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"Their Past in my Blood": Paule Marshall, Gayl Jones, and Octavia Butler's Response to the Black Aesthetic

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The University of Southern Mississippi

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PAULE MARSHALL, GAYL JONES, AND OCTAVIA BUTLER’S

RESPONSE TO THE BLACK AESTHETIC

by

Williamenia Miranda Walker Freeman

Abstract of a Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969), Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* (1975), and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) enhance our conceptualization of black aestheticism and black nationalism as cultural and political movements. The writers use the novel as genre to question the ideological paradigm of a black nationalist aesthetic by providing alternative definitions of community, black women’s sexuality, and race relations. Because of the ways in which these writers respond to black aestheticism and black nationalism, they transform our understanding of movements often perceived as sexist, racist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic. An examination of their works reveals the need for additional critical inquiry into the Black Arts era. More importantly, this study suggests that these writers are deserving of more prominent placement within the African American literary canon as the thematic content of their novels presages that found in the works of more canonical writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

[The black woman] is a college graduate. *A drop-out*. A student. *A wife*. A divorcee. *A mother*. A lover. *A child of the ghetto*. A product of the bourgeoisie. *A professional writer*. A person who never dreamed of publication. *A solitary individual*. A member of the Movement. *A gentle humanist*. A violent revolutionary. *She is angry and tender, loving and hating*. *She is all these things—and more*. “The Black Woman”—Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman* (1970)

Taken from the eponymous anthology, Bambara names and defines “the black woman.” A compilation of poetry, short stories, and critical essays, *The Black Woman* is important in its efforts to have black women validate their own *Self(-ves)* at a pivotal moment for understanding the politics of identity in the latter half of the twentieth century. The collection problematizes the interplay of race, class, and gender from the perspective of black women.¹ The text signals an effort on the part of black women to assert their voices in racial and gendered discourses to which they had been historically marginalized. Though black women novelists, dramatists, and poets had long established a tradition of addressing these issues in their literary texts,² 1970 proved a watershed year in propelling their concerns to the forefront as these writers seek inclusion into the social, cultural, and political discourses (Civil Rights and Feminism) that had at times excluded them and at others kept them from moving from “margin to center.”³ Seemingly, race and gender certainly would serve as point of entry, but both movements excluded black women’s direct involvement. Though black women had a visible presence, their concerns were ignored. In essence, “all the women were white and all the blacks were men”⁴ as iconic representations of these cultural movements.

Audre Lorde in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” posits that “black women and men have shared racist oppression and still share it,

although in different ways. Out of that shared oppression [they] have developed joint defenses and joint vulnerabilities to each other that are not duplicated in the white community...”(118). Though her original thesis centers on the inclusion of black lesbians into the collective black community, her argument offers a method of addressing the concerns of all black women. Simply put, though black men and women suffer from racism, the burden they bear is different because of gender conditions. Black Nationalist ideology that privileged racial patriarchy did not consider that black women also suffered from sexist oppression. This failure to recognize black males’ culpability as potential oppressors results in the dismissal of black women’s concerns and tries to limit their agency. As bell hooks cogently observes:

Black male leaders of the movement made the liberation of black people from racist oppression synonymous with their gaining the right to assume the role of patriarch, of sexist oppressor. By allowing white men to dictate the terms by which they would define black liberation, black men chose to endorse sexist exploitation and oppression of black women. They were not liberated from the system but liberated to serve the system. (*Ain’t I* 181)

My purpose is to interrogate the exclusion and marginalization of black women in Black Nationalist and Aesthetic discourses by examining how black women writers of the 1960s and 1970s challenge the ideologies that were ostensibly about racial uplift and unity but deny the explicit participation of black women. I offer Paule Marshall, Gayl Jones and Octavia Butler as they “dare to verbalize [black women’s] resistance” (Lorde 119) to oppression. “The Black experience” meant the *black man’s* experience as black

women's concerns were overshadowed by the black masculinist dogma of Black Nationalism and its outgrowth, the Black Arts Movement, as black women's construct of blackness was more inclusive. Kathleen Cleaver, Elaine Brown, Afeni Shakur, and Angela Davis, as Black Panthers, were effective political agents; they were outspoken activists at rallies, organizing protests, and promoting the tenets of Black Power as officers in the group.⁵ Though the Movement's pervasive sexism still restricted the change these women could affect, as "the Black Panther Party reflected the gender politics of the misogynist society out of which it emerged" these women forced their male counterparts to confront the limiting nature of the patriarchy (Ogbar 105). On the aesthetic front, Black women writers demanded inclusion in these socio-political discourses and felt connected to the Movement. Ntozake Shange claimed to be "a daughter of the black arts movement (even though they didn't know they were going to have a girl!)" (Read 159). In a bit of irony, Shange suggests that she as well as any black man could articulate the ideological importance of the Movement. She along with other African American women writers like Marshall, Jones, and Butler of the era attempt to address broader concerns within the context of Black Nationalist discourse, specifically how the intersections of class, race, and gender continually affect black women. As Cheryl Clarke astutely observes, "Wherever [black women] stood in relation to the Black Arts Movement, most black women writers of the time wrote *because of it*—and still do" (2).

Some critics have argued that the proliferation of texts by African American women writers beginning in 1970 and continuing throughout the decade played a central role in ending of the Black Nationalist and Black Arts movements.⁶ Elizabeth Alexander

refutes such a claim, positing that black women who rose to prominence in the 1970s were writing before and during the movements. Gwendolyn Brooks, Paule Marshall, and Lorraine Hansberry were writing in the 1950s while Audre Lorde, Adrienne Kennedy, Carolyn Rodgers, Nikki Giovanni, and Alice Walker published collections of poetry in the 1960s (Alexander 61-65).⁷ Black women's writings did not lead to the demise of movements. Their writings transcend the movements as they are not set historically to the era but are foundational to later developments. Further, perhaps the refusal to be inclusive—no just of women, but of any oppressed group—was a primary cause, along with the pervasive ideologies of “masculine bias, homophobia, anti-Semitism, violent imagery, [and] simplistic racial dichotomies”(Mullen 57).

Cheryl Clarke's *“After Mecca”: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (2005) examines how the era's poetry represents “black communities struggling for rights and liberation” (1). She argues that black feminist poets and their works have advanced the conversation of racial and social equality to address issues of sexual orientation (lesbianism) and women's rights (feminism). By focusing on thematic representation of lesbianism and feminism in black women's poetry, Clarke's work interrogates Black Nationalist and Aesthetic discourses to re-conceptualize black female sexuality and gender equality in the context of Black Nationalism and Black Arts. In an ironic twist, Clarke illustrates how these writers use the Black Nationalist and Aesthetic principle of community to give voice to black women's concerns that had been ignored by such discourses. *“After Mecca”* is significant in its contribution to the growing but still scant scholarship on the Black Arts era and the role of black women poets in it. More importantly, the work shows the specific nature of community as a theme in black

women's poetry and how these writers avoid an adherence to prescribed Black Aesthetic theoretical paradigms. However, Clarke's work still focuses on the form of the day (poetry) and its import as means of transmitting ideology.

Black women writers used many formats to articulate their concerns. Bambara's *The Black Woman* is such an example. The collection presents literary and critical pieces that confront the racism, sexism, and classism that had historically oppressed black women. Abbey Lincoln in "To Whom Will She Cry Rape" demands that black womanhood be respected; Toni Cade in "The Pill: Genocide or Liberation" argues that birth control is about providing the black woman with reproductive choices and not about destroying the race; Ann Cook's "Black Pride: Some Contradictions" suggests that the only way to achieve racial pride is to transcend previously held notions of blackness; and Joanna Clark de-romaniticizes motherhood as a noble ideal. Ironically, though Black Nationalist and Aesthetic proponents dismissed these gender issues, they embraced black women's poetry that presented similar thematic content.⁸ Because of their oral nature, poetry and drama served as the "acceptable" mode for articulating the movements' messages. The work of black women novelists, on the other hand, often went unnoticed or was dismissed, accused of being "intellectually" removed from the people because novels did not allow for the same interaction between artist and audience as did poetry.⁹ Robert E. Washington in *Ideologies of African American Literature* (2001) explains the neglect of the novel during the Black Arts Movement, positing that "literary forms (poetry and drama) were accessible to the black American masses" while the novel required "isolation and a solitary engagement of the reader with the text, experiences alien to communally oriented black ethnic culture" (307-308). Novels written by black

women writers attempt to make their texts “accessible to the black masses,” as Toni Morrison asserts, “[by] provid[ing] the places and spaces so that the reader can participate...[to] comment on the action as it goes ahead.” She adds that while the novel “should be beautiful, and powerful, it should also *work* (“Rootedness” 341), suggesting the inherent political nature of the novel. The novel as generic form allowed black women novelists to question Black Nationalist and Black Aesthetic ideological and monolithic constructions of race, community, gender, and class. Some women writers employed innovative techniques: a fragmented plot line—Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva’s Man* (1976); a mixture of generic conventions (science fiction and the slave narrative)—Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979); multiple plot lines—Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) and polyvocality—Morrison’s *Sula* (1973).

Many of the concerns (black women’s sexuality, gender inequality, classism) Clarke highlights in her analysis of black women poets of the Black Arts Movement are also addressed in the novels of black women writers. Madhu Dubey’s *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (1994) draws upon black feminist theory to present black women writers contesting sexist constructions of black female identity within nationalist discourses. Dubey’s study is particularly important because of its focus on the novel as genre. Though black women writers produced novels at an unprecedented level during the Black Nationalist and Black Arts Movements, sparse study has been devoted to an examination of these novels in context of the movements. Dubey suggests that Black feminist literary criticism (a critical discourse that emerged during Black Nationalist and Aesthetic Movement) serves as useful paradigmatic tool in

the analysis of texts to “restructure and supplement the ideological program of black cultural nationalism” (1). She restricts her study to the construction of black femininity within “black cultural nationalism” to show how Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker challenge conventional roles of black womanhood while simultaneously questioning constructs of history, community, and identity. Building upon Dubey’s initial study, I examine similar concerns in a broader thematic context of the Diaspora, black female sexuality, and racial reconciliation. More importantly, I contend that the works of Paule Marshall, Gayl Jones, and Octavia Butler not only challenge the ideological program of a black nationalist aesthetic but also establish paradigms for the successive work of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Sherley Anne Williams, Gloria Naylor, Jewelle Gomez, and Tananarive Due among others. Marshall, Jones, and Butler expand the tradition of African American women’s literature and do so at a very specific historical juncture. My analysis suggests that their experimentation with the novel as generic convention broadens the black aesthetic paradigm that called for a “radical reordering of western cultural aesthetic” (Neal, “Black Art” 272) by redefining the emerging *new* black consciousness of the era. Paule Marshall creates a character in the setting of Bournehills—the *chosen place* that embodies the plight of an oppressed people; Gayl Jones incorporates oral elements (vernacular and blues) from African American culture into her written narrative; and Octavia Butler merges speculative fiction with the African American slave experience.

Lauren Olamina, a character from Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) encourages her friend, Joanne, to prepare for the “end” of the world by taking along “encyclopedias, biographies, anything that helps [them] learn to live off the land and

defend [themselves]” (59). She adds that “even some fiction might be useful” (59), and fortuitously, the books do provide them both with life-saving information, physically and psychologically. The novels, particularly, help both women survive the chaos of a culturally, politically, and morally bankrupt society of the future. Just as “some fiction” helps Lauren and Joanne survive, it becomes the life-saving force for black women novelists of the 1970s as they use fiction to argue for the legitimization of black women’s concerns. Paule Marshall, Gayl Jones, and Octavia Butler write before, during, and after the political, social, and cultural chaos of the Black Nationalist and Black Arts era. These writers use their fiction to “survive” by challenging the limiting ideological formulations of the movements. To embrace a nationalist black aesthetic, one had to forsake fighting other oppressive forces, i.e., sexism and classism. One had to devote all “revolutionary” efforts to combating racism. The Movement demanded unqualified acceptance of the ideology under the guise of racial loyalty and solidarity, and when black women did dare to address forms of oppression they were “accused of promoting animosities not only between the sexes in general but between males and females in the black family. In other words, when the women tell the truth about men and refuse to accept the blame for what men have done to them, the men get mad as hell...[and] try to discredit and invalidate the women” (Hernton 141). These writers refused to be invalidated and used their fiction as a literal and figurative means of survival by giving voice to issues ignored by movements that prioritized race at the sake of its black women.

Understanding when these writers emerge and the significance of that emergence allow for broader discussion of not only the literary merits but also the political and sociological implications of these novelists’ works. Following in the tradition of Zora

Neale Hurston's Janie Mae Crawford, Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953) served as the symbolic representation of black female consciousness and became the antecedent to fiction produced by black women during the 1970s. These women writers create narratives that portrayed black women's quest for autonomy. Reflecting this shift in the literary dynamic of black women's fiction, Paule Marshall articulates the black woman's desire for subjectivity in her short story "Renna" to proclaim:

...what is perhaps the most critical fact of my existence—that definition of me,...and millions like [me], formulated by others to serve out their fantasies, a definition we have to combat at an unconscionable cost to the self and even use, at times, in order to survive; the cause of so much shame and rage as well as, oddly enough, a source of pride: simply, what it has meant, to be a Black woman in America. (20)

From 1969 to 1979 (over the course of the Black Nationalist and Black Aesthetic era), the literary world witnessed the publication of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970). These texts exposed how the hierarchies of race, class, and gender oppress black women while simultaneously presenting black women who attempt to redefine and empower themselves in efforts to affect socio-political change. This project enters the on-going critical conversation (especially in other disciplines) about an era that has experienced a renaissance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Some noteworthy scholarship includes Peniel E. Joseph's *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*

(2007) and *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (2006), Curtis J. Austin's *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party* (2008), Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas' *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panther and Their Legacy* (2001), V. P. Franklin and Bettye Collier-Thomas' *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (2001), Margo Perkins' *Autobiography of Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (2000), Robert L. Douglass' *Resistance, Insurgence, and Identity: The Art of Mari Evans, Nelson Stevens, and the Black Arts Movement* (2008), and Amy Abugo Ongiri's *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (2009). Such studies focus primarily on prominent figures, the movements' emergence, the black male experience, racial identity, and black female activists. However, not enough scholarly research has been devoted to literary production of the era, specifically novels written by black women.

Paule Marshall, Gayl Jones, and Octavia Butler respond to Black Nationalist discourse, particularly its principles of community, black women's roles, and racial separatism to offer a different conversation about Black Nationalism and Black Arts as political, social, and cultural movements. They use the novel as generic form to simultaneously articulate and question the movement's message. Marshall in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* interrogates the concept of community, arguing if a community constitutes an oppressed people, then that community cannot limit who is included by restricting inclusion to race. Jones in *Corregidora* presents the black woman's womb as a historically contested space and uses it as text to re-inscribe the

historical construction of that body as grounded in a white, racist patriarchal establishment and reified in Black Nationalist and Aesthetic discourses. Butler in *Kindred* argues that black Americans cannot arrive at this new “Blackness” or racial consciousness without an awareness of the inextricable link they have to white Americans, suggesting that the interwoven histories of blacks and whites in this country will not allow one to achieve full racial identity without recognition and acceptance of this fact. These works illustrate that the patented formula of a black aesthetic paradigm is insufficient in articulating the totality of any experience. Marshall, Jones, and Butler celebrate specific ideals of Black Nationalism and Black Aestheticism while they simultaneously deconstruct monolithic constructs of community, sexuality, and intra/interracial relationships.

Black Nationalism and Black Aestheticism have myriad and sometimes nebulous definitions, so it is important that I frame my analysis of the selected texts by providing undergirding principles that shape the ideologies. Marshall, Jones, and Butler directly engage these ideologies in their texts to allow readers to expand their conceptualization of the movements. This study is not intended to examine the emergence of the “sister” movements of Black Nationalism and Black Arts but rather offer an analysis of the cultural output of the movements and how that output morphs our discussions of the era.

The philosophies of Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X form the tenets of a black nationalist aesthetic. Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967) called for resistance to colonial control and suggested that ending oppressive rule can only be achieved through violent revolution. His ideas were compatible with the transmuted Civil Rights movement as the quest for social and political equality shifted from the passivity of civil

disobedience toward the militancy of “black power.” Fanon also sought to illuminate the psychology of oppression by noting the innate connection among varied oppressed people and by illustrating its affect on the oppressed as well as the oppressor. Black Nationalists co-opted Fanon’s principle ideas, especially those that advocate violence and those that “connected” the suffering of oppressed people, but did so only superficially. Aesthetically, black women novelists were advancing Fanon’s ideas, extrapolating his ideology in their literature in ways their male contemporaries were not.¹⁰ These black women writers extended Fanon’s idea of “revolution” in their work, making it significant as a useful aperture that widens our concept of “revolution.” Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) depicts a collective of oppressed individuals who revolt against oppressive forces be it racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, or classism. Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973) presents its eponymous character rebelling against societal mores and conventional gender roles. Other African-American women writers also create direct parallels between the plight of blacks in the Diaspora and blacks in America. Lorraine Hansberry’s *Les Blancs* (1972) can be read allegorically—a condemnation of African colonialism and a critique of race relations in 1960s America, and Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) presents West Indian immigrants struggling to meld history, culture, and identity with a new sense of Americanness.

Like Fanon’s theory of the oppressed, Malcolm X’s nationalistic call for racial separation and ideas of self-improvement and racial unity became central to the new “Black” identity. Larry Neal contends that:

Malcolm’s ideas touched all aspects of contemporary black nationalism: the relationship between black America and the Third World; the

development of a black cultural thrust; the right of oppressed peoples to self-defense and armed struggle; the necessity of maintain a strong moral force in the black community; the building of autonomous black institutions; and finally, the need for a black theory of social change.

(“New Space” 27)

Interestingly, Neal’s observation is made after Malcolm X’s assassination; yet he does not refer to Malcolm’s “enlightenment” that leads him to the recognition that blacks in America are not the only oppressed peoples of the world but share that burden with others. Though Malcolm X’s separatist views change, his ideas do not transfer to pervasive ideology of Black Nationalist thought.¹¹

Black Nationalists appropriated Malcolm X’s core beliefs as they sought to create a society devoted to addressing the concerns of blacks and combating racist oppression. Nationalist at its core, the Black Arts Movement (BAM) would serve as the medium through which the ideas of racial pride and unity would be expressed. Larry Neal described this new movement:

Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the BAM proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critiques, and iconology. The Black Arts and Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American’s desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and

politics; the other with the art of politics. Recently, these two movements have begun to merge: the political values inherent in the Black Power concept are now finding concrete expression in the aesthetics of Afro-American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, and novelists. A main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for black people to define the world in their own terms. The black artist has made the same point in the context of aesthetics. The two movements postulate that there are in fact and in spirit two Americas—one black, one white. (“Black Arts” 272-273)

As Larry Neal suggests, the Black Arts Movement like its counterpart Black Power was concerned with the expression of a “black experience” articulated to a black audience. It was to be written or spoken in the vernacular and had to articulate a transformative message accessible to the black masses. Hoyt Fuller succinctly notes that “the young writers of the black ghetto have set out in search of a black aesthetic, a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience” (9). This ideology is further solidified by Amiri Baraka who proclaims that new black literature should present not “history or memory” but “new men, new origins” (217), and by Addison Gayle who declares that “The Black Aesthetic...is a corrective—a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism” (xxiii). While Baraka and Gayle establish the importance of nationalist unity to the Black Arts Movement, their ideas are gender-biased, offering only a black male critique of black creativity and purpose that was often reified in Black Arts literature. Additionally, the Movement’s very prescriptive paradigm for defining “blackness” through language, culture, and community stifled creativity.

In an effort to escape prevailing Western hegemonic ideology, Black Nationalists and their proponents attempted to create terms for “reading” and constructing their own literature but only replaced one hegemonic discourse with another as black aestheticism became an authoritative discourse in its own right. Its theory dismissed African American writers like Ralph Ellison whose *Invisible Man* (1952) avoids any strict adherence to ideology yet poignantly articulates the black male consciousness. Black Aestheticians called Ellison’s work assimilationist literature and suggested that it “belong[ed] to the period of the dinosaur and the mastodon” (Gayle 418). Ironically, it is because of Ellison’s exploration of identity that allows for the creation of a new *black* identity within a Black Nationalist discourse.

Some African American writers challenge the prescriptive nature of this new nationalist black aesthetic. Ishmael Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) satirizes Black Nationalistic Aesthetic theories, arguing that the theories repressed artistic creation and posits that writers must be allowed to determine the value of the aesthetic and cannot nor should not be bound by rigid paradigms. “From its title on, *Mumbo Jumbo* serves as a critique of black and Western literary forms and conventions, and of the complex relationships between the two” (Gates 221). Gwendolyn Brooks argues that the ideology of a nationalist black aesthetic is not necessarily new. “We have been talking about [black identity] all along. An announcement that we are going to deal with ‘the black aesthetic’ seems to me to be a waste of time. I’ve been talking about blackness and black people all along” (Tate, *Black Women* 46).

Alice Walker offers a specific critique of the pervasive sexism within the movements in “To *The Black Scholar*.” She responds to Dr. Robert Staples’ “The Myth

of *Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists*.” Staples, an African-American sociologist and Black Nationalist scholar, provides a biting critique of Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1978) and Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979). Staples accuses Shange and Wallace of colluding with white feminists to destroy the black community. However, Walker argues that Staples does not in any way advance a critical conversation about the relationship between or the socio-political woes of black men and women, suggesting that his rhetoric and ideology only widens the chasm between the two. “The element of truth is that, because of sexism (as much as racism, generally, and capitalism, yes) black women and men (who, despite all ‘isms,’ own their own souls, I hope) are at a crisis in their relationship to each other” (“*Black Scholar*” 321). Walker then turns her attention to what she considers a more useful assessment of Michelle Wallace’s *Black Macho* to denounce the stereotype of black superwoman Wallace offers in her text. Walker posits that instead of focusing on what Staples considered efforts to emasculate black men in Wallace’s text, we should use the book to “help...shape our thinking” (“*Black Scholar*” 325).

These early critics of the “new” black aesthetics focus on its rigid and narrowly defined parameters as to what does or does not constitute “black”—literature, language, culture, and communities. Recent scholarship on the Black Nationalist and Black Aesthetic movements provide more nuanced examinations. Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar’s *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (2004) provides a comprehensive overview of the origins of the Black Power movement and its import in “the development of America’s collective racial and ethnic identity” (191). He discusses the significance of

such groups as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party and the role they played in the formations of African American identity. Peniel Joseph's "Black Liberation Without Apology: Reconceptualizing the Black Power Movement" offers an "examination of the strengths and weaknesses of recent historical, literary, and political works" of Black Power Studies (3).¹¹ Joseph posits that by grounding our understanding of Black Power within a historical framework, we can better "see" the relationship between politics and culture that lead to a reconceptualization of Black Power as a "series of creative political and intellectual experiments that varied depending on political geography, social class, gender, and political ideology" (14).

James Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005) details the national phenomena of the Black Arts Movement by outlining its regional development across America to illustrate the influence the movement has had on African American literary production. Smethurst cogently argues that in order to fully engage contemporary African American literature we must do so in the context of the literary, social, political, cultural shifts wrought by the Black Arts Movement. Though Smethurst devotes attention to the "development of Black Arts ideology and the impact of the ideology on artistic practice" (11), he does not attempt to explicate literary texts to show how the ideologies shape the artistic *product*. Perhaps not his intended purpose, but a work that offers an analysis of the Black Arts Movement in which the literary and political are one seems incomplete if it does not attempt to show, more explicitly, how the ideology and art marry—to illustrate harmony as well as discord.

New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement (2006) edited by Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Crawford re-examines the contributions of key figures of the Black Aesthetic movements like Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Haki Madhubuti. More importantly, the collection of essays broadens the scope of the respective movements by examining music, Black colleges and universities, photography, prison literature, and color fetishism in the context of the era. Though this text does provide exegeses of poetry and art produced during the Black Arts Movement, it does not examine fiction.

Ashraf Rushdy's, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999) examines novels written in the 1970s and 1980s as they reflect the lingering social and cultural impact of the politics of the 1960s. He endeavors to inject a woman's voice into the discourse of the movements by reading Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986). Rushdy posits that Williams engages in a righting/writing of the historical record, reading her re-appropriation of the "Mammy" figure as a "critique of Black Power" (163).¹³ Rushdy's analysis reflects an understanding of the implications from the Black Power era remain to shape contemporary literature. This study, like Rushdy's, examines texts and their engagement with social, political discourses. To offer another gendered critique, I however, examine women-authored texts written at the beginning, during the middle, and at the end of the Black Arts and Black Power movements to present the black woman's response to Black Nationalist and Aesthetic discourses. I contend that Paule Marshall, Gayl Jones and Octavia Butler use their novels as a means of entering these socio-political discourses, challenging ideologies that either marginalized or excluded the concerns of black women. So, together, Rushdy's and this

study chart new ways of examining the intersections of race, gender, and class as articulated in black nationalist discourses and as reflected in literary texts.

The overarching goal of this project was to rethink the ways in which we approach the works of Paule Marshall, Gayl Jones, and Octavia Butler. Though included in the African American literary canon, these writers yet remain on the periphery. They appear as marginal writers because there has been no significant study to date that examines their significant contribution to the development of black nationalist and aesthetic ideologies. Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, Jones' *Corregidora*, and Butler's *Kindred* offer a direct response to ideologies centered on community, gender roles, colonialism, post-colonialism, black feminism, racial identity, and political involvement. This project of historical recovery uses these specific novels to re-evaluate emerging selfhood for black women in their struggle against racism, classism, and sexism in the masculinist era of Black Nationalism and Black Aestheticism.

This quest to re-examine these twentieth century African American women writers and their texts is similar to the recovery of nineteenth century African American women writers and their texts in Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987). Not a conventional literary history, but rather a cultural history and review of forms, Carby's text outline nineteenth century ideologies and literary conventions of womanhood that excluded black women from cultural definitions of "woman" and shows how black women writers of the period reconstructed these ideologies to produce an alternative discourse of black womanhood. Carby interrogates contemporary feminist historiography and literary criticism that tries to forge a bond of sisterhood between black and white women. She confronts this history

of difference by examining the literary and political contributions of such writers and activists as Frances E. W. Harper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett (Carby 6-7). Like the women of my study, nineteenth-century black female novelists reconstruct our view of a period that marginalized the literary and political contributions of black women. Carby analyzes such works to underscore the discourse and context in which they were produced. This study employs a similar methodology engaging literary and social ideologies of 1960s and 1970s that omitted or misrepresented black women as artists and agents of social change. Looking at Marshall, Jones, and Butler, I argue for a more prominent position of these writers within the African American literary canon, considering the authors' radical repositioning of black female protagonists as a challenge to contemporary black aesthetic ideology.¹⁴

Marshall, Jones, and Butler reconfigure black aesthetic ideological categorization of black women, forcing us to engage in a more evolved and nuanced conversation about black womanhood, history, individual identity, and community. Black Nationalist ideology determined that one of the primary purposes of black women was to reproduce black male warriors, equating black women's value with their ability to bear male children who would continue the fight against the white, racist power structure. The restricted roles of black women and the limited control of their bodies illustrate a lack of agency. Marshall, Jones, and Butler present characters who contest this role of forced breeder, to reveal the greater role of black women in affecting change. Another tenet of Black Nationalism was the desire to break with what was deemed an oppressive slave past.¹⁵ Marshall, Jones, and Butler's texts attempt to counter this disavowal by presenting a usable slave past where their protagonists are not damned by it, but

empowered through it. The emphasis on community was also important to black nationalist ideology, and while these women-authored texts affirm this principle, they also caution against the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of the community and show that community and individual are inextricably linked. Additionally, Marshall's representation of the links among blacks across the Diaspora, Jones "troubling" of the African American literary tradition by creating discomforting, sometimes psychotic characters who refuse labeling, and Butler's combination of science fiction and slavery are innovative contributions to the African American literary tradition. I believe this recovery process will show us how to (re)read black feminist texts in context of political, social, and cultural movements. Marshall, Jones, and Butler treat multiple tenets of Black Nationalism and Black Aestheticism in their respective novels—(re)construction of black women's sexuality, communal relations, diasporic black identities, and the historical slave past. I use a thematic focus to address the ways in which Black Nationalist ideologies appear in their works. The sociopolitical principles become literary themes in the creative process, allowing black women novelists to alter aesthetic mandates.

Chapter II entitled, "Bourne-free": Merle Kinbona, Political Activism and the Community of Bournehills in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* examined the novel to illustrate how Marshall embraces the black nationalist idea of a unified community as the only means of fighting and ultimately ending oppression. However, she extends the Black Nationalist concept of community. Marshall creates a community of oppressed individuals in which race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion do not matter, suggesting that none of these factors should serve as determinants

for inclusion or exclusion from a community. By doing so, Marshall challenges Black Nationalist and Aesthetic principles that present a homogenous black community.

Additionally, Marshall examines the inherent relationship between blacks in America and those of the Diaspora as she links their shared oppression.

