

A Study of Womanist Discourse in Cynthia Bond's *Ruby*

Kathleen YAMANE*

Abstract

The term “womanist” was coined in 1983 by novelist Alice Walker to describe the “consciously Black woman-identified art” rooted in and preserving African American culture while celebrating the diversity of individual experiences. It is only through the close examination of a variety of womanist writing and other works that the themes, motifs and language that characterize black women’s communication can be identified. This paper aims to contribute to that discussion through the analysis of womanist discourse in a recently published work by Cynthia Bond, her debut novel *Ruby*.

Bond’s critically-acclaimed novel centers on protagonist Ruby Bell’s struggle to survive against racism and abuse and her relationship with Ephram Jennings, a supermarket bagboy who has loved her since childhood. Ruby leaves the oppressive brutality of rural Texas for New York City where in spite of new opportunities to enjoy jazz bars and a satisfying lesbian relationship, she is victimized in different ways. Returning home, she confronts the haunting nightmares of her younger years, spiraling to madness. The novel received praise for its “luminous prose” and “exquisite language”, but was also criticized for its graphic scenes of child rape, including Ruby’s own brutal defiling at the age of five. This paper is a preliminary study exploring Bond’s manipulation of language. Through the use of one particular kind of functional shift involving adjectives used nominally (*the lonely*), the personification of body parts, and novel metaphors and similes, Bond has succeeded in creating vibrant, multi-dimensional characters who inspire empathy and compel us to listen to their stories.

[Key words] womanist discourse, figurative language, Cynthia Bond, *Ruby*

I. Introduction

Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (Walker, 1983, xii)

Four decades have passed since the publication of Barbara Smith’s seminal treatise “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” which laid the groundwork for the black feminist movement fostering “the use of Black women’s language and cultural experience in books *by* Black women *about* Black women.” (Smith, p.727). In 1983 Alice Walker pushed it a step further, coining the term *womanist* to describe the creation of this “consciously Black woman-identified art” rooted in and preserving African American culture while celebrating the diversity of individual experiences. The term itself derives from the black folk expression used as an admonishment by mothers to their daughters when they engage in audacious

*Received September 12, 2017 *College of Liberal Arts*

behavior inappropriate for their age, “You acting *womanish*.” Acknowledging that not all blacks are men and not all women are white, the womanist stance creates an autonomous space separate from the more general feminist movement which tends to focus on the white experience to the exclusion of the marginalized. Womanist scholarship “positions African American women at the center of their own experiences and, in doing so, connects the everyday lives of African American women with the intellectual positions held by African American academicians and others in the academy” (Hamlet, 2006, p.214). Walker’s quote above expresses the expectation that womanist studies would allow the vibrant voices of African American women to shine rather than fall subject to stereotypes or worse, remain silent.

In fact, womanist theory has provided a powerful framework for research on the communication of African American females across diverse fields, as evidenced in such volumes as Caponi (1999), Guy-Sheftall (1995), Houston and Davis (2002) and Phillips (2006), among others. Initially, much of the research focused on identifying representative motifs in the works of womanist writers, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison foremost among them, such as female bonding, the motif of the journey and the movement from victimization to consciousness of black female heroines like Janie in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Celie in Walker’s *The Color Purple*.

The aftermath of the 1990s Ebonics debacle furthermore witnessed a prolific burst of research on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) itself, with a new generation of Black linguists, many of them female, leaving their mark on the field of sociolinguistics with their exploration of the synchronic and diachronic aspects of the code. Smitherman (1994, 2000, 2006), Troutman (2001), Morgan (2002), Lanehart (2009) and others examined elements of African American Women’s Language (AAWL) such as patterns of intonation, *girl* as a discourse marker, and AAWL markers of strength. This author studied the use of call and response and code switching as rapport-building strategies integral to female bonding (Yamane, 2006, 2007).

At the present time African American females are enjoying a heretofore unknown level of admiration in popular American culture. Novelists including Terry McMillan and Issa Rae are on the bestseller lists. Oprah Winfrey has become the richest woman in America and hugely inspirational across racial boundaries through her television network, films and magazine. The black female stars of some of television’s most highly rated hits, Taraji Henson in *Empire*, Kerry Washington in *Scandal*, and Tracee Ellis Ross of *Blackish*, are winning critical acclaim, bringing home Emmys and Golden Globes. The film *Girls Trip*, a celebration of black sisterhood released in July 2017, recently became the first film in history written by a black female and with an all-black cast and production team to earn \$100 million at the box office (Alcindor, p.12). The *sistahs* are shining, indeed. They are telling their stories and we are listening.

A clear and careful elucidation of the specifically black female language through which to express their own and their characters’ thoughts remains an ongoing challenge. It is only through the close examination of a variety of womanist writing, films and other art forms that the linguistic and stylistic

features that characterize Black women's discourse can be identified. The current proliferation of works by African American women representing with authenticity a range of life experiences provides a rich opportunity to do so. This paper aims to contribute to that discussion through the analysis of a recently published womanist work by Cynthia Bond, her debut novel *Ruby*. Specifically, we will investigate in what ways Bond utilizes womanist language patterns to enhance her story, and to what effect.

