Fearless foremothers: matrilineal genealogies, (inter)subjectivity and survival in Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*

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This article examines Margaret Walker’s neo-slave narrative *Jubilee* (1966), identifying it as an important prerequisite for subsequent neo-slave narratives. The article aims to offer a new reading of the novel by situating it within a black feminist ideological framework and drawing on critical race and whiteness studies, postcolonial and trauma theory. Taking into account the novel’s social and political context, the article suggests that the ancestral figures or elderly women in the slave community function as means of resistance, access to personal and collective history, and contribute to the construction of the protagonist’s subjectivity against slavery’s dehumanisation. Challenging reductive and ahistorical critical readings, the article concludes by suggesting that Walker’s novel fulfils a politically engaged function of inscribing the black female subject into discussions on the legacy of slavery and drawing attention to the particularity of black women’s experiences.

*My grandmothers are full of memories*
*Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay*
*With veins rolling roughly over quick hands*
*They have many clean words to say.*
*My grandmothers were strong. Why am I not they?*
*(Margaret Walker, ‘Lineage’)¹

Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966)² is one of the first neo-slave narratives, and one of the first narratives to focus exclusively on enslaved black women’s experiences. In his study of African American literature, Bernard W. Bell hails *Jubilee* as ‘our first neoslave narrative; a residually oral, modern narrative of escape from bondage to freedom’.³ Subsequent critics of the novel affirm its status as ‘a transitional novel which anticipates the novels of many late-twentieth-century black women writers concerned with imagining their enslaved maternal ancestors’.⁴ In

terms of its structure, the novel places significant emphasis on slave women’s experiences of slavery and relates history through a black woman’s perspective as she moves from slavery to post-Civil War freedom and Reconstruction. Basing her story on thirty years of extensive research, Walker writes Jubilee using the conventions of the historical novel. She develops a realistic plot derived from factual research and evidence, and adheres to a predominantly linear narrative structure. The novel focuses on Vyry, a mixed-race protagonist, and her life before, during and after the Civil War. She is the ‘illegitimate’ child of Hetta, a slave, and her slave-master, John Dutton. After losing her mother as a child, Vyry is nurtured by the slave women from the plantation and eventually becomes a cook at the Big House. There, she meets a free black man, Randall Ware, and marries him without the slaveholder’s consent. The couple has two children, Minna and Jim, who are born enslaved. At one point, Vyry tries to escape the plantation with her children but is caught and punished. After her failed escape, she loses contact with Ware who leaves to build a better life and earn money to buy his family’s freedom. Walker’s subsequent descriptions of the Civil War years are marked by the death of the Duttons and increasing racial violence. Believing Ware is dead after the Civil War ends, Vyry marries another man, former field slave Innis Brown, and the family leaves the Dutton plantation in search of a better life. What follows is a series of tragedies and troubles that they ultimately survive, remaining, however, deeply affected by the horrors they have experienced.

Combining elements of oral storytelling and historical fact, Jubilee privileges the experiences of black women over traditional and hegemonic, white male-centred versions of history. To do this, Walker uses the ‘matrilineage model’, which places the black woman and her connections to other women at the centre of analysis. This particular model is aptly summarised by Madhu Dubey as ‘presenting the mother as the medium of the daughter’s access to history’. Reflecting on the model’s role in constructing a particular black women’s tradition, Dubey contends that:

The matrilineage model overtly and covertly identifies a cluster of values as essential, defining features of black women’s fictional tradition. The figure of the mother or the maternal ancestor is insistently aligned with the black oral and folk tradition (usually situated in the rural South), which is celebrated as a cultural origin, a medium of temporal synthesis and continuity, and the basis of an alternative construction of black feminine history and tradition.

It is precisely this model that Walker uses in Jubilee to celebrate black womanhood in the novel, and to show it as a distinct and separate tradition. Affirming the importance of women’s tradition and orality, Walker reveals that the story of Vyry was passed on to her by her own grandmother, who offered, in the writer’s own

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words, ‘the most valuable slave narrative of all… the naked truth’. The novel reflects this privileging of the black female voice, along with a sense of female community and interconnectedness, as it traces the life of an African American woman from antebellum slavery to freedom and economic self-sufficiency in the Reconstruction period. In her compelling discussion of black matrilineage, Diane Sadoff suggests that ‘the literal and figurative genealogy of artists and storytellers enables and empowers the art of the contemporary black woman’. Turning her grandmother’s narrative into fiction, Walker participates in the creation of alternative histories and reinvests the black female slave with the power to author her own story.

A number of critics have reflected on the reasons for the critically marginalised status of Jubilee. Charlotte Goodman hypothesises that it may be because of a perceived lack of innovation, given Walker’s imitation of the conventional linear structure of the traditional slave narrative. Elsewhere, it has been criticised for an apparent failure to ‘delve into the inner world and self of the main character’. In countering these views, other critics emphasise that reductive readings of the novel leave numerous issues it tackles unaddressed, dismissed or potentially misread. For instance, Maryemma Graham concludes that Jubilee, although widely anthologised, is ‘far more often read than it or its author are discussed’, while Jacqueline Carmichael points out that ‘the layered reconstruction of African American women’s lives remains largely unmapped’. Moreover, Carmichael finds it remarkable that Jubilee did not ‘receive more credit as a feminist and African Americanist reconstruction of both a type of the American novel and the history on which such novels have been previously based’.