In Chapter III entitled, “Whose Woman is you...I [ain’t] no Corregidora”: Redefining Black Woman’s Sexuality in Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*, I argue that Jones subverts stereotypical representations of black women’s sexuality to challenge sexualized tropes within Black Nationalist and Aesthetic discourses and to show how psychically damaging these constructions are to black women. Jones suggests that motherhood is not some idyllic role that black women were pre-ordained to fulfill. She illustrates the conflicting nature of motherhood in the capitalist system of slavery, which objectifies the black woman’s body. Furthermore, Jones critiques heterosexuality and its conventions by offering lesbianism as an alternative. In doing so, she gives voice to the black woman’s sexual expression through her construction of a blues woman as sexual subject and not sexual object. Jones directly challenges the privileging of the black man’s needs propagated by Black Nationalist thought. And though black men claimed to have celebrated black women, calling them their “black queens,” black men placed value in black women’s sexuality, specifically their ability to procreate. Through *Corregidora*, Jones refuses such false constructs to create autonomous sexual beings.

Chapter IV, entitled, “Haven’t I Seen You Somewhere Before?”: Confronting and Reconciling a Slave Past in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*” analyzed Butler’s novel to illustrate her play on the nineteenth-century literary reconciliation narrative to suggest the impossibility of racial separatism that Black Nationalist ideology advocated. As a

literary medium, this early narrative convention sought to restore a Union torn apart by civil war. Butler's *Kindred* seeks to repair a *union* splintered by racism. Butler argues for inter-racial unity, positing that this "new" Black identity cannot be achieved without reconciling with the past. She shows that because of the interwoven histories of blacks and whites neither can define itself in the absence of the Other. This quest for racial reconciliation will require whites and blacks to recognize and accept their complicity and culpability while revealing racial, sexual, political, economic, and social anxieties.

Although Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, Jones' *Corregidora*, and Butler's *Kindred* respond to social and cultural discourses of the 1960s and 1970s, their works are not mere mimetic representations. Each author explicitly challenges black aesthetic ideologies, refusing to fit neatly into ideological constructions of "black" literature of the period. Despite these authors' significant contributions to the African American literary canon, they remain on the margins, eclipsed by such writers as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. While Morrison and Walker are certainly deserving of their place within the canon, so are Marshall, Jones, and Butler because of the ways in which their texts present new "traditions," but more specifically, the ways in which their writings engage a different kind of conversation about black aesthetic ideology and the role of black women as well as black women writers.

Notes

1. Some of the most notable pieces in the collection include Frances Beale's "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" which offers the term "double jeopardy" to describe how racism and sexism work in tandem to oppress black women; Toni Cade Bambara's "The Pill: Genocide or Liberation" which examines black women's

reproductive choices; Nikki Giovanni's "Woman Poem" which decries the repressed roles of black women; and Audre Lorde's "Naturally" which embraces the black woman's *natural* self.

2. Prior to the 1960s and 1970s, black women writers used their texts as a means of challenging racial and gender inequalities to achieve autonomy. Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), Georgia Douglas Johnson's *The Heart of a Woman* (1918), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953), Alice Childress' *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life* (1956). This is by no means a definitive or exhaustive list but rather a sampling of seminal texts.

3. Phrased borrowed from bell hooks' text, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Hooks' text offers her definition of feminism as she argues that the theory and practice of feminism should not exist separately. Hooks posits that men should not be perceived as the enemy of feminism but should share in the struggle to combat sexism; she champions literacy for all races and classes as it is vital to the success of a feminist program; and she notes that while the expression of sexual autonomy for women is a necessary aspect of feminist politics, she believes that the more important agenda rests in changing established sexual mores and conventions.

4. I reference the title *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982) edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. The text is important for its contribution in the establishment of black women's studies curriculum.

5. Black Panther Party female members write autobiographies that address their involvement within the Party. More importantly, their works are important in the tradition of African American literature. Like their literary contemporaries, these women address black women's concerns—education, physical and sexual violence, judicial injustice, economic disparities, racism, political disenfranchisement, and sexism. Some notable examples include Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (1992); Angela Davis' *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974), and Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987).
6. Kalamu ya Salaam argues that the key reasons for the demise of the Black Arts Movement were the disbanding of the Black Panther Party, the commercialization and exploitation of black aesthetics through Blaxploitation film and literature, and the publication black women's texts (effort on the part of publishing houses to align themselves with the Feminist movement).
7. Carolyn Rodgers, prominent poet in the Black Arts Movement, died April 2, 2010. Her early work reveals her commitment a Black Nationalist aesthetic with her use of angry, militant rhetoric fused with black street vernacular and curse words. As the movement wanes, Rodgers shifts her ideological perspective to more of a search for self as a black woman outside of the black collective.
8. Leading black women poets of the Black Arts Movements included Nikki Giovanni, Jayne Cortez, Sonia Sanchez, June Jordan, Carolyn Rodgers, Audre Lorde, and Gwendolyn Brooks. They used their poetry to challenge Black Nationalist and aesthetic programs. Nikki Giovanni's "Woman Poem" questioned prescribed gender roles; Kay Lindsey's "Poem" interrogates the belief that her individual value is inextricably bound

to her procreative ability; Sonia Sanchez's "Memorial" calls on black women to define this new "revolution" for themselves; and Audre Lorde's "Naturally" defies Eurocentric beauty standards to suggest that black women embrace what is "natural" about their own beauty.

9. The African American oral tradition grew out of slavery when literacy for slaves was illegal. However, slaves used music and folktales as a means to sustain their culture and to indict an unjust society. They used primarily music and folktales (in slave vernacular) which required direct audience participation in the form of call-and-response. The poetry and drama of the Black Arts Movement embody this oral nature as the content of poetry and drama was often gleaned from chants and slogans of the movements. James Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black, and I'm Proud" became a rallying cry; Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready" awakened political consciousness; and Marvin Gaye's "Mercy, Mercy Me" questioned war, hatred, poverty, and injustice.

10. My research did not unearth literary works by black men novelists writing between 1969 and 1979 that connected Black Nationalists ideology with the Diaspora as this endeavor was beyond the scope of my study. John Edgar Wideman's *A Glance Away* (1967) and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) use experimental forms that challenged a black aesthetic paradigm; Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) critique a racist American society; Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965) and Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) provide social criticism embedded in the coming of age stories of black men; and Robert Beck, aka Iceberg Slim's *Trick Baby* (1967) and Donald Goines' *Whoreson* (1972) develop what will become known as the African

American *street* novel as they reflect black nationalist ideas that demonized white society, illustrating the social and economic injustices of a racist society.

11. Many Black Nationalist leaders like Amiri Baraka, Ron Karenga, Kalamu ya Salaam, Haki Madhubuti, aka Don Lee eventually begin to broaden their separatist views.

However, James Smethurst points out that sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism did not disappear from the movements but argues that “caricatured versions of [the] movements as fundamentally and unusually [separatist] distort them.”

12. Interestingly, Joseph generically references Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Black Woman* (1970) for its contribution as “a tour de force analysis of the intersection race, class, and gender...of black women’s movements” (7), but does not go beyond offering any other black women’s texts.

13. Rushdy adds that Williams constructs “Mammy” as a revolutionary, suggesting that Black Power proponents were not the first blacks to rebel against oppression.

14. With the advent of Black Studies programs in academia, black canonicity developed around key male figures like Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Amiri Baraka whose work focused on social injustice and black masculinity. More recent scholarship reflects the evolving nature of the African American literary canon. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. s’ *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* takes a multicultural approach to canon formation, challenging us to transcend racism and sexism. He suggests that the canon is no more than “one possible set of selections among several possible sets of selections” (32); and Paul Lauter’s *Canons and Contexts* suggests that our valorization of an established

literary canon may be detrimental in the ways in which it informs theoretical discussions, shapes the academy, and impacts student learning.

Anthologies such as Patricia Liggins Hill (General Editor) et al.'s *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998) and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (General Editors) et al.'s *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996) help to redefine and expand the canon by including previously excluded such as oral vernacular pieces and late twentieth-century works by contemporary authors.

15. Black Nationalist 'deny' those aspects of slavery that portrayed the African American as weak, docile, submissive. Interestingly, there is a recovery of many nineteenth-century texts about slavery during the 1960s, most notably, David Walker's *David Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America* (1829), Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), and Sutton Griggs' *Imperium in Imperio* (1899). These texts focus on black masculinity in the form of the rebellious slave. The Black Nationalist project is indebted to these nineteenth-century texts. The texts serve as philosophical model, particularly, Walker's *Appeal* which championed racial pride and unity.

CHAPTER II

“BOURNE-FREE”: MERLE KINBONA, POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND THE
 COMMUNITY OF BOURNEHILLS IN PAULE MARSHALL’S *THE CHOSEN
 PLACE, THE TIMELESS PEOPLE*

In it there is a conscious attempt to project the view of the future to which I am personally committed. Stated simply it is a view, a vision if you will, which sees the rise through revolutionary struggle of the darker peoples of the world and, as a necessary corollary, the decline and eclipse of America and the West.

Paule Marshall, “Shaping the World of My Art”- 1973

Though speaking about *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969)

specifically, Marshall’s quote articulates her political ideology, revealing her revolutionary spirit. On its surface, the quote suggests that the “revolutionary struggle of darker peoples” Marshall alludes to is a struggle of only African Americans and those of African descent; however, Marshall’s reference to “darker” can be read as representative of any “oppressed peoples of the world” for they, like the African American, share a history and must be committed as a global community to overturning oppressive rule. Writing before and during the 1960s Civil Rights era, Marshall was a proponent of much of Black Nationalist ideology, particularly, its fight against oppressive rule; however, Marshall views revolution as a concept broader than Black Nationalism’s limiting notion that offers violence as the only means of fighting and ultimately ending oppression. Marshall’s reference to revolution in the epigraph is not to be taken as violent revolution but rather a psychological revolution of a collective community against oppressive rule.

While embracing certain tenets of Black Nationalism, Marshall also challenged the inflexibility of those principles. An original member of the Harlem Writers Guild (HWG),¹ Marshall worked with aspiring activists who would eventually align themselves

with a burgeoning nationalist ideology. Marshall, as part of the older vanguard of HWG, held divergent perspectives from many of these new nationalist ideologues like Amiri Baraka, Calvin Hernton, and Askia Tourè; however, there was mutual respect for difference and a free exchange of ideas. To this point, Paule Marshall along with Sarah Wright and Alice Childress in “The Negro Woman in American Literature” discussed how issues of race, class and gender directly affected black women²; specifically how such issues were or were not examined in literature. Their discussion would anticipate much of the criticism leveled against Black Nationalist thought, particularly its sexism.

A literary foremother to Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, among other African American women writers who will inaugurate a new era of African American literature in the 1970s, Marshall begins a tradition of examining the inherent connectedness between African Americans and blacks of the Diaspora, expanding the scope of the intersections of race, sex, and class. Thus, Marshall creates a diasporic idea of community that will serve as a dominant theme in her work and situate it as an exemplar in the African American literary canon.

Black Nationalists viewed the concept of community differently. According to Ronald S. Copeland’s “Community Origins of the Black Power Movement,” sustaining the black community required a social, cultural, economic, aesthetic, and political commitment (235). Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton posit that the primary goal of Black Nationalism was to create a unified, distinctly “black” cultural community offering that the only way to do so would be to wrest control of the black community from the white man, and this could only be done through revolution (39). Revolution served as a guiding principle of Black Nationalism as many proponents adopted the ideas

of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967) to free themselves from the physical and psychological enslavement of a racist society. In the text, Fanon addresses problems of decolonization, specifically the need for the colonized subject to break from colonial power. According to Fanon, this freedom can only come through armed struggle, for "violence frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction: it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (61). Black Nationalists advanced Fanon's ideologies and much of his rhetoric for this new wave of civil rights through militancy, arguing that breaking from a white, racist, patriarchal society, could not be a solitary act, for revolution could not be possible without a group, specifically, the black Diasporic community. Interestingly, Black nationalists co-opt Fanon in limited terms, equating the experience of the colonized subject with the experience of the African American to suggest a race-based connection with Diaspora. A native of Martinique, Fanon himself, is a member of the Diasporic community. In constructing his discourse on racism and its psychological impact on blacks, Fanon argues that race is intrinsic to identity formation. And while Fanon studies the effects of racism and colonial rule on the black colonized subject, greater implications exist. His analysis in the psychology of the colonized is all important to the identity of a Diasporic community. Those who suffer under any *colonial* rule are racially, socially, politically, economically oppressed.

Nowhere did this sense of commitment to community resonate more than in the "spiritual sister of Black Power," the Black Arts Movement. The theoretical foundations of Black Aestheticism lay in idea of a racially unified community. In characterizing black art, Ron Karenga in "Black Cultural Nationalism" declares that black art "must be collective. In a word, it must be from the people and must be returned to the people"

(34). Larry Neal adds that “the Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienate him from his community” (“Black Arts” 272), thus establishing the inextricable link between artist and community. The artist had a personal responsibility to carry a message to the community. Using poetry and drama—the accessibility and participatory nature of each made it easier to articulate a message of racial and cultural solidarity—these artists were able to transmit this overarching philosophy.

Madhu Dubey posits that “black women poets writing in this period were unable or unwilling to summon this unified oral collective spirit” (22). She argues that their poetry lacked the sense of urgency and polemic tone found in the poetry of their male contemporaries but it instead offered subtleties of meaning that were inaccessible to the masses and references specific poems by Sonia Sanchez, Mari Evans, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and Ntozake Shange to support her assertion. However, I find Dubey’s assessment problematic. In her limited sampling of poets and their works, she cannot fairly claim that these poets were incapable of articulating a communal voice thereby making their works inaccessible to the masses. Sonia Sanchez offers very direct, even explicit language in her poem “Memorial” (1981) when she demands that black women “git [their]/blk/asses out of that re/volution/ary’s bed” (244) and act to combat not only racism but also sexism. There is nothing ambiguous or subtle in Sanchez’s tone. In “blk/rhetoric” she asks “who’s gonna make all/that beautiful blk/rhetoric/mean something” (15). While Dubey suggests that Sanchez poetically muses on the implications of black revolutionary discourse, I argue that the question she poses resonates with an urgency and relevancy that exposes the limits of a Black Nationalist

agenda. Phillip Harper concludes that Sanchez “call[s] into question what will ensue among the black collectivity after it has heeded the general call and succumbed to the rhetoric”³³ (463). Sanchez asks that we move beyond the rhetoric to collective action. So, I would argue that the poetry of black women writers conveyed a different kind of revolutionary rhetoric—one that did not prescribe to a rigid Black Nationalist aesthetic paradigm.

Black women poets did write out of a communal spirit and to suggest that these writers intentionally chose not to ignore the use of community as a theme in African American women’s literary tradition. Black women poets not only employed community as a theme in their works but they also recognized the limiting definition of community proffered by Black Nationalist aestheticism. Audre Lorde disagreed with what she described as a “unilateral definition of what ‘blackness’ is” (Tate, *Black Women* 101), and Nikki Giovanni argued that the prescriptive nature of Black Nationalistic aestheticism “cuts off the question by defining parameters” (Tate, *Black Women* 63). Gwendolyn Brooks’ *In the Mecca* (1968) and Audre Lorde’s *The Black Unicorn* (1978) directly challenge Black Nationalist’s narrowly defined idea of community, offering broader representations by avoiding a strict adherence to theoretical paradigms. Brooks establishes a community of poor, disenfranchised blacks of the inner city while Lorde creates a community of black women by linking African American women with the goddesses of African mythology as well as constructing lesbian communities. These works suggest that community is not a monolith but can take on varied meanings and constructions.

Like many African American women poets during the late 1960s, African American women novelists adopt a communal thematic focus in their works to question monolithic constructions of black community. These writers sought to avoid idealistic and unrealistic representations of the black community yet celebrated community (customs, beliefs, connection to the Diaspora, and oral folk culture). Their novels suggest that if the black community is to prosper, it must recognize its own failings—biases, inaction, complicity in own plight, contentious battle between the sexes. Madhu Dubey argues that “while retaining the communal frame, however, these novels split the black community along gender lines, thus threatening the unified racial community projected in Black Aesthetic theory” (23). To support her assertion, Dubey offers the negative reception of Black women writings by proponents of a Black nationalist aesthetic who often accused these writers of “sowing seeds of ‘division’ in the black community...[of] promoting animosities not only between the sexes in general but between males and females in the black family itself” (Hernton 141). In examining the construction of feminine identity, Dubey restricts her assessment of black women writers’ thematic rendering of community to the divisiveness within the black man/woman relationship, and while black women writers certainly addressed problems between black men and black women, they also examined other concerns; therefore, Dubey’s assessment is a bit limiting. While the schism between black men and black women was an important element in understanding the relationship dynamic, to reduce how these writers explore community as a theme in their work to gender strife, neglects larger issues. Certainly these women writers highlight gender concerns, but they also address

other issues vital to the black community (racism, to include intra-racial prejudices, and classism).

Paule Marshall begins a new era in the thematic representation of community in novels by black women, anticipating the work of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor.⁴ Paule Marshall offers a broader definition and representation of “black” community by establishing inextricable links between African Americans and blacks of the Diaspora, challenging the idea of a race-specific black community to illustrate that because multiple forms of oppression exists, there are shared commonalities beyond race that bind individuals in a community. Black Nationalist thought does not explicitly focus on any specific connections to the black Diaspora, devoting attention to present-day circumstances of African American in the United States. In fact, Black Nationalists wanted to sever all ties to the past, especially the slave past in America, to “reconstitute an ahistorical or transhistorical symbolic African space” (Smethurst 79). Their only perceived link to the Diaspora was in an “imaginative” return to Africa. However, Marshall offers both a literal and imaginative return to the Diaspora to include not only African spaces but also Caribbean spaces, and in doing so, establishes broader and more inclusive definitions of community.

Marshall’s exploration of the relationship between the West Indian and the African American in her first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) predates Rosa Guy’s *Ruby* (1973) that examines the relationship between a West Indian girl and Harlem black girl. However, Marshall’s novel not only deals with cross-cultural conflict and understanding but also with internal conflict. Her protagonist, Selina Boyce must learn to reconcile the “two warring souls” that are her West Indian and African American

identity⁵. Unlike Guy, Maryse Conde and Jamaica Kincaid, her West Indian contemporaries, Marshall's works specifically engage the inextricable links between the West Indian and the African American. As harbinger of literary change, Marshall's novels explore the West Indian/African American woman's dual cultural identity and how she navigates between those cultures.

Always connected to America and the West Indies, Marshall notes that... "it was very early on that [she] had a sense of a very distinct difference between *home*, which had to do with the West Indies, and *this country* which had to do with the United States...yet there always was this very strong sense in the household of this other place that was also home" (Pettis, "Interview" 117-118). Home for Marshall is beyond any singular representation of racial commonalities. A citizen of the West Indies and America, Marshall was born to immigrant parents and grew up in Brooklyn, New York among a community of immigrants—West Indians and Great Migration blacks from the South. Though confronted with the contrasting social and cultural beliefs of both groups, Marshall believed that she embodied both worlds. In an interview with Daryl Cumber Dance, Marshall stresses the significance of community in her work:

I don't make any distinction between African-American and West Indian. All o' we is one as far as I'm concerned. And I, myself, am both...I need the sense of being *connected* to the women and men, real and imaginary, who make up my being. Connection and reconciliation are major themes in my work. (7)

Marshall extends the narrow definition proffered by Black Nationalist Aesthetic theory that argues for a race specific notion of community, suggesting that a community is not

solely defined by race or culture and therefore cannot exist as a monolithic construction. Marshall's concept of community anticipates Alice Walker's womanist construction of a non-separatist community that champions a commitment to the "survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female" and asserts the universality and diversity of black people (Walker xi).⁶

Eugenia Collier posits that *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* is Marshall's attempt to "link Black culture in the Western Hemisphere with its African past...[and] sees this Black culture as different from Euro-American culture, which has been the oppressor" (310). Collier is accurate in her claim that Marshall wants to connect the experiences and histories of the African-American community of the West with Blacks of the Diaspora. The researcher agrees with Collier's assessment and draw from it to show how *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* is a complex tale involving multiple plots and multiple characters, yet the stories are interwoven into one narrative that resonates with themes of community, history, oppression, identity, and selfhood. At the center are the stories of Merle Kinbona, Saul Amron, Harriet Amron, and Allen Fuso. Merle Kinbona returns to her native Bourne Island after an extended stay in England. Bearing the shame of a lesbian affair and a failed marriage, Merle struggles with her identity. To avoid confronting her own demons, she immerses herself in the plight of the Bournehillsians to champion their fight against neo-colonist oppression.

Saul Amron is a cultural anthropologist employed with an "aid" agency who comes to Bourne Island to assist in the most recent endeavor to elevate the natives. Racked with guilt over the death of his first wife and tortured by a conflicted sense of identity, Saul learns that he is not alone in his suffering and soon intimately connects with

the people of Bournehills. Saul's current wife, Harriet Amron, is the direct descendant of a widowed merchant who made her fortune in the slave trade. Harriet's first marriage to a man named Andrew Westerman (Marshall's irony is a bit heavy-handed, but her point is well-taken) ends when she recognizes but cannot bear their culpability in the oppression of others. She marries Saul and believes her work with him and the aid agency will assuage her guilt-ridden conscious, but Harriet's inability to accept her role as oppressor leads to her eventual suicide.

Lastly, there is Allen Fuso, Saul's research assistant, who refuses to acknowledge his homosexuality. Introverted, Allen avoids human relationships, but finds himself physically and emotionally drawn to a young Bournehills man. Despite the overt sexual tension in the relationship, nothing happens between the two men, as Allen stifles his desires, refusing to admit his homosexuality even to himself. Though seemingly disparate tales, all of the Marshall's characters battle some inner turmoil. However, Merle, Saul, and Allen also battle repressive outside forces. With them, Marshall creates a community of the oppressed—the protagonist, Merle Kinbona, the indigenous people of Bournehills, Saul Amron, and Allen Fuso. Though Harriet Amron, Saul's wife, is important to the novel as she serves as a symbolic representation of the West and colonizer, she is the antithesis of Marshall's definition of community. Because she resides so clearly outside of a community of the oppressed, I am not offering an analysis of her specific role in the novel.⁷

Marshall wants to stress the commonalities of shared experience among all oppressed peoples, offering a community in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* of peoples who suffer under oppressive rule (be it racism, sexism, classism, sexual

orientation bias, neo-colonialism) and gives us characters like the Jew, Saul Amron and the repressed homosexual, Allen Fuso to prove her point. Susan Willis posits that “Marshall’s great talent as a writer is her insightful portrayal of individual characters as they articulate the complexity of a community’s actions and desires” (54) and while exploring the concerns of individual characters, Marshall simultaneously engages concerns of larger community. Marshall not only maintains connections to African Americans by equating the struggle of African Americans with those of formerly colonized peoples (hence the link between the people of the Caribbean and Africa), but she also illustrates an interconnectedness between characters who establish communities that supersede social, economic, cultural, and racial divisions.

Political in nature, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* is reflective of the cultural landscape during the 1960s not only in America with blacks struggling for civil rights but also in Africa and the Caribbean as countries fought to end colonial rule. The novel responds to the burgeoning Black Nationalist ideological constructions of black identity and community, suggesting that prescriptive definitions result in monolithic representations. Published in 1969, the novel is the second of a trilogy, beginning with *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) and concluding with *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). The thematic focus of all three novels centers on literal and figurative quests to unify the protagonist’s “double-consciousness”—the African American and West Indian self—and on representations of community. Early reviewers of the novel reinforce Marshall’s middle positionality. The work was dismissed by some Black Nationalists for not being “black” enough or “angry” enough and by some West Indian critics for not being West Indian enough.

Nikki Giovanni's "Review of *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*" credits the novel for its technical merit; however, she criticizes it for its lack of angry rhetoric espoused by many African American writers of the day, writing that the "sheer emotion of *The Chosen Place* can be 'whelming.' To say overwhelming would be to put an onus on the book, and there is no such word as 'underwhelming' (though some things do 'underwhelm' us)" (84). After issuing a scathing critique of the novel's lack of "blackness," particularly in its use of language that Giovanni characterizes as not "black" enough, too "white," and too eloquent, she ends the review on an intentionally disingenuous tone, noting that "we [should] take the novel and mak[e] it food for Black thought" (52). Giovanni's offers a critique at the height of an established Black Nationalist aesthetic and applies its rigid aesthetic paradigms and theoretical approaches to Marshall's work. However, in a much later interview with Claudia Tate when asked to define "a black aesthetic," Giovanni responds that "as the black-aesthetic criticism went, you were told that if you were a black writer or a black critic, you were told *this* is what you should do. That kind of prescription cuts off the question by defining parameters" (*Black Women* 63). It is unfortunate that Giovanni's shift in perspective did not occur sooner and perhaps she would have avoided engaging in the same prescriptive approach.

Edward Brathwaite's "West Indian History and Society in the Art of Paule Marshall's Novel" does not attack Marshall for lacking a sense of West Indian identity and offers that *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* marks "a significant contribution to the literature of the West Indies" (227). But in what seems to be a contradictory assertion, Brathwaite questions Marshall's representation of that West Indian identity in the novel. Brathwaite claims that Marshall fails to sufficiently articulate a West Indian

identity for her protagonist, suggesting that we simply “*read* about Merle” and that her West Indian consciousness remains elusive (230). He argues that unlike Harriet Amron who is clearly and symbolically Western, Merle Kinbona, “the fictional presentation of the middle-class West Indian woman’s predicament has eluded Paule Marshall” (230). Despite Marshall’s lineal connections to the West Indies through her parentage and the maternal grandmother, Da-Duh, whom she bases her short story “To Da-Duh, in Memoriam” (1967), for Brathwaite, Marshall cannot fully articulate a West Indian experience.

These critical claims do not sufficiently assess broader implications of Marshall’s novel. A more thoughtful consideration should have been given to Marshall’s larger project of identifying and analyzing the relationship among and between the oppressed and the oppressor. Marshall hopes “that the novel not solely be seen as a novel about the West Indies...but a novel that reflects what is happening to all of us in the Diaspora in our encounter with these metropolitan powers, the power of Europe and the power of America” (Pettis, “Interview” 124). By focusing on the narrow parameters of her race and ethnicity, Giovanni and Brathwaite dismiss the novel’s most significant accomplishment. Because Marshall parallels the struggles of other oppressed people with her own, she is able to transcend the limits of race and ethnicity propagated by black nationalists.

Marshall creates the fictional country Bourne Island and describes it as a “microcosm in which can be seen in sharp relief many of the basic problems and conflicts which beset oppressed peoples everywhere” (Marshall, “Shaping” 111). The country serves to represent any place where the oppressive forces of racism, sexism, classism,

homophobia, colonialism, and neo-colonialism suppress a people. It “had been wantonly used, its substance stripped away, and then abandoned” (*Chosen Place* 100). The island is split into two parts: New Bristol and Bournehills—New Bristol where the black bourgeois elite and whites live and Bournehills where poor blacks reside. In creating this dichotomous community, Marshall challenges the Black Nationalist concept of a racially unified community, illustrating strife among blacks to broaden the scope of how we define a unified community. Both inhabitants of New Bristol and Bournehills are formerly colonized peoples; their psyches warped by the effects of colonization. They have allowed Western hegemonic ideology to subjugate their own will. Marshall will show how mobilizing as a community (revolution at Merle’s urgings) can not only overthrow neo-colonial rule but also in effect begin to heal psyche consequences of colonialism. Marshall believes that if the community is to sustain itself, it must work together and learn to depend on itself instead of outside entities (neo-colonialism).

All of the original inhabitants of Bourne Island once worked on the many sugar cane plantations as slaves. Though no longer slaves, the poor of Bournehills are still “enslaved” by sugar cane. It remains a major crop, and they must rely on the white-owned Cane Vale sugar refinery to process the cane that they have to sell in order to survive. Even more ironic is that many of the natives on the island are diabetic and cannot even use the product that they struggle to raise. The blacks of New Bristol obtain Western education and acquire wealth through marriage or career, abandoning cultural beliefs to adopt a superiority complex toward the blacks of Bournehills, often referring to them as “those people...those brutes” (58-59). Early post-colonial theory helps elucidate Marshall’s thematic representation of community as it serves as a useful aperture to

explore the root causes of inaction and acceptance of a colonized condition on the part of, the citizens of Bourne Island, Saul Armon, Allen Fuso, and Merle Kinbona (all members of a community of the oppressed).

Albert Memmi's, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* expounds on the ideology of colonization to posit that colonization is a process (physical and psychological) and that when people are removed from history, language, government, the result is a "socio-historical mutilation" or simply put an erasure of identity (105). He posits that colonized subject "must recover self and autonomous dignity" (128) and believes that revolt serves as the only means to do so. Memmi offers that those who have resigned themselves to remain colonized subjects simply assimilate by "draw[ing] less and less from [their] pasts...[and] seem condemned to lose [their]" (102-103). The blacks of New Bristol represent the assimilated colonized subject. They do not believe that there is anything (a history, language, culture) to recover and have aligned themselves with the white oppressor, and as Memmi observes "in the name of what [they] hope to become, [they] set [their] mind on...tearing [themselves] away from [their] true sel[ves]...as the colonized adopts [the colonizer's] values, [they] similarly adopt [their] own condemnation" (121). The more New Bristol deny their brothers of Bournehills the more they deny themselves and in doing so, destroy their identity and their humanity.

