such descriptors, and it challenges the way rape is usually described in texts or other forms of media. For example, in a magazine entry, Stacey Strauss discusses her reasoning for vaguely alluding to the fact that her father sexually abused her: “my father bent forward, leaning his tanned arms across his thighs and folding his hands between his knees. He said he’d dispense the funds, but I had to give him something in exchange” because “less is more” (Strauss 33) when it comes to describing trauma. In direct contrast, Gay writes that her rapist “just unzipped his jeans and knelt between [her] legs and shoved himself inside of [her]” (Gay 43). When he was finished with the object he treated her body as, he “switched places with the boy who was holding [Gay’s] arms down” (Gay 43) so his friend could have a turn with Gay’s body while he “refused to look at [her].... spat on [her] face.... [and] laughed” (Gay 43). The lack of literary devices and direct language is also influenced by trauma. This language reflects Gay’s reality during the rape and during her writing process. There was no room for decorative language. There was only pain, brokenness, and the harsh truth that girl bodies are thrown around like things instead of vessels for life. These completely candid descriptions reflect Gay’s lived experience while also commenting on the horrible truths of childhood rape and quietly criticizing the way rape is written about.

Gay’s avoidance of ornate language when describing violent sexual abuse persists in her fiction writing as well. In her short story “I Will Follow You,” Gay writes in a slightly different way but maintains her direct language. Here, she chooses to use direct language but stays away

from the word “rape.” Since she is telling a story with two fictional characters who experience sexual abuse, she is able to use their actions, mannerisms, and dialogue to communicate to the reader what has happened to these characters. Rather than plainly stating that the two sisters were raped, she writes that the man who abuses the main characters wants for both girls to be his “friends” (Gay 15) as the two girls refuse to look away from each other “no matter what [those men] did to [them]” (Gay 15). While she does not call it rape, she also avoids dancing around the truth of the matter. The dialogue and action of the story point to the way Gay feels rape and violent sex should be written about: clearly and in a way that makes the reader uncomfortable. In fact, in an article from 2011 entitled “The Careless Language of Casual Violence,” Gay writes that rape and violent sex should be written in a particular way in order to be fair to the victim or to the one being treated violently. In response to a report of a young girl’s rape written by James McKinley Jr and published by *The New York Times* that treats the place of the rape as more of a victim as the girl she says,

I would suggest we need to find new ways, whether in fiction or creative nonfiction or journalism, for not only rereading rape but rewriting rape as well, ways of rewriting that restore the actual violence to these crimes and that make it impossible for men to be excused for committing atrocities and that make it impossible for articles like McKinley’s to be written, to be published, to be considered acceptable. (6)

Gay’s choice to write and publish this essay makes clear her stances on the ways rape and sexual violations should be written about and published. She goes on to fix McKinley’s article entitled “Vicious Assault Shakes Texas Town”, writing that “An eleven-year-old girl was raped by eighteen men. The suspects ranged in age from middle-schoolers to a 27-year-old. There are

pictures and videos. Her life will never be the same” (7), before continuing to further call attention to the effects of careless language: “*The New York Times*, however, would like you to worry about those boys, who will have to live with this for the rest of their lives. That is not simply the careless language of violence. It is the criminal language of violence (7). Since the publication of Gay’s essay, *The New York Times* has changed the name of the webpage to: “Gang Rape of Schoolgirl, and Arrests, Shake Texas Town” but the name and publication of the original article remain the same. When people use flowery language, metaphors, and unclear analogies to describe rape, it undermines the truth of what happened. Rape is neither flowery, metaphorical, or unclear. Referring to it using terms like these releases those responsible from appropriate blame and it silences those with stories to tell. Gay’s clear, abrupt, and uncomfortable language surrounding rape in her memoir places responsibility where necessary and it gives a voice back to the victim of the crime, herself. She says it would be “easier to use detached language like “assault or “violation” or “incident” than it is to come out and say that when I was twelve years old, I was gang-raped by a boy I thought I loved” (41), but she knows speaking about her rape that way would strip Christopher of the responsibility and take language away from other victims. Gay rightfully feels strongly about the language used to describe rape, whether that language appears published in fiction, creative nonfiction, or in reputable news outlets, and is using her adult voice to make this truth known.

### **Feel It Still: Trauma Lasts A Lifetime**

Gay’s rape and the fatness that come afterward color everything else she experiences in her life and the ways she describes the happenings of her life. Her description of the rape is harsh and painful, and the way she explains many other things throughout the memoir share the same characteristics. After her sexual abuse, Gay falls into a dangerous relationship with food as a coping mechanism meant to heal her existing wounds from sexual abuse. Instead, she remains

broken from her original trauma while setting herself up with a new trauma that comes with its own bag of torment. Her rape and subsequent weight gain position her on the receiving end for several new and different wounds throughout the remainder of her memoir. Additionally, her descriptions of the events to come after her experience with rape call attention to the compounded and unfair treatment and underlying bias America has against fat Black women, who are, arguably, victims of physical, systemic, and emotional trauma based on their inherent otherness and multiple jeopardy in American society.

## CHAPTER 3.

## TRAUMA TAKES SHAPE: THE STRUCTURE OF HUNGER.

The last time I wanted to hurt myself was on the drive home from a graduate seminar I visited in March of my last year in graduate school. I had a bad day. I was completely overwhelmed, and it felt like I would never be able to get enough breath into my body. I thought if I opened my skin up, just a little, then maybe oxygen would pour into my veins and I could breathe again. I did not take a knife to my arm that night. I did not even seriously consider it, but the thought was still there. I still hurt all the time. I have not healed from all the wounds leading up to my 5-year stint of self-harm. In fact, I have blatantly ignored many of them until recently. I am not better, and I have not been actively working to get better, but I can see that I am moving, however slowly, further away from who I was.

