

5-2017

## **The Black Maternal and Cultural Healing in Twentieth Century Black Women's Fiction**

Paula Wingard White  
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Literature Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### **Citation**

White, P. W. (2017). *The Black Maternal and Cultural Healing in Twentieth Century Black Women's Fiction*. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/1974>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact [scholar@uark.edu](mailto:scholar@uark.edu).

The Black Maternal and Cultural Healing in Twentieth Century  
Black Women's Fiction

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

Paula White  
Jackson State University  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2007  
Jackson State University  
Master of Arts in English, 2010

May 2017  
University of Arkansas

This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

---

Dr. Susan Marren  
Dissertation Director

---

Dr. Lisa Hinrichsen  
Committee Member

---

Dr. Constance Bailey  
Committee Member

## **Abstract**

This work examines representations of maternal relationships between black women in five contemporary novels: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *Sula* by Toni Morrison, *The Salt Eaters* by Toni Cade Bambara, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and *Louisiana* by Erna Brodber. Rather than situating the origins of black feminist literary studies during the Black Women's Literary Renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s, I argue that Hurston's work shapes contemporary black feminist literary studies. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Nanny provides a mothering archetype that inspires a dominant theme and practice—the black maternal, within contemporary black women's fiction, specifically the Black Women's Literary Renaissance of the 1970s and 80s—an era greatly inspired by second-wave Black feminism. Contemporary black women writers use the black maternal to demonstrate how mothering relationships culturally heal communities of the socially constructed diseases of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism. To this end, my research draws upon Patricia Hill Collins' critical social theory of othermothering, which argues the centrality of non-kin and extended family maternal relationships between black women as integral to their personal agency as well as the sociopolitical progression of their communities. Additionally, my analyses of the novels included in this study reveal six themes in contemporary black women's fiction: self-love, resistance, community, afrocentrist folk sensibility, power of the ancestral and spirituality. These themes function alongside the black maternal in shaping black feminist literary studies.

©2017 by Paula White  
All Rights Reserved

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the Sisters of Fulbright mentoring group for their support along this journey. I especially thank my mentor and friend, Dr. Pearl Ford Dowe whose wisdom, compassion and encouragement is a continual presence in my academic and personal life. Also, I would like to thank Dr. Constance Bailey for her mentorship and expertise in African American literature and studies. Finally, thank you to my dear friends and classmates Christy Davis and Whitney Martin for the sisterhood we formed while completing our projects and program together.

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to Dr. Jean D. Chamberlain. Although you are no longer with us, your legacy of sisterhood, mentorship and scholarship continues...

## Table of Contents

Introductory Chapter 1: Black Maternal Tradition and Zora Neale Hurston's <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> .....	1
Chapter 2: Othermothering and Self-Love in Toni Morrison's <i>Sula</i> .....	26
Chapter 3: Othermothering and Healing in Toni Cade Bambara's <i>The Salt Eaters</i> .....	50
Chapter 4: Othermothering and Liberating Friendships in Alice Walker's <i>The Color Purple</i> .....	71
Chapter 5: Othermothering and Black Diaspora in Erna Brodber's <i>Louisiana</i> .....	94
Conclusion.....	116
Works Cited.....	121

## Introductory Chapter One:

### Black Maternal Tradition and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Whether reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through a lens of Black Feminism or Womanism, women scholars across the Black Diaspora will agree that Zora Neale Hurston's novel is a definitive work in black women's literary tradition, specifically contemporary black women's fiction. In this study, Hurston is positioned as foremother of black feminist literary studies. Though others precede her in conceptualizing a Black feminist epistemology, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* uniquely inspires a maternal trope where black women authors and their characters participate in cultural healing as well as personal, creative and sociopolitical agency. In *Their Eyes*, Nanny provides a mothering archetype that inspires a dominant theme and practice, the black maternal, within contemporary black women's fiction, specifically the Black Women's Literary Renaissance of the 1970s and 80s—an era greatly inspired by second-wave Black feminism. Contemporary black women writers use the black maternal to demonstrate how mothering relationships culturally heal communities of the socially constructed diseases of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism. Within the dissertation, these diseases function as intersecting oppressions for black women creating a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Moreover, key to my argument is that black women use maternal relationships to heal these diseases. To this end, my research draws upon Patricia Hill Collins' critical social theory of othermothering, which argues the centrality of non-kin and extended family maternal relationships between black women as integral to their personal agency as well as the progression of their communities. In addition, this study is explicitly invested in a black feminist epistemology constructed by black women. Therefore, analyses of mothering relationships between black women are framed outside of maleness, meaning my research includes critiques and theories by mostly black women scholars

and critics. My analyses of the novels included in this study reveal six themes in contemporary black women's fiction: self-love, resistance, community, afrocentrist folk sensibility, power of the ancestral and spirituality. Rather than situating the origins of black feminist literary studies during the Black Women's Literary Renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s, I argue that these themes prevalent in Hurston's work, alongside the black maternal, shape contemporary black feminist literary studies.

Acknowledging Hurston as foremother of the contemporary black women's novel and what many scholars now perceive as black feminist literary studies is critical to this study for several reasons. First, Hurston's work instigates one of the first examples of black women struggling against sexism in their communities, in very different ways than fellow Harlem Renaissance writers such as Nella Larsen and Jesse Fauset. For example, in Hurston's portrayal of Joe Starks, she acknowledges what a black patriarchy looks like for "everyday black folk," specifically working class, non-college educated black women. Alice Walker makes a similar critique in her characterization of Mister in *The Color Purple*. Hurston's dedication to telling the stories of everyday black people, popularized afrocentrist folk sensibility patterns, specifically, the black vernacular tradition in contemporary black women's fiction. Secondly, at a time when black men *and* women writers were focusing on respectability, Hurston de-centralized themes of racial uplift, respectability, color lines and whiteness in her work. Instead, *Their Eyes* is a narrative centered on folk tradition and the self-hood of black women. Novels such as Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* would follow Hurston's tradition of female protagonists like *Their Eyes'* Janie Crawford who rebel against notions of respectability and class. Furthermore, Hurston disregards narrative patterns of the struggles of black middle class and urban life set by her male literary peers Richard Wright and Claude McKay. Her "originality," and courage to

address a black patriarchy was criticized by Wright in the same ways Ishmael Reed would rebuke Alice Walker for “playing the hate black male angle” in *The Color Purple* (Reed). Lastly, as a writer and anthropologist, Hurston’s work demonstrates interdisciplinary interests within black women’s literary tradition. For instance, most of Hurston’s writing is inspired by her work as a folklorist. Jamaican author and sociologist Erna Brodber honors the spirit of Hurston’s work as an anthropologist in her 1994 novel, *Louisiana*. The protagonist Ella Townsend Kohl is a graduate student in anthropology that travels to Louisiana to retrieve the stories of the elders in the community. Her mission is much like Hurston’s ethnographic work in which she records folk stories of the elders in Florida and New Orleans. Moreover, just as Alice Walker rediscovers Hurston’s work, Ella’s 1936 manuscript is rediscovered by the Black World Press in 1978.

Similar to how Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* established the discourse for feminist themes for the contemporary black women’s text, *Their Eyes* pointed Black feminist and womanist scholars alike to the ways in which race, class and gender intersect to inform the sociopolitical position of black women. For example, throughout the novel, Janie struggles between her conceptions of marriage and those of her three husbands, in that each of them in some way appropriates white, capitalist or patriarchal ideals of marriage and power. However, *Their Eyes* is not simply a novel about love and marriage; neither are these the only frameworks that Hurston employs to inform readers about black womanhood. Instead, the novel demonstrates black women’s perceptions of agency and community. Although scholars often ground their analyses of *Their Eyes* in Janie’s marital relationships, I argue that Nanny’s mothering relationship with Janie illuminates far better the complexities of black sociopolitics and womanhood. Moreover, Nanny’s dialogue with Janie exemplifies an indigenous way of theorizing special to historical grannies and their fictional re-creations by black women writers; Valerie Lee refers to this as “testifying theory.”

Other examples of testimonial discourse are represented throughout this study by elder women characters such as Minnie Ransom in *The Salt Eaters* and Mammy in *Louisiana*. In these later novels published during the age of modern advancement, testimonial discourse flows through technology and inanimate objects, specifically conjuring or the power of the ancestral.

### **Literature Review**

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Sula*, *The Salt Eaters*, *The Color Purple* and *Louisiana*, I trace the black maternal or characters that serve as “othermothers” to illuminate their roles as cultural healers. Othermothers form networks of as little as two women. They can be grandmothers, elders, friends, neighbors or any woman in the community. Othermothers emerge when (1) lessons need learning, (2) wounds need healing or (3) minds and bodies need saving. As Collins explains, othermothers rely on oppositional knowledge, meaning they construct world views based on the need for self-definition and social justice. In my reading of *Their Eyes* in chapter one, I combine Valerie Lee’s testifying theory with Collins’ theory of othermothering. By combining these social and literary theories, I suggest that readers and scholars look to mothering relationships containing granny figures like Nanny, to understand black women’s position on reforming and at times accommodating American capitalism, racism, gender disparities in racial uplift, and sexism in marriage. In chapter two, I argue how *Sula* demonstrates the theme of self-love for black women who have been denied its privileges in a racist and sexist society. Considering the lesbian impulses within Nel and Sula’s relationship noted by Barbara Smith in “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” I argue that the relationship displays how black women use friendships with each other to fill various types of relational voids, particularly the void of a mothering relationship. Through friendship, Nel and Sula receive the love, acceptance and loyalty lacking in their relationships with their mothers. This is also true for their relationships with their

husbands or lovers. Additionally, Nel and Sula's relationship serves as a critique of heterosexism and the institution of marriage. In chapter three, I discuss *The Salt Eaters* and the theme of spiritual awareness and healing in contemporary black women's fiction. My analysis of the novel is informed by Gloria Hull's theory of new spirituality. I examine the black maternal in *The Salt Eaters* by focusing on the othermothering network between Velma, faith healer Minnie Ransom and ancestral spirit guide Old Wife. This network reflects the novel's theme of community and the significance of the ancestral matriarchal past in black women's fiction. My discussion of conjuring is informed by Laura Haynes theory of Christio-Conjure. Moreover, I engage Gay Wilentz' theory of black women writers as cultural workers who incorporate indigenous rituals of healing in their narratives as a form of activism. Chapter four focuses on *The Color Purple* and the sexually and politically liberating capacities of friendships between black women. I argue that Celie overcomes the racist and sexist system in which she lives through an othermothering network that is communal, transnational and homoerotic. Celie's othermothering network includes her sister Nettie, who lives abroad in Africa, her lover-friend Shug Avery and sister-in-law Sophia. I argue that Shug Avery demonstrates the plurality of the modern black woman, in that she is conscious, spiritual *and* sexual. Sophia appropriates male privilege by exercising physical strength alongside a black feminist rhetoric by literally fighting the men in her life. Lastly, Nettie exemplifies the power and significance of blood family and African Diasporic Connectedness or the ways by which African peoples are culturally connected throughout the diaspora. Regarding theory, I discuss scholarly debates surrounding *The Color Purple* regarding black women's ideological stance, whether it should be defined as "Black feminism" or "Womanism." Conceptions of Black feminism in this chapter are informed by The Combahee River Collective, Collin's *Black Feminist Thought* and Hull's *But Some of Us Are Brave*. Layli Phillips' *Womanist Reader* provides

definitions and modern reinventions of Womanism. The final chapter of the dissertation examines *Louisiana* and the significance of transnational identity in black women's fiction. My discussion of immobile transnationalism or transnational identities constructed without crossing national borders, is informed by Simone C. Drake's *Critical Appropriations* and *Sometimes Folks Need More*. In *Louisiana*, the black maternal functions through an othermothering network of Ella, and two spirit foremothers Mammy and Lowly. I evaluate this network by engaging Kinitra D. Brook's theory of *Black Maternal Inheritance*. My discussion of conjuring and afrocentrist folk sensibility is informed by June E. Roberts's, *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora through Folk Culture and Religion*. These theories shape my discussion of *Louisiana*, and the important ways Third World women employ mothering relationships to deconstruct master narratives and make visible the narratives of the black diaspora.

Central to my discussion of the black maternal and *Their Eyes* is Lee's theory on testimonial discourse. Understanding testifying theory is dependent upon its relationship to black feminist theory and literary criticism within black women's fiction. According to Robert J. Patterson, "Black feminist theory...has used black women's writing, including fiction, poetry, autobiography, memoir and manifestos as loci from which to theorize its goals and responsibilities" (88) Black feminist theory has reshaped American literary history through its commitment to expose racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of oppression that prevail within capitalism and other economic structures. This commitment to exposure has inspired historical and literary images of American feminist movements as well as the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements. Patterson further explains that black feminist political and literary theory grapples with one primary question..."how do the categories of gender and sexuality, along with class and other subject positions, inform our understanding of what it means to be an African American?"

(88). Black women's fiction, and African-American fiction at large, seeks to answer or address this question through characterization, theme and figurative language. Moreover, "...black feminist literary theory analyzes how different systems of oppression interlock and function to disenfranchise black women, while proposing solutions to eradicate oppression for everyone" (Patterson 88). It is important to note that sometimes men and women accommodate or involuntarily work with systems of oppression, which maintain social ills like misogyny, classism and racism. For example, Hurston allows Janie, her husbands and Nanny to perpetuate racist, patriarchal constructs to illustrate that men and women facilitate the social oppression of black women. Nanny's ideas about marriage and security, for instance, are informed by the same patriarchal ideology that shapes Logan Killicks', Joe Starks' and Tea Cake's conceptions of gender roles and marriage.

Before the advent of Black Feminist criticism, mostly men conducted analyses of black female protagonists and the black women writers who created them. hooks states, "When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women" (bell hooks qtd. in King 296). King concurs, stating: "It is precisely those differences between blacks and women, between black men and black women, between black women and white women, that are crucial to understanding the nature of black womanhood" (296). In the academy, almost silenced and absent from the issue of racial discourse, however, is the opinion and insight of women, especially Black women. As Collins argues, "men control the knowledge-validation process" (342). Black feminist theory helps to close these types of disparities in socio-political and academic communities.

## Testifying Theory

In *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers*, Valerie Lee is interested in historical grannies' life stories and the writers who re-create those stories; for example, fictional granny characters like Nanny are developed and inspired by history. Lee refers to this analysis of history beside or with fiction as "reading double-dutch" (2). Literary and historical grannies possess the knowledge of traditional black religion, healing, rootworking and midwifery. They function as cultural icons that empower others through their use of oral tradition or their ability to *testify* to common and experiential knowledge within their communities. So, to testify theory is "to acknowledge that African American testimonial discourse has been a site for "insurgent black intellectual life" (79).

She elaborates:

It [testimonial discourse] is to affirm that one of multiple locations for theory production is the oral tradition and that testifying as a speech act within black church services has always been preceded by the open invitation, 'Can I get a witness?' It is not simply the learned who may answer this call, but anyone who is lucid, the granny as well as the scholar. (79-80).

As expressed by Lee, testimonial discourse and many other conceptual frameworks within black feminist criticism are spiritual in origin due to the historical role of the black church in emancipatory politics and identity formation. Testifying theory, then, articulates a culturally grounded framework, combining oral tradition, spirituality, and the ethics of caring and activism. First, oral tradition consists of narratives from the African slave tradition while spirituality blends the African American church and West African concepts of healing, conjuring and rootwork. Finally, the ethic of caring is "the value placed on individual expressiveness, the appropriateness of emotions and the capacity for empathy" (Collins qtd. in Lee 87). When black women writers create granny characters, they participate in cultural exchange and tradition. Toni Morrison calls

black women writers cultural bearers, “participating in the recreation of the granny and her cultural matrix” (Morrison qtd. In Lee 2). Lee discusses more explicitly the role of historical grannies and their relationship to womanism and black feminist criticism:

“historical grannies were women who, without a formal pulpit, preached a gospel of womanist ethics and theology, and...black women writers build upon this tradition by imbuing their fictional grannies and women healers with a spirituality, a sense of mission rooted in the tenets of black feminist criticism” (79).

Lee’s note concerning “womanist ethics and theology” points to the significant role of spirituality, community and activism within womanist thought, while “tenets of black feminist criticism” refers to the dismantling of systemic racism and other forms of oppression. For clarity, womanism is a social change perspective rooted in black women’s everyday experiences. Black Feminism is an ideology that struggles against the intersecting oppressions of racism, classism, sexism and heterosexism.

Key to the reading of *Their Eyes* and the study at large, is Nanny’s rhetoric on race, gender and labor. Not only does Nanny’s dialogue with Janie exemplify testifying theory, but it establishes the core issues that modern to present-day black women authors and feminist scholars confront in their fiction, criticism and scholarship. Among these issues are the intersectionality and oppression of racism, sexism, classism, capitalism and patriarchy. Moreover, these issues will particularly reveal the nuances of black women’s sexuality and their relationships with black men and their community. Before she marries Janie off to Logan Killicks, Nanny speaks of woman-less pulpits, high places and metaphorical assembly lines. She *testifies* to Janie about the socio-political oppression of black women. Her rhetoric is equal parts Sojourner Truth and bell hooks, as she reaffirms her womanhood while also addressing a white, supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.

Mary Helen Washington proclaims:

*Their Eyes* is a novel as much about powerlessness as about power—about women’s exclusion from power. It is a text as much about submission as about self-fulfillment, as much about silence as about voice. Part of the novel’s force lies in its exploration of the implications and effects of patriarchal values and male domination on the lives of black women. (Washington qtd. in Ducille 123).

As Washington suggests, when Nanny testifies, she prompts a reading of history—of slavery and post-reconstruction and their relationships to the Harlem Renaissance. These relationships illuminate the racial, gender and sexual tensions embodied by the 1937 novel itself.

### **Black Feminism and Motherhood: Othermothering**

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins' assessment of motherhood centers on black women’s influence and response to social disorder and social change in their communities through extended familial networks. Collins argues that “Black women’s experiences as mothers, othermothers, teachers, and churchwomen in Black rural communities and urban neighborhoods, enabled them to construct and reconstruct oppositional knowledge, forming a particular type of social theory; this allowed them to refashion conceptions of self and community” (10). Here, oppositional knowledge refers to knowledge developed out of the need to combat social and political invisibility, exclusively through women-centered networks. It is important to note that oppositional knowledge is not limited to activism, but more specifically encompasses community rehabilitation and service through what Collins refers to as *othermothering*. Receivers of othermothering are not always children, can be male or female and both young and old. She describes othermothering as assistance in mothering by a woman in the community other than one’s kin or bloodmother; othermothers are also grandmothers and stepmothers. For example, in *Their Eyes*, Nanny, Janie’s grandmother, “mothers” Janie, although she is not her *biological* mother. As Collins states, “Grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins act as othermothers by taking on child-care responsibilities for one another’s children” (177).

## **Othermothering and African Tradition**

Collins contends that “the institution of Black motherhood consists of a series of constantly renegotiated relationships that African-American women experience with one another, with Black children, with the larger African-American community, and with self” (176). This means motherhood for black women consists of various mothering modes. Mothering takes place as needed—when (1) lessons need learning, (2) wounds need healing or (3) minds and bodies need saving. Othermothering is oppositional knowledge based on life experience, but more specifically, I argue that these life experiences become generational, passed down through testifying—a telling, learning and compounding of oppositional knowledge and history intended for survival and progression of black women and the black race itself.

Collins further expounds on the distinctiveness of black motherhood and its connection to African tradition:

...Biological mothers, or bloodmothers, are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, othermothers—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood...The centrality of women in African-American extended families reflects both a continuation of African-derived cultural sensibilities and functional adaptations to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, and nation (178).

From Collin's note, readers gather how conceptions of motherhood and parenting surpass blood relation and the physical home itself in black communities. But more importantly, her theory reveals several truths about Black motherhood. Indeed, the concept of othermothering stretches normative ideas of mothering. It encompasses physical care but can span to foster racial justice and sexual freedom. Moreover, othermothers not only can partner with blood mothers, but also can replace them. Readers must consider that although othermothering is essential in black

communities, it is not always helpful and can sometimes exist in a text to provide examples of what decisions and paths protagonists should avoid. For instance, Nanny mothers Janie by teaching her marriage is a sanctuary when she marries Janie off to Logan Killicks. Killicks is an older, financially secure man whom Janie does not love. Ultimately, the marriage is not beneficial for Janie because Nanny's decision is determined by her singular experience of womanhood, which is informed by slavery and her daughter's sexual exploitation. Nanny's mothering teaches Janie what type of woman Janie *does not* desire to be; however, Nanny inadvertently helps Janie to develop her own ideas of agency, love, and marriage.

Collin's observation about women-centered communities and Hurston's depiction of them speaks to the cultural and ancestral differences of black and white families that make normative models of family and motherhood unsuitable. As Ann Ducille argues, "black women did not have the same tradition of dependence on men or submission to male authority that white women had...Women were the more likely heads of slave households though this labor-intensive role was defined by responsibilities not power" (*On Canons*, 30). Other black feminist scholars would agree and argue that normative models of family create an ever-present need for black women to redefine themselves.

### **Black Women's Fiction as Social Protest**

In her book, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*, Ducille contends that black women writers used marriage and the motherhood ideal to display real-world, subversive change in their communities. For clarity, the motherhood ideal is a patriarchal construction, primarily white, and forecloses desire and pleasure for women. Ducille asserts that Larsen and Hurston (as well as Jessie Fauset) address the concerns of Black women in four specific ways within their novels: (1) Black women begin to become active sexual beings, questioning their

positioning as objects of male desire; (2) marriage ceases to be celebrated on paper as the quintessential signifier of civil liberty and instead becomes a symbol of material achievement; (3) patriarchy is recast as a pervasive institution whose ideological apparatuses influence black men as well as white, resulting ultimately in the oppression of black women within their own communities, households, and erotic and marital relations; (4) heroines cease to be singularly and uniformly heroic, good, pure, blameless...they become instead multi-dimensional figures, full of human (and, in some cases, monstrous) faults and foibles (87). Ducille's observations point to the ways black women writers use characterization, and fiction at large, as social protest. For example, in *Their Eyes*, Janie counters Nanny's class-based logic for marriage with a love-based desire for marriage. This challenges the idea that a husband provides socio-economic stability and that class, not love, should be the determinant of a marriage relationship. It is important to note however, that black women writers did not always create characters to dismantle marriage and motherhood, but to determine ways in which they can exist in them *and* reform them. For example, despite her unhappy marriages to Logan Killicks and Joe Starks, Janie does not lose her desire for love or marriage, evident in her third marriage to Tea Cake. Janie continues to seek love through the institution of marriage. Although the union is tumultuous, Janie does find the love she wants with Tea Cake; their story does not end neatly in "happily ever after," however, as Tea Cake contracts rabies and becomes delusional and violent towards Janie, which causes her to shoot him in self-defense.

### **Pairing Sociology and Literary Analysis**

Reading *Their Eyes* through a sociological lens contextualizes the protagonists and the authors who create them within the events, places, and people that inspire them. Hazel Carby concurs and argues that the novels of black women should be read as an "active influence within

history,” as they “not only mirror society but attempt to change it” (95). McDowell echoes Carby’s claim that Black women authors have reshaped society through their novels, and adds that they also sought to repair the image of black women. The pairing of sociological and literary analyses provides a reading of *Their Eyes* that is reflective of the intellectual and professional world of Harlem Renaissance writers. Writers and sociologists in the early twentieth century existed in communities together. Their work was created within a society of *diverse* scholars and thinkers. This suggests that authors and sociologists were influenced by each other’s work. For example, sociologist and Pan-Africanist W.E.B. Du Bois, founding editor of *The Crisis*, worked alongside writers like Jessie Fauset, who served as the literary editor of the magazine from 1919 to 1926. Du Bois became a mentor of Fauset’s during her senior year at Cornell University. Fauset later became a member of the NAACP as well as the organization’s representative at the Pan-African congress in 1921 (Paul P. Reuben). Moreover, Harlem Renaissance authors were multi-faceted scholars studying and specializing in several disciplines. Zora Neale Hurston, for example, was both a writer and an anthropologist. Hurston’s fieldwork inspired two of her most notable works, *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*. Finally, Du Bois’s social theory on race in the twentieth century is reflected in the work of other Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and Jean Toomer, whose work Fauset promoted as literary editor of *The Crisis*.

