2012

Rewriting the Mother Figure in Selected Novels by Contemporary African American Women

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REWRITING THE MOTHER FIGURE IN SELECTED NOVELS BY CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

By

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A Dissertation submitted to the Program in Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Degree Awarded:
Summer Semester, 2012
Andreia Thaxton-Simmons defended this dissertation on June 26, 2012.

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This Dissertation is dedicated to my husband, my son and my daughter.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of those who believed in me and helped to make this project possible in the midst of all of the changes that occurred during my process.

I would like to thank my dissertation committee for working with me and providing me with the necessary guidance I needed. Thank you to my committee chair, Dr. Maxine Montgomery for her invaluable insight and her scholarly aptitude to help me conceptualize my topic. Thank you to Dr. Dennis Moore, David Johnson and Leon Anderson for your support. I would like to thank “the village” who helped with childcare: Geraldine Thaxton, Betty Simmons, Gloria and Edward Fuller, Lisa Pratt, Christine and Kirk McDearis, Christina Joy Robinson, Jarred Thaxton and Gerrica Thaxton.

I would like to thank my mother Sharon Thaxton and my father Allen Hampton for their support. I would like to thank Dorothy Randall for her encouragement and support.

I would like to thank Regina Thaxton, Stephanie Hunt, Pamela Thaxton-Barney, Leslie Barney, Kimberly Ross-Brown, Kimberly Pickett, Errica Thaxton, Lisa Paige, Diedra Lattimore, Jeneen Surrency, Sheryl Davis, Anwar Diop and Rachael Scott for being there.
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ABSTRACT

In this project, I theorize the implications of maternal loss in novels by contemporary African American female novelists. Maternal loss in this project is used to describe a separation of mother and child, specifically daughter, due to a disconnection in communication, death or dislocation. I argue that maternal loss symbolizes loss figuratively and literally. It symbolizes the loss of a distant African past, the loss of freedom, a loss of historical records and a literal/literary loss of black mothers. I note that the experience of maternal loss in the novels causes protagonists to search for Mother. The character must seek a connection with an enabling, maternal figure.

Black motherhood has historically been laden with numerous challenges. Discussed by black feminist scholars such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Davis, these challenges include mothers being disconnected from their children during and after the slave trade, poverty, various forms of abuse and efforts to overcome negative images set forth by dominant society. Contemporary African American female authors examine these challenges in the context of maternal loss, re-memory and third space. They look at the past to see how it impacts the present. However, they also face challenges in writing the maternal stories of the past. The primary challenge they face is trying to write in a void.

They attempt to write/rewrite a history that has limited written records and the records that do exist are often thwarted or told from a biased point of view. Thus, black motherhood becomes a site for re-memory. This project examines the use of maternal loss, re-memory and third space to reconstruct black motherhood in Toni Morrison’s Sula, Gayl Jones’ Corregidora, Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, Gloria Naylor’s Bailey’s Café, and Tina McElroy Ansa’s Ugly Ways. It focuses on the use of history and its merge with an idealized space for maternal figures. The maternal figures contemporary black female novelists reconstruct can be linked with a distant African past and vestiges of the rural south. Yet, they are empowered and positioned to reject the historical mandates that have been placed upon them by patriarchal society and male dominance. Through the use of
maternal loss, re-memory and third space, contemporary black female novelists create maternal figures that are able to mother on their own terms and in their own way.
INTRODUCTION

i am accused of tending to the past
as if i made it,
as if i sculpted it
with my own hands. i did not.
this past was waiting for me
when i came,
a monstrous unnamed baby,
and i with my mother's itch
took it to breast
and named it
History.
she is more human now,
learning languages everyday,
remembering faces, names and dates.
when she is strong enough to travel
on her own, beware, she will.

Lucille Clifton

From the Motherland of Africa through the Middle Passage all the way to the American plantation and well into the city, the institution of slavery posed many obstacles for Black mothers. Black mothers were not allowed to be involved in the economic, social or political discourses that dictated their lives. They experienced rape, ridicule, hard labor, poor treatment, and, most disheartening, separation from their children. Throughout the course of history in America, the slave past has hovered over Black motherhood. Even when slavery ended, racial and gender discrimination presented more social, economic and political threats to maternal relationships.
For years, the impact that slavery had on Blacks went unaddressed. Ashraf A. Rushdy in *Remembering Generations* argues that scholars have yet to truly understand the full effects of slavery and there has been no true commitment to even try. He states, “Slavery, in American intellectual discourse, is not only or merely a metaphor, a sin, a cancer, a crime, or a shame, although it is also all of these things” (Rushdy 2). There is a need then to examine maternal loss as it relates to slavery and black motherhood.

Undeterred by the pain of slavery, early Black female writers lifted their voices in resistance. Many early written works of African American women were autobiographies and slave narratives. Early Black female writers, such as Lucy Terry, Phyllis Wheatley and Jarena Lee, wrote about their experiences which documented their inhumane treatment as slaves. Narratives also became a popular means for free Blacks, including Mary Prince, Frances Harper, and Sojourner Truth, to fight against the institution of slavery in the South. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs wrote as a former slave about the sexual, physical and mental abuse slave women withstood. She had to work like a horse, breed like an animal, serve as a concubine, and still take care of her children as well as her master’s children and other children. Though many of these slave narratives were not uncovered until the twentieth century, this literature is important because it indicates that, by telling stories, Black women played a significant role in uncovering the perils of slavery.

The female slave’s experience became investigative ground for Black female novelists, and, echoing Jacobs' experiences, motherhood emerged as a defining characteristic of these novelists’ art. In the fifties and sixties, Gwendolyn Brooks and Paula Marshall, for example, defied the stereotypical slave images of the black mother as the pervasive mammy figure.

In white southern literature, the mammy figure was loyal to her white God, her white domestic employers, and their children. Mammy sacrificed for everyone except herself. Richard H. King further notes southern thought of the black mammy.

Because of her skin color, she was an illegitimate sibling, childlike though not without force of will. Yet the romance, and sometimes reality, contradicted this image by presenting her as the loving foster mother to whom the Southern hero owed all. In this role... she was a rebuke to the
stereotypically cold and distant white mother.... She becomes one who nurtures and truly mothers. She was also regarded as sexually ardent and animal-like in passion. Thus, she was a sultry temptress and a nurturing mammy, inferior sibling and true parent, incestuous object and idealized mother. What linked these rather contradictory roles was the fact that to the black woman were attributed the emotional impulses denied to the white woman. (Southern 37)

For Brooks and Marshall, the southern patriarchal mammy image was not an acceptable representation of Black mothers. Like Bettye Saar, who would later provide mammy with a broom and a rifle, the mothers in Brooks’ and Marshall’s works were often domineering matriarchs as they sought to defy images of the subservient slave mammy. Brooks’ and Marshall’s portrayals of the Black mother demonstrate a literary tradition among Black female novelists to engage in rememory, the act of revisiting and revising the past.

This need to revise the Black mother is driven by loss and absence. Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Tina McElroy Ansa as well as other contemporary Black female novelists such as Ntozake Shange, and Edwidge Danticat are literary daughters who have experienced a literary maternal loss. They are daughters of the diaspora, looking back and trying to reconnect with the maternal figure that is at once a figure, a character, and a representation of Africa and everything Africa signifies in their lives. In doing this, contemporary Black female authors reconstruct in their fictional work what the mother is like. They work from a disadvantaged position in that they are so distant from that maternal past, yet these authors use maternal loss to drive the narrative and deal with the oppressive images and remnants of slavery using rememory and what Homi Bhabha refers to as Third Space. Homi Bhabha’s definition of Third Space indicates a space with “the capacity to produce a cross-referential, generalizable unity that signifies a progression or evolution of ideas in time, as well as a critical self-reflection on their premises or determinants” (54). Bhabha writes that, by exploring third space, “we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves” (56). Third Space is relevant to W.E.B. Dubois’ double consciousness in that it functions in opposition to double consciousness. Double consciousness is self-identity
as seen through the eyes of others. The perception creates a twoness wherein one is either black or white one thing or another, but Third Space offers a flexibility that allows figures to vacillate between identities, reside in the middle of an identity or choose no identity at all.

Additionally, contemporary Black female novelists use maternal loss—the deceased mother—as a metaphor for the conditions of the slave past, suggesting that the death of the mother in these novels is central to rememory and the construction of the empowered Black mother. Rememory is taken from Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved wherein a slave mother attempts to kill her children to protect them from the cruelty of slavery.¹ The novel speaks to the imagination as it reexamines the slave past and traumatic memory. By doing so, Morrison assiduously works to explore the site of slavery. She reconfigures the slave past and rewrites/revises it so that it becomes available for the present. Thus, contemporary African American female authors use rememory to revise the past and articulate the concerns of Black women and representations of Black motherhood.

For the last two decades, motherhood has been at the core of contemporary Black feminist theory and current scholarship surrounds the issue. For example, Dianne Sadoff’s “Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston,” and Joanne Braxton’s “Afra-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance” show that maternal themes have given birth to Black women’s literary tradition. Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (1974) and her recovering of Zora Neal Hurston led many Black feminist literary critics to further examine motherhood and to consistently connect with the past (Sadoff 10). Recognizing what Sadoff labeled a double history, “oppression and resistance, generational rupture and survival,” recent Black feminist conversations on motherhood negate such feminists as Adrienne Rich, whose work does not represent the conditions of slavery and injustices experienced by Black mothers past or present. Rich notes:

[T]o be maternally with small children all day…requires a holding back, a putting aside of that imaginative activity, and demands instead a kind of

¹ See Harris. The Black Book (New York: Random, 1974). Toni Morrison initially read the story of the slave woman, Margaret Garner while working as an editor at Random House. The text features a reprint of the 1856 newspaper account of the incident.
conservatism…. [T]o be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination. (qtd. in O'Reilly 22)

Rich explained the situation for Anglo-American mothers as an “either-or dichotomy: women must choose between work and motherhood” (qtd. in Oriely 23). However, African American women have historically had little to no choice which Toni Morrison expressed as being “the ship and the safe harbor.” Morrison continued, “Our history as Black women is the history of women who could build a house and have some children, and there was no problem” (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 135).

Whereas Rich and other mainstream feminists see children as oppressive, Angela Davis acknowledges that, for Black mothers, there are other factors that can create oppressive circumstances. Davis’s examination of Black motherhood notes that the desperate acts committed by mothers, such as abortions and infanticides, were not because of the “biological birth process,” but because of oppressive conditions (205).

bell hooks also disagreed with the concept of children as oppressive; she argues that “racism, the absence of jobs, limited skills, and the lack of education is the root of oppression, not motherhood” (71). Patricia Hill Collins adds that motherhood among Black women is a “series of constantly renegotiated relationships. African American women face challenges and have to renegotiate their relationships with each other, with their children, within the larger community, and within themselves” (176).

Collin’s sense of negotiation also suggests W.E.B. Dubois’ use of double consciousness. Negotiation is the twoness Dubois speaks of where one sees herself through the eyes of someone else. The “either/or” model offers no in-between for Black mothers. Other marginalized groups have also expressed similar concerns of having to negotiate. For example, Ana Castillo says of Mexican women that, once a woman becomes a mother, she becomes “a visible and valued entity and becomes an institution in and of herself, a source that at times must be deferred to and paid homage to and of which there are always many expectations, a considerable number which are humanly unrealistic” (“The Mother-Bond” 183). Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” illustrates the 19th century woman’s desire to not have to negotiate with a husband but to have her freedom. For Black women, however, there is both a past and present
burden that requires more skillful negotiating. Black mothers are most often not the doll wife Nora was in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. Nora did not work; she had someone to take care of the children and to clean, yet she needed to find herself and to establish her independence. Historically, Black women have had to take care of their children, someone else’s children, clean the house, and be the attentive wife.

Feminist theory builds its maternal ideology on the separation of the male space—business and politics—being ruled by men versus the private space of home ruled by women. African American maternal theory rejects a pure dichotomy of the public and private space, the masculine and the feminine. Collins suggests that, among ethnic women’s homes, this dichotomy cannot be sustained. Economics and politics create a different reality for women of color, one which does not permit them to function in a vacuum (Collins 61). The Black home is a space of resistance to the perils of hegemonic forces of institutional racism is both initiated and sustained. Presently, more than half of Black mothers are head of household, and it is not uncommon for Black women earn more than their male counterparts. So there is not a double consciousness for many Black mothers. There is not a one or the other, but a space that Black women must find for themselves that will allow them to maneuver as needed. Rememory, then, is a practical way to bring attention to topics that impact Black women’s lives such as childbearing, religion/spirituality, Black male and Black female relationships as well as Black women’s relationships with each other and other members of society. Since the primary themes of rememory are freedom and resistance, Black women’s refusal to mother in a traditional sense teach the future generations of mothers to mother on their own terms. Though the African American community relies heavily on Black mothers as carriers of culture, beliefs and training, choosing when to mother, how to mother, or even if to mother becomes essential to Black mothers’ survival. Georgia Douglas Johnson’s poem, “Black Woman,” brings to bear the challenges of Black women and childbirth.

“Black Woman”

Don’t knock on my door, little child,
I cannot let you in,
You know not what a world this is
    Of cruelty and sin.
Wait in the still eternity
    Until I come to you,
The world is cruel, cruel, child,
    I cannot let you in!

Don't knock at my heart, little one,
    I cannot bear the pain
Of turning deaf-ear to your call
    Time and time again!
You do not know the monster men
    Inhabiting the earth,
Be still, be still, my precious child,
    I cannot give you birth!

Black women, like Johnson’s persona, have to move beyond the challenges and mother, if they choose, on their terms, “wait… until I come to you.” Patricia Hill Collins, in “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships,” states that African American women “must learn how to survive in interlocking structures of race, class and gender oppression while rejecting and transcending those very same structures” (54). In essence, making independent decisions about childbearing and/or childrearing is vital for Black women.

A non-conforming response to relationships with Black men in the community is also a recurrent trope in rememory. Though both Black men and women face racism, Black male sexism places Black women in a position to resist both racism and sexism. Rememory addresses these issues. In *Feminism is For Everyone*, bell hooks calls for an “ongoing critique” of Black male and female relationships, “within a society that remains patriarchal, no matter how alternative you want to be within your unit, there is still a culture outside you that will impose many, many values on you whether you want them to or not” (84). hooks acknowledges the need for Black women to resist the racism and sexism that complicates Black relationships.
These themes represent the impact and extensive reach of rememory which shapes a shared bond for African American female novelists like Morrison to engage in a revision of the Black mother. This study will examine maternal loss and rememory in selected novels of contemporary Black women writers. I have chosen to examine representative novels by Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Tina McElroy Ansa because of the authors’ inventive approach to maternal loss and the diversity of their revised and empowered Black mother. These novelists have addressed maternal loss and worked to revise images of the Black mother presented by Zora Neale Hurston, Jamaica Kincaid, and Paule Marshall. In summary, the central argument of this study investigate how maternal loss necessitates that Black female protagonist connect with an enabling maternal figure. The narratives follow similar structures in that the protagonist experiences loss; without her mother’s guidance, she must navigate the world for herself, and her success is reliant upon her interaction with the revised enabling maternal figure. Significantly, the project aims to demonstrate that the enabling maternal figure is not defined by black or white, male or female, good or bad, past or present, not even child or childless, but an in-betweenness and an intermediate Third Space that allows the protagonist and others to reach their full complex potential.

To illustrate how this process plays out in fiction, this study will utilize Black feminist theories as well as theories on space to examine three phases of rememory as shared in the practice among the novelists. In the first phase, the protagonists experience maternal loss. Black mothers have historically had to cope with various forms of oppression, often resulting in an emotionally distant mother-daughter relationship. The mothers have witnessed life’s harshness and die leaving the protagonists feeling more perplexed than sorrowful. This is evident in Sula’s strange observation of her mother as she commits suicide by fire: “Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested” (76).

In the second phase of rememory, Black daughters are left to navigate the world for themselves. Black daughters must learn to survive on their own. They struggle as they search for identity which becomes difficult as there is no mother figure with whom they can identify. Black daughters without their mothers must make their own decisions and strive for independence. This is seen in Betty’s independence and survival skills:
“Even she was sometimes surprised at how much money she made without an education” (123). Other novelists have produced similar daughters without mothers, raising the questions: How do they see themselves? How do they love? How do they themselves become mothers when they have not been mothered? How do they view motherhood? These questions gird the discussion in this study.