Roxane Gay, at the end of her memoir, says “I am as healed as I am ever going to be” (302), but the memoir’s structure and content (as well as the living text on her Twitter account, and several post-*Hunger* publications), suggest otherwise. While *Hunger* certainly focuses on the overwhelming traumas of violent sexual abuse and living life in a fat Black body, it is also a memoir about healing, which “is not a destination, but a journey” as Tarana Burke asserts (Burke). Like myself and anyone else who suffers from trauma, Gay is not healed but she is getting better. She will never be completely absolved from all that has hurt her. She will still move through life knowing that her traumas could resurface. She is simply moving forward and learning to love herself. Her decision to be “as healed as [she] is ever going to be” (302) is not an acknowledgment that there is nothing more for her to do to continue becoming whole because she *does* do more, as I will discuss later in this chapter. This assertion is powerful and honest but it almost undermines the (intentional or otherwise) work that Gay does to come closer to loving



herself both in *Hunger* and in other works and moments after its publication. As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, Gay has several wounds, including her gang rape, her relationship with food, and her feelings toward “the problem of [her] body” (75). Gay’s purpose in writing her memoir is clear: “I wrote this book because it felt necessary. In writing the memoir of my body, I am sharing my truth and mine alone.... I am also saying, here is my heart, what’s left of it” (303). Though Gay writes with intent to share a truth, *Hunger* functions as a prolonged moment of scriptotherapy or a “life-writing project [that] generates a healing narrative that temporarily restores the fragmented self to an empowered position of psychological agency” (McQuail 6). By the end of *Hunger*, she “no longer need[s] the body fortress [she] built” and she admits that she “need[s] to tear down some of the walls.... for [her] and [her] alone” (303).

There is power in the declaration that she is “as healed as she is ever going to be” (303): *Hunger* is not only the story of Gay’s fatness in a world that will not accept her, but it is also the unfinished or stalled healing journey of a woman who refuses to continue healing. Here, healing should be understood as something closer to a continuous and daily practice rather than something that is ever truly complete. Gay is “not the same scared girl that [she] was” and she is “learning to care less what other people think” (303), but the significance of her choice to stay broken, to “accept that [she] will never be the girl [she] could have been if, if, if,” and to “never forgive the boys who raped [her]” (302) cannot be ignored. Her closing declaration speaks to the complex concepts of health and healing as a Black woman in America, painting a picture of what it is to be a victimized fat Black woman, subverting both weight loss narratives and the Strong Black Woman archetype.

Arguably, Gay unintentionally sets herself up for a healing journey when she decided to write a book about suffering, participating in a Black feminist writing tradition. Alice Walker

once remarked, “writing is... a matter of necessity... so far [writing] has been a very sturdy ladder out of the pit” (qtd. in DeSalvo 8) to describe how valuable the act of writing can be when the need to heal presents itself. In “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” hooks writes that “we [women] can create feminist theory, a feminist practice, a revolutionary feminist movement that can speak directly to the pain that is within folks, and offer them healing works, healing strategies, healing theory” (hooks 12). hooks’ connection of theory to help heal pain goes hand in hand with Walker’s belief that writing works to heal. This truth is exemplified in memoirs by both Maya Angelou and Janet Mock. Both of these Black women experience sexual trauma and choose to publish a first-person account of their experiences. This act alone, the writing of the trauma in their own words and as they remember it, gives agency back to the victim and works to further them on their healing journey. In a way, writing is a coping mechanism that aids the author in moving forward with control of their past instead of moving away from it. Each of the practices hooks mentions supplies the author, the thinker, the theorizer, with the necessary tools to take their trauma into their own hands and understand it enough to “name” the pain and make “all” or at least some of the “hurt go away” (hooks 12). Thus, Gay arguably takes the power back from those boys who ruined her in the woods as a young girl and uses it to come to terms with the way she reacted, as well as the way she now lives in this world. Gay’s participation in the long-standing tradition of Black life-writing does not change the past or “deny what [victims have] experienced” (DeSalvo 11). Instead, like Angelou and Mock who reclaimed their agency through participating in the Black women’s writing tradition, Gay’s choice to write her trauma out on the page allows for a shift in perspectives and thus, the ability for her to reclaim the power stolen from her as a child. Through writing her memoir, which was “the most difficult thing [she]

has ever done” (303), Gay deepens her connection in the tradition of Black women’s writing and takes back the agency over her voice and body.

This Black feminist writing tradition is important for understanding Gay’s writing. Because she chooses to silence herself after her rape and engage in several coping mechanisms including, but certainly not limited to “turn[ing] to food” because it “offered immediate satisfaction” (53), “develop[ing] a pack-a-day [cigarette] habit” (78), or “dating women who couldn’t give [her] what [she] wanted, who couldn’t possibly love [her] enough because [she] was a gaping wound of need” (235), she was never given the opportunity to heal from the trauma of her gang-rape or the corresponding traumas that came after it. Writing allows that. As she writes her memoir and goes to 88, but not 90 chapters, she forces herself to recall detailed memories of her past, and thus experience each of those emotional, physical, and systemic traumas over again. As she realized she was writing a memoir of her body, she found that she was simultaneously “forcing [herself] to look at what [her] body has endured, the weight [she] gained, and how hard it has been to both live with and lose that weight,” as well as making herself “look at [her] guiltiest secrets” (5). The process of writing and reflecting on these traumas effectively reopens wounds that were previously closed but not healed and grants Gay with some of the time and distance it takes to work to properly heal from these hardships.