Taking these arguments into account, this essay engages with Walker’s innovative and layered portrayals of matrilineal genealogies and the role of female ancestors in the self-constitution of the novel’s protagonist Vyry. Challenging claims that Jubilee fails to engage with the inner self and gender issues, this essay draws from black feminist, postcolonial and trauma theory to bring attention to Walker’s subtle and nuanced engagement with Vyry, and the prominent ancestral figures in the novel who function as her ‘surrogate’ mothers. Analysing the novel in terms of the Civil Rights discourses of the 1960s when Jubilee was written, Walker’s protagonist and her struggle for survival can be interpreted as performing a socially engaged function with the purpose of inscribing the black female subject into discourses on African American rights and the legacy of slavery. Within this context, I identify Walker’s use of essentialism to describe Vyry as the courageous

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14 Carmichael, Trumpeting a Fiery Sound, p. 43.
representative of all African Americans. I draw on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notion of strategic essentialism to argue that Walker responds to a particular set of social and political circumstances necessitating such a portrayal.

In analysing Vyry’s complexity and her ability to inhabit multiple identities, I aim to challenge reductive critical readings and offer new ways of engaging with this work and its influence on subsequent neo-slave narratives. I read Vyry in relation to her foremothers and surrogate mothers, and identify the ways in which these relationships (and individual and collective histories) function in the construction of her subjectivity. In particular, I reflect on Walker’s postbellum portrayal of Vyry and the effects of internalised violence, drawing from trauma theory, to identify how Walker engages with the inner life of former slaves and the reproductions of violence after abolition.

Drawing on anthropological and folkloristic studies in her discussion of women’s communities, Jean M. Humez suggests that

Women’s observed capacity to adapt to difficult new circumstances, such as cultural uprooting and ageing, is greatly enhanced by their eclectic repertoire of spoken arts evolved in the context of domestic and neighbourhood life.15

This ‘eclectic repertoire’ is particularly applicable to intergenerational storytelling, where the foremother serves, to echo Dubey’s definition of matrilineage, as the daughter’s ‘access to history’, as well as skills and experiences needed for survival.16 Jubilee’s focus on the domestic life reveals Walker’s preoccupation with portraying the lived realities of black female slaves, their epistemologies, folklore and heritage. My understanding of the term ‘community’ is historically-specific and takes into account the conditions of slavery and the challenges posed when forming kinship bonds. Although slavery relies on the dehumanising premise of owning human beings as chattel, slaves do create their own culture within and against such oppression. Thus, the slave community is, by its very existence, a counter-narrative, and its discussion in this essay presupposes both the conditions of oppression working to negate it and their radical repudiation. As depicted in the fictional world of Jubilee, the slaves nurture relationships, form ties and develop cultural codes imbued with both subtle and direct acts of insubordination to the slaveholders. Timothy Mark Robinson observes that ‘elders in many slave communities passed on their wisdom and experience to the next generation, managed to care for the young children, and healed the sick in their communities by way of folk medicine’.17 Extending this emphasis in her innovative discussion of ancestors in black women’s literature, Venetria K. Patton defines community elders as ‘conduits of ancestral wisdom’.18 Indeed, the elderly slave women of the Dutton plantation offer support to

one another, share and transfer their skills to the next generations, and create networks of resilience based on mutuality and understanding of the gendered vulnerability of black female slaves.

*Jubilee* begins with the death of Vyry’s mother Hetta and underscores Walker’s preoccupation with maternal loss and abandonment figured as a consequence of slavery. The tragedy of gendered abuse is made explicit in these initial passages, as Walker describes the plantation owner John Dutton’s incessant abuse and rape of Hetta. Commenting on the abuse slave women suffered, Eugene Genovese argues that slave women who gave multiple births were particularly vulnerable to maladies because of ‘overwork, inadequate prenatal care and enforced performance of tasks beyond their strength’.\(^{19}\) It is important to highlight that the novel does not engage with Hetta’s state of mind, as she is figured only through the perceptions of other characters, including slavemaster John Dutton. Certain critics, such as Angelyn Mitchell, have attributed the lack of introspection to Walker’s lack of skill as a writer.\(^{20}\) However, I argue that the lack of engagement with Hetta’s inner self highlights the extreme commodification of Hetta’s suffering conveyed through descriptions of her body as the source of gendered abuse and ultimately her death. Hetta’s lack of introspection and her seemingly ‘passive’ personality exemplify the devastating effects of violence, gendered abuse and exploitation. Under slavery, Hetta’s body is removed from her control, thereby creating a paradoxical relation to her own self, as she comes to inhabit a body she does not possess and is, in Denise Noble’s words, ‘shackled to an alienated and objectified body’.\(^{21}\)

Although Walker does not delve into Hetta’s inner thoughts, her circumstances are related through women from the community tending her. The women demonstrate compassion and understanding stemming from intersubjectivity. This term, applied to African American communities, is aptly defined by Kidada E. Williams as ‘a shared sense of oneself as member of a subjugated group in relation to racial violence, perpetrators and a nation that accepted white supremacy’.\(^{22}\) The women in the community of slaves on the Dutton plantation share a sense of gendered oppression, in relation to rape, sexual violence and exploitation. For instance, Granny Ticey, a midwife who tries to ease Hetta’s pain by giving her laudanum, is introduced as a knowledgeable and competent ancestor figure or elderly member of the community supporting the women during childbirth and displaying an intimate knowledge and empathy. Portraying Hetta through other women’s perspectives, Walker establishes a network of women who share a particular gendered oppression as slaves and have an intimate understanding and knowledge of her condition and its causes. This is particularly evident in the depictions of Hetta’s death, where the slaves are forced to perform their daily chores without any right to honour and acknowledge their dead. However, it is Granny Ticey who disrupts this continuation of everyday toil:

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...but suddenly Granny Ticey gave a bloodcurdling yell, startling all the watchers and making them all sit up wide awake. She ran out of the cabin into the dawning daylight. Gathering her ample skirts, coarse petticoats, she threw them over her head, showing her aged nakedness while covering her face, and thus ran blindly and screaming down the road.23

Granny Ticey’s yell and her nakedness represent a particular form of mourning as it alerts the community to the death and disrupts the daily routine and toil. In her astute analysis of the protagonist’s howling in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, 24 Mae Gwendolyn Henderson argues that,

