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“Interracial Intimacy in Antebellum America”

Dolen Perkins-Valdez, Trudier Harris, Sharony Green, and Lisa Ze-Winters

Panel Discussion

GREEN: Okay, we’re going to go ahead and get started. I want to thank you all for joining us this evening. My name is Sharony Green and I’m an assistant professor of history at The University of Alabama. The title of this evening’s talk is “Interracial Intimacies in Antebellum America,” and it should go without saying, but I’ll say it anyway that the ramifications of our talk go beyond the antebellum period. As Thomas Sugrue, riffing on Faulkner, once said, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” And with three amazing writers and scholars by my side, we’d like to invite you to think of the possibilities for such a statement.

I also want to state for the record the obvious, which is that the horrors of slavery and the state of present day race relations are also before us, but something else is too. To give you an example of what I mean, yesterday I was privileged to see the beautiful paintings in that gallery right there. I learned that the artist is a white southern woman in her eighties, from Dothan, Alabama. She beautifully captures not only the faces and the expressions of white Americans but also black ones. I don’t know if any of you even had moment to peek into that gallery, but I was especially struck by the African-American debutantes. It’s stunning. It is as stunning as her painting of African-American men in a barbershop. And if you can see the show, it opens February 11.

Here’s the point: Her name is Dana Kennington. Again, she’s in her eighties. She’s from Dothan, and she is white. So I was telling my dear friend Amy McKendrick, who is here today, about those paintings and how she was able to capture not just blackness, what’s obvious about being a person of African descent, but just the tilt an African woman’s head. You know, when we get a little upset, we can have quite a tilt. [Laughter] And she’s able to capture that, and Amy said to me, “This is what I’m talking about. Some things can be so southern that even across the color line we can get each other’s story.” Now Amy and I both know how we act on what we get is an entirely different conversation.

So to get at the possibilities of what can happen if we act on we get, I want to share one more anecdote. I recently traveled to New York City from Birmingham. I once lived in New York, so I knew the minute that I got off the plane; I needed to put on my game face. Any of you who have been in Manhattan know that this is necessary. The city that is so nice we named it twice is not for the faint of heart. I knew exactly what I’d planned to do. I would deplane, I would hurry through the terminal, I would identify a cabstand, I would get in my cab and hurry to my hotel, in the financial district. Yeah, right. Got outside, there was a cabstand. There wasn’t a cabstand attendant. There wasn’t even a cab. There was a middle-aged blonde woman I recognized. She too had been on that plane from Birmingham, and she was hurrying beside me with her game face on. “You were on that flight from Birmingham, right?” I said to her and she said, “Yes, I was.” We both remarked that things looked pretty bad when it came to finding a cab that night. And without missing a beat, we said, almost together, let’s ride into the city together. All we had in common in that moment was Birmingham, Alabama, and that airplane. We were two women, one black, one white, coming from a southern space, trying to survive something huge, in the big scheme of things, getting to Manhattan.

We found our cab, and for the next twenty minutes, drove our driver, who appeared to be a man of West Indian descent, absolutely crazy. We laughed, we giggled, she told me about the guy she met on match.com. I told her about my latest book, and finally, she said, “People don’t know how it is in the South. That other stuff is there, it’s always going to be there, but something else is there, and



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that’s this.” Without even identifying what “this” was, I nodded, and by then the driver shut his window firmly [Laughter] because he was not hearing what we were trying to say. Was he offended by our Laughter, our giggles, or something we’d said? I don’t know. I’ll never know. I do know that she got out of the cab on the Upper East Side and left him a huge tip and part of the fare, and as we turned to head to the bottom of the island, I abandoned my southern disposition. I was now a big city girl, and moreover, one from Miami, Florida. [Laughter]

As Amy and I often say, not from area code 205 but 305. And I begin to, like Michelle Pfeiffer in *One Fine Day*, tell this man every street he better avoid, and how he should make the FDR, the East Side Expressway, his best friend, if he’d wanted another fat tip. [Laughter] And he did, and he smiled, because I was a woman who was becoming more familiar to him—a bossy woman of African descent. I was still from the South, but I was something more. I was not giggling with a white woman, talking about what we do in the South. And he was calmer, and he was nicer, and he definitely avoided the streets I wanted him to, and he got his fat tip. We’d made him uncomfortable, and tonight there are some things we may say that will make you uncomfortable, but I invite you to be open as we navigate through a difficult conversation.

I’m going to stop here to thank the people who made this event possible and to introduce you to my fellow panelists. We will read a bit from the work that sort of brings together tonight. We will address the issue of intimacy across the color line. And then we’re going to start a conversation in which we ask you to participate. I’d like to thank the College of Arts and Sciences, the Summersell Center for the Study of the South, directed by my colleague, Joshua Rothman, and Kari Frederickson, chair of the history department, also a sponsor of this event.

I’d also like to thank the Department of American Studies, English, gender and race studies, anthropology, theatre and dance, New College, and UA Crossroads. I also want to give a warm thanks to Christina Kerchar, who literally dots all of our P’s and crosses the T’s logistically for the history department, and Katie Deal, one of our graduate students who worked so hard to make this event possible. I’d also like to thank my colleague and dear friend, and my eternal soundman, John Beeler, for his help today. I’d also like to thank my colleagues, my friends in eTech, who are here with us, and my fellow panelists, and you.

Let’s turn to my fellow panelists. I’d like to introduce them now. I’d like to start with in the middle with Dolen Perkins Valdez, if that’s okay with Dolen. She’s an amazing author, who has taught in the Stonecoast MFA program in Maine and at American University, outside of Detroit—oh, excuse me—outside of Washington, D.C., where she lives with her family. She is a graduate of Harvard and a former University of California president’s post-doctoral fellow. When I first read *Wench*, her debut novel, which was a New York Times bestseller, I did not want the book to end. I don’t know if you guys know what that’s like to have a book in your hand, and it’s so good you just close the page so it can be there the next day so you can pick it up, and then you close it again because you just don’t want it to end because she was speaking at some truth I needed to hear. Although difficult, she seemed to be able to go to those impossible places that historians cannot go, owing to a lack of evidence. Her novel puts on display kinship and pain that can often be found in the African American community. It occurs around the braiding of hair, the cooking of food, the sewing of dresses, and the crying of tears, among other things too difficult to name right now.



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Her latest book, *Balm*, takes her to more difficult places but now during the Civil War. It and *Wench* will be for sale after this talk, along with books from the rest of us, including my own recently published book *Remember Me to Miss Louisa*.

Lisa Ze-Winters, my immediate left, is our next panelist. You may have met someone like her. You ever meet someone via footnote? [Laughter] And since she’s one of those scholars who seem to put as much time into being a good person as she does into being a professional. That’s Lisa, and I’m embarrassing her now, and I’m going to ask for your apologies later, but this is what I sensed about Lisa, who is an associate professor of English at Wayne State University in a city that I once called home. And that would be Detroit. If I got it right, you are a UC Berkeley graduate. Her research interests are American cultural and literary studies.

