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**MAMIE BRADLEY'S UNBEARABLE BURDEN**  
**Sexual and Aesthetic Politics in Bebe Moore**  
**Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine***

*by Koritha Mitchell*

*"Unbearable" is my mother's word. She uses it often but never lightly.  
[ . . . ] Unbearable doesn't mean a weight that gets things over with, that  
crushes you once and for all, but a burden that exerts relentless pressure.  
. . . A burden touching, flaving everything. Unbearable is not that which  
can't be borne, but what must be endured forever.*

—John Edgar Wideman

The quotation that serves as my epigraph comes from John Edgar Wideman's stirring memoir *Brothers and Keepers*. As the award-winning author insists upon an alternative definition of "unbearable," he notes that his more complex understanding of the word comes from his mother. While readers may be drawn to the text by an interest in the experiences of Wideman and his incarcerated sibling, Wideman spotlights his mother at a crucial moment which suggests that her wisdom enabled him to finish writing the book.<sup>1</sup> If Wideman's work proves to be undergirded by his mother's insights, Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* similarly articulates what its author learned from a mother. Campbell's writing a novel based on the Emmett Till case suggests that her childhood had been transformed by the fact that a fourteen-year-old black boy could be brutally murdered for supposedly flirting with a white woman.<sup>2</sup> Just as importantly, however, the novel gives voice to how profoundly Campbell had been touched by Till's grieving mother. Indeed, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* reveals that having watched Mamie Bradley from afar taught Campbell that an "unbearable" burden does not crush once and for all; it exerts relentless pressure.

Blacks who escape death at the hands of racists do not escape racial violence, and the Emmett Till case continues to illustrate this truth. As Karla Holloway puts it, "Emmett is remembered by still-aggrieved generations of black folk, grandparents, parents, and their children, each of whom recalls the personally felt terror of that loss" (7). Till's mother, Mamie Bradley, was his most prominent survivor and if Americans can claim to understand the reverberating quality of racial violence, she enabled much of that insight. It was Bradley's famous decision to "let the people see what they have done to my boy" that has made his tragedy hard to forget. Insisting upon an open-casket funeral, Bradley ensured that photographs of her son's mutilated body as well as images of her grief and her long fight for justice would teach the world that the violence does not end with the victim's death and burial.

Much excellent work has been done to identify the connections between the journalistic coverage of Till's death and the Civil Rights movement, and no one underestimates the importance of his mother's decision. But was that decision important for her or for the world? Did it help her to mourn and heal, or did it serve the many who felt connected to her pain without actually experiencing it? Historians have shown that many who came of age aware of the Till murder were saddened and enraged enough to participate in history-changing Civil Rights activism.<sup>3</sup> While scholars have traced the links between the Till case and political movements, artists have worked to represent the thoughts and feelings of those who were thus inspired.<sup>4</sup> Many black men, women, and children understood Till's fate to be a symbol of their own vulnerability in the United States. Accordingly, artists interested in representing black experiences have highlighted the injustice not only of death but also of avoiding it, for survival simply allows one to live in a country that makes untimely death the norm for African Americans.<sup>5</sup> In other words, blacks living in the United States in the 1950s understood that, as easily as they could suffer Till's fate, they could be thrust into Bradley's.

Not surprisingly, then, one of the legacies of Till's murder and its aftermath has been the careful attention that Bradley has received from artists in awe of this private pain made public. This art often explores what it means to "escape" the mob, to continue to live in a nation in which such atrocities are possible.<sup>6</sup> In 1992, Bebe Moore Campbell entered this tradition, offering her novel as a tribute to both Till and Bradley. Nevertheless, Campbell remained invested in showing the agony of being the survivor whose pain occasions such tributes. Through Delotha Todd, the character loosely based on Mamie Bradley, Campbell imagines the unbearable burden that Bradley bore, the burden that exerted relentless pressure—precisely because so many strangers, including Campbell herself, claimed to share it.

By all accounts, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* offers a complex portrait; the narrative follows the many people who are touched by the killing of a fourteen-year-old black boy just months after the Supreme Court had outlawed segregation in public schools. Since his parents' separation four years earlier, Delotha's son, Armstrong, has been living with relatives in Mississippi while his mother maintains her home in Chicago. He is therefore in Mississippi as the academic year in which integration will be tested approaches. A bit of a show-off, Armstrong speaks French to Lily Cox, a young white woman who has stepped inside her husband's pool hall despite being told to stay in the truck. Her husband, Floyd, is abusive and insecure, and allows himself to be pressured into killing Armstrong. Floyd's father and brother do not feel that Floyd had sufficiently handled the boy who had stepped out of place with his wife, so they help him brutalize and murder Armstrong. As the men ride home together after the deed, Floyd feels for the first time that his father is satisfied with him. They congratulate each other because there is a "certain way you handle niggers that talk French to white ladies and say the schools is gon' integrate" (29).

Armstrong is killed early in the text, in the fifth of 51 chapters. The bulk of the novel thus focuses on the murder's aftermath and the ways in which the lives of very different people overlap, intersect, and diverge as a consequence of their connection to the murdered child and his mother. The third-person narrator establishes myriad connections between characters and follows their intertwined lives from 1955 to roughly 1988. Campbell structures her work so that readers must choose to persevere. In the mass market edition, which

claimed the broadest audience with its \$7.50 list price, the story runs 433 pages,<sup>7</sup> and each short chapter discloses the painful dimensions of several characters' lives. Everyone is wounded and carrying significant emotional baggage. Thus, each chapter increases the weight that readers feel while prompting them to continue the journey.

Campbell refuses to privilege victims over perpetrators. Because it is often reviewed and advertised as a novel inspired by Emmett Till's 1955 murder, those who choose to engage this material expect a sympathetic portrait of grieving members of the black community. Yet, Campbell's text is designed to have readers spend as much time with Floyd and his overtly racist family as with Armstrong's loved ones. In fact, Campbell begins her story with a sympathetic portrayal of Lily Cox, for whose "virtue" and "honor" Armstrong will soon be killed. Campbell's narrator reveals that Lily is routinely beaten by her husband and that she had been molested by an uncle when she was a child. Still haunted by memories of that abuse, Lily often inspires compassion even though she shares many of Floyd's views. The tribute to Till and Bradley, then, is not achieved simplistically.

Furthermore, the narrative structure depends on linkages between the seemingly distinct lives of those mourning Armstrong's death and those responsible for it. Because the chapters usually focus on one set of characters, those interested in understanding what next takes place with Armstrong's grieving mother must read what happens to his killers. In Campbell's hands, victims and perpetrators prove to be connected by the boy's fate—just as the public photographs of Emmett Till's mutilated body have connected individuals all over the world. Because Campbell gives everyone nearly equal space in the narrative and equally complex treatment, scholarly attention to any of the individual characters would be richly rewarded. Still, I focus here on the way in which Campbell executes her vision of Delotha, the character inspired by Mamie Bradley.<sup>8</sup>

Campbell succeeds in making Delotha a complete character who is both strong and vulnerable, forgiving and vengeful, maternal and sexual. Ultimately, it is Delotha's profound individuality and flawed humanity that make her unforgettable—as unforgettable as Mamie Bradley's decision to "let the people see" her son's mutilated body. Yet, by offering a more intimate portrait than that recorded by journalists and historians, Campbell aims to make the world see what racist murder does to those who survive it. While pictures of her son's body, and her active grief, allowed many to believe that they shared in Bradley's loss, Campbell's text focuses on extraordinarily private dimensions of Delotha's struggle to suggest the extent to which she bore this truly *unbearable* burden alone.