Marshall offers a portrait of the fully colonized subject in Lyle Hutson. Born to an "obscure village tailor in a remote section of the island" (61), Lyle once championed the poor, disenfranchised inhabitant of Bourne Island, but now is an opportunist who compromises his beliefs to maintain his social position. He goes to

England to study, first to Oxford (and there could be a fine Oxonian thrust to his speech when he chose), then the London School of Economics, and finally the Inns of Court...once he had returned home and married into the famous Vaughn family, once his law practice had grown and he had entered politics, he had gradually started speaking about the need to change in less radical terms. He had begun to caution moderation and time. (61)

Lyle is the complete colonized subject (symbolic of all of New Bristol), having abandoned his language as evidenced by the “fine Oxonian thrust to his speech” he has adopted. More importantly, he is psychically colonized for he has “assumed all the accusations and condemnations of the colonizer, that he is becoming accustomed to looking at his own people through the eyes of the procurer” (Memmi 123). Once the people’s champion, Lyle now promotes his own interests. He colludes with various *aid* agencies (ostensibly there to assist the people of Bourne Island but instead institute neo-colonialist control) to sell the people’s land for personal gain. When Merle chastises him for his betrayal to his people, he cynically retorts that he is no longer a “youthful idealist” and has accepted “the realities of [their] situation” (211). Critiquing the issues of intra-racial prejudice and classism, Marshall strips away illusions about an idyllic black community.

Unlike Lyle and the community of New Bristol, the inhabitants of Bournehills are not completely colonized subjects. They refuse to assimilate by adopting Western codes and maintain a connection to their culture, specifically their history. They refuse to deny this history, embracing the story of Cuffee Ned, a black slave who led a revolt against his

master. John McCluskey, Jr. refers to the Bournehillsians as “the keepers of racial memory” (331). Merle is fired from the high school in New Bristol for refusing to “teach the history that was down in the books, that told all about the English” (32); instead teaching about Cuffee Ned’s slave revolt, and the men of Bournehills debate the length of time Cuffee held the British at bay, some even claiming to have gone “down to the library and read the big book there that tells all about him” (122). This suggests that Cuffee is not only inscribed in the oral history of the people but also in written history. The citizens of Bournehills keep Cuffee’s story alive, hence their history, by constantly retelling the story and in the annual re-enacting of the slave revolt at Carnival. Trudier Harris in “Three Black Women Writers” observes that despite the “scorn of more progressive Bourne Islanders [New Bristol citizens]...[the Bournehills natives] refuse to forget that old stuff” (67), and because the Bournehills remain connected to their history and culture, they are not completely colonized. However, this connection to the past is not enough. Colonization has still warped their psyches. Though the Bournehillsians do not suffer from an erasure of identity as exemplified by Lyle Hutson and other New Bristol resident, they are still colonized subjects because they remain disenfranchised from government and economic empowerment and refuse to act to restore their self-sufficiency.

Bournehillsians, in part, have internalized elitist and racist notions that the Western world could “save” the backward of their community. They “welcome” the various *aid* agencies—they have yet to participate in any sustained effort to improve conditions on the island—the most recent being the conglomerate, Unicor. Like the others, it [was] “part of that giant commercial complex which, like some elaborate rail or

root system, endlessly crisscross[ed] the world, binding it up” (37), and once again Bournehills would labor under oppressive rule. The agency’s attempts at irrigation and housing projects fail because of “poor planning, the condescending attitude of the people in charge, and the failure to include the villagers directly in the project from the beginning”...[yet], “something apart from the obvious” (157) lay at the cause of the failures. What paralyzes the community with inaction? What keeps them from taking an active role in fighting the oppressive forces that keep them enslaved? Pablo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* would describe the Bournehillsians as “having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines [and] are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility” (47). The Bournehillsians suffer from a psychic colonization. They do not believe that they are deserving of progress and will not be capable of sustaining success without assistance; but more importantly, the people are complicit in their own oppression, stubbornly refusing to take part in any *aid* endeavor.

When Saul inquires as to why the people of Bournehills “had never taken advantage of any of the improvement schemes started by the government” (158), Delbert responds:

Bournehills people are funny,...they don’t take easy to anything new, even when it might be to their good. Too set in their ways, I guess. Another thing is the kind of schemes government starts. Most of them don’t suit conditions here. Who told them we could grow bananas on this stone we have for soil? And who told them we’re a people used to living in any concrete box in a housing scheme?” (158)

Delbert makes clear that though the projects are intended to offer *aid* to the people of Bournehills, the citizens have no voice. Ironically, those who are offering to help never ask those being helped what it is that they actually need. Unicorn and other *aid* agencies never bothered to “study the facts...and come to live the place and speak directly with the people and find out firsthand what’s what” (158), so the Bournehillsians refuse the *aid*. Herein lies the problem. It is evident that the Bournehills community needs both the housing and irrigation improvement plans that Unicorn is offering, and while it is true that Unicorn never bothers to seek input from the people of Bournehills, the people’s refusal to utilize what has been provided for their own means further perpetuates their suffering and illustrates their psychic paralysis. What may be considered an attempt to exert agency, the people’s refusal to assist in the projects, really suggests a failure to revolt to free themselves from the psychic paralysis caused by colonization. The people of Bournehills must act on their own behalf if they are to triumph over oppressive rule. Because the Bournehills community suffers, inaction is not a viable means of resistance.

The community’s refusal to act makes it complicit in its own subjugation. Merle acknowledges the community’s colonized psyche and its seeming impotence:

We’re supposed to be on our own these days—free and independent. But it’s our fault since in most cases we ask them to come. We might have a local chap who can do the job ten times better, but he’s not considered quite good enough in our eyes...we don’t as yet really trust our own; we don’t really believe deep inside us that we can plan and do for ourselves...they colonized our minds but good in this place. (129)

The people of Bournehills have been psychologically conditioned to believe that they are incapable of taking care of themselves and have accepted their role as colonized subjects accepting their “lot” in life, “see[ing] [themselves] through the eyes of [their] procurer(s)” (Memmi 123). They have developed a “dependency complex” whereby as colonized subjects they are marked and objectified through a series of negations that characterize them as inferior, lazy, weak, and timid, “let[ting] themselves be oppressed” (Memmi 83-87). These colonized subjects rely on the colonizer to take care of them because they cannot and; more importantly, do not believe that they can care for themselves. Therefore, we can conclude that the people’s inaction is directly linked to the psychic damage caused by colonization. Merle wants the Bournehills community to resist its oppression by depending on itself for survival and not on an *aid* agency or the sugar refinery for both have and will continue to oppress them.

Marshall’s anger at colonial and neo-colonial corruption within the fictional country of Bourne Island parallels the outrage articulated by Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* (1988). Kincaid’s text offers a scathing indictment of the impact of colonization on Antiguan society, arguing that *aid* becomes code for “the rich getting richer.” She concludes that such *aid* endeavors are never about the people. More importantly, she questions why Antiguan are not examining forces that shape their lives and is puzzled by their apathy and indifference. “I look at this place (Antiqua), I look at these people (Antiquans), and I cannot tell whether I was brought up by, and so come from, children, eternal innocents, or artists who have not yet found eminence in a world too stupid to understand, or lunatics who have made their own lunatic asylum, or an exquisite combination of all three” (57). Like Kincaid, Marshall does not attempt to idealize the

colonized people of Bournehills but rather shows their complicity in their present colonization.

Bournehills' government agencies—run by New Bristol aristocracy—are also complicit in the continued oppression of its people because it colludes with neo-colonial powers:

Signed, sealed and delivered...the whole place. Is that what we threw out the white pack who ruled us for years and put you chaps in office for? For you to give away the island? For you to literally pay people to come and make money off us? Fifteen years without having to pay a penny in taxes! All their profits out of the island! A whole factory for ten dollars a year! Why, man, Bourne Island comes like a freeness to them.

(209)

Though no longer politically colonized, the island is still controlled by colonizers from within and without. The corrupt Bourne Island government and neo-colonialist powers—Unicor and the Cane Vale Factory maintain economic dominance. “Things are no different. The chains are still on” (210). Though not literally enslaved, but because the people of Bournehills must rely on the factory and other entities to survive, Merle rightly observes that they are still enslaved, not just physically, but even more so, psychologically.

This psychic enslavement is further evidenced in the behavior of the people as they toil in the cane fields. “[Stringer] undergo[es]...a transformation” which made him appear to be “shriveled bones and muscles within the drawn sac of skin [with] one arm flailing away with a mind and will of its own” (162), and [Gwen’s] face...[and] in the

...had aged beyond recognition...[and] her eyes... had the same slightly turned up, fixed, flat stare that you find upon drawing back the lids of someone asleep or dead” (163).

Marshall implies that the cane fields consume, trapping the people of Bounehills—a trap they seem unwilling to resist. Gary Storhoff describes Gwen’s behavior as “zombie-like” (57). While Gwen does appear to be more dead than alive, unconscious of her mechanical actions, I believe she, like her fellow Bournehillsians have free will but are unwilling to exert it.

From the moment Marshall introduces the character, Ferguson, he is made to appear bold, even audacious in his renderings of Cuffee Ned’s tale, but Marshall reveals that he too is a colonized subject. When an administrator from Kingsley and Sons, Sir John Stokes, visits Cane Vale Factory, Ferguson is prepared to forcefully demand the rollers on one of the machines not be repaired but replaced. He had rehearsed a speech; yet, when confronted by the colonizer he is rendered mute. Ferguson finds himself fixed in Sir John’s disinterested gaze,

their eyes [meeting]..., the little commanding lift to [Sir John’s] head challenging Ferguson to speak, and Ferguson straining to do so, the veins and tendons that strung together his limbs standing out in a tangle beneath his skin in the effort. But no sound came. He stood silent. Behind his glasses his eyes were eloquent with the speech he was to have given...but his lips were as if sewn together. (221-222)

Ferguson sees himself through “the eyes of his procurer”—unimportant. He recognizes his insignificance to Sir John and therefore does not address the problem of the failing machinery. Though acknowledged for his years of experience and expertise, Ferguson is

made invisible. Sir John emasculates and objectifies Ferguson, turning him to “stone, a dumb effigy of himself” (222).

Despite the psychic paralysis that the people of Bournehills suffer, Marshall implies that they can overcome it through “revolution”—coming together to fight in a common cause. During All Souls holiday and Carnival, the people Bournehills act as a unified community to resist their oppression. However, their action is incomplete because there is no follow through. Their action is temporal. Once All Souls Days and Carnival end, the people return to status quo. No matter how symbolic the events which occur during All Souls Day and Carnival are, they remain perfunctory—only out of habit do the Bournehillsians *act* to resist their oppression.

Each November during the All Souls holiday the citizens of Bournehills spend the night cleaning the cemetery. Once the cleaning ended, the mood would turn celebratory where they would light candles and sing to their ancestors, transforming “Protestant hymns of mourning into songs of celebration and remembrance” (268). Each year the people gather in a showing of communal unity and strength, but once the day comes to an end, nothing has changed. The people still labor under oppressive forces that refuse to recognize their humanity.

The most public display of communal unity and collective action takes place each year during Carnival. At this time the citizens of Bournehills stage a re-enactment of a slave rebellion led by Cuffee Ned. Legend has it that Cuffee and fellow slaves overthrow the plantation owner and live “as a nation apart...independent, free” (102). It is this bit of history about the “little fella” defeating the oppressor that give the Bournehillsians hope. The entire community joins in the event, donning the same costumes, like

uniforms for battle—because it is a battle, albeit a fictitious one—and the people revel in victory over oppressor. Cuffee Ned takes on greater significance not only for his being an emblematic figure of revolution but also for his role as ancestor. Toni Morrison reminds us that “ancestors are not just parent, they are sort of *timeless* [my emphasis] people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (“Rootedness” 343). By remembering Cuffee Ned, the people of Bournehills remain connected to history and to the past. Their re-enactment of Cuffee’s rebellion keeps the historical act alive as well as the possibility of their overthrowing repressive rule:

They had worked together! ...Under Cuffee,... a man had not lived for himself alone, but for his neighbor also...they had trusted one another, had set aside their differences and stood as one against their enemies. *They had been a People!*...they informed the sun and afternoon sky of what they, Bournehills People, had once been capable of. (287)

Missy Kubitschek and Barbara Christian read the Carnival scene in relation to its import to the development of individual characters while Joseph T. Skerrett suggests that though the Carnival helps the community and Merle temporarily exorcise their psyche demons, it does not lead them to affecting meaningful change to their present circumstances. Eugenia Collier offers a contradictory claim to Skerrett arguing that “Carnival is both affirmation and assertion of the independent selfhood of Black people” (309). With the exception of Collier, the aforementioned critics only acknowledge the emotional significance of re-enacting Cuffee’s revolt for the citizens of Bournehills but

believe that the Carnival, like All Souls Day, is no more than just another cathartic exercise.

However, others do not limit the significance of Carnival. Gary Storhoff argues that the Carnival is Marshall's attempt to portray "an individual's social action into a collective creativity in the construction of a revolutionary social and political reality—in a sense, a people together can create a new combination of future experiences...the islanders experience not only a sense of yearly renewal in the Carnival, but a liberating vision of political possibilities" (60). Adam Meyer in "Memory and Identity for Black, White and Jew in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*" posits that the re-enactment of Cuffee Ned's rebellion "provides [the people of Bournehills] with the hope that such a coming together can occur again...remind[ing] themselves yet again of what their past is and how it allows them both to live in the present and look to the future (102). Both critics suggest broader implications of the importance of Carnival for the entire Bournehills community; however, their readings seem incomplete. I agree that we can read the scene as the paradigm for initiating revolutionary change, as Carnival becomes the means of exerting control by giving voice to a disenfranchised and forgotten people; however, I would argue that just having a "liberating vision of political possibilities" or a "hope" of what might come is insufficient in combating oppression. Yes, the islanders are spiritually renewed, but their participation in Carnival has yet to prompt revolt against their present oppression. While the Carnival march by Bournehills citizens portends revolution "in one dark powerful wave bring[ing] everything in its path crashing down... if heed wasn't taken and provision made" (290), they must transform re-enactment into immediate action in the present.

The collective strength and unity exhibited by the Bournehillsians during Carnival in the figurative re-incarnation of Cuffee Ned and the slave revolt needs to lead the people to action in the present. If the people are to survive, they must literally revolt. Though the Bournehillsians embrace and maintain their value and cultural beliefs through their re-enactment of Cuffee's revolt, this is inadequate in advancing their political and social situation. Marshall clearly illustrates that the idea of a culturally unified community proffered by Black Nationalism is not enough as it is only part of what a community needs to sustain itself. They know the history; they embrace the history; but they fail to use the history. Saul recognizes the community's passivity in fighting repressive rule:

It's that people, . . . who've truly been wronged like mine all those thousands of years—must at some point, if they mean to come into their own, start using their history to their advantage. Turn it to their own good. You begin . . . by first acknowledging it, all of it, the bad as well as Cuffee's brilliant coup, and the ones most people would rather forget, like the shame and ignominy of that long forced march. But that's part of it, too. And then, of course, you have to try and learn from all that's gone before—and again from both the good and the bad—especially that! Use your history as a guide, in other words. Because many times, what one needs to know for the present—the action that must be taken if a people are to win their right to live, the methods to be used: some them unpalatable, true, but again, there's usually no other way—has

been spelled out in past events. That it's all there if only they would look. (315)

His comments presage Merle's call to action at the Cane Vale Factory to suggest that if Bournehills as a community is to recover, it must not only know its history to re-enact Cuffee's rebellion at Carnival each year, but also understand how to use that history to change their oppressive plight. Despite his keen observation, the people of Bournehills have yet to use fully the past to assist them in the present.

The people of Bournehills eventually employ its inherent revolutionary spirit. Merle Kinbona, a black woman, will challenge them to channel Cuffee Ned and act as he did to end their present oppression.⁸ Merle forces the citizens to revolt; to stop re-enacting and act. If the Bournehillsians are to regain their humanity it will be important for them to "have their own little crop which they can take over to Cane Vale and sell...[to] feel they're somebody, too" (356). This pivotal scene occurs when the rollers break (the same rollers Ferguson could not bring himself demand by repaired) at Cane Vale Factory. The citizens' sugar cane cannot be processed, and the neo-colonial economic regime decides that it will neither repair nor replace the rollers. This decision could mean the literal destruction of Bournehills for without the processed cane, the people will not be able to survive, and once again the people are at the mercy of their colonizers. In a tirade directed to Saul and the owners of the plant, Merle's words are aimed at exposing neo-colonial ideologies that have "enslaved" Bournehillsians, however they resonate with the oppressed citizens:

Look at those poor people standing out there like they've turned to stone, afraid to set foot inside the gate when they should be overrunning this

place and burning it the hell down, or better yet, taking it over and running it themselves. Talk about change? That's the kind we need down here...Do something, but oh, Christ, don't just stand there with your head hanging down doing nothing. (389-390)

Harris posits that “[Merle] is helpless against the forces that own and operate Cane Vale, but feels that someone must speak out” (69). When Merle cannot prevent the plant owners from closing the factory, she believes herself to be a “sorry failure” but this is not the case. Though Merle’s tirade is directed toward the oppressive power structure, her words spur the Bournhillsians to action. She verbalizes the anger and resentment of the “little fella of Bournhills” toward neo-colonialist oppression and forces the community to recognize how it has been culpable in its plight and how it must work to change it. The people of Bournhills recognize Merle’s selflessness and decide to be responsible for their own fate by transporting their cane to the nearby town of Brighton to be processed. The Bournhillsians acknowledge that the only way for them to survive is by working together as a community instead of depending on their colonizers. Cuffee Ned and his community were self-sufficient; however, the people of Bournhills have not been—a direct result of their colonized psyches. Merle’s call to action reminds the citizens that by supporting one another, they sustain the whole:

We know we're not a people famous for helping out the one another...not anymore at least. Years back when Cuffee was alive and we was running things around here ourselves we did different maybe because we knew then that if we had lived selfish we couldn't live at all. Well, it's the same now. Kingsley and them has shut down Cane Vale, saying the

main roller's broken, and leaving our canes standing in the ground, and we must needs get them out and over to Brighton... We're faced... with a grave emergency down here in Bournehills, and we're going to have to see whether we can't work together, help out the one another, as we did back in Cuffee's time, if only for this once. Because if we don't, if it's going to be every man for himself and to hell with the other fella, not one, but all of we are goin' to lose out. (394-395)

By participating in All Souls Day and Carnival, the Bournehillsians are able to connect with their ancestors to experience a figurative revolt but when they devise a plan to haul their cane to distant processing plants they literally revolt—fighting oppression in a truer sense that parallels Cuffee's rebellion. Through Merle Marshall illustrates that when an oppressed communities literally act together, they can fight to end their oppression. She juxtaposes the Bournehillsians' oppression to the struggle for civil rights of blacks in America to reinforce the idea that a unified diasporic community working together for a common cause can manifest a nationalist consciousness to achieve self-sufficiency and personal autonomy.

Another member of Marshall's community of the oppressed is Saul Amron. Emotionally tortured, he carries the guilt of his first wife's death who dies during childbirth while on an anthropological field assignment with him. He cannot reconcile how his wife could survive the Holocaust but die in a remote, but innocuous, area of Honduras. Saul is also conflicted by his Jewish heritage and sees himself as alone in his suffering. However, with Harriet, his current wife, encouraging him, he returns to *aid* work as a means of paying penance and has come to Bournehills on another attempt to

“help” the impoverished country. This *aid* trip will yield very different results for Saul. It will be here that Saul will recognize that he is not alone in his suffering but is a part of community of sufferers. He will establish himself as part of a black community to suggest that “a solid front can be built on the basis of alliances of exploited peoples” (Nazareth 131). Saul as Jew shares a history of oppression, but he does not anticipate the connectedness and sense communal spirit that will occur between him and the people he has come to “help.”

Saul and the people of Bournehills are members of an oppressed Diaspora. Interestingly, the word “Diaspora” was once used to refer to the dispersion of Jews throughout Palestine after the Babylonian captivity. Now the term has broader meaning and is important in Marshall’s establishing of a community of oppressed people. She links Saul and the oppressed peoples of Bournehills. The WASP Allen Fuso describes Saul, noting his “nose, rising like the curved blade of a scimitar out of the pale, [the] somewhat fleshy face, the forehead that in its breadth and height looked vaguely hydrocephalic, [and] the hair, coarse and rust-colored (nigger, hair, Allen’s mother would have called it)” (17). The differences in Saul’s physiognomy suggest an “otherness” that aligns him with native Bournehillsians.

As a Jew, Saul shares with the people of Bournehills a history of suffering as he is the “most sensitive, personally, culturally, and intellectually, to nuances of power and powerlessness in Bournehills” (Christian, *Black* 128). However, Saul does not immediately recognize this connection but has to know the people. The more he learns about the people of Bournehills, the more he lives among the people, Saul discovers that he is “no stranger to Bournehills” (124). While watching Stringer and Gwen toil in the

sugar cane fields, Saul experiences a conversion of sorts “Struck in that moment on the road to Spiretown” (163), he recalls his mother’s telling him of her, and now his “special heritage” of oppression and eventual triumph.⁹ It is in that moment Saul experiences an epiphany whereby he begins to understand that he is a member of a larger community of oppressed people:

Moreover, her tale, in assuming the proportions of an archetype, a paradigm, in his youthful imagination, also came to embody, without his realizing it (the story working its powerful alchemy on him when he had been most vulnerable), all that any other people had had to endure. It became the means by which he understood the suffering of others. It encompassed them all. It had even, suddenly, reached across the years to include within its wide meaning what he had just witnessed on the hill.
(164)

This connection to the people of Bournehills is further evidenced as he watches the Carnival and reflects on his own history. “The long silent march at the beginning which [tells him] better than all the words in the world what it must have been like back then for [their] people—and for [his], for that matter, all those centuries. Because it made [him] think of them, too” (314). This scene illustrates his acknowledgment and acceptance of the inextricable links he shares with the people of Bournehills.

However, Hortense Spillers does not believe that Saul is one of the oppressed and considers him a representative of the white man/the colonizer who has come to “advance” the island. She argues that “no one in Bournehills is ‘bettered’ by [Saul’s] presence, but for [him], this tenure of research in the Caribbean—not [his] first—will be

[his] last and most devastating because [he is] brought to consider that the humanity they must heal is [his] own” (156). Spillers suggests that Saul’s suffering is not caused by his Jewishness but claims that his role as “cultural agent of institutions of technological and bureaucratic means” (164) is the true cause of his suffering. While Spillers is accurate in her assessment that Saul needs to heal his tortured soul, I do not believe that he is the self-serving opportunist she suggests. Saul is not the typical *aid* worker for he acknowledges that in order to really help the people, he must *know* the people:

Moreover, as the weeks passed, he felt himself being slowly drawn into the life of the place, his day taking on the rhythm and feel of the day in Bournehills—so much so that after awhile, without being conscious of it, he left off wearing his watch and began telling time by the sun like everyone else. And yet, although this was what he was after, this participation and merging, he couldn’t help feeling obscurely troubled by the ease with which it was happening. (153)

Saul wants to and needs to know the people of Bournehills to ensure that his project is a success. However, he is troubled by how easily this “knowing” is occurring suggests that his understanding of the people goes beyond acquiring customs. Saul senses deeper connections with the people, and though he is *white*, Marshall clearly constructs in Saul as a kindred to the people of Bournehills to show that he, like them, has suffered.

Frantz Fanon discusses how Jews and blacks are conceptualized by whites, comparing the black man to the Jew to offer that both have been persecuted and exterminated; however, he believes that “the Jew can be unknown in his Jewishness” (*Black Skin* 115). Fanon believes that the Jew is overdetermined from within while the

black man is overdetermined from without. The ontological qualities for the black man are inherent, naturalized, but the Jew is a “white man, and, apart from some rather debatable characteristics, he can sometimes go unnoticed” (*Black Skin* 115). Fanon’s assessment of the Jew’s identity suggests that the Jew can deny his Jewishness because there are no external markers like skin color to “mark” him as *other*. His plight is unlike the black man’s whose skin color “marks” him from birth. Saul does not try to deny his Jewishness, and it is because of his Jewishness that he intuitively connects with the suffering souls of Bournehills.

Marshall illustrates this common suffering by juxtaposing a description of the Atlantic that carried “the nine million and more,” clearly a reference to the Middle Passage, with Saul’s memories of “the earth shudder[ing] and recoil[ing] under him as the bombs struck”(106)—references to World War II and the Holocaust, explicitly interweaving histories of suffering despite color or race. Marshall broadens the Black Nationalist definition of community when she provides a space for Saul. Her novel suggests that race is not a sufficient determinate for what individuals comprise a community. Because Saul has suffered and struggles to free himself from the memories and guilt that oppress him, he is clearly a member of Marshall’s community of the oppressed.

Marshall does not devote a significant portion of the novel to Allen Fuso, but he is an important character because as a homosexual (though closeted), he is member of Marshall’s larger community of the oppressed. “[He] feel[s] closer to [Merle] and the people in Bournehills than to anyone else [he] know[s], including my own family” (376). Despite the connection he has with this community of oppressed people, unlike them,

Allen refuses to resist his oppression. He represses his homosexuality in a society where heterosexuality is normative. As an Irish-Italian Catholic, Allen's religious and ethnic backgrounds play an integral part in his denial of his sexual orientation.

Socially awkward, Allen is the statistician on Saul's research team who is "[fond of] putting everything, including people, in their proper categories" (15); however, he forms a bond with Vere. Vere, a native Bournehillsian, returns home after three years in America working as a migrant laborer and forms a relationship with Allen who "helps"—Allen watches and admires Vere as he restores a dilapidated Opel Kapitän, an American-made car. "So his days went, each one carefully planned, orderly, filled with the work he loved and the few simple pleasure he allowed himself. And what added to them even more (although he could not admit it to himself), what, in fact, made those days stand out as perhaps the most memorable he had ever know, was the beginning of his friendship with Vere" (151). One afternoon the two go for a swim each "[keeping] pace, their bodies—the one white but growing brown from the sun, the other as dark as the sea beneath its fire-lit surface—attuned to a single rhythm as they repeatedly circled the pool" (152). The sexual tension is evident, but what Marshall does not make clear is whether the tension is shared by one or both of the men.

In the hysteria of Carnival events, their relationship reaches a crossroads. Vere and Allen meet two women and in the exchange that follows, Allen is left disoriented and confused. They begin drinking, and Vere suddenly changes for Allen no longer recognizes in Vere the "diffidence and uncertainty that had kept him—kept them both—standing outside the door of the Spiretown social center at the Saturday night dances" (307). At this point, any illusions Allen may have harbored that the two shared a mutual

attraction begin to dissipate. Vere and Allen return to one of women's home, and things turn intimate—Vere with his woman and Allen with the other. A screen separates the couples, each privy to the events taking place on the opposite side. Allen does not know how to react when the woman tentatively kisses him; yet, she wants him to advance the moment, but he finds it “distaste[ful]: [her] bod[y],...lack[ing] purity of line with the up-jutting breasts and buttocks, the suffocating softness” (309). Angry and offended by Allen's lack of arousal, the girl accuses him of being a “he-she” and storms out of the room. Allen is left alone while Vere and the other woman begin to make love. Allen “suddenly feels...a wave of feeling and desire so awesome that before he [can] resist it, fight it off,...he performe[s] alone...the act taking place behind the screen” (312).

Ashamed he quickly leaves the house to stumble blindly toward home. The incident irrevocably changes the relationship and though they continue to meet as friends for the occasional swim, the “ease and intimacy [of their friendship] was gone” (347).

Vere is killed in the Whitmonday Race when the Opel falls apart, a “collapse so total it seemed deliberate, planned, personally intended. It was as if the Opel, though only a machine, had possessed a mind, an intelligence, that for some reason had remained unalterable opposed to Vere, so that while doing his bidding and permitting him to think he was making it over in to his own image,...it had...been conspiring against him” (366). Marshall casts the car as character as it comes to symbolize Western technology and its ability to destroy natural man and to further illustrate the damage colonization and Westernization has wrought in Bourne Island. In his grief over Vere's death, Allen confides in Merle, acknowledging his mother's bigotry and his failure in not challenging her. He admits that he has repressed his own desires but wants to resist conformity, to

“risk everything.” Allen wants to reject his role as oppressed subject, to “be something people didn’t approve of”; however, he cannot. He admits that “even if [he] knew of something to do, [he] couldn’t bring [himself] to it. That [he did not] have it” (381). Freire would argue that Allen, as an oppressed subject, is in a struggle with himself, for “instead of striving for liberation,...[has] become [the] oppressor. The very structure of his thoughts has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which was shaped” (Freire 45). Simply put, society has inculcated Allen to believe that heterosexuality must be accepted as the established norm; therefore, Allen is transfixed by denial as he cannot envision self outside of this normative boundary.

Merle offers Allen the opportunity to revolt, to challenge his oppressors by admitting his homosexuality when she directly asks, “What is it you want to do?” (381). Instead of disavowing the societal notion of wife and children, Allen only responds that he wants to do “something different” and becomes angry when Merle pushes him to define what “something different” actually is. Merle’s challenge to Allen to fight his oppression parallels Audre Lorde’s discussion of difference in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference.” Lorde suggests that though race, gender, class, and age are legitimate differences, they “have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation” and that “it is our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them (115). Though her discussion is specific to inclusion of black lesbians into the collective black community, her ideas are applicable to Marshall’s representation of Allen as character and the redefining of community. As heteronormativity and homophobia have excluded lesbians from the the larger black community, the same strictures compel Allen to deny himself. And while

Marshall uses Merle to urge Allen to challenge such restrictions, and unlike Lorde who is able to “integrate all the parts of who [she is], openly, . . . without the restrictions of externally imposed definition” (121), Allen yields to these “externally imposed definition[s]” and like Lyle Hutson, fully assimilates. His self-denial leads to what Memmi cautions against—an erasure of self. Allen joins the Bournehillsians, Saul, and Merle in community of oppressed, but unlike them who resist the very forces (racism, sexism, classism) which oppress them, Allen is unable to confront and openly admit his homosexuality, and as a result Allen remains oppressed by internal and external forces to remain a psychically colonized subject.