The howl, signifying a prediscursive mode, thus becomes an act of self-reconstitution as well as an act of subversion or resistance to the ‘network of signification’ represented by the symbolic order. […] It is precisely these violations or transgressions of the symbolic order that allow for the expression of the suppressed or repressed aspects of black female subjectivity. 25

Granny Ticey’s yell, as a prediscursive mode, fulfils the function of expressing the repressed aspects of selfhood. It is an act of self-assertion which resists the dehumanising system’s rendering of the slave woman’s death as merely an economic loss for the abusive slaveholder. Drawing on Kidada E. Williams’ definition, I would further extend Henderson’s argument to suggest that Granny Ticey’s yell expresses the repressed black female *intersubjectivity* or the shared awareness of sexual violence and exploitation suffered by the female slaves. By encapsulating the community’s grief, Granny Ticey’s performance of mourning humanises Hetta’s death, and serves as means of both memorialisation and subversion.

The protagonist Vyry is introduced for the first time at her mother’s deathbed, surrounded by the women from the community. Although this early loss deeply affects Vyry, Hetta is continuously supplemented by ancestral figures or women in the community who participate in the construction of Vyry’s subjectivity. Losing her mother, Vyry acquires important ‘surrogate’ mothers or, in Beaulieu’s words, ‘othermothers’, like Aunt Sally and Mammy Sukey who serve as guides and provide emotional sustenance in dehumanising conditions. 26 In her landmark discussion of black feminism, Patricia Hill Collins argues that the notion of black women as othermothers allowed African American women to treat biologically unrelated children as if they were members of their own families and thus demonstrated a clear rejection of separateness and individual interest as the basis for self-actualisation or

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community. Collins’ arguments aptly illustrate the affirming role of ‘othermothers’ in Jubilee’s slave communities.

After Hetta’s death, it is Mammy Sukey who initially assumes the role of the knowledgeable ancestor instructing Vyry in necessary survival skills. Seeing that Vyry would go on to work in the Big House as a house servant, Mammy Sukey teaches Vyry particular behaviour codes necessary for avoiding harm: ‘Mind your manners good, and be real nice and polite. You a big gal now, but you ain’t gone be no field hand and no yard nigger. You is gone wait on Quality and you got to act like Quality’. Although Mammy Sukey encourages Vyry to adapt to the conditions of slavery to survive, she remains fully aware of the absurdity of the system that dehumanises and exploits human beings. These thoughts are never made explicit to Vyry but remain part of Mammy Sukey’s monologue as she leads the girl to the Big House: ‘Ain’t make a speck of difference nohow. Politeness and cleanliness and sweet ways ain’t make no difference nohow. She gone stomp her and tromp her and beat her and mighty nigh kill her anyhow’. As a knowledgeable community elder, Mammy Sukey is aware of the compromises slaves had to make in order to survive and the fact that a slave’s life depends on the slavemaster’s will or whim.

After Mammy Sukey dies, the Big House cook Aunt Sally takes on the role of Vyry’s ‘surrogate’ mother. This crucial ancestral figure, frequently neglected by critics of Walker’s work, is invested with resistant properties. In order to engage with the ways Aunt Sally resists slavery’s commodification, it is important to outline what ‘resistance’ entails in conditions of slavery. Analysing various acts of slaves’ resistance, Saidiya Hartman suggests that the everyday practices of the enslaved included work slowdowns, feigned illnesses, unlicensed travel, the destruction of property, theft, self-mutilation, dissimulation, physical confrontation with owners and overseers and that these small-scale and everyday forms of resistance interrupted, re-elaborated and defied the constraints of everyday life under slavery.

Following Hartman’s emphasis on small scale and everyday acts, the notion of ‘resistance’ requires a nuanced and historically specific approach, similar to my previous elaboration of ‘community’. Resistance under bondage is affected by numerous factors and contingencies and assumes direct and indirect forms. Using the notion of ‘resistance’ critically allows for historical and cultural specificity and for more subtle means of insubordination to resurface, especially when considering slave women.

Through subtle acts of insubordination, Aunt Sally transgresses the limitations of domestic work forcibly assigned to slave women. Functioning as a nurturing and loving elderly figure, she passes on certain skills and strategies to Vyry that prove crucial for her survival. Some of these skills are related to domesticity, tying Vyry to conventional gender roles, and others point to possibilities for transformation. First, Aunt Sally teaches Vyry how to cook, transmitting an important skill that serves as a survival strategy: ‘Naturally, Vyry was learning how

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29 Walker, Jubilee, p. 20.
to cook by watching Aunt Sally. Aunt Sally showed her how to do everything the way she did it and how to please the Marster’s family.31 In this way, Aunt Sally transforms domestic work into a form of resistance and turns her own home into a site of possibilities. Aunt Sally manifests, in Angela Davis’ words, an ‘irrepressible talent in humanising an environment designed to convert them into a herd of subhuman labour units’.32

The slaves’ domestic space assumes a protective and transformative role in the evenings, during the rare moments the slaves have for themselves. After closing the doors at night, Vyry and Aunt Sally go off ‘into another world that was grand and good’.33 Aunt Sally fills the space with affection and storytelling and transforms a site of oppression into a site of nurturance, forming an important aspect of slave women’s counterculture. Since the slaves on the Dutton plantation frequently go hungry (with their rations strictly monitored and scarce), they sometimes resort to stealing to survive. Stealing food is yet another everyday act of resistance through which Aunt Sally disrupts the slaveholder’s control and nurtures the hungry Vyry:

Vyry was so devoted to Aunt Sally she would never have told anyone how often she saw her steal great panfuls of white folks’ grub, and how many pockets she had in her skirts and her bosom where she hid biscuits and cakes and pie, even though Big Missy threatened more than once to have Aunt Sally strung up and given a good beating if she even caught her stealing.34