Addressing key themes in womanist literature, Bond's highly-acclaimed novel centers on protagonist Ruby Bell's struggle to survive against racism and abuse and her relationship with Ephram Jennings, a bagboy at the P&K Supermarket who has adored her since childhood and remains fiercely determined to protect her. The child of a light-skinned, red-haired mother and absent father, Ruby leaves the stifling brutality of the Texan black township of Liberty for New York City where in spite of new opportunities to enjoy jazz, a gratifying lesbian relationship and brief contact with James Baldwin, she remains victimized. When a telegram from her beloved cousin forces Ruby's return to Liberty, she confronts the violent nightmares of her younger years and the possession of her body by the evil Dyboù spirit, ultimately becoming unraveled and spiraling to madness.

Since its publication in 2014, Bond has inspired comparisons to Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston and other giants among African American female writers. *Ruby* was shortlisted for the 2016 Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction and was a finalist for the PEN American Robert Bingham Debut Novel Award. It topped the New York Times Bestseller list and, most lucratively if not most impressively, was the Oprah Book Club 2.0 selection. The book jacket quotes praise for the novel's "luminous prose" and "exquisite language", likening it to "dazzling poetry" in which "every line glimmers with vigor and sound and beauty" — comments not unlike those hailing other works of womanist prose.

The novel has also been the object of abject criticism for its graphic depiction of extreme violence. Ruby's flashbacks include detailed scenes of child rape and sexual torture, including her own brutal defiling at the age of five and horrific molestation at the midnight pit fires. Superimposed on this is a supernatural level populated by the evil Dyboù and the haunts of the dead babies who inhabit Ruby's body. The dichotomies of dark and light, of love and evil incarnate, of haunting cruelty and small-town comedy that fill its pages mark *Ruby* as a complex and compelling tale, albeit difficult reading.

Ruby's story is told in the third-person narrative mode. This omniscient perspective allows the writer to switch back and forth between various characters, locations, and time periods throughout the novel by uniting them all with one voice. It also provides the reader with a bird's eye view of everything going on, allowing access to information that the characters themselves do not always know and privilege to at times agonizing detail surrounding the events that unfold.

II. Rhetorical Strategies

Language use covers a wide spectrum of phonological and morphosyntactic manipulation, figurative language and rhetorical discourse strategies. In this preliminary analysis we will focus on discourse

strategies identified as particularly unique to the African American idiom, beginning with functional shift, personification and hyperbole. Metaphor and simile as related to the description of the main characters will also be examined, with the aim of teasing out those elements that distinguish Bond's womanist voice.

1. Functional Shift

Functional shift involves the novel use of lexical items in non-standard grammatical use, normally without any overt change in form. Harlem Renaissance novelist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston identified the use of "verbal nouns" (*funeralize, uglying away*) and "nouns from verbs" (*take a listen*) as being one of the most notable characteristics of black speech, observing that through their reclaiming of English, ". . . the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics" (Hurston, 1933, 50).

In her study of the creative impetus of the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) lexicon Yamane also found this to be a highly productive process (1997, pp.175-177). The analysis of two dictionaries of the black lexicon by Clarence and Smitherman, both originally published in 1994, showed numerous examples of nouns and adjectives used as verbs, including *to booze* 'to drink heavily', *to crib* 'to stay at home' and *to evil* 'to cause trouble.' Suffixation, similar to functional shift but including the addition of an overt grammatical marker, was also found to be quite common, resulting in lexical items such as *loosies* 'loose cigarettes', *nasties* 'sexual desire', *airish* 'cool and breezy' and *Disneyfied* 'prone to fantasy ; unrealistic.'

Bond's work includes several uses of this pattern. The first set includes verbs created from nouns and adjectives. Page numbers follow each example in the data.

1. Surprise flowered on her face, then fell away leaving a spreading red shame. (5)
2. . . . as Andy William's rendition of "Battle Hymn of the Republic" syruped its way through the kitchen. (13)
3. So when Glister say her boy Charlie seen you eyeballin' that Bell gal ever day. (16)
4. A school of swallows took flight from a tall pine, their complaints little pinpricks in the stretch of dawn. Both men looked up and watched them freckle the sky. (202)
5. Ma Tante's eyes gentled. (35)

These constructions have the effect of creating an image that incorporates an object with an action, adding a dynamic vitality not unlike the examples cited above from Hurston and the two contemporary lexicons. In each case the reader senses a process unfolding. In #2, *syruped* suggests the slow movement of the sound from one part of the house to another with perhaps a touch of irony given the reputation of the singer of having a sweet voice. The use of *freckle* in #4 is particularly original, providing a fresher image than had another verb (*dot, pepper*) been used in its place.