The last member of Marshall’s community of the oppressed is Merle Kinbona. Considered the “the perfect cultural broker” (118). “. . . In a way [one] can’t explain, she somehow is Bournehills” (118). Though part of the larger community, Merle is more a link between and among various groups—the wealthy of New Bristol, white colonist powers, and the poor of Bournehills. The illegitimate daughter of plantation owner Ashton Vaughn and one of his black slaves Merle is the embodiment of all of Bourne Island. At two, Merle witnesses her mother’s murder and faults herself for not being able to identify the perpetrator. With her mother dead, Merle grows up among the people of Bournehills but has the privilege of her father’s wealth. Though Merle is emotionally and culturally connected to the people of Bournehills, she has no sense of self since she never really knew her mother and her father, who as member of the white patriarchy, did not allow for a meaningful relationship with any of his bastard children. In many ways she is of an orphan class attended to by the poor blacks of Bournehills. She identifies with their suffering, championing their causes. Interestingly, while Merle advocates for

the oppressed citizens of Bournehills, she remains psychically paralyzed in fighting her own oppression.

Like Lyle, she too is educated in England and experiences a crisis of identity. While there Merle engages in an affair with a wealthy white woman who “pays” for her companionship, but eventually decides to the end affair. Her scorned patroness tells Merle’s African husband, and he abandons her, taking their daughter and returning to Africa. A despondent, Merle experiences the first of her catatonic episodes—episodes that continue whenever she is upset. With nothing to keep her in London and because “she’s known what it is to suffer,” (22) Merle returns to Bourne Island to be among a community of “sufferers.”

A Fanonian analysis of Merle Kinbona will be helpful in explicating the root causes of her catatonic spells or what I refer to as her literal psychic paralysis. Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* presents a psychological portrait not possible in strictly Freudian and Lacanian terms to examine the psychic economy of colonialism.¹⁰ His work is particularly important in analyzing the psychic fissures of the colonized and post-colonized subject as he discusses the epistemic violence perpetuated by colonial contact on the colonized psyche. Fanon writes, “the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, ... I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart” (109). Simply put, when the colonized subject is trapped in the gaze of the colonizer, his ego/identity fractures. Fanon extends this study in *The Wretched of the Earth* to argue that a direct consequence of colonialist/neo-colonialist oppression is mental collapse. He defines colonialism as “a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity...forces

the people it dominates to ask themselves the quest constantly: ‘In reality, who am I?’ (203). ‘Who am I’ becomes the central question for Merle, and as she struggles to answer this question, “she often [sinks] into one of her long, frightening, cataleptic states during which she was more dead than alive” (398). Her lack of identity is the source of her paralysis and like the people of Bournehills, she must find a way to revolt in order to be a whole self.

We first meet Merle

wearing a flared print dress made from cloth of a vivid abstract tribal motif...pendant silver earrings carved in the form of those saints to be found on certain European churches adorned her ears...[and] numerous bracelets, also of silver, [binding] her wrists...an outfit...to express rather a diversity and disunity within herself, and her attempt, unconscious probably, to reconcile these opposing parts, to make of them a whole...to recover something in herself that had been lost. (4-5)

The obvious disconnect in Merle’s appearance reflects her fragmented psyche. Her physical appearance with its opposing parts is a contradiction. While the dress is “African” with “vivid abstract tribal motif” that she wears “draped...[like] a West African market woman,” (4) and though the bangles/shackles bind her wrists; she “mutes her darkness” with talcum powder and wears the colonizer on her ears. Despite using conflicting symbols, Marshall intentionally allows Merle’s physical appearance to reflect a connection to Diaspora; however her room is symbolic of all that is the colonizer:

The bed, an ugly massive antique of stained mahogany with cherubs trailing might well have been the bed in which old Vaughn had sired the

forty-odd children before retiring for the night on his planter's chair...old prints...of the planters' wives and daughters out for their late afternoon drives...scenes...of black figures at work in the fields...a drawing of three-masted Bristol slaver [adorn the walls]. (400-401)

Unlike Merle's clothes and accessories, the room restricts any sense of self. Fanon argues that, "when the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego...the goal of his behavior will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth (Fanon, *Black Skin* 154). The room lacks Merle's own personalization and creates what Fanon would term a "feeling of nonexistence." It physically and psychologically traps her in a colonial space that forces her to identify with the oppressor.

Despite Merle's psyche dysfunction, she remains intimately connected to the people of Bournehills. It is this communal bond that will lead to her psychic healing. As their advocate, she articulates the anger against neo-colonial powers that continue to economically oppress the people. According to Missy Dehn Kubitschek "political commitment precedes the solidification of the quester's individual personality;" ("Paule Marshall" 57) therefore, Merle cannot attend to her own psychic wounds before ensuring that the community is unified and self-sustaining. In describing her conception of Merle as character, Marshall explains that "what [she was] trying to do in [this] work [was] to take the black woman as character to another level, to give her an added dimension. There is the quest for self, but at the same time...to suggest that [her] search is linked to this larger quest which has to do with the liberation of us as a people" (164).

In her role as champion of the people, Merle often verbalizes the Bournehillsians' anger and resentment about neo-colonialist rule, but it will be the incident at the Cane Vale Factory that not only precipitates the community's revolt against "decolonization" but also Merle's integration of her fragmented psyche into a whole:

Kill! Destroy!...That's all your science and big-time technology is good for...Everything and everybody blown to bits, the whole show up in flames because you couldn't have it your way anymore...I read about someplace that they call the neutron or some damn thing, that they say only kills off the people—the people, everybody, just vanish into thin air...All the poor half-hungry people who never had a chance. The little children....The whole world up in smoke and not a fie to be seen anywhere! (391)

Merle parallels the threat of nuclear warfare with the imposition of neo-colonial ideologies in Bourne Island to suggest that if the people do not revolt neo-colonialist rule, it, like nuclear war, will result in the ultimate destruction of Bournehills and its people.

After her breakdown at Cane Vale Factory Merle suffers her last catatonic fit:

There was not the slightest hint of recognition or awareness [in her eyes]...it was as though she had fled completely the surface of herself for someplace deep within where nothing could penetrate, leaving behind a numb spent face, a body which looked as if it had been thrown like a rag doll, its limbs all awry, on the bed and left there, and the dead eyes. (399)

While Merle slowly recovers, Harriet pays her a visit. Harriet feigns concern about Merle's recent attack to disguise her true motive—getting Merle away from her husband

Saul. She suggests that Merle take a vacation and offers to “advance [her] enough money not only for [the] fare but to tide [her] over until [she finds] a job” (438). Merle initially responds with “an ugly anguished scream” and then adamantly refuses to “be bought” (441). Marshall intentionally constructs analogous scene. Earlier Merle’s English lover tries to bribe her to continue their relationship. Merle is unable to verbalize her anger and disgust to the Englishwoman and is made to feel ashamed because despite her misgivings, she still accepts money. However, she finds her speaking voice with Harriet. She rejects Harriet’s offer and in doing so, is empowered. Merle refuses the shame and guilt of past choices to regain her humanity, but more importantly, she denies her role as colonized subject, as Harriet is representative of the colonizer. Merle’s speaking voice led the people of Bournehills to revolt against their psychic paralysis, and now she uses it on her own behalf by refusing to remain assimilated and deciding that “revolt is the only way out of [her] colonial situation” (Memmi 127).

Bell hooks writes that “black people must speak...if we are to heal our wounds (hurts caused by domination and exploitation and oppression), if we are to recover and realize ourselves” (*Talking* 3). Throughout most of the novel, when Merle speaks, she is speaking on behalf of the oppressed citizens of Bournehills and not for herself. It is when she “speaks” to heal her own psychic wounds does she begin to recover. Joyce Pettis examines Marshall’s use of “‘talk’ as defensive artifice,” suggesting that it “binds Merle’s badly fractured ‘self’ and sustains her...[and] becomes the means through which she initiates self-healing and potential wholeness” (“Talk” 110) and contends that Merle’s talking/speaking throughout the novel is about Merle’s tenuous grasp on maintaining of her sanity. Pettis is correct in part. Merle admits that if she were to “stop

[talking] that'd be the end of [her]," (65) but I would argue that Merle's incessant speaking is not enough to prevent her catatonic spells from occurring. The speaking Merle does is on behalf of the Bournehillsians and not herself. It is only in her confrontation with Harriet does Merle directly address her own hurts caused by the consequences of colonization.

Merle's confrontation with Harriet begins the process of her physical and psychological decolonization. She strips away all that had weighed her down, "remov[ing] both the earrings and the heavy silver bracelets on her wrists: unburdened, restored to herself...[She] left off the talcum powder she was forever dabbing on her face and throat as though to mute her darkness, and her hair which she normally kept straightened flat with the iron-toothed comb....now stood in a small rough forest around her face" (463). She removes all vestiges of her colonizer father from her room, stripping it "bare as a bone. Everything gone—all that old furniture and junk [that] had cluttering up the place" (463). Merle's cluttered room reflected her cluttered psyche. By clearing this psychic space, she is able to define who she is as a non-colonized subject. Jane Olmsted argues that "Merle has divested herself of all the symbols that helped to define her—more to the point, helped her to speak the complex, disjointed, desperate language of history, her own and Bournehills" (255). While Olmsted is correct that by removing these oppressive symbols, Merle frees herself, I am uncertain as to whether or not the earrings, the bracelets, the talcum powder ever really defined who she was or fully articulated an oppressive history. They do tell the story of Merle as colonized subject, but Olmsted suggests that by donning these items Merle consciously recognizes herself as a colonized subject; however, I do not agree. Merle is psychologically damaged by her

relationship with the Englishwoman and wears the earrings a penance, an outward display of her shame. Additionally, Merle straightens her hair and lightens her face with talcum powder because she identifies with the colonizer. Therefore, the accessories hinder Merle and symbolize the inner conflict that results in her psychic fragmentation and inner conflict, making it impossible for her to answer Fanon's question, "Who am I?"

Unburdened by the physical markers that aligned her with the colonizer, Merle's next step in her decolonization requires that she admits her culpability in her personal situation. By acknowledging her role in her oppression, Merle is able to end her mental and physical stasis. She says that "I'll never get around to doing anything with what's left of my life until I go and look for my child. You know that...I'll just go on as I am...Doing nothing but sitting out on this veranda all day or down in that damp cave of a room feeling sorry for myself and blaming everyone and everything for the botch I've made of things" (463-464). Merle, like the citizens of Bournehills, has been complicit in her psychic paralysis. No longer psychically paralyzed as a result of colonization, Merle can now physically act. Her mental stasis had kept her from literally moving, as evidenced by the paralyzing catatonic episodes. She can now travel to Africa in the hopes of reconnecting with her daughter but promises to return to Bournehills because it "is home. Whatever little [she] can do that will matter for something must be done here. A person can run for years but sooner or later [s]he has to take a stand in the place which, for better or worse, [s]he calls home, do what he can do to change things there" (468). Because Merle is part of the Bournehills community, she is compelled by an inherent sense of responsibility to return "home" and continue to assist her community in their fight against oppressive forces.

Marshall expands and challenges Black Nationalist ideological constructions of community to argue that a community is any group of individuals united in common causes. She also suggests that if one group is to combat oppression, it must recognize that the fight against oppression cannot be a singular battle and must join with others in resisting all forms of oppression. A flaw of the Black Nationalist project was its myopic view of oppression. Its focus on the oppression of the black community did not allow the recognition and acceptance that others suffered under oppressive forces. Marshall's community presents individuals struggling against racism, classism, sexism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and homophobia. They are connected because they are oppressed not because they necessarily share a racial, cultural, social, or political bond. She presents a group of individuals whose differences would seemingly suggest separate struggles but because Marshall makes them all part of a larger community, she does what Audre Lorde will later recommend that "we must recognize differences among [those] who are our equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each others' difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles" (122). The native Bournehillsians, Saul Amron, Allen Fuso, and Merle Kinbona are a community of sufferers. Each member of this community, with the exception of Allen, stages a successful revolt against oppressive forces (social, cultural, economic, political) to achieve varying degrees of autonomy and self-hood while maintaining an inextricable link to their community, for "[the oppressed] will gain liberation...through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it" (Freire 45).

Notes

1. Formed in 1950, The Harlem Writers Guild wanted to continue Harlem's legacy as the locus of cultural and artistic production. Some of its members included John O. Killens, Sterling Brown, James Baldwin, Alice Childress, and Sarah Wright.
2. Race, class, and gender will later be referred to as "triple oppression." Frances Beale coined the term double jeopardy in her "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." Beverly Lindsay's "Minority Women in America: Black American, Native American, Chicana, and Asian American Women" expands the discussion of minority women's oppression to include issues of class, thusly offering the concept of triple jeopardy.
3. Harper's reference to "the general call" is from his analysis of Amiri Baraka's "SOS" in which he claims that though the poem "calls black people in a nationalistic way...but that is all it does" (462).
4. After Marshall, community becomes a dominate theme in the works of African American women writers of the 1970s and after. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973); Morrison will even explore the theme of community within the Diaspora with *Tar Baby* (1981); Alice Wallker's *Meridian* (1976); Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982).
5. The reference to "two warring souls" is taken from W. E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* and his examination double-consciousness as the African American struggles with the quest for identity. The actual quote reads: "One ever feels his two-ness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body..."(3).

6. In her *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Alice Walker provides four specific definitions for a womanist: 1) a black feminist or feminist of color; 2) a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually; a woman committed to entire people; 3) a woman who loves music, dance, the moon, the Spirit, love, food, struggle; 4) a womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender
7. Eugenia Delamotte's "Women, Silence, and History in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*" and Hortense J. Spillers' "*Chosen Place, Timeless People: Some Figuration on the New World*" provide detailed discussions of Harriet Amron as character.
8. It is important that Marshall chooses a black woman as a community leader. Clearly, Marshall's casting of Merle as political activist and catalyst that ignites a people to revolt against their oppressive conditions directly challenges prescribed roles (secretaries and producers of black male warriors) of black women in community action within the Black Nationalist Movement. Merle serves as the literary antecedent for Meridian Hill of Alice Walker's *Meridian*. Additionally, when black feminists treat community, they are concerned about the physical, spiritual, and cultural survival and growth of the entire community. See such works as Paula Giddings' *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*; Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, Barbara Smith's *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*, and Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*.
9. Saul's epiphanic moment has been compared to the biblical Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus in Acts 9:1-10. For a more detailed discussion see Barbara

Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*; Mary Jane Schenck's "Ceremonies of Reconciliation: Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*; or Hortense Spillers' "Chosen Place, Timeless People: Some Figurations on the New World.

10. Fanon rethinks Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to argue that race and class are part of identity formation. For a discussion of the major precepts of psychoanalysis see Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*; Jacques Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* and *Écrits*.

CHAPTER III

“WHOSE WOMAN IS YOU...I [AIN’T] NO CORREGIDORA”: REDEFINING

BLACK WOMAN’S SEXUALITY IN GAYL JONES’ *CORREGIDORA*

I maintain that black women are already O. K. O. K. with our short necks. O. K. with our calloused hands. O. K. with our tired feet and paper bags...O. K. O. K. O. K.

Toni Morrison, “What the Black Woman Thinks About Women’s Lib”-(1971)¹

The 1970s saw the rise of two political and cultural movements, women’s liberation and a more militant civil rights era; however, neither movement focused on issues concerning black women.² The Women’s Liberation Movement allowed privileged white, educated, middle-class women to free themselves the perceived constraints of the private sphere of home and its prescribed duties of wife and mother. This Movement represented an avenue toward self-empowerment as these women demanded equality, fought to control reproductive choices, and sought work outside the home. However, black women were already working outside the home not out of a desire to be free from patriarchal constraints but out of economic necessity. Angela Davis points out that, “black women have seldom been just housewives,...they have carried the double burden of wage labor and housework” (*Women, Race* 231). Because the issue of race was not an immediate concern of the Women’s Liberation Movement and because paid labor did not symbolically represent a “liberating experience,” black women found that the conditions of oppression under which they suffered did not equal those of their white counterparts. As a result, the unifying cause of sexism did not resonate with black women and many did not identify with white women as “sisters” in an oppressive patriarchal state.³

The proud refrain of the 1970s Civil Rights era, “Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud” replaced the 1960s plaintive cry of “We Shall Overcome,” and the more aggressive and militant tone of Black Nationalism served as the civil rights discourse of the day. Ostensibly about racial uplift, Black Nationalism subsequently oppressed part of its group, black women. Deborah K. King, in “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology,” argues that black men used the idea of the matriarch to “manipulate and coerce black women into maintaining exclusive commitments to racial interests [by] redefining and narrowing black women’s roles and images” (55). King suggests that because black men forced black women to commit themselves to ideas of racial equality and to ignore gender inequalities, “black women did not experience sexism within the race movement in quite the ways that brought many white women to feminist consciousness...” (54); yet, black women were conscious of their marginalized position within society. King argues forcefully the obstacles (racism, sexism, and classism) facing black women and offers ways in which they seek to overcome them. And though black women were certainly committed to and influential in affecting racial change within the Civil Rights Movement they did so amidst rampant sexism, particularly within the Black Nationalist movement.⁴

Michele Wallace describes Black Nationalism as a “vehicle for Black Macho,” and like the Women’s Liberation Movement, Black Nationalist’s ideology too ignored the concerns of black women. Black Nationalism depicted black men as the primary targets of a racist society, marginalizing black women. Not only were black women marginalized within the Black Nationalist movement, its proponents actually made black women “the enemy” of black men. Ironically, Black Nationalists desired patriarchal

control within the African American community more so than racial solidarity. Eldridge Cleaver defamed the black woman as the white man's conspirator, claiming that "all down through history, [the white man] has propped her up economically above you and me, to strengthen her hand against us" (162). Thusly, in order to achieve and maintain positions of authority, black men redefined and prescribed roles for black women that would relegate them to a subordinate and marginal status.

Black Nationalism accomplished its sexist marginalization of black women by blending its notions of a traditional African patriarchal society with the racist and sexist ideas of various sociological studies of the time. In particular, Black Nationalists echoed the sexist rhetoric of the Moynihan Report. The report's overarching thesis contended that slavery destroyed the black family because it reversed the "natural" order of the roles of man and woman. The report argued that black women entering the workforce and heading households created a matriarchal society that ultimately led to the emasculation of black men. As a result, black women failed to fulfill their traditional womanly duties (Moynihan 62). To "right the order of things," Black Nationalists determined the black woman's place to be "six feet behind black man" or "in the kitchen and the bedroom." They even designated specific roles for black women who were part of the movement, allowing them to answer the phone and make coffee while the men mobilized for action.

Black Nationalists believed the black woman's most significant role was to provide black babies, specifically black boys who would one day become warriors for the revolution. For example, Robert Staples saw the black woman's contribution to the movement in terms of her procreative capabilities, "from her womb have come the revolutionary warriors of our time" ("Black Macho" 27). This debasing "womb-

centered” definition of black women reinforces the historical objectification of the black woman’s body, specifically her role as forced breeder during slavery. Florynce Kennedy, founder of the National Black Feminist Organization, posits that this idea of “breeding revolutionaries is not too far removed from a cultural past where Black women were encouraged to be breeding machines for their masters” (147). I dare to clarify Kennedy’s claim to argue that black slave women were not *encouraged* to breed, they were forced to do so. The black slave mother suffered under a doubly oppressive bind, forced breeder and perpetuator of a slave system.⁵

Despite the divergent agendas of Women’s Liberation and Black Nationalism, the 1970s proved a watershed moment for African American women writers. Like early black feminist critics, black women fiction writers of the 1970s are concerned with refuting “the assumptions and terminology of colonial, capitalist, racist, and gendered versions of” (Taylor xi) who the black woman is. These writers resisted an imposed common sisterhood with white feminists and rejected definitions of black womanhood imposed by black males. They vehemently opposed the sexist constructions of black female sexuality and created characters who contested roles that cast black women as passive, subordinate, baby-making objects. Black Aesthetians and Black Nationalists castigated writers who addressed gender issues in their work particularly issues of abuse inflicted on black women by black men. Such attempts like those of Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva’s Man* (1976), Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) were met with hostility and disparaging reviews that portrayed these writers as “Black men-haters, bull-dykes and perverse lovers of white

men and women” (Hernton 141). These writers as well as many of their contemporaries challenged the pervasive sexism and misogyny of Black Nationalist discourse, specifically its construction of the black woman’s sexuality, and some sought to offer definitions of the black woman’s sexuality outside of her procreative capabilities. The work of Gayl Jones more so than that of Angelou, Walker or Morrison attempts to defy the sexist constructions of black womanhood that grew out of a Black Nationalist’s ideologies. Later, in *Liberating Voices: Oral Traditions in African American Literature* (1991), Jones claims that “while [Black Aesthetic critics] assault[ed] racist strictures, these critics often employed new strictures of exclusion and created a new hegemony” (191). *Corregidora* presages Jones’s critical analysis of the Black Nationalist and Black Arts Movements as she uses her narrative to examine this exclusive and newly created hegemony to include its limited constructions of black women’s sexual identity. I argue that in *Corregidora*, Jones subverts these limiting, historical constructions of black women’s sexuality, presenting sexually autonomous subjects.

Critical studies examining representations of black women’s sexuality in nineteenth to mid-twentieth century novels by African American women writers reveal some writers’ attempts to refute negative stereotypes of black womanhood.⁶ These novelists challenge such demeaning and caricatured images by presenting characters who embark upon individual quests toward self-definition. Barbara Christian in “Trajectories of Self-Definition” argues that in an effort to create positive images, these early black women novelists limit any “exploration of [a black female] self” (235). Christian adds that by the 1970s black women writers were creating protagonists working toward self-definition and creating characters that refused convention and countered prevailing

notions about black women's sexuality (242). Christian is correct in her claim that the 1970s did represent a significant paradigm shift in the writings by African American; however, fiction writers of the 1940s did portray the black female protagonist's quest for autonomy even if such quests were unsuccessful. Ann Petry's Lutie Johnson and Nella Larsen's Helga Crane are unable to achieve complete agency because of societal forces (sexism, racism, classism). Yet, Zora Neale Hurston's Janie Mae Crawford achieves agency. Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* follows in the tradition of Hurston's Janie as she offers Ursa Corregidora—a woman who resists socially constructed roles of black womanhood in search of personal and sexual autonomy. Jones' novel presents black women as sexual subjects with sexual desires and anticipates Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" that suggests that black women reclaim their sexuality (the erotic) and use it as an empowering creative force. "When [she] speaks of the erotic,...[she speaks] of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which [black women] are now reclaiming..." (55).

This "speaking" as it pertains to black women's sexuality was provocative. Darlene Clark Hine in "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women" notes that the sexual exploitation and institutional rape of black women established in slavery led black women to create a "culture of dissemblance" that indoctrinated a cult of secrecy within their daily lives. She defines this secrecy and dissemblance as "those issues that Black women believed [were] better left unknown, unwritten, unspoken" (916). Not necessarily a deliberate creation, Hines argues that this secrecy served as a means of protecting the private lives of black women and further notes that "in the face of the pervasive stereotypes and negative estimations of the sexuality of Black women, it was imperative

that [black women] collectively create alternative self-images and shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self” (916). This culture of dissemblance operates differently in the lives of fictional black women. While this secrecy/silence offered empowerment and newly created “definitions of self” in the day-to-day existence of black women, for fictional black women characters, the silence is not enough to attain autonomy. Sula Peace in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973) is the town pariah, reviled for her sexually promiscuous behavior. Her most egregious crime is the allegation that she sleeps with white men; claims Sula will not refute. In the instance of Jones’ *Eva’s Man* (1976), Eva, the protagonist, is confined to a mental institution after poisoning and dentally castrating her abusive lover. Forced to undergo psychiatric evaluations, Eva evades and refuses to answer questions. For both women, “remaining silent” offers a measure of autonomy, unfortunately, their refusal to offer a response or explanation for their behavior allows the stereotype of the hyper-sexual black female to remain. The creation of such protagonists suggests that there exists an imperative to articulate—through words or action—one’s subjectivity.⁷

Gayl Jones disrupts this “culture of dissemblance” by using storytelling as a means of achieving agency.⁸ Born in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1949, Jones grew up surrounded by the stories of her mother and grandmother. In her fiction, she creates women-centered narratives in which storytelling is used to explore oppressive forces—racism, sexism, classism—allowing black women to challenge their subjugation and gain autonomy. In *Corregidora*, she has Ursa sing while her foremothers provide figurative (oral narrative) and literal (girl children) manifestations of their oppression. Set in Kentucky, *Corregidora* is the first-person narrative account of Ursa Corregidora, a blues

singer burdened by a legacy of vengeance. Ursa's great-grandmother and grandmother are Brazilian slaves and prostitutes whose slave master, Old Corregidora, forbids any sexual relationship between his prostitutes and black men. Consequently, he fathers both Ursa's grandmother and her mother. Ursa's great-grandmother escapes after she commits a "secret" act of sexual violence against Old Corregidora, an act central to Ursa's discovery of her own power.

Once Brazil legally abolishes slavery, the government burns all historical documentation of slavery's existence in the country and in an effort to ensure that the atrocities of Old Corregidora not be forgotten, Ursa's foremothers command that each descendant literally bear witness to the slave master's crimes by giving birth to girl children. This "bearing witness" empowers the Corregidora women by redefining them not as victims, slaves, or prostitutes, but avengers. The conflict of the novel centers on Ursa's inability to "bear witness" and how she must now define herself outside of that paradigm. In a jealous rage, her husband Mutt pushes her down a flight of stairs, resulting in not only a miscarriage but also a hysterectomy. Now that she can no longer fulfill her foremothers' decree of "mak[ing] generations," Ursa struggles over the course of the twenty years to discover a sense of self that merges her family's painful past with a renewed future.

Ursa sings about her familial history of sexual exploitation. "I'll sing as you talked it...sing about the Portuguese who fingered your genital. His pussy. The Portuguese who bought slaves paid attention only to the genitals. Slapped you across the cunt till it was bluer than black. Concubine daughter" (53-54). Here Jones uses the "blue[s]" as a musical form to articulate oppression and as color imagery to allude to the

violence and pain that black women bodies have historically endured. Ursa's foremothers do not remain "quiet" about those "unspeakable things unspoken" (Morrison, "Unspeakable" 1) and as a result usurp the master's control. They are no longer his slaves and whores but are now *historians* and "bearers" of vengeance. By having the Corregidora women break the cult of secrecy, Jones not only dispels stereotypes about black women's sexuality but also offers herstory articulating black women's sexual exploitation and abuse.

More importantly by examining black women's sexual needs and desires, Jones moves black women from sexual object to sexual subject. Ursa sings of her need for Mutt to understand that despite the pain he has caused her, she still wants him:

That time I asked him to try to understand my feeling ways. That's what I called it. My feeling ways. My voice felt like it was screaming. What do they say about pleasure mixed in the pain? That's the way it always was with him. The pleasure somehow greater than the pain. My voice screaming for him to take me. And when he would, I'd draw him down into the bottom of my eyes. They watched me. I felt as if they could see my feelings somewhere in the bottom of my eyes. (50-51)

Expressing her most intimate thoughts, Ursa sings of her sexual desire for Mutt. As a sexual subject, Ursa articulates her sexual desires, dispelling stereotypical characterization of the black woman as sexually wanton. She is a woman who loves her husband and wants to express that love at the most intimate level, lovemaking.

Published at the height of a growing feminist movement and the ebbing of the sister movements of Black Arts and Black Power, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975)

enters the socio-political discourse of the time to by subverting racist, sexist, and homophobic constructions of black women's sexuality. Critics suggest that Jones's novel "deals implicitly with racial and feminist issues" and "builds from [its] political convictions rather than toward them."⁹ Jones, though, denies having a "political stance" and does not believe "one can be a creative writer and a politician."¹⁰ In stark contrast to the dictum "the artist and the political activist are one" espoused by Black Aestheticians, like Baraka, Neal, Karenga, and Madhubti, Jones's distancing her work from the politics of the day, met with harsh criticism from this group who decried her work as outside of Black Aesthetic ideologies because of its focus on the fissures between black men and black women which in turn shifted the movement's focus from the *more important* issue of racism. When asked by Claudia Tate about this perceived "sexual warfare" in *Corregidora*, Jones responded, "I didn't think Ursa was involved in sexual warfare. I was and continue to be interested in contradictory emotions that coexist. There is...sexual tension in [the novel]...in the historical and...personal sense" (Tate, "Gayl Jones" 95).

It is important to note that Toni Morrison served as Jones' editor for *Corregidora* and as a result, Morrison's proclivity toward political thematic renderings is evidenced throughout the novel. During her editorship at Random House, Morrison worked to re-establish the significance of the African American novel to the American literary tradition and to eschew the patriarchal conventions that hindered the African American female author during the Black Nationalist and Black Arts Movements.¹¹ While Jones may not consider her work intentionally political, Morrison asserts that "the [literary] work must be political" ("Rootedness" 344). Consequently, Morrison's influence as editor of Jones's first novel results simultaneously in a work of fiction and political

doctrine. Because the novel addresses issues of sexism and racism from the perspective of a black woman, I argue that *Corregidora* certainly carries political implications as it challenges the sexist and monolithic constructions of black women propagated by Black Nationalist and Black Aesthetic ideologies, and as Madhu Dubey in *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (1994) posits, *Corregidora* questions the “reading codes of Black Aesthetic ideology,” (72) directly challenging its constructions of blackness and femaleness. In part, my analysis will build upon Dubey’s assessment of the novel’s interplay with Black Nationalist discourse, but I also suggest that through the novel, Jones specifically re-inscribes the role of black women, and as a result, articulates their voices into the discourse.