### **Black Female Strength: A More Complex Portrait**

In order to give depth and texture to her narrative depiction of the woman based on Mamie Bradley, Campbell confronted conventional representations of black women. Because she is based on a woman who fought so valiantly to obtain justice for her son, Delotha could easily be rendered and interpreted as a strong black woman who seems to endure pain effortlessly. Choosing to avoid giving that impression, Campbell does not focus on Delotha's moral and physical strength.<sup>9</sup> She opts instead to help readers to recognize the woman's burden. Campbell was committed to presenting experiences likely overlooked

when historians account for Bradley's losses. This is most evident as Campbell refuses to operate as if the woman's private life did not include sexual expression. Yet Campbell also knew that, in a depiction of a black woman, virtually anything could be read as proof of her lasciviousness. As she navigates a cultural terrain that she knows is full of stereotypes, Campbell gives complexity to Delotha's strength by allowing her a range of emotional expression and by dedicating narrative space to Delotha's sexuality.

Campbell's first task in giving this public figure a private life was to wrestle with the presumption that black women have an extraordinary capacity for withstanding pain and hardship. Within a society that heaps some of its cruelest injustices on those black and female, mere survival has required a grit and tenacity that black women have exhibited so often that it has come to seem like a part of their natural constitution. As Trudier Harris has argued, African-American women have long been assumed to possess impenetrable strength, leading to the creation of a putatively positive stereotype: "the strong black woman." Given that so many disparaging images of black women circulate, the tendency to embrace a more favorable one is understandable, and Harris believes that the stereotype has been accepted by generations of African-American authors and by real-life black women themselves. Yet Harris suggests that, by the 1990s, strength had become so defining as to prove unhealthy. Harris explains, "this thing called strength, this thing we applaud so much in black women, could also be a disease"—another "form of ill health" (Disease 110). In literature, "These suprahuman women have been denied the 'luxuries' of failure, nervous breakdowns, leisured existences or anything else that would suggest that they are complex, multidimensional characters. They must swallow their pain, gird their loins against trouble (the masculine image coincides with the denial of traditional femininity to them), and persist in spite of adversity (they "keep on keeping on")" (*Saints* 12). Harris therefore asserts, "The superficial attractions of strength have dominated portraits of black female characters to the detriment of other possibilities. . . . This tradition of portrayal, therefore, has created as well as become its own form of stagnation" (*Saints* 10–11).

Especially because it is inspired by historical events, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* lends itself to an approach that acknowledges the dialectical relationship between literary portrayal and lived experience.<sup>10</sup> If African-American writers attuned to the racist characterizations of real-life black women responded by creating a more positive stereotype, then affirmation of stereotypical strength by writers from the community may encourage real-life women to place undue pressure on themselves. By the 1990s, black women novelists were likely as attuned to this possibility as Harris was. Perhaps this awareness made Mamie Bradley's unique situation even more compelling for Campbell, because it set the stage for a more elaborate picture of strength than had become dominant in African-American literature. Along with the rest of the world, Campbell had seen as many pictures of Bradley as of Till; Bradley's strength was undeniable, but so was her pain. As Jacqueline Goldsby reminds us, "seemingly innumerable photographs were taken of Mamie Bradley, showing her in all kinds of poses and moments: grieving, weeping, and fainting before the body of her son; praying, packing her clothes to travel to Mississippi; observing the trial in Sumner; and lecturing at political rallies" (265). Campbell's literary portrait is no less varied.

As Campbell imagines Bradley's pain through Delotha, she creates a complex version of strength by allowing this black woman character to express a wide range of emotions. After she hears of her son's death, she does not become loud and hysterical, but there is

no pretending that she can always contain her feelings. The town's most powerful white man sends his adult son, Clayton, to convince Delotha to bury Armstrong's body there in Mississippi (126). Her mother, Odessa, answers the door. Clayton offers his condolences and asks to speak with her daughter. When Delotha emerges, she seems "forlorn and unmoored, as though without her mother to guide her she would have walked off in any direction" (126). Before Clayton can finish saying that he is sorry for her loss, she "began sobbing and fell against his chest" (126). Odessa pulls Delotha away from Clayton, explaining "she ain't herself" (126). It does not take long for Delotha to recover her armor, though, because Clayton soon reveals the purpose of his visit. Delotha wipes her tears and faces Clayton squarely, declaring that she will not bury her son in Mississippi. Before departing, Clayton warns that the town's most powerful people are determined to keep her from leaving Mississippi with the corpse (128). Delotha decides that she is finished crying and guilts a family friend into helping her to retrieve her son's body that very evening; the friend drives her to Memphis where she will take the train to Chicago. Later, while on the train, she is again overtaken by tears, sometimes in her sleep. At one point, when she awakens and finds the other passengers are staring at her, a woman leans over and whispers, "You was having a nightmare, miss" (130). With little transition, Campbell takes us from this difficult moment to Delotha's outright rage at simply seeing a white man. Then, the narrator describes Delotha's euphoria as she steps off of the train, recalling the happiness that she had felt when she arrived in Chicago for the first time. This exhilaration is quickly replaced by her deep despair as she remembers what is now in her pocket: the claim check for her son's body.

This sort of vacillation is not unlike the complexity that readers witness earlier, when Delotha thinks that the stuttering train attendant is going to be kind only to feel foolish for having been optimistic. Upon hearing that Delotha needs to transport her dead son's body, he expresses sympathy and asks if the boy had been sick for long. When Delotha says that he had not been ill, the attendant becomes suspicious. He asks her to fill out a form about the cargo to be shipped; upon reading it, he realizes that this is the mother of the black boy whose death the townspeople have been discussing. After the clerk explains that Armstrong's corpse will be shipped in the livestock car where no one will be offended by the presence of a black body, Delotha tries to leave before he can say anything else. He persists, though—making sure that she hears him: ". . . it's a sh-sh-shame . . . Sh-sh-shame you didn't teach that boy of yours to watch his mouth. He might be riding with you and the other colored people instead of going back to Chicago in a b-b-box" (99–100).

In the midst of the many humiliations that occur during Delotha's exchange with the train attendant, the narrator describes how her mother discreetly helps Delotha to stay calm because she is well aware of Delotha's temper. Growing up in Mississippi, Delotha had been whipped by the sheriff for calling a salesperson who had been rude to her a *bitch* (97). Also, when a white insurance man had walked into her room while she was dressing, she hit him over the head with a jar and her mother had to plead with him not to call the police (97). Clearly, Delotha's decision to move to Chicago had been influenced by her refusal to tolerate abuse from whites. So, when the train attendant's unexpected sympathy turns into a rapid succession of insults, Odessa literally massages the small of Delotha's back. Delotha concentrates on her mother's touch and swallows the words that she wants to utter (99). Campbell foregrounds the fact that Delotha prefers direct confrontation when

dealing with disrespectful whites because she wants to illustrate that, in this moment, Delotha exhibits her strength by choosing not to respond. Mother and daughter walk in silence from the train station to Odessa's house. They sit on the porch and Delotha begins to cry. Then, screaming and sobbing, she raises her hands and closes her eyes. Not long afterward, when she hears her estranged husband's name, "Delotha's sobs choked off in her throat, and she felt a hatred so molten that the heat made her sway" (101).