Please join me in congratulating Lisa on the recent publication of her book *The Mulatta Concubine: Terror, Intimacy, Freedom, and Desire in the Black Transatlantic*. Her book is so new when I ordered it on Amazon, it was not promised until last week, and even then, and this is a first, I received an email from Amazon saying it would be still a little bit later. But it got here on time. I was so happy to read it. Like most scholars, I went straight to the acknowledgements, a place where you can sort of see a scholar’s heart on display, and I just saw another confirmation of how she’s just good people. I was also able to see, as I began to read her book, the degree to which she extends my interest in intimacies across the race line, and Dolen’s, by inviting us to be attentive to geography, imagination, and the African diaspora. And I look forward to hearing more from her about those issues and more.

And finally, Trudier Harris, my colleague, who is as much a mentor as she is a friend. Anyone who will go down to the altar to pray with you after you have lost a cherished loved one . . . One who has eaten your oxtails [Laughter] when you’re not even sure you got the recipe right . . . [Laughter] And promises to teach you not only how to eat and prepare but clean chitterlings [Laughter] has got to be a good friend. She is so well published we could spend quite a bit of time listening to what she has written. This woman earned her Ph.D. in English at The Ohio State University. She is so accomplished a professorship in her name now exists at UNC Chapel Hill, where she taught for years before moving on to Emory University and blessing us with her presence here at The University of Alabama. A native of Alabama, she is the author of *Martin Luther King Jr.: Heroism and African American Literature*, published in 2014 by the University of Alabama Press. Among her many other books, including *Summer Snow*, her memoir, her article in *The Limitations of Vacations for Enslaved People* and Dolen’s *Wench* is a must-read.

If you took the time to look at the slideshow that was running before our talk began, you saw an advertisement for a resort in Tennessee owned by a historical actor I encountered in my research, John Armfield. That primary source opens a possible window on a real life resort in Xenia, Ohio, now the site of Wilberforce University, to which white southern men took enslaved women. I look forward to learning more about the topic of vacation and how it encounters more horrific realities for enslaved women.

And now we will each read from our work for about three to five minutes each. Next, we will throw out some questions to each other for another fifteen to twenty minutes. Our time together would



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not be complete without hearing from you, which will be done for up to twenty minutes. So, without further ado, I'd like to, if it is okay with Lisa, start with you.

ZE-WINTERS: All right. Thank you. Thank you. I'm going to confess, I think I misinterpreted. I'm not actually reading from my work. I'm just going to give a quick synopsis of my work and place it in the context of this conversation. So, hello. Thank you, Sharony. I'm learning names today at the same time. Thank you so much for extending the invitation to me. I'm really thrilled to be here and so excited about how this conversation will unfold today. So, my book is about how black people across the African diaspora remember and imagine freedom through the figure of the mulatta concubine. So when I think about and use the term mulatta concubine, I refer to both the stereotype of the enslaved mixed race women who achieved at least a degree of if not outright freedom through their sexual relations with white men, and I also refer to the range of enslaved and free black women, historical subjects, whose experiences and stories get flattened or otherwise distorted by the stereotype. So I'm really interested in kind of juxtaposing this, you know, primarily literary but imaginative stereotype against the historical subjects that emerge in the archive. A lot of the scholarship on the mulatta concubine has focused on national rather than transnational contexts, so you'll see studies on mulatta concubine more frequently than tragic mulatta struggles in U.S. literature, for example, or in Anglophone Caribbean literature. Never within the African continental context, or almost never, I should say. And so a lot of the scholarship is focused on her stereotypical and literary representations and how these representations help us understand the construction of a white American or European national and racial identities. Also, a good amount of this scholarship has relied on an archive produced by just about any subject except the very women named mulatta concubines and an archive maintained and legitimated by what we might call official institutions, especially libraries and special collections at universities and other public institutions.

So, I'm thinking about what happens when we understand two things in terms of the mulatta concubine, and within this context I just kind of outlined. First, we should recognize that the historical subject is the actual women named mulatta concubines and the stereotype of the mulatta concubine travel across time and space and thus cross national and imaginative boundaries. And second, black people in the African Diaspora have produced their own archive of memories of these women, but it's an archive that is outside and even contradicts the official records.

So I did this work of understanding and examination by focusing on representations of three iconic figures in the African Diaspora: the seniors of eighteenth century Senegal, who were famous for their relationships with primarily French but also British officials in the colonial safe ports of Saint-Louis and Gorée Island. The famous quadroons of antebellum New Orleans and the Haitian [inaudible] or goddess Erzulie. So these are my three case studies and I'm happy to kind of talk about those in the conversation and what I think through. But in terms of thinking about questions of intimacy, which are absolutely central to my book, my U.S. case studies include literary representations of the fancy trade, and representations of voodoo, black women, and interracial sex in antebellum New Orleans. And in thinking about antebellum interracial intimacies, I'm primarily interested in how interracial sexual relationships affected intimate bonds within and across free and enslaved black women's communities. I'm also interested in how enslaved and free black women made meaning of their intimate sexual relationships with white men. So, whereas a lot of the scholarship thinks about, okay, what do these relationships and representations of relationships



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between enslaved and free women of color with white men say about white masculinity and white nationhood? I'm really interested in, like, how does that help us understand something about what it means to be black within these spaces.

So, the question that begins and ends my book, and the one that I'm still struggling with and would love to think through here is this: What does it mean? Freedom for black women is often dependent upon their relationship to interracial intimacy. What can that freedom look like, and what possibilities does it foreclose, and what possibilities does it open? Thank you.

[Applause]

PERKINS-VALDEZ: Hello. Thank you, Sharony. Thank you, Lisa, for taking notes because Lisa said a lot of good stuff in that five minutes, and I was going to say, I had an interracial cab ride into New York City once, but it was a tall, good-looking doctor. [Laughter] He said, “Do you want to share a cab?” I said, “Why, yes.” [Laughter] Little different experience. I'm kidding, honey, you know. We're on video, I got to watch what I say.” [Laughter] Okay, so I was going to read a little bit of *Wench*. I don't know if I have time. I'll read like two pages maybe. My book *Wench* is set in the 1850s in Ohio, and it's set at a resort where slave owners took their servants to vacation with them. Among their enslaved servants, they took women who were basically their sexual slaves to service them while they were on vacation. That's really sort of the direct representation of it. And, the resort actually existed. It was in Ohio near Xenia, Ohio, and the resort was eventually sold to a Methodist group who had wanted to establish a school for free coloreds for a long time. And when the property came up for sale, they bought it, and they established this school which became Wilberforce University, which dates its founding to back before the war to 1856. And the interesting thing about the school is that those original students, if you look at the student catalogues, were for the most part listed as mulatto. And it was interesting to look at those catalogues because, when they came up there, there weren't dormitories, per se, so they would stay with families. And they showed where they were from originally, and so you saw, for example, a family of five siblings who had been sent there to go to college who were from Mississippi. And you know, Mississippi did not have a law where you could legally free your slaves at that time, so literally, these were the mixed race children of southern slave-owners, and they were basically sending them to college, which I found fascinating and kind of contradictory to anything I'd ever thought about slave-owners and their children. Now, of course, you know we knew about the Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemings story. We know that Sally Hemings's children received some favor from Jefferson, partially, I would think, is due to Sally Hemings's very shrewd negotiation of that relationship. But having said that, when I encounter this resort in Ohio, I really was stunned. I couldn't believe it. I didn't know I was going to write a book about it. I was really curious. I thought maybe it was going to be an essay, like a scholarly essay, and then I visited the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus and I hit a wall. I just could not, just come on in, come on. [Laughter] I'm sorry. Don't interrupt, I'm sorry, I don't want to interrupt.