From the outset, Gay establishes that *Hunger* “is not a weight-loss memoir” (9). Unlike other memoirs focused on weight-loss,<sup>15</sup> Gay does not position her weight as a problem that will

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<sup>15</sup> Often, literature published on weight-loss perpetuates the idea that fatness is something to heal from and that it should be done with haste. A plethora of memoirs focusing on weight, especially those written by women, feature photographs of the authors standing in one leg of the jeans that used to fit their bodies and grinning from ear to ear. The covers of these kinds of books signal to the reader that they will be more about the weight-loss and the required subsequent happiness the author experiences and less about the trauma from living in a fat body they are likely still working to overcome. These authors may mean well, but their books work to further the idea that self-worth and health go hand-in-hand with thinness.

be solved by the time the readers reach the back cover of the book. She does situate her weight or her body as a socially constructed problem, but not one that needs to be solved. The focus of her memoir is not to solve any problem related to her body; however, it is meant to solve or at least bring light to the society that values weight-loss over general wellness. Gay knows that her body is not the problem and her memoir, in part, is meant to criticize the society that thinks it is. Her story works to dismantle the narrative other pieces of literature regarding weight-loss work so hard to uphold. With *Hunger*, Gay subverts the traditional purpose of a weight-loss memoir to draw attention that the systems created by society are the problem, not the body she lives in. Therefore, this chapter interrogates the structure of *Hunger* to suggest that the 88 chapters of the memoir are a significant factor when detailing her healing journey in that they act as an incomplete version of the 90-day journey so often recommended or required of other mainstream health programs. Positioning this memoir as an unfinished version of a 90-day health or weight-loss plan attacks the validity and purpose of traditional weight-loss memoirs and diet-plans and reveals Gay's refusal to participate in such a dangerous trope, much like she refuses to dance around the subject of rape because society so often deems the subject as something to be hidden and ashamed of. Using the structure of this memoir as a commentary on fatness and trauma in America also allows for the analysis of Gay's story within the Black women's writing tradition, which brings the compounded layer of fatness to the already existing traumas of Blackness, womanhood, and sexual abuse to the tradition. This chapter will position Gay's outright refusal

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For instance, Rosemary Green's *Diary of a Fat Housewife* claims to be a refreshingly honest and humorous take on weight-loss meant to inspire those wanting to lose weight. Instead, it is a book full of self-loathing, fat phobia, and fat bias written by a woman who becomes thin by the end. Alternatively, Jennette Fulda's *Half-Assed: A Weight-Loss Memoir* is clearly rooted in acceptance but still ends with a thin person fearing another weight-gain cycle. The thin woman at the end of the book both implies that the author still nervously participates in diet culture and operates with a fat bias and suggests that a journey toward health and acceptance is over once thinness is achieved.

to claim survivor status from her several wounds as a critique of the unrealistic standard Black women victims are held to after experiencing trauma in America. Lastly, this chapter will position Gay's 2018 article "What Fullness Is" as the 89th chapter to *Hunger*, suggesting that her healing journey continues after she has declared it finished.

### **88 Chapters, But Healing Ain't One**

The completion of the memoir at 88 chapters and an un-healed Gay at the end of *Hunger* rejects weight-loss memoir as a genre and questions the validity behind the idea that weight loss equates to health and therefore, happiness. It does not. As previously mentioned, the word "healing" in this thesis refers to holistic healing, meaning that weight loss in no way signals the completion of a healing journey. Many have the common misconception that weight loss will solve all problems. In fact, one of the participants in Jim Karas' 90-day weight loss program asserts that a 12-pound decrease in her weight would make her "the happiest girl in the world," (Funderberg) as if weight loss is the only thing keeping her from complete euphoria. Programs like the ones Karas is running, like other weight-loss products and advertisements, "encourage self-loathing" (Gay 135) by positioning happiness as just a work-out plan, weight-loss product, or diet-food away. In Gay's experience, when presented with these deceptively simple paths to happiness, "women swoon at the possibility of satisfying their hunger with somewhat repulsive foods while also maintaining an appropriately slim figure" (135). She goes on to say that "it is a powerful lie to equate thinness with self-worth" (135). To illustrate this point, Gay references Jennifer Hudson's history with the popular (and problematic) weight-loss program, Weight Watchers. Gay details one of Hudson's Weight Watchers commercials in which Hudson "shrieks about her newfound happiness and how, through weight-loss - not, say, winning Oscar - she achieved success" (136). This commercial is just one of several moments that dangerously "equate happiness with thinness and, by the law of inverse, obesity with misery" (136). This

equation hurts its target audience by positioning the desire for weight-loss as a “default feature of womanhood” (137), which communicates that a woman must either be thin or crave thinness to be happy and healthy.

To further demonstrate the dangers of the idea that thinness is equitable to health and happiness, Gay details and takes issue with Oprah Winfrey’s public history with losing and gaining weight, which is woven throughout her now 5-year long Weight Watchers endorsement and 40-million-dollar investment in the company (138). According to Gay, Winfrey promoted Weight Watchers in a commercial by telling the thousands of people watching that now is the time “to make this the year of our best bodies,” effectively implying “that our current bodies are not our best bodies, not by a long shot” (139). Gay’s detailing of Winfrey’s leads her to realize that “even Oprah... a billionaire and one of the most famous women in the world, isn’t happy with her body,” which illuminates just “how pervasive damaging cultural messages about unruly bodies are” (139). The significance being, Gay continues, that “even as we age, no matter what material success we achieve, we cannot be satisfied or happy unless we are also thin” (139). Here, Gay dismantles the falsehood that thinness equals satisfaction, health, or happiness. This equation only preserves the all-too-convincing lie that women need to be in a certain shaped body in order to achieve ultimate happiness, and thus, heal from all that has hurt them.