Campbell's portrait remains complex when, later that day, Delotha is shown to be simultaneously capable of violence and tenderness. There is a knock at the door and Delotha reaches for the rifle and "place[s] it on her lap." Instantly, she realizes that "the cold weight of the gun on her thighs [is] comforting, almost friendly" (101). When Odessa walks in to see this, Delotha vows, "If it's them, Mama, if they done come back here, I'm gon' take them to hell even if I have to go with them" (101). Odessa demands that Delotha yield the gun and then leaves to answer the door. Two white men from a New York newspaper ask to speak with her about what has happened to her grandson. Theirs is a powerful newspaper whose coverage of the murder may lead to justice in the case, they explain. Odessa is not interested in cooperating but Delotha has overheard their claims and she wants to find justice for Armstrong. She steps onto the porch feeling old and weak but also feeling like she was "waking up, reclaiming her vitality, her will, and all the power that Armstrong's death had drained from her" (101). Buoyed by the remote possibility of justice, "she looked the men straight in their eyes. *He was my son*, she said, turning to Odessa. *She'll talk to you. We'll both talk to you*" (101).

In literature, as in life, the determination to pursue justice for her son forever changes this young mother's perspective on the country in which she lives and her place in it.<sup>11</sup> Delotha uses her pain as fuel for the fight that awaits in the U.S. legal system and in her re-defined daily existence. Whereas other African-American writers had made black women "stronger than life" and often unwilling to express their feelings of vulnerability, Campbell's Delotha is quite expressive, sometimes emotionally breaking down—a rarity in literary portrayals of black women. Campbell is more interested in highlighting Delotha's intense pain than depicting her ability to challenge the nation's injustices and inspire others to do the same. Delotha's behaviors and decisions are sometimes noble, sometimes not, but it seems that the range is what touched Campbell as she imagined what Mamie Bradley must have endured.

Along the way, Campbell attacks another aspect of the strong black woman stereotype: asexuality. As Harris suggests, in order to compensate for the nation's consistent portrayal of black women as whores, many African-American authors have effectively approved of the other extreme, constructing characters that "deny their own femininity or sexuality" (Disease 113).<sup>12</sup> Asexual strength often dominates black-authored texts even when the women are mothers. While making no claims that the novels are populated by clones of the Virgin Mary, authors nonetheless routinely fail to give these black female characters romantic partners or sex lives. In contrast, Campbell's Delotha admits that she needs intimacy.<sup>13</sup> Thus, if readers sympathize with Delotha's pain at losing her son, it will not be because she has been the embodiment of chaste, selfless motherhood.

In fact, Campbell complicates her portrait of Delotha's pain by showing that it is fueled by guilt: Delotha quickly concludes that she is responsible for her son's death because she had failed to relinquish her need for sexual companionship. She confesses, "God is punish-

ing me, Mama. . . . He's punishing me for being a bad mother" (100). Odessa responds by insisting that Delotha is not at fault; Armstrong would still be alive if Wydell, Delotha's estranged husband, had been a good partner and father. Instead, the narrative reveals him to be a miserable drunk. Still, Campbell does not offer a tale about unreliable black men and the heroic women who compensate for them.<sup>14</sup> For, very early on, there is much evidence of Delotha's refusal to sacrifice everything for her child. Before Delotha knows that Armstrong is dead, she admits to herself that "since he had been gone [to live with relatives] she'd learned to like the freedom of being unencumbered by a child" (46). After all, Armstrong had been an absolute "handful" (46). When another woman declares that she would never have sent her own son south, Delotha defends her decision by thinking to herself that Armstrong is "just a hardheaded, mannish boy who wore her out" (46). By the time that Armstrong is killed, Delotha has been separated from Wydell for four years and her new boyfriend does not even know that she has a child. Delotha needs intimacy and she is willing to make that need a priority. She plans to tell her boyfriend that she has a son when she feels sure that it will not end the relationship. She reasons, "now that she had a man in her life, well, why shouldn't she enjoy herself a little? God knows she worked hard enough" (46). Glimpses of her moments of self-centeredness make the depth of Delotha's subsequent pain particularly striking. Readers soon see her feeling guilty about those very same rationalizations about her right to pleasure and companionship.

Campbell's decision to make Delotha a fully sexual being proves to be important not only because of the many black women characters whose sexuality is sacrificed in hopes of countering the whore stereotype, but also because Mamie Bradley's experience had been dominated by extraordinary expectations of selfless motherhood. Without question, Bradley's credibility largely hinged on her "being photographically imaged and politically imagined as the 'good' mother" (Goldsby 262). In order to be seen as such, one's every action needed to illustrate selflessness. Especially in the 1950s, any indication that a woman makes decisions based on her own needs or desires could be used as evidence that she is a bad mother. With so little middle ground between "good" and "bad"—especially for already demonized black women—it is no wonder that authors would rather err on the side of saintly selflessness. It is not unreasonable for African-American artists to operate as if a black woman cannot afford to be seen as the least bit interested in her own welfare. As historian Ruth Feldstein reminds us, when NAACP representatives felt that Mamie Bradley's behavior drifted from utter self-sacrifice, a permanent rift emerged between her and the organization. Because she had quit her job to lecture full-time for the NAACP, she asked for compensation. This request led to accusations that she was trying to capitalize on her son's death.<sup>15</sup>

If requesting financial assistance could spark these accusations, any sign that Bradley was interested in sexual companionship would have been even more detrimental to her reputation.<sup>16</sup> Given that her son's death made Bradley a public figure, the fact that Campbell uses fiction to imagine a sexual dimension to Delotha's life points to the many levels on which Campbell believed that Bradley "endured forever" her unique burden. Campbell's novel identifies the losses that Bradley sustained which are not addressed in historians' accounts.

As Campbell commits to designing her novel to speak truths that are largely silenced in the historical record, her narrative portrait suggests that Bradley shouldered her un-



bearable burden in the most intimate moments and in the most intimate spaces. Delotha believes that her having enjoyed a sex life after separating from her husband led to her son's death. Her grief and guilt become inseparable and permeate every aspect of her life. Eventually, she tries to recuperate her sense of agency and motherly worth by becoming sexually aggressive within the sanctioned site of marriage.

But before her guilt leads to sexual aggression, it takes the form of depression, as Campbell again marks her departure from simplistic strength. Delotha's shame leads to months of her alienating friends and family, drinking and smoking more than eating, and refusing to clean her apartment (183–84). She also dreams two or three times a week about "baby boys, a yard full of sons who all looked like Armstrong, all calling her name" (184). Six months after the murder, "the tiny explosions began"; she would scream at people but not remember having done so. On these occasions, when she would later regain cognizance, "she couldn't stop shaking" (185). The year after Armstrong's death, just a couple days after Mother's Day, Delotha buys a gun and subsequently boards a train with a simple plan: "to kill Floyd and Lily Cox. Take her own justice. Just take it the way they always did. Just knock on the door and *Blam! Blam!* And another one for their child. *Blam!*" (186). However, when she sees a mother and son board the train, she stumbles out, "crying so hard she could barely see" (186–87). Once back home, Delotha "cried all the time and prayed for the courage to avenge her child's death" (187). When she happens upon a picture of herself and Wydell, she is filled with desire and masturbates to the memory of his kiss and his touch. When the spell is over, she decides that she will kill Wydell; only once he is dead will she murder the Cox family. Delotha relishes the idea of not just shooting Wydell but also cutting his throat (188).