So I just hit this wall in the archive, and I couldn't get my questions answered. And my real question, y'all, was, “Why didn't they run? Why would they go all the way to Ohio, a free state?” I knew people had died trying to cross the Ohio River, and here they are in what is basically abolitionist country. I mean, the resort eventually closes because the abolitionists in the area, who were largely religious people, really detested the sight of these southern men, you know. They said they were



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riding their horses, and they had their hunting dogs going across the property up there. And they just found it distasteful, so the wealth Cincinnatians stopped going up to Xenia to the resort. And so, I thought, like, why wouldn't women just run? And I also had talked to older people who said that they were from Xenia and that they had grown up, and these were, you know, some of them were octogenarians, said when they grew up it was sort of a well-known fact, if you will, that if you would make it to Xenia, you would probably make it to freedom, because there were so many Underground Railroad safe houses in that area. So I was fascinated. If these women went up there, then why didn't they run? So this book is really driven by that one question. It's sort of a, you know, unidirectional narrative in some ways, which is probably why people like reading it. Because that's my question, is why didn't they run?

So, in part two, I go back in time. The main character is Lizzie, and she believes that she loves her master Drayle, who has been in an intimate relationship with her since she was thirteen. And she's very sort of naive in so many ways in the first part of the book, and so I felt it was really necessary for us to go back to the moment of seduction so that we really could understand how he had gained such mind control over her because part of what I was really interested in were the psychological ramifications of slavery.

So I'm just going to read, like, literally two pages, and we can talk more during our discussion. And I'm going to skip a little bit just so we can kind of get to the meat.

The first night he went to Lizzie, she was soaked with a sticky wetness that clung to her. The door was more than cracked, but it hadn't done much to relieve her in the small storeroom. She had extinguished her candle because even its flame sent off more heat than she could bear. One arm rested above her head on the moss-filled pallet and a foot was planted against the shelf, her legs propped wide. Looking back, she reckoned she must have looked as if she were waiting on him.

Okay, I'm going to skip.

Later Lizzie would reason that perhaps Drayle really was just passing through the kitchen and noticed her door open and only meant to close it. Perhaps he did think he heard a disturbing noise and came to check it out. And it was certainly possible he didn't even know that the house girl slept in the storeroom off the kitchen. It was closer to dawn than dusk when she removed most of her clothes and propped the door open. If someone came in the kitchen, they would have to light a lantern, giving her time to cover herself. But there was no warning light and he appeared in the doorway like an apparition, a sudden whistle of breath, a book tucked beneath his arm, a glass in his hand. "It's terribly hot in here," he said. She didn't have time for a "yessir," rolling over until her body was safely wrapped in the pallet, the muslin shirt too far to reach without exposing even more than she already had. What had moments before seemed like utter darkness now looked like blue light, and she could easily make out his form. She hoped her dark skin offered some cover. "I'm very sorry," her master said. "Yessir." She wasn't sure what he was talking about or what to answer. Big Mama had taught her when these moments happened to just say "sho" or "yessir." There were so many things to remember. It had taken a full week to remember to answer to her



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new name. The first change after she moved to the main house was that her mistress renamed her. She had been Eliza, but she became Lizzie because Miss Fran felt it was easier to say. “Here,” he said. “Take my water.” She stared at his outstretched arm. Her eyes adjusted to the dark, but she still couldn’t see his expression well enough to tell if he was setting a trap for her. Sometimes they set traps for you, Big Mama had said. You got to be awares at all times. “Oh, no sir.” Then a pause. “Do you needs something?” “Please.” he moved into the storeroom, so close his toe touched the edge of her pallet. “I won’t leave until you drink every bit of this here water.” She sat up and pressed her back to the wall. She stared at the cup as if it contained poison. What do I do, Big Mama? Lord knows I’s thirsty. “Please,” he repeated. He set it on the floor in front of him as if he knew she wouldn’t take it from his hand. Something about the way he said it the second time made her think for a moment that he was being kind. She looked down at her hand as it made its way across the bare mattress and finally closed around the cold, sweating glass. She touched it to her lips and drank it down. When the glass was almost empty, she stopped. “Go on,” he said. “Drink it all, now.” She felt done, but she drank the rest of it, hoping it would make him leave. “You get some rest now,” he said. For the next week or so, he brought her cold water in the middle of the night, and each time, she took it more and more willingly until she was waiting expectantly, her body tense with restlessness and thirst while she anticipated his low rumbling voice. He changed glasses twice, until finally he brought a large jar she couldn’t finish off at once. Now he sat down to wait. And with each visit, he moved closer and closer to her on the pallet, until finally he was lying beside her, his smooth skin slick against hers as he touched the cold glass to her face.

I’ll stop there. Thanks.

[Applause]

HARRIS: Good evening! Thank you for coming out. I am here because of Dolen, whom you just heard read from the novel. And because of Sharony, because she twists people’s arms and makes them do things. [Laughter] And I’m delighted to meet Lisa. When I think about intimacy across racial lines during slavery, it’s almost always informed by a lack of voluntary actions. I think of violence, force, coercion, and rape. That pattern in literature prevailed throughout decades of representation. Consider Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life* in 1845. Douglass witnesses the whipping of his aunt Esther. Her master performs that grisly task, and the implication is that he is jealous of Esther... Hester because she has dared to select another man, a black man, as a sexual partner instead of responding to him, or perhaps to a man whom he has selected for her. When I think about this kind of intimacy, I think of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the character Stamp Paid. For years, he was forced to deliver his then-young wife Vashti to the white master, for the master’s sexual comfort. Stamp Paid has earned the nickname because he decides at one point that he is done delivering his wife to the master. He escapes from slavery and determines that he is going to spend the rest of his life helping other black folks escape from slavery. So the young Vashti, Stamp Paid’s wife, is comparable to the historical bedwarmers, who were delivered to white men for their sexual release, young black girls. Violence and lack of choice inform these sexual intimacies.