The gendered particularity of Aunt Sally’s resistance is tied to the domestic space where slave women were frequently forced to perform exploitative labour. Addressing this point in her germinal discussion of black women slaves and the culture of resistance, Angela Davis argues that in the slaves’ living quarters, the major responsibilities ‘naturally’ fell to the woman charged to keep her home in order, as dictated by white male supremacist ideology. However, Davis challenges the notion of domestic work as means of affirming women’s inferiority. She argues that through performing the drudgery which has long been a central expression of the socially conditioned inferiority of women, the black woman in chains could help to lay the foundation for some degree of autonomy, both for herself and her men, and was, therefore, essential to the survival of the community.35 Following Davis’ argument, survival forms another facet of slave women’s resistance. Instructing the younger woman or descendant in strategies of survival and showing her how to steal food and feed herself, Aunt Sally is rendered essential to Vyry’s self-constitution.

Further adhering to Walker’s matrilineal model of tradition (previously defined by Dubey), Aunt Sally serves as Vyry’s access to her personal and collective history. She tells Vyry stories of her origin, life and family and thus asserts herself as a speaking subject. As Jean M. Humez suggests,36

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31 Walker, Jubilee, p. 41.
33 Walker, Jubilee, p. 43.
34 Walker, Jubilee, p. 43.
When called upon by a younger, female member of her family to review her past life, a woman must construct its present meaning, not just for herself but in order to fulfil an obligation to instruct succeeding generations. This is particularly applicable to Aunt Sally, who is aware of her instructional role as she reveals her own history to Vyry and facilitates the young girl’s reflexivity. Describing how she came to be a cook at the Big House, Aunt Sally offers a genealogical model for Vyry which counters the reduction of a slave to a commodity, stripping slaves of humanity, context and history.

Aunt Sally also relates a sense of collective history and intersubjectivity or subjugated people’s shared sense of suffering. This is demonstrated through her reference to Native Americans:

One time they posted a sign with an Injun head on it, and it said that Injun had smallpox and everybody keep away from him; and another time the poster read how it was agin Georgy law (still is) for nary nother piece of paper, pencil, pen, writing papers, books, newspapers or print things to get in black hands, slave or free.

This particular reference links the treatment of Native Americans, suffering under dispossession and genocide, with the enslavement of black people and the slaveholders’ efforts in keeping them illiterate. The smallpox Aunt Sally refers to also holds significance since it is the white colonisers that are considered to be the carriers of this particular illness. Linking the enslavement of black people with an act of genocide and dispossession inflicted upon the Native Americans, Aunt Sally provides Vyry with a wider perspective on white supremacy and its effects. Correlating colonialism and slavery in the ancestral figure’s story of origin, Walker highlights alliances between the peoples who suffered under genocide and dispossession and invests Aunt Sally not only with the ability to narrate those particular histories but also to transmit them to the younger woman.

Drawing on particular traditions and cultural contexts, Aunt Sally makes the novel’s first and only explicit reference to the slaves’ African past and particular epistemology. In her discussion of elders and ancestral figures, Venetria K. Patton develops the concept of the ‘elder as culture bearer’ as follows:

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36 Humez, ‘We Got Our History Lesson’, p. 131.
37 Walker, Jubilee, p. 49.
38 Historical records indicate that Sir Jeffrey Amherst, commander of British forces in North America, ordered smallpox infested blankets to be sent to the Native Americans in order to bring about their extermination. Subsequently, a smallpox epidemic erupted amongst the Native tribes in the Ohio Valley that could have been a result of the infected blankets. According to Harold B. Gill, Jr. this connection could not be confirmed with certainty. The inoculation of Native Americans with smallpox was part of a genocide project named ‘Colonial Germ Warfare’. For further information, see: H.B. Gill, ‘Colonial Germ Warfare’, Colonial Williamsburg, Spring 2004, http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/spring04/warfare.cfm (accessed 13 April 2012).
These elders take on the role of culture bearers by ensuring that the younger generation maintains some connection with their ancestral roots because they realise that ancestors are a source of strength. Aunt Sally functions precisely as a ‘culture bearer’ through her emphasis on African cultural contexts and ancestry. Providing intimate support and reassurance to Vyry when she starts menstruating, Aunt Sally assures her not to be afraid of her ‘womanhood’. When asked what womanhood is, Aunt Sally tellingly states:

It’s what makes you a woman. Makes you different from a no-good man. It’s what makes you grow up to have young’uns and be a sho-nuff mammy all your own. Man can’t have no young’un. Takes a sho-nuff woman. A man ain’t got the strength to have young’uns. He too puny-fied.

Focusing on the potentialities of women’s bodies, Aunt Sally subverts the trauma of Hetta’s death from childbirth complications and her repeated rapes, by positing the reproductive organs as a source of empowerment rather than exploitation. Crucially, she draws her thoughts on reproduction and the body from her own mother who tells her about Africa:

My Maw say that us colored folks knows what we knows now fore us come here from Affiky and that wisdom be your business with your womanhood: bout not letting your foots touch ground barefooted when your womanhood is on you.

This mention of Africa delineates a particular genealogy or a different social and cultural understanding of the body and thus challenges the exploitative logic and legitimacy of enslavement and reclaims black women’s bodies dehumanised through rape and exploitation. Amy Levin reads this scene as engendering Africanisms and thus ‘rendering the female body as a site of resistance to white culture’. Here, the violated female body is reclaimed through a type of self-love stemming from an Afrocentric matrilineal genealogy that transcends oppression and alienation and imaginatively rejoices in its creative potential.

