

2 | Racial Hurt and Soul Murder

Chester Himes contemplates racial hurt and soul murder in his 1971 autobiography *The Quality of Hurt*. His description of hurt spans a broad but segmented field of pain typecasting. He writes:

Up to the age of thirty-one I had been hurt emotionally, spiritually, and physically as much as thirty-one years can bear: I had lived in the South, I had fallen down an elevator shaft, I had been kicked out of college, I had served seven and one half years in prison, I had survived the humiliating last five years of the Depression in Cleveland; and still I was entire, complete, functional; my mind was sharp, my reflexes were good, and I was not bitter. But under the mental corrosion of race prejudice in Los Angeles I had become bitter and saturated with hate. . . . I had become afraid. . . . I was thirty-one and whole when I went to Los Angeles and thirty-five and shattered when I left to go to New York. (75-76)

For Himes, mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual pains are distinct experiences that can be compounded and perceived beyond sensation as a series of hurts the weight of which shatters, or wounds, the soul. Thirty-five years after the publication of his autobiography, many have adopted a similar understanding of the relationship between perception and pain. The big divide sep-

arating physical, mental, and emotional pain is nearly closed. According to David Morris, the segmented thinking or typecasting of the past now looks “like a gigantic cultural mistake, perhaps similar to the belief that the world is flat” (*Culture of Pain* 12).

Still, the remnant of pain's big divide causes one to ask pertinent questions of a study like this one. What kind of pain is under survey? Are we talking about the body's pain stemming from physical injury, or is this text about pain originating with the mind's confusion or the so-called wounded heart? An examination of questions such as these points out the false boundaries separating racial hurt from various sites or sources of pain.

Morris contends, “[D]ifferent sources do not necessarily imply different pains. . . . Pain is always personal and always cultural . . . [it] is never timeless, just as it is never merely an affair of bodies” (9, 25, 29). Like Himes, Morris draws a picture of pain that needs more than an acknowledgment of sensation to exist and have meaning. For both, pain exists meaningfully as long as it is perceived and has the potential to be interpreted socially, culturally, politically, and historically. What is not so clearly communicated by Morris is where the concepts of soul murder and spiritual wounding (suggested in Himes's autobiography) might fit in this revised understanding of pain.

Spirit and soul are often thought of as esoteric and metaphysical concepts. Therefore, pain associated with either is considered either nonexistent or peripheral to investigations of medical practice, sociocultural relations, and intellectual life. Such considerations of pain exist on the borders of belief systems that offer a speculative nod to the interpretation of sacred, symbolic, and religious connotations of spirit and soul without considering their meaning or value within the secular registries of human experience. This is perhaps why Morris describes the “redemptive, visionary implications” of pain as “actively at work in the modern world, like a *neglected* but potent sacred text” (125, emphasis added).

Morris's observation is particularly important to consider when examining the relationship between black bodies and the development of an American culture of pain. Spirit is soul—an essential element of a cherished African American “sacred text” known in folklore, literature, popular culture, and cultural mythology. Although soul is most often associated with a certain type of music (featuring James Brown and Aretha Franklin, among others), Himes describes it as an unabashed ability to “hurt too painfully” while traversing life-threatening assaults “safely” (351). “Having soul,” in this context, means

possessing the ability to keep both the sacred and secular power of one's "self" intact through sheer determination.

Soul is the glue that fixes the tripartite unity of body, mind, and spirit. As such it brings together the essential elements one needs to experience and survive pain. In *City of God*, book 14, Saint Augustine claims, "[W]e speak of bodies feeling and living, though the feeling and life of the body are from the soul, so also we speak of bodies being pained, though no pain can be suffered by the body apart from the soul." In this way, body, mind, and spirit are united through the centrality and immediacy of the soul. Consequently, the soul provides access to both experiences of pain and the will, or power, to live beyond those experiences. In this paradigm, victims of hurt may not be "safe" from pain, but they may emerge safely from an encounter with "painful hurts" by using the impulses and activities of a determined spirit.