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Now in the mid-twentieth century, however, there was an interesting shift in the representation of sexual intimacy across racial lines during slavery. And this occurred with the invention and maturation of what we’ve come to refer as the neo-slave freedom narrative. This sub genre of African American literature, which was inaugurated in 1966 when the publication of Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*, re-imagined what was possible during slavery. Sometimes the lack of choice still informed such relationships, and I’m thinking here of Octavia E. Butler’s novel *Kindred*, which was published in 1979. That novel echoes Toni Morrison and Frederick Douglass in that Alice, a young enslaved woman, has the misfortune of attracting her master, Rufus’s attentions. Rufus will have her, no matter what he has to do, including raping her. He also seeks the cooperation of Dana, the transported twentieth century heroine, in softening Alice to his sexual advances. He succeeds finally in having two children by Alice, and one of these children is Dana’s great-great-great ancestor. This is sort of an Arnold Schwarzenegger Terminator-type novel in which somebody has to go back into the past to save the future. Mostly though, neo-slave narratives deviate from the prevailing historical script, and they imagine characters that act differently, whether that is committing violence against their so-called masters, or engaging in voluntary intimate liaisons with them.

Two novels enact this scenario. The first is Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose*, which was published in 1986. What’s striking in the text is that the voluntary sexual intimacy occurs between a white woman and a coal black enslaved, or formerly enslaved man. The second novel is one of the reasons we are here tonight. In 2010, one of my colleagues in the College Language Association (CLA) reviewed Dolen Perkins Valdez’s *Wench* in the CLA journal. Now, I decided that I immediately needed to read that novel although I had determined upon leaving North Carolina that I was not going to buy any more books. [Laughter] After all, I had gotten rid of a third of my library before I came to Tuscaloosa. Nonetheless, I bought *Wench*. It was, I’d describe it as, a jaw-dropping read. I knew immediately that I wanted to write about the text, and as these things go, and as you scholars in the audience know, that took a little bit of time. So the article just appeared in the *South Atlantic Review* in 2015. Now, Dolen has described the novel to you, and for our purposes of our discussion tonight, I want to offer some questions about it. By what definition can we consider Drayle a pedophile? Is pedophilia even a category to be considered given the circumstances of slavery? Can someone love you if he forces you wear a chain around your neck like a dog collar? Can someone love you if he is aware that you have just been raped and he does nothing about it? Can someone love you if he orders you to drape yourself over a barrel while he penetrates you from the rear because he really doesn’t want to look at your face? Yet Lizzie persists in referring to Drayle as quote ‘her man’ unquote and she insists that she is in love with him. Indeed she betrays the other three African American women at the Ohio retreat because she loves Drayle and believes that by revealing their plans to escape, she will ingratiate herself to him.

My article explores the impact of geography upon the so-called romantic relationships during slavery in this novel. It is entitled “Does Northern Travel Relieve Slavery?: Vacations in Dolen Perkins Valdez’s *Wench*.” Ultimately, the answer to that question is no. I argue that slavery is a portable concept and the slaveholders transport it to Ohio. While they may be conscious of northern eyes judging and evaluating them, they nonetheless pursue their racist habits of sexual exploitation and physical abuse. And we can pursue this more during the discussion. In terms of non-sexual intimacy, we might think of the relationship between Lizzie and Drayle’s wife Fran. Or that between Miz Rufel and Dessa in *Dessa Rose*. This is an especially interesting case because Dessa arrives at Mrs.



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Rufel’s farm after having given birth to, or in the process of giving birth to a child. And she has participated in an escape, so her milk dries up. In this instance, the white woman becomes the wet nurse to the black baby. And there all kinds of questions raised then, as Dessa has to watch this white woman feed her little black baby when Dessa herself cannot do that. So that’s a different kind of intimacy.

We can also talk about the kind of intimacy that’s involved when people of color were be called upon to very private tasks for whites during slavery, such as washing babies, bathing them, dressing them, and those kinds of things. And how can you have somebody doing those kind of personal things for you when you don’t consider the person doing those things human? Thank you.

GREEN: So I think it’s necessary before we go too much farther to maybe think about how we define intimacy. I will let you know how it works in my book. Given the all too evident horrors of slavery, it is imperative to clarify what is meant by the word intimacy. Put simply, the word intimacy suggests emotional—that’s something I think scholars need to better pull apart—and physical closeness between two human beings, even unlikely ones. The word sheds light too, on the wins and losses of such closeness, when one party has more power than the other. But still, both find ways to reap some benefit.

I’d like to tell you that my interest in this topic began, once again, in New York City. The towers had just fallen. I was laid off from a pretty nice job and found myself working as a substitute teacher in a high school. And there on a bookshelf I saw Deborah Gray White’s now classic study on black women in the antebellum south. I learned about two words, a term called fancy girls. This is the brand name for enslaved women sold for use as concubines. I’d like to put that in, let’s qualify that: concubines, mistresses, and prostitutes. I could smell the smoke from my little apartment in Manhattan. The towers had just fallen—this is serious, you guys—and just to keep my head in place, I began to write what I thought could be a story about these women. And it was very bad fiction, Dolen, nowhere near what you’ve done. [Laughter]

Thankfully, I had a friend who worked for a pretty big New York publishing house who said to me, “You need to go find some real women.” And I said, “How do you do that?” And she said, “You need to go back to school.” I said, “And then what?” She says, “You need to locate an archive.” And I said, “Where’s that?” She’s like, “You’re going to have to figure that out.” And indeed, I ended up locating my archive at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. For weeks, I looked through boxes and boxes. Boxes and boxes of microfilm. And I saw only letters written by white southern men. They were discussing, you know, their daily chores as domestic slave traders; they’re also known as Negro speculators. And then, one day—I’ll never forget it—I was at the University of Chicago’s Regenstein Library, and I began to read a letter clearly written by someone who was not a man, who was not white. It was an enslaved woman. And in this letter, she was telling her former master, it was very clear that it was her former master (and by the way, this letter was written in 1838), that she needed money for fuel, that she and the woman in her presence, and the four children with them, also needed money for food. It was clear that they had been recently freed. I almost fell off my chair. I kept going through the archive, that particular roll of microfilm, and found another letter from her, and yet another letter from her, and even one in which she sent her master her love. And then finally I saw a final letter from her, this one written a year and a half



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after that first letter. And in this letter she said to him, and I quote, “I’ll never forget it. I don’t even have to read it.” She says, “If you have forgotten me, I hope that you have not forgotten the children.” And clearly this was something, you know. I’m like, this is it, I found the women. So what do I do with it? Well, you do a seminar paper. That’s usually the first step, and then you learn how to store a [inaudible] and all that good stuff.

I’d like to stop right there. Let’s think about the children for a second. Here at The University of Alabama, in our whole special collections, we have a fine archive, another archive, lots of letters that survive. Septimus Cabaniss was a lawyer who was charged in the 1850s with seeing about, seeing to the financial security of nine enslaved children, who apparently were his own, by five enslaved women and their immediate kin. He left them two hundred thousand dollars, which is 5.5 million dollars in today’s currency. He was a native of Virginia who relocated to Huntsville, Alabama. Late 1820s, lots of people were relocating from Virginia at this time, only to fail crops. There was also this thing called cotton taking off here in the Deep South.

