Title
“My Body the Lesson”: Queering Black Women’s Subjectivities in The Street and Symptomatic

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Synopsis: As twentieth-century black women writers, Ann Petry and Danzy Senna have used the form of the novel to construct multifaceted black women’s subjectivities through what Mae Henderson refers to as “simultaneity of discourse”. By including characters in their novels that inhabit non-normative bodies, both Petry with *The Street* (1946) and Senna with *Symptomatic* (2004) expand our notions of what it means to be female and black. This paper will theorize the “queer of color” identities of two particular female characters introduced in these novels: Mrs. Hedges, a marginal character in Petry’s famous novel, and the unnamed protagonist of Senna’s lesser known work. Undefined gender identity and ambiguous racial identity, respectively, open up the possibility in the texts that these complex black female characters represent non-normative sexual orientations as well. Initially, my literary analysis reveals how Petry’s disfigured, masculinized Mrs. Hedges works in dialectical relationship to the her protagonist, thereby depicting the single black female in the urban ghetto as a threat to U.S. heteropatriarchy of the 1940s. Subsequently, I turn to *Symptomatic*—in the same urban landscape some 50 years later—to explore in greater detail how Senna’s protagonist is queered by her non-normative body. To expand an understanding of how physical difference constructs the subjectivity of black women, I apply a queer of color theory to my literary analysis of these two texts and make essential connections to emergent disability studies.
In this paper I begin to examine the role of non-normative bodies in novels written by and about black women.\(^1\) Two mostly-unnoticed characters in novels by black women writers lend themselves well to this discussion: the physically-scarred, marginal character Mrs. Hedges in Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946); and the unnamed and nearly tragic protagonist in Danzy Senna’s *Symptomatic* (2004). I consider these two texts, written over fifty years apart, to represent examples of the “black women’s novel.”\(^2\) In monologue-style narrative, each portrays a black female protagonist who migrates to New York City, where she experiences isolation and fear due to her social positioning. In both of these texts, a critical discourse takes place between and within characters that have non-normative bodies.\(^3\) In order for each novel’s protagonist to come into consciousness about who she is and who she is not, this engagement with what Mae Gwendolyn Henderson refers to as “aspects of ‘otherness’ within the self”\(^4\) must occur. It is a skill of particular necessity to black women writers\(^5\) who experience being viewed as wholly transgressive and inherently Other in American society.\(^6\)

I am interested in how bodily difference in these novels is critically intertwined with race and gender in the construction of black female subjectivity. I aim, as Siobhan B. Somerville writes, to “recognize the instability of multiple categories of difference simultaneously, rather than to assume the fixity of one to establish the complexity of another.”\(^7\) That is to say, I recognize race, gender and sexuality in triangulation with one another, but want to add additional leg: physical, bodily difference. I read these two novels against the grain in order to reveal the how race, gender, queerness and bodily difference of characters are constructed in dialogue with one another.\(^8\) Non-normative bodies in the texts function in many ways. First, they test the bounds of hegemonic frameworks of the normative,\(^9\) revealing compulsory heteronormativity and
compulsory racialization. Second, these characters signify aspects of the fractured and actively unifying self (consciousness) of the black female represented in the novel. For example Audre Lorde worked to claim all pieces of herself, through her writing. Each of the characters in her biomythography, *Zami*, take on this role of composing aspects of her self. Her blackness, her queerness, her gender, her disability and her size were all in a process of continually joining within the text. Finally, taking up Gayatri Gopinath’s definition of queer as a “range of dissident and non-heteronormative practices and desires” that do not necessarily fit existing categories of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian,’ I would like to suggest that these two black female characters are in ways queered by the contexts they exist in: urban environments in which they are presumed to be sexually transgressive by the fact of their racialized bodies. Mrs. Hedges’ ambiguous gender identity and the ambiguous racial identity of Senna’s protagonist make room in the text for the possibility queer identities as I will show.

Ann Petry’s 1946 novel, *The Street*, tells the story of Lutie Johnson’s quest to achieve the American Dream. An infinite number of characters on *The Street* signal to us Lutie’s potential for success. Having all but succumbed to the poverty and depredation around them, Lutie’s optimism is a bright light that draws them toward her with a seemingly insatiable hunger. It is in contrast to and in dialogue with Mrs. Hedges’ non-normative body and non-normative gender performance that Lutie may be read as a desired female object. Herself, a poor black single mother who represents the worst fears of the Chicago School sociologists of the era, Lutie describes Mrs. Hedges as having the “appearance of creature that had strayed from some other planet” (242). While Lutie is obviously female, Mrs. Hedges requires several glances to know what gender she is. When Lutie first hears Mrs. Hedges’ voice on the stoop of the
tenement where she’ll be renting, she’s unable to locate where it’s coming from. Mrs. Hedges is quite literally invisible from her perch, a dark figure at the window. Piece by piece, readers develop a composite sketch of Mrs. Hedges. In this way, the narrative form itself reflects a process of joining.