The second set, with nearly three times as many examples, includes functional shifts involving adjectives used as nouns :

6. But I don't blame them none. You know how men do. Nasty ring its bell and they come running like it's supertime in hell. (15)
7. He felt a twang of concern as he passed it to Ruby, but was soothed by the sweet of her smile as she took the cup. (37)
8. Ruby felt the lonely before it came. (48)
9. Me, I don't know much, 'cept that he chased her all the way to lonely. (65)
10. A rocking sadness filled her. The air was dead and the wind had stopped. Of all that happened in her grandfather's small house over the years, the lonely had been the worst of it. (97)
11. There was nothing to say and so he just stood there, letting the soft of his eyes gently stroke her hair. (306)
12. She lost the rising curve of her shape. Already thin, she wasted to a sliver, her clavicles like handrails. The plump in her calves and thighs disappeared. (78)
13. Ruby pulled out her compact, looked in the mirror. Crazy stared back. (130)
14. . . . the gentle in the center of his eyes that never slipped and fell. (216)
15. In spite of the lie or maybe because of it, she felt the soft of the man like a balm. (263)
16. Tressie Renfolk concluded that Ruby Bell looked good enough, but crazy still hung around her eyelashes. (280)
17. He came back the next day with a nasty lump on the side of his head and a package of mean stowed in gut. (312)
18. Then she heard a warm voice, deep, familiar, family-like. . . . It stroked her, seemed to anchor her, so in the empty she grabbed ahold. (316)
19. It felt like a baptism, washing away the day, the weeks and the years of crazy. (329)

Given the relatively large number of examples in this set, it is interesting to note that there were few examples of this particular type of derivational shift in the two dictionaries of contemporary AAVE. Several points merit discussion. First, it should be noted that for each of the adjectives above there is a corresponding noun form available. In sentences #8, 9 and 10, for example, the nominal form *loneliness* would be the expected usage. Likewise, the *sweetness* of Ruby's smile and the *softness* and *gentleness* of Ephram and particularly of his eyes (#11 and 14) would be typical usage in the standard code. This begs the question of why Bond utilized the adjective forms when nominal forms are available. Interestingly, this uncommon shift has the result of reducing the quality to its pure essence. *Loneliness* is an entity unto itself, a generalized state, while *the lonely* is specifically connected to one person. Use of the adjectival creates a focus on Ruby's loneliness, just as *crazy* in #13, 16 and 19 becomes part of her identity rather than simply labeling an attribute. *Nasty* in #6 involves not only functional shift but also personification of the adjective.

The most common pattern of functional shift in our data involves nouns used adjectivally to modify other nouns or adjectives, as in these examples :

20. He assessed the plum darkness under his eyes. (11)

21. She was one of those grasshopper children, with legs almost as thin as their arms and twice as long. (21)
22. She was caramel brown with her hair up and fancy, grown-up eyes in a heart-shaped face. (21)
- 23, 24. She was burnt cork black with yellow eyes, rake thin and tall as God. (32)
25. Ruby smiled at the chocolate boy. (37)
26. by the lobster red sheriff from Newton (59)
27. Gubber Samuels, a butter cream lump of a man, wall-eyed since birth, (61)
28. . . . her hair grew brittle from soap and steam, and her velvet eyes began to film with grease and onerous routine. (111)
29. From the woman's cow eyes (117)
30. . . . they sat under the blueberry sky, listening to his fiddle. (124)
- 31, 32. that Popeye-the-sailor-man hat bobbing on top of that ridiculous zebra wig . . . (147)
33. The woman had been banana pudding yellow and as fat as a prize hog . . . (94)
34. There were chocolate men in brown velvet suits with piles of books stuffed under their arms. (157)
35. Miss Barbara had been the hostess. She was plaster white and hard, poured wet into her skin dress and solidified in gooey mounds. (164)
36. She wore her inky wig high. (164)
37. Cottony voices that made Ruby's throat close tight. (167)
38. He was paste white with red-water eyes. (169)
39. The man was asleep, his body draped like a rag against the side of the bed, knees on the floor, his acorn head resting on the pillow. (195)
40. His creamed corn skin wet with the strain of walking so early. (198)
41. The caramel glow of her skin, the curl of her black hair, rolling like a frothy river past her shoulder blades. (214)
42. The streets and fields were Sunday morning empty. (141)
43. Under the blackberry sky, the impartial moon shone on night phlox, evening primrose and lone houses with slanted steps. (193)
44. Her face was plum dark, fat. (296)
45. The one person oblivious to the doings across town, Junie rested stiffly, a grin curling about his peachy lips, his wool navy duster and wing tips pressed and buffed to a shine. (217)
46. A slight, algae brown man with a moustache, Edwin . . . (217)
47. Ruby then remembered the periwinkle ringing the earth brown of Ephram's eyes. (326)

This pattern of N+N (ADJ) is more generally used, even in the standard code. While some of the examples above are quite ordinary (*plum* darkness, *caramel* brown) in other cases, Bond's innovative juxtaposition of nouns with the words they describe serves to create surprising and vivid images. The *grasshopper* children (#21), the *acorn* head (#39) and *Sunday morning* empty (#42) create particularly

fresh images due to their unconventionality, although the descriptor nouns *grasshopper*, *acorn* and *Sunday morning* are all commonplace objects, especially in the rural setting of this story. The impact is more powerful than the use of similes would be (“the children were like grasshoppers”, “his head was like an acorn”). Use of a metaphor in this context (“she was one of those grasshoppers”) would be nonsensical.

It is worth noting that with the exception of the *blueberry* sky, the *blackberry* sky and *Sunday morning* empty, the remaining examples in this data set all describe people. They can be further subdivided into descriptive categories. The majority involve color: *plum* darkness, *caramel* brown/glow, *burnt cork* black, *chocolate* boy/men, *lobster* red sheriff, *banana pudding* yellow, *plaster* white, *paste* white, *red-water* eyes, and *algae* brown man. *Inky* wig and *peachy* lips also suggest color, with the addition of the overt grammatical marker *-y* signaling an adjective form. That is also true of *cottony* voices.