So I’m going to read to you the opening to the chapter concerning the children in his family. I’m going to start with one named Charles Osborne Townsend. It’ll be very quick, so we can go on to our conversation. It is now the 1880s. He has been freed. He lives in Colorado, where he earns his living as a barber and a silver miner. As a new century approached, Charles Osborne Townsend, an African American silver miner and sometimes barber living in the hills of Georgetown, Colorado, he sat down to write a letter, as a new century approached, he sat down to write a letter. The recipient was his brother Thomas, a lawyer who resided in Huntsville, a place in which both men had once been enslaved. Their white father had owned the land on which they lived and had claimed them as his own. Though enslaved, Osborne, as he often called himself, as well as his siblings, occupied an ambiguous space. It is one in which they enjoyed some of the benefits and anxieties of freedom. Even whites around detected that their young bodies were testing the waters of autonomy in ways that most African Americans would not do until the post-bellum period. As Osborne recalled in this letter to Thomas, before the war, one of their siblings had jumped over a fence on the land of Mr. and Mrs. Tate, their white neighbors. Mr. Tate came running after this child to scold him. The sibling jumped back over the fence to escape Mr. Tate’s wrath. The commotion got so out of hand that Mrs. Tate intervened. The child “hollered”—so, this is a direct quote from the letter—“hollered so much that old Mrs. Tate made Mr. Tate leave them alone.” Mrs. Tate’s response might have been an outcome of a charitable disposition, or it might have stemmed from her ability to see that this child was no ordinary enslaved person. Perhaps he resembled his father; perhaps she had seen him get away with things that other enslaved people could not. Because he looked mixed race, it probably didn’t take much for her to put two and two together. This was the child of Samuel Townsend, who, judging by his subsequent actions, made clear his concern for his children. There were nine, in all; again, from five enslaved women who were hardly those fancy girls. Women, who were, you know, generally speaking, in port cities like New Orleans and Mobile and Charleston, women men traveled long distances to purchase for service. Instead, these were dark-skinned women. Women who were probably on his plantation or on plantations owned by his associates. Still among them were individuals these men would someday free.

And I’m going to stop there with this sentence, maybe this paragraph. “It has been far easier to explore the blatant oppression experienced by people of African descent than the intimacy that I’ve



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been talking about, especially the kind that concerns fair skinned women and girls who in imagined works and surviving records often appear larger than life. While some were people of real significance to white men, others were bodies exploited by lonely and sometimes vile individuals. Getting at both extremes and all of that great area in between requires real investigation. It is through such scrutiny that we can probe how black women emerge as both victors and victims, immoral and upright, enslaved and indeed, free, with white men’s help. As if addressing the hurdles of such a task, a white woman, this one from the upper south, once told me, ‘It’s easier for both blacks and whites to say it was only rape, because to say it was love or something approaching that is too difficult. We then have to explain how this happens alongside of everything else.’” [applause]

So now, our twenty minutes where we talk to each other, and then we’ll have twenty minutes where we’d like to talk to you and have you talk back to us. Lisa, you have wonderful questions for us, and I’m going to invite you, if you’d like, to start. If not, Dolen, you may start. Trudier, you may start. Let’s just talk.

HARRIS: I’m happy to start. This is a question for Sharon as well as for Dolen, and let’s start with Dolen because in one of your interviews in 2010, you said in the first draft of this novel you had Lizzie and Drayle sort of hopelessly in love, and then a friend pointed out to you, nah, there has to be some kind of negotiation going on. And then in a later interview you said, “Well, I’m not sure if they’re in love or not. I leave that for the book clubs to decide.” [Laughter] Then Sharony talked about preparing her work and how there were all of these African American female historians out there sort of looking over her shoulder, and she was wondering what their responses were going to be. So the question is, what kind of baggage do you as a writer . . . and by baggage, I don’t mean that so pejoratively. What do you have lurking in your mind, in your spirit, to look back that prevents you from saying this was unequivocally love, and for Sharony, what is this that you are fearing or apprehensive about with those historians? You want me . . . you can go first. Okay, if you like.

PERKINS-VALDEZ: Well, I’d love to hear what you have to say because I do feel still that I have to sort of walk a thin line about that relationship. I feel that, and you know, it’s so interesting because in my second book *Balm*, I have a burgeoning friendship between a white woman and a black woman. And, you know, my agent kept saying, you need to let the other shoe drop and let them be best friends. And I said no, they’re not best friends. And she says, “Why not? Because all of the makings of the friendship are there.” And I say, “I just don’t believe that they would have been best friends, you know.” And so I feel that these relationships are really complicated. And part of framing them, for us, as contemporary people, is how do we kind of walk in their shoes, which were such difficult shoes to wear, right, on both sides. And so I say that, you know, the trickiest, really the trickiest, most difficult character in this book to write was Drayle because I had to really delve into this idea of a benevolent slave owner, which in so many ways is sort of an oxymoron, right? Like, how are you a benevolent, right? But that’s a trope we often see in African American studies of this period. Like, you know, you had the cruel overseer, you know, all of these sort of types. You had the cruel master, and then you had the benevolent slave owner, and I had to kind of try to characterize someone who might have been considered benevolent, so to speak. So it was just very difficult, and it was just really for me to go there and say they were absolutely in love. So you know, my agent and I had this argument over, with my new book, whether or not these two women would be friends. And she said, “I feel strongly, Dolen, I said I feel strongly.” And it was just a good, productive



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conversation. And so funny, because just the other day, I spoke with a book club via Skype, and it was in Atlanta, black women and white women, interracial book club, and they said, “We kept wanting them to be friends.” [Laughter] So you just, I don’t know, it’s a very difficult line to walk, but I’d be interested to hear what Sharony thinks.

GREEN: I’ll tell you, I’ve grown a bit beyond where I was, even two years ago, when you and I were members of—Fred Whiting sort of oversaw this—this moment where people were interested in American history, and we would meet and share our work. And I remember you strongly saying to me, sort of, “You’ve just got to tell the story, Sharony.” I remember the day I defended my dissertation, and I had a member of my committee say to me, “So you’re telling me that white men were critical actors in the ways in which black women and children experienced freedom?” And I said to him, “No, I’m telling you the evidence says this.” And he’s now a friend, so I can say I virtually hurt because he was being Skyped. Well all right then. You know, and, I think the difficulty I’m having now is all the stuff that’s happening outside of the academy.