Lutie’s performance of gender permeates every moment of the novel, as one of the few things that she has control over in her life. Objects define her gender identity, as she presses her blouses for work, sways along in flowing skirts, and clicks her high heels on the stairs. Lutie’s femininity “reeks of the artificial” yet she makes it look natural. Objects that are symbolic of her womanhood—the lipstick, the talcum powder, the flowered bedclothes—enrage and excite the building’s Super, William Jones. Within a system of compulsory heterosexuality, we soon see that Lutie is little more than an object of sexual desire to the men around her and a potential victim of male dominance. In stark contrast, Mrs. Hedges is physically powerful and rejects the trappings of femininity that are socially proscribed. Rescuing Lutie from the Super’s attempted rape, Mrs. Hedges’ muscles “bulge” as she reaches out to snatch Lutie from Jones’s pull toward the basement of the building. Petry describes an “awe-inspiring” Mrs. Hedges at that moment as “all hard, firm flesh—a mountain of a woman” (237).

While Mrs. Hedges is at first concerned that because of her size she won’t be able to find a man, I want to suggest that she is able to be a man and take on power and privilege because she inhabits a non-normative body that can be read as masculine in a number of ways. First, when Mrs. Hedges wanders the streets of New York alone at night scrounging for food, she wears men’s shoes on her feet and even these shoes are too small. Second, when she meets the white man Junto, he puts her to work for him and together they build his empire—as business partners. Third, after Mrs.
Hedges is horribly disfigured by a fire in the tenement she was maintaining for Junto, he admires her more. He admires her bravery throughout her death-defying ordeal in which she is literally “blackened” by fire, scarred all over her body after escaping through a basement window. Yet, through it all, Mrs. Hedges is able to “take it like a man,” if you will. Her disfigurement also serves in ways to de-sex her.\(^\text{25}\) In monologue, she says of Junto—described as an impish old man—“And even he would never want her as a woman” (246). In this urban landscape, poor black bodies seem to invite desires that are non-normative. Junto’s desire for Mrs. Hedges serves to “queer” him in the eyes of his business associate, Boots. Alternately, pursuing his desire to sleep with the feminine Lutie Johnson makes Junto a true man. Mrs. Hedges also responds to Lutie with seemingly erotic desires, and possibly even a homoerotic past. She says,

> Lutie Johnson made her remember a great many things. She could still hear the soft, silken whisper of Lutie’s skirt, see the shining hair piled high on her head and the flawless dark brown of her skin. She thought of her own scarred body with distaste.

Because of her bodily difference, Mrs. Hedges transcends many of the heteronormative demands placed on black women. Her invisibility becomes an asset and she enjoys far more agency than the black female protagonist with whom we initially align. She maintains her position of power and does not, like Lutie and the next character I will examine here, jeopardize her sanity.

In Danzy Senna’s 2004 novel *Symptomatic*, an unnamed protagonist, our narrator, struggles to reconcile the way that her non-normative body shapes her experience in the world.\(^\text{26}\) She is of mixed racial heritage, with a white mother and an African American father, and grew up in multicultural Berkeley, California. The novel is set in 1992, which is significant because it precedes a mixed race movement in the mid-1990s and increased political recognition for mixed race Americans.\(^\text{27}\) Senna’s
protagonist moves to New York for a prestigious writing internship at a magazine and finds herself out of context. Like in *The Street*, the urban landscape as a space of strangeness and anxiety for her. In this new context, what is real and what is not real depend wholly on interpretation—even her racial identity. *Symptomatic* is an allegory about race, one soon discovers that everything in it hints at something else. Senna plays with the language of race and identity in ways that are sarcastic and smart.

When the protagonist describes first meeting her racially-mixed co-worker Greta Hicks at a “brown-bag luncheon,” one cannot help but recall the paper bag test for skin color done among upper-class African Americans to determine one’s inclusion into high society.

Three different central characters exist at the beginning of *Symptomatic*, but by the end we come to understand that they are all one and the same. The form of the novel as interlocutory consciousness lends itself to the expression of an experience of fluid racial identity. The protagonist, and her experience as a non-normative body within the text, are depicted in multiple voices because she is at once multiple racial identities—and experiences of identity. She is the young, anonymous, racially-mixed college graduate of the 1990s. She is simultaneously Greta Hicks, an outcast, “tragic mulatto” who lashes out at the world. At the same time, we learn that she is ostensibly also the promiscuous Vera Cross, a white woman—or woman who could pass as white, whose apartment she sublets. Senna deliberately creates discomfort for readers about race, gender and sexuality throughout the novel. Repeatedly, she employs vague impossibilities. At one moment, the character’s gender identity, as something we as readers had been certain of, is blurred to a destabilizing effect. When we become preoccupied with race it is possible to overlook our commitment to gender
categories—and gender pronouns—as normative.  