During these dark days of murderous fantasy and deep depression, Delotha's loss is the only basis for interaction with society. A newspaper reporter wants to write a story "about the aftermath of Armstrong Todd's death" (191). They talk in Delotha's living room, and "it was the first time she'd had company in her home in a long while, and she was uneasy" (191). The narrator explains, "A week later, when she read the article, she didn't even remember wearing the dress that she had on in the picture. She didn't recall saying any of the words that the newspaper said were hers, although the part that read *I can't forgive, I just can't* sounded familiar" (192).

After looking for Wydell, intending to kill him, Delotha finds that circumstances have placed him at her mercy. She receives a call from the county hospital; Wydell is in the psychiatric ward. Before taking her to see Wydell, the doctor explains that, as his wife, she must decide whether to sign him in or have him discharged. He says that Wydell had been admitted when his boss reported him to the police for "tearing up" the work place, "imagining that someone was after him" (204). Wydell had not been drinking, the police surmised, so they brought him to the hospital (204). The doctor emphasizes that he cannot guarantee that Wydell will not become violent again, but he feels that it had been a temporary reaction. Clarifying for Delotha, he concludes: "No, he's not crazy. He just got very upset after being really sad for a long time, and he started acting violently" (204). Delotha likes the idea that Wydell's fate is in her hands and, upon entering his hospital room, she briefly raises a knife. Then she admits, "I don't know who to hate more, you or the white people," and his response makes her laugh for the first time in a long time: "Ain't that every colored woman's dilemma?" (205).

The tender moment when Wydell makes Delotha laugh marks the point at which Campbell's narrative portrait of Delotha becomes dominated by sexual aggression within her marriage. During their conversation in the hospital, Wydell looks Delotha over and "her body tingled every place his eyes touched" (205). Yet, by the time they are mingling tears over their shared loss, "what she felt was *not desire, not love, but a deep yearning*. He was half of what had been taken from her. And she was the other half" (207, my italics). Wydell insists upon staying in the hospital for four full months to cleanse his system of alcohol and to deal with his grief. Delotha visits him daily during this time and is not sure that she is falling back in love with him, but knows that she is obsessed with his "genetic link" to Armstrong (208). When Wydell comes home with her, she invites him immediately into her bed. He insists upon wearing a condom but she says that she wants his baby. Wydell reasons, since Armstrong cannot be replaced, "let it just be us" (210). For an entire year, he wears condoms and she whines that they irritate her. Wydell even hides the prophylactics so that Delotha cannot tamper with them.

After more than a year of not convincing Wydell to impregnate her, Delotha becomes even more determined and her sexual desire exists only in the service of procreation. Earlier, Delotha had planned to kill the Coxes, then she had planned to kill Wydell and then kill the Coxes; now her third plan emerges: "she would mold Wydell Todd into a successful, sober man, and in return she would demand that he give her a child" (212).<sup>17</sup> Delotha soon proves to be relentless as she works to become pregnant. Wydell explains that he does not want to have any more children, but Delotha disregards her husband's wishes. "She knew how to please him," the narrator reports, so:

in the morning she woke him with kisses and soft probing fingers. When he opened his eyes, her breast was near his mouth and her thighs were wrapped around Johnson. As soon as she came home from the factory, before she took out the chicken or the hamburger she'd cooked the previous night, she led him into the bedroom, stripped his clothes off, and made love to him across the made-up bed. At night she tossed her bra and panties to the floor as she danced for him, her fine, tight ass bumping from side to side, beckoning him to enter her. (212)

After well over a year of this, she pounces: "that night in bed, as they were about to make love, Delotha took the rubber that Wydell was holding in his hand and threw it to the floor" (214).

That Wydell allows Delotha to throw the condom to the floor suggests how successfully she had executed her plan of making him a sober man who would repay her with a child. Her strategies had taken her well beyond the bedroom. Without his knowing it, she had applied to barber school on Wydell's behalf; later, she helps him to study for the licensing examination, and then encourages him when he fails twice (212). After he passes the third time, they both apprentice in the beauty / barber business for a year. They later open *Wydell and Delotha's House of Good Looks*, which prospers partly because of the memory of their dead son. As the narrator makes clear, Armstrong's death had made the community angry but also keenly aware of its impotence. If they could not punish the whites who had killed the boy, they could at least support his parents' business (213). In

the midst of their success, Delotha continues to press Wydell to impregnate her. He assures her that he recognizes that she has restored his manhood. Nevertheless, “what you asking me to do now—to be somebody’s father—I don’t know how to do. You know how I was raised. What I’m saying is, the only father I ever had is not the kind I want to be” (214). She promises that she will teach him, so nine months after the condom hits the floor, they have a baby girl whom Wydell fully embraces. Meanwhile, Delotha quietly deals with her disappointment that the baby is not a boy. She consoles herself: “there [is] time to try again” (214). Her next child is also a girl, and Delotha cannot bring herself to mother her daughters. She does not nurse them, and she returns to work after only two weeks. It is as if she wants to save all of her love for the boy that she is determined to have.

As Delotha resists investing maternal energy in the girls, Campbell highlights the extent to which racial violence gives Delotha insight into the realities of black motherhood. She sees the very real dangers that surround her and her children; her perception is not warped, but the clarity of her vision prevents her from developing healthy relationships. Even as she tries to keep emotional distance, having the girls in her life serves as:

a constant reminder of her past trauma and what it had taught her: She couldn’t save them. They could be snatched away, stolen, brutalized, or killed at any time, and there was nothing she could do about it. Often when she tiptoed into their room at night to watch them sleep, she became angry, filled with a bone-chilling rage that rendered her body frigid and untouchable. Sometimes the only way she could bear to watch them walk away from her was to pretend that they weren’t hers, as though she were an observer rather than their mother. (280)

Fortunately, Wydell compensates beautifully: “It was funny, Delotha thought to herself, how Wydell turned out to be a better mother than she was. . . . She knew she had pushed [the girls] away. And the more she did, the more [they] turned to Wydell. *But God was her witness, if she had a boy, she’d do better*” (281, my italics).

Fifteen years after Armstrong’s death, at age forty-four, Delotha gets her chance to “do better” as a mother and it is clear that, in her mind, that means putting this child above all else. In the process, she destroys her business and her marriage. Delotha had seen the pregnancy as her last chance to “retrieve the child she lost” (279). Not surprisingly, then, when this baby is born a boy, Delotha begins calling him “Armstrong,” though his name is *Wydell Henry Todd, Jr.* or *WT*. At one point, she whispers in the infant’s ear, “No white person will ever hurt you” (284). Delotha becomes completely absorbed, fulfilling the definition of a good mother that Armstrong’s death has thrust upon her. She had not kept a watchful eye on Armstrong, and even worse, she had allowed her desire for sexual companionship to take attention that should have been his. She would not make those mistakes again—not with a boy.<sup>18</sup>

In Wydell’s view, Delotha’s attachment to WT borders on the perverse. The narrator offers Wydell’s perspective when revealing that Delotha had not breastfed her daughters, but “every time he turned around, she had one of her fat titties stuck up in the boy’s mouth!” (289). What’s more, “night and day she was all over that boy, and when Wydell came near, she was either hushing him up or shooing him away” (290). Delotha also

neglects basic housework, like making the bed or properly disposing of diapers (290). As for the salon, she not only refuses to take clients, but she also neglects her recordkeeping responsibilities (289). Furthermore, her to-do list never includes making love to her husband, despite the years of sexual wooing that had defined their renewed commitment. Clearly, Delotha believes that placing a priority on her desire for sexual companionship had left Armstrong vulnerable to the mob; there would be no chance of white racists getting a hold of this boy.