## **Historical Framework**

### **Harlem Renaissance Fiction and the New Negro Dilemma**

*Their Eyes* was written in an age of mass black identity crisis. This age was filled with the dominant, yet varying voices of racial uplift shaped by W.E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke. These voices, however, were rejected by the black urban working class. The early 1900s was a period of

budding social movements, in all of which black women's participation was marginalized. The mass black identity crisis of the Harlem Renaissance era proved influential in its literary culture, as archetypes like the tragic mulatto emerged in the novels of authors such as Charles Chesnutt and Nella Larsen. Tragic mulatto characters not only demonstrate the social isolation of bi-racial African Americans, but the self-hatred, psychological damage and intra-racial conflict developed out of slavery and segregation as well. Tragic mulatto characters could also be found in the novels of popular Southern literature authors like William Faulkner. The preoccupation with the representation of race permeated the cultural and literary landscape of black writers. Out of the New Negro dilemma formed a respectability politics. Respectability politics contended with the re-sexualization of black women during the early 1900s, as displayed in Janie's character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Reclaiming sexual freedom for black women was significant because respectability politics encouraged black women to repress their sexuality and hide their bodies to counter myths of the deviant and hypersexual black (female slave) body. Respectability politics requires one to change one's appearance, behavior and standards as a means to gain economic freedom and acceptance into white society. Once accepted, blacks could obtain access to white privilege, so long as they assimilate the standards of the white middle class. Toni Morrison writes in the foreword to *Sula*, "Female freedom always means sexual freedom, even when—especially when—it is seen through the prism of economic freedom "(xiii). So, in order to be respectable, black women must practice assimilation, because blackness offers no socio-economic opportunity; neglect their sexuality or any pleasures that can come from it; and adopt a domestic persona so as not to challenge the power of black or white men. Respectability politics and its effectiveness is controversial within communities of black scholars. For example, historian Evelyn Higginbotham argues that it was respectability that helped to establish black colleges and thriving socio-political

organizations from post-reconstruction well into the early twentieth century. In black women's fiction and black fiction at large, respectability is often portrayed by middle-class, deeply religious, or asexual characters. In many cases, these characters prove to be stifling for the protagonists in the novels. Writers like Hurston, Larsen, Morrison and Walker problematize notions of respectability in their fiction by creating characters that live in societies that promote or reject respectability to reveal some truth about its importance or its threat.

### **Respectability in Harlem Renaissance Fiction**

During the Harlem Renaissance, scholars such as Du Bois and Alaine Locke considered respectability fundamental in achieving social mobility and equal rights. However, respectability was very contested in Harlem Renaissance fiction by black women. For example, as a granddaughter and a wife, Janie wrestles with the constraints respectability places on her behavior and sexuality. Likewise, in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, Helga suppresses her sexuality in male-centered, public and religious spaces. During the Black Women's Literary Renaissance, respectability issues continued to be represented in novels. For example, Morrison's protagonist in *Sula* and Velma Henry in *The Salt Eaters* are deemed rebellious or considered outsiders of their communities because they are not respectable. In this study, respectability is a prevailing ideal perpetuated by mostly black male and civil rights leaders that prioritizes the ability to display behavior and values compatible with the white middle class for acceptance. Nanny's and Janie's characterizations are largely constructed in response to early twentieth century white patriarchal structures, such as gender roles. In addition, Nanny and Janie are challenging respectability and other ideologies informed by racial uplift and the emerging black middle class. Class differences within the black community further complicated constructions of blackness. Should the "elite" be the "face" of the black community? How can one assimilate while maintaining one's cultural

identity in America? Perhaps a more important question is, what do these race and class differences mean for Black women? The central issue of representation for most black writers was to construct an image that was not a replica of whiteness, one that did not exude self-hate or inferiority. Activist and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois best exemplified the dilemma of representation in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois states, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” He explains that blacks have a *double-consciousness*—the African and the American self (Du Bois, qtd. in *Three Negro Classics* 215). He describes blacks or Negroes as having a veil, which gives them a “second sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (Du Bois, qtd. in *Three Negro Classics* 215). Throughout many of the works by Harlem Renaissance authors, Du Bois’ theory and the issue of racial representation at large is reflected in plot and characterization, sometimes in a very political way. This was the case with authors like Wallace Thurman and Richard Wright. Also, black women writers during this era created multidimensional characters who encountered life-shaping experiences and many of those experiences involved intra-racial conflicts such as colorism and sexuality.

### **Literary Analysis: *Their Eyes Were Watching God***

#### **Othermothering: On Marriage and Protection**

The relationship between teenage Janie and Nanny reveals the contention between Black women of the post-reconstruction era and those coming of age during the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston displays the polarity of black female sexuality, as Nanny, a much older black woman from an era of slavery and hypersexualization, coexists in the text with a young and idealistic Janie. Adolescent Janie is representative of a black feminist discourse and embodies the spirit of young black women during the Harlem Renaissance. She rejects the othermothering by Nanny because

of its acquiescence to patriarchy and respectability, which is characterized by her first husband Logan Killicks and second husband Joe Starks, and also practiced by the black middle class to which Hurston belonged, yet with which she often contended in her professional life and her literature.

Although Janie and Nanny represent the conflicting realities surrounding Black women from two different social and historical periods, Nanny's othermothering is nevertheless essential in Janie's development, if only for her understanding of the choices concerning love and marriage she wishes to avoid. Janie was sixteen and had "glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her? Nothing on the place nor in her grandmother's house answered her" (Hurston 14). Janie realizes that her life is different from Nanny's and she knows her path is beyond "the top of the front steps... down to the front gate and up and down the road" (14). She is "looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience...waiting for the world to be made" (14). At the start of the novel, Janie is caught between Nanny's pragmatic approach to marriage and her youthful misconceptions about marriage as a vehicle for love. Janie thinks, regarding her arranged marriage to Logan Killicks: "she would love Logan *after* they were married...Nanny and the old folks had said it...Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant" (25). Janie had reconciled in herself that it was "just so...she felt glad of the *thought*, for then it wouldn't seem so destructive and mouldy..." but she later discovers that "marriage did not make love" (25; 30). Nanny's perspective of marriage and relationships provides her with a cynical perception of love, deeming it secondary if not unrealistic for black women. Janie's desire to chase the feeling of love, the "bursting buds," is met with Nanny's depiction of Janie's "manure pile" kiss with Johnny Taylor (14). Whereas Nanny saw marriage to Logan Killicks as protection, "the vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating

the pear tree”, the marriage, the sexual awakening in Janie (16). Arguably, Nanny knew this, as she “stood there suffering and weeping internally for both of them” (16). Nanny did not wish to rob young Janie of the idealism often associated with love, but she was convinced that Janie’s ignorance of her socioeconomic realities as a black woman would cause her even greater heartache.

Nanny believes she can protect her granddaughter if she is “married off right away,” to “school out and pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry...”. She states, “ ’Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection” (Hurston 15, 18). Nanny is responding to, but also perpetuating, patriarchy. Moreover, Nanny’s othermothering serves two purposes here. First, it aims, with good intention, to introduce Janie to a society that will not respect her body without the protection of a husband. It is important to note, however, that historically, black husbands have never been able to protect their wives physically or financially in the same ways as white husbands. Secondly, Nanny implies, also with good intention, that marriage is insurance and love is secondary to insurance. Love will come later, if it materializes at all. Nanny’s logic points to what many black feminists argue: class-based, patriarchal perceptions of marriage prove detrimental to a woman’s happiness, self-worth and agency. Yet, even facing these challenges, Janie resists Nanny’s staunch pragmatism each time she, with great resilience, enters a new marriage and abandons an old one that does not serve her.

Hurston allows Janie to flourish in maturity and independence. Even more, Janie is not embittered by the imperfections of marriage. She returns home whole, although husbandless and childless. Perhaps Hurston does not allow Janie to conceive on purpose. Hurston might be responding to the muted presentation of sexuality perpetuated by the racial uplift agenda—sex is for marriage and sex must lead to conception. In regard to black women, respectability meant marriage *and* motherhood; surely a woman must have a husband and children—not one without

the other. So, ultimately allowing Janie not to conform to these ideals is subversive—Janie is neither wife nor mother, but her character is one that still demonstrates power.

### **Othermothering: Testifying on Gender, Labor and Power**

Nanny frames the coerced marriage between Janie and Logan Killicks with her own realizations regarding gender and power as a young woman. She explains to Janie that she was born “back due in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat’s one of the hold-backs of slavery” (19). Here, Nanny’s dialogue with Janie alludes to the social condition of women during the antebellum period. This speaks to the absence of agency for black women, on which Nanny further expounds: “Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but there wasn’t no pulpit for me” (19). This passage implies that Nanny may have sympathized with the early Black Feminist leanings of her time from women like Sojourner Truth and Maria Stewart. Nanny desiring to preach about “colored women sittin’ on high,” implies Nanny’s knowledge of and objection to her social condition as a woman and a slave. However, in the same passage, Nanny states, “Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah’d take a broom and a cook-pot and throw a highway through the wilderness for her” (19). Here, motherhood reassigns traditional gender roles and thwarts mobility in the public sphere for Nanny; it robs Nanny of her interests or any further pursuit in the liberation and the social progression of black women. Nanny “taking a broom and cook-pot” with her through the wilderness, implies her primary position to be on the domestic front instead of the political front. However, Nanny “throwing a highway” for herself removes her from the domestic sphere and shows her resilience despite the barriers created for her by race and gender. Despite Nanny’s social position as a former slave, unwed black woman and a domestic, she is economically stable

with her own home, is able to raise her granddaughter alone, and is able to *testify* to Janie through experiential knowledge about race, gender and labor.

Nanny's talk with Janie about the socio-economic oppression of black women calls to mind the American capitalist assembly line. She states:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able to find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothing but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you." (17)

Nanny's use of figurative language demonstrates a black feminist rhetoric concerning labor and power. Her language points to the power and labor dynamics between white and black men on the one hand and black men and black women on the other. In addition, readers will also perceive the gender and labor dynamics between black women and men exemplified in Janie's relationship with her second husband, Joe Starks. As Ducille notes, "it is not mere men who oppress in this novel but ideology—the ponderous presence of an overarching system of patriarchal domination. Janie's first and second husbands, Logan Killicks and Joe Starks, are surely agents of patriarchal oppression, but so is her grandmother" (*Coupling Convention*, 120). However, Nanny is still a powerful othermother as she follows historical and social currents to the best of her knowledge to prepare Janie for what she knows to be threats for black women such as rape and poverty.

Nanny's assembly line metaphor aligns with bell hooks' assertions concerning Black men, patriarchy and sexism in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, as hooks contends that sexism and racism together caused Black women to have the lowest and worst social condition of any group in American society. hooks states, "To suggest that Black men were dehumanized solely as a result of not being able to be patriarchs implies that the subjugation of black women was essential to the black male's development of a positive self-concept. This idea only served to

support a sexist social order” (20). Nanny uses a metaphor of capitalist labor relations, employer (white man), supervisor (Black man), and employee (Black woman), to symbolize the social condition of women. Nanny’s description mirrors an assembly line: “... So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up...but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks...” (Hurstons17). Alice Walker argues for the accuracy of Nanny’s mule and capitalist metaphors in her collection of womanist prose, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*; she states: “Black women are called in the folklore which so aptly identifies one’s status in society, “the mule of the world” because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else refused to carry” (405). As Walker contends, at the end of this symbolic assembly line is the Black woman, “toting” her load, the Black man’s load, the white man’s load and any other remaining “loads.”

### **Nanny and Joe Starks: Characterizing Black Patriarchy and Black Nationalism**

Joe Starks, Janie’s second husband, positions Janie as the “mule” depicted by Nanny, as she picks up and totes the “loads” that are thrown down by Starks and the citizens of Eatonville. Through Janie’s marriage to Starks, Hurston exhibits the ways Black women are suppressed by black patriarchal rule, which also parallels Nanny’s metaphorical assembly line. In Eatonville, Janie’s personhood becomes social and economic capital for Joe; she is both an employee and a possession; she manages the town store and she is “Mrs. Mayor.” In her role as Mrs. Mayor, Janie is as hooks puts it, “socialized out of existence,” as Starks’s desire to appropriate white patriarchy is dependent upon her silence and invisibility (153). Hurston’s characterization of “the people or the folk,” reflects a reality where blacks live in towns like Eatonville, where blackness exists separate from the white middle class and the Black elite, but not without their influences. Eatonville mirrors a type of Black Nationalism but not a romanticized one—not one without complications of intra-racial conflict and black patriarchy.

Starks associates power with his ability to appropriate whiteness, although this is futile as Nanny has revealed blackness as a barrier to power. However, this does not stop Starks from building a white house, distinctive from the smaller houses of the citizens of Eatonville. At Stark's command, Janie moves between trophy and manager, wife and employee. She manages the town store, but must cover her hair and have no part in discussing town business. The more Janie moves out of the domestic sphere, the more silenced she becomes. Stark makes this clear when he publically announces it to the town. When the citizens of Eatonville want to listen "tuh a few words uh encouragement from Mrs. Mayor Starks," Joe responds, "...mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech makin.' Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (Hurston 50-1). Here, Starks adopts white patriarchal ideals of marriage and power. But his attempt to adopt these ideals is in itself illusive, because Stark's power would not reach far outside of Eatonville. As Nanny has already stated to teenage Janie: "Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothing but what we see" (17). Joe's persistence in demonstrating power over his own community symbolizes the black man's refusal to abandon appropriations of white patriarchal power. This is apparent in Stark's use of the phrase "I god." However, these expressions of power often oppress black women and collapse beside white male privilege.

Readers are exposed to the marginalization of women in black communal and political spaces, as Janie's identity evaporates besides Starks' thirst for power. Starks only wishes to command with his "big voice" ... "invested in his new found dignity" as mayor in his white house (51). He informs Janie that *his* "big voice...makes uh big woman outa Janie" (54). Starks' conceptions of marriage and power echo bell hooks' note on black patriarchy: "...the [notion that the] subjugation of black women is essential to the black male's development of a positive self-

concept...serves to support a sexist social order” (20). When Janie and Joe arrive in Eatonville, they meet a community of blacks who are satisfied merely with the ability to survive economically, but who have little hope to improve their condition. With Starks’ ambition, Eatonville acquires a “mayor,” more land, a post office and a general store. Starks’ leadership abilities prompt the citizens of Eatonville to appoint him as mayor. Starks has enough cultural pride and consciousness to identify the needs of his community. However, Stark’s desire to have a “big voice” makes him tyrannical, as he builds a large “white house” in the community, symbolic of whiteness and power. Joe enters Eatonville and assumes a Moses-like persona to save, improve and progress the city and its citizens from socio-economic stagnation and ruin. The common trope of a “Moses” figure throughout African American literature and history complicates racial uplift as it places the power and responsibility of a race on one person. This trope is prevalent throughout decades of African American literature, which exhibits and investigates political ideals and movements of figures such as Booker T. Washington, Du Bois, Locke and later Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

After Starks builds his white house in Eatonville, the citizens no longer regard him as the personable man who had first arrived in mayor-less Eatonville. Starks begins to resemble an untouchable, un-relatable demagogue who appears only to reform situations, things or people that oppose his interpretation of what Eatonville should be. Perhaps Hurston is aware of the delusion of appropriating whiteness and the personal and communal damage caused by asserting its types of power within a racist society. Furthermore, Hurston’s critique of Eatonville suggests that while she appreciates a Black Nationalist community, she does not agree with a socio-economic structure dependent on the oppression of black women. Nanny’s assembly line and Janie’s marriage to Joe Starks work together to confront the relationships between race, gender and power.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that othermothering relationships and testifying theory in black women's fiction illuminate the complexities of black socio-politics and womanhood. As Nanny mothers Janie, readers see how testifying theory (an intersection of fiction and black womanist and feminist ideology) and othermothering work together to critique and reform American capitalism, racism, and sexism. I have also argued that using social theories *created* by black women such as othermothering, testimonial discourse and Black Feminism at large, provides a more accurate reading of black women's fiction than white, European or male-centered criticisms. Most importantly, readers and scholars should look to othermothering relationships to understand black women's fiction and the existing theoretical frameworks that work to conceptualize it. Hurston employs othermothering and testimonial discourse as tools for subversion and protest, not to devalue the institutions of marriage and motherhood or the ideology of racial uplift, but to prompt reformation. The goal for black women writers then, was to not always create characters that dismantle these types of institutions, but to determine ways in which they can exist in them *and* change them. Hurston's work prepares the foundation for an emergence of black womanhood that births self-reliance and sisterhood networks through churches, clubs and colleges within the middle and urban working class, which creates what scholars perceive as black feminist literary studies. Moreover, I have contended that Hurston's *Their Eyes* exemplifies themes of self-love, resistance, community and folk tradition, which are core themes of novels written during the Black Women's Literary Renaissance.

## Chapter Two:

### Othermothering and Self-Love in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

*Sula* is essential to the formation of black feminist literary studies. The centrality of relationships between girls and women in the novel demonstrates the theme of self-love for black women who have been denied its privileges in a racist and sexist society. Historically, black women have taken on the roles of care-giver, nurse, wife and mistress often without their consent and many times to their detriment. Primarily domestic, silent or secretive, these roles can require black women to prioritize the physical, mental and emotional wellness of others above their own. To encourage black women to reclaim self-love, contemporary black women writers create characters that challenge these roles by rebelling against the societies that create them. So, care giver, nurse, wife and mistress become discretionary and subversive instead of restrictive. Women of the black feminist literary tradition such as Morrison, Alice Walker, Sherley Anne Williams and Toni Cade Bambara allow women characters to hold as well as take power—to leave their husbands, children and even careers that do not serve them. Although diverse, contemporary literature by African American women writers is “literature which explores the self, its desires, its longings, its aspirations, and its possibilities, particularly [in the] post-civil rights United States” (Dana A. Williams 71). Readers see this type of ambition in *Sula*, as she is an unapologetically self-serving character; Nel on the other hand, is the opposite. Despite *Sula* and Nel’s differences, they share an intimate friendship, one that surpasses their romantic and familial relationships throughout the novel. However, *Sula*’s love for herself and self-pleasure is greater than even her love for Nel. Seemingly, this is a bad thing. But with *Sula*, Morrison is more concerned with the redemptive power that black women can have from knowing and loving themselves. From *Sula*, readers learn that self-love and the courage that comes along with it empowers one to withstand

judgment, abandonment and conformity without fear of rejection. Readers love and hate Sula because she is both relentless and resilient. Sula loves herself more than Nel, Ajax, the Peace women and most importantly, more than the opinions of the people in the Bottom. This makes her rebellious, but also free. After Sula's relationship with Ajax and Nel's marriage to Jude, the narrator observes:

She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman. And that no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand. There was only her own mood and whim, and if that was all there was, she decided to turn the naked hand toward it, discover it and let others become as intimate with their own selves as she was. (121)

Sula's understanding that her relationships with Ajax and Nel do not compare to the relationship she has with herself exemplifies the spirit of the contemporary black woman writer. After Sula's affair with Jude, she reflects on her friendship with Nel. The narrator states: "She had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing" (119). Although Sula comes to the realization of her identity apart from Nel, their relationship remains the most intimate throughout the novel in comparison to their relationships with men and their families.

Self-love regarding both identity and sexuality are dominant, reoccurring ideas in the socio-politics and literature of black women during the era in which Morrison writes--specifically, during second wave feminism and the Black Arts Movement. In the foreword, Morrison writes, "In much literature a woman's escape from male rule led to regret, misery, if not complete disaster. In *Sula*, I wanted to explore the consequences of what that escape might be, on not only a conventional black society, but on female friendship" (xvi-ii). The fact that the most intimacy is shared between Nel and Sula and not within the relationships with their husbands or lovers offers a critique of heterosexual unions and invites the possibilities of love relationships between black women. The

narrator states, “Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other’s personality...; their friendship was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one’s thoughts from the other’s” (Morrison 53, 83). The language here implies that Sula and Nel have fallen in love with one another, that there is a sense of completeness that is achieved through female friendship that does not exist in Sula and Nel’s relationships with men. At the close of the novel, Nel declares, “All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude...We was girls together, ...O Lord, Sula...girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.” The narrator then notes that Nel’s cry was “fine, loud and long—but had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (174). So, it is Nel’s marriage to Jude that severs the most intimate relationship in her life, which is her friendship with Sula. But equally, it is Sula’s possessiveness and rebellion that provoke her affair with Jude.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The novel exhibits a black feminist discourse in that the protagonist, Sula, is determined to self-identify to the point of rebellion against her community and risking the demise of her intimate friendship with Nel, who “follows the pattern of life society has laid out for her” (Christian, *Black Women Novelists* 26). In the foreword to *Sula*, Toni Morrison discusses the questions that shaped the novel. Those questions were: (1) What is friendship with women when unmediated by men? (Morrison 2) What choices are available to black women outside their own society’s [the black community’s] approval? (3) What are the risks of individualism in a determinedly individualistic, yet racially uniform and socially static, community? These questions suggest that Morrison’s intention was to center the novel on women, their relationships with each other and their identities apart from the opinions of men and community. These types of questions structure Morrison’s critique of the black community and American society at large in its treatment of black women.

Morrison grapples these questions in the 1970 publication, *The Bluest Eye*, which many African Americanists mark as the novel that begins the era of contemporary black women's fiction.

Sula's identity formation frames the novel in a black feminist context, because her self-directedness represents the need for black women to construct their own narratives, histories, identities and especially, their sexuality. However, constructing one's narrative does not negate the importance of community amongst black women. Black women need community to combat silence in white, male and heterosexual circles. For example, it was Barbara Smith's groundbreaking essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" that provided the novel with its first black feminist lesbian reading. Before Smith's analysis, *Sula* was critiqued through a gender-normative, heterosexual lens. Smith writes:

Despite the apparent heterosexuality of the female characters I discovered in re-reading *Sula* that it works as lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel, but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance towards the heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage and the family. Consciously or not, Morrison's work poses both lesbian and feminist questions about Black women's autonomy and their impact upon each other's lives. (Hull et. al.165)

Smith's reading of *Sula* considers the complexity of Nel and Sula's relationship in a way that challenges the more common, heterosexual analysis of the novel. Considering the lesbian impulses within Nel and Sula's relationship noted by Smith, I argue that the relationship displays how black women use friendships with each other to fill various types of relational voids, particularly (or especially) the void of a mothering relationship. So, black women participate in othermothering within friendship in place of a non-existent, damaged or undeveloped maternal relationship with a "blood" mother. Through friendship, Nel and Sula receive the love, acceptance and loyalty lacking in their relationships with their mothers. This is also true for their relationships with their husbands or lovers. Moreover, the love between Sula and Nel is emphasized by the marginalization of men

throughout the narrative. Morrison's treatment of othermothering in *Sula* is unique in that the mothering dynamic is not parental. For instance, Nel and Sula's non-kinship, non-mentor bond aids them in rescuing one another from communal banishment, family and even themselves. Morrison models this type of bond or friendship between black women to illuminate and reimagine conceptions of self-love, family and community. Finally, I will argue that Nel and Sula function better together than apart, because their relationship symbolizes the needed balance of individuality and conventionality necessary to exist in a society and community. The duality and complexity of Nel and Sula's relationship exemplifies Black Feminism's commitment to progression inside and outside the black community while also prioritizing its intentness on self-love. Black women writers' and feminists' allegiance to self-love stems from the expectation placed on black women to emphasize racial uplift over gender and sexual inequalities within their communities. This continues to be an issue in the black community today: uplifting race before gender and not *with* gender. Readers witness black women writers from reconstruction to the civil rights era include this common theme in their work.

## **Historical Framework**

### **The Influence of the Black Arts movement on Contemporary Black Women Writers**

Women writers of the Black Arts movement (BAM) revolutionized literary and socio-political discourses. Eleanor W. Traylor states, "Like any artist inspired by the spirit of the era, the work of women writers engaged the enterprise of 'reversing the power relation between black and white America' (Cheryl Clarke qtd. in Traylor 52). Black literary feminists like Barbara Christian and Audre Lorde shared this primary goal, but were especially concerned with illuminating and challenging the racism, sexism (and heterosexism) that existed within these power relations and their impact on excluding and silencing black women and other underrepresented groups.