The final phase in the practice of rememory requires that the daughters embrace the freedom of the enabling maternal figure. The enabling maternal figure exists, not to mother though she may indeed do so, but to provide a model of resistance and empowerment. If the daughters are to survive, they must be able to define life and motherhood for themselves. Ursa for example, cannot conceive, but she writes and sings the blues; by doing so, she finds her own way to “make generations.”

These three phases are threaded between contemporary, black female novelists and emphasizes their kinship to one another within a literary practice that speaks to their culture.

Early Black women writers had limited space in which to write, and they contended more with issues of slavery, abuse, exploitation, poverty, and racism. Their challenge in writing was finding a way to convey their real experiences to people who did not recognize them as equals. They had to create characters who resembled them, but they had to be fully aware of society’s expectations for these characters. Often, they had to be given “endorsement” from white scholars to prove their authenticity. They had to combine traditional white writing with their new black voices.

Contemporary black female novelists, on the other hand, are not restrained in this manner. They are able to freely use their imagination to create complex maternal figures. They use the maternal space symbolically to “unwrite the brutal history of rupture and dislocation and to write an alternative story of familial and cultural connection” (Dubey 245). However, in order to unwrite, contemporary black female authors must “write in” layers of voice that confront the past and negate ill representations. Through un-writing and re-writing the Black maternal story, the authors are able to address the pain Black women suffered during slavery and at the same time celebrate their resistance.
Furthermore, from suffering such a literary loss (i.e., writing without full historical records or artifacts), writers must use memory. bell hooks in Yearning borrows the phrase, “our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting.” For hooks, memory functions as an aid in knowing and learning. It is through memory that the self can be recovered. hooks continues, noting that if we only look at contemporary history we will forget that we have not always been in one place and that we have journeyed away from home and roots and made a new history (40). Toni Morrison, who considers her task as a writer to be that of an archeologist, referred to it as "re-memory," meaning “journey to a site to see what remains were left behind” (192).

This project is in no way suggesting that maternal loss and all that it symbolizes for African Americans in novels by contemporary Black women is unique to the Black American female experience. Black males have also addressed disconnections between mother and child, Africa and the slave and racism in America. In Richard Wright's Black Boy, Richard lives with Granny as he becomes fully aware of his place or lack of place in society. He experiences a distancing from his mother as a result of her paralysis:

My mother's suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering. Her life set the emotional tone of my life, colored the men and women I was to meet in the future, conditioned my relation to events that had not yet happened, determined my attitude to situations and circumstances I had yet to face. A somberness of spirit that I was never to lose settled over me during the slow years of my mother's unrelieved suffering, a somberness that was to make me stand apart and look upon excessive joy with suspicion, that was to make me keep forever on the move, as though to escape a nameless fate seeking to overtake me.

At the age of twelve, before I had one year of formal schooling, I had a conception of life that no experience would ever erase. (87)
Earnest Gaines’ *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* shows southern oppression, defiance and maternal loss as seen in the following passage:

My mama been dead…. The overseer we had said he was go’n whip my mama because the driver said she wasn’t hoing right. My mama told the overseer, “You might try and whip me, but nobody say you go’n succeed.” The overseer ’lowed, “I ain’t go’n just try, I’m go’n do it. Pull up that dress.” My mama said, “You the big man, you pull it up.” And he hit her with a stick. She went on him to choke him and he hit her again. She fell on the ground and he hit her and hit her. And they didn’t get rid of him until he killed two more people. The brought me to the house to see after the children because I didn’t have nobody to stay with. (28)

Although this novel is written by a Black male, he clearly addresses the issue of maternal loss that Jane experienced. Therefore, it would be unfair to assert that only Black women writers can effectively articulate maternal loss in novels or even that only Black female characters experience maternal loss. Black male characters in literature also experience maternal loss. For example, the murder of Harpo’s mother in *The Color Purple* creates maternal loss for Harpo and his other siblings. In *Life Along The Color Line*, Gregory discovers he is black after he is abandoned. It was the experience of maternal loss that triggered for him the realization of his “blackness.” Similarly, separation from the mother as a part of the black experience is also not only limited to literature.

Morrison, Jones, Naylor, Walker, and Ansa write in a historical void that has been shaped by the distant African past and vestiges of the rural south. As contemporary African American female authors, they look for new information and must reconstruct Black motherhood with a reliance on collective memory, minimal records and a history that has at times been thwarted. They thus create an idealized version of the maternal figure, one endowed with the strength, power and the perseverance that it would have taken to endure slavery. These figures are also given freedoms that past mothers were denied. They are enablers (referred to in this project as enabling maternal figures). They enable and assist other in finding their identity and reaching wholeness. Most
notably, they feature an ownership of themselves that contemporary women must continue to fight for in order to progress.

Furthermore, Third Space is especially relevant in considering how Black female novelists situate their enabling maternal figures to empower victims of maternal loss and others. Enabling maternal figures live their lives in this Third Space. They manage their lives as they choose and without having to choose. They are not confined to an either or dichotomy as a result, they are able to resist oppression. These women thrive on freedom. Those who can access them find a model for freedom.

The mother figures discussed in this project reside in the literary spaces of Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Gloria Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café*, and Tina McElroy Ansa’s *Ugly Ways*. My rationale for the inclusion of these texts is that they all provide varied examples of maternal loss and a vision/ re-envision of the mother figure through rememory and third space.

My project is organized by novel in chronological order, the best way to demonstrate how contemporary black female novelists have envisioned and re-envisioned the maternal figure over the years. In Chapter One, I discuss Toni Morrison’s *Sula*. I discuss the quest for identity between two friends Sula Peace and Nel Wright. In re-writing the maternal figure, Morrison relies heavily on folklore and myth with the creation of Eva Peace, a larger than life maternal figure who defies traditional motherhood. Eva, along with the other female figures offer a basis for understanding Sula and Nel’s search for their own identity. Morrison’s characters live with contradictions such as good and evil, but these characters find spaces in between the extremes in order to survive. Toni Morrison is especially important to this study because it is her “beloved” model for rememory that has heavily influenced and ensured the continuation of the practice of revision as resistance.

Chapter Two brings attention to maternal loss and remnants of the slave story present in Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*. Born in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1949, Gayl Jones grew up surrounded by the stories of her mother and grandmother. In her fiction, Jones creates female-centered narratives in which storytelling is used to explore the oppressions of racism, sexism, classism. Her work allows Black women to challenge subjugation and to seek autonomy. In *Corregidora*, Jones has Ursa sing while her
foremothers provide figurative (oral narrative) and literal (girl children) manifestations of their oppression. In this novel, the slave past lingers over the present. The Corregidora women who were prostituted by their slave master nonetheless worked diligently to pass on their slave story generation to generation. The blues, with its allegiance to women’s empowerment, provides the medium for constructing a new space for Ursa Corregidora. Ursa redefines the perimeters of motherhood so as to allow her an opportunity to "make generations" without the oppressive biological mandate of either Old Man Corregidora (white patriarchy) or the women in her family’s past (Black women). She establishes new boundaries for motherhood in ways that challenge historically prescribed conceptions of the role.

Chapter Three investigate Walker’s use of the narrative format. I suggest that maternal loss prompts the construction of an alternate, third space that allows Celie to form a self in opposition to both a distant African past and an oppressive European American present. I revisit Gates’ *Signifying Monkey* to reassess his views of Celie’s initial writing and striking through I am. Where he asserts self-negation, an absence and erased presence, I examine her as the amanuensis of the African maternal ancestors. The strike out in my research works to indicate how history has tried to leave her out, but she knows better. I focus on the next four words: “I have always been” (1). In essence, her existence is not just in present time; she has long been in existence. Though she was not heard, she existed. Moreover, I discuss Shug Avery as the enabling maternal figure who validates the maternal past, present and future.

Chapter Four examines Eve, the enabling maternal figure in Gloria Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café*. Eve is neither male nor female; she is organic matter, mud. She does not fit into an either/or dichotomy. Eve is a mother figure, a Goddess figure, a spiritual figure, and a healer. Several characters reap the benefits of her power, however, Sadie does not. Naylor’s participation in the practice of rememory is unique in that she shows, through Sadie, compelling concern and compassion for those who are not able to find the freedom and resistance that the enabling maternal figure provides. Sadie’s end amplifies Eve’s importance.

Chapter Six examines the deceased mother, Mudear, in Tina McElroy Ansa’s *Ugly Ways*. Ansa’s take on rememory as Mudear is a reconstructed maternal figure that
operates in extreme alterity. Mudear examines her own mistreatment and the exploitation of black women. Ansa’s use of rememory extends to the daughters as well who must reconstruct motherhood for themselves.

The projected findings on rememory in this project outlines African American female novelists’ participation in a conversation with one another about who the mother is. Though the enabling maternal figure is not perfect, she is idealized. Contemporary African American female novelists portray her, as the narrator put it in *Sula*, “according to [her] own predilections” (113). All of the authors offer varied ideas about the maternal figure. Furthermore, this study’s contribution to the existing body of scholarship includes another way to look at African American texts. Freedom from oppression is not limited to daughters but Black males are also transformed by the enabling maternal figure. I hope to contribute to the larger scholarly conversation by showing rememory as a sympathetic goal that perhaps starts with Black women, but extends well beyond. Since a primary theme in African American literature is the dismantling of racism, this approach established and sustained by black women may serve as useful.
CHAPTER ONE

BETWEEN SURVIVAL AND FREEDOM: CONTRADICTION IN TONI MORRISON’S SULA

Toni Morrison’s second novel Sula engages issues of motherhood, rememory and Third Space through a focus on the bond between the title character Sula Peace and her best friend Nel Wright. The two women are polar opposites, and they attempt to define themselves in a context where they are distanced from their own mothers who are ineffectual at best. In re-writing the maternal figure, Morrison relies heavily upon folklore and myth with the creation of Eva Peace, a larger than life woman who defies conventional notions of what a mother should be. Eva, along with the other female figures, offers a basis for understanding the quest for self-identity on the part of Sula and Nel.

The first most obvious instance of Morrison’s indebtedness to folklore is in the account of the Bottom’s origins as a part of a joke. The community is founded on a joke, wherein a Black slave is cheated out of prime land by his master. The all Black community, Medallion, highlights the community’s strength to endure the joke and points out its limitations. Morrison situates the history of Medallion, the Bottom, to reflect the lives of its residence. The joke represents the contradictions that come along with the community as well as the citizens ability to live with contradictions, especially the women. In the Bottom, “the laughter was part of the pain” (4).

1 The “Nigger Joke is best understood in the context of Morrison’s Playing in the Dark. The Joke suggests that the slave past is always present. In “Playing in the Dark,” Morrison coins the term response-ability (xi). Morison uses the term response-ability to describe what happens during the reading and writing process. “writing and reading mean being aware of the writer’s notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for meaning”(xi). In essence, there is a meeting with the text that requires readers and writers to participate and respond to it, first “viscerally” and then “intellectually” (xi). In doing such she proposes consideration for what black identity and white culture contribute to a text. She explored what she called “American Africanism”, which is her assertion of an Africanist “presence or persona” created in white male-dominated American literature. The African presence, she suggests, is silent, yet it appears “in the rhetoric of dread and desire,” serving to define the white self. What it truly suggests is that the slave past lingers over everything and everyone in American society white and black alike.

analyzes the situation of the Bottom as it relates to the women. Bergenholtz argues that there is no concise way to judge the women in the Bottom’s actions by asking some pertinent questions: “Should we admire Sula’s courage, her determination to be free and to ‘make herself’? Or should we loathe her for engaging in casual sex with her best friend’s husband?” (80).” Toni Morrison creates a space wherein women’s lives are viewed through different perspectives. She positions them in an intermediate space which, for the other writers in this study is a space of freedom, empowerment, and even peace, but for Morrison’s characters it is all of these ideas and at the same time the opposite of all of these ideas and sometimes somewhere in-between. Like the joke, Morrison’s intermediacy recognizes the contradictions that come with black women’s self-ownership, freedom and empowerment. Deborah McDowell states that in Sula:

The narrative insistently blurs and confuses (...) binary oppositions. It glories in paradox and ambiguity beginning with the prologue that describes the setting, the Bottom, situated spatially in the top. We enter a new world here, a world that demands a shift from an either/or orientation to one that is both/and, full of shifts and contradictions.(40)

Thus, the narrative is intertwined with peculiar actions and boundaries that are not fixed but rather flexible as the characters are trying to survive.

In Sula, it is difficult to judge the characters through simplistic views and dichotomous analysis of good or evil. In “Rootedness”, Morrison explains her use of African American history and folk culture emphasizing that she wants the success of her books to be determined by the culture for which she writes (342). The slave past and its after effects are at the root of the character’s decisions and instability, therefore blurring the lines of right and wrong. Morrison demands that the characters’ actions be considered in relation to what they experience. In this sense, women characters and their attitudes in Sula cannot be divided into binary oppositions because the women are often responding to some form of oppression. The protagonist shape their actions differently from expected norms of dominant society, sometimes even succumbing to altered and extreme measures for survival.
Morrison emphasizes the struggle by describing the Wrights, who seeks to live right. The novel begins with the introduction of Cecile, Nel’s great-grandmother, the grandmother of Helene (Nel’s mother) and the mother of Rochelle (Nel’s grandmother). Little is said about her other than that she cares for Helene when Rochelle leaves the house. Cecile rears Helene “under the dolesome eyes of a multicolored Virgin Mary, counseling her to be constantly on guard for any sign of her mother’s wild blood” (17).

Cecile’s house is described as a place where “the Virgin Mary clasped her hands in front of her neck three times in the front room and once in the bedroom where Cecile’s body lay” (25). The description depicts Cecile as a virtuous and religious woman who seeks to follow the example of the Mother of God. Morrison suggests that Cecile seeks to be the perfect mother with the Virgin Mary as her maternal standard. Though Cecile seeks spiritual guidance in her attempts to be the perfect mother, Rochelle defies her upbringing and becomes a prostitute. Morrison appears to challenge the moral values of the “good mother” and “bad mother” with Rochelle.

When Cecile dies, Rochelle and Helene attend her funeral. Helene missed the opportunity to speak to her, “seeing instead that painted canary who never said a word of greeting or affection or” (26). Helene, like Hannah, yearns for a gesture of love from her mother, Rochelle. Helene’s desire for her mother’s affection comes with a contradictory dilemma. She wants her mother, but she does not want her mother. She wants her love, but she hates who she is and tries desperately not to be like her mother or acknowledge her mother’s past. Helene marries and moves to Northern Medallion. She disciplines herself in keeping with the upbringing her grandmother provided and creates a happy home for her husband. Although Morrison indicates that Helene “enjoyed manipulating her daughter and husband,” it reflects her desire to separate from her mother’s dark shadow, “far enough away from the Sundown House” (19).

Helene, trying her best to be a good mother, is a part of the bourgeois society. Critic Susan Willis stresses Morrison’s use of bourgeois society in her novels:

Migration to the North signifies more than a confrontation with the white world. It implies a transition in social class. Throughout Morrison’s writing the white world is equated with the bourgeois class—its ideology and lifestyle. (84)
The undisputed encroachment of White society results in conflicting ideologies. By striving to remove herself from her mother's past, for example, Helene denies herself the benefits of the Black experience in exchange for a White middle-class sensibility. Consequently, she is not able to discover the strategies that would allow her to survive and resist. Morrison posits that the attempt to erase the maternal past creates loss of the identity that is a healthy part of the past and an authentic awareness of the present. Thus, Helene's happiness comes from acquiring middle-class success, not a sense of well-being. Morrison emphasizes that Helene "loved her house" (18), the space she could control, including her child and husband.

Nine years into a marriage in which her husband is often absent, Helene gives birth to her daughter, Nel. Details of Helene's life are given only after she becomes a mother, showing the significance of motherhood. As bell hooks suggests, "[Black women] endeavored to prove their value and worth by demonstrating that they were women whose lives were firmly rooted in the family" (Ain't I, 70). Helene is depicted as a controlling woman who has no room in her life for children. However, among the people of the Bottom, Helene is the personification of the cult of true womanhood. Nevertheless, in her own home, she regards her family as a nuisance. Morrison highlights the contradiction of external appearance and the realities of Helene's behavior at home to question the binaries by which women serving as mothers are criticized or praised. Helene's behavior affects Nel: "Under Helene's hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (18). While the community sees her as a righteous woman, Helene's power in the United States in the early 1920s is non-existent.