In describing Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), Toni Morrison says “no novel about any Black woman could ever be the same after this. [*Corregidora*] changed the terms, the definitions of the whole enterprise...Ursa Corregidora is not possible. Neither is Gayl Jones. But they exist” (“*Reading*” 14). Though Morrison references the ways in which African American women must now approach the novel as genre, this “changing of terms and definitions” certainly applies to the creation of the black female protagonist. Interestingly, Morrison does not mention her own work *Sula* (1973) published two years earlier as she lauds Jones for her representation of an unconventional African American female protagonist. But Jones’s Ursa is indebted to Morrison’s *Sula*. *Sula* is an innovative character, particularly for African American woman because she defies conventional mores of race and gender. *Sula* has an independent spirit—she leaves the Bottom for ten years, earns an education, abandons familial obligations, and chooses her own lovers—all the things that men only have the right to do traditionally. However, the

restrictions of a racist and patriarchal life in the Bottom stifles Sula's creativity and as a result, with "no paints or clay, [and] like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous" (*Sula* 121) and self-destructs. Jones provides Ursa what Morrison does not provide for Sula, a creative outlet. As a blues singer, Ursa defies the patriarchal and sexist restrictions imposed on her. The blues allow Ursa to sing herself into being, but because Sula has no creative medium, she is therefore unable to construct a true identity. This self-creation is essential for survival and this is why Morrison praises Jones for her construction of Ursa as character.

Ursa begins her quest toward rediscovery by turning to her friend, Cat Lawson. This relationship quickly ends once Ursa discovers Cat's lesbianism, but more importantly, the relationship ends because Cat's lesbianism disquiets Ursa, as she struggles to accept her own latent lesbian desires. Ursa then marries Tadpole McCormick but the marriage is short-lived because she cannot sexually or emotionally connect with him. With a failed friendship and second marriage, Ursa continues to sing the blues, articulating her own painful past as well as that of her foremothers.

The novel ends with Ursa reuniting with Mutt, but it is an uncertain reconciliation. While performing fellatio, Ursa discovers what her great-grandmother had done to make Old Corregidora "hate her so bad...one minute [yet] keep thinking about her" (184). Ursa's self-discovery leads to an understanding of her family's history as well as to recognition of her own power to exercise control over her sexual desires. She freely acknowledges her sexual desires despite her warped familial legacy of sexual abuse and exploitation. This self-actualization brings full-circle Ursa's quest for a "new world song" of her own.

It is in this newly created protagonist that Jones offers a different kind of black woman, one who refuses Stockley Carmichael's designation to the "prone position." Such sexist rhetoric was not only part of Black Aesthetic and Nationalist discourses but also integral in the shaping of its ideological definitions of black women in and out of the Movements. Rather consciously or unconsciously, black men colluded with the white patriarchy in a sexist endeavor to oppress black women and as a result, sexism superceded racial solidarity; consequently, black male nationalists constructed the black woman's sexuality to continue the historical objectification of the black woman's body by again casting her in the role of forced breeder. Gayl Jones challenges such a construction as she uses *Corregidora* to show that reproduction does not define the totality of the black woman's sexuality. Recognizing that the nexus of black women's oppression is control of their sexuality, Jones offers alternative definitions of black women's sexuality as she questions the notion of reproduction and motherhood as noble ideals, illustrating the often ambivalent nature of being a "black" mother; presents lesbianism and its possibilities to sexually empower; and uses the blues to show black woman as sexual subject and not sexual object.

Ursa is repeatedly instructed to "bear witness" to the atrocities inflicted on her maternal line. Great Gram, Grandmother, Mama, and Ursa were "to pass [the] story down...from generation to generation so [no one would] never forget" (9). A literal "passing down," each *Corregidora* woman was to bear a girl child, for the girl who became a woman would be the only one who could make generations to "bear" witness to the crimes of the "Portuguese slave breeder and whoremonger" (9). As a means of extracting vengeance and righting/writing the historical record, for "they can burn the

papers but they can't burn conscious,...And that's what makes the evidence," (22) Jones allows these women to use their wombs as the loci of resistance,¹² offering a counternarrative to Black Nationalist ideology. The Corregidora women produce "girl" warriors to combat not only racism but also sexism, and "bearing witness" becomes a form of birth control. Angela Davis believes that "women's desire to control their reproductive system is probably as old as human history itself (Davis, *Women, Race* 206). She further adds that "birth control—individual choice, safe contraceptive methods, as well as abortions when necessary—is a fundamental prerequisite for the emancipation of women (202). The Corregidora women exert control over their own bodies. Historically black women had been denied reproductive choice and resorted to self-inflicted abortions and infanticide as a means of exhibiting their own power at resisting the slave system. However, the Corregidora women have their children, and these children bear witness to the horror of Old Corregidora's crimes. Controlling birth frees the Corregidora women.

Slave historiography provides data to show that the black slave woman's value was inextricably linked to her ability to procreate, and this commodification extends into Black Nationalist thought that constructed sexually passive black women and defined their sexuality in terms of their procreative capabilities.¹³ Black women were to provide the "warriors" needed to continue the revolution. Defining the black woman by her ability to have children bolstered the historical construction of an objectified black female body, highlighting the fact that "black women...have had the fewest opportunities to exercise control over their own reproductive activities" (hooks, *Ain't I 74*).

Corregidora casts an ironic twist on the role of black women as breeder by combining slave women who decide that they must procreate with a slave master who

resists their procreation. Great Gram and Gram use reproduction as a means of empowerment because they literally and figuratively bear witness to an erased history/her story, wresting power at the site of oppression from the oppressor. In the novel, reproduction becomes a matter of choice for the Corregidora women and not a mandate from the slave master. However, this “choice” does not come without a price. For them, “...the important thing is making generations,” (22) and, while it would seem that Jones empowers Great Gram and Gram, this would be too easy an ideological fix. Jones illustrates that because vengeance drives the women’s desire to reproduce, they are not fully empowered. Though the Corregidora women are literally fertile, this fertility yields a figurative infertility. Great Gram and Gram produce witnesses to Old Corregidora’s crimes, but they suffer from an emotional impotence that renders them incapable of forming emotional connections with men. They in turn pass on to Mama and Ursa not only the duty to bear witness but also the emotional detachment that goes with it:

Great Gram and Gram order Mama and Ursa to ‘leave evidence,’
Because [the slave owners] didn’t want to leave no evidence of what they
done—so it couldn’t be held against them. And [we are] leaving
evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children
got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence,
we got to have evidence to hold up. (14)

Great Gram and Gram’s directive to Mama and Ursa demands unqualified compliance despite neither of the younger descendants having been raped or prostituted by Old Corregidora. For Mama, her relationship with Ursa’s father rests solely on his ability to provide her with a child. Mama’s desire to fulfill her foremother’s commandment

assumes its own power. Great Gram and Gram's need for vengeance consumes Mama's psyche and becomes the latent force driving her need not so much for Martin but rather for what Martin could provide. She cannot control the indoctrinated need for vengeance as it takes over and she admits that it was as if her "body or something knew what it wanted even if I didn't want no man...it was like it knew it wanted [Ursa]...and knew [she'd] be a girl" (114). With Mama's actively seeking a breeding mate, Jones counters the perversion of forced breeding during slavery and defies the womb-centered definition of black womanhood offered in Black Nationalist thought.

Again, Jones seemingly empowers her character with reproductive choice, but she also presents how the *need* to reproduce results in Mama's inability to emotionally connect with Martin. When Mama and Martin make love for the first time, Mama admits that she "wouldn't let [herself] feel anything" (118). This indifference toward men is a direct consequence of her foremothers' teachings, and once Martin realizes that Mama never loved him but used him for sex, he reacts violently, beating her and sending her into the streets "lookin like a whore" (121). Martin "makes" Mama a whore just as Old Corregidora made Great Gram and Gram whores. But unlike Great Gram and Gram, Mama is not angry with Martin for humiliating her. She understands that the beating is about his need for revenge and recognizes that "[she] carried him to the point where he ended up hating...and that's what [she] knew [she'd] keep doing. That's what [she] knew [she'd] do with any man" (121).

Great Gram, Gram, and Mama have borne witness (es) literally and figuratively; however, this will not be for Ursa. The novel opens with Ursa falling down a flight of stairs, resulting in a miscarriage and a hysterectomy. With the loss of her womb, Ursa

“lay on [her] back, feeling as if something more...had been taken out” (6). With her sense of self, a defining legacy based in her ability to procreate gone, Ursa’s dilemma revolves not only around her inability to bear witness but more importantly, who she is without it. Because she did not “even know [Old Corregidora]” (10), Ursa cannot tell the same story as Great Gram and Gram; yet, she is haunted by the repeated refrain, “...you got to make generations” (10). She must find a way to articulate a story that is simultaneously her foremothers’ and hers, but one that lies outside of reproductive capabilities.

Ursa’s initial attempt to tell a different story begins with her relationship with Tadpole McCormick. Ursa’s caretaker once she is released from the hospital, Tadpole cares for her physical needs and ensures that her ex-husband Mutt keeps his distance. Ursa realizes that Tadpole “wants” her and in some ways feels obligated to submit to a relationship that she knows will not last. She recognizes that “[she] was forcing something with Tadpole...Something [she] needed, but couldn’t give back” (6). Ursa wants and needs to feel loved, but is incapable of reciprocating. Dubey argues that after being “defeminized” by the hysterectomy Ursa’s relationship with Tadpole is her attempt to “reaffirm her heterosexuality,” allowing her a “possible space outside the reproductive system” through sexual pleasure (76). While Dubey is correct in her assertion that Ursa seeks to replace that which she has lost, I question if sexual pleasure can replace her lost womb. Sex for Ursa is inextricably linked to a legacy of sexual exploitation where sex equals violence, abuse, shame, hatred, pain, and vengeance. Until Ursa can discover or even create a different definition of sex, she will be unable to make any significant emotional commitment.

Because Ursa has not been allowed her own memories, “It was as if their memory, the memory of all the Corregidora women, was her memory too...” (129) she lacks her own identity. In order for Ursa to redefine herself she must remember her foremother’s stories in such a way that they are not her story but only part of it. She has to separate and then blend her memories with those of her ancestors to tell a different story. This pastiche or “rememory” allows Ursa to remember by creatively reconstructing the memories of Great Gram, Gram, and Mama. Therefore, the resulting “rememory” no longer depends solely upon the subjective reconstruction of Great Gram’s memories, but on a community of remembers—Gram, Mama, and Ursa.¹⁴ Jones has Ursa construct her *rememory* by allowing her to fuse her foremothers’ story with her own story of loss and failed relationships to create

A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world. [Ursa] thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress. Her father, the master. Her daughter’s father. The father of her daughter’s daughter. (59)

Ursa’s fragmented memories—the stories of her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother as well as her own dream sequences—consistently disrupt the narrative. Though the disruptions seem to impede Ursa’s quest toward subjectivity, the “rememories” are necessary if Ursa is to create her own story to transcend her family’s painful legacy. The imperative of Ursa’s subjectivity lies in her having her own story to tell while simultaneously keeping the story of her maternal ancestors alive. In this way, Jones directly challenges the cult of secrecy and dissemblance. Ursa’s “re-telling” of the sexual

violence committed against the Corregidora women changes their status from victim to subject, allowing them to reclaim their female sexual agency.

Seemingly Jones empowers Ursa and her maternal familial line through procreative and narrative processes. The women determine what does and does not happen with their womb and keep the atrocities of slavery alive with their stories. However, Jones illustrates the repressive nature of reproduction and highlights the failing of Black Nationalist ideology in its efforts to relegate the importance of black women to the role of breeder by constructing characters who are unable to emotionally commit to any man and another whose inability to have children results in her struggle to redefine herself outside of a reproductive capacity in order to discover a sense of self and self worth.

To further illustrate the repressive nature of reproduction and to de-romanticize it, Jones offers the characters, May Alice and the Melrose woman. May Alice impregnated by a boyfriend, who is now conveniently absent, is forced to live with the shame and guilt of being an unwed mother. In an attempt to escape the moral judgment of the black community, she and her mother move away. May Alice bears all of the shame for the pregnancy and even asks Ursa to “tell Harold [she] was sorry” (141) as if she has somehow wronged him and not vice versa since he has made no effort to accept any responsibility for May Alice’s plight.

Jones offers May Alice as an example of the sexually passive black woman Black Nationalists desired and sought to construct. In previous exchanges with Ursa, May Alice appears confident, even assertive, as she discusses how she and Harold frequently engage in sexual intercourse. However, this is a mere façade since May Alice feels that

she cannot say “no” to Harold. May Alice “wouldn’t feel [she] had any right to tell [him] to stop...she didn’t like to ask him to use something, and didn’t want to tell him to pull out” (140). Harold exerts ultimate sexual and reproductive control over May Alice’s body. He determines when they will have sex, and his failure to use some means of contraception results in May Alice’s pregnancy. May Alice’s capitulation is symbolic of Black Nationalist’s construction of black womanhood, and as Ron Maulana Karenga suggests, “What makes a woman appealing is femininity and she can’t be feminine without being submissive” (33).

Ursa narrates the guilt and shame of an unwanted pregnancy that leads to the Melrose woman committing suicide. The Melrose woman never “speaks” for herself and is referred to as “one of Mr. Melrose’s girl’s” (134), the implication clear that she *belongs* to a man, even if that man is her father. In creating a character with no real sense of self and linked to two men, a lover who abandons her and a father who defends her honor, Jones offers another passive construct in the Melrose woman. She, too, is the kind of black woman Black Nationalist ideology wanted, her value determined by men. However, the danger in such a construction, leads to the larger white society also continuing to devalue the black woman for the Melrose woman was “nothing but a nigger woman to the police” (134).

The Melrose woman disquiets Ursa as she “[doesn’t] think anything ever worked [her] up so much as that woman” (145). She even equates May Alice with the Melrose woman for “somehow [she] kept tying her and May Alice together” (145). Madhu Dubey argues that Ursa’s memories of these two women show “the insistent channeling of a young girl’s sexual desire toward reproduction” (79). I disagree because neither

May Alice nor the Melrose woman innately desires a child. Jones allows for the interchangeability of the two women in Ursa's mind to suggest that their stories are much the same in that for each, the womb serves as the primary site of repression and oppression. The unwanted pregnancies result in one woman living with the shame and the other woman dying because of it.

Jones parallels the stories of May Alice and the Melrose woman with the flawed but empowering stories of Ursa and the *Corregidora* women. In doing so, she allows Ursa to use all of their stories as a means of accepting her loss of a womb while recognizing the womb's ability to oppress. Jones reveals the contradictory nature of reproduction. While romanticized as this noble ideal within Black Nationalist discourse, reproduction served to repress and further marginalize these black women within their communities because it did not allow the women to choose whether or not reproduction is something they wanted. By ignoring the black woman's voice as it pertained to reproductive choice, Black Nationalist *made* the black woman invisible. Deborah K. King examines the "theoretical invisibility of black women" (43). She contends that because the black woman's experience is often equated with those of the black man and white woman, her specific concerns are considered "superfluous" rendering her and her concerns invisible. King suggest that this false analogy obscures inherent differences between race and gender and argues that in order to understand the "nature of black womanhood, we must acknowledge the difference between blacks and women...black men and black women, and black women and white women" (45-46).

Corregidora further challenges the limited constructions of black women's sexuality by introducing lesbianism as an underlying theme in the novel. Jones presents

women who actively seek the empathy, compassion, and equality that they desire from other women. Lesbianism empowers because it allows women to exercise full control of their reproductive capabilities and removes men from the equation of sexual pleasuring. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Jones explains that she uses lesbianism for artistic attention, and that she “[has] characters respond to it positively or negatively, or sometimes the characters may simply acknowledge it as a reality” (“Gayl Jones” 98). To the consternation of many of her critics, Jones refuses to offer a moral judgment about her characters’ *choice* of lesbianism. As a result, Jones is often criticized for being at worst, homophobic and at best, ambivalent about lesbianism. Gloria Wade-Gayles writes:

Jones treats two lesbian characters with sensitivity but she steps back from developing them or making clear use of them in the novel. Our failure to get a handle on the novel that does justice to Jones’s vision demonstrates the need for clearly defined and tested approaches to lesbianism criticism. With such approaches we might find that *Corregidora* belongs to the tradition of latent lesbian fiction. (175)

Wade-Gayles questions what she believes to be Jones’s indifferent treatment of lesbianism in the novel, though a lesbian reading of *Corregidora* may prove fruitful, I disagree that Jones does not “make clear use of [the lesbian characters] in the novel” (175). On the contrary, Jones’s thematic rendering of lesbianism and its representative characters, Cat and Jeffrene illuminate larger issues of sexist oppression within the Black Nationalist and Black Arts movements.

Gloria Joseph posits that within the black community lesbianism is a “story with silences and denials as its most salient features” and suggests that black women’s resistance to lesbianism is a direct result of the engendered homophobia of the black liberationist rhetoric that labeled lesbians as man-haters who served no purpose in the struggle (Joseph 192). Accurate in her assessment of the pervasive homophobia within the Black Nationalist and Black Arts movements, Joseph, like Wade-Gayles, falters in her claim that Jones has failed to fully examine lesbianism in the novel. Joseph and Wade-Gayles argue for a more prominent thematic development of lesbianism within *Corregidora* and suggest Jones’s failure to do so is a direct consequence of her succumbing to ideological forces of the time. To argue such a position, the critics miss what I believe to be Jones’s attempt to challenge the pervasive sexism and homophobia within society to offer a different discussion about black women’s sexuality.

Heterosexuality as a societal and cultural norm for the black community served as a powerful tenet of black liberationist and Black Arts ideology. Their efforts centered on “the reconstructing and revolutionizing of the black family in which men were men and women were women, surprisingly conservative ways”; therefore, gays and lesbians within the black community represented a sign of cultural decay (Smethurst 87-88). Though some within the movements began to reevaluate their position on homosexuality in an effort to better understand the multiple dynamics of oppression, overall, homosexuality was denounced as a perversion that “control[led] and undermine[d]...normal yearnings for dignity and freedom” (Newton 251). However, some African American women writers of the period did attempt to engage the gender politics and homophobia generated by the respective movements. Nikki Giovanni’s “For

Theresa” contemplates the emotional quandary of “the pleasure of loneliness” versus the pain of lesbian love (60). Despite Giovanni’s oblique examination of lesbianism in the poem, her oeuvre maintained and perpetuated the idea of heterosexuality as the norm. Though denigrated as race traitors, writers like Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Ann Shockley and Alexis DeVeaux directly addressed lesbianism and lesbian themes in their work and as a result were often marginalized within the black cultural and literary world. Black Nationalist and Black Aestheticians suggested that these writers’ attempts at the artistic expression of lesbianism was an endeavor to destroy the black family, the black community, and most importantly, the black male-female relationship, all undergirding principles of Black Nationalist philosophy.

Because Jones refuses to offer an opinion about lesbianism from her position as author, she is often excluded from consideration as a writer who addresses lesbian themes. Critics deem this refusal as a tacit disapproval of lesbianism, acquiescence to the powerful influence of Black Nationalist discourse. However, Jones did not write *Corregidora* as an overtly lesbian novel but rather uses lesbianism as a theme to interrogate what does and does not define black women’s sexuality by displacing the sexist and racist constructions of black women’s sexuality. Lesbianism acts as an exercise in power, bestowing agency and sexual autonomy to characters who contest the definition of the sexually-base and morally loose black woman imposed by the white patriarchy and the subordinate, baby-maker imposed by the black patriarchy.

Keith E. Byerman posits that lesbianism in the novel is “a form of narcissistic evasion” with the bed serving as a “space of not-men rather than of women” (179). He argues that the sexual rejection by Cat’s husband and the sexual humiliation by her boss

leads to Cat's "choosing" a woman lover because other women have known and have suffered similar pain. Therefore, Cat's choice of Jeffrene is mere substitute for a man (179). Byerman's assessment of lesbianism provides one perspective into Cat's *choice* toward lesbianism, but I believe Byerman does not fully engage the thematic nuances present. He dismisses Cat's choice of lesbianism and reads it as her inability to maintain a successful heterosexual relationship. If this is the case, lesbianism becomes more about Cat's failings as a woman than an attempt at sexual autonomy. Cat's choice of a lesbian lover is a sexually empowering choice because Cat assumes control of her sexual desires by choosing a lover who will fulfill those desires.

Cat suffers under sexist and racist oppression in the home and workplace. In an attempt to free herself from these constraints, Cat chooses lesbianism:

[she] didn't want to be a fool in front of them and then have to come home and be a fool with him too. Couldn't even get in my own bed and not be a fool and have him making me feel like a fool too. (65)

Cat's husband withholds sexual attention as a means of maintaining patriarchal control within the home since this control remains elusive in a white racist society but does so at the cost of his wife, subjecting her to the humiliation of "feel[ing] foolish" in her own bed (64). Mr. Hirshorn, her white employer, eroticizes and objectifies her black body, telling Cat that "[she is] pretty... a lot of... nigger women is pretty" (65). The shame of having to endure his lewd stares and inappropriate touching again makes Cat feel like a fool. For these reasons, we cannot dismiss Cat's choice toward lesbianism as an attempt to "replace" a man. Lesbianism offers her freedom. It allows her to exercise control over her own body by usurping the power of black and white men held over it.

When Cat admits her lesbianism to Ursa, the exchange is filled with silence. Some critics have read this silence as Jones's rejection of lesbianism, her conforming to ideological forces of the time. However, if we reconsider how Jones employs silence as a rhetorical strategy to actually "talk" about lesbianism, we achieve expanded and nuanced readings of lesbianism within the novel. Jennifer Cognard-Black examines Jones's use of the "rhetoric of silence" to suggest its import in Ursa's quest toward self-representation. She argues that silence in the novel serves as a "counternarrative or anti-discourse" (42) and shows how Jones's use of the refrain "I said nothing" is being used to "speak." However, Cognard-Black posits that "lesbianism remains a silenced topic in the novel" (59), reading Ursa's rejection of lesbianism as her inability to see her sexuality outside a normative heterosexual realm. Extrapolating from Cognard-Black's thesis, I argue that Jones does use silence to "speak" about lesbianism. In those silences, Jones offers a counter-discourse to the Black Nationalist rhetoric that denounced lesbianism by presenting it as a sexually empowering choice and not a covert collaboration with a white racist society to destroy the black family.

Though silent throughout Cat's recounting of the things "they never let [her] live down" (66), Ursa does understand "what it feels like" (64) to be rejected and humiliated by her husband as she recalls wanting Mutt, his knowing of her longing, and his cruel refusal. Yet she will not acknowledge this to Cat. Ursa knows that Cat longs for understanding and acceptance, but she refuses to give it. Ursa's refusal of sympathy and offering of silence is steeped in her indoctrination of the atrocities of Old Corregidora. The stories reveal not only the crimes committed by Old Corregidora but also the crimes of his wife who would also force Great Gram to have sex with her. Confounded by the

conflicting emotions of antipathy and sympathy at the discovery of Cat's lesbianism, Ursa at this point cannot allow for the possibility of a lesbian relationship. To accept lesbianism would somehow derogate the lesbian rape of her foremothers by Mistress Corregidora. However, Ursa's narrative is and can be different. No one is forcing Ursa into lesbianism and because she understands how the dynamics of racism and sexism continue to sexually oppress women, lesbianism can provide a path to sexual autonomy and not be associated with the violence of rape.

Great Gram, Gram, and Mama instruct Ursa to leave evidence of the crimes by making generations; however, she can longer fulfill this obligation. Now that she has lost the very thing (her womb) that defined her womanhood, lesbianism serves as a plausible way of redefining her sexuality. Ursa's display of disgust toward Cat and Jeffrene mask her own fear of admitting a lesbian desire, for "it wasn't until years later that [she] realized it might have been because of [her] own fears, the things [she'd] thought about in the hospital, [her] own worries about what being with a man would be like again, and whether [she] really had the nerve to try" (48). Though frightened by the possibility of confronting her lesbian desires, Ursa knows that lesbianism might offer her a new way of redefining her sexuality.

Though literally silenced as character (Cat does not occupy a physical presence in the novel) after her "confession" to Ursa, Cat will help Ursa confront her own potential toward lesbianism. When Ursa discovers Tadpole in bed with another woman, she shouts to her, "if you want something to fuck, I'll give you my fist to fuck" (87). Interestingly, these are the same words Cat uses to threaten Jeffrene. Surprised to hear herself echoing

Cat, Ursa realizes the doomed nature of her relationship with Tadpole, something Cat recognized from the beginning, but Ursa refused to acknowledge.

After Ursa leaves Tadpole, she finally has the “conversation” about the unspoken desire with Cat. In an interior monologue addressed to Cat, Ursa acknowledges the things she understood and the things she feared, “afraid only of what [she would] become [when during] those times he didn’t touch the clit, [and she] couldn’t feel anything...”(89). If only in an imagined conversation, Ursa admits to Cat her desire for sexual pleasuring and the fear of turning to women to fulfill that desire. Though Ursa does not choose lesbianism, she recognizes herself as sexual being and this allows for the exploration of lesbianism as an alternative means of expressing her sexuality.

Near the novel’s end, Cat reemerges for the final time as Jeffrene relates the horror of Cat’s tragic accident at the factory to Ursa. Left bald after her hair is caught in a machine, Cat again suffers the humiliation of “things that [made her not] feel like a woman” (177). The scene is significant because this time it is Jeffrene who forces Ursa to once again confront her own proclivity toward lesbianism. Though a minor character in the novel, Jeffrene is important to the novel’s thematic presentation of lesbianism. From the time she molests Ursa as they share the same bed, Jeffrene’s presence disconcerts Ursa. Jeffrene, unlike Cat, makes direct sexual advances toward Ursa to which Ursa responds violently, slapping and pushing her to the floor. Cat may have been sexually attracted to Ursa, but she never acted on that attraction. However, Jeffrene does, and as a result Ursa sees her as the physical manifestation of her own unspoken desires. Because Ursa has consciously “accepted” the possibility of a lesbian desire, this exchange with Jeffrene, more so than their previous encounter, discomfits Ursa. Ursa has

not verbalized or acted upon her lesbian desires, but Jeffrene compels her to face these desires and sexually suggests that when Ursa is ready, “[she] got something for [her]” (178). The implication that lesbianism can possibly provide what Ursa needs and wants remains an alternative means of representing her sexuality. However the scene ends suggesting that for now Ursa will choose not to act on her lesbian desires, for “whenever [she] saw Jeffrene, [she’d] cross the street” (178); yet, the possibility remains.

Lesbianism works in the novel to sexually empower women by giving them control over their own bodies and their own desires. The historical objectification of the black woman’s body by a white, racist patriarchal society and the perpetuation of that objectification by black men in their own efforts to reclaim their own masculinity reduced black women to subordinate positions. The alternative of lesbianism removes men, black and white from their position of power and permits black women to define their own sexuality.

If Jones uses lesbianism to serve as a viable alternative for the expression of black women’s sexuality, then she uses the blues to allow for black women’s autonomous construction of a sexual self.¹⁵ Discussions of blues within *Corregidora* focus on its performance as means of achieving voice and its symbolic representation of the black male-female relationship;¹⁶ however, I endeavor to illustrate the ways in which the blues may provide a means of reconfiguring black women’s sexuality and how that reconfiguration may lead to sexual subjectivity.

Central to the founding principles of Black Aesthetic theory, oral forms, particularly poetry and drama, served as the primary modes of propagating Black Nationalism’s ideological message of racial equality and cultural unity. However, the

blues held a more ambiguous position. The debate surrounding the importance of blues presented two conflicting ideological perspectives. For Black Aesthetician, Stephen Henderson, the blues served as “paradigm...of the Black Experience in America” (13). Amiri Baraka believed the blues to be “the only black cultural form” that did not have European influences and argued that blues articulated a genuine black voice, for the black artist could find his “essential identity[y]” in [the] blues (106). On the other side of the debate, some Black Aestheticians and Black Nationalists claim that the blues were too outdated to reflect the liberationist thinking of the day. Sonia Sanchez wanted to be black rather than blue because, “blues aint culture/they sounds of oppression” (“liberation” 54), and Ron Karenga suggested that blues as a cultural form were a repressive reminder of the past. He posited that “blues [were] invalid” and “[taught] resignation” and were not useful in advancing the agenda of Black Nationalism “because [blues] do not commit us to the struggle of today and tomorrow, but keep us in the past” (36).

Black Aesthetic theory presented a dichotomy of either/or as it pertained to blues. Either blues were a good and “original” black art form that allowed black artists to express and represent their “blackness,” or blues were bad because as an “old” form they could not possibly offer a “new” empowered voice for blacks of the 1960s and 1970s. This dichotomous representation of ideas further complicates an ambiguous position on the importance of certain oral forms within Black Nationalist and Black Aesthetic discourse. Proponents of blues who argue that the blues reflect an authentic black experience risk projecting the idea that that there exists a monolithic black experience; and for critics who suggest that blues can only articulate a people’s oppression, they only consider a small part of the definition of blues and fail to examine their fuller meaning.

While expressing oppression, blues also provide a means for transcending that oppression. Black Aestheticians provided no resolution for the conundrum surrounding these contrasting ideologies about the significance of the blues to Black Nationalist discourse, leaving spaces of contradictions.