Alongside Morrison, other women activists, writers, and poets of the 60s and 70s, were Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, Angela Davis, Sonia Sanchez, Paule Marshall, Sherley Anne Williams and Alice Walker. Traylor further explains the impact and significance of the BAM:

Women writers of the BAM entered every literary genre and constructed a language that took poetry to the taverns, streets, bars, housing projects, libraries, prisons, parks, newly founded theaters, and time-honored churches; language that redirected the conventional expectations of the stage; that interrupted the familiar story told in autobiography; that introduced new discourses, reconstructed the generic expectations of fiction; and that set the premises of theoretically invented essays. (52)

Traylor refers to the Black Arts movement as a project charged with the reimagination of America. She argues that this reimagination required the tracing of two concepts: black power and black art; “one is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics” (Larry Neal qtd. in Traylor 50). Published in the same year as *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Black Woman: An Anthology* “sets the tone for the literature to come and its corresponding social critique” (Williams 71). Bambara and Morrison offer a similar critique of literary tradition, nationalism and feminism in their work. They are both concerned with the physical, mental and spiritual health and empowerment of black women. In the introduction to the 2005 reprinting of *The Black Woman*, Traylor notes that the anthology “explores first the interiority of an in-head, in-the-heart, in-the-gut region of a discovery called the *self*. It tests the desires, the longings, the aspirations of this discovered self with and against its possibilities for respect, growth, fulfillment, and accomplishment” (Traylor qtd. in Williams 71). Bambara and Morrison’s work invited other black women writers into a twenty-year-old, otherwise male-dominated literary discourse. As Barbara Christian argues, “from the late forties to the sixties the plight of the black male was the dominant subject of the black novel” (Christian qtd. in Washington 68). Women of the BAM would later transform not only the black novel, but the whole of black art.

## **Zora Neale Hurston's Influence on the Black Arts Movement**

Hurston's influence on contemporary black women's fiction and more specifically the BAM is exceptional. Traylor states that one of the most "resounding" rediscoveries of the BAM was that of anthropologist, dramatist, theorist, and novelist Zora Neale Hurston. She notes:

Hurston's 1920s/30s community-based fiction—transmitting the oral storytelling voices of its inhabitants, asserting the sovereignty and pervasiveness of its progenitive cultural richness, establishing its worldview through its unique private field of language, portraying its self-empowered women, and critiquing community and wider American impositions on identity that dwarf the possibilities of self-actualization—has impacted the production of fiction by African American women, from Sarah E. Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live* (1969) [to...] Terry McMillian's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992).

Hurston was a visionary in her celebration of blackness and black women during the Harlem Renaissance, a segregationist and male-saturated literary era. She could not have anticipated her influence on the BAM, contemporary black women's fiction and African American literature at large. Nevertheless, her work helped black writers to de-center race relations and respectability from their narratives. Moreover, Hurston inspired writers to return to black culture and community and its reach beyond national borders.

## **Morrison's Impact on Contemporary Black Women's Fiction**

Morrison's fiction confronts and characterizes intra-racial conflicts prompted by assimilation, nationalism, colorism, class and sexuality. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, interrogates the black community and America at large and how it complicates the notion of self and conceptions of beauty, specifically for black women or black girls. Mary Helen Washington argues that it was writers like Morrison, Paule Marshall and Alice Walker that moved black women's fiction beyond "the problem of the tragic mulatta and the social pressure to present respectable, asexual, imitation-white heroines" (179). Although "black is beautiful" rhetoric is often used to describe the 1960s, contemporary black women writers like Morrison often critiqued

black communities for their perpetuation of western ideals of beauty. Williams notes the significance of the novel and its critique of black community:

In the sense that the community adopts two dangerous western concepts—physical beauty and romantic love—without any adaptation of these notions to accommodate blackness, the novel highlights the dangers of an all-out assimilation and integration. And even as the black community has the wherewithal to sustain itself in the novel, this same community's conscious and unconscious willingness to perpetuate the racist idea that white is better destroys the novel's central character Pecola Breedlove. (72)

Williams makes it clear that *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates how ideas about the superiority of whiteness can be perpetuated by blacks and how these types of ideas can result in self-hatred and communal devastation. These issues remain relevant today and continue to be central in her recent novels *Home* and *God Help the Child*. Furthermore, Morrison uses relationships between black women, between black women and men, and between black people and their families and communities to reveal an aesthetic and socio-economic context for the African American experience.

### **Second-Wave and Multicultural Feminism**

*Sula* is feminist in the centrality of black women to its plot, the marginality of love relationships between black men and the near absence and insignificance of whiteness and interracial conflict. This was a daring effort on Morrison's part, but not an unprecedented one. Hurston had already critiqued black patriarchy and marginalized whiteness in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Before Hurston, themes of race relations and black masculinity had, up until 1970, dominated the pages of African American literature. Morrison transparently echoes Hurston's convictions about the realities of black womanhood in Nel and Sula's characterization. The narrator states, "Because each [Nel and Sula] had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about

creating something else to be” (52). Here, the narrator reminds readers of the importance of self-love and definition despite the oppressive barriers of race and gender. Also prevalent here is the relationship between whiteness, maleness, freedom and power. These ideas point to a black feminist rhetoric. *Sula* was published in 1973 during what some consider the height of the second wave of feminism. Second-wave feminism began in the early 1960s in the United States and lasted throughout the early 1980s. First-wave feminism focused primarily on suffrage, while second wave feminism addressed issues of sexuality, family and the workplace. Second-wave feminism also illuminated issues of domestic violence, and brought about the establishment of rape crisis and battered women’s shelters and changes in custody and divorce law.

In “Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism,” Becky Thompson problematizes the framing of the history of the second wave. Thompson argues that the histories of the emergence and contributions of the second wave ignore worldview and women of color. Thompson notes Patricia Hill Collins’ “understanding of women of color as ‘outsiders within’ and Barbara Smith’s concept of ‘the simultaneity of oppressions’ as theoretical guideposts for multiracial feminism” (335;7). Smith’s and Collins’ observations reaffirm the necessity and work of Black Feminism and black women’s fiction—to demonstrate that Black women are other in and outside of their homes and communities, and uniquely oppressed in terms of both race and gender. In addition, they are asexualized and hypersexualized in ways uncommon to black and white men and white women. I assert that black women writers, who were most often black feminists as well, instigated social change during the contemporary era by: (1) creating black female protagonists and characters that illuminate patriarchy, racism and oppression transnationally; (2) thematically challenging and subverting gender roles and ideals of marriage and motherhood; (3) placing black female characters in leadership roles in public spheres such as

universities, workplaces and most importantly, socio-political activism; (4) creating narratives where black men and whites are absent or de-centered; and (5) replacing damaged heterosexual relationships with self-nurturing homosexual and homoerotic relationships between black women characters. Like Hurston before her, Morrison employs these tools for social change in her literature. Walker would also continue in Hurston's tradition of afrocentrist folk sensibility in her 1980's novel *The Color Purple*.

## **Literary Analysis**

### **Community in Connection to Sula and Nel's Friendship**

Sula and Nel's relationship demonstrates balance and represents the relationship between self-direction (Sula) and conformity prompted by pressures of a community or society (Nel). Sula and Nel function better together than apart, because they are opposites of one another. Their home lives reflect two different worlds with different sets of rules. The narrator notes that Nel "sat on the steps of her back porch surrounded by the high silence of her mother's incredibly orderly house, feeling the neatness pointing at her back...", while Sula is "wedged into a household of throbbing disorder constantly awry with things, people, voices and slamming doors" (Morrison 51;52). Nel provides structure and boundaries for Sula, but Sula reminds Nel of the rebellion needed to prevent being swallowed up by conformity. Hortense Spillers notes the significance of Sula's rebellion in her analysis of the novel:

If we identify *Sula* as a kind of countermythology, we are saying that she is no longer bound by a rigid pattern of predictions, predilections, and anticipations. Even though she is a character in the novel, her strategic place as *potential being* might argue that subversion itself—lawbreaking—is an aspect of liberation that women confront from its various angles, in its different guises. Sula's outlawry may not be the best kind, but that she has the will toward rebellion itself is the stunning idea. (Spillers qtd. in Patterson 98)

Ironically, Sula's rebellion and "evilness" are intricately connected to the growth and development of the Bottom. Sula's evilness transforms the citizens of the Bottom in "accountable, yet mysterious ways." Sula becomes the "source of their personal misfortune" and they begin to "protect and love one another, cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children and repair their homes" (Morrison 117). Ironically, it is Sula's bad behavior that inspires her neighbors to be good. Morrison plays on morality and appropriateness here, by allowing Sula's apparent evil to illuminate the "hidden evils" within the Bottom, causing its citizens to change. Sula's "evils"—her promiscuity and brazenness—are so apparent that she becomes a standard by which the townspeople measure their own evil; their evil may be bad but, at least it's not *as bad* as Sula's. They are inspired to "right their wrongs" as not to be compared to Sula. Involuntarily, Sula becomes an anti-model, and most interestingly, she is least affected by her own decisions. It is the community that is most affected by Sula's rebellion.

Morrison allows two girls from different backgrounds to share a deep friendship to illustrate the convoluted relationship between community and the individual, and even more, the necessity of rebellion and how society can impede self-discovery. In *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*, Barbara Christian writes, "... the theme is but a sign of all that the novel explores, for the search for self is continually thwarted by the society from which Sula Peace comes...the novel is not only about Nel Wright and Sula Peace, it is emphatically about the culture that spawns them" (153). I agree with Christian, as Morrison spends the first two chapters of the novel solely introducing readers to the Bottom, to Medallion and to its citizens. Agnes Suranyi concurs with this point in her article, "*The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*: Black Female Experience from Childhood to Womanhood":

Morrison projects the history of the obliteration of a black community, and then reconstructs its history chronologically in retrospect. The prologue of the novel

focuses on specificity and difference, the history of the community, nostalgia for its past, the violence done to it, and the consequences of that violence, predicting the future that brings total annihilation. (17)

Following Christian's and Suranyi's ideas, it is clear that Medallion serves as a socio-physical barrier to Nel and Sula. Medallion is so central to the novel that it functions as a character within the text, so that the community's survival is integrally related to the friendship between Nel and Sula (Christian 154). So, Nel and Sula's relationship is connected to Medallion in that the community personifies a type of power able to shape as well as interfere with Nel's and Sula's separate identities, their relationship with each other and their relationships with their families and fellow citizens of Medallion.

### **Distant Mothers and Absent Fathers**

In the novel, parents seem to provide poor or no direction into proper womanhood due to their toxicity, distance or absence. Many readers might understand "proper womanhood" and "direction" within the context of western morality, western social etiquette and most importantly, traditional western gender roles. Within this context, readers might expect the Peace women to arise out of their rebellion to become ladies, repent for their fatherless and husbandless homes to later find happiness through marriage. Furthermore, this expectation posits that the Peace women's social conformity will mend their relationships as mothers and daughters, and bring them into proper standing in society. Instead, Sula is given manlove by an abandoned grandmother and widowed mother, who provide for her a model of the type of woman she might become. Similarly, Helene Wright models for Nel the type of monotonous, middle-class woman she *is* to become.

Nel and Sula become friends during early adolescence and it is at this stage that readers encounter the parents and relatives--or lack thereof--that have influenced them. The narrator notes: "Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant

mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't); they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for" (Morrison 52). The passage suggests that Nel and Sula need each other "to grow on" because their parents are physically and emotionally unavailable. Their friendship serves as a vehicle for the kind of unconditional love typically (or traditionally) shared between a parent and child. This love is seemingly unconditional as Nel and Sula share the most consistent and passionate relationship in the text.

Neither Ajax nor Jude can provide the type of intimacy shared between Nel and Sula. Their bond lingers over a 10-year separation, an affair and even Sula's death.

Nel realizes after Sula and Jude's affair: "Not only did men leave and children grow up and die, but even the misery didn't last" (Morrison 108). The motif of abrupt and continual abandonment by husbands, lovers and fathers is seen in almost all of the heterosexual relationships in the novel. For example, Sula exclaims to Nel, "Every man I ever knew left his children." Nel replies, "Some were taken." "Wrong, Nellie. The word is 'left.'" (Morrison 43). By "taken," Nel is referring to men leaving by death, although this seems to be no exception for Sula. When seaman Wiley Wright takes his bride Helene to Medallion, his "long absences become bearable" only after Nel is born nine years into the marriage. Helene then finds "comfort and purpose in life" through motherhood, yet establishes no relationship with Nel. The narrator provides several accounts of Helene's reminder to Nell to pull her "flat nose." This behavior inadvertently teaches Nel to feel inferior and self-conscious about her appearance. But a rebellious Sula models comfort and escape for Nel from the mediocrity and conformity placed upon her by Helene, whose only goal was to get "far enough away" from the Sundown House and "any sign of her [prostitute] mother's wild blood" (Morrison 18).

After readers meet the Wright and Peace women, Nel's and Sula's relational voids become explicable, as do their contrasting personalities. The Peace and Wright women's sexualities are displayed in extremes--hypersexual or asexual--and overall, parenting appears more dutiful than loving. These circumstances fit well with Morrison's theme of self-love, even to the point of perceived family chaos and communal rejection. Nel's and Sula's mothers and grandmothers appear distant, cold and relentlessly pragmatic. For example, Hannah proclaims that she loves Sula, but she just doesn't *like* her. Hannah, Patsy and Valentine use several negative phrases and connotations to describe motherhood and their relationship with their children:

They a pain.  
Yeh. Wish I'd listened to mamma. She told me not to have 'em too soon.  
Any time atall is too soon for me.  
...Be glad when Rudy is growed and gone.  
...Can't help loving your own child  
Well Hester grown now and I can't say love is exactly what I feel.  
Sure you do. You love her, like I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference. (Morrison 57)

Hannah's, Patsy's and Valentine's dislike for their children works to dispel the myth of joy and completeness that comes with motherhood. This hard truth is overheard by Sula, and sends her "flying up the stairs." It is Nel's call that "pulls Sula away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight" (57). Eva's mothering relationship with Hannah displays the same distance and coldness expressed by Hannah towards Sula. Hannah asks Eva, "Mamma did you love us?" Eva replies, "No I don't reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin'" (Morrison 65). Hannah is referring to an emotional bond and fondness that supposedly develops between a mother and child. Ironically, Eva understands this and realizes that this emotional bond and fondness do not exist in her relationship with her daughter. However, this does not prevent her from becoming angry and taking Hannah's inquiry as a sign of ungratefulness.

## **Mothering and Sexual Freedom in Sula**

Hannah and Eva are vital to Sula's development and understanding of womanhood and sexuality. Hannah, is unapologetically, sexually free. She "simply refused to live without the attentions of a man, and after Rekus' death had a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors...she would fuck practically anything..." (Morrison 43-4). Hannah values her sexual freedom over communal opinion and even friendships. Moreover, she has no desire to form relationships with her sexual partners. Hannah's rebellion causes her to be both disliked and envied in Medallion—disliked because her sexual relationships with married men are judged morally wrong and envied because she pursues pleasure and exercises freedom without fear of that judgment. The narrator states:

Hannah exasperated the women in the town—the "good" women, who said, "One thing I can't stand is a nasty woman": the whores, who were hard put to find trade among black men anyway and who resented Hannah's generosity; the middling women, who had both husbands and affairs, because Hannah seemed too unlike them, having no passion attached to her relationships and being wholly incapable of jealousy. (Morrison 44)

Hannah passes on to Sula more than rebellion; she passes on indifference to relationships. The Peace women cannot be controlled by the expectations of gender roles or even the prospect of marriage and motherhood. Whether the women of Medallion are envious of or disgusted by the Peace women, Eva's, Hannah's and Sula's behavior involuntarily prompts (communal) self-reflection or transformation. However, the Peace women do not inspire this type of change among themselves. For example, Hannah models rebellion and sexual freedom for Sula and in turn, Sula becomes a similar type of woman driven by pleasure with disregard for the communal and familial consequences of her decisions. In the foreword to the novel, Morrison explains the significance of Hannah's sexual freedom and its centrality to the novel:

The sexual freedom of Hannah Peace was my entrance into the story, constructed from shreds of memory about the way local women regarded a certain kind of female—envy coupled with amused approbation. Against her fairly modest claims to personal liberty are placed conventional and archaic ones: Eva’s physical sacrifices for economic freedom; Nel’s accommodation to the protection marriage promises; Sula’s resistance to either sacrifice or accommodation (Morrison xiii).

Hannah, Eva, Sula and Nel represent different types of women: sacrificial, accommodating and rebellious. These traits are required not only for women to survive in Medallion, but in any community. Furthermore, these attributes could be embodied by one woman; instead, Morrison creates three individual characters to represent them. This illuminates the difficulties and expectations of gender roles placed on women broadly in their communities, and more specifically, in their relationships with men and children; Most important here is that readers understand the struggle to simultaneously possess these traits and to nurture self.

Hannah’s sexual freedom shapes Sula’s perception of sex and its disassociation from love and relationship. Hannah was a “daylight lover...” and it was only once that “Sula came home from school and found her mother in bed, curled spoon in the arms of a man” (Morrison 44). The rarity of affection between Hannah and her sexual partners demonstrates a self-serving pursuit of pleasure. A similar dynamic of disassociation of love from relationship exists between Eva and Hannah, as the poverty and abandonment Eva experiences during young motherhood validates her dutiful and not affectionate bond with her children. For this reason, Eva only models the physical responsibility of motherhood for Hannah, and in turn Hannah repeats instead of counters this behavior with Sula. Arguably, Hannah could not counter this behavior with Sula, because she has not had an example of affectionate mothering. As an adolescent, Sula encounters Hannah’s affairs with the men and husbands of Medallion. Hannah beds her lovers in the crowded Peace family home and sometimes in the room where Sula slept with her, disconnecting privacy and intimacy

from a sexual act. This reinforces for adolescent Sula that sex is “unremarkable.” The narrator states:

Seeing her step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable. Outside the house where children giggled about underwear, the message was different. So she watched her mother’s face and the faces of the men when they opened the pantry door and made up her own mind. (Morrison 44).

Sula’s understanding of sexuality is shaped by Hannah’s insistence on blurring normative constructs of gender and power. With no father or man present in the Peace household, Sula’s conception of masculinity and manhood are shaped by her mother and grandmother. The Peace women’s possession of manlove and sexual freedom allows them to exist for themselves, not for men or children. This is important as women stereotypically construct their identities in relationship to their husbands, lovers and children.

### **The Marginality of Men and the Masculine Woman in *Sula***

Morrison attributes traditionally masculine attributes to the Peace women by allowing them to be self-serving, and to form sexual, non-emotional and non-romantic relationships with men. In this way, the Peace women participate in the motif of abandonment; they can abandon men sexually, and refuse them romantically. Still, Morrison allows Nel to conform to the standards of society through marriage, but the unsuccessful union works as a critique of the institution and reemphasizes the solidarity of Nel and Sula’s relationship. Nel and Jude’s marriage models traditionalism and the expectations of men in marriage and reveals the self-serving and patriarchal nature of the institution. For example, Jude “needed some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply...And if he were to be a man, that someone could no longer be his mother...” (82). Meanwhile, while Nel becomes a wife and mother, Sula is trying the [married men] out and

discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow...” (115). Although Sula appears morally and sexually reckless, it is Nel who is abandoned by her husband Jude.

The Peace household contains no men to fill the roles of husband and father. The men that frequent the households function in the capacity of comrade to Eva and lover to Hannah. The motif of abandonment is found in every heterosexual relationship in the novel apart from the absent and brief account of Pearl Peace, who writes “unremarkable letters” about the everyday details of marriage and motherhood. Still, she is absent and provides no physical example of the “appropriate” roles of wife and mother for Sula, Eva and Hannah. For the remaining Peace women, men are objects that exist to provide pleasure, whether that pleasure be platonic or sexual. There is no talk of desire for relationship or companionship. Even Sula’s romantic encounter with Ajax happens by chance, and develops out of her own pleasure-based decision. As for Eva, BoyBoy Peace abandons her while her three children are small. This leaves the tasks of providing, protecting and childrearing to Eva. Provision and protection are traditionally the familial responsibilities of a man. However, Morrison allows Eva, a disabled widow, to provide leadership and sacrifice for her family. The name BoyBoy strips Eva’s husband of manhood, maturity and masculinity, which also seem to be missing characteristics of her youngest son, Plum. Eva uses this logic of unrealized manhood to justify suffocating Plum. Plum’s service in World War I does not make him masculine enough to survive in the Peace household, at least not in comparison to the “manlove” embodied by the Peace women.

### **Significance of Manlove in *Sula***

Manlove is not a word in the English language and the context in which the narrator uses the term implies that it is both masculine and gender neutral—because the Peace women and their

male visitors possess it. However, it also implies that the Peace women themselves can love like men. The narrator notes:

With the exception of BoyBoy, those Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. Probably, people said, because there were no men in the house, no men to run it. But actually that was not true. The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake...[Eva] argued with [the men] with such an absence of bile, such a concentration of manlove, that they felt their convictions solidified by her disagreement. (41-2)

Manlove is a word created to describe the Peace women's attitude towards love as well as their expression of it. Manlove is not dependent upon a man's presence, because "there were no men in the house, no men to run it." Eva does not need the presence of a man to possess or express manlove. She *passed this down* to her daughters--to know the desires of men, which is not limited to sexuality. Eva's "absence of bile" refers to the lack of emotion or traditionally feminine behaviors exhibited by women with and in conversation with men. Because the Peace women blur gender roles and privileges, they behave with men as if they are men themselves. The Peace women have two distinct characteristics that allow them to possess manlove: (1) They are unafraid of rejection and abandonment. For example, Hannah and Sula have multiple sexual partners without the care or prospect of a romantic relationship. (2) They are indifferent, defiant and non-conformist, which empowers them to speak and act freely without fear of judgment. These characteristics are important because they align with male privilege and stereotypically align with male perspectives on love, sex and relationships with women. So, the possession of manlove, along with defiance, indifference and sexual freedom, serve as acts of rebellion.

### **Debunking the Plight of the Black Man: Black Feminist Rhetoric in *Sula***

Sula's perception of the black man's socio-economic condition demonstrates the work of black women writers and feminists to, first, illuminate black male privilege, and second, to place the struggles of black men and women on the same level. The burdensome and "emasculated"

plight of the black man (because he could not have the privileges or power of the white man) in African American politics and culture is a dominant theme in early to mid-twentieth century African American literature. Debunking and challenging this plight is not to ignore or devalue the struggles of black men, but to include and acknowledge that black women have equal and arguably worse struggles. Morrison uses a conversation between Nel, Sula and Jude to address this issue. Jude returns from work to complain about his position and treatment by his white employer. Sula responds to Jude's complaint by dismissing it, noting the fear and fixation given to black men by white men and black women and children. She contends:

I don't know what the fuss is about. I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed...Colored women worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang on to your cuffs. Even little children—white and black, boys and girls—spend all their childhood eating their hearts out 'cause they think you don't love them. And if that ain't enough, you love yourselves. Nothing in this world loves a black man more than another black man...So. It looks to me like you the envy of the world. (104).

The scene opens with the stereotypical response to a husband's "hard day at work." Nel says, "Bad day, honey?" And Jude continues as expected, discussing the troubles of racism and economic oppression put on to him by the white man. Instead of the dialogue ending with Nel's solace and affirmation of Jude's work ethic and manhood, Sula dismantles the grievance.

Despite Jude's depressing work narrative, Sula offers no "commiseration" and interjects before Nel can "excrete it." (Morrison 103). It is also important to note that Sula's commentary on the gender, race and sexual dynamics of black men takes place in a private, domestic space—a kitchen, as opposed to a public space, such as an office or political platform. However, Sula's monologue suggest that private spaces often occupied by women are as socio-politically significant and impactful as public spaces typically occupied by men. Moreover, Sula is seemingly more confident

and informed on race, sex and male privilege than Jude—who displays a fragile ego in need of rescue from a docile Nel.

### **Rebellion and Family Dynamics in Sula**

Family dynamics within the Peace home appear toxic, whereas dynamics within the Wright household appear fragmented, yet conformist. This causes Sula and Nel to be “solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them...” (Morrison 51). The Peace mothers remain unmarried or widowed, and experience abandonment by their husbands and by their children’s fathers. Many would regard this type of home as dysfunctional and assume that any children produced in such a household would be emotionally damaged. However, Sula is born into a rebellious, matriarchal home with a solid, yet controversial dose of self-worth. While many might regard Sula as damaged, the narrator suggests otherwise:

Sula was distinctly different. Eva’s arrogance and Hannah’s self-indulgence merged in her and, with a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. (Morrison 118)

The language in the narrator’s description of Sula’s personality and the atmosphere in her home imply a black feminist rhetoric. There is no mention of husbands or fathers in the shaping of Sula’s personality; however, Sula receives arrogance and self-indulgence, two traditionally masculine personality traits, from her mother, Hannah, and grandmother, Eva.