A number of the other examples involve size or shape. These include *grasshopper* children, *rake* thin and *acorn* head, which result in exaggerated descriptions of the thinness and small, round head by equating them with mundane objects. Several of the more interesting examples play simultaneously to multiple senses. *Cow* eyes, for example, suggests a certain size, shape, and “droopiness.” Likewise, the *creamed corn* skin (#40) implies a yellowish color as well as a characteristic lumpy texture. The use of *velvet* to modify eyes (# 28) evokes a soft, shimmering quality and at the same time a deep, rich color. Arguably the most colorful example in the set is Ruby’s description of Celia as seen through the window, decked out for church with her “*Popeye-the-sailor-man* hat bobbing on top of that ridiculous *zebra* wig.” Use of the verb “bobbing” adds a sense of motion, underscoring the comical effect of the cartoon-like hat and Celie’s precious striped wig.

Bond shuns conventional adjectives to describe color, size and other features of her characters, relying instead on unexpected and sensual images created through derivational shift. The nouns selected for functional shift are everyday items, commonplace in the world she has created. A large number involve foods (*banana pudding* yellow, *creamed corn* skin) and several, objects from nature (*cow* eyes, the *algae* brown man.) This shifting attests to the flexibility of grammatical usage within AAVE and results in imaginative descriptions of the characters who populate the novel.

2. Personification

The personification of body parts and emotions has also been identified as a characteristic of AAVE discourse and prose. In her study of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, the author found the images in Celie’s prose to be enriched through the use of personification of body parts such as “Her face full of eyes” and “Her mouth just pack with claws,” producing a more animated effect as compared to the more conventional constructions used by her standard English-speaking sister (Yamane, 2000, p.200). There are numerous examples in our data in which body parts are the agents of some action :

48. She lost the rising curve of her shape. Already thin, she wasted to a sliver, her clavicles like

handrails. The plump in her calves and thighs disappeared. Her breasts drew close to her chest. Her wrists withered to blades of grass, bones knobby and hard under her skin. (78)

49. Scars wrapped themselves about her shins and knees. (111)

50. At sixteen her full lips started their descent towards her jaw and grew tight with the anger of responsibility. (111)

51. There was nothing to say and so he just stood there, letting the soft of his eyes gently stroke her hair. (306)

52. She felt a kind of magic running through her palms that made them want to dance like butterflies in the air. (229)

53. The hair started whispering to his fingers. It showed him where to part and what to leave alone. It told him to crush wild ginger and mix it with the peanut oil, to warm it, to slip into the tunnels beneath the tumult and work that concoction along her scalp with his fingertips. He suddenly realized that it had been speaking to him all day while he was cleaning, telling him what to buy, what it needed. (187)

54. Then Ruby's hair began to do more than guide Ephram's hands, it began to guide his heart. (188)

55. It spoke to him in feelings. Each strand holding a story, each known event. (188)

56. She lay on the ground until her heart filled her brain with reason. (235)

57. He ran past P&K, and past the whole congregation of men on the porch. He felt every eye on him, judging and laughing at him. (309)

58. . . . and held his smiles because they tickled something in her chest. (282)

59. Then she heard a warm voice, deep, familiar, family-like. Gentle. His voice entered with the other words, but it seemed to hold her. It had sugar stirred in like sweet tea. It stroked her, seemed to anchor her, so in the empty she grabbed ahold. (316)

Notably, it is Ruby's body parts—her breasts, wrists, scars, hair and the palms of her hands—that are most frequently personified in the data. From childhood she developed the ability to compartmentalize and move outside of her own body as a protective mechanism when she was being violated. These examples serve to reinforce the separation of body and mind, with the body parts themselves assuming an active role in her development and transformations. In examples #53 through 55, her hair takes on a life of its own, the subject in consecutive sentences of *whisper, tell, show, speak, guide*. It has the power to communicate to Ephram the thoughts, desires and needs that Ruby is unable to vocalize.

Compare this to the examples involving Ephram. In his case it is not physical body parts but rather the soft of his eyes, his smile and his voice which are personified. More than his arms or lips, it is these intangible, non-corporal aspects of Ephram that ultimately succeed in communicating his love to the fragile Ruby.

The text also includes interesting examples of personification involving time references and objects in nature, as in the sentences below :

60. She made it in that pocket of time before dawn when the aging night gathered its dark skirts and paused in the stillness. (6)

61. Then when they was done, out there on that hilltop, time stretch itself out like molasses. Crickets slow they crik. Owl drags her 'hoo's.' (68)

62. Papa Bell cut Neva down before the sun had the nerve to show itself. (69)

63. The yard seemed to hold its breath. (70)

64. He looked up and saw the moon reaching in through the window. (190)

65. The pines had been watching men and their fire circles since they were saplings. For nearly two hundred years they had seen upside down crosses glowing red in the dark, long before men in white sheets ever rode the horizon. (274)

Throughout the story, images of the night, sun and moon serve as powerful symbols, witnesses to all that happens below and the source of multiple metaphors crucial to the novel. The piney woods (#65) also play an important role in moving the narrative forward. The pines are in fact personified to the point of becoming more a character than a mere setting or scenery.