As WT grows older, Delotha's behavior becomes more destructive. Again, her observations are quite accurate, but they lead to increasingly problematic reactions to those closest to her. By the time that WT is five years old, he is "the spitting image of his dead brother . . ." (351). Despite how desperately Delotha had wanted another Armstrong, the resemblance does not bring her joy but keeps her worried that something will happen to him (351). She responds by operating as if the entire world is determined to prey on WT. For instance, even when she sees WT pushing a smaller child, she defends him, insisting that the little girl must have done something to him first. Delotha therefore will not punish him and will not allow her husband to discipline him. In other words, she spoils WT rotten. When Wydell questions her methods, she snaps, "Don't tell me how to raise my son, Wydell," to which he responds, "he's my child too" (357). Delotha's retort cuts deep because it ignores all that Wydell has done during the most recent twenty years: "Yeah, he's your child until you feel like walking off and leaving him, like you done Armstrong. I'm the one he has to depend upon" (357). That night, Wydell takes his first drink in nearly two decades. Later, when WT is ten years old, he is suspended from school (again) for fighting. For the first time, Wydell picks WT up from school and gives him a whipping for the suspension and his overall disrespect. When Delotha finds out, WT is standing behind her as she scolds Wydell, "Don't you never touch my child again" (366).

Delotha is the only one who is surprised as WT becomes unmanageable; having joined a gang, he routinely skips school and stays out late. Though Delotha has never allowed Wydell to father their son, she convinces herself that WT's behavior is Wydell's fault. By the time that WT is fourteen, Delotha puts Wydell out of the house. At this point, WT is a gang member and criminal, Wydell's second descent into alcoholism is complete, and the marriage is over.

### Homebuilding Anxiety

Making the character based on Mamie Bradley a sexual being is important in itself, because a mother thrust violently into the public eye is generally treated more as a symbol than a person, but Campbell does more than humanize this figure; she also makes sex perform significant textual and cultural work. At a time when African-American literature had been dominated by portrayals of asexual strong black women, Campbell explicitly links Delotha's sexuality to Armstrong's death and it becomes her primary weapon in the fight to regain control of her life. Delotha and Wydell's marriage had disintegrated the first time because of Wydell's alcoholism. After four years of separation, Delotha had begun enjoying a healthy sex life with her new boyfriend. This joy then seems to cause her to lose

her son; Delotha believes that God punishes her for attending to her own desires. Convinced that she had been a “bad mother,” Delotha becomes obsessed with having another boy so that she can be a “good mother.” This determination sets the stage for Campbell’s most sustained treatment of Delotha’s sexuality, which centers on her rekindled marriage with Wydell. She pursues him sexually for fifteen years. She manipulates him into having children and then must continue to do so because she has two girls before having WT at age forty-four. Once she gives birth to WT, sex is the last thing on her mind; she is too busy being a “good mother,” which she believes is her most important role as a successful homebuilder. Delotha comes to see her sexuality as her only tool for recovering what the racist murderers, and the nation that would not punish them, had taken from her. Sex is relevant to her identity as a wife but she believes that it has no place in pristine motherhood, so once it has given her another son, it is useless.

Delotha and Wydell reconcile when he makes her laugh by acknowledging that black women often struggle with the question of who to hate more: whites or black men. By making this scene the turning point in the estranged couple’s relationship and in Delotha’s sexual expression, Campbell shows that, as an author, she grapples with a similar question. She is determined to imagine and represent the contours of Mamie Bradley’s experience, but doing so requires her to contend with reified notions of black womanhood. As a writer, then, Campbell is forced to ask, who has done more to limit the representation of black women: the whites who had invented the black whore stereotype to excuse their lust or the black authors who had glorified female strength, hoping to overpower the Jezebel image? Rather than declaring that one stereotype has been more detrimental, Campbell works to trouble both the notion of black women’s sexual promiscuity as well as simple strength and the attending asexuality. In the process, Campbell’s novel suggests that one way to understand the relentless pressure exerted by Bradley’s burden is to recognize the *homebuilding anxiety* that racial violence creates for many African Americans.

Homebuilding anxiety is the palpable tension that emerges when black women, in particular, invest in homebuilding even while seeing the signs that it will not yield for them the respectability and safety that it should. Creating a domestic haven is supposed to win reverence for women in the United States, and respect from society presumably translates into protection for oneself and one’s children. However, this is not the case for black women as long as their communities are vulnerable to racial violence. Thus, there is a contradiction between the nation’s rhetoric about the sanctity of the nuclear family and its disregard for black kinship. African-American authors recognize the inconsistency and sometimes create characters that perceive it too. The result is what I call *homebuilding anxiety*, a sort of nervous energy that can drive the author’s creativity and/or propel the narrative.<sup>19</sup>

Before briefly tracing its contours in Campbell’s novel, it is important to note that authors whose texts incorporate homebuilding anxiety bear witness to the nation’s long history of disregarding black familial ties and African Americans’ insistence upon valuing them. In slavery, whites declared the impossibility of raping black women. A master could use a female slave as a breeder, forcing her to sleep with other slaves or he could guiltlessly impregnate her himself, because she was supposedly so debased as to enjoy it.<sup>20</sup> These assumptions and practices worked to make the slave’s feelings for her partner irrelevant and set the stage for making her emotional connection to her children immaterial.

After Emancipation, one way that African Americans marked their entry into full citizenship was to re-assemble their families and make their marriages legal. As blacks placed faith in the inviolability and legal protections of marriage, whites again disregarded those bonds. Whites ignored the existence of these intimate attachments when insisting that black men were rapists obsessed with white women. This discourse sought to erase the image of black men happily paired with black women through constant claims that white women needed to be afraid and white men had to be vigilant.<sup>21</sup> Even as they declared that black coupling was non-existent and that white households were in danger, mobs “Ku-Kluxed” black homes, often raping successful black men’s wives.<sup>22</sup> Despite these violations and the constant threat of them, African Americans continued to have faith in the home as a site for establishing and sustaining the foundation for racial uplift. Accordingly, club women of the 1890s and early 1900s taught uneducated mothers how to create domestic havens. As importantly, they gave lessons on how to deport oneself as a restrained, proper woman. Always, the goal was to stand as proof that the constant labeling of black women as whores could not be further from the truth. Black women were determined to represent themselves “. . . not by noisy protestations of what we are not, but by a dignified showing of what we are. . . .”<sup>23</sup>

Again, the dialectical relationship between African-American history and literature is worth noting; as women activists worked to represent themselves as avatars of moral and sexual propriety, they produced literature that bolstered those efforts. Historian Elsa Barkley Brown has suggested that having their character denigrated on sexual grounds made many black women eager to “de-sexualize” themselves in public discourse. As a result, by the early 1900s, rape and other gender-specific injustices that black women faced were not fully integrated into the race’s political agenda.<sup>24</sup> Darlene Clark Hine argues to similar effect that a “culture of dissemblance” arose among black women, whereby they “shielded the truth of their inner lives . . . [often in order to] claim some control and ownership of their own sexual beings and the children they bore.”<sup>25</sup> In concert with these tendencies, the fiction written by black authors at the turn of the century eschews explicit references to sexuality. As Claudia Tate argues in her seminal study *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*, such novels reflect what many middle-class blacks believed: “that acquisition of their full citizenship would result *as much or more* from demonstrating their adoption of the ‘genteel standard of Victorian sexual conduct’ as from protesting racial injustice” (4, italics mine). In the process, these works seem to equate domestic success—a solid marriage and “proper” home life—with achieving social equality. That is, the narratives put forth a world in which individual virtue would eventually be rewarded with social justice. These texts implicitly argue that, because black characters hold Victorian values and live accordingly, blacks are already morally equal (if not superior) to whites, so they should certainly be socially equal to them. Literary studies by black feminist scholars, like this one by Claudia Tate, have been invaluable for understanding why black authors so consistently avoided sexual references. Whites had relentlessly and successfully cast African Americans as sexual deviants and had used those representations to justify blacks’ exclusion from citizenship.