Senna is able to write a seemingly inconceivable experience of signifying multiple racial identities at once. In the process of joining parts of herself, the unnamed protagonist bumps up against the walls of compulsory raciality at every moment, being constantly required by others to identify her race. According to the “one drop rule” of the United States, she is indisputably “black,” but her body does not conform to other people’s ideas of blackness today. The narrative becomes an attempt to claim all aspects of a body that does not fit, parts that are socially unacceptable or inconceivable. Without racial signifiers, the protagonist’s identity has no racial meaning to others—perhaps, not even to herself. For her white ex-boyfriend, she is literally invisible when he walks past her on the street. Standing with a new lover who is not white, suddenly neither is she. Within a racial binary, this black female character is, as Senna writes, an “optical illusion” (85).

As color is constantly played with, redefined, undefined and blurred in this novel, the boundaries of sexuality are pushed. The racial identity of the protagonist is often dependent on who she is sleeping with. At different moments, each of the men that the protagonists describes having sexual relationships with fetishizes her and wants her to make some decision about her “true” racial identity. Not unlike in Petry’s novel from over a half-century earlier, homosexuality is hinted at while heterosexual relationships are privileged as essentially formative. A queer sexuality is suggested for this black female character—testing the bounds of compulsory heterosexuality—but it is ultimately silenced. Misinterpreting her friend’s apparent obsession with her, the protagonist says, “I thought of a line somebody said to me once in college, and spoke it aloud, ‘It’s just that I’m not into women’” (155). We are left to imagine the context in which the
protagonist first heard this line herself, when she was trying on some other identity while a college student. Sexuality appears as fluid then as race and gender.

Early in the novel, in a violent dream, the protagonist is penetrated by the white woman Vera whose apartment and life she has disappeared into. She narrates, “I came without wanting to” as an explanation of the erotic event. This moment serves to queer the protagonist’s body yet it is inextricably also about her experience of some part of herself as a white woman. It can be read as a parallel to Gloria Anzaldúa’s poem, “Interface,” from in Borderlands/La Frontera. In her dream-like poem, the racially-mixed Anzaldúa births a piece of herself she had not previously been able to see and names it Leyla. Just as Anzaldúa says of Leyla, “She’d always been there/occupying the same room,” Senna’s protagonist hints at whether or not the other characters in the novel are figments of her imagination. She says of Greta, “How deep was it? I couldn’t say. Only that she was always there for me…” (123).

I have been able to offer this morning a mediation on the complexity of the struggle for black women to claim all of ourselves at once, what becomes obvious are costs to conforming to rigid social expectations. Discourses of wealth and poverty, are equally inextricable from this conversation, though I have not begun to engage them here. I will close with a scene in Senna’s novel in which the unnamed protagonist finds herself desperately trying fit someone else into her equally limiting frame of reference:

At first I’d thought that it was a runaway teenage boy, all croaky voice and motherless smile. But now on second glance, it looked more like an old woman, her wiry body wasted by drugs and alcohol and maybe disease. I couldn’t say for sure. It dressed in layers…I stared hard into its face, trying to decide once and for all. Boy, girl, old man, or old woman. No clue. Even the voice was unclear (63).
Turning her back and pushing onto the subway car, she joins the masses in looking past that which cannot be understood at first glance. And for just that moment, she herself is not the one viewed as “other.”


2 I take the category of “the black novel” and further refine it. The vast number of works by black women about black women makes up this category (See works by Hurston, Morrison, Walker, Brooks and others).

3 Ibid., 145. “What is at once characteristic and suggestive about Black women’s writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the “other(s),” but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of the self that constitute the matrix of Black female subjectivity. The interlocutory character of Black women’s writings is, thus, not only a consequence of a dialogic relationship with an imaginary or “generalized Other,” but a dialogue with the aspects of “otherness” within the self.”

4 Henderson, 145.


6 Roderick Ferguson, Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 43.


8 In Crip Theory Robert McRuer writes that compulsory able-bodiedness necessarily produces disability, just as compulsory heterosexuality necessarily produces queerness. Robert McRuer, Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 9. This is similar to Gopinath’s assertion that queerness and heterosexuality and diaspora and nation are mutually constitutive as seemingly opposite things.