### **Progress In Parts: The Structure Of *Hunger***

When looked at as a process of healing, the structure of Gay’s memoir shares similarities with the structures of many 90-day diet plans that claim to be the answers to fixing the “problem [of the] body” (75). However, that Gay’s memoir is separated into 88 short chapters, not 90, is significant. According to a popular weight-loss plan called “Rina’s 90 Day Diet: Divided Nutrition” created by Slovenian authors Breda Hrobat and Mojca Polijansek, weight-loss is a

journey in which “Perfection is hard to be achieved, but still, it’s not a mission impossible” (90daydiet.org) during a mere 90-day time period. While the information on the ease and benefits of following a diet or recovery plan for 90 days is easily accessible, substantial evidence for the effectiveness or reasoning of the 90-day time period is difficult to find and remains ambiguous. The consensus, though, seems to be that 90 days is long enough to build a helpful habit but short enough to realistically maintain and that after 90 days a habit will “feel like second nature” (Michelle). Additionally, proponents of alcohol and addiction recovery believe that 90 days are crucial to long-term recovery as well. Some recovery directors or sponsors claim that “the first 90 days are critical.... because it’s during this time that most relapses occur” (addiction.com). English Mountain Recovery, an organization dedicated to helping addicts recover, uses a statement made by The National Institute of Drug and Abuse (NIDA) to communicate the significance of a 90-day journey. This institute posits that addiction recovery can be different case by case, but “for most patients, the threshold of significant improvement is reached at about 3 months in treatment. Additional treatment can produce further progress” (Why 90 Days?). English Mountain Recovery goes on to say that “NIDA refers to programs offering a true 90-day program as the new “gold standard” in treating alcoholism and addiction.” The support and wide-spread use of 90-day programs from people who promote them and people who use them indicates their helpfulness. While weight loss and addiction recovery can be two entirely different battles to fight, working at something for 90 days, whether it is addiction recovery, weight loss, or healing from trauma, seems to build a foundation to work from. Once 90 days is achieved, the lengthy remainder of the healing process becomes much more feasible. With knowledge of the significance and usefulness of 90-day healing plans, Gay’s 88 chapters

force readers to wonder if she has made it to the threshold where healing apparently becomes less difficult, or if she is still working, or refusing, to make it to such a milestone.

That the process of reopening and healing from these wounds ends after 88 brief chapters for Gay, a number just shy of the 90 days several healing or health journeys ask participants to commit to, is intriguing. Writing just under 90 chapters may have been accidental or unintentional, but the similarities between the number of chapters and the number of days many claim will be enough time to battle either weight loss or addiction are difficult to overlook. Further, that Gay declares her healing journey from sexual abuse and an unhealthy relationship with food finished at 88 chapters rather than 90 may suggest, among other things, that she has not quite healed past the point of relapse-risk or reached a celebratory milestone. This potentially unfinished healing process is also powerful. Gay's decision to be "as healed as [she] is ever going to be" (302) at the end of the memoir communicates the widely overlooked truth that Black women do not have to represent their trauma as healed. This moment, as well as several others across the span of the memoir, actively dispute the strong-Black-woman narrative that is so often forced upon Black women victims in need of healing.

Along with suggesting an attempt at using her previous traumas to move closer to a healthier mental state, the structure of Gay's memoir also points to the general fallacy around 90-day weight loss programs, as her 88 chapters only move her slightly closer to a healthful milestone rather than almost completely healed. It is true that people have lost weight and become more healed after just 90 days of diet and exercise plans, but this weight-loss often only comes with "disciplining the body" which, according to Gay, is partly rooted in denial (145). Embodying this assertion is television personality, Gayle King. In 2002, Oprah Winfrey, who is famously known for her long-term friendship with Gayle, featured Gayle's 90-day weight loss



journey on Oprah.com. While on this journey, Gayle, along with a few other participants, work with “superstar fitness trainer” Jim Karas for a strict 90 days in hopes to “to slim down and tighten up,” since none of these participants had “serious weight problems” (Funderberg) at the time. During a two-hour pep talk before the weight loss transformation was to begin, the trainer handed out copies of his book *The Business Plan for the Body* to the participants, effectively communicating that this program would not treat its participants as people but instead like successful business plans, Gayle reveals one of her concerns about the diet. When Jim details the only-water hydration plan the participants must follow in order to see the results they want at the end of the program, Gayle confesses that water is not her go-to thirst-quencher. She says: “I do a whole liter of that CranGrape. Two liters, easy” (Funderberg). In response, her new trainer tells her that “if [she] cut that out, [she] could really lose weight” (Funderberg). Then, before the subject of the pep talk changes to strength-training regimes, “Gayle falls silent and stares into the middle distance, struggling to imagine a world without juice” (Funderberg). Here, Gayle portrays the deprivation of things we “want but dare not have” (Gay 145) and our unfair tendencies to put “what we want just beyond reach... still know[ing] it’s there” (Gay 146). Denying herself some of the things she most enjoys temporarily works for Gayle. According to the trainer, “Gayle took the role as leader” and lost 20 pounds in the 90 days. After losing the 20 pounds, she reveals that she is not “over-confident in the long-term effects” (Funderberg), claiming that “the true test is going to be a year from now” (Funderberg). Gayle’s prediction was correct, at least to an extent. A quick Google search uncovers several different headlines spanning over years covering another one of Gayle’s weight cycles, the most recent episode being a gain of 13 pounds during a part of 2020’s self-isolation followed by a 7-pound loss after a “5-day soup fast” (Chon). Gayle’s experience points to the ineffectiveness of 90-day plans. Additionally, the decision Oprah, whose

television personality Gay has her own issues with, made to include Gayle's experience on her website reveals Oprah's willful perpetuation of this fallacy. Here, it is clear that Gayle's participation in this 90-day weight loss program, as well as in the seemingly cyclical yo-yo dieting exemplified previously, has not moved her any closer to health. Although she has done something for 90 days, she has not progressed toward the life she wants. Her experience with weight loss and weight gain work to exemplify the fallacy of the 90-day journey by underscoring her own failure to reach the end of her journey and thus, highlighting Gay's slow success with her unfinished 88 steps toward health.