Himes's autobiography shows us the face of debilitating trauma and its crisis of truth. Shockingly, the truth it hides is not found in experiences of pain but in the crevices of pain's face, so to speak. It exists in racial hurt. Pain is a personal experience, a feeling that is uniquely our own. Himes would have us believe we own it and can, thereby, control it. Racial hurt, however, is not something we own. Racial hurt owns us. It, not pain, attacks the soul and renders its victims wounded or worse—soul murdered.¹

Soul Power

Soul power is will power on fire—a combination of hope and self-determination that influences how woundedness, pain, and injury are read internally, as well as how fully their negative potential is manifested externally. Through soul power one maintains control over personal responses to confrontations that create barriers to motivated living. Soul power is not fatigable. It cannot be taken away or conquered, but it can be killed or given away. Consequently, it diminishes only if those suffering symbolic and overt violence collaborate with pain and its champion to the point of being consumed.

Euphemistically, the product of such collaborations and complicity is called a *broken spirit*. Pain emanating from such brokenness weakens the will, makes courage volatile, overwhelms confidence, fuels anger; and, yes, it can kill. The historian Nell Irvin Painter, borrowing from psychology, uses the phrase *soul murder* to identify the consequences of spiritual brokenness. The "depression, lowered self-esteem, and anger" she attributes to "soul murder" are externalized expressions of an individual or community beyond the reach of "safely"

surmounted conflict and woundedness.² It can also be the consequence of a soul, or souls, consumed by collaboration with institutional and cultural processes that cause black people physical, psychological, and emotional injury.³ Painter argues that “sexual abuse, emotional deprivation, physical and mental torture can lead to soul murder, and soul murdered [people’s] identities are compromised; they cannot register what it is that they want and what it is that they feel” (“Soul Murder” 16–17). As the product of various forms of illness, torture, and abuse, spiritual woundedness and soul murder breed hopelessness and urge forth the death of desire sometimes to the point of rendering victims members of the walking “dead,” unmotivated and afraid (or, at the least, unwilling) to engage life.⁴

The Women of Brewster Place, published in 1983, demonstrates the potential danger posed by spiritual wounding and loss of soul power. In this novel, Gloria Naylor presents Ciel, a young mother and wife, whose experiences are so excruciatingly painful, so penetrating, that she wishes for death. After an abortion, being abandoned by her husband, and her baby daughter’s fatal accident, Ciel “shuts down.” Her condition results from painful “overloads” that force her to disengage on multiple levels of viability. She loses her desire to live (spiritual), her ability to cry (physical), and her concern for her body (mental). The narrator tells us:

People had mistaken it for shock when she refused to cry. They thought it some special sort of grief when she stopped eating and even drinking water unless forced to; her hair went uncombed and her body unbathed. But Ciel was not grieving for [her daughter] Serena. She was simply tired of hurting. And she was forced to slowly give up the life that God had refused to take from her. . . . Her visitors’ impotent words flew against the steel edge of her pain, bled slowly, and returned to die in the senders’ throats. No one came too near. . . . A neighbor woman entered in studied certainty and . . . as she reached for the girl’s hand, she stopped as if a muscle spasm had overtaken her body and, cowardly, shrank back. (101–2)

Ciel is committing suicide. Only the “steel edge” of her pain exists beyond the walls of symbolic violence she erects in her own soul. Perhaps she is lost in spiritual brokenness; perhaps she is not broken at all but willfully intent on being complicit with pain’s ultimate end. Either way, the power and depth of her alienation from safety ward off attempts from others to save her. It is as if her inability to surmount pain safely also threatens their ability to “hurt too painfully” and survive.

Beyond recognizing it as a danger, Ciel's friends fail to connect with the overwhelming reality of her pain. More specifically, they fail to recognize its connection to what Naylor describes in the epigraph of another novel, *Linden Hills* (1984), as "that silver mirror God propped up in your soul." Repeatedly, they insist on fragmenting Ciel's experience, looking only at a small part of it instead of the whole. Unable to witness it all, they either withdraw or misread her behavior as an emotional response to her child's death and nothing more.

Only Mattie Michael, Ciel's friend and surrogate mother, recognizes Ciel's pain as full, deep, and deadly. Only she has the courage to reach beyond the familiar and bearable to touch skin "so hot it burned." Only she dares reach into the "nadir of [Ciel's] hurt," beyond the rubble of time, "Aegean seas," and "murdered dreams," to retrieve the instrument of this woman's torture—"a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of [Ciel's] skin" (103). This splinter is evidence of an attack against Ciel's soul. Without Mattie's willingness to look deeply into Ciel's pain and acknowledge its soul-wounding potential, witness its "naked force" and "raw fires" instead of reading surfaces and isolated parts, Ciel would have died a victim of suicide by soul murder (102).