The absence of men does not leave the Peace women helpless or depressed. They are resilient, and selfish, yet willing to make sacrifices for their children. But the Peace women, particularly Eva and Hannah, believe that the clothing, feeding and security of their children compensated for the lack of relationship with them. For example, when Hannah asks Eva if she ever loved her, Eva replies, “You settin’ here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Hannah replies, I didn’t mean that...I know you fed us. I was talkin’ ‘bout something else...like

did you ever you know, play with us?” (Morrison 68). Hannah is inquiring about the time required to build a relationship, not the parental duty of security. But Eva prioritized survival over personal time with her children. As the narrator states: “The children needed her; she needed money, and needed to get on with her life. But the demands of feeding her three children were so acute she had to postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and the energy” (Morrison 32). Poverty and abandonment emphasize the ways in which society inhibits the individual. But more specifically, it illuminates a man’s freedom to enter and exit relationships and parenthood in ways women cannot.

There is little mention of the relationships between the estranged husbands or lovers of the Peace and Wright women other than the backstory provided by the narrator, which usually focuses on when the estranged men abandoned the mothers or when the men died. Other dynamics, such as the way in which the Wright and Peace women interact with each other, are self-serving and self-directed. Helene chooses assimilation and conformity, as she feels it is the only way to avoid the shadow of hypersexuality and prostitution. This makes her self-directed because she exercises the freedom to *choose* conformity, despite its suppression of individuality. She is selfish because she expects Nel to follow the same path.

Eva, Hannah and Sula are driven by their individual desires without a thought for how they might affect others. This is a privilege that Nel refuses, but not without the influence of her mother Helene Wright, her religious grandmother Cecile and the troubled legacy of Helene’s estranged, creole prostitute mother, Rochelle. When it came to Nel’s relationship to her parents, her husband Jude reflects: “Except for an occasional leadership role with Sula, she [Nel] had no aggression. Her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had” (Morrison 83). Sula exists, as the passage suggests, to make Nel shine despite her parents’

insistence on monotony. Helene's constant reminder for Nel to pull her nose with the clothespin symbolizes self-hatred and the measures black women will take to achieve western ideals of beauty. This parallels Pecola's inferiority concerning her eye and skin color in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison makes the Peace women selfish and single to fit with the motif of rebellion throughout the novel. Traditional patterns of family dynamics (between mother and daughter, husband and wife) and social institutions such as marriage or other notions of conformity are challenged throughout the novel and simply do not fit within the lives of the Peace and Wright women, although Helene manages to stuff as much conformity as possible into her and Nel's world. Eva, Hannah and Sula care little for the judgements of the citizens of Medallion or their insistent pressure for the Peace women to marry, settle down and assume traditional gender roles. For example, fear of judgment or banishment does not stop Hannah and Sula's "sex-capades" with the husbands of Medallion. Neither does it interfere with Sula's affair with Jude. The narrator notes, "Hannah had been a nuisance, but she was complimenting the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands" (115). The logic here is paradoxical, in that the wives feel complimented because Hannah desires and beds their husbands. However, later in the novel Eva scolds the almost 30-year-old Sula for being unmarried and childless, despite the audience's perception that she has unsuccessfully filled the roles of wife and mother herself. Eva asks Sula, "When you gone get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you." Sula replies, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (Morrison 92). Again, Sula chooses neither sacrifice nor accommodation, a choice certainly framed by Eva's and Hannah's examples.

## **Conclusion**

*Sula* exemplifies the centrality of relationships between girls and women and demonstrates the theme of self-love and self-definition within fiction by contemporary African American

women writers. The most significant point of the novel is the importance of female friendship and relationships between black women, apart from their relationships with men and children. Nel's and Sula's insufficient relationships with their husbands and lovers offer a critique of heterosexual unions and invite the possibilities of love relationships between black women. Moreover, as I have argued in this chapter, Nel and Sula's relationship displays how black women use friendships with each other to fill various types of relational voids, especially the void of a mothering relationship. Morrison's boldness in exploring intimacy between black women later invites contemporary African American women writers to construct narratives with homoerotic and homosexual relationships between black women, as seen in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Also, Morrison creates three individual women characters to represent sacrifice, rebellion and accommodation to illuminate the expectations of conformity placed on black women within their communities.

### Chapter Three:

#### Othermothering and Healing in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*

*The Salt Eaters* introduces the third phase in contemporary African American women's literature, "the journey of healing through inquiry" (Dana Williams 75). In chapter two, I examined how Morrison's *Sula* demonstrates the significance of self-love or "the longing for self-hood," (75). *The Salt Eaters*, published in 1980, does not abandon notions of self-love, but transcends them to examine mental and spiritual healing. Toni Cade Bambara is among several women authors across literary genres that use their writings to heal self and community. Gay Wilentz argues this healing aims to resolve what she refers to as "socially constructed disease." In *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Disease*, Wilentz names Bambara, Jamaican Erna Brodber, Native American Leslie Marmon Silko, Maori Keri Hulme and Jewish American Jo Sinclair as authors—"cultural workers", that use the novel "as a means of building upon storytelling traditions so important to indigenous rituals of healing" (Wilentz qtd. in Griffin 262). Healing of self and community are key issues in Black Feminist Studies. More specifically, black feminists are interested in the relationship between convalescence and political resistance. bell hooks for example, elaborates on this subject in her book, *Sisters of the Yam: black women and self-recovery*. In *Sisters of the Yam*, hooks examines the relationship between racism, sexism and the emotional health of black women. Likewise, in *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara explores these relationships with the protagonist Velma, a political activist that has attempted suicide by slashing her wrists and sticking her head in her kitchen oven. It is the disillusionment of political activism and the gravity of sexism and racism that triggers Velma's suicide.

This chapter focuses on the othermothering network of Velma, faith healer Minnie Ransom and ancestral spirit guide Old Wife. This network reflects the novel's theme of community and

connectedness as well as its motifs of Christio-Conjure and the ancestral matriarchal past. In this chapter, Christio-Conjure is defined as the integration of African and Western spiritual and healing traditions. Also, the ancestral matriarchal past functions as a singular or group of ancestral spirits that employ Christio-Conjure to provide physical, spiritual and sociopolitical healing. I evaluate racism and sexism through the lens of Wilentz' theory concerning socially constructed diseases. In addition, my examination of Christio-Conjure aligns with Wilentz theory of women writers as cultural workers who incorporate indigenous rituals of healing in their narratives as a form of activism. Finally, the theoretical framework of this chapter is taken from Akasha Gloria Hull's *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women*, which is a textual tribute to Toni Cade Bambara. *Soul Talk* investigates the new spirituality of African American women through three interlocking dimensions: politics, spiritual consciousness and creativity. Beside Hull's theory of new spirituality, I examine the relationships between second-wave Black Feminism, conjuring and black women's fiction.

### **Historical Framework**

*The Salt Eaters* addresses and critiques American socio-political views and the historic currents that have created and transformed them. Bambara is interested in how these views and historical moments have affected the physical and spiritual health of the African American community. Although *The Salt Eaters* was published in 1980, the novel is set in the late 1970s and focuses on the life of protagonist Velma Henry and her neighbors of Claybourne, Georgia --many who are veterans of the civil rights, feminist and anti-war movements. These socio-political movements occurred during the 1960s and 70s. The 1960s brought about the assassination of many key civil rights and political leaders such as: President John F. Kennedy, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Wiley Evers and Malcolm X. In addition,

U.S. involvement peaked during the Vietnam War during the 1960s until America exited the war in 1973. Since 1954, black American soldiers had fought in Vietnam on behalf of the U.S. which had denied them full citizenship rights. Jim Crow segregation ended in 1964 and the following year the Voting Rights Act was passed. A more radical approach to social justice and equality erupted with the founding of The Black Panther Party in 1966 and the urban revolts in Detroit, Newark and Chicago followed in 1967. The civil rights era reached its climax as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968. Two years after King's passing, academia would welcome its first Department of Black Studies at San Francisco State in 1970. 1970 marked the contemporary era of black women writers as well as the end of the civil rights era in American history. Exclusion from the civil rights and women's movement led black women to create their own organizations such as The National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) and The Combahee River Collective (CRC).

Although Black Studies had made its way to academia, black women remained absent from the American literary canon. Second-wave Black Feminists like Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, June Jordan and Gloria Hull rescued black women writers from invisibility. Between 1980 and 1983, many works by black women writers such as Harriet Wilson, Frances Harper, Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison would be anthologized or edited by Smith, Lorde, and other members of the Kitchen Table: Woman of Color Press. The NBFO and CRC inspired several foundational texts in Black Feminist and Black Feminist literary studies such as Bambara's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition* (1980) and Smith's *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983).

## **The National Black Feminist Organization**

In 1973, Florynce Kennedy, Margaret Sloan and Doris Wright formed the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). The organization emerged to distinguish itself from the dominant feminist movement, which primarily reflected the concerns of white middle class women. Also, black women needed to foreground their sociopolitical ideals outside of the sexist structures of racial uplift ideology. According to Deborah Gray White, the NBFO “more than any other organization in the century...launched a frontal assault on sexism and racism. More than 400 women from various class backgrounds attended the organization’s first conference in New York” (White qtd. in Thompson 340). The organization’s goal is best expressed in their 1973 Statement of Purpose notes:

the Movement has been characterized as the exclusive property of so-called white middle-class women and any black women involved in this movement have been seen as selling out, dividing the race, and an assortment of nonsensical epithets. Black feminists resent these charges and have therefore established The National Black Feminist Organization, in order to address ourselves to the particular and specific needs of the larger, but almost cast-aside half of the black race in Amerikkka, the black woman... Black women have suffered cruelly in this society from living the phenomenon of being black and female, in a country that is *both* racist and sexist...Because we live in a patriarchy, we have allowed a premium to be put on black male suffering. No one of us would minimize the pain or hardship or the cruel and inhumane treatment experienced by the black man. But history, past or present, rarely deals with the malicious abuse put upon the black woman. (*Personal Statement*. U of Michigan-Dearborn Library Resource)

The NBFO created a political space for black women which would inspire many of its prominent members such as Alice Walker and Barbara Smith to create spaces for Black Feminist Literary studies in academia. In *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara critiques the politics of the civil rights and feminist movements, as well as organizations like the NBFO and CRC. Moreover, Bambara creates characters like Velma, a leader in the feminist group Women for Action, which provides

readers with a metaphorical look of the nuances, successes and failures of these types of organizations.

### **The Combahee River Collective**

In 1974, several members broke away from the NBFO to form the Combahee River Collective (CRC), a Boston-based organization founded by black feminists and lesbians. CRC is named after a river in South Carolina where Harriet Tubman led 750 slaves to freedom. Thompson credits the Combahee River collective for providing “the blueprint” for Black Feminism. The CRC differed from the NBFO in that it explored the interaction of multiple oppressions, including racism, sexism and most distinctly, heterosexism. The organization’s mission is best articulated in its personal statement:

we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women, we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face (Hull et.al 13).

As expressed in their personal statement, CRC held a transnational approach to political resistance in that their mission included “all women of color.” Likewise, their commitment to exposing class oppression revealed its relation to racism and sexism. Finally, the organization’s inclusion of black lesbians re-conceptualized ideas of sexuality, politics and power, which later inspired novels like Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*.

### **CRC and Othermothering through Consciousness-Raising Groups**

One of the most effective tools used by the Combahee River Collective was the creation of consciousness-raising (CR) groups. These groups consisted of women from various races, ethnicities and classes. Within these groups, women embraced transnationalism and multiethnic

feminism. During the 1970s, “women of color were involved on three fronts—working with white-dominated feminist groups; forming women’s caucuses in existing mixed-gender organizations; and developing autonomous Black, Latina, Native American, and Asian feminist organizations” (Thompson 338). *The Salt Eaters*, set in the late 1970s, reflect these important political and historical moments with the presentation of the multiethnic feminist group Seven Sisters, who present plays at various political and cultural events across the country. Gloria Hull, a leading scholar on Toni Cade Bambara and spirituality in Black Women’s Studies states: “As a black feminist, I had been more central—generating theory and articles and working as a member of the Combahee River Collective Retreat Group, an association of fifteen to twenty African American women committed to consciousness-raising and organizing” (Hull, *Soul Talk* 24-5). A CR group’s primary goal is to heal its participants and their respective communities from the effects of racism, sexism and other social ills derived from white supremacy and imperialism locally and nationally to impact Third World women and oppressed peoples globally. This goal makes members of CR groups cultural workers. CR groups encouraged “personal sharing, risk-taking, and involvement, which are essential for getting at how each of us is racist in a daily way; and it encourages the “personal” change that makes political transformation and action possible” (Hull et al 52). CR groups are also a form of othermothering, because they consist of small, intimate groups of non-kinship women gathered with the purpose of healing themselves and their communities from socially constructed diseases. Furthermore, CR groups are rooted in the ways women communicate with one another. For example, In “Face-to-Face, Day to Day—Racism CR”, black feminists Tia Cross, Freada Klein, and Barbara and Beverly Smith, explain CR is “based on the ways women have always talked and listened to each other...doing CR is based upon the fact that as a person you simply cannot do political action without personal interaction” (Hull, et al. 52-3). With its

commitment to expose racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of oppression that prevail within capitalism and other economic structures, the Combahee River Collective became catalysts in community organizing.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this chapter is taken from *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women*, in which Hull explores spirituality and its emergence within contemporary black women's fiction. According to Hull, *Soul Talk* "brings together three interlocking dimensions:

1.[Politics] the heightened political and social awareness of the civil rights and feminist movements, 2.[Spirituality] a spiritual consciousness that melds black American traditions such as Christian prayer and ancestral reverence with New Age modalities such as crystal work and self-help metaphysics, and 3.[Creativity] enhanced creativity, especially as represented by the outburst of literature by Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Lucille Clifton, Octavia Butler, Audre Lorde... and others—literature that foregrounds supernatural material, viscerally impacting an unprecedented number of readers" (2).

The first interlocking dimension refers to political consciousness, which is an awareness of race, gender, and economics and their relationships to power and privilege. Most importantly, political consciousness is synonymous to (political) resistance. Secondly, spiritual consciousness is the "relationship with the realm of spirit, with the invisibly permeating, ultimately positive, divine, and evolutionary energies that give rise to and sustain all that exists" (Hull 2). Lastly, Hull states that creativity is "what results when the ideas, originality, and beauty we apprehend in the world of spirit" are concretely expressed through art and inspired daily living, such as a poem, painting, or novel, [or] an original solution to one of our children's problems... (Hull 2). Bambara exhibits these dimensions in *The Salt Eaters* using theme and characterization. For example, Velma, the protagonist is politically conscious, because she is an activist, environmentalist (anti-nuclear energy) and community organizer. But she is not a "whole" character until she gains spiritual

consciousness, which notably occurs through othermothering. Bambara makes a strong point to connect politics with spirituality and she does so creatively, in novel form.

*The Salt Eaters* is published in 1980, the same year Hull marks as a pivotal year for black women. During this time, black women's understanding of womanhood, community, politics and wellness, undergo transformation. Hull elaborates:

Around 1980 an outburst of spirituality concomitantly erupted among African American women, just when the civil rights and the early ferment of the feminist movement were subsiding. This upsurge of spirituality continued from the wave of these two political movements and rippled forward as an extension of them... Black women embraced practices associated with the New Age, such as crystal work, Eastern religions, and metaphysics, and laid them alongside more traditional, culturally derived religions and spiritual foundations... authors such as Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Alice Walker... writing captured unprecedented public attention because of its blend of racial-feminist-political realism and spiritual-supernatural awareness. What African American women were creating added political dimension to the generally apolitical spiritual movement and contributed immensely to a higher collective spiritual consciousness. (Hull, *Soul Talk* 24; 23).

*The Salt Eaters* reflects this “outburst of spirituality” through Bambara’s fluidity and contextual blending of religions. She treats Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism equally and contextualizes them as if they originate from the same source. This religious contextual blending reflects Bambara’s personal philosophy concerning spirituality. For example, Bambara referred to New Age philosophies as “everybody’s ancient wisdom” and thought expressions of it were “in fact, very old systems for spiritual attunement that appear in slightly differing forms but with the same essential content in all root cultures” (Hull 3). In this study, I define New Age with Hull’s reference of it pertaining to “Tarot, chakra work, psychic enhancement, numerology, and Eastern philosophies of connectedness” (Hull 2). *The Salt Eaters* alludes to various religious philosophies such as dharma, Karma and ying and yang to investigate the physical and spiritual ailments of characters. This is a bold move for Bambara, as Judeo-Christian references and symbolism are

dominant in African American literature. In many cases, religions outside of the Judeo-Christian spectrum are taboo. However, Bambara uses Christianity and New Age religions to create a healing cocktail for the protagonist Velma. In *Christio-Conjure*, Haynes writes:

Old Wife, Minnie and Sophie (Velma's godmother) "profess Christian ideals, while simultaneously demonstrating deference to ancestral spirits of loa. They participate in Christian prayer groups and/or attend services held in Christian chapels and interface directly with the spirit world. In addition, these women possess supernatural curative powers, which they use throughout the community offering services such as midwifery and psychic healing. (81-2).

Haynes' observation aligns with Valerie Lee's testifying theory concerning the Christian church, granny figures, and their mentoring roles within the black community. In addition, it is the contextual blending of socio-politics, New Age and Judeo-Christianity that makes *The Salt Eaters* a "new spiritual text," prompting transnational approaches to the concept in later novels like Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*.

## **Literary Analysis**

### **Healing the Contemporary Woman**

Velma's healing takes place at the Southwest Community Infirmary established in 1871 by the Free Coloreds of Claybourne, Georgia. Above the entrance of the black-owned and operated infirmary is the maxim, "HEALTH IS YOUR RIGHT," which reaffirms the novel's focus on individual health and wholeness within the context of communal bonding (Haynes 80). In the infirmary "conventional medical treatments are integrated into the traditional healings" performed by Minnie Ransom, her prayer group the Master's Mind and her spirit guide, Old Wife. (Wilentz 69). As Minnie and Old Wife begin Velma's healing session, they discuss common psycho-social conditions afflicting the contemporary black woman such as suicide and substance abuse:

"What is wrong with the women? If they ain't sticking they head in ovens and opening up their veins like this gal, or jumping off roofs, drinking charcoal lighter, pumping rat poison in their arms, and ramming cars into walls they looking for

some man to tar his head off. What is wrong, Old Wife? What is happening to the daughters of the yam? Seem like they just don't know how to draw up the powers from deep like before. Not full sunned and sweet anymore. Tell me, how do I welcome this daughter home to the world... (Bambara 44).

Minnie is convinced that Velma like others in her community suffers a crisis of the mind and spirit due to the toxicity of contemporary society. Black feminists might argue this toxicity is informed by the oppressive nature of a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Velma is burdened by these oppressions mentally and physically and her conditions mirror those in her community. For example, there are no borders between Velma's personal and political life. Her issues bleed into one another, causing her anxiety. She complains about her husband and son "driving her nuts [. . .] sexual harassment on the job [. . .] supervisors trying to do the shakedown [. . .] a migraine or nightmare or some ill-defined bad feeling she could not shake" (Bambara 139-40). Within the context of "home, family, [and] marriage," she tries "to maintain the right balance" (Bambara 241), but she is overwhelmed. Unable to manage her life, she attempts suicide to "make herself unavailable to pain" (Bambara 19). Bambara's point which she makes through Minnie and Old Wife is that socially constructed diseases cause physical and psychological illnesses, which are manifestations of spiritual disharmony. For example, the narrator notes: "They were proud, frequently, the patients that came to Mrs. Ransom. They wore their crippledness or blindness like a badge of honor, as though it meant they were... special. But way down under knowing special was a lie, knowing better all along and feeling the cost of the lie, of the self-betrayal in the joints, in the lungs, in the eyes" (Bambara 108). Here, self-betrayal ensues because of spiritual disharmony. Bambara implies that spiritual disharmony exists because spiritual consciousness is marginal, though she argues, it is central to one's identity. Instead, in contemporary America, identity is shaped by systems like capitalism, which suggests that one's self worth is as great as one's ability to consume. The issue then, is people of color suffer from "socially constructed diseases" such as

racism, classism, and sexism. This type of prejudice encourages inferiority, bitterness, and disillusionment, which according to Minnie, materializes as physical illness. The narrator states: ... sometimes a person held on to sickness with a fierceness that took twenty hard-praying folk to loosen. So used to being unwhole and unwell, one forgot what it was to walk upright and see clearly, breathe easily, think better than was taught, be better than one programmed to believe...” (Bambara 107). Black feminists such as bell hooks will agree that living within a society of intersecting oppressions is linked to physical and mental illness. So, having no spiritual outlet to relieve these stressors will decay one’s body and spirit.

### **African Americans and Conjuring**

Over the years, the Southwest Community Infirmary has been shaped and informed by the spiritual and healing tradition of othermothers—specifically, grannies, midwives...and conjure women (Bambara 107). Minnie is a conjure woman because she employs African spiritual and healing practices. Conjuring is unique to the African American experience, and has remained intertwined with Christianity within the black community since slavery. In “Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic,” Yvonne Chireau discusses the cultural origins of conjuring and its relationship to Christianity within African America:

Conjure is African American occultism that applies to an extensive area of magic, practices, and lore that includes healing, spells and supernatural objects...[these] occult beliefs [might be] residual superstitions, the consequence of an incomplete Christianization of black Americans that began in slavery [or] spiritual fodder by which bondspersons challenged slave owner hegemony and retained powerful ancestral heritage (226).

Although Chireau agrees with the validity of these arguments concerning residual superstitions and spiritual fodder, he argues that the relationships between culture, religion and assimilation are far too complex to fully subscribe to either argument concerning Christianization or conjuring. In

any case, African Americans do not shape the dominant narrative about conjuring, because it shrinks in comparison to Christianity—it becomes deviant. However, these perspectives point to the significance of cultural legacy and oral tradition. The grand narrative often excludes or marginalizes African American narratives and histories or writes them out of existence. Similarly, black women suffer invisibility by race and gender and must rely on othermothering networks to tell their stories. Contemporary black women writers and Second-wave black feminists aid in producing and evaluating these stories.

Minnie's healing is supernatural, because she "touches" her patients through their minds and innermost being. The healing is described as a process that moves through various channels extending from Minnie's patient to inanimate objects across the community of Claybourne. The narrator notes:

And often she did not touch flesh on flesh but touched mind on mind from across the room or from cross town on the map linked by telephone cables that could carry the clue spoken—a dream message, an item of diet, a hurt unforgiving and festering, a guilt unreleased—and the charged response reaching ear then inner ear, then shooting to the blockade and freeing up the flow." (Bambara 48-9).

Minnie participates in conjuring because she "touches mind to mind" and depends on inanimate objects, such as "telephone cables" to reveal the illness of her patient. Through these channels, she receives a "clue" on how to proceed with the healing process. In addition, Minnie uses conjuring to access technological knowledge to assist with healing. For example, she is aware of her patient's illness through "biometrics," which are metrics used to identify physiological characteristics of people, such as retina, palm veins and finger prints. The narrator states, [Minnie] read "the biometric reading of worried eyes and hands in writing, the body transported through the mails, body/mind/spirit out of nexus...she'd receive her instructions. And turbulence would end (Bambara 48-9). Minnie uses various systems of knowledge, inanimate objects and even her

nervous system to heal the people of Claybourne. The healing process is described as a magical, religious and at times technological experience. Minnie gathers healing power from spiritual philosophies all over the world. For example, she heals using chakras, which are the seven centers in the body in which energy flows. The narrator describes this process:

Over the years, it had become routine: She simply placed her left hand on the patient's spine and her right on the navel, then clearing the channels, putting herself aside, she became available to a healing force no one had yet, to her satisfaction, captured in a name. Her eyelids closed locking out the bounce and band of light and sound and heat, sealing in the throbbing glow that spread from the corona of light at the crown of the head that moved forward between her brown then fanned out into a petaled rainbow, fanning, pulsing, then contracting again into a single white flame" (Bambara 47).

Bambara grants Minnie ubiquitous healing power, which critiques religious hierarchies and from a historic perspective, the colonial and imperialistic tendencies of Christianity. In this type of framework, African Americans can reclaim the cultural significance of conjuring, because it is no longer deviant. When Minnie "clears the channel" and opens herself to "a healing force no one had yet, to her satisfaction, captured in a name," she embraces universality of all the world's ancient wisdoms.