However, some have warned that viewing African-American literature as a simple reflection of history can lead scholars to ignore black writers’ creativity. With an eye to-

ward honoring the art of turn-of-the-century black novelists, Ann du Cille has worked to revise common interpretations of them as adherents to Victorian sexual codes. Like Tate, du Cille analyzes African Americans' negotiation of propriety, but du Cille finds that 1890s novelists did not create women characters devoid of sexuality (31). Rather, there was simply an appropriate channel for the portrayal of that sexuality and the authors use it: marriage. Indeed, du Cille suggests that scholars must analyze the construction of these characters for what it can tell us about how authors claimed expressive power in a racist, sexist society.

Published in 1992, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* contains more explicit sexual situations than those to which du Cille refers, but I contend that the text's approach to engaging sexuality should similarly be read as the author's way of navigating a cultural terrain hostile to black women. Delotha and Wydell's re-assembled marriage enables Campbell to question the validity of attaching responsibility for racial violence onto the black family unit—whatever its configuration. With society's encouragement, Delotha blames herself for Armstrong's death because she was estranged from her husband and had allowed her son to live with other relatives. Comforting Delotha, Odessa insists that the boy's vulnerability had resulted from his father's alcoholism and other inadequacies. However, Armstrong is not killed because he did not live with happily wedded parents; responsibility should be placed on the society that paints blacks as sexual deviants to the point that a fourteen-year-old boy can be murdered for supposedly flirting with a white woman. Nevertheless, Delotha believes that her family's living arrangements and her intimate relationships (her failed marriage and new boyfriend) are to blame. Her guilt illustrates how successful white supremacy has been in convincing everyone that blacks bring hardship on themselves—allowing the nation's systems of oppression to remain invisible.

While Delotha falls prey to ubiquitous anti-black discourse, Campbell seems interested in more historically based truths: "Just as systematic rape of black women both during and after slavery was justified through reference to their 'promiscuity,' lynching has historically been justified by making reference to the out-of-control sexuality of black men" (Jenkins 19). In other words, the violence visited upon African Americans has routinely been explained away as necessary: black "deviance" is said to jeopardize the nation. Meanwhile, African Americans are really the ones in danger because whites can (and do) use their negative assumptions about blacks as an excuse to violate and kill them. After all, there is a "certain way you handle niggers that talk French to white ladies and say the schools is gon' integrate" (Campbell 29). One need not be paranoid to detect "a ceaseless and indiscriminate vulnerability for blacks as a collective to whites' judgments or to actions based on those judgments" (Jenkins 19). Is it any wonder, then, that African Americans have responded to "narratives of black sexual and domestic deviance" by imposing upon themselves the strictest standards of propriety?<sup>26</sup>

Though Delotha's self-imposed restrictions come after she has already suffered a grave loss, she acts out of what Candice Jenkins in her recent study *Private Lives, Proper Relations* calls the "salvific wish."<sup>27</sup> Jenkins argues that because blacks' reputations could have "consequences for their physical safety," the salvific wish emerges in hopes that a voluntary scapegoat, not unlike Jesus Christ, could save the larger group. Often, black women take on this role, believing that they "could pay . . . with the concealment and restraint of their bodies, for the ultimate 'safety' of the black community . . ." (13–14). In

essence, behaviors inspired by this wish spring from a desire to defend African Americans against “narratives of sexual and familial pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety . . .” (14). Delotha therefore uses her sexuality only to create the son whose presence allows her to abandon the role of available partner and become a mother for whom sex is unimportant. As much as neglecting her marriage may contradict today’s notions of successful homebuilding, Delotha’s willingness to be a mother *above all else* falls in line with traditional ideals. Delotha thereby demonstrates an investment in distancing herself from the hypersexuality that society attaches to black womanhood as she strives to enter a realm of safety generally reserved for white women.<sup>28</sup>

Delotha comes to believe that if she uses her sexuality properly—not for pleasure but for having a boy to whom she will devote herself completely—she will prove that she is a “good mother” who can rear a child whom whites cannot hurt. This problematic assumption is particularly important because Mamie Bradley had to establish that she had raised her son “correctly.” As historian Ruth Feldstein argues, “Mamie Bradley thus testified that she had warned Till ‘to be very careful’ in Mississippi, cautioning him to ‘say *yes sir* and *no, ma’am*’ and ‘to humble himself to the extent of getting down on his knees’ to whites if necessary” (281). In literature and in life, black women are sometimes forced to concede that their boys are in particular danger, so being seen as “good mothers” may depend on their teaching their sons to “know their place.” *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* illustrates this predicament when the stuttering train attendant says that Delotha’s child would not be in a casket if she had taught him how to behave. Delotha’s obsession with mothering another boy is therefore significant. When she challenges herself to use personal sacrifice and discipline to protect her next son, she seems unaware of the fact that Armstrong’s death did not result from individual failings but from the nation’s insistence upon justifying white supremacy by casting black males as sexual predators.

Delotha’s relentless pursuit of another son becomes Campbell’s best illustration of the extent to which the black rapist myth is always linked to the insistence that black women are whores.<sup>29</sup> Campbell ultimately paints homebuilding anxiety as the outcome of the collision between Delotha’s complex strength and her inability to escape what the racist society wants her to believe about herself. That is, Campbell not only shows that strength can be complicated; she also brilliantly suggests that black women’s strength does not automatically shield them from what has been said about them. If strength exists alongside unacknowledged acceptance of mainstream rhetoric, the response can be as painfully confused as Delotha’s. Delotha cannot rid herself of the idea that having felt entitled to sexual companionship had made her unfit for motherhood. As a result, her ability to *keep on keeping on* also applies to her attempt to prove that she is anything but a (whorish) bad mother.

The recognition that the nation disregards black familial ties by leaving racial violence unchecked generates nervous energy in both Delotha and the author creating her. Because homebuilding anxiety dictates Delotha’s decisions after Armstrong’s murder, she continues to strive for a baby boy even when watching her daughters reminds her of the lesson of his death, that she cannot protect her children. She emotionally detaches from the girls when faced with this reality, but convinces herself that it will all be different if she can have another boy. In other words, she continues to invest in homebuilding while having to admit that it will not yield the safety and respect that it should. A persistent



anxiety leads Delotha to operate out of pained confusion and it motivates Campbell to expose U.S. hypocrisy through a character that does not recognize the trap of the nation's contradictory promises and practices.