How prepared we are to cope with a hurt like Ciel's, to acknowledge and use *soul power*—that indefatigable source of personal will—as refuge against complicity determines pain's influence upon us. Sofia in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) never goes as far as Ciel in her movement toward self-imposed or collaborative spiritual wounding and acceptance of soul murder. Instead, Walker gives her readers insight into how Sofia survives a soul-wounding experience safely. She does not relinquish her soul. Instead, she stimulates it through her imagination, which she describes as both pretending and dreaming. Sofia dreams, for instance, of securing revenge for the beating she suffers beneath the anger and disrespect of white men's overt violence. "I dream of murder, she say, I dream of murder sleep or wake" (76).

Still, her confrontation with wounding highlights spiritual networks linking physical, emotional, and mental fields of experience in ways similar to those we witness when we read about Naylor's Ciel. Although Sofia does not entertain suicidal thoughts or behave as if she desires death as Ciel does, she still acts in collusion with her own soul-wounding experience for several years. Her story is a testimony to how soul power influences "the making and un-making of the world"—the stakes that Elaine Scarry claims are at risk for every pain victim (23).

Sofia's problem begins when she and her financially secure boyfriend, a

prizefighter, take her children to town. The mayor's wife, Miss Millie, sees Sofia and her well-dressed children "looking like somebody," standing beside a car, which marks them as prosperous. Considering herself superior, she speaks to Sofia, complimenting her on her children's appearance, but in a condescending manner. Miss Millie then proceeds to remind Sofia of her place in the social and financial hierarchy of dominant society by asking Sofia if she wants to work as a maid. Sofia responds, "Hell no," and receives a slap from the mayor for her insolence (73).

Sofia rejects the roles racism dictates as appropriate for her. She refuses submission to white authority and behaves in a manner she deems practical—perhaps even soulful. Her rejection of her place within a community of role players, however, solicits an overtly violent response from the white men who gather around her. Celie, the novel's protagonist and narrator, says, "They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the color of a eggplant" (74).

After suffering this brutal beating, Sofia is sent to jail where she works in the prison laundry. Her final punishment for insolence and for the assumed prosperity Miss Millie observed in town is to work as the woman's maid, teach her to drive a newly purchased car, and chauffeur her in that car when necessary.

In both the film and the novel, Sofia's injury is communicated through a disposition of silence and bodily posturing that suggests the integrated nature of her physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual hurt. The novel describes her as "yellow and sickly"; her demeanor is described as being like that of a "slave" (75, 85, 86). For three years she does not laugh or act as if she is living in the world. The psychiatrist and trauma specialist Henry Krystal refers to this type of reaction as a *psychogenic death*, a "psychic closing-off" wherein "a mere vestige of self-observing ego is preserved" (81).⁵ In the film, Oprah Winfrey, who plays the character, dramatizes Sofia's brokenness, or psychogenic death, by not only lowering her head but also slowing her steps. She assumes a mode of behavior, of standing, speaking, and not speaking, that reveals externally the character's submission to internal injury. For Sofia, resistance leads to physical assault, which then leads to a devastating mental acceptance (de facto symbolic violence) that threatens soul murder.

Like Celie, who accepts a continual wounding experience in her relationships with men, Sofia, who is confronted with devastating racial hurt and as-

sault, is complicit with that wounding through silence. Unfortunately, she uses Celie's method of survival only to discover that acceptance of spiritual wounding is no answer to the threat of soul murder.

Celie struggles with spiritual wounding from the opening lines of the novel. In fact, her wounding is so severe its relationship to the living death of soul murder is suggested by the words deleted in the character's first letter to God: "I ~~am~~." That dramatic inscription of death introduces Celie as the novel's "walking dead." The film version of her story actually places her in that role as she walks behind the wagon carrying her mother's casket. A small piece of the cloth hanging outside the casket lures the viewer's eye down as the camera pans toward the spokes of the death wagon's wheels. The spokes, moving inward, seem to beckon Celie to move deeper into the funeral march by joining her mother inside the casket. Celie ignores the beckoning. She does not lay down her life as Ciel attempts to do in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Instead, she endures the pain of spiritual assault daily, relinquishing her will to that of others while ignoring any personal desires she might have.