There are two final examples, less conducive to categorization, which deserve mention :

66. Who read their papers, played dominoes and chewed tobacco. Toothpicks dangling. Pipes smoking. Soda pops sweating. (4)

67. The faint scent of Johnson's Baby Powder kept him company. Calmed the rocket in his chest. (55)

#66 is from the opening section of the novel and serves to acquaint us with the local townsmen. Moving the three inanimate objects to subject position highlights their importance to the scene and probably to the men themselves. They are engaged in their own activities (reading, playing dominoes, chewing tobacco) while the accoutrements help generate a colorful picture. The symmetry of the three actions followed by the trio of personified objects results in an interesting rhythm as well as creating a sense of bustling activity. The final example is interesting in that the scent of a common household item most often associated with babies and diaper rash serves as the subject of multiple verbs, both keeping Ephram company and helping him to relax. The contrast between the simple home product and the dramatically-stated "rocket in his chest" is striking and humorous.

3. Hyperbole

The use of exaggerated statements to express strong feelings has also been identified as a salient feature of the black code. Weber (1995, pp.464-465) discusses this in the context of the competitive verbal games "the dozens" and "runnin' it down" which serve to showcase the verbal creativity of young African American males (and less commonly, females.) In her discussion of the rhetorical qualities of Black English, Smitherman (2000, pp.216-217) identifies exaggerated language as one of the prominent characteristics of the "sacred-secular oral tradition" of African American discourse. There are a number of examples in our data :

- 68, 69. She was burnt cork black with yellow eyes, rake thin and tall as God. (32)
70. She was so black she was almost blue. (35)
71. But not Mister Bell, who was whiter than milk from a white cow in winter. (64)
72. She looked even better than she had that morning, too skinny, but legs as long as the River Nile. (255)
73. Stupid as dirt before God blowed across it to make up some humans. (50)
74. Dumb as dishwater, light on suds. (50)
75. Them Klux keep her out there for hours—doin’ what God ain’t got the muscle to look at. (68)
76. Ruby’s grandmother and Maggie’s mama sweated oceans under the Texas sun as the two children sat under a faded umbrella and sucked on sugarcane. (123)
77. Ruby remembered how everyone said that the two of them had locked eyes and hearts in the time it took a star to twinkle. (123)

In its simplest form, hyperbole in AAVE discourse often involves exaggerated numbers to indicate size, speed or volume (“a million miles an hour”, “for the bobillionth time.”) The data from Bond’s novel favors more colorful depictions indicating the degree of a particular quality—thinness and tallness in the first example, blackness in the second, stupidity in the fifth. The last two usages involve embellished references to the amount of sweat and the speed with which the girls’ relationship developed. It should be noted that three of the examples (#69,73,75) include a reference to God. Another four of the examples allude to forces of nature: a white cow, the River Nile, oceans and stars.

In her discussion of the rhetorical qualities of AAVE, Smitherman identifies the use of creative exaggeration as part of a set of highly valued verbal skills (2000, pp.216-217; 2006, p.77). While the examples cited above are all uttered by the narrator and are not part of a public performance *per se*, Bond has successfully incorporated this feature into the narrative to heighten the visual impact (as in the first five examples) or the emotional impact (in the last five.)

4. Metaphor and Simile

Metaphor and simile will be considered together in this section. We will limit the discussion to tropes describing the main characters, beginning with the protagonist, and will present examples in context rather than lists as in the previous sections. The narrator first introduces Ruby to us in the opening pages of the novel, 11 years after her return to Liberty:

She wore gray like rain clouds and wandered the red roads in bared feet. *Calluses thick as boot leather*. Hair caked with mud. *Blackened nails as if she had scratched the slate of night*. Her *acres of legs* carrying her, *arms swaying like a loose screen*. *Her eyes the ink of sky*, just before the storm (p.3).

This description uses figurative language to create a vivid image of Ruby that plays to a variety of senses. Likening her dress to *rain clouds* suggests not only a particular dark hue but also a certain shapelessness. The colors of the approaching figure are not simply described as gray and black but gray

like rain clouds, blackened nails *as if she had scratched the slate of night*, and eyes *the ink of sky*, foreshadowing Ruby's as yet unmentioned communion with nature as well as a sense of impending doom suggested by the *rain clouds* and the phrase *just before the storm*. The *acres of legs* that propel her and her arms *swaying like a loose screen* add a sense of motion that helps the reader visualize her movement. The shifting focus from her clothes to her feet, hair, nails, arms and eyes give the reader a strong pictorial image of Ruby as seen by the townspeople who watch her walk the dusty roads of Liberty day after day.

This contrasts with the descriptions of Ruby when she first returned from New York City 11 years earlier and as she is seen through the eyes of the local men who seek her out for sexual favors :

When she'd stepped from the red bus, the porch had crowded her with their eyes. *Hair pressed and gleaming like polished black walnut*. Lipstick red and thick, her cornflower blue sundress darted and stitched tight to her waist (p.4).

Gubber and all of the men stopped dead when they saw her. The caramel glow of her skin, *the curl of her black hair, rolling like a frothy river past her shoulder blades* (p.214).

She looked even better than she had that morning, too skinny, but *legs as long as the River Nile*. Ephram Jennings was no fool. He stood and looked at *the girl's hair, all wet and moving like black oil rolling down her back*. It was what folks called talking hair (p.255).