The incident on the train provides insight into Helene's identity that is contingent on how others see her. When the conductor refers to Helene as "gal," Helene's identity is threatened:

She hadn't even begun the trip back. Back to her grandmother's house in the city where the red shutters glowed, and already she had been called "gal." All the old vulnerabilities, all the old fears of being somehow flawed gathered in her stomach and made her tremble. She had heard only that
one word; it dangled above her wide-brimmed hat, which had slipped, in her exertion, from its carefully leveled placement and was now tilted in a bit of a jaunt over her eye. (20)

The flaw that Helene faces is not just her life as a prostitute’s child but that she allows her mother’s life to define hers. Helene never embraces her mother for who she is. In hiding from her maternal past, she hides from herself and, thus, does not find the path to resistance. When the conductor pushes Helene aside, Morrison suggests that Helene accepts it:

Then, for no earthly reason, at least no reason that anybody could understand, certainly no reason that Nel understood, then or later, she smiled. Like a street pup that wags its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before, Helene smiled. Smiled dazzlingly and coquettishly at the salmon colored face of the conductor. (21)

Helene’s response separates her from the other African Americans in the car, including Nel, who sees the “bubbling hatred” that some Black soldiers have for Helene. In her portrayal of Helene, Morrison shows that Helene’s life is a contradiction that turns on itself as she bends to White supremacy as shown in the train scene and the Black male sexism that characterizes her life.

The Bottom’s chaotic beginnings offer a clue to understanding the unusual behavior that characters exhibit. For example, Shadrack tries to accommodate for the turmoil of war by creating National Suicide Day. He escapes all the pressures of life through mental illness and finds further escape in his suicide day initiative. Gloria T. Randle notes that “depictions of community in Toni Morrison’s work are powerful not only as literary portraits but also as reflections of shared group experiences as a crucial aspect of community identity”(67). Shadrack’s initiative became a part of community thought:

“As time went along, the people took less notice of these January thirds, or rather they thought they did, thought they had no attitudes or feelings one way or another about Shadrack’s annual solitary parade. In fact they

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simply stopped remarking on the holiday because they had absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives" (15)

Additionally other wounded men in the novel exhibit unusual behavior and place demands and extreme responsibility on women. Eva gives her husband the childish and befitting name BoyBoy. BoyBoy rejects responsibility, forcing Eva to take on all responsibility to provide for her household. Moreover, Hannah’s married lovers engage in infidelity without considerations for their wives. Moreover, Jude proposes that he and Nel together would make one Jude (83). In addition to metaphorically giving birth to her husband, Nel carries all of the responsibility for their children.

In *Sula*, the unusual behavior of the males creates the contradictions in the lives of the women. For instance, the novel suggests that the Peace women “simply loved maleness for its own sake” (41); however, considering what these mothers endure, maleness for the Peace women represents freedom: the freedom to leave the family, the freedom to sleep with whomever they choose, the freedom to escape mentally, and the freedom to reject responsibility. Thus, though the women appear to love maleness, they do not appear to love men necessarily. Eva contradicts “man love” by killing one male, her own son, and thriving on the hate of another: “Hating BoyBoy, she could get on with it, and have the safety, the thrill, the consistency of that hatred as long as she wanted or needed to define and strengthen her or protect her from vulnerabilities” (37). Hannah’s conversation with the women about children can be associated with a resentment for the consequences of “man love.” She states, “I love Sula, I just don’t like her.” Hannah honestly loves her daughter, Sula, but she does not like having to rear her under the circumstances in the Bottom and having that responsibility alone.

Hannah’s statement is a precursor to her suicide. It is the reality that Hannah faces. Hannah’s husband dies, and Eva’s husband is absent, so Hannah moves in with

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her mother and takes on the burden of a domestic role: “Hannah moved back into her mother’s big house prepared to take care of it and her mother forever” (41). Like Shadrack, Hannah sees escape and freedom in suicide.

Hannah’s suicide happens so suddenly, there is very little opportunity to save her. Sula watches a long gruesome performance as her grandmother tries to rescue her mother from fire:

Eva knew there was time for nothing in this world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter’s body with her own. She lifted her heavy frame up on her good leg, and with fists and arms smashed the windowpane. Using her stump as a support on the window sill, her good leg as a lever, she threw herself out of the window. Cut and bleeding she clawed the air trying to aim her body toward the flaming, dancing figure. She missed and came crashing down some twelve feet from Hannah’s smoke. Stunned but still conscious, Eva dragged herself toward her firstborn, but Hannah, her senses lost, went flying out of the yard gesturing and bobbing like a sprung jack in the box. Mr. and Mrs. Suggs, who had set up their canning apparatus in their front yard, saw her running, dancing toward them. They whispered, “Jesus, Jesus,” and together hoisted up their tub of water in which tight red tomatoes floated and threw it on the smoke-and-flame-bound woman. The water did put out the flames, but it also made steam, which seared to sealing all that was left of the beautiful Hannah Peace. She lay there on a wooden sidewalk planks, twitching lightly among the smashed tomatoes, her face a mask of agony so intense that for years the people who gathered round would shake their heads at the recollection of it. (75)

Hanna’s suicide comes as a result of having to contend with her mother’s alteration to her position in life, yet she is not able to embrace Eva’s altered space. “Mamma, did you ever love us?”

“Now give me that again. Flat out to fit my head.” Hanna asks her again,
“I mean, did you? You know? When we was little.”

“No, I don’t reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin’.”

“Oh, well. I was just wonderin’.” Hannah appeared to be through with the subject.

“An evil wonderin’ if I ever heard one” Eva was not through.

“I didn’t mean nothing by it, Mamma.”

“What you mean you didn’t mean nothing by it? How you gone not mean something by it?” (67)

In this scene, Morrison forges an honest conversation about maternal loss as an emotional distancing between mothers and daughters due to oppression. Black mothers with contradictory lives are judged by the standards of society without any consideration of the past. Eva understands the racial and sexual oppression she and other Black women have faced, as evidenced by her strong will for freedom. Her missing leg represents her history as well as the life-affirming lessons of freedom she conveys to her daughter. For example, although Eva has had to live with the devastating experiences of her past, she also knows that freedom comes with a price. Gloria Wade-Gayles insists that maternal love is not always expressed through affection, particularly not in the Black experience: “[T]he exigencies of racism and poverty in white America are sometimes so devastating that the mothers have neither time nor patience for affection” (10). She adds that literary Black daughters must often reconcile themselves to this dearth of affection and begin to appreciate the complexity of love and sacrifice that epitomizes their relationships with their mothers, for “affection does not equal bonding” (10).

Nel and Sula, who are best friends, define themselves in this disordered reality where nothing is what it should be. Morrison indicates that in writing the novel, what she had in mind was the creation of one character, not two. Through the characterization of Nel and Sula, Morrison illustrates that self-definition and consideration for the mother’s experiences are imperative. In a 1976 interview with Robert Stepto, Morrison
describes the heart of Nel and Sula’s friendship as “there [being] a little bit of both in each of those two women, and [. . .] if they had been one person, I suppose they would have been a rather marvelous person. But each one lacked something that the other had” (13). The narrator further indicates that “their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on” (52). In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), Nancy Chodorow examines how girls separate themselves from their mothers during adolescence to develop their own sense of themselves. She argues that the “central issue” during this time is a “psychological liberation from her mother” (136). Before this departure from her mother, “a daughter acts as if she is and feels herself unconsciously one with her mother (relations to men, menstruation and feminine reproductive functions and so forth)” (136). With a best friend, however, the girl becomes an independent being. Sula and Nel’s friendship is one that offers them a sense of freedom and emotional closeness that both feel they did not receive from their mothers, having felt their mothers’ oppression in their homes. Without having to reject their mothers’ way of loving, the girls interact with the maternal spirit within each other.

As only children, both girls often find themselves alone. While Nel is reared “surrounded by the high silence of her mother’s incredibly orderly house” (51), Sula lives in a “household of throbbing disorder constantly awry with things, people, voices and the slamming of doors” (52). Furthermore, the relationships with their parents create the space for their friendship: “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” (52). The narrator notes, “Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other’s personality” (53). Implicit in this comment about relief is the idea that each girl is given the chance to examine herself and reevaluate her mother.

Nel and Sula observe the differences in their households:

When Sula first visited the Wright house, Helene’s curdled scorn turned to butter. Her daughter’s friend seemed to have none of the mother’s slackeness. Nel who regarded the oppressive neatness of her home with dread, felt comfortable in it with Sula, who loved it and would sit on the
red-velvet sofa for ten or twenty minutes at a time—still as dawn. As for Nel, she preferred Sula’s woolly house where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions; where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hour at a time in the sink, and where a one legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets or read you a dream. (29)

Realizing that they lived differently, Sula and Nel “could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things” (55). Sex, love, and friendship were theirs to interpret for themselves. Moreover, Morrison implies that comparing other ways of living provides a means by which the girls can “[c]reate something else to be” (52). It also allows them to let their mothers be who they are. Nel realizes that she does not have to resign herself to her mother’s conservatism because she now sees how Hannah lives; Sula realizes she does not have to resign herself to her mother’s lifestyle because she sees how Helene lives. These polar opposites open a space without limitations. Sula and Nel are at liberty to define themselves without patriarchal intrusion.

Though Nel and Sula experience emotional distance from their mothers, unlike their mothers, they are able to acknowledge these maternal contradictions and free their mothers as they themselves begin to face challenges and must find comfort, healing, and counseling in each other. Each mothers the other. Morrison foregrounds the success of such relationships in the early periods of the girls’ lives and emphasizes how female solidarity has an impact on mother-daughter relationships. In Sula, the girls’ friendship is a metaphor for the fight against racial, class, and gender prejudice. The girls are aware of the oppression of their mothers as well as the oppression in the community, but unable to deal with these issues directly, Sula and Nel form their own bonds to survive. Nel and Sula defend and protect one another. For example, Sula defends Nel from the Irish boys and boldly cuts off her finger in an act of resistance. Thus, Sula is doing for Nel what Eva did for her children when she possibly placed her leg beneath a train to collect insurance money. Eva sacrificed her leg for the sake of her children’s survival. Even though Sula’s actions are extreme even to Nel, who fails to
understand Sula’s agenda, the act of cutting her finger shows the magnitude of Sula’s love for Nel. The act reveals the depth of their friendship and the extent to which Sula would go for Nel. Sula endures the pain for Nel, and she scares off the White boys. As a result, Sula and Nel realize that fighting oppression is dangerous and requires extreme sacrifices.

A crucial moment in *Sula* is Sula’s overhearing her mother’s comment, followed by Chicken Little’s drowning. Sula takes Hannah’s comment—“I love Sula I just don’t like her”—to heart, feeling that her mother does not truly love her (57). She ignores the sexist and racist context in which her mother must rear her. The statement marks the moment of distance between Sula and Hannah and sends Nel and Sula to the river where they have a first-hand experience of this type of maternal contradiction.

The girls play while digging holes. Morrison sexualizes the conversation between Nel and Sula with the movement in the grass:

Nel began a more strenuous digging and, rising to her knee, was careful to scoop out the dirt as she made her hole deeper. Together they worked until the two holes were one in the same. When the depression was the size of a small dishpan, Nel’s twig broke. With a gesture of disgust she threw the pieces into the hole they had made. Sula threw hers in too. (58)

Shortly after, Chicken Little walks up. His abrupt appearance is as though Nel and Sula brought him about or gave birth to him with the twig and the hole digging. However, no sooner is he brought about than is he engulfed by the river.

Sula picked him up by his hands and swung him outward then around and around. His knickers ballooned and his shrieks of frightened joy startled the birds and the fat grass hoppers. When he slipped from her hands and sailed away out over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter. The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank. (60)

This dramatic moment causes Sula to panic. After moments of confusion, both Sula and Nel go home, leaving Chicken Little in the river. Without any significant discussion or plans, Sula and Nel decide to silence themselves. Though what Sula has
done is awful, Nel protects her. The two choose survival over confession. The comment and the child’s death symbolically represent the frailty of the Black mother-and-child relationship. In one moment, there is joy, but with a minor slip of the hand, the child is easily engulfed. Furthermore, Morrison speaks to the silencing of mothers. Sula’s response to Hannah’s comment shows that mothers are not permitted to speak about their conditions without consequences or without being considered bad mothers.

Morrison has the girls experience oppression and a moment of maternal dilemma and respond in a manner that demonstrates that they understand themselves and their mothers more deeply. With their initiation into Black womanhood, Nel and Sula gain the benefits of friendship, the value of experience. For example, Hannah’s suicide is not disturbing for Sula. Eva, Sula’s grandmother, declares that Sula was more interested than upset:

> When Eva, who was never one to hide the faults of her children, mentioned what she thought she’d seen to a few friends, they said it was natural. Sula was probably struck dumb, as anybody would be who saw her own mamma burn up. Eva said yes, but inside she disagreed and remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested. (76)

Sula’s response is that she “watched her mother burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep dancing” (147). Though Hannah could not understand Eva, Sula appears to understand Hannah. She watches her burn/dance as though she understands her struggle, her pain. Aside from sexual freedom, this is the first time Sula sees her mother free on her own terms. Sula has enough experiences up to this point to understand what freedom means to herself and to her mother. Thus, she does not give birth to a child, and she has no desire to have children. She makes it clear that she does not want to mother. Eva asks Sula when she would get married and have children. She responds, “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). She realizes her mother’s oppression and her own freedom in contrast.

However, Sula’s life does show contradiction. Though Sula enjoys bearing witness to her mother’s new and few moments of freedom, she seems to forget her own. In a confusion of names, Sula thinks A. Jacks is Ajax. Ajax, in Greek mythology, is
strong and virile, yet like her mother, he committed suicide. She also confuses A. Jacks with maternal love, recognizing the maternal in A. Jax but not in Eva. Ajax is closely associated with a mother figure. He is very nice to women: “His kindness to them [women] in general was not due to a ritual of seduction (he had no need for it) but rather to the habit he acquired in dealing with his mother, who inspired thoughtfulness and generosity in all of her sons” (126). The description of him indifferently watching women fight over him is comparable to Sula’s watching her mother burn to death. He is also fascinated with Sula’s stories because they remind him of his mother. Most importantly, he loved his mother: “This woman Ajax loved, and after her—airplanes. There was nothing in between. And when he was not enchanted listening to his mother’s words, he thought of airplanes, and pilots, and the deep sky that held them both” (126).

Sula is attracted to the maternal side of A. Jax. To further support her search for the maternal in Ajax, the narrator states that Sula likes that he “tells her the power of plants, does not baby her or protect her, his assumption is that she is both tough and wise” (128). This treatment is what Sula would expect from a mother. Though he does not treat her like a baby, he does indeed bring her bottles of milk:

“I been looking all over for you.”

“Why?” she asked.

“To give you these,” and he nodded toward one of those quarts of milk.

“I don’t like milk,” she said.

“But you like bottles don’t you?” (124)

Though Sula is supposed to be the seductress, the “bitch,” and she has had her share of indiscretions with men, including her best friend’s man and White men, she is still very vulnerable (113). Sula is able to free her mother, but she confines Eva, the enabling maternal figure, to a home. Like Hannah, Sula disregards her grandmother’s sacrifices. As a result, true resistance becomes difficult, and her life is a contradiction. The novel states that she is “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 rein, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure please her. (118)

However, Sula is not distinctly different. In the end, she is not much different from Nel who is maternal and accepting of patriarchal ideas.

Sula falls prey and begins to go against even her own ideas of freedom as she begins what A. Jacks referred to as “nesting”:

He looked around and saw the gleaming kitchen and the table set for two and detected the scent of the nest. Every hackle on his body rose, and he knew that very soon she would, like all of her sisters before her, put to him the death-knell question “Where you been?” His eyes dimmed with a mild and momentary regret. (133)

A. Jacks thought that Sula was different and strong enough to handle just a casual sexual friendship. Of course, it was sexier for her not to need him or want him. However, she disregards the enabling maternal figure that would have allowed her to find a sense of nurture at least within herself. Instead of having some regard for the maternal spirit in her grandmother, she looks for mother, her sense of identity, in a man, A. Jacks. As a result, she becomes interested in matters of the home and begins to assign herself to the traditional sexist, patriarchal role of the female.

A. Jacks does not allow Sula to lose herself in him or for him. His reasoning is based not only on his valuing his freedom but also on his possessing maternal qualities himself. Unlike BoyBoy, Plum, and Jude, he is not oppressive, not looking for a woman to be his wife and his mother. He and his mother are close; therefore, he does not need a mother. The respect for his mother in his life is one reason he does not appreciate the thought of the “Where you been?” question. For A. Jacks, the question reflects a mother-child relationship. He is not like Jude, who is described as one who “longs” and “aches” for work and runs to the protection of marriage only after the traditional means for purposeful expression through work are unavailable to him: “[I]t was rage, rage and a determination to take on a man’s role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling
down. He needed some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized” (82).