### **Christio-Conjure as African American Healing Tradition**

Like Paule Marshall, Bambara was influenced by both Afro-Caribbean and African American culture, which creates a unique demonstration of West African and Christian spiritual traditions known as *Christio-Conjure*. Laura Sams Haynes notes with *Christio-Conjure*, Bambara integrates African "spiritual and healing traditions with those from Western religion foregrounding a cultural/religious hybrid" (81). In *The Salt Eaters*, *Christio-Conjure* functions inside an othermothering network consisting of Velma, Sophie, Minnie Ransom, and Old Wife. During the healing, these women worship the Judeo-Christian God as well as African deities, including

“Damballah, Oshun, Oye and Ogun” (Haynes 81). Haynes further notes that Old Wife, Minnie and Sophie function as archetypal Christio-Conjure characters within the novel.

Black women writers do not work to detach the relationship between Christianity and conjuring, but contextually blend and accept them as markers of African Diasporic Connectedness. For example, Minnie and Old Wife reference cosmetology, Voodoo, and Christianity during Velma’s healing session:

Then we got to summon one of the loa to see after the Henry gal’s recuperation fore some God-slight notion lurking around her master brain turn her water wrong...Check the moon Old Wife, something’s up in fiercesome way between the men and the women and I don’t want to get caught short of teas and things (Bambara 62).

Here, Old wife employs the help of the voodoo god loa and Minnie checks the positioning of the moon and considers Velma’s chakra to perform her healing. When Minnie tells Old Wife she is nothing but a “haint” or ghost, Old Wife exclaims that she is a “servant of the Lord” (Bambara 62). To Old Wife, Voodoo and Christianity originate from the same source. In Velma’s healing session which involves voodoo and other New Age practices, Minnie calls for help from “Sweet Jesus” and even says a prayer to a Christian God. She states:

Lord, I hope you are recording this all. I hope you are beating down on this science I never auditioned for, Lord. Hope you see how your humble servant got her hands over full with both the quick, not so quick and the dead So when I petition you, Lord with feeble praise and bold requests, don’t turn me down now, gotta help me and answer my prayers. (Bambara 63)

Like Old Wife, Minnie is sure that she is doing “the Lord’s work.” The capital “L” in Lord implies that Minnie is praying to the Judeo-Christian God.

Other authors such as Erna Brodber demonstrate African Diasporic Connectedness within their novels. This is especially the case with *Myal* and *Louisiana*. Most prevalent in literature by Afro-Caribbean women writers, African Diasporic Connectedness is often demonstrated through

conjuring and root work in American and European spaces. However, African American women writers integrate similar themes in their writing by melding “black traditions such as Christian prayer and ancestral reverence with New Age modalities such as crystal work and self-help metaphysics” (Hull, *Soul Talk*, 1). Among these writers are Morrison, Lucille Clifton, Alice Walker and Gayle Jones.

### **Connectedness: Healing and Community**

Velma’s healing is central to her community. Othermothering is a communal vehicle that Bambara uses to highlight this notion. For example, Minnie Ransom othermothers Velma physically through the healing of her body and spiritually through the healing of her soul. In turn, Old Wife guides Minnie through the psychic and spiritual gateways that unlock Velma’s healing. Velma’s public healing acts as testimonial discourse to her community, as the infirmary’s staff and community onlookers witness her breakthrough “showing them another way to be in the world” (Bambara 101). In “What It is I Think She’s Doing Anyhow: A Reading of Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*,” Hull notes on how connectedness reflects both the novel’s theme and narrative structure:

The novel radiates outward in ever-widening circles—to the Master’s Mind, the ring of twelve who hum and pray with Minnie...to the city of Claybourne surrounding the infirmary walls—a community which itself is composed of clusters (The Academy of the Seven Arts, the café with its two round tables of patrons, LaSalle Street, the park); From the center, the threads web out, holding a place and weaving links between everything and everybody. At the same time, this center is a nexus which pulls the outside in—setting up the dialectic of connectedness which is both meaning and structure of the book. (Hull qtd. in Pryse and Spillers 125)

Hull’s observation on the centrality of connectedness also points to the role of the ancestral matriarchal past. Bambara uses the ancestral matriarchal past and othermothering to demonstrate the relationship between political resistance, healing and spirituality. Velma’s need for physical and spiritual healing is synonymous with Claybourne. As Haynes notes: “Christio-Conjure

transformation is only achieved through communal effort” (91). In the novel, tensions are depicted “within the sphere of the black community represented by conflict within the 7 Arts Academy, an organization in the novel that promotes performing arts, the martial arts, the medical arts, the scientific arts, and the arts and humanities” (Haynes 80). At 7 Arts, two camps emerged that Velma held together, “urging each to teach the other its language, “one spiritual and the other political. The narrator states:

The one argued relentlessly now for the Academy to change its name from 7 Arts to Spirithood Arts and to revamp the program, strip it of material and mundane concerns like race, class and struggle. The other wanted “the flowing ones” thrown out and more posters of Lenin, Malcolm, Bessie Smith and Coltrane put up. (93)

The academy points to connectedness, specifically Bambara’s theory that politics and spirituality can exist in harmony. Velma symbolizes connectedness because she is the one that “held them together” and urged “each to teach the other its language.” Her leadership in Women for Action and her influence at 7 Arts, reveal the stressors that lead to Velma’s suicide attempt and illuminate the need to examine relationships between self-recovery and political resistance.

### **Cultural Workers and Community**

Bambara is a cultural worker, because *The Salt Eaters* participates in the *work* of eradicating the “socially constructed diseases” of racism and sexism. Moreover, Bambara is struggling against these diseases by promoting health, wholeness and spiritual awareness within the black community. Hull notes:

The thrust of Toni’s work has always been the healing of the (black) “nation” –in this case symbolized by the repair of Velma’s fractured self and psyche. Only when that internal and external work has been accomplished is health possible on larger scales. Ultimately, not only will Velma be made whole, but so too must her community, nation, the world, and the universe. (Hull, *Soul Talk*, 30)

Bambara identifies systems of oppression, but also critiques the organizations that resolve to fight it. This examination reveals broken systems and the broken spirits of the people who exist and fight within them. Bambara exposes the connection between politics, economics and community by situating Velma in a community where she simultaneously works for and struggles against the same corporation, Transchemical. For example, Haynes states, "...Bambara exposes the dissonant element disrupting the entire town of Claybourne: a split between employees of Transchemical and activists who oppose its presence (Velma is employed by both camps" (80). Velma, Minnie Ransom, The Master's Mind, and other activist groups such as Women for Action and the Seven Sisters act as cultural workers seeking to eliminate racism, sexism and other intersecting forms of oppressions. Moreover, many of these characters take part in the struggle directly as political activists. Similarly, Janie and Sula are cultural workers on a journey to self-love, healing, and agency, struggling against similar socially constructed diseases. For Janie, it is Nannie and Phoebe and for Sula, it is Nel and The Peace Women that provide othermothering networks along their journeys.

### **Othermothering and The Ancestral Matriarchal Past**

The othermothering tradition of black women relies on the power of ancestry, specifically the ancestral matriarchal past. The ancestral matriarchal past serves many purposes. First, it works to preserve and perpetuate ethnic and folk traditions from the threat of dilution or non-existence within its community. Secondly, it works as teacher and giver of alternative and counter-knowledge not practiced or accepted in mainstream society. Thirdly, it supports communities through the othermothering of parents, spouses and children. Lastly, the ancestral matriarchal past employs resources from the spiritual and physical world to progress and heal its community. Old Wife serves these purposes and she is essential to the othermothering process between Minnie and

Velma. Old Wife, symbolic of the ancestral matriarchal past does not deal directly with Velma. Instead, Minnie is the channel through which the ancestral matriarchal past flows and othermothering is the network by which healing is generated. The narrator notes:

“On the stool or in the chair with this patient or that, Minnie could dance their dance and match their beat and echo their pitch and know their frequency as if her own. Eyes closed and the mind dropping down the heart, bubbling up in the blood then beating, fanning out, flooded and shining, she knew each way of being in the world and could welcome them home again, open to wholeness. Eyes wide open to the swing from expand to contract, dissolve congeal, release restrict, foot tapping throat throbbing in song to the ebb and flow of renewal, she would welcome them healed into her arms. (48)

Minnie’s healing abilities are produced through othermothering and empowered by the ancestral matriarchal past. Othermothering is essential to the contemporary black woman, as domesticity, marriage and child-rearing are secondary to career, education and politics. Velma illustrates this circumstance as a leader in Women for Action, educator at 7 Arts Academy and employee at Transchemical. Also, Obie, Velma’s husband recalls this conflict between home and activism when pondering: “should he and Velma hire help to do the ‘mother act’ or should Velma and maybe both of them cut back on community work?” (Bambara 139) Velma simultaneously attempts to be a wife, mother a child, and engage in community activism. This is where she unravels. Not because she cannot fill these roles as black women have done for generations before her, but because she does so without balance. Bambara posits that this balance occurs through spiritual consciousness, something Velma does not possess. Because she is unbalanced, her innermost self appears as a child in the healing session. For example, the narrator notes: “Miz Ransom rocking that woman like the mothers of all times hold and rock however large the load, never asking whose baby or how old or is it deserving. Only that it’s a baby and not a stone” (Bambara 110). Here, Minnie acts as a surrogate mother, providing spiritual guidance and wisdom Velma did not receive from her blood mother. Minnie is empowered by the “mothers of all times”

which allows her to reach Velma spiritually. Her knowledge of othermothering and access to the ancestral matriarchal past reveal to her that Velma “is not a stone” as she appears to be to herself and others.

Velma’s illness is transparent to Minnie, although Minnie wondered “why it couldn’t be something usual like arthritis, bursitis or glaucoma?” (Bambara 48) However, she recognizes that the physical nature of Velma’s affliction (slashed wrists, head injuries) are only a shell surrounding the innermost issue: a crisis and heaviness of the spirit. Minnie states: “I can feel, sweetheart, that you’re not quite ready to dump the shit...got to give it all, the pain, the hurt, the anger and make room for lovely things to rush in and fill you full...She waited til she got a nod out of Velma” (Bambara 16). It is important to note that Minnie does not force healing upon Velma. Minnie says: “You’ll have to choose sweetheart. Choose your own cure” (Bambara 103). Velma’s healing is dependent upon freewill as much as it is her willingness to forgive. To Minnie healing and freedom are synonymous. It is impossible to heal Velma’s body, because her spirit is not free; Therefore, Velma’s suicide attempt is a manifestation of spiritual bondage. Minnie states: “Release...Give it all up. Forgive everyone everything. Free them. Free self” (Bambara 18). Minnie presents freedom as a choice and once Velma decides to be free, she begins a “telepathic visit with her former self” which starts her journey to wholeness. For example, Minnie asks Velma the question that affirms the novel’s emphasis on healing and wholeness: “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well? ... Just so’s you’re sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you’re well” (Bambara 3;10). Minnie implies Velma’s personal responsibility to physical and spiritual wholeness when she tells Velma of the “weight” she must carry when she is well. Throughout the text, this weight is symbolized through Velma’s

recollection of her experiences and relationships and her willingness to confront and accept them; it is her unwillingness to meet these issues that pushes her to suicide.

The ancestral matriarchal past is chronicled through oral tradition in othermothering networks consisting of elder women or the elders. Elders are central because of the knowledge they have acquired through experiencing and witnessing the past. They are godmothers like Sophie or community women like Minnie who have birthed, midwived and outlived most of the present generation. For example, Sophie, Velma's godmother, is an elder, and central to her othermothering network. Sophie "had been in attendance at every other event in Velma Henry's life...she'd been there at the beginning with her baby-catching hands" (Bambara 11-12). Sophie and Minnie are elders which makes them leaders. Both leaders and mothers are teachers. This is important, because othermothering and the ancestral matriarchal past do not function as "quick fix-magic." The process or the journey is central to healing and self-recovery. For example, Minnie performs Velma's healing as a tutorial, taking several steps *with* Velma so that she can experience each moment and learn each lesson to the degree that she does not repeat this painful experience again. Velma struggles with this process and requests a "pill" instead, which is a critique of modern society's tendency to medicate physical symptoms and ignore spiritual health. Minnie states:

"Hold my hand, daughter," she [Minnie] had coaxed the wailing woman [Velma]. "Let me share your pain. And your joy. I hurt with you and rejoice with you...But then the woman just climbed into Miz Ransom's lap...still yelling for some magic pill. Wanted to swallow her mother and grief with the pill, drink down sorrow and keep her inside, as though a daughter could give birth to her own mother ...great big overgrown woman wanting to be Miz Ransom's baby and her mama's mama all at the same time (Bambara 110).

Minnie is patient with Velma, because she must heal to teach and heal others. When elders share their experiences, they allow generational access to othermothering and the ancestral matriarchal past. Haynes notes: "... Minnie and Sophie are elderly female figures who not only perform

physical healing, but also impart spiritual and secular wisdom. As well, they acculturate newly converted African American women into Christio-Conjure and mentor them as cultural heirs. (82). As Haynes posits, elders emerge in a text to teach, heal and rescue. Just as Minnie and Sophie are elders, so are Nanny from *Their Eyes* and Eva Peace from *Sula*.

## **Conclusion**

*The Salt Eaters* introduces a fundamental aspect of black women's fiction, the journey of healing through inquiry. Bambara theorizes the centrality of spiritual consciousness to healing and sociopolitical freedom. Furthermore, she argues that physical, political, and spiritual freedom are intertwined. Bambara articulates Black feminist attitudes by: (1) displaying relationships between black women's health and political resistance. (2) arguing that communal change occurs through personal change and reflection. (3) celebrating conjuring as a powerful, non-deviant aspect of African American culture, and (4) using othermothers to teach and heal community. In this chapter, I discussed the significance of othermothering networks and their relationships to conjuring and the ancestral maternal past, which are common motifs in black women's fiction. I also discussed the novel's theme of connectedness, and how Christio-Conjure demonstrates diaspora within the African American community. Finally, I applied Hull's theory of new spirituality to *The Salt Eaters* to examine the relationships between second-wave Black Feminism, conjuring and black women's fiction.

## Chapter Four:

### Othermothering and Liberating Friendships in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

*The Color Purple* demonstrates all six core themes of contemporary black women's writing: self-love, resistance, community, afrocentrist folk sensibility, spirituality and power of the ancestral. It is considered one of the most quintessential novels in black women's literary tradition for its noteworthy, yet controversial critique of heterosexism and black patriarchy. Published in 1982, *The Color Purple* tells the story of Celie, a black woman from rural Georgia with a history of incest and rape. Celie overcomes the racist and sexist system in which she lives through an othermothering network that is communal, transnational and homoerotic. Celie's othermothering network includes her sister Nettie, who lives abroad in Africa, her lover-friend Shug Avery and sister-in-law Sophia. Written in epistolary form, the narrative centers on Celie's struggles and her journey to agency through which she experiences liberating friendships, spiritual awareness, and African Diasporic Connectedness. Besides othermothering, Celie gains support from the letters she writes to God and Nettie, which records her meditations about her life as well as her society's structure. Like *Sula*, *The Color Purple* focuses on the redemptive power of black women's friendships. Particularly, both novels display the power black women gain from knowing and loving themselves. Like *The Salt Eaters* and *Louisiana*, *The Color Purple* displays the significance of spirituality, while also exhibiting othermothering and its important relationship to community. Moreover, Walker follows the tradition of Hurston by engaging afrocentrist folk sensibility, as both *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes* are written in the black vernacular.

The raw representations of the intersecting oppressions of black women made *The Color Purple* influential to late twentieth century sociological conceptions of Black Feminism, as reflected in Patricia Hill Collins' iconic book, *Black Feminist Thought*. For example, Collins' notes

“by reclaiming the works of Zora Neale Hurston and in other ways placing Black women’s experiences and culture at the center of her work, she [Walker] draws on alternative Black feminist world views” (13). As Collins suggests, Walker’s work greatly contributes to the visibility and voices of black women. *The Color Purple* was also awarded The Pulitzer Prize and The National Book Award in 1983, and later adapted into a film and musical. Despite its popularity, Walker received criticism for the novel’s illustration of sexism, black patriarchy and homoeroticism, which challenged the masculinist bias in Black social and political thought. Walker along with other writers of the Black Women’s Literary Renaissance were often rebuked by black male writers for the centrality of black women’s issues in their work. In “The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers,” Calvin Hernton offers insight into the masculinist bias in the criticism of publications by black women during the 1970s and 1980s:

The telling thing about the hostile attitude of black men toward black women writers is that they interpret the new thrust of the women as being “counter-productive” to the historical goal of the Black struggle. Revealingly, while black men have achieved outstanding recognition throughout the history of black writing, black women have not accused the men of collaborating with the enemy and setting back the progress of the race. (5)

The dismissal and marginalization of black women’s ideas by black male writers reveal the sexist nature of intellectualism, leadership and resistance. Since black women’s positions are both raced and gendered, they are often invisible regarding issues inside and outside their communities. So, they are outsiders within their own communities. The Combahee River Collective refer to this form of exclusion as “outsider-within.” Collins notes how this position affects black women scholars and academics: “U.S. Black women intellectuals have found themselves in outsider-within positions...Whiteness for feminist thought, maleness for Black social and political thought, and the combination for mainstream scholarship—all negate Black women’s realities” (12). *The*

*Color Purple* demonstrates an outsider-within position as the women in the novel combat subjugation from two groups: the white community and black men.

In this chapter, I focus on the role of community and friendship within Celie's othermothering network, which consists of Nettie, Shug Avery and Sophia. I argue that Shug Avery demonstrates the plurality of the modern black woman, in that she is conscious, spiritual *and* sexual. This gives her the freedom to navigate a racist and sexist system, in ways Celie, at the start of the novel, cannot. Sophia appropriates male privilege by exercising physical strength alongside a black feminist rhetoric by literally fighting the men in her life—from the white mayor to her husband Harpo. Both women provide a resistance model for Celie, and through their interactions with their family and community, offer portrayals of the nuances of Black womanhood. Nettie exemplifies the power and significance of blood family and African Diasporic Connectedness. Like Ella in *Louisiana*, Celie participates in immobile transnationalism. Nettie's letters from Africa inform Celie's transnational identity without her physically crossing national borders. Also, by writing to God and Nettie, Celie achieves agency in developing her own voice. The primary theoretical framework for this chapter is Black Feminism, and much of the chapter's theory is taken from Layli Phillips' *The Womanist Reader* and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* and "What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond." However, I discuss Black Feminism beside Womanism to distinguish between the two contentious schools of thought. With the popularity and controversy surrounding the novel in academic and pop culture circles, as well as Walker's 1983 coining of the term "womanism," defining Black Feminism became problematic.

## Historical Framework

Most of Alice Walker's work including *The Color Purple* was inspired by the sociopolitical movements of the twentieth century. Walker, along with Morrison and Bambara were part of the Black Women's Literary Renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s. As writers during this period, both women were inspired by the Combahee River Collective and National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), of which Walker was a member. Walker is a civil rights and feminist activist who writes fiction and prose about racism and sexism. Also, her novels *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* address the issue of female circumcision in Africa. As a college student during the civil rights struggle, Walker met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who she credits for her decision to move to the South, and work as a volunteer for voter and welfare rights and children's programs in Georgia and Mississippi. Walker considers her writing a form of activism. In her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden: Womanist Prose*, she states: "In my own work I write not only what I want to read—understanding fully and indelibly that if I don't do it no one else is so vitally interested, or capable of doing it to my satisfaction—I write all the things I should have been able to read" (13). Here, Walker indicates two vital aspects of Black Feminism: self-hood and self-definition. Walker's work like much of black women's fiction during the 1970s and 1980s was written in response to the cultural and historical events related to the Civil Rights, Black Arts, Black Power and feminist movements. Although her writing reflected the sociopolitics of her time, Walker had a strong desire to demonstrate the power of the ancestral in her work, which served as the primary motivation for *The Color Purple*. She explains:

I think I was longing, really, to know my ancestors better—the immediate ancestors. My parents, my grandparents, my great-grandparents, and I just started thinking...that I could write a story about them that I would enjoy, because it would mean spending time with them...with people I hadn't had a chance to spend time with, growing up. (Edemariam, "The Color Purple," *The Guardian*)

It is not uncommon for black women writers to create narratives with feminist characters set during the post-reconstruction and “new negro” or Harlem Renaissance eras. For example, Walker illustrates this technique with Shug Avery. Shug is a blunt, rebellious, bi-sexual black woman living in the segregated, American South during the 1930s. Because African American novels read in conversation with one another, Shug can liberate Hurston’s Janie from the contradictions of love and marriage. It is Shug Avery, Henry Louis Gates argues, who “stands in this text as Walker’s figure for Hurston” (244). In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates expounds on conversations between texts in the African American literary tradition. He argues that black writers read each other—repeating, imitating and in some cases revising each other’s work. This “literary inbreeding” as Gates calls it, is present in *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes*, which both function as “speakerly texts.” Gates notes: the speakerly text is “a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition, designed to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech and produce the illusion of oral narration” (181). In this case, the oral literary tradition is the black vernacular, or what Walker calls “folk language.” The black vernacular tradition in black women’s literature often occurs to demonstrate or celebrate the power of the ancestral. For example, Gates suggests, In *The Color Purple*, Walker “rewrites Hurston’s narrative strategy, in an act of ancestral bonding...Walker in effect, has written a letter of love to her authority figure Hurston (244). Walker looks to Hurston as foremother of the contemporary black women’s novel, defining its aims and the characteristics of its narrative.

*The Color Purple* is set in rural Georgia during the 1930s. Walker’s upbringing inspired most of the plot and setting of the novel. Walker was the eighth child of sharecroppers in Eatonton, Georgia. At eight years old, she was sent to live with her grandmother and grandfather in rural Georgia. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Walker explains how Mr.\_\_\_\_’s character was

modeled after her young grandfathers, who were “batterers, womanizers, and alcoholics” (Edemariam, “The Color Purple,”). She describes her relationship with her grandparents as endearing, stating how she “really fell in love with them” (Beauchamp, “Rebellion is Close to Godliness,” *Huffington Post*). However, Walker mentions her confusion about her grandparents past lives before she knew them, and how they could have once been considered “bad” people. She states:

“They were so kind, so giving. In the early days, they were terrible, terrible people. So, I began to wonder, how could people who were so wonderful, when I knew them, be terrible when I didn’t know them? That made me realize there was some reclamation to be done... [I] had to show what happened to them and why they were like that” (Beauchamp, “Rebellion is Close to Godliness,” *Huffington Post*).

Here, Walker alludes to the racism and violence her grandparents witnessed or experienced in the segregated America South, which is reflected in the novel. For example, Celie’s father was lynched and his body “mutilated and burnt” (Walker 175). He suffered a violent death because his store was “taking all the black business away from them, and man’s blacksmith shop that he set up behind the store, was taking some of the white. This would not do” (Walker 174). Celie’s father reaches his demise because of the intersections of racism and capitalism in the Jim Crow South. The novel’s portrayals of power and masculinity reflect the trauma of slavery on African Americans. Particularly, Walker contends that centuries of subjugation and bondage taught black men to imitate their oppressors. So, conceptions of power and manhood are modeled after a white supremacist patriarchy. Walker states:

You’ll notice that most people, in discussing Mr\_\_\_, even old Mr\_\_\_, who was the son of a slave owner, they just cut it off right there, they act like 400 years of being dominated and enslaved by white men left no trace, and that all this bad behavior started with the black people. It’s so ridiculous. But it’s the way people distance themselves from their own history, and their own participation in what is very bloody and depressing behavior, over centuries. (Edemariam, “The Color Purple,” *The Guardian*)

Walker's note concerning people's unwillingness to accept or participate in their own history reflects the controversial reactions to the novel. Walker was accused of lesbianism, despising black men and betraying her race. Walker recalls being hurt by these allegations, but realized it was the centrality of black women in the novel that upset men the most. She states: "It's a book mostly about women, and what they're doing and how they're carrying on no matter what the men are doing...I think that for many men at that time it was a shock that you could actually write a novel with women at the center" (Edemariam). Barbara Christian echoes Walker's assertions about models of power from slavery in her essay, "What Celie Knows That You Should Know." Christian compares Celie's husband Mr. \_\_\_ to Jim, a character from Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*. She states: "Imagine Mister as another version of the hard-working Jim. In this context, he is a Southern black of the Reconstruction period whose family is descended from slaves and slave owners and who has observed the means by which white men maintain power (22-3). Christian refers to Celie's father-in-law old Mr. \_\_\_, and his examples of power gathered from his cultural memory of slavery. She writes, "...He inherits from his hard-working father not only property and middle class status but the modes of behavior that white men, who are above him, exhibit (22-3). Mr. \_\_\_'s father also exerts power over him, as he owns the land on which Mr. \_\_\_ and his son Harpo have raised their families. In the novel, Old Mr. \_\_\_ often reminds Mr. \_\_\_ of the subordinate relationship between them. Celie writes: "Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ clear his throat. Well, this my house. This my land. Your boy Harpo in one of my houses, on my land. Weeds come up on my land, I chop 'em up. Trash blow over it I burn it" (55). The repetitious "I," connotes superiority and possession. Throughout the novel, possession and abuse are revealed as tools to control women. Old Mr. \_\_\_ continues a generational example of a slave-type patriarchal power, as Mr. \_\_\_ observes him, and Harpo observes Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. For example, Harpo asks Celie what he should do to "make

Sophia mind.” Because Celie has internalized her oppression, she instructs Harpo to “Beat Her” (34). These kinds of portrayals of subjugation, between black women and black men and black women and their communities, gained Walker much criticism.