As Campbell shows that Delotha bears her burden even in the bedroom, she suggests that the larger community, which is supportive of Delotha and feels touched by the tragedy, fails to recognize the price that she continues to pay. Years after Armstrong's death, reporters still come to the house because the community remains interested in the legacy and wants updates on Delotha and her growing family (350). At one point, the narrator explains, "As hard as she tried not to think of him, visions of Armstrong forced their way into her mind. Her church's twenty-year memorial for her son would be held later that year, and the prospect had set Delotha to thinking of him almost constantly. Now she couldn't help reflecting bitterly that if he had lived, he might have graduated from college . . ." (350). The memorial is "later that year," but the mere "prospect" puts Delotha in a space of mourning and bitterness.

Campbell's novel is a tribute, not unlike the church's memorial service, but the author nevertheless suggests that the community's need to remember the tragedy helps keep Delotha imprisoned. WT has moved beyond childhood delinquency and is well into his gangster lifestyle when the narrator says of Delotha, "For the last five years she had ridden on a float that said 'We remember Armstrong,' but this year she declined. She was just too tired" (400). In writing *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, Campbell proclaims the legitimacy of community mourning. The novel's existence and wide circulation testify to the sorrow of the wider black community, and of subsequent generations more generally, in the wake of Emmett Till's death. The text creates a space for Campbell, and others who recall "the personally felt terror of that loss," to remember and grieve and pay homage. Just as vividly, though, Campbell spotlights the burden of being the survivor whose experience becomes the occasion for the community's memorial ceremonies.

While declaring for herself and her readers the right to remember and express their pain, Campbell also meticulously records the price paid by the person with whom so many strangers claim to identify. At one point, Delotha resists going to church. She does not think that she can handle being around people. Her cousin assures her, "everybody know how you feeling" (190). He means well and the church really is full of people who sympathize, but Campbell's narrative portrait suggests how limited their perspectives are. Delotha never says, "your blues ain't like mine," but the novel screams that she could.

#### NOTES

1. I say this simply to acknowledge that he emphasizes his mother's wisdom early in the "Doing Time" section of the memoir. It is in this third and final part of the book that Wideman most directly engages the indignities of the prison system. He wrestles with the man-made line that separates him from his brother, allowing him to be an author while his brother is an inmate. As he completes the book, then, Wideman examines the "relentless pressure" placed on his brother, on his relationship with his brother, and on Wideman's sense of himself as a brother, as a writer, and as a United States citizen. As the memoir shows, especially in that final section, "relentless pressure" is applied by a social hierarchy of which he is a part.
2. Campbell was five years old when Till died. She recalls, "He was a topic, and still is, in my community. He was a reference point. I'd hear my dad talking about him, or he would come up in conversations

with my uncles, or somebody would mention him, and I just felt as though I knew this boy. He could have been my big cousin. He was not an historical figure. [ . . . ] He was my age just about. So, I always thought of him—the outrageous injustice of the way he died—as sort of symbolic of the oppression of African Americans in this country. He was always in my mind. I felt as if I knew him . . .” (Jane Campbell 958).

3. The highly influential documentary *Eyes on the Prize* begins its segment on the Civil Rights movement with the Emmett Till case and many historians have made similar connections. See, for example, Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta*. New York: Free Press, 1988. More recently, see Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America*. New York: Random House, 2003.
4. Besides spotlighting those who were inspired to become activists, some authors account for those who were terrified enough to refuse to enter the political fray. Campbell represents such characters when Ida is dating the civil rights activist in *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* and some admit that they do not want to be involved with his voter registration efforts.
5. Here, I am influenced by Karla Holloway's conception of *black death*, or “how we die.” As Holloway puts it in *Passed On*, “the generational circumstance may change but the violence done to black bodies has had a consistent history” (27). As a result, African Americans often actually anticipate “untimely death.” Whether killed by lynch mobs or by the fact that a hospital “does not treat Negroes” or by the fact that drugs are pumped into the poorest communities, those who die a *black death* remind us of the myriad ways that our society makes untimely death the norm for African Americans.
6. Black survivors take center stage in many literary works that engage the Till case (or lynching more generally), and black authors have paid homage in every genre. Examples include James Baldwin's play *Blues for Mister Charlie* and Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry, especially “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” (1960) and “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” (1960). Also, for a classroom-friendly anthology of relevant works, see *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond*, edited by Anne P. Rice. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2003.
7. The novel was first published in 1992 by Random House. Ballantine Books released a trade edition in 1993 and the first mass market edition in 1995. My citations are from that first mass market edition. It is also interesting to note marketing categories used for these releases. The 1993 paperback edition labeled the book thusly: “Fiction - Literary; Fiction - Psychological; Fiction - Family Saga.” When released again in 1995 to “the masses” for \$7.50, the categories were: “Fiction - Romance; Fiction - Romance - Contemporary; Fiction - Family Saga.” See <[http://www.randomhouse.com/rhpg/catalog/results.pperl?title\\_auth\\_isbn=bebe+moore+campbell](http://www.randomhouse.com/rhpg/catalog/results.pperl?title_auth_isbn=bebe+moore+campbell)>, accessed 1 July 2008.
8. Campbell so carefully attends to each character that important work can be done on Lily, the white woman for whom Armstrong is killed; Floyd, the insecure man who kills him; Ida, Armstrong's aunt who befriends Lily only to feel betrayed by her; as well as Clayton, the rich white man who seems critical of his father's prejudice but whose investment in racial justice is thoroughly tested throughout the novel.

For Campbell, giving equal weight to the humanity of every character is crucial. Indeed, she says in an interview that even her title is somewhat ironical: “And I gave it the title with some irony—in a lot of ways your blues *are* like mine. We had to go through our own holocaust, which was slavery, but human pain is still human pain” (qtd. in Graeber 13). However, as I hope my analysis makes clear, “in a lot of ways” is not the same as saying “your blues *are* like mine.”

9. As she explains some of the inspirations for the *strong black woman stereotype* that dominates African-American literature by the 1990s, Trudier Harris cites precursors from the pens of artists such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Zora Neale Hurston, and Harris reminds readers that both moral and physical strength have been lauded. The moral strength often comes in the form of Christianity; the women are found “answering only unto themselves, to their conceptions of God, or to their conceptions of the goddess status for themselves” (Disease 114). Harris notes the focus on physical strength thusly: “Reclaimed and often romantic ties to Africa have made prominent the strength of the African American female character in literature. Images of African women who trudge for miles with heavy loads of wood across their shoulders, or of regal women carrying huge pails of water on their heads, or of warrior queens, or of women who cultivated their own fields, or of women who fought alongside their men during intertribal wars serve as ancestral inspiration for depictions of contemporary matriarchs and other strong black women” (Disease 112–13).
10. Acknowledging that there is a dialectical relationship means recognizing a give-and-take. I do so without proceeding as if the literature simply mirrors reality. I recognize that the authors are artists.