Furthermore, Jude Green is really looking for a mother in marriage rather than a wife: “mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply. Deep enough to hold him, deep enough to rock him. [. . .] And if he were to be a man, that someone could no longer be his mother” (82). Nel, perhaps because of her own experience, willingly accepts the role. Sula wants the role as well, but A. Jacks does not allow it. Morrison does not show a closeness between the women in the Peace family, but a disconnected strategy among mothers and daughters that leaves the existence of maternal love as an implicit part of motherhood that a daughter should understand. Eva, with such a contradictory life, is not able to get her children or Sula to understand her struggle, and with a disregard for the sacrifices of the distant past, Sula has no grounding.

Ironically, Sula’s life is a further contradiction because she does not give birth to a child, but she does give birth to the community. Before Sula, the community is chaotic yet lifeless. However, Sula’s return and the fact that the people think that she is evil leads them to “protect and love one another, cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst” (117-118). This banding together is essential to understanding re-memory and the reconstruction of the maternal figure with which the characters must connect. It reminds the readers that, although the maternal figures—Eva and Sula, in particular—have significant flaws, they must be embraced as they are and for what they represent: freedom from oppression, patriarchal ideas, and male dominance. The enabling maternal figure functions in her own space. For others to join her, they have to let go of the boundaries and negative judgments that separate them.

What keeps the Bottom alive is Sula and the fact that the people consistently revise their concept of her as a maternal figure. They do not know everything about her or her past, but in their minds, they create who they think she is. The Bottom collapses because the community no longer has any regard for Sula, and Sula’s demises occurs for the same reason. She has no regard for Eva.
In “Rootedness,” Morrison suggests that disconnection from the ancestral past is dangerous: “If we do not keep in touch with the ancestor, [. . .] we are in fact lost. [. . .] When you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don’t happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection” (344). Morrison also suggests that misinterpretation of the past is also dangerous. Thus, third space or the spaces of contradictions in Black mothers’ lives affect their daughters, particularly when the daughters are unable to consider their mothers’ past and circumstances and embrace them for who they are without the demands of a sexist or patriarchal society. Albeit, Sula ends with a restored bond between Sula and Nel. Though Nel is steeped in tradition, Sula’s contradictory life and death enables Nel to see beyond her immediate space. Nel’s entry into a transcendent space buttresses the argument in this study because the contradictions reveal Morrison’s concern for the experiences of Black women in the face of oppression. Nel reexamines her own life and the past for herself, and she is left to revise motherhood as she deems necessary for her own survival and freedom.

Eva Peace, the novel’s central mother is a unique character who reveals the author’s attempts to rewrite the mother figure using a range of oral and written sources. First, Eva assumes god-like qualities that make her almost supernatural. She sacrifices her leg in order to get money to take care of her family- something that one might not consider plausible. The loss of her leg sets her apart: it is a marking similar to the ones that Morrison’s characters carry. In a similar sense, Sula has a birthmark that some townsfolk see as a snake while others see it as a stemmed rose. Eva’s marking, like that of Sula, makes her the subject of gossip, as the elder woman is enfolded into the fabric of oral lore.

Morrison reiterates the capacity of mothers to function in duality through the naming and actions of Eva Peace. Eva is Eve, the first mother who created and

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4 Markings also correlate with (maternal) loss, the slave past and rememory because they are everlasting reminders of history rather inflicted by others or self inflicted. In addition to markings in the novel, in Beloved Denver asks that her mother marks her too. See Cynthia Dobbs’ essay “Toni Morrison's Beloved: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited,” *African American Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Winter, 1998), pp. 563-578, for an example
destroyed. Eva is good, helping “passing through” and “stray folk” (37), but she is also evil, with the townspeople calling her “mean” (171). Furthermore, rather than a life of peace, Eva Peace’s is one of contradiction. Eva, with three children, an absent husband, and a single leg, finds a way to survive in 1921. The basic element of Eva’s character is the loss of her limb. It defines her as a mother, and it shows her advantage and disadvantage. When Eva returns to Medallion, her missing limb gains attention from the community. Furthermore, her home shows the community of the Bottom that a single mother can rise above poverty and desperation. Consequently, Eva’s home contradicts “the laws of white society, whose unwritten laws would have condemned her to a life of poverty” (Rigney 105). Barbara Rigney suggests that Eva’s physical marking metaphorically unites her with other characters who are marked and brings to focus community and racial identity:

If these marks distinguish at all, they distinguish a racial identity, for the most are either chosen or inflicted by a condition of blackness itself, by the poverty that has historically accompanied blackness, or by the institution of slavery which marked its victims literally and figuratively, physically, and psychologically. (56)

Unlike others who allow the circumstances in the Bottom to cripple them, Eva uses her circumstances and her being crippled to make herself whole. Susan Willis points out that motherhood is redefined through Eva and that she evolves “as a new and whole person, occupying a radically different social space” (104).

Still, another aspect of Eva’s larger than life maternal character has to do with her decision to kill Plum, her only son. She is god-like in her power over him. Conversely, when the dignity of her motherhood is threatened by her “Sweet Plum,” Eva sacrifices her dignity. The murder of Plum, her son, raises questions about maternal roles and expectations. Plum had been drafted into war and separated from his mother. When he returns, having faced the cruel reality of war, he finds it difficult to cope:

I had room enough in my heart but not in my womb, not no more. I birthed him once. I couldn’t do it again. he was growed, a big old thing. godhavemercy, I couldn’t birth him twice. I’d be layin’ here at night and he be downstairs in that room, but when I closed my eyes I’d see him . . . six
feet tall, smilin’ and crawlin’ up the stairs quiet-like so I wouldn’t hear and openin’ the door soft so I wouldn’t hear and he’d be creepin’ to the bed tryin’ to spread my legs, tryin’ to get back up in my womb. he was a man, girl - a big old grewed-up man. I didn’t have that much room. I kept on dreamin’ it. [. . .] and I would have done it, would have let him if I’d’ve had the room but a big man can’t be a baby all wrapped up inside his mamma no more; he suffocate. I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn’t, and I had to keep him out so I just thought of way he could die like a man. not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man. (72)

Morrison’s portrayal of Plum as infantile yet sexual signifies Black male oppression and sexism. Because of his life experiences, Plum demands far too much of Eva, as though her previous sacrifices were not enough.

For Eva, love is both a commitment to her children and a commitment to the cause of freedom. Eva gives her children the ultimate gift of love: freedom. Even in Plum’s disregard for her freedom, she loves him enough to set him free. Though Hannah does not find enough peace within herself to feel loved by her mother, Eva loves her too. Most importantly, the tension between Hannah and her Mother is antithetical: It does not belong to them; it belongs to the past. Eva, however, is able to pass on freedom to Hannah, evidenced in the fact that Hannah chooses her death on her own terms. Furthermore, Hannah does not survive because she restricts Eva’s freedom. She does not reciprocate freedom. The more Hannah works to force her mother to say what she wants her to say or love her the way she wants her to, the more resistant Eva becomes: “No I don’t reckon I did” (67). Eva considers the question of mother love evil: “An evil wonderin’ if I ever heard one” (67). Calling the question an “ evil wonderin” reveals the need for a revised maternal space and demonstrates the complexity of love and the challenges it presents for African American mothers.
CHAPTER TWO

EVERYTHING SAID IN THE BEGINNING:
THE BLUES IN GAYL JONES’ CORREGIDORA

Written two years after the publication of *Sula*, Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* was published in 1975.\(^1\) In response to Jones’ release of the novel, Toni Morrison, her editor at the time, said, “no novel about any Black woman could ever be the same after this. *Corregidora* changed the terms, the definitions of the whole enterprise…. Ursa Corregidora is not possible. Neither is Gayl Jones. But they exist” (“Reading” 14). Though Morrison references the ways in which contemporary African American women must now approach the novel as genre, this changing of “terms” and “definitions” is applicable to the consistent revision of Black motherhood. In addressing *Corregidora*, Morrison does not address her own work *Sula* (1973), but it is clear that Jones’s Ursa is indebted to Morrison’s Sula. Just as Sula is an innovative Black female protagonist who defies conventional mores of race and gender, Ursa functions in much the same way.

In an interview with Claudia Tate, Gayl Jones discusses the development and revisions of her novel:

*Corregidora*, as it appears in the Random House edition, is mostly my first version, although there is a minor revision. It consists of having added information about Ursa’s past, her relationships with Mutt and her mother. My revision method generally consists of asking questions, and then I try to answer those questions dramatically. In the case of *Corregidora*, my editor, Toni Morrison, asked the unanswered question: What about Ursa’s past? This question required that I clarify the relationships between Ursa and Mutt and Ursa and her mother. So I added about one hundred pages to answer those questions. Now before I submit anything, I’ll ask myself the questions that have not been answered in the course of the manuscript, or perhaps pose new questions. I then answer them. (142)

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\(^1\) See Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*. Boston: Beacon, 1991
Thus, in answer to the questions of the spaces in Ursa Corregidora’s life, Gayl Jones fills in those spaces and relationships with the blues.

Set in Kentucky, the novel is a first-person narrative account of the protagonist Ursa Corregidora who is a Black woman blues singer in the rural South. Ursa is left with the slave stories of her grandmother and great grandmother and must work out the past’s lyrics for herself in order to find self-identity and self-fulfillment. Jones makes the quest the principal aspect of the novel’s plot and language. Ursa struggles with her family’s maternal slave past and her relationship with her mother, with herself, and with men. She tries to tell her story to a captivated male audience. Ursa’s life is analogous with the blues in that there is some repetition, adjustments and additions made in the center, and, in the end, a new space develops. Jones’ development of the novel opens the doors to unveil alternative maternal space for Black women.

Most important to this study is the way in which Jones uses the blues to reconstruct the past. The blues, with its ability to confront the past, serves as a viable instrument for Ursa to revise motherhood for her own purposes. Within the blues, Black women are not confined to liminal spaces: white structures or black male structures. Instead, they have the flexibility to create their own identity. The novel promotes the revision of maternal stories that have been historically told from a male perspective, in particular, those that involve sexual abuse and exploitation as it was experienced by Black slave women. In Corregidora, Jones uses the blues as her method of revision and storytelling in order to articulate the situations of violence toward women and to achieve Third Space which consists of Ursa’s unlimited identity in the maternal space she creates for herself.2

In this chapter, I examine Jones’ use of the blues to revise Black motherhood. Jones demonstrates maternal loss through the deceased grandmothers in the novel who must pass on their stories. Corregidora is a novel about survivors of slavery and sexual abuse who remember and disclose their personal and buried truths. The past Corregidora women fear the silencing of their slave experiences and maternal stories. Jones draws attention to the theme of survival through Ursa Corregidora’s reclamation

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2 In addition to Jones, the blues tradition is also used by other African American female writers such as Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple (1982) as a means of fighting oppression.
of her memories and her family’s maternal memories through performance as a blues singer.

Furthermore, the blues, as a musical genre, is about confronting situations and speaking to them directly to find resolution; it is in this capacity that Jones implements the blues lyric structure—AAB or call-and-response. In call-and-response, the second line of the stanza is a repeat or variation of the first line, and the third line is a response to these lines; line one is repeated in line two, and line three is an “answer,” in a sense, to the preceding lines. Thus, the blues medium complicates relationships and lends itself to an ambiguity that separates the fantasized aspects of relationships from the actual, lived experiences in relationships, often incorporating both. This can be heard in the lyrics of Billie Holiday’s “Good Morning Heartache.” She speaks to her pain, and, rather than allowing her pain to control her, she gives it specific commands. She tells her heartache to “sit down.” In the same vein, Bessie Smith says, “Good morning Blues, Blues, How do you do?” She uses her power of words to let the blues know that she is aware of their presence. Being aware of the blues’ presence provides the space for her to speak to and confront her situation.

Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* makes use of the blues literally as well as metaphorically to emphasize sexual abuse and male and female relationships. As a blues narrative, this literary text examines the ambiguity that surrounds various relationships, including master/slave, mother/daughter, self, and male/female in order to subvert conventional discourses surrounding such relationships. Jones’ adaptation of the blues trope recapitulates an important shift made by contemporary Black women’s writings: a move from early black women’s writings that limit the exploration of a black female self to what Barbara Christian notes in “Trajectories” as a protagonist who works toward self-definition (Christian 235).

The blues develop in the decades following the abolition of slavery and articulated the social, economic, and sexual freedoms African Americans now possess (Davis 6). Angela Davis maintains that, “[w]ith the blues came the designations ‘God’s music’ and ‘the Devil’s music.’” One would hear “God’s music” in church but “Devil’s music” in “jook joints, circuses, and traveling shows” (6). Furthermore, blues singers were linked to the devil because they were considered immoral and sang about taboos,
including sexuality and abuse. Thus, blues singers opened these taboo subjects to public scrutiny and emphasized perceptions of forbidden subjects (Davis 124). Jones uses this duality to contrast history told by the slavemaster and the immoral taboos of history told in the slave’s narrative.

Ursa learns the struggle of her family’s maternal history. The oral history of the Corregidora family is told generation after generation in hopes of keeping the memory of the slave past alive. Their history begins with bodies: the abuse, rape, and prostitution of their female slave bodies. The novel transmits a family story to Ursa Corregidora, the great-granddaughter. Ursa’s grandmother, Gram, and her great-grandmother, Great Gram, were prostituted and gave birth to children who were fathered by the abusive Simon Corregidora, their Portuguese slave master. Ursa is assigned the task of remembering the story and passing it on. This traumatic memory was passed on from generation to generation through the maternal line of the Corregidora family:

My great-grandmother told my grandma the part she lived through that my grandma didn’t live through and my grandma told my mom what they both lived through and my mom told me what they all lived through and we were supposed to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we’d never forget. Even though they’d burned everything to play it like it didn’t never happen. (9)

Memory is the only evidence of their family’s slave history as documentation of the events was burned:

They burned all the documents, Ursa, but they didn’t burn what they put in their minds. We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that’s left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood. (72)

Jones assesses the loss of the papers as perceptions of truths between master and slave and between written history and oral history. Her review of Brazilian history reveals that, in 1890, abolitionist Minister Rui Barbosa ordered slave trade documents to be burned (Hughes 788). Jeff Friedman, referencing Introduction to the Study of
History by Von Langolis and Seignobos, admonishes that nothing can take the place of written documents: “no documents no history” (36). Jones, however, contests this assertion. Documents from the slave trade were often biased, conflated, or inflated for the purposes of those who were controlling the writing of the history anyway. So, Jones’ examination of this loss of history helps us to see what the loss of history creates in the lives of the Corregidora women. The women become desperate to have their stories told. The women try to keep the memory. Anne McClintock states that women “function as unmediated channels of oral memory” (2).

Oral and material memory become united in the maternal. Madhu Dubey observes that the ancestral connection between the women exists because of a biological connection based on reproduction that the Corregidora women share (260). For example, Jones uses the birth of a female child to oppose slavers’ commodification of the black female body. Slavery values the women only as breeders, and the United States was by far the most successful at “producing slaves by natural increase.” Hugh Thomas in The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440-1870 insinuates that this productivity was because of the heartless breeding of slave women who were considered “uncommonly good breeders.” Therefore, female slaves became a common concern. Debates arose suggesting that slave women could produce more children if they were treated well. Initially, Brazil did not take such an approach into consideration. Breeding slaves did not appear profitable to them. For a woman to be away, unable to perform her duties for long periods of time was not worth the cost of feeding her. However this attitude changed with the high demand for coffee. Brazil then realized that both the slave woman and her young child could easily pick coffee (Thomas 571).

Jones uses this idea of reproduction as a way to reproduce memory. Susan Sontag, in Regarding the Pain of Others, analyzes the representations of atrocity and the uses and meanings of images that depict such cruelty. Sontag points out an important distinction between individual and collective memory. She writes: “All memory is individual, unreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it

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happened … " (Sontag 86). Rather than naming this collective memory she recasts it as “collective instruction” (85). Sontag’s discussion of collective (instruction) and individual memory opines that “all memory is individual and not reproducible – it dies with each person” (86). In *Corregidora*, the treatment and breeding of the slave women call attention to the importance of reproducing the female slave’s story as represented by the girl child. Jones emphasizes the importance of the female body as evidence and memory. During their sexual abuse, the women did not own themselves and had no control. Thus, a part of maternal loss is trying to remember. The Corregidora women want to reclaim their history and thereby reclaim their bodies.