Aunt Sally’s singing is yet another way in which she participates in the construction of her ‘descendant’s’ subjectivity. Slave work songs constitute an important part of slaves’ counterculture: they are an indirect means of expressing a plethora of emotions and experiences. In deeply affective passages of his slave narrative, Frederick Douglass reflects on the emotional impact of work songs and suggests that ‘the songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.'

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40 Walker, Jubilee, p. 54.
41 Walker, Jubilee, p. 54.
emphasis on sorrow and relief is evident in Aunt Sally’s mourning over the death of an elderly member of the community, Grandpa Tom, who was whipped to death by the overseer for a minor ‘offence’. Listening to Aunt Sally’s wailing song, Vyry indirectly learns of the elder woman’s life of slavery. Her lyrics are tellingly reminiscent of Mammy Sukey’s perspective on slavery’s absurdity: ‘Before this time another year, / I may be dead and gone. / Be in some lonesome graveyard bed, / O, Lord have mercy, Lord, how long?’. With her focus on a life beyond death, Aunt Sally expresses, in W. B. E. Du Bois’s words, ‘unvoiced longing toward a truer world’. Walker’s emphasis on slave songs points to the historic origin of blues music, where, in Angela Davis’ words, ‘indirect methods of expression were the only means by which the oppression of slavery could be denounced’. I maintain that Aunt Sally’s singing affects Vyry’s thoughts on freedom and invests her with energising blues sensibilities. This is evident from the following passages describing Vyry’s visit to a favourite spot:

She stood on the hill and watched the sunrise and saw the ribbons of mist hanging over the valley […]. This was her favourite spot in the early morning, but oh, how she wished she were going some place. She wishes herself out where the fields ended, where the wagon road was winding, and the Central Railroad of Georgia was puffing like a tiny black fly speck along the tracks. […] She would like to go far beyond Aunt Sally’s voice calling her back to her morning chores of picking up chips, feeding chickens, finding that setting dominicker hen …

This scene encompasses what Angela Davis has termed ‘psychological repositioning’ in a discussion of slaves’ mobility after slavery. More specifically, Davis suggests that the abolition of slavery and its restrictions on slaves’ mobility enabled former slaves to undertake personal journeys whose territorial and economic relocations were occasioned by psychological repositionings. Looking at the railroad, Vyry is undertaking a personal journey that frames her as a mobile subject of experience, countering slavery’s commodification and movement restrictions. In addition, this scene explicitly demonstrates the complex construction of Vyry’s subjectivity beyond the commodified body. What this means is that Vyry’s contemplation of escape and movement allows her to psychologically extend herself beyond her conditions of enslavement and imagine alternative possibilities. Vyry’s movements and observance of the Central Railroad of Georgia corresponds to an important blues motif, defined by Houston A. Baker, which involves transit and the railroad junction. According to Baker, the black blues singer at a railway juncture transforms continuous oppressive experiences into song where the juncture is marked by

44 Walker, Jubilee, p. 72.
47 Walker, Jubilee, p. 39.
48 Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism, p. 68.
transience.\textsuperscript{49} Investing a female protagonist with blues sensibilities and placing her at the railroad junction, Walker challenges the implicitly male trope of the blues singer.\textsuperscript{50}

Walker’s descriptions of Vyry throughout \textit{Jubilee} are predominantly positive; she is represented as an awe-inspiring, spiritual character whose strength keeps her family together and transforms tensions into love and tolerance. Taking into account Jacqueline Carmichael and Maryemma Graham’s critique of \textit{Jubilee}’s marginalised status as detailed earlier in the essay, I maintain that one of the reasons \textit{Jubilee} did not receive sufficient critical attention is Vyry’s assumed conventionality as a nurturing wife and mother. Countering such assumptions, I maintain that Vyry’s complexity lies in her role as a successor to her foremothers who install her with survival strategies, resistant properties and blues sensibility. Through everyday forms of resistance passed on from her foremothers, Vyry gains complexity and challenges the static frame of a stereotype. She is, in many ways, a visionary character who, according to Joyce Pettis, functions as a ‘necessary prerequisite to later fictional representations of enslaved women whose behaviour, goals and activities may be perceived as atypical or exceptional to enslaved women in general’.\textsuperscript{51} This is not to argue that Walker’s portrayal of Vyry is not, at times, idealised (as it is when invoking her courage, self-sacrifice, spirituality and dedication to her children), but to point to more nuanced analyses that consider Vyry as more than a two-dimensional stereotype, and open discursive possibilities such that black feminist discourses may be identified and considered. In the following passages, I demonstrate how Vyry’s character gains complexity through Walker’s exploration of reproductions of past violence in the post-bellum period, and through the invocation of Aunt Sally’s ancestral presence in difficult circumstances.

Although it is Aunt Sally who first tells Vyry about the abolitionist cause, Vyry’s becoming a mother acts as a crucial catalyst in her thoughts on freedom. After Aunt Sally’s abrupt sale, Vyry tellingly assumes the older woman’s role and becomes the cook at the Big House, using the skills she learnt from her foremothers in order to survive. While working as a house servant, she meets a free black man, Randall Ware, who promises to buy Vyry’s own freedom, and they develop a romantic relationship. Eventually, Vyry becomes a mother of two children, Jim and Minna, and contemplates her own conditions of bondage through thinking about her children’s future. She even attempts to escape with her children but fails and gets cruelly punished by whipping. It is only after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, that Vyry achieves freedom. Walker’s portrayal of Vyry’s post-bellum life engages in more depth with the effects of ancestral loss and enslavement. Although Walker uses a predominantly linear narrative, she explores slavery’s traumatic return in order to signal both a sense of progression and the manner in which past


\textsuperscript{50} Davis, \textit{Blues Legacies and Black Feminism}, p. 9. Davis argues that the role of women in the production of the blues is perceived as being marginal. In many ways, Walker challenges this notion by investing her female characters with ‘blues tropes’, such as the desire to sing work songs, which emphasises the crucial role of women in the slave community and culturally-specific legacies.

violence gets reproduced in the psyche of her postbellum subjects. This is particularly evident from Vyry’s troubles as she struggles to survive after abolition in an increasingly hostile and dangerous Southern environment.