Gayl Jones's treatment of blues and her construction of a blues woman as character simultaneously engage and question the Black Aesthetic and Black Nationalists contradictory positions surrounding the usefulness of the blues. In *Corregidora*, Jones uses blues as an oral form to tell the story of one woman's oppression and how she overcomes that oppression, to articulate a black experience (black experience often being synonymous with black man's experience) but in this instance, a black woman's experience. Blues in the novel serve as a vehicle for establishing Ursa's humanity being black and as a woman. While some Black Nationalist's perceived the blues as a symbol of an oppressive past, they also associated the black woman with the past and considered her to be "a symbol of slavery."¹⁷ In an ironic gesture, Jones combines these supposed symbols of oppression—blues and the black—to show a black woman singing the blues and in turn recreating herself a sexually empowered subject.

Hazel Carby posits that during the late 1920s and 1930s black women used the blues to "manipulate and control their construction as sexual objects" ("It Jus" 333), using their lyrics to subvert stereotypical representations of black women. Expanding Carby's initial theories, Angela Davis further examines the lyrics of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday to suggest that the blues authenticated "women's capacities in domains assumed to be the prerogatives of males, such as sexuality and travel" (*Blues* 120). Additionally, Michelle Russell in "Slave Codes and Liner Notes" contends that the

blues comment on all the major theoretical, practical, and political questions facing black women, and the songs of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith empower black women to accept their “past, present, and future” by reclaiming and reconfiguring their identities (130). In sum, the blues becomes a means of exerting control within a racist and patriarchal society. Though the critics are specifically discussing black women blues performers, they identify an established tradition of black women’s attempts at agency.¹⁸ Bernard Bell notes that “black novelists used [blues] to de[cry] oppression and celebr[ate] the possibilities of the human spirit” (*Afro-American* 26). A tradition established through music is now represented in literature by black women writers.

Borrowing from this black woman blues tradition, Jones offers us Ursa Corregidora, blues woman. Blues provide for Ursa what it provided for blues singers of 1920s and 1930s—an opportunity to create of a “truer sexual self-image” while examining the “black female sexual experience” to become a “primary subject of her own being” (Spillers, “Interstices” 86-88). Michelle Russell argues that Bessie Smith “articulated...how fundamental sexuality was to survival” and as a result “transformed [black women] from sexual objects to sexual subject and in doing so, humanizes sexuality for black women” (131). As a blues singer, Ursa humanizes black women’s sexuality by transforming the legacy of her foremothers’ condition of sexual object as forced concubine and rape victim to an expression of herself as sexual subject.

Through the blues Ursa tries to craft an identity that is separate from the rigid definitions of her sexuality imposed by her foremothers and by a racist and sexist society. Her foremothers demand that she “make generations,” equating her sexuality to her womb. A racist and sexist patriarchy commodifies her black body as its “gold pussy, [its]

little gold piece,” (10) reducing her sexuality to a monetary value. Ursa sings of this painful legacy of sexual oppression but refuses to be burdened by it. Thus, she is able to redefine herself as sexual subject, using voice as the vehicle toward autonomy for her protagonist. Ursa’s blues articulate black women’s sexuality that contains as well as transcends a history of oppression. Ursa’s “speaking” with a blues voice emboldens power—the refusal to be defined by rigid determinates of her sexuality.

Jones illustrates the transformative nature of blues when Ursa resists the way in which Mutt objectifies her sexuality. Mutt repeatedly refers to Ursa as “*his* pussy,” and would demand that she “let [him] feel [his] pussy” (46). Ursa denies that she is Mutt’s “pussy” and questions the idea that it alone is “the center of a woman’s being” (46). Mutt orders Ursa to “sing for me, goddamn it, sing” (46); she does so, but tells him that she sang to “[him] out of [her] whole body” (46). By telling Mutt that she sang her blues from her entire body and not just her “pussy,” Ursa not only refuses Mutt’s objectification of her body, making clear that he cannot reduce her sexuality to a body part while usurping his control and possession of her body.

When Ursa sings for the first time following her hysterectomy, Cat compares her voice to Ma Rainey. Cat tells Ursa that her voice “sounds like [it] had been through something...like Ma...the strain made it better...you could hear what she’d been through” (44). Jones plays on this blues tradition of redefining self and sexuality established by black women blues singers. Cat’s comparing Ursa to Ma Rainey is important because it suggests that as Ma Rainey used the blues to redefine herself so will Ursa. At this point, Ursa has lost that which had defined her—her womb. Ursa’s sexuality had always been about her ability “to make generations,” and now that she can

no longer do so, the blues will become a means of redefining herself and her sexuality.

As a lesbian, Ma Rainey sang blues about nonconformity:

Went out last night, had a great big fight,
 Everything seemed to go on wrong;
 I looked up, to my surprise,
 The gal I was with was gone
 Where she went, I don't know,
 I mean to follow everywhere she goes;
 Folks said I'm crooked, I didn't know where she took it,
 I want the whole world to know:
 They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me,
 Sure got to prove it on me;
 Went out last night with a crowd of my friends,
 They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men
 It's true I wear a collar and a tie,
 Like to watch while the women pass by
 They say, I do it, ain't nobody caught me,
 They sure got to prove it on me.

“Prove It on Me Blues”- 1928

Though the lyrics are an overt expression of Ma Rainey's lesbian desire as well as her sexuality, the lines “ain't nobody caught me/they sure got to prove it on me” imply a duality. Ma Rainey believes that lovemaking is private, an intimacy that should involve just the two lovers who happen to be women. On the other hand, Ma Rainey understands

that her lesbianism is something people condemn and therefore, she requires that they “prove it on [her].” Despite the disdain toward homosexuality in African American community where “[it] was generally frowned upon” (Harrison 103), Ma Rainey still sang about her lesbianism. Because Jones places Ursa within a blues tradition, Ursa now has the means to redefine herself and her sexuality. Though Ursa never sings about lesbian love or desire, she knows that lesbianism is a means of defining one’s sexuality and that the possibility exists for “what [she] needed to make [herself] feel, [for] what [she] had to know” (89).

Jones casts Ursa as a blues performer, and as such, Ursa simultaneously offers the tale of her oppression and the means of overcoming it. Blues allow Ursa “to explain” that which was “somewhere behind the words,” (66) as her blues center on themes of rape, racism, sexism, and hatred. Ursa’s blues tell a revised history of slavery of “everything said in the beginning...said better than in the beginning” (54) to include black women’s script a history. Singing the blues empowers Ursa as she recreates and expresses her sexuality. Jones wants to present a black woman as a sexual subject who acts and not a sexual object that is acted upon, and in an endeavor to do so, attempts to deconstruct the jezebel image. An image that originated in slavery, a jezebel was the sexually aggressive and morally base black woman, and as a result this negative portrayal of the black woman’s sexuality became the basis for legitimizing the institutionalized rape of slave women.¹⁹ With Ursa, Jones re-appropriates the jezebel stereotype by directly challenging the construction of black women as sexual objects. Ursa’s singing of her sexual desires and pleasures permits her as a blues performer to define herself as sexual subject and as such is empowered. Ursa’s need to redefine her sexuality is

particularly important because of her familial history of sexual abuse and exploitation.

As a blues woman, Ursa is able to be a sexual subject whereas her Great Gram and Gram as prostitutes and slaves were sexual objects.

Sherley Anne Williams notes that blues are analytical and argues that as such they present a situation or feeling that is described, commented upon and then assessed by the performer. She further observes that typical blues lyrics follow an a/a/b pattern, where the first and second lines are the same and rhyme with the third line, a variation on the first two (“The Blues” 125). These features are useful in examining how Jones uses blues in the novel. Blues as self-analysis suggests subjectivity, and we become privy to Ursa’s “blues analysis” through each song she “sings.” Evidenced in the lines from one of Ursa’s songs, she creates a sexual subject who rewrites the history of rape by empowering the victim:

Don’t come here to my house, don’t come here to my house I said
 Don’t come here to my house, don’t come here to my house I said
 Fore you get any this booty, you gon have to lay down dead. (67)

The lines describe a man’s attempt to “break into” a woman’s house and tell him of the consequences if he does not heed her warnings. The sexual undertones often present in blues lyrics are expressed here as Ursa employs the double entendre of “house.” House representing the actual object, and house representing a woman’s vagina—both of which she is willing to protect. Her refusal to allow him “in” suggests a sexual agency that had been denied her foremothers and is particularly empowering because they could not refuse to allow Old Corregidora or other men into their “houses.” Ursa refuses to let any

man force his way into her “house,” for if he does, “[he] gon have to lay down dead.” Ursa is clear in that she will kill to protect that which is hers.

As a sexual subject, Ursa can defend her body from violation yet still acknowledge her own sexual desires. Ursa describes the first time she sees Mutt and remembers that she “was singing a song about a train tunnel. About this train going in the tunnel, but it didn’t seem like they was no end to the tunnel, . . . and then all of a sudden the tunnel tightened around the train like a fist” (147). The sexually suggestive nature of the songs lyrics is clear. Mutt’s train (his penis) enters Ursa’s dark and deep tunnel (her vagina) and before the train can exit the tunnel, the tunnel tightens (Ursa’s climax). Ursa has been unable to tell her lovers about her own need for sexual pleasuring, but singing the blues enables Ursa to articulate this desire. In admitting her desires, Ursa begins to conceptualize a sexual identity that is not distorted or perverted by racist and sexist ideologies. In this scene, Jones again challenges the jezebel image by suggesting that just because a woman recognizes her need for sexual pleasure does not make her a hyper-sexualized object that men can violate.

In the concluding scene of the novel, Ursa performs fellatio on Mutt. The act further reveals Ursa as a sexual subject when she assumes control by choosing to perform this specific sexual act. Mutt is even surprised as he reminds her that “[she] never would suck it when [he] wanted [her] to” (184). Ursa’s choice to perform the act is not predicated on Mutt’s wants. She chooses fellatio as an expression of her own sexual desires, and as a result she not only exercises sexual power over Mutt, but also she breaks the control Old Corregidora had on her body. Though she never endured his rape, Ursa is

burdened by the legacy of her foremothers and the control Old Corregidora exercised over their bodies and by extension, her body:

It had to be sexual: ‘What is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can’t get her out of his mind the next?’ In a split second I knew what it was, in a split second of love and hate I knew what it was, and I think he might have known too. A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, a moment that stops just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin: ‘I could kill you.’ (184)

Ursa experiences an epiphany during the act, as she realizes that what caused Old Corregidora to love and hate Great Gram “had to be sexual.” The present oppression of black women is grounded in a history of sexual exploitation, but Ursa usurps that control by performing fellatio on Mutt, a reenactment of the same act between Great Gram and Old Corregidora. Though the scene is in part a re-enactment of what happened between Old Corregidora and Great Gram, its ending is one of reconciliation and not violence. Great Gram bites Old Corregidora’s penis before climax, but Ursa does not bite Mutt. Instead she and Mutt silently acknowledge that she has the power to hurt, but in her refusal to inflict pain on someone who had hurt her, she is empowered on two levels: the recognition of her power in choosing not to commit an act of violence and the acceptance of sexual desire and the freedom to express that desire in whatever manner she chooses.

Additionally, Ursa is able to resolve her family’s psycho-sexual dysfunctional need for vengeance. Great Gram as a sexual object is acted upon because she is forced to

perform the act in her role as Old Corregidora's slave and whore; however, Ursa is a sexual subject because she chooses to perform fellatio on Mutt. Ursa constructs a different narrative for her sexuality by rewriting a familial history of sexual exploitation and oppression to revision a present and future not warped by a painful legacy and revenge. In discovering Great Gram's unspoken act of "pleasure and excruciating pain," Ursa acknowledges her ability to pleasure as well as her own potential for violence. Such a sexual power helps Ursa accept her past, transcend her present, look toward her future.

Ursa is on her knees, holding Mutt's ankles as she performs fellatio. This perceived posture of submission during this act suggests that Ursa has failed to transcend the pain of failed marriages, a hysterectomy, lost friendships, and the burdensome familial legacy to achieve true reconciliation with Mutt. However, this is not the case. Though she appears to have submitted and become obedient, Ursa is fully empowered because she has the power to unman or man. Ursa's past sexual encounters with Mutt and Tadpole had been about their wants as they would ask, "Whose pussy is it?" or "Am I fucking you?" The act of fellatio is not about her "pussy" or whether or not either man is "fucking" her. As a sexual subject, Ursa controls her pleasure and Mutt's, but more importantly, her ultimate control rests in her choice not to emasculate Mutt and his realization of her power.

The final exchange between Mutt and Ursa mimics a blues song:

He came and I swallowed. He leaned back, pulling me up by the
shoulders.

"I don't want the kind of woman that hurt you," he said.

"Then you don't want me."

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”

“Then you don’t want me.”

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”

“Then you don’t want me.”

He shook me till I fell against him crying. “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither,” I said.

He held me tight. (185)

Returning to Williams’ thesis about the blues as a cathartic means of self-analysis, we see Ursa singing a “new song.” Her blues medley has taught her to accept her lack of a womb, and more importantly, it has permitted her to redefine herself as sexual subject. Ursa’s newly conceived sexuality is more about her desires and her controlling how she will fulfill them. As a sexual subject, Ursa expresses her wants and refuses to allow men to subjugate her or those desires.

Interestingly, Ursa does not “sing” this last blues “song” alone. In this blues duet, Mutt and Ursa reflect on their relationship, each telling the other that neither wants to be hurt and articulating equality between the two that had not previously existed. Mutt and Ursa’s duet is central to conveying any concept of “reconciliation” between the two. Houston Baker posits that the blues is as important for the blues performer as it is for the listener; the blues not only empowers the blues performer with an “energizing inner subjectivity” but also encourages the blues listener to search for agency (5). Ursa as blues performer reaches this “inner subjectivity,” and Mutt as once Ursa’s audience (listener) and now as he sings the blues duet, he is compelled toward a measure of subjectivity that comes as the two work toward reconciliation. Melvin Dixon suggests

that Ursa and Mutt's song "replace[s] the ambiguity of language and the pain of violence with a direct exchange of feeling" (116). While Dixon is correct in his assertion that the blues duet is one of reconciliation, for Mutt and Ursa do seemingly evolve to an understanding of one another, I argue that Jones implies that the relationship cannot be as it was before. During and at the completion of the act of fellatio, Ursa has gained a measure of subjectivity that had been denied by predetermined definitions of her sexuality. She has expressed herself as sexual subject, and as such will not allow Mutt to deny her emotional and physical needs, and Mutt knows that he will not be allowed to punish Ursa for his failings.

"I don't want a kind a woman /man that hurt you" suggests reconciliation in that Mutt and Ursa express what the other does not want from the relationship. This exchange can be read as reflexive of 1970s and the tenuous relationship between black men and black women, particularly within the Black Nationalist and Black Arts Movements. As previously noted, critics of *Corregidora* focused on the idea of "sexual warfare" within the novel. However, warfare connotes some kind of conflict with an enemy, and Jones wants to make clear that Mutt and Ursa are not each other's enemies. If we want to argue that the novel offers an ideological response to the socio-political discourses of the time, then I believe that Jones is suggesting that black women in the 1970s are not the enemy of black men and there exist no competing agendas of race versus sex. The concluding scene of Mutt and Ursa's "reconciliation" is a way of transcending that past, resolving some of the historical and personal tension between black men and women as each comes to understand how the other's painful ancestral past has psychologically scarred the other.

More importantly, each realizes that neither can live in the past, for the past can influence the present but should not determine it.

Jones offers in *Ursa Corregidora* an authorizing voice for black women's sexual identity. If black women's oppression is rooted in the racist and sexist constructions of their sexuality, Jones uses *Corregidora* to challenge such constructions and to resist this oppression by presenting a tale that shows black women redefining their own sexuality. Consequently, Jones empowers—in varying degrees—the women in the novel because they resist and even restrict men's control over their bodies. Great Gram, Gram, and Mama deny the role of forced breeder; May Alice and the Melrose woman illustrate the burden of motherhood; Cat turns to lesbianism when heterosexual love will not fulfill her physical and emotional needs; and Ursa uses the blues to recreate herself as a sexual subject. Though a fictional representation, Jones uses the women in the novel to give voice to black women whose voices had been silenced or simply omitted from the discourse within the Black Aesthetic and Black Nationalist movements about black women's sexuality.

Notes

1. In the article, Morrison comments on the racist nature of beauty standards, rejects Eurocentric ideals of beauty for black women, celebrates black women's own beauty, and decries the consumer culture and its commodification of beauty. On a broader level her statement reflects the disconnect between black women and the women's liberation movement, suggesting that the concerns facing white women were not necessarily the concerns facing black women.

2. For discussions about black women's concerns during the Women's Liberation and Black Nationalist Movements, see such notable studies as Frances Beale "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female"; Linda LaRue's "The Black Movement and Women's Liberation"; and Barbara Smith's *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*.
3. Though both groups were subject to the oppressive nature of the white patriarchy, white women did share a racial alliance with white men. Nineteenth-century ideologies about womanhood were foundational to the schism between white women and black women. Sexualized stereotypes of black women emerged during slavery, and as Hazel Carby notes in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, these negative constructions of black womanhood did "not reflect or represent a reality but [rather] disguise...objective social relations" (22). Further Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* contends that stereotypes of black women "provide ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression" (68). So, historically race and gender colluded to oppress the black woman in ways that they did not for white women.
4. Because my focus is on Black Nationalism and the Black Arts Movements, I am referencing women specific to those movements. Barbara Sizemore, Amina Baraka, Angela Davis, Nikki Giovanni, Jayne Cortez, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lorraine Hansberry, Sonia Sanchez, Naomi Long Madgett, Angela Davis, Afeni Shakur, Elaine Brown to name a few. Though actively involved in the advancement of racial equality with the movement, many of the women did directly address the issue of sexism. Barbara Sizemore "Sexism and the Black Male" attacks the pervasive sexism of the Kwaaida movement and its proponents Amiri Baraka, Maulana Karenga and Haki Madhubuti. Toni Cade Bambara *The Black Woman*, a collection of essays, poems, stories was an

effort by black women to define themselves, rejecting definitions imposed on them by black men.

5. For a detailed discussion on the experiences of black women during slavery see Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South*; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*; and Rennie Simson, "The Afro-American Female: The Historical Construction of Sexual Identity."
6. Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* outlines nineteenth century ideologies and literary conventions of womanhood that excluded black women from established definitions of "woman" and shows how black women writers of the period reconstructed these ideologies to produce an alternative discourse of black womanhood; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* addresses stereotypical representations of African American women as mummies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, and jezebels
7. Gayatri Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak" argues that even when the "subaltern" speaks, she is not heard because of her position as female "other." However, any oppressed "other" only gains subjectivity through action.
8. Interestingly, Gayl Jones would adopt a cult of secrecy in her private life often commenting that she would like to be known for her body of work and not her personal life. Always private, Jones became a recluse, following her husband, Robert Higgins' suicide and a failed suicide attempt of her own on February 20, 1998.

9. Quotes taken from critical reviews of Jones's *Corregidora* by John Updike in *The New Yorker Magazine*, August 18, 1975 and John Avant in *The New Republic*, June 28, 1975, respectively.
10. Gayl Jones discusses at length her position on the role of politics should play in literature in "About My Work."
11. Dana A. Williams, in "Dancing Minds and Plays in the Dark: Intersections of Fiction and Critical Texts in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," observes that because the novel as genre and issues concerning black women had been largely ignored by the Black Nationalist and Black Arts Movements, Morrison, in her role as editor at Random House, worked to recover the novel by incorporating of postmodernist narrative techniques. To bring issues of black women to the fore, Morrison made sure that the texts by black women writers addressed feminist concerns but from a black woman's perspective.
12. Kim D. Butler in *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition Saõ Paulo and Salvador* verifies that once slavery was officially abolished in Brazil, the Brazilian government burned all documents that indicated the existence of slavery in the country. Though Jones offers a fictional account of a descendent of slaves, the mandate that Ursa "make generations because they burned all the evidence" is based in actual historical fact.
13. See note 4.
14. Toni Morrison uses the term "rememory" in *Beloved* (1987) to describe how her protagonist remembers the past. In the novel, Sethe desperately tries to repress her memories as a slave, but the memories continually invade her present. Morrison has

Sethe not only confront her memories but also blend those memories with others—Paul D and Baby Suggs—to reconstruct a past that must be remembered despite “this not [being] a story to pass on” (275). Much of the critical work on the concept of re-memory has centered on the works of Toni Morrison: see Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, “Rememory and Primary Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison’s Novels”; Marianne Hirsch, “Maternity and Rememory: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”; Madelyn Jablon, “Rememory, dream memory and revision in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar*.” However, I believe Jones’ *Corregidora* not only utilizes the concept but also problematizes its prescribed uses.

15. When I refer to the blues, I am specifically referring to blues as musical form. I am not ignoring the importance of the novel as reflective of a blues aesthetic. However I want to examine how Jones allows her protagonist to use blues music as a tool for empowerment.

16. Because several critics have examined *Corregidora* as a blues novel as well as a novel about black male and female relationships, I have chosen to list the ones that I think offer the most developed analysis of the two themes. Richard K. Barksdale *Praisesong of Survival: Lectures and Essays, 1957-1989*; Keith E. Byerman *Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction*; and Joyce Pettis “‘She sung Back in Return’: Literary (Re)vision and Transformation in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*.”

17. This reference to the black woman as a “symbol of slavery” is taken from Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*. Cleaver, like many of his contemporaries, believed that the black woman was a reminder of an oppressive past and therefore could not be useful in advancing the cause of black power.

18. This blues tradition is also evidenced in writings by African American men like Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Ralph Ellison to name a few. However, since my focus is on how African American women use blues as a means of fighting oppression, my discussion of the tradition builds on the connections between African American women blues singers and the creation of empowered African American female protagonists in writings of such African American women novelist as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982).

19. bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: black women and feminism*; Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class*; Deborah Gray White *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*; Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* examine the racist and sexist constructions of black women's sexuality.

CHAPTER IV

“HAVEN’T I SEEN YOU SOMEWHERE BEFORE?”: CONFRONTING AND
RECONCILING A SLAVE PAST IN OCTAVIA BUTLER’S *KINDRED*

If Samuel R. Delany is the forefather of African American science fiction, Octavia E. Butler must be its foremother. Drawn to science fiction to escape the loneliness of being an only child, Butler would eventually use it to challenge socially and culturally constructed beliefs about race, gender, sexuality, identity, and power. She broadens the genre by incorporating the conspicuously absent African American female voice and by focusing on slavery and its impact on contemporary racial, political, societal, and sexual relationships. This black feminist thematic representation is at the center of *Kindred* (1979), considered by many her most mainstream novel. Unique to *Kindred* is its generic blending. Part historical novel, part science fiction, Butler’s novel defies generic categorization.¹ Interestingly, Butler emphatically asserts that that “*Kindred* is fantasy...literally, it is fantasy...[since] there is no science in [it]” (Kenan 495). Despite Butler’s disclaimer, the “elements” of science fiction combined with other generic conventions obscures any kind of easy generic placement and as such allows for a myriad of critical approaches. I argue that *Kindred* can be considered a reconciliation narrative, not in strictest sense of the nineteenth-century Southern romantic reconciliation narrative as it breaks free of established conventions of the genre. Butler employs reconciliation as trope to suggest the possibility of easing racial strife through understanding and acceptance. Additionally, reconciliation as theme in the novel illustrates the inextricable link between the past and the present in America’s history. Butler places slavery at the center; yet, in the process of reconciliation, exposes horrors of

slavery to critique a genre that romanticized it. Trudier Harris, in *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line: African American Writers and the South*, (2009) posits that “no matter where an African American writer is born in the United States, . . . he or she feels compelled to confront the American South and all its bloody history in his or her writings” (1-2). The engagement of the reconciliation narrative is Butler’s confrontation with the South.

Because slavery’s thematic representation figures prominently in *Kindred*, critics have compared it to Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Upon authentication of the narrative by Jean Fagan Yellin in “Texts and Contexts,” Jacobs becomes the representative female slave voice. Hazel Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987) notes that the narrative “stands as exposition of her womanhood and motherhood . . . contradicting and transforming an ideology that [would] not take account of her experience” (49), and William L. Andrews calls Jacobs’ narrative “the major black woman’s autobiography of the mid-nineteenth century” (239). Therefore, Jacobs’ narrative proves a useful framework to examine contemporary writers who create empowered subjects in neo-slave narratives. Jacobs’ narrative details the painful humiliation of sexual exploitation the slave woman endured—her role as forced breeder and sexual concubine to the master—that makes slavery especially oppressive for black women. However, the greater importance of Jacobs’ narrative is her refusal to be a victim, and as Frances Smith-Foster posits in *Written by Herself* (1993), Jacobs “counters the prevalent literary construct of slave woman as completely helpless victim [to give her protagonist] personal autonomy and self-expression” (95). This creation of an autonomous black female subject serves as a model for Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979).

Sandra Govan suggests that the parallels which exist between *Incidents* and *Kindred* “make[s] Butler’s account of events at the Weylin plantation even more credible” (92), and Angelyn Mitchell notes that “like Jacobs’ fictional self Linda Brent, Dana embarks on a journey of self-possession and self-discovery” (53). Jewelle Gomez, like Mitchell, suggests that like Linda Brent, Dana embodies “acuity as well as strength” as she embarks on a heroic journey between past and present (“Black Women” 11). Such readings illustrate the links within the tradition of African American women writing. Butler uses slavery as a historical setting to examine the enduring legacy of slavery manifested in institutional racism while simultaneously presenting a story that transcends such categorization.

Set in Los Angeles, California, in 1976, *Kindred* begins on Dana Franklin’s twenty-sixth birthday when suddenly and quite mysteriously she is transported to nineteenth century Maryland. Once there she finds herself saving the life of a drowning child, Rufus, who she will eventually discover to be her slave-owning ancestor. Over the course of the novel, Dana will be involuntarily summoned to this past each time Rufus’s life is in peril and returned to the present each time she fears her own death. With each trip into the past Dana comes to better understand and accept her complex familial history. Dana, this twentieth-century racially conscious black woman “is made a slave” in that not only does she have to endure the physical burden (beatings, attempted rapes, forced labor) but also the psychological burden of slavery.² Specifically, Dana is tormented and conflicted by her own complicity in arranging the rape of her great-great grandmother, Alice, to ensure her African American family’s ancestral line, and by extension, her own existence—not just a literal existence, but a psychological existence.

Kindred articulates not only the lasting psychological, physical, social, and cultural effects of slavery but also provides a means of healing through the fictional form of the neo-slave narrative. Bernard W. Bell in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Traditions* (1987) defined the neo-slave narrative as “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289). At that time, Bell’s definition was a direct characterization of Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966), and her novel would go on to serve as precursor to a proliferation of contemporary texts about slavery.³ *Jubilee* appears at the peak of a non-violent/pacifist Civil Rights Movement and at burgeoning militant Black Nationalist and Black Power movements. Like *Jubilee*, the texts to follow would center on the emerging importance of a “return” to the past to redefine and re-inscribe a historical narrative that shaped black identity.

In his critical study, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999), Ashraf Rushdy does not redefine the genre but instead situates its development in a contemporary social, political and cultural context as he examines how the neo-slave narrative as form emerges “in response to developments in the public sphere” (5). Rushdy looks specifically at neo-slave narratives written in the 1970s and 1980s that directly engage the politics of the 1960s and its lingering social and cultural impact. All of the texts he reads, with the exception of Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986), are male-authored and focus on black masculinity within the context of slavery. Borrowing from Rushdy’s examination of how the neo-slave narrative engages a contemporary socio-political context, and in an effort to expand the critical lens through which we have traditionally viewed Butler’s novel, I argue that Butler uses *Kindred* to

challenge Black Nationalist discourses that condemned a slave past and espoused racial separatism.

In likening Butler's *Kindred* to other novels written by African American women in the 1970s, Marjorie Pryse says that this novel "contains strategies by which individual black women overcame every conceivable obstacle to personal evolution and self-expression" (3). While this is true for Butler's protagonist, Butler's novel engages larger issues. Like other African American women writers (Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison) who also deviate from a strict adherence to Black Nationalist and Black Power ideologies—challenging specific notions about race and gender, Butler offers an examination of race through the theme of racial reconciliation. As genre, the reconciliation narrative was designed to heal the rift between North and South following Civil War. It offered a romantic union between a Northern male and a Southern female and "in the process of courtship obstacles of misunderstanding [would] to be overcome, so...North and South contact brought reconciliation and the closing of the chasm (Buck qtd in Keely 623). Butler disrupts the standard use of the reconciliation trope to construct a narrative that allows for the possibility of resolving racial hostilities between blacks and whites. This resolution is possible only through the acknowledgement of faults on the part of both groups—Butler does not absolve Rufus of his crimes as slave master, and she does not portray Dana as a helpless victim, showing her culpability in the rape of her ancestor, a point that I will return to later.