Although a weight loss journey does not encompass the entirety of her healing experience, the similarities in the structures of Gay's memoir and main-stream weight loss programs lend themselves to be compared. Doing something, perhaps anything, excessively and for 90 days is not sustainable. A slower and less linear method will obviously take more time, but it will also allow for the healer to build a foundation with healthful and long-lasting habits. Gay's journey through weight loss and toward a more healed version of herself has not yet reached the 90-day, or in Gay's specific case, chapter mark. Even when it does, she will not be completely healed. She will still have work to do, but the slow steps toward health have allowed her to build sustainable methods. This journey, although unfinished, is the antidote for relapse or regression. An isolated 90-day program where participants go "all-in" for three months and then return to life as they lived it before is designed to fail, as evidenced by Gayle King's years of weight loss cycles. The 90-day healing plan seems to be a fallacy. Rather than days, those looking to heal might have better luck focusing on 90 steps. For Gay, the years it has taken to reach 88 chapters, and then arguably an 89<sup>th</sup> with her 2018 publication entitled "What Fullness Is" (discussed later), is ultimately more beneficial. Rather than 90 days, healing journeys would

better serve those on them if they were composed of 90 steps, much like other 12-step healing journeys meant for those struggling with addiction recovery. After all, Gay and everyone else affected by the suffocating grasp of diet culture arguably need long-term recovery, not short-term cyclical diets comprised of any number of days. Intervals of 24 hours at a time are in no way universal. 90 steps, or more literally, 90 meaningful actions moving further away from being consumed by trauma and closer to healing, however, could be. These 90 steps could happen in 90 days, but they so often do not. 90 steps over the course of however long it takes to make them seem to be a much more sustainable method of movement toward health. Gay's 88 chapters compute to 88 steps toward a day when she is more healed, and each of these steps works to dispel the validity of strict 90-day weight loss or healing programs—at least partly. These steps also help to actively differentiate weight-loss and health, a separation Gay's family, as well as American society, find quite difficult to make.

### **Black Healing on the Backburner or Embracing Vulnerability?**

Gay's choice to stop her healing at 88 chapters rather than at or past 90 chapters also works to further critique the image and narrative of the Strong Black Woman. Zora Neale Hurston, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, writes that Black women are mules of the world, meaning that they are the earth's lowest and least respected inhabitants (Hurston 17). Signithia Fordham interprets Hurston's line suggesting that "the existence of strength and endurance" (14) Black women needed to have when they were enslaved, which it does. This strength, though, was not a virtue; it was a requirement or a controlling image (Collins 72). Black women's survival has always depended almost exclusively on their ability to be strong, which is a belief that has seeped its way into modern-day society. Gay's assertion that she is neither strong nor brave in combination with her slightly unfinished movement toward health underscores the memoir's commentary on the trope that Black women already have the utmost strength, and,

thus, do not need to finish or even start healing. The belief that Black women have unlimited strength may seem positive or beneficial, but it only works to dehumanize them and discount their pain. If Black women are so strong that they are never in need of healing, then they must not have feelings like other women. This belief denies Black women the freedom to heal or to need help, which undermines their humanity.

Further cementing the fact that Black women's healing has been largely ignored because of the strong-Black-woman narrative is Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant. Her argument indirectly gives justification for Gay's stunted healing journey. In "Strong and Large Black Women? Exploring Relationships between Deviant Womanhood and Weight," Beauboeuf-Lafontant illuminates the stilted assumption that Black women are simply stronger than their non-Black peers. She begins her article by reminding her readers that unlike white women, Black women have, for too long, "had to contend with the myth of the strong Black woman [which is] a historically complex distillation of images derived from two sources: the rationalizations of a white slave-holding society and Black culture's attempt to define womanhood" (111). Her claim makes it clear that Black women have been viewed as abnormally strong since before the American Civil War when white enslavers tried to rationalize their grotesque treatment of Black women. This myth has permeated throughout Black women's livelihoods in several different ways, and it has caused people from both Black and white communities to subscribe to the belief that Black women are able to easily dress their invisible wounds and still take on all other responsibilities without needing to heal as if they were either already completely absolved of all of their traumas, or their traumas never hurt in the first place. While an assumption of strength may not sound like something to dispute within the Black community, it is. Forcing a narrative where Black women handle hardships and traumas with ease strips Black women of their time to

heal. Whether the time needed to heal is one day, the time it takes to write 90 chapters, or an entire lifetime, forcing the belief that Black women are inherently stronger than the rest perpetuates the idea that Black women do not need to heal,<sup>16</sup> that they are too strong to endure hardships, and that they do not need any resources to aid in the healing process. This narrative does not allow for Black women to be hurt, wounded, or broken. It instead prevents Black women from getting or seeking out care when they need it, and it pressures Black women to heal as quickly as possible, not at all, or to never become hurt in the first place. Additionally, this dehumanizing narrative resolves blame from those who cause Black women pain. If it is believed that Black women cannot be hurt, then no one has to take the blame for doing the hurting. It justifies and perpetuates the system in which Black girls and women have to be hurt or traumatized *and* continue taking care of themselves, others, and all of the other tasks no one else wants to do. With this argument, Beauboeuf-Lafontant's work allows me to give a definition to Gay's 88 chapters and thus her unfinished healing journey. Gay is not strong enough to have been immediately healed from her wounds in the same moments they were inflicted on her. Gay's 88 chapters reflect that a Black woman working toward health but remaining ultimately unhealed is normal, or at the very least, that it should be normalized.