Although Randall Ware promises to come back for Vyry after her failed escape, he does not return until long after slavery’s abolition. Believing Ware is dead, Vyry marries another man, Innis Brown, a hard-working former field slave, who supports her and her children. The family goes through numerous trials as they move from one place to the other, continuously victimised by hostile whites and various tragedies. Contextualising the plot within the historically turbulent period of Reconstruction and the attendant racial violence, Walker places Vyry and Innis as both witness to, and victims of, the Ku Klux Klan’s ideologies of hatred. This enables Walker to fully explore the psychological toll of enslavement on her protagonists, the reproduction of violence in the postbellum period and white supremacist identity. In her discussion on whiteness, Robyn Wiegman argues that the ‘distinctiveness of southern white supremacist identity since the Civil War hinges on a repeated appeal to the minoritised, injured ‘nature’ of whiteness’ and suggests that the notion of ‘being injured’ by the economic transformations of Emancipation and the perceived loss of all white spaces ‘provides the basis of white supremacist collective self-fashioning, which has functioned, and continues to function, by producing the threat of its own extinction as the justification and motivation for violent retaliations’.52 Walker depicts this very self-fashioning of white supremacy and its role in perpetuating racism and oppression in the post-bellum period by engaging with Ku Klux Klan’s violence through Vyry’s and Innis’s perspectives.

Traumatic memories of enslavement and various brutalities continue to affect Vyry after slavery’s abolition and they return to haunt her. This cyclical return of past violence, I argue, remains largely unexamined in critical discussions due to emphasis on Vyry’s strength and survival strategies. For instance, Melissa Walker argues that Vyry:

Lives in the present, only occasionally looking back from her bustling kitchens to all that she has lost, rather than being haunted by the past.
She moves from one tragedy – and even one beloved husband – to another with some sadness and difficulty, but she is rarely incapacitated by suffering.53

Although Vyry is shown as strong and persistent, this view does not take into account the insidious effects of enslavement and the instances that clearly demonstrate this point. Notable in this context are Vyry’s frequent nightmares about the deaths of Mammy Sukey, Old Grandpa Tom and the sale of Aunt Sally: ‘Vyry dreaded the nights when she called out in her sleep after Mammy Sukey or Aunt Sally or remembered the way Grandpa Tom had died’.54 Reflecting on witnessing violence and the effects of slavery on subsequent generations, Orlando Patterson

54 Walker, Jubilee, p. 107.
notes that another feature of slave childhood was the added psychological trauma of witnessing the daily degradation of parental figures at the hand of the slaveholders. Growing up, Vyry witnesses the deaths of her elders, including her own mother, and continues to be haunted by those memories long after slavery’s abolition.

Engaging with the devastating effects of slavery in the post-bellum period, Walker is able to explore the reproduction of internalised violence in the lives of her post-enslavement subjects. It is in these difficult moments, when the remnants of slavery permeate Vyry’s post-bellum present, that she ‘conjures’ Aunt Sally’s comforting ancestral presence by singing her song. Replicating Aunt Sally’s verbalisation of slavery’s horrors, Vyry sings as an act of witnessing to slaves’ hardships. Moreover, she integrates ancestral trauma into her own narrative of enslavement and survival. The lyrics of the song mourn the difficult life of slavery and effect a merging of the past and the present: ‘I been boked and I been scorned, / Lord, I been boked and I been scorned, / Lord, I been boked and I been scorned, / I been talked about sho’s you borned’. By identifying with her foremother during the postbellum period, where fears of racial violence and abuse continue to dominate, Vyry is able to verbalise her sorrow (and thus narrate her particular experience. Apart from the reproductions of past violence brought by the Klan’s terror, Vyry and her family suffer from the effects of internalised violence. This is particularly apparent in the vexed relationship between Vyry’s second husband Innis and Vyry’s son Jim. Innis pressures Jim to work harder in the fields and accuses the young boy of laziness. Significantly, it is Vyry who compares Innis’ treatment of Jim with the cruel overseer Grimes:

Well, you knows he ain’t a man like you is and I expects he git tired sometime and I don’t think you oughta keep working in no shower neither. Thet’s something Grimes didn’t even make the field hands do on Marse John’s plantation in slavery time.

The conflict escalates when Innis’ sow gets stuck in the mud and dies, despite Jim’s efforts to save it. Innis blames Jim and violently whips him, leaving bloody wounds all over his back and ripping his shirt. Chasing after Jim in anger, Innis even threatens to hit Vyry’s daughter Minna. In a particularly telling scene, Vyry stands up to Innis and physically places herself between Innis and the children:

‘I wants you to know you ain’t gwine browbeat and mistreat nobody here, not long as I’m living and I can help it. You ain’t gwine hit Minna lessin it’s over my dead body, now does you hear me? I’m a little piece of leather, but I’m well put together, cut the holy man!’

‘What you means by that?’

‘I kivers every inch o’ground I’m standing on. That’s what I means’.