Right, so I thought about the Facebook page for this event, and I don’t know how many of you have had to manage a Facebook page, but for an event, including one that can be, like, difficult like this, I had to, and I still am monitoring what’s being said. The difficult comments were coming from a likely source, black men. “What’s the point?” That one I let stay up. But there were other things that were being said about the four of us that you guys don’t even know about. People are hurting right now. Americans are afraid right now. Michael Brown, you know, Sandra Bland. And so, why are we having this conversation about the good things white men did, you know, a hundred and fifty years ago, like we’re not talking about right now. That’s the baggage I’m struggling with now. But anyway . . . So I began with talking about the possibilities. That’s how I proceed. I am a woman of color at a public institution here in the South. I am teaching students, among them, ones who have never seen a person of color in a position of authority, so this is a daily, you know, thing in and outside of my research. And I think it’s an important conversation to have, because we need to think about our shared past. And the horrors are there, but I know something without a doubt: something else is there, because when I talked to, before my grandmother fell as ill as she is right now, about my research, she didn’t understand what the big deal was. This is a woman, you know, born and raised in Mississippi picking more cotton than my grandfather, you know. He said she could pick it too. [Laughter] And she just couldn’t understand. She’s like, “I don’t get what’s the big deal.” And what she’s pointing to is among other people, Mr. Ray, the white man in their Mississippi Delta town who was clearly, clearly concerned about the welfare of our household, and I say “our,” meaning our family because of his ties to my great-grandmother. My mother knew that she could go into the local dress shop owned by a Jewish shopkeeper and pick out any dress she wanted because Mr. Ray had an open tab. And so my grandmother . . . Yeah, the Jim Crow signs were there. All that ugliness was there, but she was like, “Yeah, that other stuff is there too so what is it you’re writing about again?” [Laughter] So, I don’t know, the baggage is there, but I think it goes beyond the academy for me. It’s the everyday. I don’t know if that’s an adequate answer.

ZE-WINTERS: Okay, thank you for asking. Yeah, I have to admit that when I first picked up *Wench*, when it first was published, I was probably part of the baggage. I was like, “What is she going to do here?” [Laughter] And I fell in love with the work because I think that it elicits or evokes this complexity, right, of reasons for being in these relationships and the diversity of how the different



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women kind of understand and imagine their “relationships,” and I use relationships in quotes, right. And men, also their relationships in the community with each other. I was interested in that. You asked that question. How do you think it affects their relationships with each other?

Well, I was just, I mean, that first, like, that opening scene, right, when Mawu comes, all these registers and glances about, like, how does she look at Lizzie and Sweet and like how she kind of, you know, she’s kind of positioned right away as kind of, like, being, like, more skeptical about, like the possibilities vis-à-vis these other women, but with herself, she seems to have a different understanding of what her relationship is like, and so, I saw it in the way, like, in the glances in the opening scenes.

GREEN: Can we tell the audience who Mawu is?

PERKINS-VALDEZ: Well, you know, there’s basically Lizzie’s the main character who believes that she’s in love with her master, and Mawu despises her master, so they’re very much . . . when the book begins, they’re in some ways sort of polar opposites. But I was really interested in Lisa’s because I’ve not really thought about the ways in which these interracial intimacies—and I love the word intimacy, by the way—affect interracial intimacies. You know, I had never really given that a whole lot of thought. So when Lisa brought that up, I was sort of, I read your pre-panel question and I paused and I have not really thought about that, I mean, just the first thing that came to mind was that, you know, interracial intimacies tended to produce s depending on powerful or wealthy the white person you were intimate with was, you know. So for example, to take the light of *Wench* for a second, I just wrote an introduction to a new edition of Elizabeth Keckley’s narrative about her friendship with Mary Todd Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln’s wife, right. And that intimate relationship really gave her some power during the times of the years that Abraham Lincoln was in the White House. When she was working in the White House, she had standing in Washington, D.C. She made money. She had her own, she was a successful businesswoman, and she started, like, an organization to help freed men and women who had been emancipated to sort of establish their new lives. And she had all of these well before she was Mary Todd Lincoln’s dressmaker. She was Jefferson Davis’ wife’s dressmaker before the Civil War began. And so she had some very powerful white friends. And those friendships gave her a certain sort of station. And so I think, you know, when I first saw the question, I thought, my immediate thought was like, you know, how those interracial intimacies affected you depended on who the intimacy was with, you know.

HARRIS: But I think it’s also important to point out that in spite of how these women feel about the men in their lives, and they’re very, very, one woman’s master is her brother, which is really awful because he sexually abuses her in spite of that fact. But, and Lizzie, the far extreme, thinks that she’s in love with Drayle. But these women come together to form their own kind of community. So there is a little space in which they operate outside of what’s going on with their white masters, when Sweet, one of the women is pregnant and delivers a child, they are there, they’re the midwives, they don’t even wake up her master, they just take care of things. So they share recipes, they braid each other’s hair. Somebody mentioned that earlier. So there’s a little space where they can overcome basic differences in order to achieve a limited kind of sense of community.



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If I may, can we invite you, if you have a question or two, in the interest of time, so, is there anyone who'd like to ask a question, would you like for us to continue? Questions. Yeah, questions. One way in the back, behind the pole.

AUDIENCE: Yes. Hi, I have a question about the children. When I hear this, I think about New Orleans and the white slaves and the photographs of the white slave children that were used to fundraise for freedmen, such as the white slaves of New Orleans. When New Orleans falls in 1862, they go on tour across the nation and take pictures of them to help fundraise for education and services throughout the former south after the war. How are these children, that trope (it's not just used literarily or imaginatively), used to fundraise for others without any of those benefits going to those children themselves?

GREEN: Well, Mary, now I think it's Mary Niall Mitchell. Yep, yep, Mary Niall Mitchell. Well, I think she's covered that thoroughly. You're wanting to know how?

AUDIENCE: How does that affect the interracial relationships, how do the children affect, but also their aftermath, because we don't know anything about them but there's got to be hundreds of children in those cases.

GREEN: Well, thank you for that question. None of the archives from my research really speak to it. I feel like I want to look at you, Hillary. [Laughter] Speak to this issue, but I can say, and this is what's difficult about what's unwhole. You have, and this is just one archive. And part of this challenge that I have is that, one, archive is massive, but then when you read the secondary literature, you keep getting sentence or two or a paragraph or two about another child. And this is what's happened to me over ten years, and so what appears to be little, small crumbs of evidence ends up being this pretty substantial pile. In addition to that big old boulder. That's all that bad stuff, right. Based on what I've been able to see, and I'll go back to this whole archive, those children were very aware as adults, of even their own limitations, having access, and I might tell you it's delayed access to their fathers' money. They never received more than \$33,000. Their lawyer died before the estate was settled. He would try to get as much money out of Alabama as he could. You mentioned, and if I can try to answer something . . . Trudier also said or at least speaks to it. You mentioned intraracial, or was it you, Dolen? I think it's important to talk about that piece too because one thing we're able to see in this archive and in other archives is the degree to which some of these people who have intimate moments with white men aren't always on the same page. They've picked up on the promises of the American Dream and they're out to exploit it to their own benefit. So, whereas you might have one like Osborne, saying, "I will never travel to Alabama, never travel to Alabama unless I can ride in a train car like any other man." Meaning white man, right. And this is before Plessy. He's reading the black paper that's coming out of Huntsville. Until I can be treated like any other man, I'm never coming to Alabama. And yet, his brother Thomas is a prominent man in Huntsville. He is the next-door neighbor of a former Confederate colonel, right. It's like, so how do, like, you reconcile this? Osborne, based on what I saw, wrote the most letters. I'd say maybe it's just because he was just so happy to have a typewriter, but I think he was really interested in how that estate was being settled. He wanted to make sure he was going to get his. Thomas, on the other hand, because he was a lawyer, because he was prominent in Huntsville, definitely probably trying to protect his own interests, didn't write as many letters. That's something I hope that we can address



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and if not, can think about as we leave, just the ethics of what historians do. These letters are often documents that we take liberties with. But think about your emails. How many of you want somebody, fifty, twenty years, a hundred years, even tomorrow, looking at what you wrote, right? So we’re here trying to make sense of the past, but there is an ethical piece to it, right. Thomas, based on my research and reading of what’s left behind, he was aware that he’d better be careful with some of his siblings, you know, who were probably out to protect their own interests. But getting back to what you’re saying about how they benefit or don’t benefit, I think that’s just a big, messy question, because you have to look at so many places to even try to find answers. Some of them were definitely exploited, but the texture of that exploitation was different, right. I don’t know if that helps.