It was also important for Walker to create an organic portrayal of the rural, segregated South. So, she chose language as a vehicle for this process. When asked about creating Celie’s voice and the language of the novel at large, Walker states, “If I were using a more standard English, which in their time would only have been spoken by the people who oppressed them, I could not express this experience—it would have been frightening for them” (Edemariam, “The Color Purple,” *The Guardian*). Much like Hurston, Walker believed writing African American stories using black vernacular or “the folk” as its sometimes called, was empowering.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Black Feminism and Womanism**

Though the theoretical framework for this study and the dissertation is Black feminism, it is important to acknowledge the role of Womanism in Walker’s work as well as contemporary black women’s fiction, at large. First, to contextualize the discussion of feminism and its associations, Collins provides three areas a global feminist agenda addresses: “(1) the areas of economic status of women and issues associated with women’s global poverty, (2) political rights for women and (3) marital and family issues” (Collins 12-3). Black feminism and Womanism confront these issues, but in fundamentally different ways. Published in 1983, one year after *The Color Purple*, Walker released a volume of essays entitled, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden: Womanist Prose*. The collection contains 36 essays, articles, reviews, statements and speeches written between 1966 and 1982 (xvii). At the start of the collection, Walker coins a term, “Womanism,” which prompts on-going deliberations about feminism and its place within black

women communities inside and outside academia. Debates concerning whether black women's ideological stance should be defined as "Black Feminism" or "Womanism" reveal the difficulties of accommodating diversity among black women. Furthermore, these debates reflect the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. The culture wars were conflicts over definitions of American values, specifically, its inclusion and representation of traditional, conservative, progressive, liberal and multicultural influences. In *The Rising Song of African American Women*, Barbara Omolade argues: "black feminism is sometimes referred to as Womanism because both are concerned with struggles against sexism and racism by black women who are themselves part of the black community's efforts to achieve equity and liberty" (Omolade xx). As Omolade suggests, despite the centrality of black women within both schools of thought, they are not identical. Since its inception, Black Feminism has grown as an acceptable academic discourse. Barbara Smith explains in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" that Black feminism is rooted in its fight against the intersecting oppressions of racism, sexism and classism. Moreover, it seeks to eradicate these issues in the lives of all women of color, including third world women. Smith and other members of The Combahee River Collective also emphasize Black feminists struggle against heterosexism. Due to the outpouring of publications by black women during the 1970s and 1980s, Black Feminism has been ideologically defined and canonized. This is not the case for womanism, which is often absorbed into Black Feminism, without clarity or articulation of its meaning. Although conceptions of womanism are most associated with Walker's use of the term, Womanism has its grassroots in how it is applied to the lives of everyday people of color. So, it is more than an ideology; it is a practice. Layli Phillips argues, "Womanism is something that had been in existence for some time, functioning below the academic and activist radar and outside dominant histories

of consciousness” (xx). She further elaborates that Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women’s and other women of color’s everyday experiences.

While it is related to Black feminism, Womanism is not defined by feminist terms, and should not be used as a synonym for Black feminism. However, Walker has used the terms interchangeably, defining Womanism as “a black feminist or feminist of color” (Walker, *Our Mothers’ Gardens*, xi). Phillips opposes this association, stating that womanism “does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism; rather it elevates all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social-address categories like gender, race, or class to a level of equal concern and action” (xx). Published in 2006, *The Womanist Reader* is the first volume to anthologize womanist scholarship. The anthology discusses Walker’s use of the term “womanism,” (defining it as African American feminism), Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi’s African womanism and Clenora Hudson-Weems’ Africana womanism. In *The Womanist Reader*, Phillips states that womanism has five overarching characteristics: “(1) it is antioppressionist, (2) it is vernacular, (3) it is nonideological, (4) it is communitarian, and (5) it is spiritualized” (xxiv). At first glance, these characteristics seem similar to what I argue are the core themes of contemporary black women’s fiction, which I also align with black feminist literary studies. However, Womanism is not concerned with self-hood. As Phillips elaborates, Womanism’s main concern is not black women, but “livingkind.” Phillips borrows this term from Taliba Sikudhami Olugbala who defines it as “all living things-from humans, to animals, to plants, to microorganisms, as well as the “inanimate” components of Earth, the universe(s) beyond Earth, the spiritual world(s) and transcendental realm(s) encompassing the universe(s), and, ultimately, all of creation” (Olugbala qtd. in Phillips xxvi). Most interestingly, Olugbala’s conception of

“livingkind,” particularly her ideas concerning the universality of spirituality, is similar to the Toni Cade Bambara’s position on New Age spirituality, as “everybody’s ancient wisdom.”

Many Womanists’ resistance to the word “feminism” is due to its association with lesbianism. Patricia Hill Collins states: “The association of feminism with lesbianism remains a problematic one for black women. Reducing black lesbians to their sexuality, one that chooses women over men, reconfigures black lesbians as enemies of black men” (14). Black feminism is an ideology that is insistent on matters of gender and sexuality, which some womanists find divisive. Its commitment against heterosexism, some feel, coerces those that subscribe to the ideology to accept lesbianism. Moreover, many womanists do not wish to participate in an ideology that practices solidarity at the expense of black women’s relationships with men or their desires for motherhood. This dilemma points to one of Walker’s several definitions of Womanism, within which she includes the practice of lesbianism and preference for black women’s interests over others. This definition eventually led to yet another reinvention of the term, Womanism.

Walker writes:

A woman who loves another woman, sexually and/ or non sexually. She appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility...[she] is committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health... loves the spirit.... loves struggle. Loves herself. Regardless. (Walker, *Our Mothers’ Gardens* xii).

Despite the lesbian implications of Walker’s statement, other aspects of her definitions of Womanism still agree with the latest reinventions of Womanist thought, such as Africana womanism. For example, Walker states that Womanism is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, *Our Mothers’ Gardens* xi-xii). This is one of several examples of the challenges and contradictions of defining womanism. Some scholars might argue that *The Color Purple’s* depiction of the ways racism intersects with sexism clearly argue a Black

feminist perspective. For example, Mister taunts Celie: “Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam...You nothing at all” (Walker 204). However, a Womanist might argue that Mister’s patriarchal rhetoric and the novel in general serve to instigate difficult conversations *with* black men about their relationships with black women. Womanism works with, not against Black feminism, but the two schools of thought are mutually exclusive. Collins’ compares the convoluted relationship between Womanism and Black feminism to black nationalism and racial integration. Collins notes: “Just as black nationalism and racial integration coexist in uneasy partnership, with pluralism occupying the contested terrain between the two, Walker’s definitions of womanism demonstrate comparable contradictions” (11). Tensions remain between Womanists and Black feminists despite their agreement that their philosophies derive from and represent the concerns of Black women. Seemingly, because both groups aim to reflect the heterogeneity of Black women, the process of reinvention is continuous.

Another conflicting issue regarding Black Feminism is its association to white feminism. Historically, in the United States, feminism tended to reflect the interests of middle class white women with a dominant ideological focus on gender inequality. These core principles excluded black women from mainstream resistance, but did not silence them. For example, Sojourner Truth’s 1851 “Ain’t I Woman” Speech, is one of the first demonstrations of black women’s abolitionist and feminist work. There were two main barriers to black women’s involvement in the feminist movement. First, race prohibited black women from joining white women’s protests. To fight sexism together, white women had to acknowledge that black women were their equals, deserving of the same human and citizenship rights for which they so adamantly fought. Secondly, as Hazel Carby argues in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, definitions of gender and femininity created by white women were not only informed by white patriarchy, but did not include black women’s

experiences of hypersexualization, deviancy and labor. In *But Some of Us Are Brave*, members of The Combahee River Collective confronted white women on these issues, particularly for their acquiescence and practice of white supremacy. With these issues in mind, many Womanist scholars argue they cannot identify with Black feminism because feminism is *for white women* and was created *in response* to white women. So, it is impossible for it to reflect the goals and interests of black women. This is one of the main arguments of Africana womanism. In her 1993 publication *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, Clenora Hudson-Weems coined the term “Africana womanism.” The term combines two meanings: Africana, to reflect the ethnicity culture and homeland of the woman being considered—Africa, and Womanism, which identifies with Sojourner Truth’s speech “Ain’t I a Woman” (22-3). In her book, Hudson-Weems explains the reasoning behind Africana womanism’s disassociation from feminism and black feminism. She writes:

The Africana woman did not see the man as her primary enemy as does the White feminist, who is carrying out an age-old battle with her White male counterpart for subjugating her as his property. Africana men have never had the same institutionalized power to oppress Africana women as White men have had to oppress White women (in the effort to fight against racial injustice) Black women cannot afford the luxury, if you will, of being consumed by gender issues. (25)

Since Walker coined the term in 1983, conceptions of Womanism have evolved to neglect clauses on gender and sexuality, expressing a more communal, spiritual and Afrocentric base that includes and encourages black men’s joint participation in political resistance. Though, it is important to note that there are men in and outside of academia who subscribe to Black feminism. Conclusively, lesbianism and the historical implications of feminism and its connection to a white supremacist patriarchy negate contemporary Womanism as an umbrella term for Black feminism. Moreover, because Black feminism has been ideologically defined and canonized within academia, it

struggles to adequately reflect the ideas and experiences of everyday black women, leaving contemporary Womanism the work of filling its voids.

## **Literary Analysis**

### **Communal Othermothering and Spirituality**

Many novels by contemporary black women writers focus on self-hood, particularly, working out independence by exceeding the boundaries of family and community. This is certainly the case with Morrison's *Sula*. The protagonist *Sula* as well as her friend Nel struggle with being individuals and members of a family and community influenced by racism and sexism. Likewise, in *The Color Purple* Celie seeks to define herself outside conditions of rape, incest and patriarchy. Although at times community works to perpetuate systems of oppression for black women, it can be a source of healing, knowledge and comfort. Because Celie, Shug, Sofia and Mary Agnes (Squeak) are a part of a community, they can combine their knowledge, resources and experiences to combat oppression. For example, Shug uses oppositional knowledge about God and Christianity to reconceptualize Celie's ideas of blackness and faith. This provides her with a sense of hope and purpose, and offers her a different lens through which to view her position as a black woman. Celie assumes God is both white and a man, because those are the representations of power in her community. But Shug convinces her to "chase" those images out of her head. Celie writes: "Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make ...not the color purple (where it come from?). Not the little wildflowers. Nothing... Man corrupt everything, say Shug... He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't" (Walker 193). Celie's new ability to see God in nature--in everything as well as the discovery that Jesus' hair was "kinky" like hers--like "lamb's wool," provides Celie with an understanding of her place and beauty in the universe. Shug

helps Celie conceptualize spirituality, beauty, love and sexual pleasure outside of whiteness and maleness, emphasizing a lesbian theme in the novel. Shug explains:

God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for... I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh. Shug! I say. Oh, she say. God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like. (Walker 190-191)

Shug is central to Celie's growth and teaches her how to gain agency in a community that wishes to control, abuse and seemingly, at times, exterminate her. However, Shug alone cannot do the work of Sophia and Nettie. The three women create a communal bond that heals bodies, minds and souls, rears children, cares and contends with husbands as well as fights oppression.

In "Gloria Naylor's Geography: Community, Class and Patriarchy in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*," Barbara Christian argues that community is so important to contemporary black women writers that it becomes another character. Despite their critiques of community, black women define themselves in relation to it, especially in the roles they play in relationships with others. So, community becomes a space to define black womanhood, but also a space to interrogate the ways black women are subjugated. Just as *Sula* demonstrates the power and significance of female friendships, *The Color Purple* displays how friendship can liberate and cultivate the lives of black women. In "*The Color Purple*: Revisions and Definitions," Mae G. Henderson discusses how community is central to the novel:

the relationships among the women are based on cooperation and mutuality. Women share the children, the labor, [...] Ultimately it is the female bonding which restores the women to a sense of completeness and independence. The relationship between Celie and Shug, on the one hand, and between Celie and Nettie on the other, exemplify the power and potential of this bonding (58).

Celie's othermothering network functions because of its members need for survival. Celie, Nettie Shug and Sophia need to survive for their children and communities, because their labor and sacrifice continues its legacy. They need to survive for themselves to tell their stories and teach their daughters oppositional knowledge not offered to them in schools or by black men and whites.

### **Othermothering as Liberation**

Shug Avery and Sophia are versatile and dynamic characters, equipped to teach Celie about God, sociopolitics and sexuality, which considering the historical (Jim Crow) and geographical (American South) setting of the novel, is outlandish. Both women demonstrate a corrective agenda to free black women and the characters that represent them from the racial and sexual politics of the early 1900s—a shared aim first represented by Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Shug and Sophia liberate the tragic mulatto, collegiate woman, race woman and domestic woman, because she prioritizes pleasure and self-definition. Shug and Sophia exercise a “Sula-like” freedom, which defies respectability and patriarchy. In their communities, Shug and Sophia struggle against respectability politics, which were behavioral codes practiced by blacks to gain social mobility. Additionally, as “outsiders-within,” Shug and Sophia battle patriarchy from black and white men. Most strikingly, they must also fight the *women* that perpetuate patriarchy. In *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson explains that women are offered two identities in any patriarchal society: “good girl” and “bad girl.” Tyson explains that if a woman “[...] accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal rules, she is a good girl; if she does not, she is a bad girl” (89). Clearly, Shug and Sophia are bad girls.

### **Shug Avery**

For Celie, Shug detaches the mystique, fear and lasciviousness from sexual freedom, while also challenging notions of respectability that require black women to suppress their sexuality. She

is a blues singer at a “juke joint,” that uses the power of seduction and manipulation to woo men. Shug makes rebellion and self-hood more than “fun” for Celie, she makes it possible. Celie like most of the women in her community, live under the control of men and whites, as well the judgement of their communities. If black women move outside the lines of respectability, they affirm the hypersexual caste attributed to them by white society and most importantly, their rebelliousness would “set the race back.” No such pressure exists upon men. Concerning Shug’s reputation Celie writes, “[e]ven the preacher got his mouth on Shug Avery [...] He don't call no name, but he don't have to. Everybody know who he mean” (Walker 48). To her community, Shug is wicked. She has multiple sexual partners, and even shares with Celie the pleasure she gains from sleeping with Celie’s husband. Celie writes, “You like to sleep with him? I ast. Yeah, Celie she say, I have to confess, I just love it. Don’t you?” (Walker 75) Shug models the same sexual freedom exhibited by the men in her community, but because of her gender she is considered “loose.”

Although Mr.\_\_\_\_ is not a “virtuous man,” his father, old Mr.\_\_\_\_, condemns him for his sexual relationship with Shug—not because of his infidelity to Celie, but because of Shug’s reputation.

He states:

“...she ain’t even clean. I hear she got the nasty woman disease. You ain’t got it in you to understand, he say. I love Shug Avery. Always have, always will. I should have married her when I had the chance. Yeah, say Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. And throwed your life away. (Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ grunt right there.) And a right smart of my money with it. Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ clear his throat. Nobody even sure exactly who her daddy is... Plus all her children got different daddys. (Walker 54-5)

The gender bias toward Shug is evident. When Harpo compromises his marriage with Sophia by committing adultery with Mary Agnes, he is neither judged or ousted from his community. He also has a child from the affair Suzie Q, whom Sophia cares for when Mary Agnes leaves Harpo to pursue a singing career in Memphis. Throughout the novel, male privilege allows men to escape

judgement and criticism from the community. For instance, male privilege allows Alphonso, Celie's "alleged" stepfather to rape her, objectifying her body for sexual pleasure. Mister sexually behaves in the same way toward Celie, as she describes her sexual experience with him as "going to the toilet" (Walker 75). Shug defies male privilege by *taking* similar privileges. Although she does not participate in rape, she sexually objectifies Mr. \_\_\_ as well as Germaine, a young man she encounters in Memphis that is twice her age. She leaves both affairs when they no longer serve her.

Shug does not deny herself pleasure, which is the opposite of Celie, who doubts its existence. Shug introduces Celie to blues and sexual pleasure, which is the climax in Celie's journey to womanhood. When Shug discovers that Celie does not enjoy sex, she begins to teach her about her body and its potential for pleasure, which leads to their homoerotic relationship. Because of her history of rape and abuse, this becomes a freeing experience for Celie. The most controversial and ignored aspect of the novel is its language of love. Celie's exposure to romance and sexual pleasure occurs with a woman, so *The Color Purple* reads as a lesbian novel. Like in Morrison's *Sula*, the most passionate relationship in the novel exists between women. In both novels, the heterosexual relationships and marriages pale in comparison to the bond that develops between women. The abuse and disillusionment that Celie, Nettie, Sophia and Mary Agnes experience in relationships with men is a critique of heterosexism and the institution of marriage. Celie recalls an intimate and erotic moment between her and Shug, when she reveals the pain and isolation she has experienced in her life:

My mama die, I tell Shug. My sister Nettie run away. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ come git me to take care his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me, I say. She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth. Um, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back, say, um, too. Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other. I don't know nothing

bout it, I say to Shug. I don't know much, she say. Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too... If you was my wife, she say, I'd cover you up with kisses stead of licks, and work hard for you too. (Walker 106;109-10)

In this moment, Celie engages in a homoerotic experience from Shug's soft and wet touch. But her comparison of the experience to "my little lost babies mouths," and the fact that "afterwhile she act like a little lost baby too," implies othermothering. Shug's friendship provides pleasure and healing for Celie, when Shug imagines Celie as her wife "covering her with kisses." Here, she provides an alternative, woman-centered model of love and sexual pleasure.

### **Sophia**

Sophia demonstrates a brazen type of feminism, because the rhetoric she expresses is shaped in her experiences of physically fighting men. Whereas Shug displays agency through sexuality, seduction and manipulation, Sophia gains power and control by fighting. However, despite her ability to fight like a man, she discovers that she cannot fight the white supremacist patriarchy of the American South with her fists. Nevertheless, Sophia is important to Celie because not only does she *tell* her to fight Mr.\_\_\_\_, she convinces her that she *can* do it, by example. For instance, when Harpo attempts to beat Sophia, she fights back bruising his face and his sense of male privilege, modeled to him by Mr.\_\_\_\_. Perplexed by Sophia's actions, Harpo explains his dilemma to Celie. He states, "When Pa tell you to do something, you do it, he say. When he say not to, you don't. You don't do what he say, he beat you. But not Sofia. She do what she want, don't pay me no mind at all. I try to beat her, she black my eyes" (Walker 62). Harpo's conception of marriage and power is tied to his belief that his identity as a man and husband depend on his power to beat his wife. This model has been generational for Harpo, and points to Walker's argument concerning slave-master models of power. Sophia does not acquiesce to abuse because

her upbringing around men conditioned her to fight for respect and control. She explains this to Celie:

She say, All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. Now if you want a dead son-in-law you just keep on advising him like you doing. She put her hand on her hip. I used to hunt game with a bow and arrow, she say. (38)

Sophia is not intimidated by men. Living with them prepared her for the realities of sexism. To survive in her home, she learned to behave and fight like men. Mr. \_\_\_ notices this characteristic of Sophia and her sisters, and warns Harpo not to marry her. Old Mr. \_\_\_ warns Mr. \_\_\_ (or "Albert," because his power shrinks beside Shug) not to marry Shug for the same reasons Mr. \_\_\_ warns Harpo not to marry Sophia: neither woman can be controlled. So, again, conceptions of power and manhood are displayed in men's ability to possess and abuse women.

Although she is a good homemaker, Sophia learned from her mother's example the dangers of submission under fear-induced leadership. She sees similar qualities in Celie and shares her story, while expressing her pity for Celie's position. Celie writes, "I say, You feels sorry for me, don't you? She think a minute. Yes ma'am, she say slow, I do... She say, To tell the truth, you remind me of my mama. She under my daddy thumb. Naw, she under my daddy foot. Anything he say, goes. She never say nothing back. She never stand up for herself." (38-9) Sophia testifies to Celie about her mother's position to identify with her, but also to enlighten her to the dangers of *not fighting*. Celie is convinced accepting abuse is safe, because she associates resistance with death. Nettie echoes Sophia declaration to fight: "You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself. I don't say nothing. I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive (Walker

21). Sophia's and Nettie's constant reminders to fight, as well as Sophia's description of her mother's abusive marriage, puts ideas of living, death, freedom and safety into perspective for Celie.

### **African Diasporic Connectedness**

#### ***Nettie***

Through Nettie's letters, Celie experiences a sense of home in Africa with her sister and her children, Olivia and Adam. On the one hand, the epistolary exchange between Celie and Nettie allows a *disconnect* from the physical, spiritual and psychological prison of her abuse. On the other, it provides a *reconnect* to a black diasporic self-hood. Nettie is in Africa with missionaries, Corrine and Samuel, who adopt and parent Celie's children. Because of rape and an arranged marriage to Mr. \_\_\_\_, Celie is separated from her children. Because her family is in Africa, Celie's self-hood is transnationally informed. She has blood ties to the continent and experiences African Diasporic Connectedness through Nettie's letters. For example, Nettie teaches Celie the history of the transatlantic slave trade, and shares with her its connection to her history in the American South and Africa. She writes: "Millions and millions of Africans were captured and sold into slavery—you and me, Celie!" (Walker 134) In addition, Nettie describes the culture, people and religion of their ancestral homeland. She writes: "But Celie, try to imagine a city full of these shining, blueblack people wearing brilliant blue robes with designs like fancy quilt patterns. Tall, thin, with long necks and straight backs. Can you picture it at all, Celie? Because I felt like I was seeing black for the first time. (Walker 136). Nettie helps Celie form a new identity, informed by immobile transnationalism, meaning she can learn about Africa and encounter the power of the ancestral without physically crossing borders. Moreover, Celie is offered alternative conceptions of blackness that imply regality, wealth and beauty, the opposite of the poverty, abuse and

marginalization she witnesses and experiences in rural Georgia. Nettie writes: Oh, Celie, there are colored people in the world who want us to know! Want us to grow and see the light! They are not all mean like Pa and Albert, or beaten down like Ma was. Corrine and Samuel have a wonderful marriage. Their only sorrow in the beginning was that they could not have children. And then, they say, 'God sent them Olivia and Adam' (127). Africa becomes associated with Celie's newfound identity as well as the inspiration for her escape from Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Her family's existence abroad inspires her to confront Mister, leave her abusive, unhappy marriage and start a business selling men's pants in Memphis. At a climactic moment in the novel, Celie expresses her spiritual, mental and physical rebirth:

You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need... Nettie and my children coming home soon, I say. And when she do, all us together gon whup your ass. Nettie and your children! say Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. You talking crazy. I got children, I say. Being brought up in Africa. Good schools, lots of fresh air and exercise. Turning out a heap better than the fools you didn't even try to raise. (Walker 195)

In this moment, Celie exercises the tenacity of Shug, the brazenness of Sophia and the resilience of Nettie. With the help of a dynamic othermothering network, Celie achieves the courage and self-definition that escaped her. She finds God, love and pleasure in her relationship with Shug, her family, and community. Moreover, she defines herself outside of whiteness, maleness and even blackness.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I focused on the othermothering network of Celie, Nettie, Shug Avery and Sophia. Members within this network are able to challenge the racist and sexist system in which they live through communal, transnational and homoerotic relationships. I argued that Shug Avery demonstrates the modern black woman: conscious, spiritual *and* sexual. In addition, I examined the ways in which Sophia appropriates male privilege by physically fighting the men in her life.

Moreover, I discussed how Nettie exemplifies the power and significance of blood family and African Diasporic Connectedness throughout the novel. In my discussion of theory, I considered the similarities and differences between Black Feminism and Womanism, and how each school of thought informs the novel and contemporary black women's fiction, at large.