Her ability to abdicate self to spiritual woundedness is a model for Sofia, who "becomes" Celie during the most difficult moments of her imprisonment. "Every time they ask me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say" (75). But, after living for years with Albert, who is an abusive husband, Celie rejects her subject position as a self-deprecating, spiritually injured woman and reclaims her life by speaking out and announcing her decision to leave town with Shug Avery. Encouraged by Celie's decision to take charge of her future, Sofia not only imagines ways to survive—she does survive. Sofia finds the courage, the soul power, to resurrect herself. Her ability to do so shocks everyone:

If you hadn't tried to rule over Sofia the white folks never would have caught her [Celie tells Harpo].

Sofia so surprised to hear [Celie] speak up she ain't chewed for ten minutes.

That's a lie, say Harpo.

A little truth in it, say Sofia.

Everybody look at her like they surprise she there. *It like a voice speaking from the grave.* (175–76, emphasis added)⁶

Spiritual wounding like Sofia's is a central cause of the devastating effects pain has on individuals and communities in many of the texts surveyed here. As the root of wilted desire and defeat, spiritual wounding often accompanies

and may even precede the oppressive experience of racial hurt, which Himes describes as the cruelest wound and the deepest cut to bear. Both his and Sofia's experiences of racial hurt highlight spiritual wounding as a prelude to the soul-shattering potential of prejudice, hate, and fear.

Soul Food

Authors who align spiritual wounding with pain in African American literature do not always suggest death and silence as its eventual resolution. Sometimes spiritual wounding is depicted as an economically profitable and productive entity existing within various fields of racially codified value systems. The music industry is one of the most profitable of these fields, especially when we consider the role blues music plays in soothing spiritual woundedness. If willfulness and courage are basic concepts within soul power, then the blues, balancing on the sharp edge of both, is soul food. As Trudier Harris notes in *South of Tradition* (2002), "[s]inging the blues does not solve problems, but it does boost the spirit sufficiently to continue to deal with the problems" (14).

In *Blues, Ideology, and African American Literature*, Houston A. Baker Jr. comments that "the blues performance contain[s] lyrical inscriptions of both lack and commercial possibility . . . creativity and commerce" (9). During the 1920s the blues industry flourished. While offering several weekly releases, labels like Victor, Gennett, Okeh, and Columbia experienced successful sales in the "hundreds of thousands" (Baker 12). For years, the blues grew as a trope of suffering synonymous with black pain. It was tangible, marketable, and, regrettably, appropriated in ways that compromised its authentic connections with the black phylogenetically conceived self. For many African Americans, the representation of the blues in various popular venues, including literature and film, became too closely associated with debased and perverse behaviors. For them, negative racial marking (the commerce and symbolic capital of the blues) ultimately rendered this music a source of shame—a site for denial and cultural misrecognition.⁷

Pain is a reckonable presence within the African American blues tradition, a communicated and sensed experience shared between singer and audience. It provides the blues with a powerful and authentic pedigree of meaning recognizable through texture, depth, tone and structure of voice, and engaged emotion. In other words, the blues embodies pain and gives it an articulated presence—a presence one can feed to the soul as fuel for tomorrow's pain-filled fights. In Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), for instance, Ursa, the novel's pro-

tagonist, gives voice to pain through her music. Experiences of personal and historical woundedness are not only heard as she sings, but they are also felt.

Ursa is physically, mentally, and spiritually wounded by her body's relationship with past and present acts of overt and symbolic violence. After a physical attack that ends in the removal of her womb, her voice is recognizably endowed with articulated pain and woundedness. Her friend Cat is the first to recognize the change. "Your voice sounds a little strained, that's all. But if I hadn't heard you before, I wouldn't notice anything. I'd still be moved. Maybe even moved more, because it sounds like you been through something. . . . you sound like you been through more now. You know what I mean?" (44).

Much later, Max Monroe, the owner of the club where Ursa sings, tries to name the thing that makes her voice so special. For him, Ursa's is a wounded, wounding, and enthralling blues voice. It is a presence with texture and substance. "You got a hard kind of voice," he tells Ursa. "You know like callused hands. Strong and hard but gentle underneath. Strong but gentle too. The kind of voice that can hurt you. I can't explain it. Hurt you and make you still want to listen" (96).

Pain's audible presence gives Ursa's career as a blues performer a boost. Everyone who hears her sing is attracted to her music and, by extension, to her (in some cases both sexually and emotionally). Ursa's blues speak from her soul and connect with other souls. In this novel, the soul is a safe space where emotions are stirred if not also conjured. It is a place where movement through pain to safety can be at once pleasurable, hurtful, and impossible to resist.