In these passages, it is Ruby's hair and her long legs that capture the men's (and the reader's) attention. Her hair is compared to a "polished black walnut" and described as "rolling like a frothy river" and "moving like black oil rolling down her back," suggesting not only the color but also the shine and flow. In hyperbolic language, as we have seen, her long legs are likened to the Nile River. In contrast to the shapeless robe "gray like rain clouds" Ruby is dressed in a form-fitting outfit the blue of cornflowers. The disparity is striking.

Ruby is also reflected in the eyes of Ephram's self-righteous sister who sees her not as the isolated and misunderstood woman that she is but as an evil force, leading her brother away from her and the church towards sin and damnation :

Celia craned her neck around Ephram and saw that thing sitting on a soiled mattress. *Eyes like a swamp lizard*. Evil mark on her cheek. Her legs spread out in that foul gray dress she always had on. . . . The nasty thing was standing behind him now. . . . Celia saw her Ephram turn to the creature and get *soft like saltwater taffy* (p.142).

Celia's description of Ruby renders her inhuman, labeling her *a thing* and *a creature*, with reptilian-like eyes. We recognize the gray dress, *foul* from the perspective of Celia, who the reader witnesses as being meticulous in her own selection of clothes and wigs to attend church services. The description concludes with the effect that this subhuman being has on her brother, rendering him *soft like saltwater taffy*.

At the time of their first encounter as children, Ephram himself notices Ruby's eyelashes and beauty spot, describing her as, "The sweet little girl with long braids. The kind of pretty it hurt to look at, *like*

candy on a sore tooth” (p.17). Interestingly, with the exception of her hair and the tenderness with which he cares for it as discussed in the section on Personification, Ephram simply loves Ruby for what she is. Rather than detailed physical descriptions of the woman herself, the writer expresses the effect that she has on him as in phrases like the one above and his sensual orgasmic reaction to her body here :

Then gasp as *his pelvis warmed like honey in the sun*, as hot sticky waves swirled, as his entire body tightened, contracted, as *a lightning rod of bittersweet ache* buckled his flesh. Too, too sweet, embarrassingly so, *like a roller coaster crashing to the dip*, only to discover it had another hill to climb and dip, and climb and dip. Exploding again and again and again. When it ended he didn't know how to fix his face. *He wilted like a week-old rose* (p.189).

Let us now turn to descriptions of Ephram, portrayed throughout the novel as a gentle man of quiet goodness. Our first description is from the narrator early in Chapter One :

The problem was that no one, not even his sister, took the time to really look at Ephram Jennings. Folks pretty much glanced past him on the way to Bloom's place or P&K. To them he was just another *thick horse brown man* with a ratted cap and a stooped gait. To them there was nothing special about Ephram. *He was a moving blur on the eyes' journey to more delicate and interesting places. . . . He was a pair of hands carrying grocery bags* to White folk's shiny automobiles. Taking tips and mouthing “Thank ya, Ma'am” (p.7).

The Ephram that Ruby sees, however, is different :

Folks never did see his Chinese lamp hat, or his purple-ringed irises, or the way that they matched just perfectly the berry tint of his lower lip. They didn't see *the ten crescent moons held captive in his fingernails, the way he moved, like a man gliding under water, smooth and liquid as Marion Lake*. They didn't notice how the blue in his socks coordinated with the buttons on his Sunday shirt or smell the well-brushed sheen of Brylcreem in his thick hair. . . . They didn't see the way his pupils got wide when his heart filled up with pride or love or hope. But Ruby did (p.8).

To the locals in Liberty who have known him his whole life, Ephram is nondescript, just another *thick horse brown man* who is part of the scenery. Through the use of synecdoche, he is reduced to a *pair of hands* carrying out his duties at the supermarket, in the service of others. Ruby sees beyond that, however, perceiving details like the circle of violet rimming the brown of his irises, the *crescent moons* in his fingernails, and his style of dressing and walking *like a man gliding under water, smooth and liquid*. Even as a child Ruby noticed him, describing Ephram as “*the chocolate boy*” and enjoying the way “*he grinned all droopy*” (p.37). Slowly, she comes to recognize his gentle nature : “The man was *patient—like he'd learned sweets after spinach early in life*” (p.114). Later in the novel as their physical relationship progresses, Ruby's description focuses on the entirety of his body and becomes more nuanced :

Now, in the morning light, *his body was carved like hard oak—fine sanded, buffed, stained dark*

and polished. A watercolor tin of browns (p.212).

In these two sentences Bond captures the color, texture and shine of Ephram's body as seen through Ruby's eyes with the effect that her "*heart became soft like sweet potato pie* and she couldn't wait to press against the man" (p.213).

While a full discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, Bond also uses metaphor and simile to bring the other characters in the novel alive in innovative (and often disturbing) ways. In the passages below, descriptions of two of the men Ruby is forced to service at the "Friend's Club," Bond makes effective use of figurative expressions to represent the sounds, smells and touch that Ruby associates with them, including details that enable the reader to visualize the men who force her to do unspeakable things for pocket change.

He loved the feel of her. Nasty black and tight. The way she arched her young buttocks to allow him. The way her head never turned when *he farted low and sticky* (p.156).

A man with a *big square head came in—the top and the bottom of it almost had corners*. He was paste white with red-water eyes. *He smelled sour like the rye Papa Bell kept for Sundays*. . . . with *hands like lobster claws* (p.169).