11. Pursuing justice placed Bradley in a very complicated position as both grieving mother and influential public figure, as Ruth Feldstein so carefully delineates. I am struck, for example, by Bradley's placing the seemingly contradictory label *nobodies* on herself and her son. She asserted at a rally that her loss might not have been in vain if "a little nobody like me and a little nobody like my boy can arouse the nation" (Feldstein 284). In order to do extraordinarily large-scale work, she needed to shrink in so many ways. Likewise, she needed to be strong while appearing to lean constantly on the male leaders of the NAACP. Feldstein's analysis is quite provocative and useful.
12. Harris notes that whites constructed images of "asexual, culture-supporting black women" alongside the black whore stereotype, so both images are intact by the time that black authors begin supporting the former. Of course, both stereotypes affirmed white supremacy; the asexual mammy figure did so by soothing whites' fears. In Harris's powerful phrasing, "'They can take care of your children,' so the subtext might have gone, 'but they can never take your husband. They can work hard in your service, but they cannot inspire rhapsodies of love from anyone'" (*Saints* 2, 4).
13. Asexuality is not *always* the strategy for portraying black female strength, of course. Harris argues, "When femininity or sexuality does enter the equation, it leans toward excess, which, ironically, borders on evoking nineteenth-century stereotypes of sexually promiscuous black women" (Disease 115). I see what happens in *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* to be a pointed departure for the sexual pathology that Harris mentions. Campbell keeps most of Delotha's sexual expression in wedlock and shows her punishing herself for encounters outside of that relationship. As the "Homebuilding Anxiety" section of this essay explains, Delotha's compliance with traditional conceptions of sexual propriety has disastrous consequences, but Campbell uses the resulting destructive behavior to expose the workings of white supremacy. Mainstream explanations for racial violence place responsibility on African Americans precisely in order to produce the sort of confusion out of which Delotha operates, ultimately obscuring the role of white supremacy.
14. Campbell was aware of the criticism in the 1980s and 1990s that black women writers were bashing black men, not just giving voice to black women's experiences. In a *Callaloo* interview, Campbell was careful to say, "I'm pro-woman. But my characters are all flawed, males as well as females. *I'm not a basher*" (958, my italics). For a scholarly treatment of the criticism from black men of which Campbell is keenly aware, see Ann du Cille, "Monster, She Wrote: Race and the Problem of Reading Gender-Wise" in *Skin Trade*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996.
15. See Feldstein, 282–87. She also offers insightful analysis of the rhetorical strategies used by those who defended Bradley's name during this controversy.
16. It is worth noting that Bradley was generally photographed with NAACP officials, not a male partner. Her appearing to be simply a grieving mother (who had no other interests or needs) was important for reasons that I believe Campbell's novel explores through creative license.
17. Ultimately, Delotha cannot kill as whites do, so she insists upon procreating. In this way, she animates James Baldwin's declaration: "The wretched of the earth do not decide to become extinct, they resolve, on the contrary, to multiply: life is their only weapon against life, life is all that they have." See *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*. New York: Library of America, 1998. 489.
18. Delotha's obsession with boys is related to the fact that the nation's rhetoric about black male sexuality makes black boys particularly vulnerable to the violence that Armstrong experienced. From Wydell's perspective, that vulnerability makes having daughters feel more manageable. The narrator reports his thoughts: "They kill the boys, the men. Hang them by their necks and then torch their lifeless bodies. [ . . . ] He was good with girls; he could guide and protect them. What would it take to save his son?" (286). Ultimately, Delotha's obsession reflects a determination to mother so well that she can protect a child against the *worst* odds; it is not about privileging boys over girls for conventionally patriarchal reasons.
19. My line of thinking is inspired by the "cult of single black womanhood," a concept that graduate student colleagues Robin Smiles, Kenyatta Albeny, and I very briefly described in a special issue of *PMLA* in which members predicted future lines of scholarly inquiry. In the years since graduate school, I have continued to think through the issues, developing a deeper conception through discussions with colleagues in the profession, especially historians Kate Masur and Kidada Williams and literary and cultural critics Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, Vincent Stephens, and Kim Blockett.

In the brief *PMLA* piece, we explained, "the main feature of this cult is an anxiety about achieving domestic success, particularly through marriage" (2015). Now, by also offering the term *homebuilding anxiety*, I aim to build on the broader understanding of intimacy articulated by Ann du Cille's insistence upon "coupling" (rather than marriage) as framework. To my mind, this creates more room to think about, for example, the anxieties that society generates for queer citizens whose domestic configurations are deemed illegitimate. Still, *homebuilding anxiety* can apply to cases of heterosexual

coupling, such as Delotha's in *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, and in these instances, the author's critique will often center on marriage as a socially sanctioned, putatively privileged institution. In all cases, there is validity to blacks' anxiety about whether their homebuilding efforts will be in vain. As such, the experiences of heterosexual black women characters who seek marriage will often suggest that "being single" best describes the perpetual state in which they find themselves, since being married is supposed to come with a semblance of safety for oneself and one's children. That is, the tension caused by the nation's hypocrisy urges writers and characters alike to operate in ways that suggest that even married black women may as well be single if being married is supposed to come with stability and safety, especially safety from whites' judgments and the violence that they justify with those judgments.

*I do not aim to place a value on being coupled versus being single*, but many African-American authors' texts expose the nation's contradictions through manifestations of homebuilding anxiety, and literary critics would do well to acknowledge the strategy. I will explore these issues in greater detail in future scholarship, but it is worth noting here.

20. There is no shortage of evidence that these ideas and practices undergirded slavery. For instance, Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* speaks of the extent to which such notions allowed white masters to make slavery sexually satisfying and profitable; Ida B. Wells pointed to "mulattoes" as tangible proof of unrestrained white licentiousness; and Pauline Hopkins, in her 1900 novel *Contending Forces*, labeled "concubinage" as a foundation for U.S. social order, especially in the South. In addition to turn-of-the-century perspectives, see seminal studies such as Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* and Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* or histories such as *From Slavery to Freedom*, edited by John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss.
21. The black rapist myth served many political ends that scholars have worked to identify. For an account of why anti-lynching activists focused on defeating this myth, see Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004. For a thoroughly contextualized history of lynching and the many discourses and practices that enabled it, see Phillip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*. New York: Random House, 2002.
22. For the history of the extent to which the rape of African-American women served as a political tool (despite the erasure of that history through the denigration of black womanhood), see Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2009.
23. The black women's club movement became national in the 1890s, and the agenda immediately included defending their sexual reputations. This quotation is from Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin's address at the first national Conference of Colored Women in 1895; quoted in Lerner 443. Lerner's collection also contains primary documents detailing club women's activities, including teaching uneducated mothers' homemaking skills.
24. See especially page 364 of Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom" in *Women Transforming Politics*. [Reprinted from *Public Culture* 7 (Fall 1994): 107–54. Actually, the piece has been widely reprinted.]
25. See especially pages 912 and 914 of Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance" *Signs* 14.4 (1989): 912–20. [This is another seminal essay that has been widely reprinted.]
26. Quoted phrase from Jenkins.
27. As Jenkins argues, black women have taken the most responsibility for working to "regulate black behavior in the service of creating an inviolable respectability" (12). Jenkins also makes clear that the salvific wish originated in the postbellum era, but its logic persists today. Therefore, Jenkins's term and analysis apply to this text which was published in 1992 and represents events that take place in the 1950s through the 1980s.
28. Note too that part of the legacy with which Campbell is grappling through her treatment of Delotha is that of Daniel P. Moynihan, whose 1965 report shaped federal legislation. See *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* and Candice Jenkins's cogent treatment—following Hortense Spillers—of the ways in which its ideas permeated the culture and raised issues for black women writers.
29. As Elizabeth Ammons might put it, the black male was supposedly irresistibly drawn to white femininity because black women were so carnal. Therefore, when writers invested in portraying virtuous black heroines, they also resisted lynching because the myth of the black male rapist depended on the black woman being a whore (Ammons 25, 30).

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