Even though Gay does appear to be on a slow progression toward health that remains unfinished, her belief that she was "as healed as [she was] ever going to be" (303) has an effect on the previously described narrative that Black women are too strong to be bothered by traumatic events. Gay's assertion openly attacks the stilted assumption that Black women are strong enough to be put through the wringer and then continue to function as though nothing has

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<sup>16</sup> The idea that Black women do not need to heal recalls the discussion of *Medical Apartheid* in the previous chapter. Black women were used for surgical experimentation because it was believed that they were so strong that they did not feel pain, which is a belief that persists in today's society.

happened, as if they were never wrongfully wounded in the worst ways. Near the beginning of her memoir, Gay makes it clear that she is a victim and will be claiming the terminology, even though many reject it and prefer the term “survivor.” She says, “I don’t mind the label “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” (20). After mentioning her preference in terminology, she explains it: “I don’t want to pretend I’m on some triumphant, uplifting journey. I don’t want to pretend that everything is okay” (20). With this explanation, Gay tells her readers that even though she is a Black woman in America, she is not “brave or heroic.... Strong.... [or] special” (39). Instead, she is “one woman who has experienced something countless women have experienced. [She is] a victim who survived” (39), and who is still healing.

Although Gay does not explicitly dispute the assumption that Black women need to be strong, she underscores the false and outdated narrative by perhaps controversially claiming the term “victim” and declaring that she is, in fact, not strong, though many rape victims or survivors are frequently praised with attributes like this one. Additionally, by purposefully stating her Blackness through a brief discussion of her racial history, she makes sure her readers are aware that she embraces her identity as “a Haitian daughter” who, along with her family, was “part of the first free black nation in the Western Hemisphere” (Gay 55). With the Black Diaspora in mind, being the first Black nation in the “New World” is significant because it is believed that the closer a person is to Africa, the Blacker, and thus, stronger they are. Though Jerry Rafiki Jenkins discusses the man in reference to Black vampire fiction (128)<sup>17</sup>, it can be applied to

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<sup>17</sup> Jenkins, author of *The Paradox of Blackness in African American Vampire Fiction* writes about the Masculine Africa Narrative, explaining that because “the African American community has become a

Gay's Black womanhood as well since she is among the "first free Black nation in the Western Hemisphere" (Gay 55). Being far from Africa meant that Black people had to prove a point: that they were still just as Black and therefore just as strong as their African ancestors. Because she was of the first, Gay has to prove her Blackness and heritage, too. Additionally, Haiti was the first free Black nation, which meant that they had to rise against their oppressors and kill them when it was necessary. Because Gay is a Haitian woman, she should have the strength that comes with the Haitian heritage.<sup>18</sup> Immigrants are so often believed to be strong and resilient simply because they are immigrants. She should be able to rise against her oppressors, too. By stating her Haitian descent, Gay reinforces the idea that she is a Black woman of Haitian descent who grew up immersed in a Haitian household, who has been hurt, who has not yet healed, and who is taking her time to even come close to her ninetieth chapter. Gay's Blackness in tandem with her refusal to be referred to as strong forces readers to realize that there is no need to further the narrative that all Black women are strong and can rise from the ashes of trauma. Like other women, Gay is a victim of violent sexual abuse who has taken several years to begin healing and who was then and perhaps is still now just as broken. Gay's memoir represents that a slow, 90-step healing journey with an outstanding number of detours is still a healing journey. It may be a zig-zagged and fragmented walk towards health but is still a path in the right direction.

**"So Much More Than Hungry": Another Step Toward Fullness**

While it is true that Gay's 88 chapters are indicative of her refusal to fully heal and the power behind it, it is also true that she takes an additional step toward the 90-step healing

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feminine space, it requires a foreign black man whose blackness and manhood are absent of anything white and feminine to reblaken and remasculinize the community" (144).

<sup>18</sup> One of the myths of the immigrant is the narrative of hyper-resilience. Gay's Haitian identity combined with her womanhood exacerbates this narrative, which recalls the stereotypes of the Strong Black Woman and the resilient immigrant.

journey between when the memoir was published and today. After *Hunger* had been published for a year, Gay published an essay entitled “What Fullness Is” about exploring the benefits of committing to the weight loss surgery she shuns and runs away from at the beginning of *Hunger*. “What Fullness Is” is effectively the 89<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Hunger*, and it reveals that Gay still hungers. That she is not yet full or satisfied. In the 2018 essay, Gay writes about her decision to get weight loss surgery. Her contemplation is fueled by what others want her to do with her body: “my desire for weight loss has long been about satisfying other people more than myself, finding a way to fit more peacefully into a world that is not at all interested in accommodating a body like mine” (3). The words and tones used in the article clearly recall those used in *Hunger*, signaling both that the year between the publication of *Hunger* and that of “What Fullness Is” has understandably not supplied Gay with the time necessary for the completion of a healing journey, and that this article is, in some ways, a continuation of the memoir. A bit later in the article, Gay says that she is “sometimes fine with [her] body.... with [her] curves, the solidity of [her]” (Gay, “What Fullness Is”). She continues appreciating her body in the next sentences: “I am strong and tall. I enjoy the way I take up space, that I have presence. I have someone who appreciates my body and only hates everything I must deal with by virtue of living in this world in this body” (4). These words, published after *Hunger*, indicate another step in a healthful direction. Not only is she fine with the way her body is, but she also enjoys it in some ways. Because she has taken the time to write about the goodness of her body and the way her person loves it in what can be argued to be the eighty-ninth chapter a full year after she has published a book largely about “the shameful truth of [her body] always strangling” her (*Hunger* 10), it is apparent that the small steps towards health are still happening. “What Fullness Is” suggests that



Gay's slow journey to 90 steps continues, and perhaps signals that there will one day be a ninetieth chapter.

Although Gay believes she has finished healing, she is aware that her journey should not end with chapter 88 of her memoir. Her knowledge and desire of the need for completion or at least continuance of a stride toward a more healthful life suggest that she is not actively seeking an end to her healthful progression, just that she does not currently see a realistic path to a healthier mind and body. Later in the memoir, she writes about her feelings towards healing. She says, "I wonder what healing really looks like -- in body, in spirit. I'm attracted to the idea that the mind, the soul, can heal as neatly as bones. That if they are properly set for a given period of time, they will regain their original strength. Healing is not that simple. It never is" (283). Later, she reveals that one of her "biggest hopes is that one day, [she] will cut away all the scar tissue [from living in a fat body in this "cruel world"] (301). From these reflective moments in the text, it is clear that she wants to heal her mind and her spirit and is hopeful that one day she will. While she does seem to believe that her healing journey is over by the end of the book, she also appears to want it to continue, evidenced by the writing and publishing of "What Fullness Is." Given what she has written in this memoir, as well as what she goes on to write and share after its publication, the continued walk toward a healthier mind, body, and spirit is not finished, but it is evident.