No, [inaudible] Thank you, Hillary. Ok, yes. Yes, Rachel, or it’s person behind Rachel. Sorry. Thank you.

AUDIENCE: I have a question about interracial intimacies as it applies to the relationship between the wives of these slave masters and women who were victims of abuse. I was just wondering if anyone could speak on that.

HARRIS: Fictionally—you know the historian’s over that away—but in terms of fiction, let’s think about Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. That’s not fiction; I mean, that’s autobiography, where the mistress knows what is going on when her husband is attracted to the young mixed race girl and she just sort of ignores it. And she knows this man is chasing the girl, and I guess she values her position as the mistress of the house and she’s not going to rock the boat. The same thing with the Wench. Fran is very much aware of what Drayle is doing with Lizzie. And after all, Lizzie is pregnant when she’s like thirteen and a half or something like that. And she is not sympathetic to her at all. When Lizzie, at the end to the text, is there, chained to the porch, because she’s been chained for hours before the returned from Ohio to Tennessee, she’s not sympathetic to her. But she does admit at one point, “I was jealous of you.” But she does evil things. Like Lizzie has two kids by Drayle, and after a while says, “These kids are mine.” She brings them from the quarters to the big house and lets them sleep in, buys them clothes, takes them shopping. Then her little nephew comes to visit, and she says, “Oh I’m through playing mother to the black kids.” And she sends them back to the quarters. So those things are complex too. You know . . . if your situation . . . and you have to add in the fact that Fran is barren. So if your situation is such that you are not securely in the relationship, then all kinds of awful things are possible, I guess. That’s autobiography and fiction. Dolen. Or somebody. Lisa.

ZE-WINTERS: I mean, if I can just kind of add to that. So, right, especially with Jacobs and Dolen, you can talk about to the extent to which this was on your mind too, right. Because of what Jacobs, part of her, how many people are familiar with Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*? So it’s like a slave narrative, right. And she’s addressing her narrative to northern white women, and so part of what she’s doing, right, is showing how the white wives of slaveholders are both victims but also complicit in the subjection, and the rape, and the assault of enslaved women, and so, just like kind of, the limits of black and white female intimacy and calling out how Mrs. Flint benefits from Dr. Flint’s terrorizing of Linda, her pseudonym. And I think for me this pings back for Sharony and Dolen, kind of the writing against what people want to hear about or don’t want to hear about. And



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I think for me, and being that reluctant reader of both of these narratives, is that . . . the reluctant but very curious reader . . . is that, I think there’s this fear that the basic humanity that one should kind of have and perform becomes surprising and then exciting and then like “look at this white slaveholder,” the whole idea of the benevolent slaveholder, right. And that’s an oxymoron. So the benevolent slaveholder gets celebrated for doing things that are still kind of, like, below the baseline of what you should expect from somebody to, you know, treat another person, right. So I think that that, in terms of, especially thinking about, you know, the ways in which these men, you know . . . yeah, and oh, and the thing about the children too, in terms of, many enslaved women, what they got out of, like what they navigated or negotiated for was not their own freedom but the freedom of their children, right. And so this idea, like sending their children to college . . . like, well, if you’re wealthy, you should send your kids to college, right? But then we get like, you know, so I think that’s kind of the fear, right, that this is going to be like, you know, and we think about a contemporary moment, like the level of expectation is so low that if you just don’t do something terrible then you’re celebrated, right.

GREEN: If I could add, I think I’m glad you asked the question. The title of my book, *Remember Me to Miss Louisa*, I think points to that white mistress. It’s often said that the last thing you say in an email or a letter is probably the most important, and in this letter to her master, and this is an actual letter, 1847, written by an enslaved woman named Lucille Tucker who’s been permitted to live on her own and earn money in an unstated profession. She’s in Bainbridge, Georgia. She’s likely working as a prostitute. But she sends a letter to her master and she essentially says she deserves to be free. Not only that but she needs him to make this arrangement as soon as possible and moreover spare her the expense of returning to New Orleans to negotiate the details. I mean, like, talk about power. [Laughter] But then she says at the ends, “Remember me to Miss Louisa.” And so I wondered if she was referring to his wife, whose name is Louise and in the record appears as Louisa elsewhere in his papers. Or is it, and there was an enslaved woman, a dark-skinned woman, mind you, named Louisa Long on another plantation. Was she talking about her? I don’t know. Maybe “Remember me to Miss Louisa” was some veiled threat. If you don’t free me, I’m going to tell Miss Louisa. [Laughter] But I believe Miss Louisa probably already knew. [Laughter] So we have that. But then when I read Louisa’s letters, I push myself to wonder how she dealt with her husband’s clear, if not affectionate, concern about enslaved people, including two, you know, the woman and four children I talked about before who are in Cincinnati. By the way, Cincinnati was a critical site for the relocation of these women and children because it was on the important Ohio-Mississippi River network. So it’s easy to get them out of the south. In one letter Louise tells her husband, and by the way, he conveniently puts her and their three children in Louisville, just a hundred miles south of Cincinnati. So while he’s tending to, you know, his property in the lower south, in Arkansas and Mississippi, when he decides to go home, he can go see two different households. But the point is this: she said to him once: “While you’re down there, can you bring me up a Negro woman?” She’s wanting a nursemaid, and there was no concern about whether this woman was going to be separated from her family or her own child. It was just, can you bring me up a good Negro woman? Because every person she had hired in Kentucky, including a white woman, by the way, turned out to not be a reliable nursemaid. As a scholar, do I still have some empathy for Louise? I’d have to say I do. I do. I don’t have a lot of words for how that works because we need to wrap things up, but I can say this: she heard and saw a lot. And there is yet another black woman she mentions in one of her letters to her husband. This one appears to be someone who is working



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for a wage in their household. This is someone who has a lot of dreams that Louise pays attention to. And she has a lot of respect for this woman. So I think there's this huge bandwidth that we have to think about when we think about how white women respond to the intimate ties between black women and white men. Let Dolen talk about that. I was going to say, I'd love to hear what shows up in *Wench*.