The novel makes clear the intimate relationship between soul power and the blues. Ursa's repertoire of songs, for instance, includes titles like "The Broken Soul Blues," which speaks unmistakably of soul wounding. "People always got real quiet on that," the narrator tells us (159). As audiences connect with the emotions and complex mental experiences of pain and pleasure that extend from Ursa's blues, there is silence. Sometimes there are even tears. The novel presents a forty-eight-year-old blues veteran who speaks of this as he compares Ursa to Billie Holiday: "You know you made me feel good singing. You made me feel real good singing. . . . You know the onliest other time I felt good was when I was in the Apollo Theater. . . . Billie Holiday . . . sang for two solid hours. And then when she finished, there was a full minute of silence, just silence. And then there was applauding and crying" (170).

Pain's presence safely and soulfully "mastered" is manifested in ways clearly linked to the blues singer's ability to perform the blues and, thereby, maintain

not only a career but also economic security. Although Max is attracted to Ursa sexually, he rejects the urge to “have” her because it would not end well for his business. Ursa is “safe” from an undesired touch because she masters pain and returns it to the world outside her self in a “palatable” and profitable form—in her music. Max would not risk losing the financial benefits of her “soul food’s” success for a moment of physical pleasure. For the blues singer and those who benefit from her or his song, pain equals money, pleasure, and power.

But there is a danger in becoming too connected with pain or too indebted to woundedness—even for the blues singer. The man described before as the blues veteran in *Corregidora* points out how this danger affected Holiday. “If you listen to those early records and then listen to that last one, you see what they done to her voice,” he comments. “They say she destroyed herself, but she didn’t destroy herself. They destroyed her” (170). Although this may be true, is it not also possible that her racial vulnerability overcame her ability to resist submission to symbolic violence?

According to Holiday’s autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956), which was made into a movie in 1972, the singer experienced physical attacks from Southerners who did not appreciate her brand of entertainment, particularly when she sang “Strange Fruit,” a song about lynching. She also suffered racist rejection in the form of back-door entrances and broken romances. Indeed, “They” (and, by this, I mean primarily those who control the field of music and decide who will and who will not be a success) did contribute to Holiday’s retreat into soul murder. “They” used her talent for profit and pleasure but forgot her humanity. Holiday, however, played a self-destructive role in her demise. She chose an escape from pain that had no power to accomplish its task. Instead of saving her, it threatened the one thing she had that could: her soul power. Holiday’s spirit was attacked by racism’s mortal wounding, but she died of complicity through drug abuse.

Mattie, in Naylor’s novel, recognizes Ciel’s suffering as a mortal wound existing beyond the range of what is considered “normal” mourning behaviors. She does not heal her friend by aligning their personal stories, analyzing the cause of pain, masking it with drugs, or otherwise misrecognizing it. Although a concern for and understanding of each potential source of misrecognition certainly assists Mattie’s ability to retrieve Ciel from impending death, they are not central to her healing. To uproot and dislodge pain’s overwhelming effects, and to help Ciel overcome it safely, Mattie connects with a history of woundedness and lost children, a past inscribed on Ciel’s body and present

within her dying soul. Ursa also connects with her history and survives it safely. She feeds her soul by giving voice and soul-cleansing expression to the pain that threatens it.

Apparently, Holiday was unable to do the same. She failed to dislodge or uproot racial hurt successfully because she failed to recognize and abolish a potential threat to her soul. By masking racial vulnerability and the threat of soul murder with drugs, she became complicit with them, allowing racial hurt to splinter her “silver mirror” to the point of death.

Blackpain

In the 1998 motion picture *Living Out Loud*, an intoxicated white woman ascribes the talents of an African American nightclub singer named Liz Bailey (played by Queen Latifah) to a racial and biological inheritance of pain. “I swear you make me cry,” the woman says, “because when you sing it’s not about just you, it’s not about now. It’s the whole black experience. You know what I’m saying? Because, you see, black people—African American people—when they sing sentimental songs it’s not sentimental. Not sentimental. Right? You know why? It’s because of the pain . . . because of the pain to back it up . . . it’s the pain . . . you have the pain.” Dispersed throughout the woman’s speech, mocking her words and her assumptions, are the dismissive replies of Queen Latifah’s character: “Oh yeah, . . . the pain, . . . Yes, I see. . . . I have the pain. . . . I’m just filled with pain.”