56 Walker, Jubilee, p. 433.
57 Walker, Jubilee, p. 444.
58 Walker, Jubilee, p. 449.
Vyry’s reaction and her emphasis on physicality are relevant in this context, as she inverts power relations while using her body as a source of strength. In her landmark essay on the outraged mother as a primary archetype in the narratives of contemporary Black American women writers, Joanne M. Braxton argues that the outraged mother embodies the values of sacrifice, nurturance, and personal courage – values necessary to an endangered group and employs reserves of spiritual strength, whether Christian or derived from African belief, fuelled by outrage at the abuse of her people, her person and the wrong done to her children. In the confrontation scene, Vyry exemplifies Braxton’s ‘outraged mother’ who derives her strength from spiritual beliefs and uncompromisingly defends her children. Through a black feminist emphasis on embodiment, Vyry draws on the beliefs of her ancestor Aunt Sally and her Afrocentric lessons on the strength of the female body, and its potential. As the ‘outraged mother’ threatening to overpower Ware, Vyry challenges traditional gender roles and points to her spirit and resourcefulness as a guide for overcoming physical limitations. However, this heroic image is further complicated by Walker’s emphasis on the problematic reproduction of violence. Reflecting on the incident, Vyry concludes: ‘Deeply shocked, she knew she herself had been capable of killing Innis Brown yesterday’. Her readiness to kill Innis is framed by the dehumanising conditions where survival and the urge to protect might necessitate brutal acts as well as the haunting reproduction of past violence. Engaging with cyclical violence, Walker reveals the psychological impact of enslavement on postbellum subjects; the endurance of white supremacy; and the perpetuation of racist ideologies.

The beginning of the Civil War brings forth the decline of the slaveholding Duttons who gradually die from illness, stress or war injuries. The only members of the family who do survive are Vyry’s half-sister Lillian, who descends into mental illness, and her children. With the downfall of the Duttons, Walker shows that both the creation of a postbellum community and transracial reconciliation are premised and made possible through the symbolic death of the slaveholding whites in the fictional world of Jubilee. The rebuilding process in the postbellum community is exemplified by Vyry’s succession to her foremothers’ roles and through an emphasis on black female community and folklore. Moving to Butler County, Vyry is asked to help a young woman called Betty-Alice give birth. In this way, she assumes the role of a Granny or a midwife and figuratively succeeds Granny Ticey who tended her dying mother. However, Walker also points to crucial differences between the two women’s lives: while Granny Ticey took care of slave women dying from a lack of adequate natal care, overwork and repeated sexual assaults, Vyry takes care of mostly white women as an act of survival, which results in interdependency. Caroline Rody reflects on Vyry’s newly acquired role and suggests that Vyry ascends to the position of ‘transracial ancestress’ that bridges the races and redeems the defeat of the slave granny in the opening scene of the novel. Assuming the

60 Walker, Jubilee, p. 454.
community elder’s role, Vyry also verbalises her own feelings of resentment towards the institution of slavery and the whites’ misconceptions stemming from it. Responding to Betty-Alice’s assumption that black men have tails, Vyry reveals that she is a woman of colour, saying her mother was black and her father was white. In a moment of compelling self-determination, Vyry tells Betty-Alice about the man who ‘fathered’ her:

He was my white marster, that’s who he was. He was my mother’s marster and my marster too, and I was a slave on his plantation till Surrender and the soldiers come and declared us free. Of course now, he never did own me for his child and I wasn’t nothing but his piece of property to work and slave for him, but I sho didn’t cost him nothing, that is as a price on the slave market, cause he never had to buy me – I was always his.  

What Vyry reveals is a personal history or a genealogy stemming from the violence of slavery. She breaks silences surrounding her family and her past as a slave by identifying the man who raped her mother as her ‘Master’. In a black feminist sense, Vyry ‘talks back’ to the white woman, asserting herself as the subject of her own experience while countering racism and sexism. Commenting on the politicised act of ‘talking back’ and breaking silence, bell hooks asserts: ‘It is that act of speech, of “talking back”, that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice’. This move from object to subject through speaking out also encourages the whites to re-examine their own socially constructed views of black people.

By revealing her identity and verbalising her past of enslavement, Vyry creates her own counter-narrative that challenges the dominant versions of slavery’s legacy and dispels racist myths. Minrose C. Gwin suggests that ‘Vyry’s role as a Granny creates a space of relatedness that disrupts the rigid hierarchies of race, class and gender’. Such ‘relatedness’ is demonstrated through mutuality and interdependence, since Vyry’s family needs a safe place to stay and the whites need a Granny. As the whites overcome their racism and prejudice, Vyry overcomes her own distrust of white people. The emphasis on mutuality exemplifies Walker’s vision of the postbellum community, where the community’s agreement to cooperate and support one another exemplifies progressive social relations emphasising the collective benefit, with diverse individuals working together to create a better society. In this way, Vyry rewrites Granny Ticey’s tragic script as her post-bellum successor, breaks silences surrounding the experiences of enslavement, and contributes to rebuilding relationships with whites in the community.

Another instance of interracial bonding (which highlights Vyry’s succession of her foremothers) occurs through the shared practice of needlework and sewing,

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which is continuously figured in the novel as an important element of black female culture, personal empowerment and creativity. Expressing her gratitude for the community’s acceptance of her family and their help, Vyry organises a feast and invites the whites from the community. It is here that the women decide to organise a ‘quilting bee’ where their creativity and skills bring them closer as they discuss and admire each other’s work. Through this telling scene, Walker suggests that the act of interracial bonding is premised on the transmission of ancestral knowledge. More specifically, quilting is a skill Vyry learnt from Aunt Sally and passed on to her own daughter. The skills involved in the making of a quilt, sewing and needlework gain particular meaning in the quilting bee scene:

The house was enough excitement, but Vyry fairly burst with pride and interest in the quilts. There were six quilts and each housewife had a different pattern. …Each woman sewed industriously through the morning and at dinner time they compared notes with admiring glances and comments to see how much they had accomplished.65

This act of community bonding is also relevant for its gender specificity. The women engage in a traditionally gendered activity of quilting as a way of connecting with each other’s narratives.66 Apart from alliances based on gender, race offers another important intersection to be explored in this context. The image of Vyry quilting with the white women gestures towards constructive transracial alliances, where art and creative self-expression serve as unifying agents effecting change and social transformation. Using art and the storytelling potential of the quilt, the women narrate their radically different gendered experiences premised by acknowledging white women’s privileges and overcoming their racist prejudice. Crucially, Vyry fully participates in this literal and figurative act of bringing together diverse patterns and co-creating alliances. Margaret Walker herself has reflected on Vyry’s humanism, suggesting that it influences the lives of the women around her and creates a sense of kinship regardless of race.67 Vyry’s own quilt features a pomegranate and represents an important element in transmitting her narrative to the white women. As Charlotte Goodman asserts, ‘perhaps Walker found the pomegranate to be an appropriate design for Vyry’s quilt because the pomegranate originated in Africa and was a fruit whose hull black women used to prepare one of their remedies’.68 With her colourful quilt, Vyry pays tribute to Aunt Sally who draws on African cultural contexts in her explanation of menstruation, and to her ancestral connections to Africa.