Written during a social and cultural revolution of 1960s and 1970s amidst racial strife and discord, *Kindred* can be read in context of the major racial and gender movements of the twentieth century, Black Nationalist and Black Power and Feminist,

respectively. Charles Rowell asked Octavia Butler how she was inspired to write *Kindred*, and she responded,

When I got into college...the black nationalist movement, the Black Power Movement, was really underway with the young people, and I heard some remarks from a young man who was the same age I was but who had apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep him alive...He said, 'I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents.'...That was actually the germ of the idea for *Kindred* (1979). I've carried that comment with me for thirty years. He felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it into the context of being necessary for not only their lives but his as well. (51)

Butler recognized that the privileges she presently enjoyed were predicated on those ancestors from her past. Any effort to “forget” or to “kill” these individuals would be tantamount to “killing” herself; therefore, she uses *Kindred* as a means of connecting with the past to understand its import in the present. Born in California in 1947, Butler grew up in a racially diverse and economically impoverished community. She was raised in a maternal household; her father died when she was an infant. Her mother worked as a domestic, a reality that embarrassed Butler as a child; yet she would come to recognize her mother's sacrifice of entering backdoors and stifling pride provided food and shelter. “One of the reasons [she] writes *Kindred* was to resolve [those] feelings” (Kenan 496). Butler believed that if any contemporary black American is to understand her own

identity, she must understand who her ancestors were, her connection to them, and the significance of that kinship on her. This knowledge suggests broader implications beyond individual subjectivity. By confronting and reconciling a painful historical legacy (American slavery), Butler addressed contemporary issues surrounding racial relationships.

In the novel, Butler transports a “racially conscious” African American from the twentieth century to the nineteenth century.⁴ She wants to show that this person’s present-day sensibilities are ill-suited for navigating life in the past. Initially she casts the protagonist as a black man, but decides that the black male protagonist would be perceived as threat and probably would not survive to the story’s conclusion. Playing on sexist ideology of the time, Butler decides to make the protagonist a black woman who would not be deemed a threat (Rowell 51). Butler’s selection of a black woman as her protagonist is particularly important in the context of Black Nationalist and Feminist influences on the creation of a new racial and gendered identity.

Through Dana’s travels from past to present, she is forced to re-examine the ways in which she engages issues of intra-racial prejudice, sexism, inter-racial sexual relationships, and racism. In the present Dana is married to a white writer, Kevin. While Kevin has published some of his work, Dana as a writer has yet to have her work published. Butler illuminates this inequality but more importantly, she juxtaposes Dana and Kevin’s twentieth century relationship to the nineteenth century relationship between Alice (an enslaved black woman) and Rufus (the white slave master)—a sexual relationship fraught with historical ramifications. When Kevin returns to the past with Dana, their relationship is taken out of its twentieth-century context of husband and wife

to “become one of a master and slave concubine, thus formally mirroring the historical relationship responsible for one of the most troubling truths at the core of [Dana’s] own identity” (Parham 1327). Butler will use these relationships (Rufus and Alice/Dana and Kevin) as a means of confronting the discomfiting history of slavery to move toward racial reconciliation in the present.⁵

Black Nationalist and Black Power discourses on racial identity advocated the literal abandonment of the historical slave past. “The slave ship destroyed a great many tradition of the Black man. The white man enforced such cultural rape. A “cultureless” people is a people without a memory. No history” (L. Jones 120). These movements wanted to erase American slavery from the history books and from the African American psyche and believed that if their revolutionary ideas about blackness were to resonate and lead to a newly created black subject, then blacks would have to forsake a history mired in oppression. Seeking a “counterhistory” Larry Neal referred to the past as the “enemy of the revolutionary” (281), while Julian Mayfield declared that history must be “wip[ed] clean from the very beginning as if it never happened (30). Such declarations carried the day as Black Nationalists worked to eliminate that which they deemed unfavorable or distasteful, specifically American slavery. They wanted the history of blacks in this country to reflect black pride and self-sufficiency and not the oppressive state of the enslaved. However, this proved difficult. In order to reclaim a lost or stolen history, meant confronting slavery in America. To attempt to ignore this fact would be to ignore slavery’s role in shaping the black American’s identity.

More contemporary studies about black identity within the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements further elucidate the ideology behind the movements’

historical re-visioning.⁶ According to Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, essential to Black Nationalism is a clearly determined racial identity. He illustrates how early twentieth-century principles of Black Nationalist thought sought to defy racist stereotypes of blacks by eradicating the construct of the inferior black. It became imperative for “the new” African American (Black Nationalist) to liberate himself from a mindset that created the archetypal “Negro”—uneducated, docile, and boorish” and invent an independen[t], knowledge[able], self” (7). These ideas transfer to the 1960 and 1970s dominant ideology of the self-determined *Black*. While we should celebrate the notion of an “independent and knowledgeable black self,” I contend that any repudiation of a black cultural past (slavery) in America represses and suppresses history. Whether or not these militant and nationalist civil rights movements wanted to confront the historical oppression of blacks in the United States—slavery and the institutionalized racism of its aftermath—in order to “create” this newly constructed “blackness,” they would have to do so. Instead of denying history, perhaps a better project for proponents of Black Nationalism and Black Power would have been a historical re-visioning and reclamation that would lead to the creation of racially empowered subject.

Butler’s *Kindred* offers a historical reclamation that represents the paradoxes and compromises present in the complicit relationships between blacks and whites in American history. She illustrates the impossibility of severing the past from the present and future, returning to a slave past in an effort to show the inextricable link among the three. The novel reveals a shared past between blacks and whites that determines who they are and any effort to abandon this past results in a false identity construct. The failure of Black Nationalists to acknowledge the importance of the past (slavery) in

shaping a contemporary black identity results in flawed attempts at identity formation. Butler expands the concept of identity formation within Black Nationalist and Black Power discourses to suggest that if this “new” black American is to have a true sense of self, he must understand himself in relation to others (whites). More importantly, Butler intimates that in this new understanding of self can come an acceptance of the other, leading to possibility of racial reconciliation.

Racial reconciliation has diverse meanings and representations; however, my specific reference is to that ideology which grew out of an early civil rights era whereby blacks wanted not only equality but also peaceful coexistence with whites.⁷ When Martin Luther King, Jr., a leading proponent of racial reconciliation, rejected racial separatism espoused by Black Nationalists and proponents of Black Power, he maintained that “black supremacy is as wrong as white supremacy...God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race” (King qtd in Cone 75-76). Because Black Nationalism embraced a highly racialized agenda where “racial exclusivity” served as an undergirding principle, attempts at racial reconciliation were met with hostility from Black Nationalists (Ogbar 3). However, Ogbar goes on to conclude that cultural and societal evolution that occurred during and after the Black Power/Black Nationalist era forced blacks and whites to “deconstruct widely held notions of race” (191). This deconstruction of racial ideology is evidenced in Butler’s *Kindred*.

Building upon the tradition of the nineteenth romantic reconciliation narrative, Butler extrapolates from the established generic convention the overarching purpose of resolving conflict to coexist. Just as the marriage of North and South would lead to a healed Union, Butler’s *Kindred* offers a marriage of black and white, past and present

that will lead to racial, social, and political reconciliation. The text also serves as a means of inquiry into the debate surrounding race and racial identity within Black Nationalist and Black Power discourses, ideological programs vehemently opposed to idea of racial reconciliation and what it might mean—absolving a white, racist society of the oppression it had historically perpetuated against blacks. John B. Hatch, in “The Hope of Reconciliation: Continuing the Conversation,” defines reconciliation as “a dialogic hermeneutical encounter (or series of encounters) with coherent, tragicomic reconciliation narratives and/or rituals, a process in which essentialized self- and Other-identity become unsettled and potentially remade by the paradoxes of repentance, forgiveness, sacrifice, and the like” (265). For Butler, this “series of encounters” that lead to reconciliation requires characters to confront their present and their past. Dana and Kevin’s encounters with their contemporaries as well as with nineteenth century slavery force them to confront history in such a way that they are forever changed. Though they will not understand the significance of the past until their journeys are complete, Dana and Kevin will form a closer “kinship,” as husband and wife and as white and black.

Dana and Kevin become a metaphoric representation of racial reconciliation. The relationship between a white man and black woman historically has been defined/examined in terms of illicit desire.⁸ However, *Kindred* reshapes the historical narrative of the racist white man and the sexually oppressed black woman. Guy Mark Foster interrogates the links between race, politics, and sexuality at play in this interracial relationship. He traces societal anxieties about interracial desire in the novel and suggests that Butler’s subplot—the realistic portrayal of the black woman as forced

concubine—“distracts readers critical of literary and cultural narratives of interracial intimacy that deviate from conventional portrayals” (143). Though Foster’s point is well taken, he focuses on the apprehension surrounding interracial romance, situating Dana and Kevin’s relationship within a dynamic that implies the forbidden nature of such a relationship. My focus is not on interracial desire or the anxieties it presents for many but more so on how Butler uses this conflicted black/white relationship to allow for the possibility of forgiveness.

In another effort to debunk stereotypical representations, Diana Paulin, in “De-Essentializing Interracial Representations: Black and White Border-Crossings in Spike Lee’s *Jungle Fever* and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*,” posits that “Butler’s emphasis on the desexualized nature of [Dana and Kevin’s] relationship averts any overt racialization of their desire...in order for Dana and Kevin’s relationship to maintain its status as acceptable, their color is de-emphasized, their passion hidden, and their sexuality omitted” (179). While we can applaud Paulin’s efforts in presenting a positive rendering of interracial desire, she unfortunately makes the relationship sterile; reifying the notion that intimacy and love between a white man and a black woman is taboo. The novel portrays a real love and intimacy between Dana and Kevin. The first time the couple make love Dana says, “Sometime during the early hours of the next morning when we lay together, tired and content in my bed, I realized that I knew less about loneliness than I had thought—and much less than I would know when he went away” (57). Dana feels fulfilled when she is with Kevin and alone when the two are apart. Their mutual love is further evidenced when Dana and Kevin are reunited after five years following a separation caused by one of Dana’s “journeys.” Despite recovering from a severe beating

as a consequence of an attempted escape, Dana wants to reconnect with her husband by making love. In describing Kevin's tender concern for her wounded body and spirit, she says, "He was so careful, so fearful of hurting me. He did hurt me, of course. I had known he would, but it didn't matter. We were safe. He was home. I'd brought him back. That was enough" (190).

Butler's attention to the sexual nature of Dana and Kevin's relationship is essential to articulating a language of reconciliation as the relationship stands in stark contrast to the coercive relationship between Rufus and Alice. Dana chooses to have a relationship with a white man, but Alice has no choice. She forfeits her freedom when she helps Isaac, her enslaved husband escape. As a result Rufus buys her and forces a sexual relationship between the two. His obsession with Alice compels him to demand that Dana "convince" Alice to accept the inevitable, "You talk to her—talk some sense into her—or you're going to watch while Jake Edwards beats some sense into her" (163)! In his cruelest treatment of Alice, Rufus pretends to have sold their children precipitating Alice's suicide. By juxtaposing the relationship between Dana and Kevin with that Alice and Rufus, Butler replaces the old narrative of rape with a contemporary narrative of love and racial reconciliation.

Dana and Kevin's relationship serves as only one aspect of Butler's larger goal of representing the possibility of racial reconciliation. Applying Hatch's definition of racial reconciliation, Dana and Kevin, individually have to "encounter" people, places, history; be "unsettled" by these encounters; and eventually be "remade" because of them. When Dana and Kevin decide to marry, they are met by familial opposition. Both are somewhat surprised by their family's repudiation of their impending marriage. They had

grown accustomed to the ignorance of society as represented by the character Buz who reduces Dana and Kevin's relationship to solely a sexual one with his lewd references to "Chocolate and vanilla porn!" (56). However, Butler uses Buz to suggest that his views may not only be representative of society but also may resonate within Dana and Kevin's families. Interestingly, Dana and Kevin inform their families of their pending nuptials alone, and we have to wonder if each unconsciously knew that their relationship may be met with trepidation. Dana seems more aware than Kevin that their families may not be prepared for such news as even hints that Kevin's sister "might surprise [him]" and bluntly states that her "aunt and uncle won't love [Kevin]" (110). Her warnings suggest that they are about to confront familial resistance not only to their interracial union but also to a painful history. Dana and Kevin discover that their families' reactions to their marriage attest to an indoctrinated belief of racial separation. Slavery and its aftermath of institutionalized racism made the separation of blacks and whites not only legal but also socially acceptable.

When Kevin tells his older sister, Carol, that he is marrying a black woman, his sister reveals her racial hatred. Shocked by her reaction, Kevin later informs Dana that "[Carol doesn't] want to meet you, wouldn't have you in her house—or me either if I married you" (110). Dana has a similar experience with her aunt and uncle. Though she knew that they would be disappointed by the news of her marrying a white man, she did not expect to be so disquieted by the encounter. When Kevin inquires about Dana's aunt and uncle's response to their engagement, she tells him that

my aunt accepts the idea of my marrying you because any children we have will be light. Lighter than I am, anyway. She always said I was a

little to ‘highly visible’...she doesn’t care much for white people, but she prefers light-skinned blacks...Anyway, she ‘forgives’ me for you. (111)

Kevin is completely confused by what Dana is saying and what her aunt means. Dana neither bothers to offer an explanation beyond the fact that “they [are] old” nor does she attempt to address the interracial politics within African American community and the history of miscegenation. She seems to excuse aunt’s behavior in a way that she does not Kevin’s sister, suggesting that her aunt’s reaction is the direct result of her suffering as a victim of oppression that has warped her psyche and perception of a black self.

Dana’s uncle has the harshest response, “tak[ing] [the marriage] personally” (111). He feels betrayed by Dana’s choice. She has chosen a white man, an insult to his manhood reminiscent of slavery; and more importantly, he believes that by marrying Kevin, Dana is abandoning her race. Kevin is even more perplexed by Dana’s uncle’s reaction. She tries explaining:

He’s my mother’s oldest brother, and he was like a father to me even before my mother died because my father died when I was a baby. Now...it’s as though I’ve rejected him. Or at least that’s the way he feels. It bothered me...He was more hurt than mad. Honestly hurt. I had to get away from him. (111)

Kevin cannot understand why Dana’s decision to marry a white man would mean a “rejection” of her uncle. Dana painfully admits, “I’m marrying you...he wants me to marry someone like him—someone who looks like him. A black man” (111). Kevin’s empty response, “oh” reveals his limited understanding about racial power dynamics implicit in the history and legacy of slavery.

Dana's uncle would "rather will [his estate] to his church than leave [it] to [her] and see [it] fall into white hands" (112). The uncle's reaction and his beliefs reflect Black Nationalist ideology and its vehement disavowal of the historical relationship between white men and black women. In a direct challenge to such thinking, Butler intentionally casts these two "perceived" enemies of the black man, black woman and white man to redefine historical relationships and to transcend the limits prescribed by the separatist ideology of Black Nationalism. Nathan Hare in his essay titled, "Will the Real Black Man Please Stand Up?" argued that "the white oppressor has pitted [black] male against [black] female and ... forced and seduced [her] to take on his values and through her emasculated and controlled the [black] man" (32). Eldridge Cleaver decried the black woman as the co-conspirator of the white man and further suggested that "the white man made the Black woman a symbol of slavery...every time [he] embrace[d] a Black woman, [he] embrac[ed] slavery" (162,160). Evidenced in the rhetoric of Black Nationalists, the black woman became synonymous with an oppressive slave past and helped the white man continue to oppress the black man. However, Butler wants to portray Dana and Kevin not as "co-conspirators" but as symbols of the possibility of reconciliation. Yet, after the encounters with their respective family members, Butler makes clear that the two must confront their self-perceptions and of one another to reach some kind of reconciliation. Kevin must learn to accept that as a white man he enjoys certain privileges and how those privileges have often marginalized and oppressed another group. Frustrated by Kevin's seeming lack of understanding about racism, angered by his sister's reaction to their wedding, and conflicted by her uncle's

unequivocal stance, Dana has to address her own uncertainties about her relationship with Kevin.

In “Inverting History in Octavia Butler’s Postmodern Slave Narrative,” Marc Steinberg posits that “Butler attempts a contemporary re-writing of a historical or plausible historical event” (467) through Dana who has the “[potential to] alter what has already taken place” (474). Ashraf Rushdy claims that “in remembering the past, Dana also transforms it” (“Families of Orphans” 145). While Steinberg and Rushdy argue that Dana changes the past, I suggest that though Butler provides a re-visioning of historical events, it is not her goal to have Dana alter history but to accept its import on the present, particularly in terms of shaping her racial identity and her understanding racial relationships. When Dana travels to the nineteenth century she does not attempt to change history, she only alters her response to history, changing the meaning of the events for her and thusly, their significance. Her response will aid her in redefining contemporary relationships. Because she needs to experience the past as it existed, the journeys establish connections between past and present that are vital to Dana reconciling with herself, with history, and with others.⁹

Initially, Dana accepts that for whatever reason she and Kevin have been physically transported into the past, the past will not or cannot affect them.

We weren’t really in. We were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors. While we waited to go home, we humored the people around us by pretending to be like them. But we were poor actors. We never really got into our roles. We never forgot that we were acting. (98)

They assume the roles while remaining “observers.” Dana even unconsciously romanticizes certain aspects of slavery, describing the cookhouse and its inhabitants, “[as] the friendliest place [she’d] seen” with its little children sitting on the floor and licking a wooden spoon, while “a stocky middle-aged woman stir[red] a kettle” (72). This sentimental reverie abruptly ends when Dana’s race and her gender compel her to confront and accept the harsh realities of slavery. Each trip to a nineteenth-century plantation South erases any sentimentality. Butler critiques southern plantation romances made popular in the latter half of the nineteenth century. She avoids using sentimentalism as a trope, as these narratives often focused more on the restoration of the Union through marriage of North and South while slavery and its affect on the enslaved remained periphery subject matter. Butler however, portrays the psychic and physical trauma of slavery, articulating the exploited slaves’ experience and his lack of individual agency. Dana recognizes how easily one can become indoctrinated into slavery; its insidious nature; “how easily people could be trained to accept [it]” (101). She can no longer remain an objective observer and tries explaining to Kevin that the longer she stays in the nineteenth century, the more difficult it becomes for her to just “observe” the events of slavery “[and] now and then, ...[she] can’t maintain the distance. [She’s] drawn all the way into eighteen nineteen, and [doesn’t] know what to do” (101).

The events which occur during Dana’s second trip to the past transform her from role of passive observer to active participant. Dana finds herself in the slave quarters on the Weylin Plantation when a group of patrollers storm a cabin. Dana watches from the brushes as the patrollers throw a slave family outside and begin to whip the man. Dana

could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip. [She] could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining against the rope as his screaming went on and on. [Her] stomach heaved, and [she] had to force [herself] to stay where [she] was and keep quiet...[she] had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. [She] had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But [she] hadn't lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. (36)

Though she only watches the event, for the first time Dana actually “feels” slavery.¹⁰ Physically sickened by the whipping, Dana admits that nothing she had watched psychologically prepared her for what she has just witnessed. And just when Dana thinks that she can imagine no other horror, one of the patrollers returns to the cabin to rape the woman, but finds Dana instead. Dana and the patroller fight, and the scene ends with Dana rendering her attacker unconscious, and her fear of impending death returns her to the present. Though Dana resists her attacker and avoids being raped, she is troubled by the fact that the constant threat of rape was a possibility in the daily lives of black slave women. The harsh realization that her present-day knowledge is useless in negotiating an understanding of the past forces Dana all the way into the nineteenth century where she can no longer remain on the periphery.

Karla F. C. Holloway rightly observes that for Dana,

The collision of the past and present is a shuffling between what is the objectivity of her essentially unrecovered past and the subjectivity of her

contemporary life. The novel retrieves the past through a collision between two dimensions. What Dana has read in family histories or had been told about her ancestry becomes mostly unusable when, in 1976, she is pulled back into her past, an 1813 plantation where her grandmother had been born. At this point she is faced with an immediate need to subjectify the experiences she had known only academically. (114)

Holloway suggests that Dana arrives at subjectivity through an intersection of past and present that changes her sense of self in the present. Butler's disjointed time narrative problematizes how not only Dana but also the readers respond to history. With no forewarning Dana is abruptly transported to the nineteenth century and after her return to the twentieth century, she recognizes initial encounter in the past as "real" but more so "like something [she] saw on television or read about" (17). However, the distance between return trips to the past and time spent in the present is truncated and boundaries blur. With each successive encounter in the past, Dana wants to "pull away...because [the past] scares [her]" (17), but this is not possible and as Robert Crossley notes that "in foreshortening the distance between then and now, Butler focuses [the readers'] attention on the continuity between past and present; the fantasy of traveling backwards in time becomes a lesson in historical realities" (279). As a result, Dana "subjectifies" or experiences slavery in the witnessed beating and the accompanying physical and emotional response it elicits from her—the attempted rape by one of the patrollers and the discovery of the crimes committed against her slave ancestors, Alice Greenwood and her parents. History books, oral narratives, and television have been incomplete in articulating the whole of slavery, for "nothing in [her] education or knowledge of the

future” (177) had prepared Dana for life on the Weylin Plantation as she would come to know it.

Dana’s most significant encounter toward racial reconciliation is with her paternal ancestor, Rufus Weylin. She must reconcile the nature of that relationship, one that emphasizes the inextricable connection between black and white in American history. Butler’s choice of Rufus as slave master and Dana as “slave” and as descendant illustrates the meshed lives and histories of blacks and whites. This attempt at reconciliation has Dana confront white patriarchy in the past, and eventually, its manifestation in the present. She is aware that Rufus is her ancestor, the family *Bible* provides this information, but she is unaware that he is *white*. The discovery of his race complicates her feelings toward him. An examination of their conjoined histories cannot be parceled into separate occurrences because “what would have happened to [Dana], to [her] mother’s family, if [she] hadn’t saved [Rufus]?” (29). Dana and her maternal ancestral line depend on Rufus’ survival. This poses a particular quandary for Dana. “Was that why [she] was here? Not only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure my family’s survival, my own birth” (29). Dana has to discover her importance to Rufus in the past and his importance to her in the past/present. Though Dana acts as a protector and guardian she believes that “[she] was the worst possible guardian for him—a black to watch over [her master] in a society that considered blacks subhuman, a woman to watch over him in a society that considered women perennial children” (68). Butler references the racist oppression of slavery and the inherent irony in a black slave woman protecting her white master. Despite Dana’s “slave” status, she

avoids becoming a complete object by maintaining a level of subjectivity primarily in her ability to “return” to the present and most importantly, in her control of Rufus’ fate.

Dana is summoned to the past each time Rufus’s life is in peril and knows that she must ensure his physical safety so that he can sire her black maternal ancestor, Hagar. Biblically, Hagar is a handmaid to Sarah. When Sarah and her husband Abraham cannot conceive a child, Sarah sends him to have a child with Hagar. Hagar gives birth to Ishmael. At Sarah’s request, Abraham, expels Hagar and her son from their community. Like the black slave mother and her off springs, Hagar and her child were in legal and social bondage. Pauline Hopkins’ *Hagar’s Daughter* (1901) is the story of Hagar, a woman who believes she is white but discovers her mixed-race ancestry. This discovery leads to her and her daughter being forced in chattel slavery. By tracing Dana’s matrilineal heritage to “Hagar,” Butler, surely, aligns her own narrative within the tradition of black women writers.

What Dana does not know but will discover is the crucial role she will play in this literal procreative act. Dana is complicit in the rape of Alice, her maternal great-great grandmother. Obsessed with Alice, Rufus decides that he must “have” her despite her rebuffs. He eventually rapes Alice and forces her to be his concubine. Interestingly, Rufus has an unlikely accomplice, Dana who bears the burden of her culpability; yet, she knows that without Rufus and Alice having a sexual relationship, forced or not, her existence would not be possible. “Dana’s obligation to Rufus’ life...is also an obligation to her own. If Rufus dies Dana will never be born. Or rather, she cannot afford to find out what would happen to her if she were not to save him” (Parham 1318).

Dana has to ensure that Hagar is born and decides “to help the girl—help her avoid at least some pain. But [Alice] wouldn’t think much of [her] for helping this way. [Dana] didn’t think much of her [herself]” (164). Though Dana remains conflicted by her complicity, she remains pragmatic because knows that with or without her help Rufus will “have” Alice, and that if she is to exist in the present, their sexual union must happen.

The more Dana experiences slavery, her illusions of redeeming Rufus wane. She realizes that Rufus, her paternal ancestor, is a slave master in every way. Initially, Dana rationalizes Rufus’s heinous actions—threats of selling his own children, the ordered mutilation of Isaac, the selling of the slaves, Sam and Tess as she wants to believe Rufus can be redeemed. However, his attempted rape forces Dana to confront the horror of her ancestry. Dana refuses to be made Rufus’s concubine and kills him. “[She] could accept him as [her] ancestor, [her] younger brother, [her] friend, but not as [her] master, and not as [her] lover” (260). To submit to Rufus in this way would solidify her position as slave, and Dana refuses role as chattel, telling Kevin that “I’m not property, . . . I’m not a horse or a sack of wheat. If I have to seem to be property, if I have to accept limits on my freedom for Rufus’s sake, then he also has to accept limits—on his behavior toward me. He has to leave me enough control of my own life to making living look better to me than killing and dying” (246). Killing Rufus allows Dana to maintain control over life in the present. By understanding the nature of the slave woman/master relationship, Dana’s choice of Kevin helps in rewriting the historical narrative. Whereas Alice had no choice, Dana does. She can accept Rufus as ancestor, bother, or friend but not as master.

Through Dana's struggles, Butler implies that the past as Black Nationalists conceived it was too limiting. They believed the relationship between master and slave woman only as an oppressive one. If they could erase the past then by extension, they could deny the relationship. Butler refuses the specific designation of master/slave in characterizing white/black relationships in the past. Because Dana can accept Rufus as friend, brother, ancestor, Butler argues for a more complex representation of black/white racial relationships; however, when Rufus exceeds the boundaries and insists on a master/slave dynamic, Dana has no choice but to kill him. More than Butler re-writing historical narrative of forced rape of black slave woman by white man, she offers Dana as an empowered subject with a more nuanced understanding of racial relationships in the present. Butler uses Dana and Rufus's relationship to show that because the histories of blacks and whites are so intertwined, these relationships cannot be reduced to dichotomous representations of good/bad or right/wrong, and Dana's refusal to be enslaved by the past advances her toward reconciliation.

Because Dana is the protagonist, we learn of her specific encounters in and with the past; however, Butler does not make the reader privy to detailed events of Kevin's encounters in the past though he spends more time than Dana actually does there, five consecutive years. His encounters with the past are no less important than Dana's because they too change Kevin. Like Dana, Kevin must reconcile with the past to forgive, sacrifice, and repent.

Kevin's encounters with the past and his experiences with slavery are different from Dana's because of his privileged white masculinity; yet, he is initially oblivious to his status. When he is "accidentally" transported on Dana's third trip, he cavalierly

remarks that “[he] could survive here, . . . if [he] had to” (77). He further adds that “this could be a great time to live in . . . what an experience it would be to stay in it—go West and watch the building of the country, see how much of the Old West mythology is true” (97). His comments echo a sense of nostalgia for times past; however, Dana makes him aware of what he is unable to recognize—his role as oppressor. She reminds Kevin that his idea of going “West” to manifest some great destiny was done by displacing Indians from their land and building a nation on the forced labor of an enslaved people. Kevin’s race and gender allow him to “see” the nineteenth century very differently, to be blissfully ignorant that the country he talks about would not have been possible if whites had not oppressed other groups.

Critical race theory which focuses on understanding how white privilege operates is useful in framing a discussion of Kevin’s identity. George Lipsitz in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (2006) examines how whiteness results in privileged economic, social, political, professional, and educational advantages. He concludes that when whites fail “to reckon with the rewards that come to them as a result of racial privilege, [they] prevent themselves from seeing how privilege actually works in society” (105-106). Peggy McIntosh writes that “white privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and checks” (188). She posits that her skin color is the primary determinant for the many privileges she enjoys. Like the knapsack McIntosh describes, Kevin’s whiteness allows him to navigate nineteenth-century society in ways that Dana cannot. Interestingly, Dana has a knapsack—a literal one. In it are the essentials for surviving nineteenth-century society: toiletries, clothes, a map, a knife, and a pad and pen. Dana recognizes the need

for her knapsack while Kevin fails to understand how his white “knapsack” is tied to the inherent racial privilege historically set by white supremacy.

Seemingly, Butler aligns Kevin with the patriarchal oppressor. He is white and male and his last name is Franklin, taken from Benjamin Franklin, Founding Father of America. Though her symbolism appears a bit heavy-handed in use the last name, Butler’s point is to create a character that easily fits an ideological construction that she will herself disrupt. Kevin is also likened to Rufus and Tom Weylin, slave masters.¹¹ Butler makes direct physiognomic parallels between Kevin and the Weylins. Dana notices that Rufus’ “eyes were almost as pale as Kevin” (90) and that Kevin “did sound a little like Rufus and Tom Weylin” (190). She even observes that “the expression on [Kevin’s] face was like something [she’d] seen, something [she] was used to seeing on Tom Weylin. Something closed and ugly” (194). She further juxtaposes Kevin and Rufus by illustrating their attempts to marginalize Dana by placing her into a gender-specific role. Kevin requests that she type his manuscripts and Rufus demands that she write business letters for him. The irony of such attempts at subjugation is that like Kevin, Dana is a writer, and needs to type her own manuscripts. Furthermore, she teaches Rufus to read and the scant education he has is because of her. But because she is black and female, she suffers under patriarchal and sexist oppression. Interestingly, Dana refuses Kevin’s request, but finds herself submitting to Rufus’s demand.