Female bonding, a hallmark of much womanist writing, is largely lacking in Ruby's world. Most of the women around her are villains, like the terrifying conjure woman Ma Tante, "burnt cork black with yellow eyes, rake thin and tall as God" (p.32) and Miss Barbara who is charged with protecting her but instead forces her to work in the brothel where she is hostess :

Her nails were bright pink and *long like possum claws* so Ruby hung back. When she smiled it frightened her more. Ruby could not stop staring at her teeth. *It looked like a rat had gnawed at their dark edges* (p.166).

There are two females who do have strong emotional connections with Ruby. One of them is Abby, her lover during her time in New York City, who "she would caw softly during sex, as *the gristle warrior became melted cheese under the dome of Ruby's thighs*" (p.160). The other is Maggie :

Ruby would then put her head against Maggie's wide chest, and feel *her arms like supple steel around her*. There had been a comfort to the way *Maggie smelled, like Juicy Fruit and tobacco*.

When she got older and she began *smelling like the wash she was taking in*, Ruby saw it crush something inside of her (p.124).

Ruby and Abby's relationship is primarily a sexual one. Ruby's relationship with her tomboy cousin Maggie, on the other hand, is one of profound mutual affection from their youngest years when they would watch Maggie's mother and Ruby's grandmother work in the fields together: "Ruby remembered how everyone said that *the two of them had locked eyes and hearts in the time it took a star to twinkle*" (p.123). Their deep love for each other manifests itself through physical but not sexual contact, with Maggie's touch and smell a source of comfort, her presence providing constant protection. In neither relationship, however, is there evidence of the collaborative conversation commonly associated with black women. Neither Abby nor Maggie hears Ruby's story. It is only Ephram who

carries out that role.

We are told that, “There were two suns at Marion Lake, the one high above and the one floating on the surface” (p.20). Just as a reflection of the sun can be seen on the lake, throughout the novel people see the reflections of Ruby and Ephram as opposed to who they really are as people. In this section we have considered the descriptions of the two characters from both viewpoints, as other people perceive them to be as well as their true selves. We have seen that in the creation of Bond’s characters there are numerous examples of simile and metaphor that appeal to one or a combination of the five senses, producing powerful images that are visually inspired along with others that build on the senses of motion and smell.

III. Discussion

In the pages of *Ruby*, a novel which took her over a decade to write, Bond shines a spotlight on the darkest, most sinister sliver of the Black female experience. From the days of slavery, African Americans suffered from harsh physical working conditions, brutal beatings and the forced separation of families. The additional burden of sexual exploitation marked the experience of the black females as different and infinitely more harrowing than that of the males. The theme of sexual vulnerability has been taken up in numerous womanist works, through haunting characters like Morrison’s Pecola (*The Bluest Eye*) and Walker’s Celie (*The Color Purple*). The first third of *Ruby* involves Ephram delivering a homemade cake to the woman he has loved from afar, a simple act of kindness which is interwoven with flashbacks depicting in raw, unrelenting detail the ugliest aspects of the African American women’s experience—the rape, the abuse, the sexual perversion and torture. We are forced to listen. We are forced to watch.

How is Bond able to accomplish this? We have seen that through the use of one particular kind of functional shift involving adjectives used nominally (*the lonely*), personification of body parts and natural elements, and novel metaphors and similes tapping the reader’s various senses, Bond has succeeded in creating vibrant, multi-dimensional characters. Through their stories and the variety of lenses through which we observe them, they become real to us, inspiring empathy and compassion. In *Ruby* she has created a unique voice with which to share the heaviest, most disturbing parts of the womanist experience, imbuing her novel with a realism that allows the reader to not only vividly imagine the characters, but to hear them as well, compelling us to read on.

Ruby is to a certain extent autobiographical. Like her novel’s heroine, Bond was born and raised in east Texas. Her aunt, like Ruby’s Aunt Neva, was murdered by a Ku Klux Klan-affiliated sheriff and his band of deputies. Bond herself was sexually abused in her youth and once became a victim of sex trafficking. Also like Ruby, she left her small community in Texas to seek out a life in New York City and then Los Angeles, where she currently works with homeless and at-risk youth. Bits and pieces of their experience as well as her own have woven their way into her story. “Writing Ruby,” she claims in

an interview with Oprah Winfrey, “became my salvation” (p.114). This is her story, and she needs it to be heard.

At one point near the end of the novel, Ruby is finally able to tell Ephram “the stories decades old that she had folded up and tucked away between her spine and her heart” (p.289). Listening to her tales of brutal physical and sexual violence, he whispers in Ruby’s ear, “I ain’t going nowhere. If you brave enough to live it, the least I can do is listen” (p.298). Finding someone to listen is a critical first step in Ruby’s reclaiming of her personhood. It can be said that Ephram’s words are a token for the readers, as well : through her luminous use of the black idiom, Bond makes us listen.