## Chapter Five:

### Othermothering and Black Diaspora in Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*

While Erna Brodber's *Louisiana* continues with the theme of connectedness in contemporary black women's fiction, it re-conceptualizes community beyond national borders, adding a transnational component to contemporary black women's fiction. However, it is not unprecedented for African American literature to connect itself transnationally to Africa. Oftentimes, transnational currents in African American literature are associated with physical bodies that move across borders, such as with the transatlantic slave trade. From the 1960s through 1980s, this concept of transnationalism was expressed in black women's fiction through themes of kinship, family genealogies, and community. *Louisiana* published in 1994, demonstrates a shift in focus to African Diasporic Connectedness through immobile transnationalism. For example, developments within the contemporary world make transnational identity accessible for black women who do not leave the United States. In *Critical Appropriations: African American Women and the Construction of Transnational Identity*, Simone C. Drake states: *Louisiana* "depicts communities and individuals who look elsewhere or beyond national borders for constructs that negotiate their geopolitical positions without actually leaving home. As such, earlier ideas of community, kinship, and family are disrupted" (9) The protagonist Ella Townsend Kohl for instance, encounters Afro-Caribbean history and culture through modern advancements in ethnography and technology without physically crossing borders. In contemporary black women's fiction, conjuring is a common vehicle that authors use to connect to the black diaspora. For example, in *The Salt Eaters*, Minnie demonstrates conjuring during Velma's healing session, as she employs ancestral heritage through the Haitian Vodou and Louisiana Voodoo intermediary loa and African deities Oshun, Oye, and Ogun. In addition, she uses inanimate objects such as

telephone cables to receive healing messages across spiritual dimensions. Drake notes on modernity and its relationship to transnationalism:

It is commonly acknowledged that the transnational flow of culture is transmitted through the actual physical bodies that move across borders but an inevitable fact of human experience, though many often attribute this phenomenon to modernity, is that the transnational flow of culture is also transmitted through the movement of ideas, independent of actual bodies. (Drake 3)

Similarly, in *Louisiana*, the Afro-Diasporic religious culture of hoodoo, conjure, obeah and myal function as bridges to black diaspora, as Ella connects to the Afro-Caribbean, first through an inanimate object—a gramophone or recording machine—and later spiritually, through what Kinitra D. Brooks refers to as *Black Maternal Inheritance*. Conjuring is central to Velma and Ella’s agency. Just as Minnie accessed the ancestral matriarchal past to heal Velma from the effects of socially constructed diseases, Ella becomes “Louisiana” through *Black Maternal Inheritance*. Ella’s possession by the spirits of Sue Ann/Suzie-Anna Grant-King (Mammy) and her best friend, Louise Grant (Lowly) work to restore transnational connections between African Americans and the Caribbean. *Black Maternal Inheritance* serves as a form of othermothering, as Brodber challenges racist and sexist tendencies of Western historical narratives by creating a communal bond of non-kin black women that speak and record “her-stories,” narratives that challenge colonial and patriarchal narratives. Moreover, Brodber creates an epistemology that is uniquely black and female.

Brodber expands ideas of community by connecting identity and history across black diasporic communities. This is symbolized by the novel’s title *Louisiana*. For example, St. Mary’s is both a parish in the U.S. South, in Louisiana, as well as a parish in the island nation, Jamaica. Mammy notes, “So hey there little green island, you ain’t the only soul got a place called St. Mary... Two places can make children! Two women sire another?” (Brodber 15;17). Brodber uses

oral history and conjuring to join two nations within the black diaspora that share the same name. A novel immersed in anthropology and folklore, *Louisiana* offers an ethnographical framework to interrogate the accuracy of Western historical narratives. Likewise, Ella's work as a folklorist signifies on the life and work of anthropologist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, as both women's work is unremarkably buried and then rediscovered. With an ethnographical framework, Brodber suggests a more globalized view of history that considers indigenous narratives, religions and "ways of knowing" that have been erased due to Western imperialism. Moreover, Brodber is interested in the presence and absence of black women, specifically Third World black women, within Western epistemologies. The editor's note for *Louisiana's* manuscript encourages this idea. It reads: "Here in Louisiana is a mixture of social history and out of body experiences, perhaps a new field of study. What the world needs now" (4). Ella's assignment on behalf of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA) to "retrieve the history of the Blacks of South West Louisiana," changes course with her possession. Ella writes, "The above is as true and exact a transcription as I Louisiana, the former Ella Townsend, now Kohl could with guidance over the years manage to make of my first encounter with my teachers" (31). Ella is possessed by Mammy and Lowly's spirits and consciousness. Access to their conscious minds allows Ella to possess their cultural and historical knowledge. As foremothers, Mammy and Lowly share more than diasporic history, "they literally share themselves, a revised effort at othermothering" (Brooks 18). When Ella becomes Louisiana, she disrupts the original goal of the WPA project, which was to collect a type of black history that reflects a regional identity. Western historical narratives like those constructed in America often negate transnationalism, which deem regions like the U.S. South, as a place with separate histories void of cross-border influences. This is problematic for ethnic and racial communities that arrived in the U.S. through immigration and

chattel slavery. Particularly, these types of narratives perpetuate disintegration within the black diaspora, because history and identity are non-linear, meaning systems such as white supremacy have marginalized or written these histories out of existence.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this chapter, I examine the othermothering network of Ella, Mammy and Lowly, using Kinitra D. Brook's theory of *Black Maternal Inheritance*, which also serves as the primary theoretical framework for this study. Black Maternal Inheritance functions in similar ways to the ancestral matriarchal past in *The Salt Eaters*; however, it involves more aggressive forms of conjuring such as possession. For example, in addition to receiving psychic messages through an inanimate object, Ella also functions as a physical conduit, through which Mammy and Lowly's personal histories flow. Brooks defines Black Maternal Inheritance as "the result of a communication process that occurs between a young female novice and at least two foremothers who are endowed with supernatural powers" (18). Brooks further contends that the reoccurrence of messages between Mammy, Lowly and Ella is the entrance into the communal "I." This is demonstrated by Ella's transformation in Louisiana, a convergence of the names Louise (Lowly) and Suzie-Anna (Mammy). Finally, Brooks argues that Ella, Mammy and Lowly form the "Black Maternal Trinity," an alternative epistemology that uses the power of the ancestral to destroy old paradigms of truth, knowledge, and history.

My discussion of afrocentrist folk sensibility is informed by June E. Roberts's, *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora through Folk Culture and Religion*. Roberts argues the centrality of Afro-Diasporic religions in Brodber's fiction as means of connectedness, while also emphasizing Brodber's concern with Afro-Caribbean women's self-location within a colonial, imperialist patriarchy. In this study, I also discuss immobile transnationalism, gathered from

Simone C. Drake's theory that black women writers such as Erna Brodber "offer cultural productions that present characters that claim transnational identity for African American women who do not travel, "women who stay put in the United States" (Drake, *Critical Appropriations* 1). Drake further elaborates that writers such as Brodber and Gayle Jones along with popular culture artists like Beyoncé Knowles, produce texts that register the influence modernity and technology have had on the transnational flow of culture. These theories shape my discussion of *Louisiana*, and the important ways Brodber employs black women, namely Third World women, to deconstruct master narratives and make visible the narratives of the black diaspora.

### **Historical Framework**

*Louisiana* has a multi-layered historical framework. The novel published in 1994, reflects a manuscript recorded in 1936. But the editor's note that precedes the manuscript states that Ella's husband, Reuben Kohl, delivers it to The Black World Press in the early 1970s. Nevertheless, the manuscript remains unpublished until 1978. Ella began the WPA project in 1936, as a graduate student in anthropology at Columbia University. The WPA, part of a series of federal programs called the New Deal, was created by President Roosevelt on May 6, 1935, through the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act. Roosevelt created the WPA in response to increasing unemployment rates during and following the Great Depression. According to John E. Hansan, the WPA employed over 8.5 million Americans. Particularly, "...almost 30 percent of the nation's African-American families were either on relief or were employed by the WPA" (Wolters 188 qtd. in Braeman et. al). In addition to well-known infrastructure projects such as schools, airports and roads, the WPA commissioned projects involving theatre, music and writing. As the editor's note to Ella's manuscript states: "Franklin D Roosevelt, faced with a depression cast hither and thither for schemes to reduce unemployment. He created jobs for plumbers, architects, the unskilled. Bless

his heart, he also created jobs for artists. His WPA provided gainful employment for many writers black and white, male and female. Ella Townsend was one of those up and coming black women writers the project employed” (Brodber 3). Ella’s fieldwork for the WPA project parallels to Brodber’s work as a researcher at the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) in Jamaica. Between 1974 and 1983, Brodber collected the oral histories of elders in rural Jamaica, which inspired the 1994 publication of *Louisiana*.

The Black World Press attempts to make sense of Ella’s manuscript describing it as a revolutionary and supernatural text. The editor’s note reads: “The text argues persuasively that Ella came under the influence of psychic forces. Today the intellectual world understands that there are more ways of knowing than are accessible to the five senses; in 1936 when Ella Townsend received her assignment it was not so. The world is ready. We are” (4). Here, the editor alludes to the marginal African and Black Feminist epistemologies exhibited in Ella’s manuscript. *Louisiana* demonstrates Black Feminist leanings as the manuscript is published at a black woman’s press during the 1970s, which marks the period known as the Black Women’s Literary Renaissance. The editor writes: “It’s arrival was well timed, perhaps well planned. Our small black woman’s press, like other publishing houses was looking for works on and of black women. One found us” (Brodber 3). Second-wave Black Feminism inspired the creation of several multi-ethnic feminist presses across America. For example, Barbara Smith started the Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press in 1980, which catered to women of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, ages, socioeconomic classes, and sexual orientations. *Louisiana* arrives at the Black World Press when black women’s fight for recognition in both literary and anthropological fields had gained momentum. Drake asserts: “Brodber strategically positions *Louisiana* in contemporary black feminist anthropological discourse, while also positioning this narrative within the second rise of the black women’s literary

canon during the 1970s, the Black Women's Literary Renaissance" (*Sometimes Folk Need More*, 82). It took almost 40 years for the world to prepare itself for a black female community of voices whose personal narratives had been anthropologically displaced. In "Seeking the Ancestors: Forging a Black Feminist Tradition in Anthropology" A. Lynn Bolles reveals, "So-called American anthropology developed in the antebellum period (1840s) and evolved into an academic discipline during the 1880s. From then until the 1980s, the number of Black women in the discipline has not moved beyond the low double digits" (25). The efforts of second-wave Black Feminism, the black arts and civil rights movements, created an opportune time to disclose Ella's manuscript to the public.

### **Palimpsest Narrative: Ella and Zora Neale Hurston**

Ella's work as a folklorist and the ways in which her work must be unearthed to celebrate the culture and tradition of her community calls to mind striking parallels to anthropologist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston. Drake notes: "Just as Ella becomes a ghostly figure for the Black World Press who must confirm her existence, Hurston was a ghostly figure in the literary world until Alice Walker recovered her in the 1970s. (*Sometimes Folk Need More*, 100). Like Hurston, Ella's fieldwork represents "native anthropology," which sits at the margins of a white supremacist, colonialized form of anthropology. Ella and Zora's counter-narratives demonstrate an afrocentrist folk sensibility that grants black women agency and visibility outside of whiteness, patriarchy and colonialism. These subversive counter-narratives challenge "ethnographic research methodologies' efforts to represent truth" (*Sometimes Folk Need More*, Drake 83). As black feminist anthropologists, Ella and Hurston challenge notions of white and colonized femininity, by empowering black women to tell their own stories and write their own histories. In addition, both Ella and Hurston record eccentric, folk narratives that engage in Afro-Diasporic religions and

their connections to the U.S. South. For example, Ella and Reuben move from Franklin, Louisiana to Congo Square in New Orleans where they encounter Madam Marie, who provides psychic healing for West Indian sailors. Likewise, In *Mules and Men*, Hurston records stories about Marie Catherine Laveau, a native New Orleans rootwork and conjure woman. In *Louisiana*, Brodber honors the life and work of Hurston by creating a narrative that celebrates the anthropological gains of black women and their commitment to uniting black diasporic communities.

### **United Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL)**

As a sociologist, Brodber is intentional about themes of mobility and Pan-Africanism throughout the novel. As Ella seeks to record the memories of the black elders in St. Mary's, Louisiana, she discovers stories of migrations of people leaving the African Diaspora as well as political anecdotes regarding Garveyism and the UNIA-ACL. As Drake notes, "Pan Africanism, negritude and Vodou are appropriated in *Louisiana* in order to assist diasporic subjects in negotiating the presence of one nation—a marginalized black nation—within another—the dominant white nation" (*Critical Appropriations* 58). Mammy, Lowly and Silas (Mammy's husband) were Garveyites, members of The United Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL). Through conjuring, Ella learns that Mammy was a psychic and a UNIA-ACL organizer. The UNIA-ACL was a black nationalist organization founded in 1914 by Jamaican Marcus Mosiah Garvey. Most known for his "back to Africa movement," Garvey was an advocate of Pan-Africanism, which contends that unity is vital to the socioeconomic and political progress of people of African descent. Garvey also founded the Black Star Line (BSL), a steamship corporation that encouraged black self-determination and economic independence. The BSL is well-known for its goal to transport emigrants to Africa for the establishment of a black nation-state. Garvey's influence in the progression and solidarity of African peoples is central to

the theme of Pan-Africanism throughout the novel. Arguably, without Black Maternal Inheritance, Western histories of slavery and immigration would be the basis of Ella's fieldwork of the history of the blacks in Southwest Louisiana. However, Brodber reestablishes Garvey as an essential figure in black diaspora history. Garvey was imprisoned in 1925 under conviction of mail fraud and eventually deported from the U.S. in 1927. Although the prestige and influence of the UNIA-ACL declined after Garvey's deportation, his leadership in the socioeconomic and political progression of African peoples was invaluable. Ella notes Garvey's significance in unifying Mammy, Lowly and other Caribbean immigrants in the fight against white supremacy and imperialism:

Mammy appears to have been apolitical in Chicago until she met and was courted by Silas King. King had travelled widely and been one of the preening contingents of black Chicagoans who had distinguished themselves in the First World War. He was trying to become an optometrist. In Chicago she also met Louise Grant who was a young Jamaican orphan, fairly well educated in the literary arts and domestic science for a woman of her class, colour and times. They worked as kitchen staff in a guest house. Silas King was a boarder. He undertook the political socialisation of the young orphan. Mammy eventually joined their efforts at education and in the process upgraded her literary skills. Here she seemed also to have developed her gift for second sight. These three devoted themselves to informing themselves about happenings in the black world and to developing strategies for changing this world. Their discovery of the man who was to make such an impact on the minds of black folks, Marcus Garvey, brought them a clearer focus. His UNIA gave them a framework within which to do concrete work (152).

Despite their migrations within the U.S. and abroad the UNIA-ACL helped to strengthen Mammy, Silas and Lowly's personal relationship as well as their commitment to political resistance. Arguably, without Garvey's influence as well as other racial uplift movements occurring in the U.S. during the early 1900s, Mammy, Lowly and Silas would easily have become disillusioned by segregation and racism.

## **Erna Brodber and Sociological Activism**

Brodber explains the purpose of her work in the essay collection, *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*. Her essay entitled, "Fiction in the Scientific Procedure," discusses how she employs sociology and fiction as a form of activism. She states:

My sociological effort and therefore the fiction that serves it, unlike mainstream sociology, has activist intentions: it is about studying the behavior of and transmitting these findings to the children of people who were put on ships on the African beaches and work up from this nightmare to find themselves on the shores of the New World. It is my hope that this information will be a tool with which the blacks and particularly those of the diaspora will forge a closer unity and, thus fused be able to face the rest of the world more confidently (Brodber qtd. in Cudjoe164).

Brodber uses her work as a sociologist and writer as a form of activism. Her hope to encourage unity within the diaspora suggests Pan-Africanist leanings. Also, her interest in interrogating historical narratives and the cultural productions of black people make her work invaluable to Black Feminist and Diaspora Studies.

*Louisiana* demonstrates the aesthetic and cultural characteristics of Caribbean women's literary tradition during the late twentieth century. Like contemporary African American women writers, Brodber looks to the ancestral and the folk to define black culture. For Brodber and many Third World women writers, cultural identity must be defined outside the spectrum of whiteness, colonial power and patriarchy. In *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora through Folk Culture and Religion*, June E. Roberts argues: "The aesthetic principles that Caribbean women's writing post-1980, propose are foundational to the theory that peasant or afrocentrist folk sensibility significantly represents and provides characteristic marks of Caribbean culture" (6). Likewise, African American women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker use the folk to celebrate blackness and to conceptualize identity and power outside of a white supremacist

capitalist patriarchy. Literature by black women across the diaspora share thematic interests in the power of the ancestral. Specifically, conjuring is used not only as a vehicle to express Africanisms within the diaspora, but also as a bridge that joins communities. Like Toni Cade Bambara, Brodber acknowledged relationships between the spiritual and political, and believed power existed in the harmony of the two seemingly divergent systems. Roberts notes: Brodber ‘intends her work to mobilize the like-minded into a group of activists whose first act of social and political redemption is re-cognition of the self, re-adoption of the spiritual, reorientation of the psyche and reaffirmation of things afrocentric’ (9-10). Roberts’ assertion concerning Brodber’s ideas of sociopolitical progress mirror those of contemporary African American women writers. Furthermore, it suggests the centrality of the spiritual in the agency and identity of people of African descent.

Black women in this study are writing during the contemporary period, which is immersed in technology. So, their novels are set in an era of technological influence. However, black women writers use technology to impart spiritual awareness, specifically knowledge of Afro-Diasporic religions, as demonstrated with Velma’s healing session in *The Salt Eaters* and Ella’s gramophone in *Louisiana*. Hence, modern advancements allow audiences to participate in the flow of transnational currents despite an inability to cross physical borders. Roberts argues: “there seems to be also a newly articulated concern for afrocentrist reconnection across diasporic landscapes. Brodber’s understanding of the complex relationship between the cultural, personal, and spiritual as political surpasses that of most late twentieth-century Caribbean writers” (7). In *Louisiana*, the afrocentric reconnection across diasporic landscapes occurs first through technology—a gramophone—and second through Ella, who serves as a conduit for the communal “I.” Brodber allows these reconnections to take place in communal spaces, like Mammy’s funeral as a form of testimonial discourse

## **Othermothering: Black Maternal Inheritance**

Black Maternal Inheritance, the psychic possession of ancestral knowledge, requires three women to function: a young novice or daughter and two foremothers. These three women form the Black Maternal Trinity. In *Louisiana*, Ella serves as the young novice and Mammy and Lowly are the foremothers with supernatural powers. Their powers are accessed through conjuring a facet of the Afro-Diasporic religious cultures of hoodoo, obeah and myal. Brooks explains that Black Maternal Inheritance is often transmitted through a conduit or an inanimate object. For Ella, the inanimate object is a gramophone. Ella spends a short time with Mammy before she dies, but the transmission of her stories continues beyond the grave. Ella notes, “Whatever had happened with me, however had apparently happened from the first day of machine recording Mammy. As you can see from the transcript, my other self entered their space as early as that—involuntarily—shortly after Lowly sang her song (Brodber 33). Before a message is transmitted to Ella, she sings or states aloud, “Ah who sey Sammy Dead,” a verse from a popular Jamaican folksong, “Sammy Dead.” Throughout the novel, this verse becomes associated with Ella’s psychic powers. She ponders, “. . .no doubt in my mind that I had heard things that nobody had said to me and that I had said what I could not have said but what I was to hear myself say thereafter so often when they were about to make contact with me or when I needed to speak with them, --*Ah who sey Sammy dead*” (Brodber 33). Here, modern technology becomes an othermothering tool as well as a conduit to demonstrate the power of the ancestral. Moreover, the gramophone informs Ella’s Jamaican heritage, which symbolizes immobile transnationalism. C. Cooper notes:

Brodber uses the technology of tape-recording in this novel as a metaphor for complex processes of cross-cultural, transcendental communication. In a brilliantly anagrammatic trope the physics of sound reproduction becomes the psychic medium through which the spirit of the dead communicates with the living, and the academic is challenged to really listen to her informant. (4)

The recurrence of communication between Ella, Mammy and Lowly, leads to Ella's new identity, "Louisiana," a convergence of the names Louise and Suzie-Anna, which symbolizes what Brooks calls the communal "I." Brooks notes:

Ella chooses Louisiana as a realization of her allegiance to these women and the necessity that she accepts their place within her life, for Louisiana is the joining of Lowly and Mammy's given names Louise y Anna...It is Ella's wholehearted participation in the "we" that aids in her discovery of the "I." With her transition from Ella into Louisiana, she redefines not just herself, but what constitutes the communal "I." (38)

At the start of the WPA project, Ella is not expecting to learn anything about herself, or find that someone may be interested in her past. Her Western academic and anthropological search for "these white people's history of the blacks," becomes a physical and spiritual exchange of diaspora history with two othermothers. When Ella's spirit is joined with Mammy and Lowly, she realizes she was "no longer just me. I was theirs. The venerable sisters had married themselves to me — given birth to me, —they would say. I could feel the change...I had been officially entered. I was going to be, if I was not already, a vessel, a horse, somebody's talking drum" (Brodber 32; 46). Here, Ella alludes to a talking drum, which is an hourglass-shaped drum from West Africa, whose pitch can mimic the tone and prosody of human speech.

Ella, Mammy, and Lowly form the "Black Maternal Trinity," an alternative epistemology which uses the power of the ancestral to dismantle old paradigms, particularly colonial and patriarchal systems of knowledge and history. The Black Maternal Trinity represents the communal "I." The communal "I" occurs when the "female novice's self-discovery and self-acceptance centers itself on the joining of that self with the spiritual personages of her ancestors...A trinity is formed in which the women become both distinctive, yet the same. All three are contained within the body and psyche of the novice" (Brooks 18). The Black Maternal

Trinity is best demonstrated in Reuben's account of Ella's transformation to Louisiana, when she becomes the communal "I," the voices of Mammy, Lowly and ultimately her community.

Reuben notes:

My wife's voice was there too. Different chords, different tunes, different octaves. Sheer jazz. One sound. From one body. A community song: It is the voice I hear, I hear them say, come unto me...Louisiana, my wife, Ella Kohl, the former Ella Townsend, was smiling and singing. She was going over the rainbow's mist with her knowing smile. I know now what she knows: Mammy would not tell the president nor his men her tale for it was not hers; she was no hero. It was a tale of cooperative action; it was a community tale. We made it happen. (161)

Ella becomes Louisiana, a hybrid of Louise (Lowly) and Anna (Mammy). She also becomes a hybrid of St. Mary's Louisiana, and St. Mary's parish in Jamaican. Ella's transformation represents a merging of African American and Caribbean histories and identities. The once undefined parts of her Jamaican identity becomes the strongest and most distinct parts of Ella.

It becomes clear that Mammy is central to the othermothering network in her community when Ella attends her funeral. Ella states: The funeral had brought down people—relatives I thought –in every kind of conveyance—conveyances to match the distance. There were buses large, buses small, trucks, vans, cars, wagons, bicycles, carts, two seater bikes. Mammy was indeed someone and obviously worthy of study! (Brodber 37). Because of her regional mobility across the U.S., Mammy had affected the lives of black people from around the world. She lived in St. Mary's, Louisiana, then moved to Chicago, where she worked as a United Negro Improvement Association-African Communities League (UNIA-ACL) organizer. Between her migrations, Mammy developed the gift of "second sight." After her husband's death, she returned to St. Mary's, Louisiana. Despite her relocation to the South, Mammy remained a central figure in her community. Seemingly, her psychic gift caused her to develop epilepsy. Mammy developed several health conditions, many of which her doctors as well as Mammy herself expected to lead

to imminent death. However, because of her essential work as an othermother, activist and psychic, she is “always drawn back” to help her community. When Mammy does finally pass away, she continues her work through Ella beyond the grave. Ella states:

She was epileptic and went away from time to time as I had seen her do and though she hoped that these attacks and her other maladies would take her to her final rest, was always drawn back by the intervention of some kind or needy other. I was beginning to see the character. A sort of matriarch. (Brodber 60)

Because Mammy has acquired diasporic knowledge, exercises the power of the ancestral and has experience in political resistance she is a matriarch in her community. Mammy reflects the type of activism Bambara promotes in *The Salt Eaters*, one that is both spiritual and political, one that reflects “everybody’s ancient wisdom.”