Though most blues songs by women were about men and problems, Jones borrows the character of Bessie Smith who sang in her “powerful dark voice” about being disconnected from her mother and trying to get home to her mother who would comfort her (Porter and Ulman 64). “I couldn’t be satisfied until I had seen Mama, talked to her, until I had discovered her private memory” (104). Gayl Jones utilizes the blues’ travel motif to express Ursa’s own conflict with her mother and her sincere desire to connect with her. Recognizing this desire to connect using the blues music of Bessie Smith, Angela Davis observes that “the train [and] its seductive sounds, speed and power, its recurring schedules, its ability to carry large numbers of passengers at cheap rates, [and its] implicit democracy” was a way for the blues singer to escape his or her blues, and help the listeners escape (70). Ursa wants to escape to see her mother, as represented in Bessie Smith’s music: “Dixie Flyer Blues” is about mobility, being able to take the train to see her mother. She sings about going home to her mother:

> Here’s my ticket, take it, please, conductorman.
> Here’s my ticket, take it, please, conductorman.
> Goin’ to my mammy way down in Dixieland (86)

Jones places a longing to connect within Ursa. In *Corregidora*, Ursa’s only information about her own mother’s life comes from her grandmother as she and her mother do not initially communicate. However, she wants to communicate and connect with her mother, but the mother-daughter connection has been made difficult if not impossible for Ursa and her mother. Between black mothers and daughters, there is an
internalized loss that often changes the daughter’s course; this is because the slave past carries with it an emotional detachment:

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

Great Gram and Gram’s instructions to Mama and Ursa demand fulfillment despite neither of the younger descendants having been raped or prostituted by Old Man Corregidora.

Thus, as a result of history, Ursa’s mother is detached from Ursa and men; her only commitment is that of reproduction. For Mama, her relationship with Ursa’s father is solely for the purpose of producing a child. Ursa’s mother tells her about her dilemma of having a man and making generations:

I wasn’t looking for a man. They’d be telling me about making generations, but I wasn’t out looking for no man. I never was out looking for no man. I kept thinking back on it, though, and it was like I had to go there, had to go there and sit there and have him watch me like that. (112)

She further tells Ursa about her desire for her birth. “It was like my whole body wanted you, Ursa. Can you understand that? Yes I can understand. I knew you was gonna come out a girl even while you was in me. Put my hand on my belly, and knew you was gonna be one of us” (117). With Mama actively wanting to breed, Jones counters the perversion of forced breeding during slavery. Jones allows the women to use their wombs as a site of resistance. The Corregidora women produce girls who will not only counter racism but also sexism, and rape turns on itself as “bearing witness” becomes a form of birth control. Angela Davis believes that “women’s desire to control their reproductive system is probably as old as human history itself (Women, Race and Class, 206). She further adds that “birth control—individual choice, safe contraceptive methods, as well as abortions when necessary—is a fundamental prerequisite for the
emancipation of women (202). The Corregidora women exert control over their own bodies. Historically, black women had been denied reproductive choice and resorted to self-inflicted abortions and infanticide as a means of exhibiting their own power at resisting the slave system. However, the Corregidora women have their children, and these children bear witness to the atrocities of Old Man Corregidora’s crimes. Controlling birth frees the Corregidora women.

Jones also uses the blues as the catalyst for Ursa to write and rewrite her own lyrics and revise and respond to motherhood in her own way. However, after the hysterectomy, Ursa loses her voice. Her voice changes and she does not sound the same. Cat tells Ursa:

"Your voice sounds a little strained, that’s all. But if I hadn’t heard you before, I wouldn’t notice anything. I’d still be moved. Maybe even moved more because it sounds like you been through something. Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been through more now." (44)

Max tells her, “You gotta hard kind of voice.” He compares her voice to “callused hands” and tells her that her voice is, “strong but gentle too. The kind of voice that can hurt you. I can’t explain it. Hurt you and make you still want to listen” (96). Ursa’s voice’s change is indicative of the fact that she will have to find her own voice and change the past. Her ancestors, though, embody a maternal image that Ursa cannot really fulfill because she cannot bear children. She tries to mother herself the best way she can through the blues, but, like blues foremothers such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, Ursa does not give birth to children. The women may not have given birth to children because of the lifestyle that being a blues singer entailed such as constant travel. Motherhood in the traditional sense was made difficult. Yet, through the blues they were given choices. Bessie Smith, for example, crossed boundaries that caused her to reach people in the North and South as well Black and White audiences. She mocked men and sexualized the maternal figure with lyrics such as “Momma Wants Some Lovin’ Right Now.” She was in her own way able to mother a generation of listeners. The blues became an alternate narrative to reconstruct a past that is no longer viable for Ursa. After all, she is in America and she is trying to make that past her own.
Ultimately, Ursa establishes that she is no longer like the other Corregidora women because she can no longer “make generations.” Ursa has no womb. When Mutt pushes Ursa down the stairs, she loses her baby and undergoes a hysterectomy. Ursa’s desire to have a baby early on in the novel seems rather ambiguous, but after the hysterectomy her sense of desire to make generations is heightened: “The center of a woman’s being is it? No seeds. Is that what snaps away my music, a harp string broken, guitar string, string of my banjo belly?” (46).

At one point, Ursa’s mother asks her where she got the songs she sings; Ursa replies, “I got them from you.” At the end of this particular dialogue, Ursa decides how she must “give witness.” As a response to her inability to reproduce, she announces, let me give witness the only way I can; I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes. When it's time to give witness, I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee. I'll stain their hands. Everything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning. (54)

Ursa will use the blues to find her voice and make generations. The connection between Ursa’s music and her very survival is evident. As Jennifer Griffiths establishes, “[t]he blues music [Ursa] performs acts as a form of mourning and remembrance, which are stages in recovery” (365). Ursa, in telling/singing her stories as well as through the Corregidora maternal story, performs a feminist agenda and is in the end able to begin her recovery and claim her subjectivity.

Furthermore, Jones implements strategies from the blues, such as improvisation, strong emotion, and story-telling as a means for Ursa to “make generations.” Ursa will, like her foremothers, tell the story, but she will also be able to make her own revisions. That is not to say that the story will not be accurate, as Gram quickly corrects Ursa:

You telling the truth great gram? She slapped me. When I’m telling you something don’t you ever ask if I’m lying. Because they didn’t want to leave no evidence of what they done- so it couldn’t be held against them. And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That’s why they burned all
the papers, so there wouldn't be any evidence to hold up against them (54).

Through the blues, Ursa will be able to tell the story and serve as a manifestation of the Corregidoras' Portugese song that states "[e]verything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning" (54). Ursa’s performance of the blues allows her to make generations her own way. As bell hooks argues, “our struggle is a struggle to remember” (204). Singing is a way to remember. Thus, Ursa adds to her songs each time she sings them, improving, emphasizing, and using the blues’ space for improvisation. Through improvising, the blues singer is able to address both past and present emotions being expressed in the song. Jones uses the blues to speak to the past and the present.

As Angela Davis notes, the blues form is noted for its ability to speak to the experience of an entire group of people (24). Generally, the group has shared wants, desires, and grievances. Likewise, blues women traditionally sing to voice the needs of women. They must sing for control over their lives. They sing to escape the subjection of a wandering lover. They sing to mend a broken heart. They sing because they can. In many of the blues songs of women such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, the music expresses that the women should “explicitly celebrate their right to conduct themselves as expansively and even as undesirably as men” (Davis 21). The cultural trauma and communal bond are shared through the storyteller and the listener, between the blues performer and the audience.

Jones reiterates Ursa’s revision of motherhood as Ursa thinks about her missed opportunity to sing with Cab Calloway, a master of improvisation and producing and reproducing in unique ways. Jones’ mention of Calloway represents the freedom to create words and identity. Calloway’s band was large and popular, known for “jivey vocals” and “clever songs” (Porter Ulman 61). Cab Calloway invented characters, most notably “Minnie the Moocher.” At a time when other performers were simply playing their instruments, he gave birth to characters who had a full identity. They spoke and came to life on stage. He made up words for them such as “Hi-de-ho.” He produced a glossary to define hip talk, making the language his own. Jones’ use of the missed opportunity and the longing to sing with Cab Calloway is indicative of Ursa’s desire to be
free and give birth to her own identity aside from what the past Corregidora history has dictated for her.

While the Corregidora women have been able to “make generations,” Ursa cannot do so literally. Instead, she must use her voice to tell their stories. One such instance in which she does so is the following song:

While mama be sleeping, the old man he crawl into bed
While mama be sleeping, the old man he crawl into bed
When mama have wake up, he shaking his nasty ole head
Don’t come here to my house, don’t come here to my house I said
Don’t come here to my house, don’t come here to my house I said
Fore you get any this booty, you gon have to lay down dead
Fore you get any this booty, you gon have to lay down dead. (Jones 67)

Jones compresses this song within one of Ursa’s internal monologues. Ursa is at first speaking to her mother, saying, “If you understood me, Mama, you’d see I was trying to explain it, in blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words” (66-67). The song is about Gram and Great-Gram; the old man is Corregidora. The lyric structure is AAB, which is typical of blues style. It also uses call-and-response, also typical of blues music: line one is repeated in line two, and line three answers or responds to the preceding lines. Ursa’s comment to her mother gives voice to the past and to women. Furthermore, in using her voice, Ursa speaks resistance to rape and abuse. She creates resistance, changes the past and uses memory to transform the present. Therefore, the structure of the song performs the dialogue that transpires between generations.

Blues women gave voice to their concerns and challenged men in ways that the average woman could not. Initially, Ursa’s return to Mutt in the end of the novel creates ambiguity, but after truly hearing Ursa as she wants her listeners to do, it is understood why she would end up with Mutt. Perhaps Mutt’s name says it all. Mutt can’t be a “pure breed” as he has been impacted by Corregidora as well: “Shit, I’m tired a hearing about
Corregidora’s women. Why do you have to remember that old bastard anyway” (154)? Mutt represents a mixture of sexual and racial politics. As Rushdy notes:

Black men denied access to black and white women were forced to see how their thwarted desires and the limitations on their sexuality were defining characteristics of their “blackness,” while black women were racialized by being made subject to sexual domination and losing whatever subjectivity they could exercise in directing their own desire. (59)

Mutt was a victimizer and a victim. Though it was Mutt who hurt her, it was also Mutt who listened, heard her sing more than anyone else in the novel:

Once you told me that when you sang you always had to pick out a man to sing to. And when Mutt started comin in, you kept picking out him to sing to. And when y’ll was married, you had your man to sing to. You said that others only listened, but that he heard you. (52)

In the 1920s, the blues was a way for women to voice their sexuality. Ursa sings sexual lyrics like “this train going in the tunnel, and nobody knew when the train would get out, and then all of a sudden the tunnel tightened around the train like a fist” (146). She sings about how she is possessed, strangled, and suffocated by Mutt, as the women before her were by Corregidora. The allusion is assigned to all of the Corregidora women. This song helps her to remember the Corregidora women.

Through their “provocative and pervasive” sexual lyrics and gestures, female blues singers’ lyrics and performances often “deviated from that era’s established popular musical culture” (Davis 32). Jones borrows this deviance as she often sexualizes Ursa’s voice describing it as hard. Adding this hard voice to Ursa’s lyrical stories gives Ursa agency. She remembers one day when she was working at the Spider. A man, who is obviously drunk, asks her “to put [him] in the alley tonight.” She sings, hoping that this “would make him quiet” (Jones 168). He is quieted and to her surprise he remains silent throughout the show. This interlude demonstrates the power of her voice and her control of the situation especially since he was under the influence. Ursa is in a position of power. Griffiths argues the blues allows Ursa to “document her own experience in addition to the direct testimony of her grandmothers.” She continues:
“On stage…Ursa creates a performance of her status as the irresistible object of desire. The responses she evokes from her male audience become part of the performance” (Griffiths 365). At the same time, however, “the male behavior is censured…. Her performance causes a shift in accountability, and the men must deal with the consequences of objectifying the female body” (Griffiths 366). While it is clear that Ursa is “looked at,” she also functions in the subject position in that she uses her voice to tell her stories. The reader is told on several occasions that the men—including Mutt—are held accountable for their coarse behavior: Mutt is barred from the club due to his behavior towards Ursa. Furthermore, when Mutt’s cousin, Jim, appears to cause trouble, Tadpole (Ursa’s second husband) asks her if she wants to have Jim barred as well (Jones 58). In another instance, Tadpole has a man put out of the club for asking Ursa if she is “some man’s good woman” (147). Furthermore, she allows Mutt to be frequently penetrated by this hardness: “When I started singing he would listen a little, look around again and then leave” (158). Mutt finds it hard to tolerate Ursa’s singing in the club because of the way men looked at her. He threatens Ursa by telling her that the next time she is on stage he will have men bid for her (159). There is an intercourse that transpires between Ursa and him when she sings, and he can feel and hear that intercourse being shared with others. Mutt then realizes the power of the blues and the power of Ursa’s voice. He wishes to be the only partaker in intercourse with Ursa. He wants her hard voice to penetrate only him.

Indeed, Ursa’s voice does penetrate. Angela Davis sees blues performances as an exorcism or a release:

[b]lues music is [to perform] a magical—or aesthetic—exorcism of the blues, those things that lead to unhappiness and despair. Ritually invoking the names of the blues songs serves the purpose of preparing the blues woman for the process of conferring aesthetic form on her emotional troubles. By creating out of them a work of art, she is giving herself aesthetic control over the forces that threaten to overwhelm her. (Blues Legacies 129)
Singing the blues is the way Ursa manages the transmission of history, her own as well as her maternal ancestors’, keeping it “as visible as blood” (Pettis 794). Because Ursa finds her voice, she and Mutt do not have to repeat the past pain of Great Gram and Old Man Corregidora

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,”
“Then you don’t want me.”
“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”
“Then you don’t want me.”
“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”
“Then you don’t want me.”
He shook me till I fell against him crying. “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither.” (185)

Ursa and Mutt are able to enter into an intermediary position. A way to think about Ursa and Mutt’s space and the dynamics of Ursa and Mutt’s relationship in the end is best observed in the conversation between Claudia Tate and Gayl Jones:

TATE: When I first started reading reviews of *Corregidora*, the reviewers talked incessantly about sexual warfare. At first, I agreed, but I kept reading the novel over and over again. After a while, I didn’t see the sexual warfare anymore. What I saw is something I’ll call, for lack of another term, the dialectics of love. Everybody in our society expects love to be pleasant. Everything that is supposed to be positive and pleasurable is supposed to be all positive and pleasurable. You’re not supposed to have any pain mixed in with it. The more that I read *Corregidora* the more I started to see that in love there is a combination of pleasure and pain, serenity and hostility. The warfare to which the reviewers responded was merely symptomatic of this dialectic operating within Ursa’s and Mutt’s love. In this regard, I remember one particular image that you use maybe two or three times in the novel about the calluses on the hands that are soft underneath, a symbol that becomes associated with the pleasure and pain in love. Ursa tries to develop some kind
of shield to lessen her pain, but on the inside she is very vulnerable. Do you observe this dialectic at work in the novel? And what is your response to reviewers who say *Corregidora* is a dramatization of sexual warfare?

JONES: I didn't think that Ursa was involved in sexual warfare. I guess I was interested in and I'm always interested in contradictory emotions or emotions that coexist. I do think that there is probably a kind of sexual tension in *Corregidora* both in the historical and in the personal sense.

TATE: Love, especially Ursa's love for Mutt, seems to be a very contradictory emotion. And I think that's the reason why no one can explain precisely what love is. It is entirely too ambiguous, elusive, contradictory. Love seems to be something that's held in suspension, something that is both positive and negative. And the reason that we can't get at it is because we're compelled and repelled at the same time. Do you find that relationships which involve contradictory emotions reveal more about human character?

JONES: Yes. I also think that people can hold two different emotions simultaneously. (145)

In an intermediate position, the politics that would have created warfare no longer exist. Ursa and Mutt no longer have to confront black/white or love/hate. They function in an in-between space. As Tate mentions these contrasting ideas, she considers that maybe it is both pleasure and pain, positive and negative, but it is really more like an intermediate space within these dichotomies that allows them to function as whole
individuals. It is in this intermediate space or third space that Mutt embraces Ursa for who she is: Ursa accepts Mutt, and Ursa accepts herself.