### **Healing Still to Come: A Conclusion**

Gay's decision to share the unfinished healing journey in *Hunger*, as well as in some of her publications after *Hunger* with the public and, thus, someone who may be experiencing similar hardships, is one that has the potential to help others heal. Just as her act of scriptotherapy in writing this memoir furthers her unfinished journey towards health, it also

works to aid others either on their healing journeys or in a more general sense. In a Twitter post from the second of November of 2020, she acknowledges an award she has won for the product of her scriptotherapy, *Hunger*. Upon acknowledging the award, she tweets: “In an unexpected turn, I received a presidential medal from the Obesity Society (and I still take issue with pathologizing fatness w/that word) for how *Hunger* has expanded medical discourse around fatness. I did at least one good thing with my writing” (@rgay) The claim that this success is “unexpected,” and her assertion that after years of publishing her words she has done “at least one good thing with [her] writing” (@rgay) both communicates that Gay still has work to do regarding healing her self-worth and that her memoir has helped heal her own traumas *and* those who may struggle with similar wounds.

At the end of *Hunger*, Gay makes it clear that she will no longer heal after 88 steps, as she cannot fathom what a healed version of herself looks like. She is aware that a healed version of herself does not look like the “thin woman” that weight-loss enthusiasts swear must live inside of all fat women (138) because she knows that health and thinness are not mutually exclusive. However, Gay also does not imagine herself in a more healed body regardless of her weight. Perhaps, like many of us, she is unsure of exactly what health looks like when the physical body is taken out of the equation because of the false but deeply ingrained narrative that health and thinness are equitable. She equates her body with “the problem” several times throughout the memoir but also “recogniz[es] that [*she*] is not the problem” (22, emphasis added). Gay seems to know that minimizing her body would not heal her, but also seems to find it difficult to extricate the body she lives in with the health she refuses to imagine for herself. What she does know is that she needs “to tear down some of the walls” she built because she can “feel that happiness is well within [her] reach” (302). She does not, however, explain exactly how she might go about

dismantling those walls or “undestroying [her]self” (302). While imagining a continued healing journey may be impossible for Gay, there are still several areas throughout the memoir that reveal that she is almost constantly coming closer to a healthier version of herself through her writing process. With each chapter, she inches nearer to a healing milestone. She moves forward from what she describes as “the most difficult writing experience of [her] life” (4), to being able to reference the same topics in “What Fullness Is” and verbally in interviews. This move from extreme pain and discomfort to being able to freely reference her past traumas indicates progression, but it also signals that she is not finished healing from her traumas, as she is still engaging in scriptotherapy as a remedy for her wounds. In addition to helping Gay find where the next steps toward healing are possible, *Hunger* provides important commentary on the strength Black women have and the speed at which Black women victims of violent rape are supposed to heal, which is to say: as slowly or quickly as they can manage. It is in this way that Gay’s *Hunger* worked to help her as she wrote it, as well as how it, along with several other publications by Gay, continue to help heal her own wounds and those who her words have reached.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

During my second semester of graduate school, I was assigned *Hunger in the Black* Memoir course I mentioned in my introduction. I started reading it over a week before we were meant to discuss it in class, and I finished it (on the clock) at my tutoring job the next day. The book consumed my thoughts soon after, and I immediately knew that it was the only book I have ever read that I knew I needed to write about. Throughout my time in graduate school, I have always heard from students and professors that I will be sick of the books and topics I choose to write my thesis on by the time I defend the project. I have not yet defended my thesis, but I do not see a scenario in which I ever grow tired or bored of the topics I have chosen. They are too important. In fact, as I worked on this project throughout my third semester, I also began considering what I wanted to do with my life after graduation. I landed on teaching children who are growing up under the poverty line, and who are thus, overwhelmingly Black and brown.

While attending an information session for Teach for America, an organization that works to close the opportunity gap between children who grow up under the poverty line and those who do not, I learned from one of the coordinators that children need mirrors in their classrooms. With this metaphor, the coordinator meant that children need to see themselves in who they learn from and what they learn from. I logged this moment in my memory and knew, much like how I knew I needed to keep studying *Hunger*, that the next stage of my life is meant for me to give mirrors to students who might not otherwise have them. To me, this meant that I, as a Black woman, could be my students' mirrors and that I could give them mirrors in their books. Because I saw myself in *Hunger*, I became more informed about how infrequently books like it are assigned to students who may need them. This led me to reflect on my own learning

experiences in the American education system where I saw myself reflected back at me through my educators twice before graduating from my undergraduate program, and where I was given my first mirror in a book at 22 and in a program that I had to be accepted to in order to attend.

Seeing myself in a text so late in my own educational career gave me a passion to give students the inclusive education that I did not have and that they deserve much earlier in their lives.

*Hunger* and several other books written by Black people about their personal experiences need to be taught as early as possible. They have the potential to achieve the same learning outcomes as the frequently taught books so often seen in classrooms<sup>19</sup> I grew up learning, but they can also do so much more than just cover educational standards. They can give a student a mirror and spark a passion inside of them. That work is something I am confident that I will never grow sick of.