9 While I focus on only two texts, separated in their publication by nearly six decades, there are in fact a great deal more black women’s novels that could function in this way. The fair-skinned, attractive Janie in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel Their Eyes Were Watching God, for example, believed as a child that she was white, until she one day saw herself in a photograph. The abused, scarred and “ugly” protagonist in Alice Walker’s novel The Color Purple falls in love with
another black woman and for the first time learns to love herself. Also, Pecola Breedlove was in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* was shunned for her “ugliness.”

10 Alexander, 698.

11 This is Alexander’s argument, with which I agree—though I am not prepared to connect it to, as she does, a reconciling of that which was lost by Black women on the middle passage.


16 For example, Lutie is critical of her father’s drinking and gambling habits that time and again reduce him to a state of poverty. She therefore makes a deliberate choice not to follow in his footsteps. She also observes the dissatisfaction and tragedy of the wealthy white Chandler family, for whom she works for two years. She comes away from her experience with them with an understanding of what money cannot buy (happiness) and what it can buy (the neat covering up of a suicide).

17 Petry’s protagonist comes from Jamaica, NY. This allusion to a more distant place, sets her up as an immigrant to Harlem, who brings first generation ideological values.

18 The central character in Toni Morrison’s often discussed first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), serves this purpose in her community. Throughout the novel, Morrison shows us how the mere existence of abused, adolescent Pecola makes other poor blacks in the neighborhood feel better about their situations. The fact that Pecola is marked by “ugliness”—or viewed as such—makes them unwilling to see her for who she is and thereby represents both the invisibility experienced by young black women in our society and the invisibility experienced by the disabled. A complete negation of her physical and emotional self by those around her drives Pecola into madness which also seems to be the danger for each of the black women characters I have looked at here.

19 In Marjorie Pryse’s essay, “Pattern against the Sky”: Deism and Motherhood in Ann Petry’s *The Street*” she considers Mrs. Hedges as god-like because of her omniscience during the first half of the book. However, as Pryse notes, by the end of the novel Mrs. Hedges has forgone her deistic role and let Lutie’s son Bub fall into the hands of the diabolic Super without a word of warning to Lutie.

20 Lutie’s light skin tone is described as “warm brownness” (109) in contrast to Mrs. Hedges body which is repeatedly referred to as “very black”(5) or “intensely black” (234). Color, it is important
to note, is constructed as a part of black women’s gender identity in these novels. Lutie’s
d performance of gender continually reinforces her lightness in color, which is also from the
beginning distinguishes from the other characters. It would be impossible, for example, in the
context of this novel for Lutie to be depicted as “Black as coal” and have readers still perceive
the beauty and goodness of her character.

21 Judith Halberstam, “Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race, and Masculinity in the Drag
King Scene” Social Text, No. 52/53 (Autumn-Winter, 1997), 112.

22 Petry, “He wanted to put (her lipstick) against his lips. That’s the way her mouth would smell
and it would feel like this stuff, only warm” (105).

633.

24 Petry, 242.

25 In name alone, “Mrs. Hedges,” might be read as containing the suggestion of both male and
female. As a gendered title of honor, the prefix “Mrs.” that she uses reads with the abbreviation
of “Mister” right within it. Curiously, she carries this title although there is no indication in the
novel of her ever being married. The last name “Hedges” might refer to the boundary that she
maintains between the white man Junto’s power and the lives of poor Black people on The
Street. It might also be understood in terms of her role as a financial investment for Junto, who
finds all her advice on expanding his businesses—opening a club, a bar and a brothel—to be
the most sound (243; 251). A third definition, the verb meaning “to evade the risk of
commitment” speaks much to the relationship that Mrs. Hedges has with Junto as she has
avoided his romantic advances.

26 It is unfortunate that this rather dark and twisted Noir Fiction style did not draw more readers
for Senna’s second novel. Caucasia, a coming-of-age story and Senna’s first book, was a best-
seller in 1999.

27 See works by Kim Williams and Kimberly Dacosta for more information on this movement.
Senna’s essay “Mulatto Millenium” also critiques the late 1990s movement.

28 Strangely billed as “The long-awaited follow-up to the prize-winning national bestselling novel
Caucasia” on the back of the paperback, this character or the novel itself is not reminiscent of
her hopeful and sentimental first book.

29 This attests to Somerville’s argument in Queering the Color Line.

30 Symptomatic is perhaps reminiscent of Toni Morrison’s only short story, “Recitatif,” because it
keeps us uncertain throughout, so that we admit to ourselves our desire to know “What race is
she?” Toni Morrison, “Recitatif” in Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women,
Alexander writes, “Like so many other (Black) women writers, Lorde must make a physical space for herself in a hybrid and composite language wherein what she knows is frequently at odds with what the world tells her she should see.”


Ibid., 170.