Ursa sings the blues, a cathartic form of music. The music can be sad, and it injects the listener with even more sadness. However, the injected sadness in Ursa’s case will allow the listener to hear his or her own sadness and be healed. The hurt that Ursa remembers and experiences is brought to consciousness through this healing process of giving birth. Jones depicts memory as dynamic in granting Ursa access to and permitting her to divulge the memories of her foremothers. Viewing memory as a dynamic or as a force that brings about change and progress indicates that it also informs and transforms both the present and the future. Rather than seeing history as stable and fixed, Jones urges instead to consider it as variable and unpredictable. As Walter Benjamin notes, “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (255). Benjamin’s comment is significant because it points to the meaning of historical events as viable and helps to see that the protagonist does indeed “seize hold of a memory” which “flashes up at moment of danger” in order to re-articulate a view of history. Thus, we are encouraged to revise, reinterpret, and reframe our memory of history. Essentially, Jones compels us to re-remember these events just as Ursa still feels compelled to “make generations.”
CHAPTER THREE

SHUG’S POWER-- LIBERATION IN ALICE WALKER’S THE COLOR PURPLE

In her essay “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens”, Alice Walker asks:

What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmother’s day? In our great-grandmother’s day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood. Did you have a genius of a great grandmother who died under some ignorant and depraved white overseer’s lash? Or was she required to bake biscuits for a lazy backwater tramp, when she cried out in her soul to paint watercolors or sunsets or the rain falling on the green and peaceful pasturelands? Or was her body broken and forced to bear children (who were more often than not sold away from her)—eight, ten, fifteen, twenty children—when her one joy was the thought of modeling heroic figures of rebellion, in stone or clay?

She shared this passage at Ms. Magazine, and the response from a staff member was “It was as if she’d brought forth all the ancestors and allowed us to collectively grieve” (White 270). Like her literary foremother Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker creates protagonists who participate in the restructuring of maternal figures for a sense of self.1 Walker’s revising of the enabling maternal figure in The Color Purple includes the politics of women having to face sexism, racism, and classism in the oppressive South.2 Walker’s subscription to rememory positions the blues singer, Shug Avery as an enabling maternal figure who helps others transition into a place where oppressive gender roles of women and men no longer exist. The novel showcases an intricate network of communal relationships involving female bonding. Walker emphasizes the need to move beyond oppressive and rigid roles of women and men that often lead to abuse and violence and to provide new paradigms for social relationships. The novel

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1 In many ways, Walker revises motherhood and the mother daughter relationship as she brings Hurston’s work to the forefront and allow others to grieve and celebrate her. She shares Hurston’s work, and, within her own work, she honors Hurston’s narrative style. Henry Louis Gates Jr. proclaims that “Walker rewrites Hurston’s narrative strategy, in an act of ancestral bonding” (244). He discusses Their Eyes Were Watching God as a speakerly text, one in which the protagonist Janie is able to engage in Black vernacular discourse and speak herself into existence.

also examines forms of expressions such as sewing, cooking, singing and writing and demonstrates how freedom of expression is essential throughout the diaspora of Black people. Finally, it shows how the past can be revised and the future can be transformed.

Through Shug Avery and the blues, Walker relies on the power of expression—words written, spoken and sung to transition individuals from oppression to freedom. Though writing has been used historically to oppress Black women, Walker uses it to liberate them. Not only are the women liberated by Shug, but the men acknowledge her power and find freedom as well. Through Shug Avery, Celie is able to move herself from an oppressive status to an empowered one, the men recognize their oppressive behavior and change, and Shug’s power as a blues singer brings all of the character together to change the dynamics of male and female roles and relationships.

Celia’s Writing prior to her interaction with Shug Avery is a direct reflection of her circumstances and oppression. After the death of her mother, Celie begin her second prayer to God with three simple words, “My mama dead” (3). She makes the announcement and shares the suffering of her mother:

She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me. I’m big. I can’t move fast enough. By time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By time I git the tray ready the food cold. By time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time. He don’t say nothing. He set there by the bed holding her hand and cryin, talking bout don’t leave me, don’t go (3).

Celia realizes that her mother died due to illness, but she also notes her oppression as a part of her mother’s oppression. Her pregnancy from her stepfather is painful for her and kills her mother, “She ast me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God’s. I don’t know no other man or what else to say” (3). Celia’s mother dies a witness to the after-effects of abuse.

Celia is forced to move on rapidly; she does not have an opportunity to grieve even when she tries, as she has larger issues to think about and must move on:

He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got something in my eye but I didn’t wink. I don’t even look at mens. That’s the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I’m not scared of them. Maybe
cause my mama cuss at me you think I kept mad at her. But I ain’t. I felt sorry for mama. Trying to believe his story kilt her. Sometime he still be looking at Nettie, but I always git in his light. Now I tell her to marry Mr. __. I don’t tell her why. (5)

Celie is too concerned for her sister truly to mourn for her mother, so she writes.

Her oppression is relevant because it connects Celie with the oppression of the slave past that requires revision and healing. Deborah E. McDowell compares The Color Purple to the popular slave narrative Iola Leroy:

As Iola finished, there was a ring of triumph in her voice, as if she were reviewing a path she had trodden with bleeding feet, and seen it change to lines of living light. Her soul seemed to be flashing through the rare loveliness of her face and etherealizing its beauty. Everyone was spell-bound. Dr. Latimer was entranced, and, turning to Hon. Dugdale, said, in a low voice and with deep-drawn breath, “She is angelic! . . . She is strangely beautiful! . . . The tones of her voice are like benedictions of peace; her words a call to higher service and nobler life.” (83)

As soon as dinner over, Shug push back her chair and light a cigarette. Now is come the time to tell yall, she say. Tell us what? Harpo ast. Us leaving, she say. Yeah? say Harpo, looking round for the coffee. And then looking over at Grady. Us leaving, Shug say again. Mr. look struck, like he always look when Shug say she going anywhere. He reach down and rub his stomach, look off side her head like nothing been said.... Celie is coming with us, say Shug. Over my dead body, Mr. say. You satisfied that what you want, Shug say, cool as clabber. Mr. start up from his seat, look at Shug, plop back down again. He look over at me. I thought you was finally happy, he say. What wrong now? You a lowdown dog is what’s wrong, I say. It’s time to leave you and enter the creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need. (207)

McDowell suggests that, although the passages are not exactly the same, Walker shares in the tradition of revising the slave narrative. What Walker’s text shares
with the slave narrative *Iola Leroy* is “familial separation and reunion, of lost and found identities” (281). By rewriting the slave narrative Walker is able to place the past and the present side by side and offer a new view on a woman’s role and progress as well as offer a new female voice like that of Shug Avery who has control over her own situation and enables other women to do so as well.

The use of the slave narrative forces a look at past historical writings and shows the need for the discourse to be revised. Slavers took African women from Africa on board their vessels, and they housed the women below deck with sailors, to whom they served as paramours. The sailors often raped them. The captain’s narrative or log books did not record the sexual abuse the African women experienced aboard slave ships. As Hortense J. Spillers writes:

> The visual and historical evidence betrays dominant discourse on the matter as incomplete, but counter-evidence is inadequate as well: the sexual violation of captive females and their own express rage against their oppressors did not constitute events that captains and their crews rushed to record in letters to their sponsoring companies, or sons on board in letters home to their New England mamas. (73)

Instead, the sailor’s letters represented the African women as vulgar and diseased. The narratives that were later to be written by the slave women often did not address the subject at all. Without adequate records of the Middle Passage, villains could write their letters and depict themselves as men of valor. Some used letters to erase African maternal ancestors from history, and Walker uses letters to write them back in. Additionally, by recasting the slave narrative, Walker expands the linguistic space to comprise a maternal relationship between the past and the present. Gates notes Celie’s oppression indicated in her writing prior to interacting with Shug. He identifies her initial writing and striking through “I am” as self-negation, an absence and erased presence. Conversely, as the amanuensis of the African maternal ancestors, the strike out is a precursor to the true self within her that Shug Avery as an enabling maternal figure will bring out. The next five words read, “I have always been” (1). After Celie subconsciously acknowledges her existence, Walker’s rewrite of history begins.

52
Celie writes several letters, and, placed together, they can be read as an autobiography of Celie’s “life and times, her bondage and her freedom” (Gates 247). Celie’s writing breaks the silence. She voices the assaults Albert and Alfonso have made upon her. Though they wish to silence her, she censures both of them in her letters. She is able to document and leave record of her oppression.

As Bell Hooks explains:

> Understanding marginality as a position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people. If we only view the margin as sign, marking the condition of our pain and deprivation, then a certain hopelessness and despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of being. It is there in that space of collective despair that one’s creativity, one’s imagination is at risk, there that one’s mind is fully colonized, there that the freedom one longs for is lost. Truly the mind that resists colonization struggles for freedom of expression. That struggle may not even begin with the colonizer; it may begin within one’s segregated colonized community and family. I want to note that I am not trying to romantically re-inscribe the notion of that space of marginality where the oppressed live apart from their oppressors as “pure.” I want to say that these margins have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance (342).

Hooks clarifies the space of marginality to show that it is not only a site of repression, but also one of resistance. Gates argues that Celie is writing for survival for her sister, for Shug, and for herself (246).

As an enabling maternal figure Shug also takes Celie from an oppressed mammy figure to an empowered one, and restores her motherhood. Walker uses Shug’s influence on Celie to redefine the once oppressive space between mammy and mother. Like early novelists whose writings focused more on their oppression than on motherhood, Celie does not write about motherhood. In fact, she separates herself from the maternal role assigned to her. The discussion of her care for Mister’s children is limited in her narrative. She discusses Harpo, but not the other children. By discussing Harpo, however, she is able to highlight her maternal loss, the fact that, like Harpo, she
lost her mother in a cruel way. Yet, she is supposed to console the child of her oppressor, but no one was there to console her. There is evidence of maternal resistance as she writes:

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Everybody say how good I is to Mr.__ children. I be good to them. But I don’t feel nothing for them. Patting Harpo back not even like patting a dog. It is more like patting another piece of wood. Not a living tree, but a table, a chifferobe. Anyhow, they don’t love me neither, no matter how good I is.
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(37)

Celie does not speak of herself as a mother and Walker ensures that Celie’s story is told, but not as a part of Albert’s children and her oppressive maternal space as dictated by a male-dominant and patriarchal society. In the film text, Celie, upon marrying Albert and arriving at his house, is told by Harpo that you “ain’t my mammy,” before he throws a rock at her. The book text reads a little differently:

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I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve. His mama died in his arms and he don’t want to hear nothing bout no new one. He pick up a rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down tween my breast. His daddy say don’t do that! But that’s all he say.
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(13)

Harpo does not tell Celie that she “ain’t [his] mammy” in the book. Nonetheless, “mammy” is used by Celie multiple times, and the term is prevalent in the slave narrative (Christian 5). Interestingly enough, Walker defies the southern image of the “mammy” for Celie. Barbara Christian theorizes that the White southern image of mammy is that “she is a cook, a house keeper, nursemaid, seamstress always nurturing and caring for her folk” (5). Nonetheless, acknowledging African maternalism, Walker adopts the African view of “mammy.” Christian states that the “mammy” is an important figure in the mythology of Africa and carries over into the “mammy” figure in the slave narrative. She offers Sojourner Truth as the image of a “mammy” who would comply with both the slave narrative and mammy from the African tradition. Different from the White southern image, “mammy is cunning, prone to poisoning her master, and not at all content with her lot”; mammies, she insists, “kicked, fought, connived, plotted, most often covertly, to throw off the chains of bondage” (5). Walker empowers the mammy
figure and the paradigm shifts when Shug arms Celie with Nettie’s letters That Mr._ withheld from her:

He walk round with it in his coat all day. He never mention it. Just talk and laugh with Grady, Harpo and Swain, and try to learn how to drive Shug car. I watch him so close, I begin to feel a lightening in the head. Fore I know anything I’m standing hind his chair with his razor open. Then I hear Shug laugh, like something just too funny. She say to me, I know I told you I need something to cut this hangnail with, but albert git real niggerish bout his razor.

Shug restores Celie to motherhood in two ways. First, by assisting Celie in finding and reading the letters from Nettie, Shug helps Celie to establish herself and realize that she has “always been” rather she knew it or not. In the letters Celie learns about her children, sister and heritage. By rendering denial and access to the letters, Walker reiterates the power of writing. Laws during American slavery prohibited Blacks from reading and writing. Teaching a slave to read or write was not permissible. Literacy held within itself a power that was reserved typically for Whites and, in particular, White males. When education became available to Blacks, the power to disseminate literacy was left to the Black male who could choose to have a woman educated or to have her stay within a traditional maternal role. Levi-Strauss hypothesizes that “the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery” (48). However, without the necessary laws, skills, and access to writing, Black women could not be free.

Moreover, Nettie’s letters inform Celie that there is a significant amount of African in Afro-American history that is either missing or distorted:

All the Ethiopians in the bible [sic] were colored. It had never occurred to me, though when you read the bible it is perfectly plain if you pay attention only to the words. It is the pictures in the bible that fool you.... All of the people are white and so you just think all the people from the bible were white too. (125)

Realizing the missing history, Nettie records the Olinka history and all the African information she possibly can for Celie. Walker emphasizes the erasure through Tashi:
Sometimes Tashi comes over and tells stories that are popular among the Olinka children. I am encouraging her and Olivia to write them down in Olinka and English.... Olivia feels that, compared to Tashi, she has no good stories to tell. One day she started in on an “Uncle Remus” tale only to discover Tashi had the original version of it!... But then we got into a discussion of how Tashi’s people’s stories got to America. (152)

In essence, the African maternal existence is not just in present time or America as represented by Uncle Remus, but has been in existence as long as the story could be dated back to its African origin.

Secondly, in the early interaction between Celie and Shug, Walker consistently uses images of water indicating Shug’s fluidity and intermediacy. In the magazine Shug is reading, women jump into a fountain (54). She requests a glass of water and Celie says that she “dip her up some water” (54). Lastly, Celie washes and combs her hair (55). The imagery is also of the distant past and the birth of Celie’s future, as Shug begins to reflect on her mother and grandmother: “That feel just right, she say. That feel like mama used to. Or maybe not mama. Maybe grandma.” Shug’s memory of the mothers now includes Celie as she begins to hum,

What that song? I ast. Sound low down dirty to me. Like what the preacher tell you it’s sin to hear. Not to mention sing. She hum a little more.
Something come to me, she say. Something I made up. Something you help scratch out my head. Later at the club Shug sings to Celie,
Then I hear my name.
Shug saying Celie. Miss Celie. And I look up where she at.
She say my name again.
She say this song I’m bout to sing is call Miss Celie’s song. Cause she scratched it out my head when I was sick.
First she hum it a little, like she do at home.
Then she sing the words (77).

Shug’s acknowledgement of Celie taking care of her calls attention to Celie as a mother. It demonstrates her ability to nurture. Finally, Shug further empowers Celie’s
motherhood because the song was written in Shug’s head, shared with an audience, and named: “First time somebody made something and name it after me” (77).

Shug is not like the other women in the novel; she is free and does not function under oppressive male dominance; Celie, however becomes well aware of all of the factors that contribute to women’s oppression, including male domination in the family and segregation in the community. Celie, like the other mothers in *The Color Purple*, experiences a double displacement as Susan Willis sees it. Willis indicates that the terms “black” and “underclass” point directly and doubly to Black mothers in the text: “Bound to the land and their husbands, worn by toil in the fields and the demands of childbearing these women are the underclass of the underclass” (40). As the “underclass of the underclass,” their oppression is doubled as black men duplicate the behaviors of a larger society. I will argue that Black male dominance is so pervasive it in some instances triples as Black women in the absence of an enabling maternal figure perpetuates oppression as well. In *The Color Purple* layers of male dominant oppression be it tripled or doubled is most pronounced in Sofia’s life.