The first time I taught this book, it was a requirement for my Black Memoir class. I focused partly on the scriptotherapy I saw when I was reading the text for the first time and I used it to communicate to my classmates that writing as a way of healing was one, something we likely are all already participating in, and two, largely beneficial to our health and whatever healing journeys we might have been on at the time. I taught this lesson days before Spring Break in March 2020 right before the COVID-19 shutdown, and I used Gay's traumas regarding her relationship with food to facilitate a conversation about gratitude for the body, regardless of its shape. We all participated in a yoga practice focused on taking time out of the day to serve the body to start class off, and we continued the lesson by recognizing that all traumas are valid and allowed to be felt. I then asked my classmates to participate in an activity designed to get them more comfortable with writing out or discussing some of the things they felt pained or

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<sup>19</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald *The Great Gatsby*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, to name a few books I have been taught at length throughout my public education.

traumatized by, and I concluded the class by handing out brownies, cookies, and recipe cards to remind everyone that food is meant to be eaten for nourishment rather than restricted for punishment. The lesson was successful, and I was glad to find that a book so heavily focused on trauma was able to create a productive discussion about health and gratitude.

When I taught this lesson to my own class the next semester, I used a slightly different method but got the same points across. My students were younger this time around, and they were nearing the end of an unprecedented pandemic-ridden semester. For this reason, I used parts of *Hunger* to teach my students that feeling completely consumed with negative feelings, grief, or any other kind of wound is normal and that feeling overwhelmed as college students during a pandemic is to be expected. I used a similar assignment this time, and I asked them to find the value in being vulnerable with at least one person. To my surprise, many students expressed fear and anxiety about their physical appearances, their futures, their grade point averages, and their overall happiness. At the end of the semester, several students expressed their gratitude for the lesson, claiming that it came at exactly the right time in their lives. Teaching this text twice has allowed me to see just how needed books like *Hunger* and lessons on them are. While I am sure one lesson has not eradicated the anxiety my classmates and students felt, I can say for certain that the memoir helped them, if only for a moment, to realize something about themselves. The book gave my students a mirror or at least a glimpse into one.

Although I have used it in the classroom one way, the work I have done on *Hunger* could be furthered in the educational sphere in a multitude of different ways. As mentioned in the introduction of this project, Black memoir is an essential teaching tool. It could be beneficial to everyone but especially to Black and brown students. Gay's detailing of her gang rape could be broken down and used to teach about consent. Gay's experience as an adolescent and adult could

be dissected and used as a lesson on fatphobia. The book could be used to teach about tone and the significance of language in a text, as well as a number of other literary devices like metacommentary and anaphora. The memoir can be used as a case study for learning to analyze nonfiction or apply theory. Students could learn about systemic racism from *Hunger*, or about the many privileges Gay is constantly denied because of the color and shape of her body. *Hunger* has the utmost potential in being a teaching tool because it has endless opportunities for further education, and it has the potential to be used in classrooms far before students reach the graduate level. Roxane Gay's *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* can give students mirrors, an asset much more beneficial than whatever they gain from yet another lesson on F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. As a Black woman and a future teacher, I know I will continue to teach this memoir so that it and other books like it can become a staple in classrooms used to teach students a myriad of subjects while also letting them see themselves reflected in literature.

When I first started writing on *Hunger*, I was unsure about where to start. It was a book that showed me so much of myself that it was difficult for me to pick one of the many themes in the work to write about. Eventually, after a three-hour meeting and 10 pages that did not make it into the draft of my thesis, I found that I wanted to write about trauma. This project is about the traumas Gay faces and some of the hardships and feelings that stem from those traumas. It explores how trauma is written about, how it compounds, and how it demands to be felt. It grapples with the power of language when it comes to Black bodies, asserting that language, words, are incredibly significant whether they are being taken from someone, stolen back, or given back. This project questions the society that adultifies Black girls, forces bodies like Gay's into spaces of silence where they do not fit and cannot grow, and dooms women to equate their happiness and worth with their body size. This project encourages casual readers and scholars

alike to consider the system we live in and wonder why it values everything that Roxane Gay and so many other people are not. This project is meant to ignite curiosity and anger within the reader regarding why the system we all live in is built this way. Why must we continue to other Blackness as if it is not here to stay? Why must we value thinness as if it is synonymous with health? Why should fatness be feared? Why must we dance around the subject of rape when we know skirting around the issue will not help anyone? Why must we continue to teach fiction books written by white men in classrooms across grade levels? This project, at its foundation, simply encourages readers to think.

This project argues that trauma language in Gay's memoir describes more than just her rape, positing that Gay's traumas do not start and end with her sexual abuse. There is trauma in her skin color, her gender, her body shape, and in so many other things. These several instances of trauma help readers to understand the multiplicity of the trauma that Black women must endure and have been enduring since slavery. This project also interrogates the traditional weight-loss memoir by positioning *Hunger*'s structure as a rejection of 90-day weight-loss journeys, concluding that 90-day programs like these are cyclical fallacies. Lastly, this project uses Gay's memoir to critique the dangerous assumption that Black women are stronger than their white counterparts by highlighting Gay's choice to remain a victim and refuse to continue on a health journey.

The work that this thesis attempts to do is never finished. Critical thinking can be further sparked by using the work I have done to illuminate and boost Black women's voices in scholarship, in literature, and in classrooms. Gay's work is clearly rooted in the Black women's writing tradition, and *Hunger* works to further the idea that pain and trauma are inextricably tied to Blackness and compounded by fatness. Gay's *Hunger* teaches readers that the body is not the



issue. No one's body is the issue. The problem comes from the rules society has fabricated and passed on as truth. When society places whiteness, maleness, thinness, and wealth as the pinnacle of American humanity by celebrating people with these characteristics, absolving them of all blame, and believing them at all costs, it strips anyone who does not meet all of these requirements of these "privileges." It takes away the humanity and citizenship everybody deserves. *Hunger* forces us to recognize that *that* is the problem. As long as this hierarchy exists in any capacity at all, systems need to keep being challenged and books like *Hunger* need to keep being read, studied, and taught.

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