Pain is the singer’s role, the part she is asked to play in the drama of “living out loud.” The white woman’s comments offer no other reason for the singer’s presence, no other reason to listen to her song. The only point of the scene is to emphasize the value of black people, specifically black artists, as living memorials to a pain-filled past.

Although the white woman in the scene appears ridiculous and unwittingly racist, her assumptions are not far out of line with the racial myths defining black bodies in America. For this woman, and many others like her, no matter what is occurring or what the circumstances of assembly might be, the individual whose body is black is always a reminder of the gruesome realities that sustain an impenetrable link between racial terrorism and black pain. The white woman, in acknowledging this, thinks she is vindicated, removed from the frame of those who cause racial hurt, when in reality, she is promoting a legacy of suffering that separates her from those with whom she is attempting to identify. Her verbal and visual assault amounts to overt violence.

She has wounded her victim with eyes that watch but see nothing beyond the mythical logic of black bodies as a metaphor for a legacy of pain.

Queen Latifah's character, with her flawless physical appearance and pain-free disposition, demonstrates that tangible evidence of African American suffering does not have to exist for a body-reading public to assume knowledge of black pain or be held captive to stereotypical perceptions about it. As much as we might like to deny it, sometimes when we see black skin, we assume the presence of pain. It is there either as a history embedded in the tones and texture of the flesh or as a mythology accepted as truth. This kind of image-reading allows the black body to function as a metaphor for suffering, injury, and pain (which I call *blackpain*). This perception and potential for meaning has evolved into a mythico-ritual logic (that is, intelligence drawn from the integration of history, myth, and ritual) that aligns black people inextricably with a pain-ridden legacy. It is a legacy once thought to influence and color everything African Americans create—particularly art and literature.

Irving Howe, the critic and editor of *Dissent Magazine*, falls victim to this logic in his 1963 essay "Black Boys and Native Sons." Howe claims black literature is produced beneath the pressure of "a pain and ferocity that nothing could remove" (qtd. in Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 111). For him, pain is a necessity in matters of black genius. It is the ultimate "truth" motivating black writing. Ralph Ellison responds to this accusation in "The World and the Jug" by challenging the prescriptive mandate:

I must say that [Howe's comments] brought a shock of recognition. Some twelve years ago, a friend argued with me for hours that I could not possibly write a novel because my experience as a Negro had been too excruciating to allow me to achieve that psychological and emotional distance necessary to artistic creation. Since he "knew" Negro experience better than I, I could not convince him that he might be wrong. Evidently Howe feels that unrelieved suffering is the only "real" Negro experience, and that the true Negro writer must be ferocious. (*Shadow and Act* 111)

Chester Himes also comments on the willingness of white publishers to buy into and promote the stereotype of pain's inseparable connection to black creativity. Himes claims his resistance to the stereotype is why the publishing industry rejected his novel *Black Sheep*. He writes, "American publishers are not interested in black writers unless they bleed from white torture. I was begin-

ning to bleed, but I had not bled enough by the time I wrote that book. This attitude might also apply to the white American readers of novels. I have never heard the phrase ‘It’s a beautiful book’ applied to a book written by a black writer unless the black characters have suffered horribly” (72–73).

Hilton Als charges the publishers and editors of *Without Sanctuary* (2000) with the same narrowly focused acceptance of black people as pained. Als claims his role as a cliché is the only reason he was invited to write an introductory statement for the volume of lynching photography.⁸ “In writing this . . . I’m feeding, somewhat into . . . ‘white euphoria,’ which is defined by white people exercising their largesse in my face as they say, Tell me about yourself, meaning, Tell me how you’ve suffered. Isn’t that what you people do? Suffer nobly, poetically sometimes even? Doesn’t suffering define you?” (40) Als describes himself sarcastically as the player of assigned roles, the “fool” in collusion to be displayed for the pleasure of “white folks.” In other words, he is the voice and body of blackpain.

As suggested in the introduction to this study, living a pained existence is “un-American.” True “Americans” are constructed as virtually pain-free individuals who live in economic prosperity and political authority while helping others move beyond the painful realities of unfortunate circumstances. These circumstances assume a racial specificity that provides those who are not black a superficial means of escaping responsibility for and ownership of certain types of experience. For them, black bodies are not only memorials to black pain, they also serve as vessels for all the disposed, diminished, and denied experiences rejected by white-nation principles and belief systems.