To begin, Sophia is described by Celie as “Arms got muscle. Legs, too. She swing that baby about like it nothing. She got a little pot on her now and give you the feeling she all there. Solid. Like if she sit down on something, it be mash” (36). Her physical description is indicative of her strong dominant personality. Her aggressiveness and boss like mannerisms towards Harpo are noticed by Mr.__ immediately, “Mr.__ blow smoke, look down at him, and say, Yeah, I see now she going to switch the traces on you” (36). Mr.__ can clearly see the reversal of roles in store for Sofia and Harpo. Sofia takes on a masculine role in the marriage. She is not uncomfortable giving Harpo the baby. She passes him the baby while she goes to get thread. She works the field and she works on the roof of the house. She also fights, “Next time us see Harpo his face a mess of bruises. His lip cut. One of his eyes shut like a fist. He walk stiff and say his teef ache” (37). Sophia refuses to submit to Harpo, “I’m gitting tired of Harpo, she say. All he think about since us married is how to make me mind. He don’t want a wife, he want a dog” (68). She adds:

I don't like to go to bed with him no more, she say. Used to be when he touch me I’d go all out of my head. Now when he touch me I just don't
want to be bothered. Once he git on top of me I think bout how that's where he always want to be. She sip her lemonade. I use to love that part of it, she say. I use to chase him home from the field. Git all hot just watching him put the children to bed. But no more. Now I feels tired all the time. No interest. (69)

Sofia’s exhaustion stems from Harpo trying to force her into a patriarchal and male dominated female role into which she does not fit. Sofia is punished for not accepting the role. She is punished in her marriage, as she and Harpo cannot reconcile. She is punished by White society (the mayor and his wife) for not taking on the submissive role. Just as Sofia refuses to accept the subservient role in her household, she refuses the role in the mayor’s home as well:

All your children so clean, she say, would you lik to work for me, be my maid?

Sofia say, Hell no.
She Say, What you say?
Sofia say, Hell no. (90)

Sofia’s refusal leads to an altercation and her arrest. She is also briefly punished by Celie earlier in the text. Though Harpo, the mayor, and his wife sought to oppress Sofia, Celie in her writing analyzes how Black male dominance is so pervasive that she too oppresses Sofia. Celie accidentally contributes to Sofia’s oppression. Before Shug Avery, Celie sees herself through the eyes of her oppressor Mr.__. When Harpo asks how to make Sofia mind, she, like Mr.__, advises him to beat her:

I like Sofia, but she don’t act like me at all. If she talking when Harpo and Mr.__ come in the room she keep right on. If they ast her where something at, she say she don’t know. Keep talking. I think about this when Harpo ast me what he ought to do to her to make her mind. I don’t mention how happy he is now. I think bout how every time I jump when Mr.__ call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me. Beat her. I say (38).

Though Celie knows she is wrong, her feelings of jealousy are a direct reflection of her oppression and Mr.__’s dominance over her. She repeats Mr.__’s sentiments that “Sofia think too much of herself anyway. She need to be taken down a peg” (38). Celie
realizes how her oppression has caused her to try and exert oppression against another woman and she feels bad about it. She says that she has “sinned against Sofi’s spirit” (39). She feels bad to the point of lying about it when she is confronted by Sofia.

You told Harpo to beat me, she said.
No I didn’t, I said.
Don’t lie, she said.
I didn’t mean it I said.
Then what you say it for? She ast.
She standing there looking me straight in the eye.
She look tired and her jaws full of air.
I say it cause I’m a fool, I say. I say it cause I’m jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can’t.
What that? She say.
Fight I say.

Allowing Celie to see herself the same way her oppressor sees her yet allowing her to reconcile in her writing with those feelings and her feelings of jealousy towards Sofia, Walker shows the double and triple oppression of Black women and the pervasiveness of Black male oppression and dominance.

Additionally, Walker depicts double oppression and the duplication of oppressive behavior with Celie and Nettie’s mother’s unmarked grave. Though her father’s grave was also unmarked, it may be understandable since he was lynched. Alfonso’s callousness towards the mother’s marker shows how he completely dismissed her existence. Though he could more than afford it, he does not mark the grave with even her name: “Us look for Ma and Pa. Hope for some scrap of wood that say something. But us don’t find nothing but weeds and the cockleburs and paper flowers fading on some of the graves” (188). Notwithstanding, when Alfonso dies, the writing on his marker is fictitious and appears to be indicative of a great man:

I see something look like a short skyscraper and I stop the car and go up to it. Sure enough it’s got Alphonso’s name on it. Got a lot of other stuff on it too. Member of this and that. Leading business man and farmer. Upright
husband and father. Kind to the poor and helpless. He been dead two weeks but fresh flowers still blooming on his grave. (252)

Edmund S. Morgan, in *American Slavery American Freedom*, argues that the relationship between slavery and freedom, the “freedom of the free and the growth of freedom,” is not just one of economic value, but, by showing that one has the power to enslave and oppress, legitimizes freedom (xiv). Moreover, it is this mimesis that Walker uses in Celie’s writing to “marginalize the monumentality of history” (Bhaba 125).

Likewise, Barbara Christian argues against Ivan Illich’s ideas about women and writing. He declares that the pen is not an “appropriate tool” for a woman. Edward Said determines that authorship holds “imagery of succession, paternity and hierarchy” (qtd. in Christian 144). A woman’s creativity, he asserts, is positioned in her body rather than her mind. She does not have the ability to think, write, or read. The same attitude was assigned to all Blacks (144). By examining the word author, derived from authority and meaning begetter or father, it is clear that Walker, by designating Celie as a writer/author of her own story and extending to her a maternal figure to empower her, mocks the power structure that Celie’s immediate oppressors follow.

The male dominance in these instances highlights Shug Avery’s power as she is able to transform the men in the novel. Where attempts were made by the men to erase Celie, Nettie, and their mother, Shug Avery, who was thought to be dead by “five out of a dozen” patrons, is “written in” by the men. As a physical manifestation and demonstration of this “writing in,” Harpo and Swain retrieve Shug’s old performance announcements and write in her new location. Her location, however, seems to be everywhere, nowhere, but mostly in-between because she maneuvers in and out of male space as she pleases. The men do not treat her the way they treat the traditional female figures in the text: “Mr.__ didn’t want me to come. Wives don’t go to places like that, he say” (76). In fact, Shug enjoys the same privileges as men. She has children, but she is not responsible for them. She owns a car and a home. She dates men half her age. She is able to travel. Moreover, as a blues singer, and, because of her lifestyle, the men see her differently: “Harpo puzzle by Shug. One reason is she say whatever come to mind, forgit about polite. Sometime I see him staring at her real hard when he don’t think I’m looking” (75). Most importantly, Shug’s “otherness,” the fact that she is
not like the other women, draws people especially men. At one point in the novel the statement is made: “Nobody coming way out here just to hear Swain. Wonder could I get the Queen Honeybee?” (76). By giving Shug free reign in male space Walker provides Shug an opportunity to change the men’s patriarchal ideas and ideas about male dominance. Harpo for example in his relationship with Mary Agnes tries to exert his control over her initially. Shug suggests that “Squeak”, even with her timid squeaky voice try singing in public. Harpo, however, rejects the idea of “his woman” singing in public. The two women sing together in the evenings, and eventually Shug, invades male space and points out how much money they can make. Harpo changes his mind and allows her to sing. His relationships and behavior towards Mary Agnes as well as Sofia and his children improve.

Mr._ is also transformed by Shug’s freedom. Though Celie was already impressed by her beauty when she saw the picture of her, she became even more fascinated and intrigued as she witnessed Mister’s passion for Shug. Celie sees for the first time someone standing up to Mr._. She asks Harpo, “Do Shug Avery mind Mr._?” She continues, “…Tell him his drawers stink in a minute” (66). Celie sees Mr._’s tenderness for Shug. Shug transitions Mr. to a space of peace within himself and Celie recognizes his transformation in that he “tries to make something out of himself” (230) and even notices that she no longer hates him. Instead, Celie and Mr._ begin to have more in common than that which separates them, Shug. They both embrace Shug’s freedom. Mr._ states:

All I ever wanted in life was Shug Avery, he say. And one while, all she wanted in life was me. Well us couldn’t have each other, he say. I got Annie Julia. Then you. All them rotten children. She got Grady and who know who all. But still, look like she come out better than me. A lot of people love Shug, but nobody but Shug love me. (289)

Mr. changes and expresses to Celie, “I am satisfied this the first time I ever lived on earth as a natural man. It feel like a new experience (231).” Walker includes Albert in her third space paradigm revealing that the healing power the enabling maternal figure has on women extends to men as well.
Shug draws all of the characters together by the end of the novel. Mary Agnes finds her voice creates her own songs to express her experiences. Later, everyone is sitting on the porch, Mr. is sewing, the women are wearing pants, the family from Africa has come to America and all of the old boundaries that once separated the groups of people are gone. It is in this new space that has been created as a result of Shug’s presence, influence, and example that all the characters find themselves in a place to exist outside of the traditional confines of society.

Celie says, “Hard not to love Shug. She know how to love somebody back” (289). By embracing Shug as the enabling maternal figure, the characters find freedom. They are free from the bondage of the stereotypes, standards, and oppressive beliefs. Vital to this project is Walker’s concept of rememory and intermediacy, her characters demonstrate that individuals and communities can have freedom from fixed roles. Shug Avery writes blues lyric that free not only herself, but Celie and other characters as well.
CHAPTER FOUR

BETWEEN AFRICANITY AND CHRISTIANITY: SPIRITUALITY IN GLORIA NAYLOR’S BAILEY’S CAFE

Gloria Naylor symbolically uses the title “The Shadow” for a television show the abused character Esther watches. The title of the show leads to the thought of Herman Melville’s novel Benito Cereno, a story about a rebellion aboard a slave ship. In the novel, Captain Delaney, another ship’s captain boards Cereno’s ship to assist in a rescue. Delaney however is deceived and unaware that the real problem aboard the ship is much deeper than a typical malfunctioning ship; the ship is actually under attack by the slaves. After the rescue Delaney speaks to Cereno, and tells him “You are saved,” "You are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you”(314)? The “shadow” has been read by critics to indicate slavery’s impact on White America. However, “the shadow” in this context ties Naylor with Morrison, Walker and Jones who acknowledge the presence of the slave past in everything including motherhood and spirituality. In Bailey’s Café, Gloria Naylor examines the past and broken spirits that are in need of healing. Whereas Walker’s rendering of the enabling maternal figure is secular, Naylor borrows from “Africanity” and Christianity to create a mother centered spirituality that is both and neither. Though Naylor incorporates African aspects, like the circular nature of time, the reciprocal linkage between the living and the dead, and the focus on a holistic method for well-being, spirituality is not assigned to any one specific religion or religion at all. Though Naylor in many ways acknowledges the Christian tradition, it is a spirituality that finds a middle ground or a third space. Resultantly, the emphasis on the character’s lives has more to do with finding personal healing than one way to find religion.

2 “The Negro” end of the quote was intentionally cut off in the likeness of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man which also uses the quote in this manner to indicate that for blacks it is not the negro but whites that cast a shadow on blacks. I used the quote in this paper to suggests that the institution of slavery casts a shadow over both- slavery has lingering effects on blacks and whites.
Maxine Montgomery, in *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor Houses and Spaces of Resistance* describes Gloria Naylor’s Bailey’s Cafe as, “a crisscrossing network of passages that invokes not only the migratory journeys undertaken by blacks in the continental United States [Christianity], but also the transatlantic voyage from Africa to the New World [Africanity]”(xv). Montgomery examines the characters noting their collective memories and their struggle to find “wholeness freedom and Self-identity” (53). The characters go through traumatic experiences and their spirits are broken. A “New World Order”, Montgomery explains, is rendered to remove boundaries and deconstruct patriarchal control” (xxi).

Naylor’s composite of Black motherhood is important to the conversation among Black female novelists because it extends to recover Black women’s access to the Divine and at the same time reject patriarchal views of the Divine. Justin Tally argues that contemporary Black women writers revise the African American religious tradition that has often refused women free expression and that increasingly more writers offer new interpretations of the Christian religion with traces of the African past (366-7). Bailey’s Cafe offers revisions of spirituality/religion and motherhood with a discourse that suits spiritual needs of oppressed characters, who are all outcasts, and creates a space that is free from White- and male dominant control.

Naylor’s protagonist Eve has no date of birth and no place of birth. She is raised by a man known to the reader as Godfather. He is a preacher and a father figure for Eve. He provides for her, making sure she eats, has clothing and even gives her baths, though sexually questionable. In addition to being a father figure, for all practical purposes, in Eve’s world, he is God, particularly in the patriarchal conception of God. He is all knowing. He makes all of the rules. He even distributes punishment. Montgomery points out that Godfather’s authority can be witnessed in his “institutional control” of “knowledge, religion and commercial enterprise” (60). Godfather controlled the church, the school and the cotton exchange (85). Eve expresses that “Godfather always said that he made me” (90). Assigning this much power to Godfather aligns him with the enslaved Africans’ view of God in Protestant Christianity. He was not just the ruler of the cosmos, but also the creator of History. He also has the power to build and destroy nations (Raboteau 1). Significantly, Godfather also sought to control Eve’s sexuality:
The men had only one question in their eyes when they looked at me then, and mine had only one answer: He would kill us both with his bare hands. But the women’s eyes held other questions, unnatural questions, as their heads followed us when we rode by in the wagon. Why was he still cooking and cleaning for me? Why had he never married? Why was no boy ever allowed to come and call? Or even walk me home from church? (83).

Eve, however, undermines his subjection during an act of “earth stomping” (88). She explores her sexuality with Billy Boy. In his anger, Godfather ejects Eve from Pilottown without money or clothes and purges her of food. The episode marks Eve as her own being and serves as Eve’s opposition to Godfather’s claim to her creation, “I was born of the delta” (90). Her resurrection places her in direct opposition to Godfather. Naylor then provides a space of resistance, the Bordeaux which further distances Eve from Godfather, God, and traditional Christian values. Functioning in her own space, the powerful protagonist becomes an enabling maternal figure who is able to move characters to third space: a spiritual space that fits the experiences of the individual, provides the power to restore and redeem, includes men and women, defies oppressive religious beliefs and practices and is essential for survival.

Though Esther endures bondage and sexual abuse Eve provides her with a spiritual space that fits her experience. Esther’s brother sends her to a pretty house to live, “it is very pretty. And so big. A room just to eat in, with nothing but a long table and a cabinet filled with shiny glasses and plates. And a whole bedroom just to myself” (96). She goes further to describe the smell of the flowery soap and fluffy bed and how she can pretend to be a princess (96). She adds, “There is plenty of food,” she exclaims, “there is no food back home,” here there are “jars and jars of pickled beets, string beans, cabbage, molasses, and whole plums and whole plums in the cellar. Thick burlap bags of flour, potatoes, and cornmeal” (96). Deceitfully, her brother has sold her to a man for higher wages and tells her that the man in the cellar is her husband: “This is your husband, my brother said. Do whatever he tell you and you won’t be sent away like the others” (95). Esther puts all of her trust and faith in her brother: “This is your husband my brother said… I believe in my older brother. He is kind to me and calls me only little sister” (95).
Esther is only twelve when she is sexually abused in a dark cellar and she was sexually abused for twelve years.

Esther states that she told Eve because “Eve already knew”. The statement, “Eve already knew” shows Eve as an omniscient spiritual force and connects her to history. Naylor uses Esther’s story to examine the African past and the slave’s use of spirituality in opposition to White Christian views. For example, White Christians referencing biblical text saw their voyage to America as the Exodus, and, accordingly, they considered themselves the “New Israel” (Johnson 9). They left the oppression of Egypt and traveled across the Atlantic to the “Promised Land of milk and honey.” Africans aboard slave ships did not see the voyage quite the same way. Blacks adapting the Exodus story to their condition reversed the story of the Exodus to reflect their bondage. The Middle Passage led them to Egypt where they were to suffer enslavement under unjust laws and leadership (9). However, slaves soon saw the need to create their own “extraecclesial invisible institution’ of religious life.” The slaves began to use religion to fit their own experience of enslavement. They held prayer meetings and were willing to take punishment to create a spiritual space that was free of white control. They incorporated their own experiences and merged myth, stories and symbols of Christianity (Raboteau 8).