It would seem difficult not to argue that Kevin is nothing more than Butler’s rendering of a modern-day slave master. However, by allowing Kevin to confront the past to understand his role as a patriarchal oppressor, Butler illustrates how Kevin is able to transcend this comparison. Butler’s larger point in choosing Kevin is that the onus for

and the implications of confronting past do not rest solely with Dana and though Kevin urges her to “let go of [the past]” (17), he finds this an impossibility for himself. Though his experiences as a white man with slavery are different from Dana’s as a black “slave” woman, Kevin is nonetheless transformed by these encounters.

When Kevin is unable to comprehend the magnitude of the slave children acting out a slave auction or whippings other slave are made to witness, Dana accuses him of not recognizing the import of such events. He retorts, “I’m not minimizing the wrong that’s being done here. I just...” (100). Kevin does not complete the statement, but we can imply that the missing words are “do not understand.” Kevin wants to understand, but admits that he has no frame of reference; yet, his desire to understand suggests that he wants reconciliation. Butler suggests that if Kevin is to fully connect with Dana, he would have to revisit and explore his past and allow history to “touch” him as it had Dana if they were to live in the present and hope for a future. To reconcile the past and its significance in determining the present, Kevin, like Dana must “subjectify” slavery.

During the five years in the past that he is separated from Dana, Kevin acts as an abolitionist, one way of Butler contrasting Rufus and Kevin. As an abolitionist Kevin “hid [slaves] during the day, and when night came, [he] pointed them toward a free black family who would feed and hide them the next day” (193). This experience compels him to empathize with slaves in ways he was incapable of before. Paula S. Rothenberg’s *White Privilege* (2007) argues that “white privilege is institutionalized in the United States” (5) so much so that whites are unaware of how that privilege directly or indirectly benefits them. Perhaps the most salient feature of this work is its efforts to suggest that white privilege should be used to fight racism. “The first step toward dismantling the

system of privilege that operates in this society is to name it and the second is for [whites to] use privileges to speak out against the system of privilege as a whole” (5). Acting covertly, Kevin uses the advantages afforded him by white privilege to help slaves escape. Kevin’s recognition of how his privileged position within society can be used to advance the causes of the oppressed Other further develops Butler’s reconciliation narrative.

When he and Dana are reunited in the present, slavery’s impact on him is obvious as is his inability to articulate the experience. He says, “I’ll tell you all about it, Dana, but some other time. Now, somehow, I’ve got to fit myself back into nineteen seventy-six. If I can” (193). As he touches his typewriter and studies his most successful novel, Kevin feels lost even in the place he felt most comfortable—his office. He wants to move on in the present but must first find ways to compartmentalize the past so that he does not abandon it but accept that it existed. Dana reminds him that “you can’t come back all at once any more than you can leave all at once. It takes time. After a while, though, things will fall into place” (194). Prior to Kevin’s encounters with the past, Dana had to “explain” slavery and its impact on slaves, but after his five-year stay in the past, Kevin has accepted his patriarchal tendencies (his request that Dana type his manuscripts or that she “get rid of some of [her] books”); has gained a better understanding of how one group has historically oppressed another; and acknowledges Dana’s uncle and the resentment he felt toward him. Kevin’s encounters lead to repentance and place him on a journey toward reconciliation.

Though Kevin has made earnest attempts toward reconciliation through his encounters with the past, he has yet to fully comprehend what it meant to be an enslaved

black woman. Dana tries to articulate this experience and knows that Kevin honestly wants to understand, but realizes that because he is white and male, he lacks the capacity to fully understand. Kevin does not know or can ever know the life of a black slave woman. When Dana returns home after a failed suicide attempt, Kevin decides he must “know.” He says “All right. You’ve said he was a man of his time, and you’ve told me what he’s done to Alice. What’s he done to you?” It is clear that Kevin is asking if Dana had been forced to be Rufus’s concubine as was Alice, and she responds that he,

sent me to the field, had me beaten, made me spend nearly eight months sleeping on the floor of his mother’s room, sold people...He’s done plenty, but the worst of it was to other people. He hasn’t raped me, Kevin. He understands, though you don’t seem to, that for him that would be a form of suicide. (245)

Kevin’s lack of understanding to Dana/black slave woman’s plight illustrated by his inept attempt at empathy, “look, if anything did happen, I could understand it. I know how it was back then” (245). Kevin only knows what “it was [like] back then” from the privileged position of a white man, the oppressor/master/rapist and unwittingly implies that black slave woman seemingly had a choice in whether or not she was to engage in a sexual relationship with the master. He fails to recognize that relationship between Rufus and Alice was forced, like countless others, and that the black slave woman had no choice and for Kevin to imply otherwise is insulting. Dana responds indignantly, “you mean you could forgive me for having been raped?” In that moment, Dana lashes out at Kevin but admits that “if [she] could make him understand, then surely he would believe

me. He had to believe. He was my anchor here in my own time. The only person who had any idea what I was going through” (246).

Though Kevin’s encounters in the past have changed his understanding of slavery, positioning as agent of reconciliation, Butler suggests that his reconciliation is not complete but remains a possibility as long as he continually has encounters that unsettle and remake him. Dana “[tries] to find the right words” but discovers that certain experiences cannot be fully articulated. The scene ends with an ambiguous exchange between the two. Kevin simply states, “I had to know.” What was it that he had to know? Was Dana raped? What happened in the daily lives of slaves? How were they able to survive? We can only presume that his response implies any or all of the queries. Kevin’s desire to understand his black wife’s ancestry and her history suggests his willingness to want reconciliation. The more he learns about the past, the better equipped he is to make their relationship successful, a relationship not fraught with racial tension. Dana’s follows with, “that felt like truth. It felt enough like truth for me not to mind that he had only half understood me” (246). Her remarks hint at an implied acceptance of Kevin’s inability to fully know her experiences as a black woman. This exchange is markedly different from previous ones where Dana’s frustration with Kevin’s lack of understanding was obvious. Dana no longer expects Kevin to comprehend her entire experience--that he wants to seems to be enough

The encounters with the past not only change Dana and Kevin psychologically but also physically. Part of Hatch’s definition of racial reconciliation requires that individuals be remade. I extend Hatch’s definition to argue that Butler literally remakes Dana and Kevin’s bodies to be read as texts.¹² Dana has scars on her back, face, and

wrists; however, her most visible scar is the loss of her arm. As Rufus dies he grabs Dana's left arm and as she struggles "something harder and stronger than Rufus's hand clamped down on [her] arm, squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it---painlessly, at first—melting into it, meshing with it as though somehow [her] arm were being absorbed into something" (261). Dana's arm "meshed" into the wall illustrates the binding link she has to and with the past. In explaining the loss of Dana's arm, Butler says, "I couldn't let her come all the way back. I couldn't let her return to what she was, I couldn't let her come back whole and that, I think, really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery didn't leave people quite whole" (Kenan 498). I would suggest that that though Dana is literally and figuratively fractured, Butler allows her to take those fragments and construct a new whole—one with a keen awareness of the past.¹³ Before "[Dana] was keeping too much distance between [herself] and [that] alien time. Now, there was no distance at all" (220).

Dana's body and that of the other slaves—Isaac's ears are cut off, and Alice bitten by dogs—offers a narrative of slavery that words cannot articulate; however, they are not the only ones scarred by slavery as the text clearly illustrates how slavery scarred blacks as well as whites. Kevin is also scarred; he has a scar of unknown origin on his forehead.

Diana Paulin posits that the scars serve as constant reminders of a past, observing that

Dana and Kevin's wounds may help them to work together to recover and to rebuild their strength; or these different wounds may intensify the destructive power dynamics that perpetuate inequality and dominance, forcing Kevin and Dana to go their separate ways and fend for themselves...Both Dana and Kevin are implicated. Neither one is

innocent, morally superior, or passive. It is evident that the relationship between blacks and whites is mutually interactive. (189)

Though Paulin refers to the “mutually interactive relationship” between Dana and Kevin, specifically, I believe her reference to be applicable to black and white relationships in slavery. She suggests that slavery affected the enslaved and the enslaver, marking Dana and Kevin, and as a result of their interactions in the past with slavery, both are irrevocably changed. She offers that these scars can liberate or hinder. Her claim that neither Dana nor Kevin is completely “innocent, morally superior, or passive” in the present can be applied to the black/white relationships in slavery, suggesting that these relationships were as complex. This makes her argument certainly applicable to Butler’s overarching goal—the idea of racial reconciliation. In the loss of an arm or a scar on the back or face comes an understanding of a slave past. The concluding exchange between Dana and Kevin ends on a reconciliatory note. “[Dana] touched the scar Tom Weylin’s boot had left on [her] face, touched [her] empty left sleeve” and asks Kevin, “Why did I even want to come here?” He responds, “You probably needed to come for the same reason I did... To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you’re sane... and now that the boy is dead, we have some chance of staying that way” (264). Their respective journeys to the past and their journey to present-day Maryland provide a liberating experience in their newfound understanding of the past. Kevin suggests that he and Dana can now move on in the present, not forgetting the past but accepting it.

The reconciliation Kevin and Dana achieve happens as a result of their encounters with the past. This is Butler’s intent. The first line of the chapter entitled “The River,”

states that “the trouble began long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it, but June 9 is the day I remember” (13). The statement has various implications. Though this is the day Dana begins her journey to the past, more importantly, the date is less than one month away from America’s bicentennial celebration. There is an inherent contradiction in the celebration of America’s bicentennial year because *all* of America was not free. In 1776, blacks had already been enslaved in the country for over 100 years. Butler purposefully uses the bicentennial setting to allude to the country revisiting its history of racial oppression. Twenty years prior to the bicentennial celebration, America was torn apart by racial unrest as organized Civil Rights Movements sought to end segregation and ensure equality for African Americans, and Black Nationalism and Black Power had effectively come to an end but their ideologies resonated.¹⁴ Black Americans still felt isolated, many considering themselves de facto Americans.

Missy Dehn Kubitschek observes that, “the bicentennial setting broadens the theme [of the novel], implying that the country itself must reexamine its history in order to have any hope of resolving contemporary racial conflicts” (*Claiming* 28). In re-examining history, Butler has Rufus summon Dana for the final time on July 4th. When he attempts to make her a complete slave woman by trying to rape her, Dana kills him. By killing Rufus, Dana frees herself, literally and figuratively. She is returned to the present permanently, having reconciled her history. Paralleling a nation’s independence with that of a black woman’s independence, Butler offers a portrait of reconciliation. Additionally, Butler’s choosing of Dana (black woman) and Kevin (white man) and transporting them into the past, engages a different conversation about our understanding of racial relations in the past as well as in the present. She forces us to reexamine a

history rife with oppression, suggesting that by reconciling the events of the past, we can simultaneously reconcile contemporary racial relationships, directly challenging the separatist ideology propagated by Black Nationalism.

The impetus for Butler's writing of the novel stemmed from a young man's vehement disavowal of his ancestry: "I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents." A guiding principle of Black Nationalist ideology was to separate the contemporary black from his oppressive past. By forcing a black twentieth-century character (one influenced by education, racial pride, political ideologies of the 1970s) to confront his ancestral past, Butler illustrates the necessity of the past in understanding oneself in a contemporary context. The adage "past is prologue" sets the tenor of the novel. Dana and Kevin can either move forward toward racial reconciliation or remain restricted by circumstances that cannot be altered. Neither can change the past, but each can change his responses to it. Instead of the hostility and resentment toward whites articulated by Black Nationalism, Butler offers another alternative.

The concept of "kindred" lends itself to Butler's theme of reconciliation within the novel. Butler uses the word in its literal meanings—a group of related individuals and of the same ancestry and extends the definition to include the idea of *kindred spirits*, those who do not share a bloodline but who do share a similar character, nature, history, lived experience, in essence, one's fellow man. Dana and Kevin reach reconciliation when they discover and connect with their kindred. Bernard Bell contends that "although Dana develops a kinship with both racial communities...the primary focus is on [her] white great-grandfather, who "loved," raped, and impregnated the black great-

grandmother whom Dana resembles” (*Contemporary* 347). While Dana’s relationship with Rufus is central to Dana’s evolution, Bell’s assessment minimizes the significance of Dana’s encounters with Sarah, Carrie, Alice, Sam, and other slaves. This kinship forces her to question her traditionally held and intellectually acquired beliefs about slavery and without those encounters, Dana would not have been able to reconcile her kinship to Rufus.

Dorothy Allison posits that “Butler offers no resolutions at the end of *Kindred*...Dana is left wounded...[and] we do not know what will become of her marriage to Kevin, a white man” (476). Though Allison is correct in positing that Butler does not neatly resolve the novel’s ending by telling the reader exactly what happens to Dana and Kevin, I would argue that she certainly leads us to draw clear implications. To suggest that Dana and Kevin’s story abruptly ends misses Butler’s engagement with the Dana discovers a kinship (believed not to be possible before) within the slave community that sustains her in the present. Ruth Salvaggio observes that “what Dana comes to realize at the end of her journey is that her past will always be a part of her present—not that she is doomed to suffer its horrors, but that she will always bear the mark of her kindred” (“Octavia Butler” 33). More on point with her analysis of the significance of all of Dana’s kindred than Bell and Allison, she too makes no mention of Kevin and how he has become one of Dana’s kindred or his connection to and with his own kindred. It is the acquired understanding and acceptance of their kindred (believed not to be possible before) that sustain Dana and Kevin in the present.

The kinship between Dana and Sarah compels Dana to reevaluate her conceptualization of the slave woman. On the surface Sarah appears to be a stereotypical

representation of the mammy figure.¹⁵ Dana initially views Sarah through a lens of “moral superiority...”

She had done the safe thing—had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid. She was the kind of woman who might have been called “mammy” in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom—the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter. (145)

Influenced by the pervasive radical racial ideology of the day that uneducated, servile blacks had been so indoctrinated with a sense of inferiority that they should therefore be viewed with disdain, Dana disregards Sarah’s humanity. Her intellectualism and her lack of a lived slave experience limits her perception of Sarah; however, once Dana experiences slavery as a woman—the threat of rape, the beatings, the stolen children—Sarah is no longer the mammy that the politically conscious Dana had defined her as. Dana recognizes that Sarah had simply learned to survive.

Kevin’s encounters with Rufus and the white slave patriarchy force him to acknowledge that his race and gender place him in a position of privilege. While in the past, Kevin quickly internalizes this legacy of his kindred. When Dana comments that though Rufus seemingly forgot her in a transaction between him and Kevin, he will surely remember her when there was work to be done. Kevin quickly responds, “you’re not supposed to belong to him” (79), implying that she “belongs” to him instead. The

longer Kevin stayed in the past he recognized his power to oppress and decides that to exist in the present, he cannot allow his position to subjugate Dana.

Dana and Kevin's encounters with the past force them to confront slavery and its enduring impact on contemporary racial relationships. The encounters serve as means toward reconciling painful past while helping Dana and Kevin form a closer kinship with one another as well as with those in the past. The lives of those in Butler's *Kindred* are so intertwined that we cannot separate them according to race and gender. If we endeavor to accept this as fact and understand varying perspectives, we can begin to reconcile hostilities. Butler concludes that the encounters that lead us toward reconciliation are not always "good for us, but they [do not] hurt us that much either. It [would now be] easy for us to be together, knowing we shared experiences..." (243).

Notes

1. Critics have argued various specific generic designation of the novel. Robert Crossley reads the novel as neo-slave narrative. Ruth Salvaggio and Scott Sanders argue for the novel's placement in science fiction. Lisa Yaszek posits that the novel uses science fiction to articulate African American women's histories, and Thelma Shinn claims that science fiction is only a means of representing the quest narrative.
2. My reference is to a chiasmus from Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an African Slave* (1845). "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man." (294)
3. The list of neo-slave narratives is extensive, but I have chosen to select a sampling of those published after 1966 and before 1990. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971)-Ernest Gaines, *Flight to Canada* (1976)-Ishmael Reed, *The*

Chaneyville Incident (1981)-David Bradley, *Oxherding Tale* (1982)-Charles Johnson, *Dessa Rose* (1986)-Sherley Anne Williams, *Beloved* (1987)-Toni Morrison.

4. During the 1960s and 1970s many young blacks suffered from false bourgeois affectations and as such cloaked themselves in a false history. Alice Childress examines this issue in her play *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969).

5. Any relationship between whites and blacks during slavery was complicated. At stake in both couplings were issues of sexual violence, social intimacy, and patriarchal systems. Martha Hodes examines the relationship between white women and black men in *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South* and argues that intimate relationships between the two always existed and before the Civil War were tolerated; however, after the Civil War and during Reconstruction there were a heightened number of lynchings of black men in response to cries of rape by white women. She concludes that because black men were now gaining rights of citizenship and as their legal status changed, the image of black man as rapist emerges. The political implications of such liaisons now make the relationships more taboo. Lewis Gordon in *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age* reads the white woman/black man narrative as one that ignores the "history of predatory white males reaping the advantages of legally rejected black female bodies" (58). In slavery, black women as forced breeders were essential to maintaining the economies of slavery. Black women did not seemingly enjoy the same freedoms as black men as black women appear to lack agency; however, Butler will represent Alice and Dana as agents despite the physical force and power white man exert over their bodies.

6. See Smethurst and Joseph.

7. My discussion of racial reconciliation is limited in scope. I do not explore in detail the nineteenth-century reconciliation narrative. I instead offer that Butler's text plays on the generic form to address the idea of racial healing. Additionally, I do not suggest that Butler is attempting to solve the "problem" of race in America. Such studies would include Derrick A. Bell, "Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma"; Kirt Wilson "Is There an Interest in Reconciliation?"; and John B. Hatch, "Reconciliation: Building a Bridge from Complicity to Coherence in the Rhetoric of Race Relations.

8. For a detailed discussion on the experiences of black women during slavery see Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South*; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*; Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South*; Rennie Simson, "The Afro-American Female: The Historical Construction of Sexual Identity," in *The Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Sharon Thompson, and Christine Stansell.

9. Various critics have discussed the significance of the relationship between past and present in Butler's *Kindred*. See Karla F. C Holloway, *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature*; Missy Dehn Kubitschek, *Claiming the Heritage: African-American Women Novelists and Writers*; and Ruth Salvaggio, "Octavia Butler."

10. Mark M. Smith's *How Race is Made: Slavery Segregation and the Senses* examines the role of sensory dynamics in the construction of race and racial differences.

Smith argues that whites used not only sight but also their remaining senses to establish a dichotomy of black versus white and used the differences to legitimize slavery and the institutionalized racism of Reconstruction. Smith documentation of slavery through the senses reveals how bodies serve as text.

11. In an effort to identify Kevin as patriarchal oppressor, Butler parallels Kevin with the Weylins. Mid-twentieth century slavery studies examine slavery as a paternalistic system, presenting the slave master as the father and the slaves as the children.

Two noteworthy studies are Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American and Institutional and Intellectual Life* and Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*.

12. Margaret Walker Alexander's *Jubilee* (1966), Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and *Beloved* (1987) Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) present a scarred black body. This scarred body provides a narrative that cannot always be articulated.

13. I argue that Dana's encounters with the past result in a fracturing of her mind and body, but she is able to take the fragments and create a new whole. I am basing my assertion in Franz Fanon's study of identity formation for the colonized subject in his *White Skin, Black Masks* (1952). Fanon discusses the epistemic violence perpetuated by colonial contact. He argues that once the black colonized subject comes face to face with the colonizer, his psyche fractures. The fragments are then reassembled to create a racially gendered whole. Though Dana is not a colonized subject in the literal sense, she is an oppressed subject; therefore, her contact with Rufus causes her to fracture but be remade whole.

14. For argument's sake I am dating the civil rights period from the first wave of civil rights beginning around 1955 with the Montgomery bus boycott through the more militant second wave beginning in 1966 and concluding around 1975.

15. For a discussion on stereotypical representations of black women see bell hook's *Ain't I a Woman: black women and feminism*; Angela Y. Davis's *Women, Race and Class*; and Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The 1970s became representative of a new kind of literary politics, rejecting the Modernist ideology of the separation of politics and art. This era saw a symbolic marriage of the literary and the political, and nowhere was this more evident than in the Black Nationalist and Black Arts Movements. As the platform for Black Nationalist ideology, the Black Arts Movement served as the medium through which proponents could articulate the marginalized experience of blacks in America. Though the movements officially end between 1975 and 1976, the implications remain. By examining Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, we can engage new conversations about our conceptualization of the movements as these works serve to complicate the political and cultural discourses. Marshall, Jones, and Butler challenge specific tenets of Black Nationalism to reveal strictures of the movement's ideology. Though they condemn the racist, sexist, homophobic, separatist, and anti-Semitic underpinning, they do not suggest a complete dismissal of the philosophical message. For example, their works broaden the concept of nationhood. Even if their fiction does not explicitly resonate with black nationhood as a thematic focus, their texts suggest alternatives to sustaining black community/black nation but without rigid prescriptions.

Essential to Black Nationalist program was the maintaining of the black community. However the community restricted *inclusion* to blacks that is, blacks who were committed to the *struggle*. Marshall creates a community that is more inclusive. She explicitly connects the struggles of Third World peoples with the struggle of African

Americans. As a rhetorical strategy, Black Nationalist often espoused solidarity with other oppressed people, implicitly relating their struggle but failed to recognize that multiple forms of oppression exist as sexism and homophobia were pervasive within its own movement.

If the black community/nation is to thrive, then black women must be validated for their importance to its survival. Black Nationalist philosophy equated the black woman's importance solely with her ability to literally "sustain" the black nation by producing off springs. They relegated her to sexual object and forced breeder—her role as slave. Gayl Jones refuses this designation to construct black women as sexually empowered subjects. As subjects black women are now equal to black men and should function as effective partners in a nation-building endeavor.

A nation cannot move forward if it does not look backward, as "past is prologue." If this new *Black* nation was to prosper, it had to recognize the importance of the past. The past is essential to present and future and by reclaiming it, the individual and the community are empowered. Butler illustrates the connectedness of past and present, revealing the intertwined histories of black and whites. Slavery and the consequence of miscegenation represent a reality that cannot be removed from the historical record—to ignore this historical fact denies the possibility of racial self-actualization. Black Nationalists want to deny past, but Butler illustrates that nation-building can only occur through retention and reclamation of a past.

Because of the ways in which these writers respond to a Black Nationalist aesthetic, Marshall, Jones, and Butler are important to the African American literary canon as they build upon a tradition of and create a legacy for African American women

writers. Though seemingly eclipsed by more canonical figures, their works actually serve as archetypes. More critical study needs to be devoted to Marshall, Jones, and Butler's oeuvres, as this study is in part an endeavor in that field; however, it is not intended to be comprehensive. I attempted to show that these writers and their work advance critical conversations of neglected era, expanding our conceptual landscape. Previous scholarship of Black Nationalism and Aestheticism is often devoted to its more obvious failings (sexism, misogyny, homophobia, racism). While Marshall, Jones, and Butler provocatively challenge such biases, more importantly, their works provide alternatives to the constructs of community, sexuality, and racial identity.

Contemporary African American women echo Marshall's tradition of community building. In Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), the eponymous character, Meridian Hill suffers from infirmities which weaken her (loss of hair and weight). Initially uncertain as to what is causing this "illness," Meridian recognizes that it is rooted in her lack of self knowledge and discovers that her purpose lays help ability to her community. As a community activist, Meridian initiates action on behalf of the community. However, Marshall's Merle does not do anything directly but rather challenges the people of Bournehills to act on their own behalf. She forces them to do whereas Meridian is an actual participant in the action. Because of what Marshall begins with Merle, Walker is able to expand the possibilities of character with Meridian. Though *Meridian* conveys a communal theme, Walker offers more of a woman-centered critique about such issues as racism, sexism, and motherhood.

Though not a central focus of *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, Marshall creates a community of black women who nurture and care for Merle. When Merle is

two years old, her mother dies, and the women of Bournehills raise her. After she returns from England and suffers her “fits,” they again care for her. Carrington stands “on guard outside the closed door” (398). In *The Color Purple* (1982), Walker expands Marshall’s black female communities—Celie cares for Sophie during and after her incarceration; Celie nurtures Shug back to health; Nettie teaches Celie to read. Both writers create women-centered communities to *heal* one another and to combat the oppressive patriarchy.

Toni Morrison problematizes this concept of a nurturing black community, illustrating that the community is oftentimes imperfect. Morrison’s communities create scapegoats to place their anger and anxiety. Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Sula in *Sula* (1973) are such examples. Pecola is poor and black, and Sula defies conventional mores; and as such, each is judged harshly by their respective communities. Ironically, the communities’ distorted values are the very thing that creates them. The communities blame these scapegoats instead of examining their own shortcomings. Interestingly, both are women—Morrison’s way of highlighting the patriarchal nature of society and the black community. Additionally, Morrison complicates notion of black female community. Pecola lacks the supportive black women that Merle has. Pecola has a verbally abusive mother, an adult woman who calls her a “black bitch” and peers who ostracize her. As a result, Pecola descends into madness, unable to escape her oppression. Merle avoids madness because of the community of women who support her. Again, in *Sula* (1973) black female relationships are fraught with hostilities and resentment. Morrison constructs an embittered sisterhood within the Bottom community. They women ostracize Sula, and Sula disregards the women in her community. Both

parties are complicit in the failings of the other. Marshall suggests that women communities must help one another; Morrison shows what happens when they do not.

Extending Marshall's construction of community, Gloria Naylor, in *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and *Bailey's Café* (1992) creates a community of oppressed people. To understand who the oppressed are, like Marshall, Naylor begins each tale by intertwining the histories of the people and the place. Marshall describes Bournehills as having been "wantonly used, its substance stripped away, and then abandoned" (*The Chosen Place* 100). And in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1953) she tells us that "for a long time [the Brooklyn brownstones] had been only white...but now, the last of them were discreetly dying behind...and moving away" (4). Naylor begins *Brewster Place* with a history of the street and goes on to present an amalgam of displaced peoples. She tells of the circumstances which place the seven women who are central characters in the novel in this *dead end* community. In *Bailey's Café*, the café and the town brothel serve as refuge for the forgotten. Each place welcomes a community of women who have suffered physical and sexual violence. The community of women nurtures one another and simultaneously combats the patriarchal society that has exploited them.

In *Corregidora*, Gayl Jones opens the discourse on sexuality as she expresses the need to voice sexual subjectivity by defining self to refute sexist and racist constructs. She allows the black woman to attain sexual autonomy through a re-positioning of gender roles as she de-idealizes motherhood, offers choice for sexual orientation, and uses blues to create a sexual subject. The blues as musical genre had allowed black women the freedom to define themselves, especially as sexual agents. Building on Jones' use of the blues and lesbianism (a latent theme) in the novel, Alice Walker combines the themes in

The Color Purple to articulate the expression of her protagonist's sexual subjectivity and freedom. Jones allows lesbianism in *Corregidora* to work as an expression of sexual autonomy. Walker gives it even more power in *The Color Purple*. The lesbian relationship becomes restorative. Celie has never known true love or intimacy. Her step-father rapes her, and her husband never considers her wants or desires. Her relationship with Shug leads Celie to love of herself. Celie's heterosexual sexual relationships had been violent, but Shug as blues singer teaches Celie that sex can provide intimacy and pleasure and not pain. Celie discovers the joy of love and experiences the beauty of her own body. As Ursa is no longer a victim of sexist oppression and violence, so too is Celie

“Bearing witness to the atrocities of Old Corregidora” serves as the mandate for Ursa, the descendant of slaves. As a historical revisionist novel, *Corregidora* becomes part of tradition of palimpsest narratives. Concerned with righting/writing the historical record Jones and other African American female writers create female protagonists who become empowered subjects by “redefining” themselves in the past. Jones' *Corregidora* is a model for Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Williams' *Dessa Rose* refuses to allow the slave *historian* Adam Nehemiah to define who she is. While being interviewed by Nehemiah, Dessa would remain silent or sing. She wrests control from Nehemiah, proclaiming that “he didn't even know how to call my name—talking about Odessa” (225)...“my name Dessa, Dessa Rose. Ain't no O to it” (232). In *Beloved*, Morrison illustrates the necessity for confronting history in order to achieve agency. Schoolteacher records extensive notes of Sethe and the other slaves at Sweet Home. In *writing* the slaves, he denies their subjectivity. Sethe suppresses her

memories as a slave on the Sweet Home plantation, and as a result, she becomes Schoolteacher's construct. As Sethe recovers her memories she takes that power from him, restoring her subjectivity.

Like Octavia Butler, Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991) and Tananarive Due's *My Soul to Keep* (1997) combine African American literary conventions with science fiction. *The Gilda Stories* tells of a 200 year-old black lesbian vampire who was a former slave. The novel addresses issues of race, gender, class, and identity; and more importantly focuses on the importance of the past. Gomez notes that "the past does not lie down and decay like a dead animal...It waits for you to find it again and again" (126). Due's *My Soul to Keep* is the story of David, a 400 year-old vampire who sold his humanity to ensure his immortality. This horror tale also examines the significance of the past on present circumstances, as David struggles to keep the past from destroying the "happy" family he has created. Following in the tradition of Butler and her appropriation of science fiction and African American tropes, these authors reconfigure the genre of speculative fiction.

The fiction of Paule Marshall, Gayl Jones, and Octavia Butler has transformed African American women's literature and has helped to shape and re-shape our thinking about the contested philosophical perspectives of Black Nationalism and Aestheticism as ideological movements. Marshall, Jones, and Butler create a body of literature that redefines how community, gender roles, and racial identity had been constructed within a Black Nationalist paradigm, offering characters that are positioned to affect change. Merle as a political activist and conduit for Diasporic and global relations; Ursa as an

autonomous sexual subject; and Dana as an intermediary reconstructing the nation and family by connecting the past to the present.

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