PERKINS-VALDEZ: How many people have seen *Twelve Years a Slave*? That's, oh God. I love to ask that because most people have seen it because of its Academy Award. Remember when the wife throws that glass dish at Patsy and hits her in the eyes? Probably the most shocking moment of the film. One of the most shocking moments of the film. I remember gasping at that moment. I think about that and I think about white women during this time as in some ways being driven crazy. You know, after the war ended, there was this elevated image of antebellum white women as sitting on the porch drinking tea, being, you know, living lives of leisure. There were all these kinds of myths that arose after the Civil War about the lives that white women had on what were, for the most part, isolated, rural plantations, okay. And so that moment and the way that that moment is characterized in the film really rang true to me because I've often felt that white women, even though we can talk about their complicity, they were living under a very patriarchal system, and we have to remember that slavery was a very patriarchal system. Even at this time, women were not legally allowed to own property. For example, there's a wonderful novel by this novelist Valerie Martin called *Property* about the white women. So if you want to read that novel, you want to read more about this.

And, I'll tell you one more thing. I went to the George Mason Plantation in Virginia. I was invited down there to speak, and for those of you who are native southerners like myself, you know it's a very unusual thing to go speak at a plantation if you're African American. [Laughter] They're very segregated. They're very segregated. But I accepted because I was curious, and I gave the talk, and they were very warm and inviting. And later, the young lady who had introduced me asked me if I wanted a tour. And I said yes, and she gave me a tour of the house, which, you know, this is a fabulous property. I mean it was, like, just out of the movies, you know. You look at the movie and you see the trees lining the dirt road leading to, like, the mansion, and the big lake behind it. And we go into . . . we're in the dining room, and there's a portrait of Mason's first wife on the wall. And she was going on and on about this life that she lived and she said, "Yeah, so she had eleven children by him and then she died, in childbirth, at the age of, like, twenty-eight." [Laughter] And I said, "Oh, God. How sad." You know, I was just looking at the picture, just thinking that's tragic, and the young lady says, "No, no." She was very knowledgeable. She knew the plantation stories very well, and she said, "No, no, no. She lived a fabulous world. They traveled the world. They dined with presidents, etc." And I said, "She dies, and then after she dies, he just remarries." And, you know, after she had all of those children, you know. So I have often looked at white women in the antebellum south as being tragic figures, not in the way that we typically think of them. I've often thought, like, you know, the sad part about it is that black and white women never, because of the sexual violation of black women, black and white women were never able to bond over their shared suppression and oppression by design. Exactly. And that's something that is always sort of sad, and even to this day, to this day, there has been a rift there that I think is unfortunate because when you go back to that time, there were many things that we had in common as women. But those kinds of things we were never able to articulate. Sorry.



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GREEN: So in the interest of time, Rachel will ask us our last question. But I’d like to go to the archive and tell you that our own Bryce Hospital, after the war, you would think it was filled with—this is a mental hospital, right—filled with Confederate soldiers. Yeah, they came back limping here. It was filled with women. How about that? So you’re right. Pretty crazy. Yes, Rachel.

RACHEL/AUDIENCE: Thank you. I’ll be quick. I just wanted to say that on Sunday I went to Whitney Plantation, which is in Louisiana, and it’s the first plantation museum that focuses entirely on the enslaved people who lived there. In fact, you do get to go see the big house, but it’s five minutes at the ends, and it’s the life of the enslaved. It’s a privilege and it’s worth a trip for anyone and it’s such an important site. And the tour guide was describing these interracial intimacies on the tour, and she used the word “rape” and that caused a big hubbub in the crowd, as you might imagine. That’s, that’s very unusual, I know. She almost stopped herself and then she didn’t. And your crowd wasn’t your typical, like white women retirees tours. It was so refreshing. There were lots of young African Americans on the tour, and it was just a wonderful experience, and so I’m wondering, and you might not have time to address this, but if in y’all’s research, if you can address, do you see it, is it always rape? Is there, I know there are these interracial relationships that possibly there were some emotions attached or whatever. But, do we always, could these be loving relationships? I think it’s a question worth asking.

GREEN: I haven’t seen any letter that said, “Oh yeah, I just had a good time with you last night and want to see you again. But, I mean, Richard Johnson, a prominent member of Congress in Kentucky, he left behind his, basically we have two women who were his children, young women, and their mother. They ran his plantation in Kentucky, his farm in Kentucky. In Georgia we have the Dicksons, Amanda Dickson and her mother. She was the first black millionaire, apparently ran her master’s farm with an iron fist, told him and everybody else what to do.

AUDIENCE: So, there are rare exceptions, right?

ZE-WINTERS: Yeah, I really think it goes back to Trudier’s question about how do we understand love within this context, right? So, in terms of kind of, you know, black woman historians and black feminists’ kind of perspective, it’s always rape, right. Like, but I think that’s kind of been complicated in the last few years, right. And to think about . . . how do we read and how do we kind of assess how the women themselves understood, right, because that’s where you want to kind of, at least for me, that’s where I want to go and kind of stay, right. As opposed to kind of like, what is my understanding of love within, you know, how I understand love and then apply it to there, because love is totally cultural and subjective, right. There’s not a kind of universal idea of what love looks like and what it means even though we think it is.

PERKINS-VALDEZ: Right, now one of my smart girlfriends pointed out to me, and you can be my new smart girlfriend, Lisa. [Laughter] I like to call my smart girlfriends, and they can point stuff out to me that I just didn’t see, like, and we were just talking about white women. Even love between white folks was different. You know, like when women were married to someone at that time, there was a lot involved in how that transaction worked, right. Exactly. They didn’t just fall in love and get married in the way we think of it now, you know. So she said to me, “Even if we’re not



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talking about love within the very skewed, sort of slave-slave owner relationship, we’re still talking about something that is contextually different,” which is what Lisa again, I think, is mentioning here.

HARRIS: And I think also if we move from the realm of fact and history into the realm of imagination, which I think we have all entered, just use your imagination. When you think about these women on these plantations, and there all in a particular sort of sameness. How do you get some slight advantage? With what do you have to negotiate? You have your body and possibly, you know, you could use that for the non-romantic kind of advantages that get taken. Think about accounts of the men, African American males during slavery who were proud that they fathered fifteen, twenty, thirty kids. Why can’t we reverse that and there be some pride in what a black woman, or just say woman, was able to achieve by daring to be closer to the master than perhaps other enslaved people thought she should be.

GREEN: And we’re going to close right there. I want you to, you know, this event is one of many taking place on our campus in the coming month. Our theme—if Lane McClelland is here. Hillary is here, I know—is hallowed grounds.

AUDIENCE: Hallowed grounds, sites of African American memory, and it is the ASALH official theme for Black History Month. Thank you for having this wonderful event. I hope you guys take a lot of people, places, and there’s a whole slate of events on the calendar will be going on. Please, thank you for coming out and I hope to see you all at some point in the next, you’ll see me as well.

GREEN: Thank you so much. Thank you all. [Applause] And if you’re a student, don’t forget to sign in.