One way these systems preserve a pain-free national image is through the maintenance of the black body as an absent presence within the state—a substantive, monitored, and contained vessel of pain. Such beliefs circumscribe a world and a people unmade symbolically as human beings, as U.S. citizens, and as individuals by pain’s incomparable grip. According to this mythology, the only purpose for such a person’s continued existence is to serve as a receptacle for other people’s suffering (and sexual perversions), an “other” existing to support a nation’s belief in its pain-free status. This could never be more poignantly communicated than in the 1999 film *The Green Mile*.

The movie presents a stereotypically large, infantile, frightened, and ignorant black protagonist, named John Coffey (played by Michael Clarke Duncan), who is on death row for the murder and rape of two little girls. In “Melodrama in Black and White: Uncle Tom and *The Green Mile*,” Linda Williams

rightfully describes the film as falling within the “mainstream of the negro-philic Tom tradition—that is, in the tradition that privileges sympathy for the unjust suffering of black victims. . . . [and] a Christ-like and Tom-like black acceptance of racial injustice” (16). Although this is an astute reading of the film, another exists. The cultural politics of *The Green Mile* not only ask its viewers to accept “a melodramatic misrecognition of virtue,” as Williams insists, but they also offer a cinematic design that insists readers misrecognize and deny the regulatory action and mythology of exclusion sustained through the film’s interplay of blackpain and black virtue (19).

The film falls into the recently popular “magical black man” category because of Coffey’s peculiar magical powers.⁹ He can absorb into his body the suffering and disease of others, healing them of pain and saving them from the threat of death. This is what he is attempting to do when arrested for rape and murder. He is trying to revive two dead girls. Although a “crazed” or “mad” white man (who is executed later for another offense) was the one who killed them, Coffey tells everyone he was trying to “take it back; but it was too late.” He was trying to “take” death and injury “back” into his body, which, as we can see, is where it belongs in the symbolic system of blackpain. The statement interpreted this way—that he takes back what is rightly his—suggests that both death and injury are somehow inherent to his existence and to the collective black bodies he represents. Coffey is convicted of murder not because of overwhelming evidence but because everyone misinterprets the meaning of his confession. To them he is a black man explaining what happened after he raped and killed two little white girls. That he was neither the little girls’ murderer nor their rapist has little bearing on his fate. The head prison guard, Paul Edgecomb (played by Tom Hanks), is the only one to correctly interpret Coffey’s words, but even he permits the man’s uncontested execution.

The audience is forewarned of this ending when Percy, the evil and most inexperienced guard in the movie, introduces Coffey’s arrival on death row by yelling repeatedly, “Dead man walking.” At this point in the film, we do not know the black man’s name or why he is doomed to die. All we know is that his sentence has rendered him empty of life. He is a body, walking to its final destruction. It is from this metaphorical lifelessness, a spiritual death, that the audience gets its first glimpse of the character as an icon of blackpain—a sign representing America’s desire for a pain-free existence. The black man’s magical talent—one he uses to free several white characters of pain, suffering, and disease—makes clear his usefulness to the nation-state.

Coffey takes into his body the pain and illnesses of everyone associated with the state prison system (that is, the nation-state). He cures Edgecomb's painful urinary tract infection, making Edgecomb sexually virile and disease free—purified. He also heals the warden's dying wife of cancer. When a white inmate dies painfully in a botched electrocution, Coffey feels his pain as he has felt none other. The characters assigned to view the execution run from the horror they witness, knowing the inmate is suffering in a manner they cannot bear to watch. But as the camera shifts from Coffey to the execution chamber and back, we realize the white inmate feels nothing. Although his body jerks, he is silent. Blow by blow, Coffey takes the man's pain into his body until anything touching Coffey (including the air around him) is fired with the explosive energy of pain. The force of it is so strong that we might conclude Coffey absorbs into his body both the dying man's pain and the sin of the guard, Percy, who intentionally botches the execution.

In all except this case, Coffey's magic concludes as he releases the absorbed pain in pellets that explode from his mouth and float into the air like bees from a hive. He is weakened by the experience, but he survives. After the electrocution, however, only part of this happens. Because the inmate dies, he, like the little girls, cannot receive a pain-free "existence." Although Coffey tries to contain the man's pain and "take back" death, human mortality defeats his efforts. As the inmate lies still (and on fire) in the death chamber, Coffey feels "mighty tired" and folds himself into a fetal position to rest. His "rebirth" upon waking does not free him of his responsibility and task as pain's vessel, however. He continues to function as the leveler of white suffering until his own execution, even endowing Edgecomb with a gift of longevity by simply touching him. When Coffey's usefulness as a receptacle of pain ends, he is disposed of—thrown away without reprieve.