This paper is intended as a preliminary analysis of womanist discourse in Bond’s work, focusing primarily on the use of figurative language in descriptions of people. There are numerous other aspects of the novel which merit careful attention, including a fuller consideration of other characters in the novel like the church ladies and the locals who hang out at Bloom’s Juke. The scenes of sexual activity, most of which involve non-consensual abuse, and of Ruby’s transformations throughout the story are marked by highly expressive language often tinged with synesthesia. In portraying this small Texan community and the locals who inhabit it, the author also turns to discourse features commonly associated with the black male vernacular like *signifyin’* and *dissin’*. The use of syncopation and rhythm cleverly created through the alternation of human voices and background sounds—snippets of an Andy Williams’ song playing in the next room, the *ting* of the beans dropping into the metal pan—add to the lyric flow of the story as well as providing a sense of authenticity. These, among other things, deserve further study. With her own distinctive manipulation of black female discourse evident on every page, Bond has crafted an unforgettable womanist masterpiece.

Works Cited

- Alcindor, Yamiche. “Making Movie History : ‘Girls Trip’ hits a peak for films created by and starring black artists.” *Japan Times*. 28 August, 2017.
- Bond, Cynthia. 2014. *Ruby*. London : Hogarth Publishers.
- Caponi, Gina, ed. 1999. Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin’, and Slam Dunking : A Reader in African American Expressive Culture. Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press.
- Guy-Sheftall, Beverly, ed. 1995. *Words of Fire : An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. New York : The New Press.
- Hamlet, Janice D. 2006. “Assessing Womanist Thought : The Rhetoric of Susan L. Taylor.” In *Womanist Reader*. Layli Phillips, ed. New York and London : Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group. pp.213-231.
- Houston, Marsha and Olga Idriss Davis, ed. 2002. *Centering Ourselves : African American Feminist and Womanist Studies of Discourse*. Creskill, New Jersey : Hampton Press, Inc.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. 1933. *The Sanctified Church*. Berkeley, California : Turtle Island.
- Lanehart, Sonja, ed. 2009. *African American Women’s Language : Discourse, Education, and Identity*. Cambridge : Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Major, Clarence. *Juba to Jive : A Dictionary of African-American Slang*. New York : Penguin Books. 1994.
- Morgan, Marcyliena. 2002. *Language, Discourse and Power in African-American Culture*. Cambridge : Cambridge

- University Press.
- Phillips, Layli, ed. 2006. *The Womanist Reader*. New York : Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.
- Smith, Barbara. 1977. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." In *Call and Response : Key Debates in African American Studies*. 2011. H. L. Gates and J. Burton, ed. New York and London : W. W. Norton Company. pp.723-733.
- Smitherman, Geneva. 1977. *Talkin and Testifyin : The Language of Black America*. Detroit : Wayne State University Press.
- Smitherman, Geneva. 1994. *Black Talk : Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*. Boston : Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Smitherman, Geneva. 2000. *Talkin that Talk*. London and New York : Routledge.
- Smitherman, Geneva. 2006. *Word from the Mother : Language and African Americans*. New York and London : Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.
- Troutman, Denise. 2001. "African American Women : Talking that Talk." In *Sociocultural and Historical contexts of African American English*. S. Lanehart, ed. Amsterdam : John Benjamins Publishing Company. pp.211-237.
- Walker, Alice. 1983. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. San Diego : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Weber, Shirley N. 1995. "The Need to Be : The Socio-Cultural Significance of Black Language." In *Bridges Not Walls : A Book about Interpersonal Communication* (6th ed.) John Stewart, ed. New York : McGraw-Hill, Inc. pp.461-468.
- Winfrey, Oprah. "Born to Write : Oprah talks to Ruby Author Cynthia Bond." *O Magazine*. March 2015. pp.114-117.
- Yamane, Kathleen. 1997. "A Semantic Investigation of the BEV Lexicon : Borrowing and Formal Processes." *Sapientia* No.33. Osaka : Eichi University. pp.167-183.
- Yamane, Kathleen. 2000. "The Celie Letters Revisited : Insights from BEV Research." *Sapientia* No.34. Osaka : Eichi University. pp.193-204.
- Yamane, Kathleen. 2006. "Girl, you know that's the truth : Call-and-Response in Womanist Discourse." *Sapientia* No.40. Osaka : Eichi University. pp.89-104.
- Yamane, Kathleen. 2007. "Code-Switching as a Rapport-Building Strategy in *Jungle Fever*." *Sapientia* No.41. Osaka : Eichi University. pp.195-214.

要 旨

「ウーマニスト」(womanist) という用語は、アフリカ系アメリカ人フェミニストによる作品を説明するために、1983年に作家 Alice Walker によって作り出された。アフリカ系アメリカ人女性のコミュニケーションを特徴づけるテーマや言葉遣いは、様々なウーマニスト作品を詳細に検討することによってのみ明らかにすることができる。そこで、本稿は、2014年に出版された Cynthia Bond のデビュー作 *Ruby* におけるウーマニストのディスコースを分析し、アフリカ系アメリカ人女性によるコミュニケーションの特徴を明らかにすることを目的とする。

小説 *Ruby* では、人種差別や虐待を乗り越えようとする Ruby Bell の戦いと、彼女を崇拝する Ephram Jennings との関係が主に描かれている。本作品は、「精緻な文体」(exquisite language) と賞賛される一方で、露骨な子どもの強姦シーンが批判的となっている。本稿は、Bond の巧みな表現を考察する予備的研究である。形容詞が名詞として用いられる機能転換や、身体部分の擬人化、新奇なメタファーやシミリーによって、Bond は、読者の共感を呼ぶ生き生きとした多面的な登場人物を作り出している。