65 Walker, Jubilee, p. 440.
66 By claiming that quilting is ‘traditionally gendered’, I do not wish to posit an authentic (essentialist) subject of experience. My intention is to point to women’s community, togetherness and tradition passed on between female family members in the context of a racist and patriarchal society, where the particularity of their gender gains meaning in oppressive contexts. For more information on the gendered aspects of quilting and sewing, see J. Elsley, ‘The Color Purple and the Poetics of Fragmentation’, in C.B. Torsney and J. Elsley (eds), Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1994, pp. 68-84.
Although Walker sets her novel in the decades before and after the Civil War years, the final chapters of the novel explicitly respond to the social and political conditions of the 1960s, when *Jubilee* was published. This is demonstrated through the crucial conflict between Vyry and her first husband Ware, who suddenly returns after years of absence. Countering Vyry’s forgiving attitudes, Ware directly criticises white supremacy, Vyry’s mixed race and expresses extreme distrust of whites. Responding to his criticism, Vyry repeats her message of forgiveness and optimism: ‘I don’t believe the world is full of peoples what hates everybody. I just don’t believe it. […] Only ways you can keep folks hating is to keep them apart and separated from each other.’ 69 She continues her speech by detailing the abuses she suffered through slavery to affirm her message of forgiveness. However, Ware remains unmoved by Vyry’s invitation to bond and overcome past traumas.

In order to legitimise her narrative, Vyry decides to strip off her clothes and reveal her whipping scars: ‘Hysterical now, she had thrown off piece after piece of her clothing, and now in the moonlight the two men stood horrified before the sight of her terribly scarred back’. 70 This scene shows Vyry through Innis Brown’s eyes as ‘touched with a spiritual fire and permeated with a spiritual wholeness that had been forged in a crucible of suffering’. 71 The following passage is frequently cited by critics as an example of Vyry’s idealisation:

She was only a living sign and mark of all the best that any human being could hope to become. In her obvious capacity for love, redemptive and forgiving love, she was alive and standing on the highest peaks of her time and human personality. Peasant and slave, unlettered and untutored, she was nevertheless the best true example of the motherhood of her race, an ever present assurance that nothing could destroy a people whose sons had come from her loins. 72

Reading this passage, Caroline Rody suggests that ‘Vyry lives to become the immortal mother of her race’. 73 While the passage is evidently idealised, I maintain that it fulfils an explicitly political and performative function. 74 This argument can be adequately framed through Spivak’s notion of strategic essentialism. According to this notion, an appeal to a collective identity in colonised countries is made in order to achieve certain liberatory or politically relevant aims or, in Spivak’s words, serve a

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74 My understanding of the term ‘performative’, which I relate to Spivak’s strategic essentialism, is based on Anna Louise Keating’s reading of Audre Lorde and black feminist discourses. Keating argues that Lorde’s rhetoric of authenticity functions as performative rather than descriptive and generates social change. This view destabilises the notion of the essential in situations where such invocations perform a socially engaged function. For more, see: A. Keating, *Women Reading, Women Writing: Self-Invention in Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1996.
‘scrupulously visible political interest’.\textsuperscript{75} Although Spivak subsequently criticised the misuse of the term, the need for politically engaged unity remains an important mechanism for enabling transformative politics in various colonised and oppressive contexts.\textsuperscript{76} Placing Walker’s work within its own historical and social context of the 1960s struggle for equality and turbulent discussions on the legacy of slavery, I apply Spivak’s notion of strategic essentialism to suggest that Vyry’s idealisation and appointment to represent African Americans serves the politically engaged purpose of fulfilling the historically-specific need for positive female role models.

In their foreword to \textit{Body and Soul} (1994), Angela Davis and June Jordan argue that:

\begin{quote}
[We cannot conceptualise healthy bodies, psyches, and communities without addressing problems that have always been taboo. This means we must go beyond the Civil Rights framework that privileges men over women and the public sphere over the private.\textsuperscript{77}]
\end{quote}

It is precisely this emphasis on community and political strategising that Margaret Walker invokes as she strategically and performatively appoints Vyry as the female representative of the African American struggle for freedom. Challenging white supremacy and intervening in the implicitly male discourse of the African American Civil Rights Movement, Vyry works as an an as reconciliatory figure imbued with her enslaved foremothers’ survival skills and strength. Although Walker offers a rather conventional portrayal of black womanhood connected to religion, motherhood and the nuclear family structure, she strategically posits the black woman as a subject of her own experience and the author of a ‘herstory’ on slavery. Ultimately, the novel resists reductive interpretations by creating a politically engaged female role model representative of the African American struggle for equality and historical reclamation in the Civil Rights period. Beginning with the death of the foremother and ancestral loss, the novel ends with an emphasis on matrilineality and progress through a symbolic merging of ancestral images. Constituting her protagonist’s subjectivity through an enabling matrilineal model of tradition, Walker posits Vyry and her postbellum survival as a testimony of women’s collective courage, unyielding spirit and perseverance.