John Coffey is never presented as an individual, a man whom we know. Neither do we feel a need to know anything about him. He enters the movie a stranger and remains a stranger throughout the story. By its end, we know nothing about his history, his family, his work, his likes and dislikes, his age, or his desires. We are not sure where he comes from or how he came to be near the girls he is accused of killing. And because of his abnormal size and unusual talent, we wonder if he is human at all. Instead of entertaining this possibility, the film asks us to read into Coffey's existence only those things we have been told. First, Coffey is a "dead man walking," a body void of "real" life, functioning as a depository for white (male and female) Americans' pain, suffering, and crim-

inal misdeeds. Second, he exists within the “house” of the state (the penitentiary), but he is not a subject (employee) of the state. Third, his only “job” (his only reason for being) is to cleanse those who are in danger of being bothered by virtue of their inability to escape pain’s grip. And fourth, he is the “cancer,” the infection, the unwanted and uncontrollable growth that somehow found its way into a world dominated by the pure and worthy; he must be expunged.

Even a mouse, freed magically from pain and inevitable death, is worth more than this man, for the mouse gains his life and immortality while the black man who granted his stay (as in stay of execution) is killed. The white world controlling Coffey’s destiny sentences him to death for crimes he did not commit and purges itself of disease, blame, and discomfort by using him as a container for its pain; he is then discarded like a used bandage. Although his story is fictional, it is a frightful reminder of how unjust and horrific U.S. “justice” can be when we refuse to see beyond myths and racist fictions.

According to Linda Williams, the film “rescues white Americans from the guilt of putting the innocent black man to death. . . . What is striking . . . is the remarkable extent to which the establishment of white virtue rests upon a paradoxical administration of pain and death to the black body so that white people may weep” (*Playing* 20–21). However, because the mandates of containment and image control (agreed on by the subjects of this nation) define black people as the inheritors of pain, something more is at stake.

Popular perceptions linking black bodies to a legacy of pain compromise, and sometimes diminish completely, the power of the human voice and will to support and encourage soul survival. Under its weight, black artists and everyday folk, like John Coffey, become memorials to pain and receptacles of a nation’s unwanted injury and illness—both social and physical. While Coffey loses his life, Liz, in *Living Out Loud*, loses her individuality. Both are victims of a naturalized communal association with pained bodies.

Unlike Ursa in *Corregidora*, Liz is not perceived, in the scene discussed earlier in this chapter, as the owner of a powerful and soul-feeding voice. Unlike Billie Holiday, her song is not soul food, at least not to the white listener speaking to her. The white reader of the black body in the scene misrecognizes the singer’s niche as a healer and provider of soul food. Liz becomes instead an image of pain operating very much like the black woman in Edmund Burke’s story, which confines to black bodies the assumed and inherent pain of blackness (discussed in chapter 1).

Even closer to Burke’s proposal is the “pain killer” in *The Green Mile*, John

Coffey. The black body is an icon of blackpain functioning primarily as a mythology of substitution and containment. The film, therefore, provides insight into how blackpain defines and cleanses the white nation and its constructed image of U.S. citizenry while concealing the realities of African American lives and individuality—rendering such knowledge both superfluous and unnecessary. Like Coffey, blackpain provides a space where experiences converge to dominate meaning and life. Within that space, “[p]ain defines both voice and body, the speaker and the spoken” (Davis 396).

In this way, the black body remains a site of compromise and containment: compromise of human dignity and life and containment of unwelcome or un-American experiences. Racial wounding persists under these conditions and with each strike of human abstraction brought on by the imposition of memorialized pain, soul murder and social death occurs. Without a Mattie Michael to rock us past the memory of ancient wounds and racial hurt, healing evades us.

Frequently, cultural representations intended to revise misrecognition, calm racial vulnerability, and soothe the alienation of personal hurt fail to do so. Why? I suggest that when the representation of the black body is too closely tied to a history of terror, suffering, torture, and national woundedness, it cannot break free. When life and Being are made subordinate to physical vulnerability and suffering, the body is bound, as an abstraction, to pain. It becomes *blackpain*, a metaphor void of soul. Being and, therefore, soul are made subordinate to body. It is impossible to experience or recognize the healing remedy of soul power when there is no soul offered for consideration.