### **Physical and Spiritual Border-Crossings**

*Louisiana* critiques how conceptions of history and identity are formed as Ella crosses several borders: the physical borders of the U.S. South—Louisiana, through orality the global South—Jamaica, and through the supernatural—the spiritual borders of Afro-Diasporic religions. Ella also moves from the rational to the irrational and from singularity to plurality. With each border crossing, Brodber seeks to illuminate diasporic history and deconstruct Western narratives that perpetuate the absence of cross-border influences. Ella makes this important observation as Mammy’s history informs her own. Ella states, “My work must really be finished...it could give guides to researchers...I don’t think for instance that the nature or extent of the influence of black America on the Caribbean and vice versa has been explored as it should” (Brodber 154). Ella learns of her transnational identity by crossing spiritual borders which reflects an African epistemology. Only after her encounter with Black Maternal Inheritance is she able to detach from the Western epistemologies of the academy, science and anthropology. Ella’s skepticism is revealed as she struggles to conceptualize conjuring and other facets of Afro-Diasporic religious cultures, referring

to it as “the anthropology of the dead, Celestial ethnography...Crazy” (Brodber 61). Ella travels across spiritual borders through conjuring, as Mammy’s soul is transferred to her body. Ella states: “They had no problem he [Reuben] said with the shouting and with the violence and my unusual strength. They had seen it all before or had heard of it: it was quite consistent with the transfer of souls. I was being taken on a journey into knowing and was resisting as first timers sometimes do. They hoped my travel was fruitful” (38). Ella being “taken on a journey into knowing,” represents ways of knowing beyond Western ideas of rationality. Through the transference of souls or Black Maternal Inheritance, Ella’s journey makes accessible a counter-history that is not written. She is able to record this history through the communal “I,” the communication process by which she becomes “Louisiana.” It then becomes her responsibility to transcribe the history of “Louisiana,” one in which the diaspora is visible and black women are centered. The history that Ella records signifies the nature of black counter-narratives, as her “ways of knowing” are rooted in orality and spirituality.

### **Identity and Self-Location**

In *Louisiana*, Brodber collapses national and regional borders to construct a black identity that is informed by transnationalism and feminism. In *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora through Folk Culture and Religion*, June E. Roberts argues, “Brodber’s thematization of diasporic history and the Caribbean woman’s struggle for self-location in a blighting patriarchy, as well as her attention to the defining historical characteristics of memory and community, imbue her work with universalist feminist significance” (8). As Roberts suggests, Brodber does not grapple with the disintegration of the black diaspora, without engaging Black Feminist themes of self-hood, community and political resistance. Other characteristics such as the crossing of spiritual borders and an emphasis on afrocentric folk sensibility align *Louisiana* with other

novels within Black Feminist literary studies. Black women's writing is unified in its struggle against a white supremacist patriarchy. However, notions of identity and home become more dynamic when seeking these concepts within colonized spaces. This makes the experiences of Afro-Caribbeans unique. Nevertheless, African Americans were "taken from home" and transported to various parts of the world. Because of diaspora, home is several places for African peoples; they assume a transnational identity. For example, America is a sort of displaced "home" for African peoples, and several other races and ethnicities. This is demonstrated in the American racial classification system. Notice how the "other" is attached to nationality; for instance, Asian-American, African-American, and Caribbean-American. Here, the attaching of the "home" or place of origin is evident. Therefore, the person is inevitably carrying two identities, two homes. So, home is several places, transcending borders of nation, history and culture.

When interviewing Mammy, Ella is not expecting to learn anything about herself. However, Ella's lack of transnational identity becomes the focus of the interview. The conversation reads:

"Where do you come from child...You really do talk in two different ways. Can't figure it. — From New York, Mammy. — New York don't talk so. Where before that? —Nowhere really Mammy. — 'Really'. Meaning what? —My parents. They are from the islands. — Huh. Lots of them little bitty islands down there. And yours got no name. —Jamaica. Mammy—Yes. That is right. And that's why you sounding so very much like her. Both of them girl? — Yes Mammy — (Brodber19).

Ella's liminality becomes just as important as Mammy's personal history. When Mammy notices that Ella talks two different ways, she challenges Ella's conceptions of her identity. She also causes Ella to consider her complex, yet undiscovered past and its traces in the U.S. South. Most importantly, Mammy encourages Ella to reflect on her poor relationship with her Jamaican immigrant parents.

Like Janie in *Their Eyes*, Ella was raised through othermothering by her grandmother. Ella has an estranged relationship with her parents. She refers to her parents as “those two,” recalling feelings of sorrow about their relationship and their decision to leave the Caribbean. She states: “...it seems that my father left me in my mother and went off to Central America where he found that he wanted her company permanently, came back to get her, married her and took her away but not, for whatever reason their child, only few months old. I was left with my grandmother” (38). Ella’s father left her pregnant mother to migrate to Central America and later returned to marry her and take her away, leaving Ella alone with her grandmother, who soon passes away. Ella is left with little information about her Jamaican identity or culture and is raised as an American. Still, Ella’s parents expect perfection from her, including accomplishments that align with their unrealized dreams. She notes: “I was an egg, for those two people held in me the potential for all kinds of things they hadn’t done and like an egg if I fell I could break and splatter all over their faces” (39). Also, to Ella’s parents, her marriage to Reuben is a form of socioeconomic redemption in the same ways that Nanny imagines Janie’s marriage to be to Logan Killicks. Ella states: “That golden boy [Reuben] absolved me. Gave me something to give my luckless parents about whose happiness I did care tremendously. I had only now to marry him and make their joy almost complete...So Reuben is key to my life and I didn’t want to jeopardise that relationship” (40). The narration of Ella’s relationship with her parents, along with her upbringing, is a critique of immigration. In addition, it demonstrates a common trope in Caribbean women’s writing: mother or parent as colonizer and daughter or child as colonized subject. The gravity of Ella and Reuben’s relationship to her parents is a feminist critique of the patriarchal institution of marriage.

When she is first introduced, Ella is firmly situated as an American. She is a graduate student at Columbia, tasked to collect the history of black people in Louisiana, a project funded by the American federal government. Ella describes herself as “an adult, in my late 20s, my own and sole breadwinner” (Brodber 33). As Reginald Khoker puts it, Ella’s “description of her life is marked by a sense of capitalistic individualism that is unmistakably American. She prides herself in her career, her financial independence and her ability to support herself” (38-9). Most relevant to Ella’s upbringing, is her parents’ refusal to teach Ella about her Jamaican heritage. For example, Ella’s unfamiliarity with the Jamaican folk song “Sammy Dead, is because her “parents, wishing to disassociate themselves from some aspect of their past did not/would not have sung such a song nor would they have kept company with people who would sing such a song” (31). Ella’s parents’ insistence on assimilation marks its negative effects on indigenous narratives, while also emphasizing the importance of diasporic memory. Mary Chamberlain states:

Memories are a key route into revealing and understanding the processes, adjustments, and negotiations of migrants, of the mobile and liminal worlds they inhabit, of the connections with and the longings for home. But they also contain those all-important traces from an older past, those deeper levels of values, attitudes, and behaviors, clues to a collective memory. Diasporic memory is a necessarily layered one which links the black experience and provides a cultural continuity with those back home and overseas. (186)

Brodber’s corrective agenda throughout the text is to connect the U.S. South to the Caribbean. She joins Louisiana and Jamaica through what Kutzinski calls rimland status. Kutzinski states: “In cultural terms, the southernmost parts of the United States are really rimlands of the Caribbean, and have been so ever since slaves were traded between the two areas, well before the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Their unacknowledged rimland status has all kinds of imaginative, political implications” (61-2). The transatlantic slave trade creates a barrier to ideas of rootedness, as concepts of identity and history are scattered across several nations and continents. This makes the

tendencies of the master narrative to group one race or ethnicity's identity and history into one region, space and place problematic—what Ella refers to as “these white people's history of the blacks of South West Louisiana” (14).

The irony of the transatlantic slave trade is that it is the source of displacement for African peoples, but also connects them through the ancestral experience of slavery and racism. This commonality however, does not make all African peoples the same. The heterogeneity of people of African descent occurs because of colonial, national, and cultural impulses following the slave trade.

### ***Louisiana and Southern Studies***

Since Brodber characterizes Ella as a proponent of Western thinking, the conventions of the grand narrative and its tendency to create a south that is its own nation having its own history separate from the rest of the U.S. become evident. For example, Ella suggests there is something distinct about the U.S. South, which separates it from the north and essentially the Global South, to a point of needing to understand the “psyche” of the region. She notes: “I did not know the psyche of the South, black or white so this mutual suspension of reason floored me” (66). Ella is seeing the South, through the lens by which it is normally viewed, a contested binary space of black and white. Toni Morrison argues that the chief conflict of the American self is the question of how to be an individual while also belonging to a community (*NPR*, 2008). This is the issue with American identity and history; America's inability to reach beyond its own borders to define itself and its citizens. Nevertheless, cross-border influences can be found throughout the region, particularly New Orleans, where Ella meets Madame Marie and a steady flow of sailors, many from the West Indies. In “Borders and Bodies: The United States, America, and the Caribbean,” Vera M. Kutzinski discusses ideas of connectedness between the U.S. South, particularly New Orleans and the Caribbean. She argues:

New Orleans has functioned historically and imaginatively as link between the United States and the West Indies, that problematic territory even more south than the “South,” a region so persistent in its capitalization that it does not admit the existence of anything beyond its southern borders: “one emphatically says ‘the South,’ with a capital ‘S,’ as though it represents an absolute, as though we other people of the south, to the south of the capitalized South, never existed. (61)

Historical events such as chattel slavery serve as invisible regional lines that separate the North from the South. In many cases, Southern history and identity formations become associated with the unpleasant parts of American history such as slavery, racism and poverty-- the South becomes the wastebasket of the non-fantastical elements of the grand narrative. It has been a continuous debate, “the nationhood” of the South, with its confederate flag, and annual civil war reenactments. In “Look Away! The U.S South in New World Studies,” Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn note: “Indeed, till recently both white and black constructions of a “South” (like the white constructions of “America”) have tended to elide geographical, demographic, and economic difference within the region’s borders and similarities across them” (3). The “South,” becomes somewhat of an imagined space. A space that is central to the country’s past, but presented as a ghost that haunts the multicultural, progressive persona of the country. So, *Louisiana* raises two concerns in relation to Southern and American discourse. First, America is seemingly divided within itself historically, with an inability to construct a narrative that is reflective of a nation and not two regions. Second, the American narrative does not reflect the multicultural progression it claims, because of its exclusion of cross-border influences.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed how *Louisiana* demonstrates a shift in focus to African Diasporic Connectedness through immobile transnationalism, which means transnational identity can be informed “at home;” one can cross borders technologically. As symbolized by Ella’s gramophone, developments within the contemporary world make transnational identity accessible

for black women who do not leave the United States. Although *Louisiana* displays immobile transnationalism, Ella still crosses several borders: she moves across physical borders to the U.S. South—Louisiana, through orality, the global South—Jamaica, and through the supernatural—the spiritual borders of Afro-Diasporic religions. In addition, she moves from the rational to the irrational and from singularity to plurality. With each border crossing, Brodber seeks to illuminate diasporic history and deconstruct Western epistemologies that perpetuate the absence of cross-border influences. I also discussed the ways that *Black Maternal Inheritance* serves as a form of othermothering as it exhibits a communal bond of non-kin black women that speak and record “her-stories.” Moreover, I argued *Black Maternal Inheritance* functions as an epistemology that is uniquely black and female, by challenging racist and sexist tendencies of Western historical narratives.

Conclusion:

Future Studies on The Black Maternal

**The Black Maternal and Afro-Caribbean Women Writers**

The purpose of this study was to examine representations of maternal relationships between black women in contemporary fiction and to decipher what those relationships suggest about Black womanhood as well as Black social and political thought. Much of my current research on the black maternal led me to primarily trace its significance in the novels of U.S. black women writers. However, my analysis of Erna Brodber's *Louisiana* has inspired me to explore the ways colonialism inform maternal relationships between Afro-Caribbean women in Caribbean women's writing post 1970. I want to investigate the influence of the U.S. Black Women's Literary Renaissance and Black feminist movements on fiction by Afro-Caribbean women writers. In my future research on Afro-Caribbean women writers, I hope to answer the following questions: Why did Third World Feminism emerge and what is its relationship if any, to Third Wave Feminism? What effects does colonialism have on parent/child relationships? In what ways can immigration situate the mother as "colonizer" and child as "colonized subject"? In what ways does othermothering in African American women's fiction compare to and differ from Afro-Caribbean women's fiction? These questions frame my research goals as I embark further studies on The Black Maternal and its influence in black women's fiction throughout the diaspora.

**The Black Maternal and Black Lives Matter**

My interest in the study of Black womanhood peaked when I was introduced to sociologist Patricia Hill Collins' 1990 publication, *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins' theories concerning an epistemology that was distinctly black and female resonated with me, particularly her theory of othermothering. At first, I was skeptical about applying a sociological theory like othermothering

to black women's fiction. But the more I studied black women, the more I realized that they are rarely *just* novelists or writers. They serve in various roles and professions. Among these community organizers, social workers, professors, sociologists and anthropologists. I also noticed that at the intersection of their professions and their work as writers was motherhood, (including othermothering) and community work. From this point, I knew I would have to de-center my investigation of the black maternal from the novel. But, how was *The Black Maternal* relevant to Black Studies in the twenty-first century? How was it relevant to the Hip Hop Generation and those that followed? How could I apply *The Black Maternal* to twenty-first century research in Black Women's Studies?

I knew black women had continued working in their communities since the 1970s and 1980s. I also knew based on my research, that black women often "stumbled" upon activism and politics, specifically when it bled into their homes—affecting their children and neighborhoods. I thought about Toni Cade Bambara and Alice Walker who in addition to being novelists, were activists and community organizers. I continued my investigation with Collins, who had not only introduced me to Black feminism, but to the study of U.S. black womanhood. My research led me to her 2006 publication of *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism and Feminism*. In the text, Collins discusses the relationships between feminism and black women's community work. She made a profound statement that solidified my future research goals. Collins states: "African American women have seen their fathers and sons lynched, lost their children, and visited their brothers in jail. The personal suffering of their loved ones continues to function as a powerful catalyst for action" (131). I had found the information I needed to confirm that my primary interest was in black women's community work. Specifically, I wanted to trace *The Black Maternal* in U.S. sociopolitical movements. After the 2012 acquittal of George Zimmerman in the Trayvon

Martin case, I realized I had to start with “The Black Lives Matter” movement.” Black Lives Matter or #BLM was founded on July 13, 2013 by three women: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. Two of the three women identify as queer, and one woman identifies as a transnational feminist.

At the July 2016 Democratic National Convention, the “Mothers of the Movement,” took the stage in support for Hillary Clinton as she sought the U.S. presidency. The convention’s theme for that day was “A Lifetime of Fighting for Children and Families.” The Mothers of the Movement became well known as the deaths of their sons and daughters, ranging in age from 12 to 43 years old were killed due to police brutality and gun violence. The Mothers became vital to The Black Lives Matter Movement (#BLM), as unfortunately, the national attention attached to their children’s death served as a catalyst for protests around the country and even the world—with protests occurring as far away as in Paris and the UK. The “Mothers of the Movement” are: Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin; Geneva Reed-Veal, the mother of Sandra Bland; Lucy McBath, the mother of Jordan Davis; Gwen Carr, the mother of Eric Garner; Cleopatra Pendleton, the mother of Hadiya; Maria Hamilton, the mother of Dontre; Lezley McSpadden, the mother of Michael Brown; Wanda Johnson, the mother of Oscar Grant and Samaria Rice, the mother Tamir Rice. Stories and images of their children’s deaths were played “on a loop” across the media, brewing rage and disillusionment in the black community. Millennials took the protest to social media, which sparked even greater attention for national media outlets. Particularly, “black Twitter” began mobilizing sharing tweets, images and videos about the relationship between racism, police brutality and gun violence. Since its inception in 2012, the Black Lives Matter Movement has created over 36 chapters across the U.S. and one international chapter in Toronto, Canada.

In their interviews and television appearances, the Mothers not only lament for their children, but for the potential dangers that befall other mothers whose children remain unsafe from police brutality and gun violence. As Collins' states: "...some women choose to become "mothers of the community..." Seeing the racial and gender politics that confine their motherwork can catalyze Black women to take actions that they otherwise might not have considered" (132). So, the Mothers of the Movement mobilized as a reaction to the deaths of their children and the children of their community. To continue my research on black women's community work, *The Black Maternal* and its relationship to BLM, I must investigate othermothering relationships between black women and men, as the racial profiling of black men by police officers across the country was and continues to be the thrust behind the movement. Still, I want to keep the Mothers center to my discussion as I determine to what extent scholars and those within their communities identify them as "feminists" or activists. Collins explored this issue with her assessment of Fannie Lou Hamer, Toni Cade Bambara and Pearl Cleage. She concluded that tensions between personal and collective identity often distract black women from the important goals of political resistance. She writes on investigating Hamer, Bambara and Cleage:

Are these African American women "feminists"? Does it really matter what they call themselves? Seemingly endless debates about classifying people into identity categories of who is "Black" and who is not, who is "feminist" and who is not, and whether a "transsexual" individual can join the women's tennis team sap energy from more pressing concerns. These personal identity politics are certainly important to the individuals involved, but such disputes also obscure a more fundamental collective identity politics that is essential to successful social movements (124).

Collins concludes that collective identity is necessary for effective social movements. This is true for the Mothers of the Movement, whose bond developed in their shared positions as black women struggling against a racist justice system. Their collective identity or their moral and emotional connection to a broader community prompted their participation in political resistance.

My future research goals are to address the following in relationship to black women's community work, The Mothers of the Movement and Black Lives Matter: What role does New Racism play in the Black Lives Matter Movement? In what ways is the Hip Hop Generation (the first generation to live in post-Jim crow society) marginal or central to BLM? What are the nuances of collective and personal identity politics in the black community? How does The Black Maternal work to mobilize BLM? What partnerships for profit and non-profit organizations have partnered with The Mothers of the Movement and to what extent have these partnerships been successful? With this research, it is my goal to disrupt traditional patterns of male-centeredness in black sociopolitics by focusing on the women who have inspired and progressed BLM to an international movement. Overall, my research aims to continue black feminists', womanists' and scholars' goals to promote the visibility, intelligence and resilience of black women in academic and sociopolitical circles.

## Works Cited

- Bambara, Toni Cade. *The Salt Eaters*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992. Print.
- Beauchamp, Sarah. "The Color Purple Author Alice Walker: Rebellion is Close to Godliness." *Huffington Post*. 10 Dec 2016. Web.
- Bolles, A. Lynn. "Seeking the Ancestors: Forging a Black Feminist Tradition in Anthropology." in *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*. Ed. Irma. McClaurin. Rutgers U Press, 2001. 24-43. Print.
- Braeman, John, Robert Hamlett, and David Brody. *The New Deal: The National Level*. Ohio State U Press, 1975. Print.
- Brodber, Erna. *Louisiana: A Novel*. London: New Beacon Books, 1994. Print.
- . "Fiction in the Scientific Procedure." in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*. Ed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe. Calaloux, 1990. Print.
- Brooks, Kinitra. "Maternal Inheritances: Trinity Formations and Constructing Self Identities in *Stigmata* and *Louisiana*." *Femspec*. 12.2 (2012): 17-43. *Proquest*. 1 Dec 2016. Web.
- Carby, Hazel. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. Kindle Edition.
- Chamberlain, Mary. "Diasporic Memories: Community, Individuality, and Creativity—A Life Stories Perspective." *Oral History Review*. 36.2 (2009): 177-87. *Project Muse*. Web. 1 Nov. 2011.
- Chireau, Yvonne. "Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*. 7.2. (1997). 225–246. JSTOR. 1 March 2016. Web.
- Christian, Barbara. *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*. Greenwood Press, 1980. Print.
- . "The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison." in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison's Sula*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1999. 25-50. Print.
- . "What Celie Knows That You Should Know." in *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000*. Eds. Gloria Bowles, M. Giulia Fabi and Arlene R. Keizer. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois Press, 2007. 20-30. Print.

- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000. PDF file.
- . *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism and Feminism*. Philadelphia: Temple U Press, 2006. Print.
- Cooper, C. "Science and Higher Science: Transmigration in Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*." International Conference on Caribbean Women Writers. Wellesley College, Wellesley. March 1995.
- Drake, Simone. "Sometimes Folk Need More": Black Women Writers Dwelling in the Beyond." Diss. U of Maryland, College Park, 2007. Print.
- . *Critical Appropriations: African American and the Construction of Transnational Identity*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2014. Print.
- Ducille, Ann. "On Canons: anxious history and the rise of black feminist literary studies." in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*. Ed. Ellen Rooney. Cambridge University Press, 2006. 29-52. Print.
- . *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*. New York: Oxford U Press, 1993. Print.
- Edemariam, Aida. "The Color Purple." *The Guardian*. 23 June 2007. Web.
- Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Criticism*. Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.
- Hansan, John .E. "The Works Progress Administration." Web. 28 Feb. 2017.
- Haynes, Laura Sams. "Christio-Conjure in *Voodoo Dreams, Baby of the Family, The Salt Eaters, Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* and *Mama Day*." Diss. Louisiana State U, 2002. Print.
- Henderson, Mae G. "*The Color Purple*: Revisions and Definitions." in *Bloom, Alice Walker*. (1988). 67-80. Print.
- Hernton, Calvin. "The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers." *Black Scholar*.16.4. (1985): 2-11. Web. 1 March 2014.
- hooks, bell. *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. New York: Routledge, 1982. Print.
- Hudson-Weems, Clenora. *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. Bedford Publishers, 2004. Print.
- Hull, Gloria Akasha. *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women*. Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2001. Print.

- Hull, Gloria T. "What It is I Think She's Doing Anyhow: A Reading of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*." in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*. Eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers. Bloomington: Indiana U Press, 1985. 216-32. Print.
- Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith. *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1982. Print.
- . "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." by Barbara Christian." in *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1982. 157-73. Print.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Harper, 2006. Print.
- Khoker, Reginald. "Dialoguing Borders: The African Diasporic Consciousness in Erna Brodber's Writing of the Local." *Canadian Woman Studies*. 23.4 (2005): 37-41. Print.
- King, Deborah. "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology" in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. Ed. Guy B. Shetfall. New York: The New Press, 1995. 294-318. Print.
- Kutzinski, Vera M. "Borders and Bodies: The United States, America, and the Caribbean." *The New Centennial Review*. 1.2 (2001): 55-8. *Project Muse*. Web. 1 Nov. 2011.
- Lee, Valerie. *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers*. New York: Routledge. 1996. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. Print.
- . Interview by Lynn Neary. "Toni Morrison Discusses A Mercy." Natl. Public Radio, 2008. YouTube. Web. 1 Nov 2011.
- Omolade, Barbara. *The Rising Song of African American Women*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print
- Patterson, Robert J. "African American feminist theories and literary criticism" in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*. Cambridge University Press 2009. pp. 87-102. Print.
- Personal Statement. "The National Black Feminist Organization." U of Michigan-Dearborn Library Resource. Web.
- Phillips, Layli. "Introduction: Womanism: On Its Own." in *The Womanist Reader*. Taylor and Francis, 2006. Ed. Layli Phillips. xix-xlix. Print.

- Reed, Ishmael. "A Conversation with Ishmael Reed by Reginald Martin." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 4.2. (1984). Dalkey Archive Press. Web.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 9: Jessie Redmon Fauset." *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature- A Research and Reference Guide*. Web. 1 Feb. 2016.
- Roberts, June. "Erna Brodber's Louisiana: An Alternative Aesthetic: or, Oral Authority in the Written Text:" *Literary Griot: International Journal of Black Expressive Cultural Studies*. 14.1-2. (2002): 75-93. Print.
- Smith, Jon and Deborah Cohn. "Introduction: Uncanny Hybridities." *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*. Duke UP. (2004): 1-24. Print.
- Suranyi, Agnes. "The Bluest Eye and Sula: Black Female Experience from Childhood to Womanhood." in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. Ed. Justine Tally. Cambridge University Press, 2007. 11-25.
- Thompson, Becky. "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism." *Feminist Studies*. 28.2 (2002): 336-60. JSTOR. Web. 1 Aug 2016.
- Three Negro Classics*. New York: Avon Books, 1965. Print.
- Traylor, Eleanor W. "Women writers of the Black Arts movement." in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*. Ed. Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor. Cambridge University Press 2009. 50-68. Print.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Open Road Media. Kindle Edition.
- . *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983. Print
- Washington, Mary Helen. Rev. of *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*, by Barbara Christian. *Signs* 8.1 (1982): 177-182. JSTOR. Web. 1 Jan. 2012.
- Wilentz, Gay Alden. *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-ease*. Rutgers University Press, 2000. Print.
- Williams, Dana A. "Contemporary African American women writers." in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*. Ed. Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor. Cambridge University Press 2009. 71-86. Print.