Likewise, Eve provides Esther who experiences bondage and abuse with a spiritual space where she can cope just as she is. Kathleen Puhr indicates that this space “provides a contrast to a culture that has marginalized African American Women, dictated where they must live attend school, and eat, denied them economic opportunities prevented them from voting and psychologically abused them” (519). Even after the abuse ends, Esther continues her life in the style of her abuser. She lives in the dark basement of Eve’s Bordeaux. The men who visit her in the dark must call her little sister. She does not allow anyone to see her face. Eve provides Esther with white flowers that can be seen in the dark and as a maternal figure nurtures Esther based on her individual needs and support her spiritually. Eve creates a space in which Esther, who resides in an afflicted space of the novel’s depiction of oppression and the harshness of society, can escape the patriarchal system that has deceived her and controlled her life.
Eve as an enabling maternal figure also has the power to restore. In Naylor’s text the sexually exploited and even the prostitute can be redeemed. Jesse Bell is subjected to male dominance. She marries into the wealthy King family. She says that she had the, “biggest brownstone” (122). She calls herself the “head wife” because the kings own most things in Sugar Hill. For nineteen years she has a happy marriage. Jesse falls prey to the deceitfulness of her husband’s uncle, “And Uncle Eli used my husband to do his dirty work for him (127). His dirty work entails stripping her and her “down to earth” family of their family pride and dignity, as well as turning her son into an elitist like Uncle Eli. To further humiliate her, Uncle Eli publicly exposes her as a lesbian. Naylor removes language as Jesse Bell expresses, “my words were lost, lost” (130). Jesse rants that no one was:

“interested in my side of the story, not the reporters, not the neighbors, not the divorce court, nobody, cause everybody was standing around like vultures looking at me fall, fall, fall, waiting for me to smash my brains on the pavement, yeah, waiting for me to lose my mind; and within a inch of having my head split open my brains spill out, Jesse Bell grabbed onto the reigns of that white horse, letting’em all see her spread wings as she rose.

Using none traditional methods, Eve mothers Jesse and heals her from drug addiction, As Jesse fell into deep sleeps, Eve dozed in the rosewood rocker. She was napping that way when Jesse woke up, this time finally, free I can’t believe I’m still alive (139).”

Peaches because of her beauty are objectified by men:

“He’s making a mistake with the way he tries to describe her: tall and pretty, fair skinned His daughter is more than pretty. She’s one of those women you see and don’t believe. The kind that live just outside the limits of your imagination. And I’m hardly one of those fellas who go around thinking that light is right. My whole philosophy is the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice; but this gal is from Wonderland.” (100)

Her father creates patriarchal space she is supposed to be safe within, “I remember the wall he started building around the house when I was nine years old” (103). Peaches despises the sexual objectification men place upon her and the pride her father centers
on her light skin. She lives with the eyes and comments of men similar to those of Sugarman that suggest her sole purpose for being born is sex. With self-hatred, she purposely breaks the mirror in which she sees her uncontrolled sexual self, and she breaks her father’s heart. Peaches wants to escape:

“Don’t lock me in my room, not there, I pleaded; I'll have to find a way to get out again. I tried to stop him from wasting his money on doctors. I tried to stop him from hurting himself by beating me with razor straps, leather shoes, his fists. I tried to stop him from crying. I didn’t want to leave home, but I had little choice. I couldn’t stand to see my father that way.” (106)

Eve restores Peaches. Though Peaches’ father wants her to come back home, Eve tells him, “Go home, my friend, I'll return your daughter to you whole. Rather than hating who she sees in the mirror, Peaches, Eve exclaims, is doing whatever she is doing in the room “feeling beautiful” (114). Naylor uses spirituality to defy Christian beliefs about women and sexuality. Rather than condemn Jessie Bell and Peaches Eve restores them. Jesse Bell’s expressions of the fall, “fall, fall, fall” and Peaches’ mother’s declaration, “There is pride before the fall” brings attention to the slave past and ideas about “fallen women” Naylor has woven into the novel (102).

Misconceptions about Black women and sexuality caused writers of the slave narrative to borrow language and moral beliefs from Christian doctrine. Writers such as Harriet Wilson fought to emphasize the moral character of black women. The nineteenth century marked the promotion of ideas on True Womanhood, “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Weir-Soley 13). These ideas did not apply to black women. Black women were viewed as “other”, deviants along with European white prostitutes, adulterers or those who had children out of wedlock. They were considered “fallen women”. European “fallen women” however could be redeemed in “discourse, literature and life”. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne, for example was able to transcend after an adulterous relationship. Harriet Jacobs on the other hand writes an extensive narrative in an effort to get white women to understand why she had children out of wedlock” (Weir-Soley 16). Black women’s status made them vulnerable to sexual exploitation. The narrative, however, provided an “alternative language in which the writers could articulate their claims of good moral character” (Weir-Soley 13).
Naylor however does not attempt to force Christianity or even morality on her characters. They are restored within their own space.

Eve’s space includes both men and women. Stanley Booker T. Washington Carver or Miss Maple’s, receives a college education. He realizes he cannot land a job with the Ph.D. he has earned:

“A victim of my own stupidity- anywhere that bus could have taken me in the forty-eight states was all south of the Canadian border. The offers accumulated: bellboy, mailroom clerk, sleeping-car porter, elevator operator, And after all, who was I to turn down an honest living? There were other Negroes with Ph.D.’s doing this work. Who was I indeed?” (166)

Through Stanley, in his wearing of dresses even though he is not a homosexual, Naylor is able to show that as a black man he is just as much a victim of patriarchy as the women. Miss Maple found work at Eve’s and her Bordeaux. Ironically, at the Bordeaux he is able to be the man he wants to be. He earns and saves money in Eve’s maternal space. Most importantly the education he could not use before finds its place at Eve’s. The paradigm shift the novel introduces juxtaposes African spirituality and European Christian Religion. Western Christianity is rooted in patriarchy whereas African spirituality “tolerated high degrees of religious diversity, emphasized community and experience over doctrine and dogma, and recognized women’s religious authority and gave prominent place to the feminine in its cosmology”(Johnson 81).

Both Sister Carrie and Eve are spiritual women; Sister Carrie however represents patriarchal ideology and Eve is free from such notions. Naylor uses Sugar Man and Sister Carrie to examine patriarchal thought reflected in religion, specifically the Black church and its strong ties to the Christian faith. Bailey states, “Sister Carrie and Sugar Man aren’t as far apart as they sound” (32). In essence, both fill oppressive spaces that control women’s lives—Sister Carrie, a “fervent” Christian and Sugar Man, a pimp.

Bailey exclaims:

If you don’t listen below the surface, they’re both one note players. Flat and predictable…” : You gotta help me, Lord Jesus. Remove this burning from me. Remove these evil thoughts. Wipe out Satan. Wipe him out. I
ache and touch, Lord Jesus. I ache and Squeeze. I ache and dig into heat. I bring up my fingers wet, and give glory to your name.

-Five still-alive. And they blame me. The fucking depression. One fucking relief check. And they blame me. They were gonna sell it anyway. One fucking relief check and five of my sisters sitting on gold. They were gonna sell it anyway. I just knew the highest rollers. And they blame me.

Naylor further depicts Sister Carrie and Sugar Man as oppressive forces as she ties angels to males and the Bible: “Once Eve just remarked in passing that Angel was a strange name for the girl. And Carrie flew off the handle, talking about how sweet and innocent she is. Eve’s whole point: all the angels in the Bible are men” (161). Naylor uses the angel motif in both the sacred and the secular dialogue. Both Sister Carrie and Sugar Man want to protect their angels, but the protection they want to provide is predicated on a patriarchal belief system that manifests as control:

-That Matthew is nothing but a fraud. Whoever heard of a colored rabbi? Instead of misleading the negro people he should bring’em to Christ.
-There’s no such thing as a black Jew. Ain’t being one or the other bad enough?
-I’m not messing with those people; they…
-I don’t trust those people; they… (223)

Bailey considers this sentiment as one that “broke your heart” (224). Earlier in the text, Bailey compares the two beliefs as a low musical key:

And when you take these down to even a lower key you’ll hear about: her Angel, Lord Jesus, who can’t be trusted. All of the care given the child, all of the teaching, and the betrayal is still coming. The girl wants to sin. She can see it in the breasts that keep pushing up over her brassieres. She buys them tighter and tighter, but the flesh keeps spilling out in defiance. The nipples so large and hard, they show through her dress. Inviting trouble. Wanting trouble. Cover yourself. People are staring. Wash yourself down there. Again. Again. She can’t let her smell like a bitch in heat. Like the bitch she wants to be.
And Sugar Man working hard to protect his women. All women really need is protecting. It’s a rough world out there. He knows; he moves in it. Most Men aren’t worth shit and will take advantage if they get half a chance. Just get in there, grab the jelly roll, and run. Women aren’t made up to handle the streets and think that way. Women need pretty things around them. A nice place. Nice clothes. The right man to take care of ‘em. They’re soft and need you to hold ‘em. They need your shoulders to lean on when they have to cry. And when they get confused, they need you to be strong enough to guid’em. To even give’em a light spanking. Sure, a little like children- but a whole lot like angels (34).

Bailey’s assertion that these two voices, the pimp and the Christian, form one voice leads to a clear view the sexual and religious exploitation. For example, Christian spirituality at its core is supposed to serve as a space where the oppressed can separate themselves from both the oppressor and oppression. Though this level of spirituality exists to liberate, the black church has been found guilty of limiting women. Black women have been regarded as the backbone of the church. They often make up a large percentage of the congregation. According to the PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life data which provides a synopsis of religions in "A Religious Portrait of African Americans," African Americans are most likely to associate themselves with some form of religion. Eighty-seven percent of African-Americans acknowledge belonging to one religious group or another." The study suggests that fifty-three percent of African Americans attend church services at least once per week. However, an analysis by gender shows that eighty-four percent of black women whole-heartedly value the religious experience, and sixty percent attend church services at least once per week. Black men, however, are almost twice as likely as black women not to affiliate themselves with religion or attend church ("A Religious Portrait of African Americans).

Thus, the black church is filled with black women praying and being preyed on. Eric Michael Dyson argues in the Black Church and Sexuality that the women serve as lay leaders catering to male pastors and waiting on them hand and foot, but rarely are they the pastor or spiritual leaders. The women are self-sacrificing and are taught to
suppress even their own sexuality, unless, of course, it is for a so-called man of God (233). Naylor notes these practices and renders Christianity as a gendered institution where males control the religious experience and often use male dominance to dictate to and interpret to women what a mother is or should be. By writing Eve as Mother, Naylor allows for the scrutiny of religion and the modern black church that is made up of middle-class blacks struggling to find place in America.

In Bailey’s Café, alcohol, prostitution and desperation kills Sadie’s mother’s sense of morality long before she actually dies. She prostitutes Sadie. Sadie tried to appease her, but too many demons haunt her:

Dreams that drowned out the sound of the wailing and screaming of her mama’s losing battle with invisible monsters that crawled out the absinthe bottle. The hawking coughs. The pus filled urine hitting the sides of the chamber pot. The smell of licorice and fever pouring out in night sweats. Look at what I come to trying to feed you. Just look at what I come to trying to feed you. Just look at what I come to” (46).

Sadie’s grief is awkward and short lived:

Sadie just stood there. Her face was unreadable as she watched the rain washing chunks of soil down the sides of the muddy pit. The chaplain nudged her forward. She took just a step and stood there, so very intent on the soil sliding down the sides of the grave…Sadie’s eyes were vacant and dry. The chaplain danced from foot to foot; he’d had more than enough. He grabbed up a handful of dirt, forced it into Sadie’s hand, and shoved her to the edge of the grave. She stumbled and went down on her knees. Lord we commit this soul to Thee. He raise his voice louder. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Sadie opened he hand and let the damp soil drop into the grave. Still on her knees, she watched it hit the top of the pine coffin. Yes. It was barely a whisper. She leaned over the pit to get a close look as she picked up another handful of soil and threw that on top of the box. Yes another and another. Glassy-eyed, like a robot, she tried to cover the coffin. Yes. Yes. Never above a whisper. Faster and Faster. Yes. Yes. Yes. Mud and water flew into her face and onto her jacket as she scooped up fistfuls and fistfuls of soil to fling down into the grave. She fought them when they tried to stop her. Biting and
scratching them with her muddy fingernails, using her boot heels to shove dirt into the grave as they dragged her away. Yes-she was crying now, tears tracking through the mud (49).

Though Sadie goes through this full episode, it is the only opportunity she gets to mourn. Before she could finish crying she already had to think about survival, “Making it alone”, food, clothes, and rent. Bailey states, “Too bad that Sadie couldn’t have found that brownstone the way she found us. And I knew there was no use in directing her there” (80). Sadie never made it to Eve. She found herself without her mother and without an enabling maternal figure. Sadie’s inability to connect with Eve highlights the importance of the enabling maternal figure and the spirituality needed for the oppressed to survive.

Finally, Eve’s interaction with the fourteen year old child Mary Take Two also indicates the importance of survival and hope for the oppressed. She is a virgin and was described as “a little off in the head” (143). She has not been touched by a man. Her story connects Eve to pregnancy, and mothering. It is Eve who without a medical knowledge delivers Mary’s baby. As Miriam’s people believe, the birth of the child indicates survival. Shuddering at the thought of what the children will say, Bailey contemplates on what the birth of the child means and realizes that it means that children who have lost their futures will be coming in into café (227). This further suggests that there is a constant need for revision, spirituality and enabling mother figure.

Naylor’s implementation of Eve as an enabling maternal figure in the text, and the care and nurturing Eve provides for the characters who are outcast and not biologically her children, reveals the text’s confronting of the prevailing perceptions of motherhood and family. It creates a spiritual space of empowerment that reaches the character based on their own individual needs, restores them and resists patriarchal ideas. The spiritual space Naylor allows Eve to render to the oppressed characters is what Collins considers a transformative power:

Such power is transformative in that Black women’s relationships with children and other vulnerable community members is not intended to dominate or control. Rather, its purpose is to bring people along, to …
uplift the race so that vulnerable members of the community will be able to attain the self-reliance and independence essential for resistance. (132) Through her revision of a spiritual maternal figure Naylor demonstrates a belief in the necessity of the spiritual in Black women’s tradition of resistance. As a result, her characters enter a third space and are able to survive because of the spirituality Eve provides.
CHAPTER FIVE

CHANGE: REVISING MOTHERHOOD IN TINA MCELROY ANSA’S UGLY WAYS

Tina McElroy Ansa’s sense of rememory and Third Space is directed toward contemporary Black women’s struggle to assert freedom within the home and family unit. The characters in Ugly Ways are supposedly far removed from slavery and the racial issues and oppression of the South. They are, in fact, a contemporary African American family who enjoys the middle class trimmings of a nice home, a car, catalog shopping, home renovations, and daughters who have college experience and/or careers. However, Mudear, though physically in the home, rejects the traditional domestic space, a position which Ansa uses to call to attention to an understanding of this domestic space. Feminist theory builds its maternal ideology on the separation of the male space—business and politics being ruled by men—versus the private space of home ruled by women. African American maternal theory observes that this pure dichotomy of the public and private space, the masculine and the feminine does not manifest in culture. For instance, Patricia Hill Collins suggests that, among ethnic women’s homes, this dichotomy cannot be sustained, as economics and politics create a different reality for women of color, one which does not permit them to function in a vacuum (Collins 61).

The Black home is a space of resistance where the perils of hegemonic forces of institutional racism are both initiated and sustained. bell hooks’ essay, “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” speaks of the dual function of the Black home. First, it stands as a place of comfort, where the freedom to be whole human beings resides. Inhabitants are humanized and are no longer objectified by Western institutions but exist rather as subjective beings offering debate and opinions of ideas. Second, the Black home functions as a space in which Blacks can work towards survival and prosperity in the larger world by utilizing and refining tools that assist them in their resistance (hooks 58).

Nevertheless, Ansa demonstrates that the tools of oppression have changed and modernized patriarchal ideas and male dominance still threaten the Black home and family structure. For this reason, Ansa revises the mother and determines that centrality is a spiritual space—where one can escape the pressures and burdens of male dominance and oppressive domesticity. The spiritual space aligns with nature and a peaceful sense of self. To locate an alternate space, Ansa situates Mudear around the garden and consistently draws parallels between the enabling maternal figure and earth. Ultimately, the garden allows Mudear to function in Third Space where she can identify oppression and change herself, her husband, and change her daughters. Mudear changes herself, and revises the maternal space.

Ugly Ways tells the story of Mudear who initially seeks to be a “good” mother and wife but becomes an accidental participant in her own oppression in the domestic space. Patricia Hill Collins confirms that women can often “contribute to their own enslavement to the very system that seeks to destroy them” (123). The extent to which a woman should cater to her husband may is debatable, but the extent to which Mudear went to appease her husband suggests that she went into her marriage completely absorbed by patriarchal ideas about being a wife and mother and allowed herself to accept the mistreatment. As the eldest daughter Betty recalls, her mother “acquiesced publicly to her father in all matters-money, the children, choices for dinner, or how to line the kitchen trash can in a way that was most efficient” (2). Also, Ernest, her husband, recalls Mudear catering to him by kneeling before him to clean, polish, and buff his nails (50). Mudear assesses her years of mistreatment, “getting slapped in the face with a rolled-up copy of the Clarion newspaper or told what you think or what you think you are ain’t shit. That you need to wear a bra all the time around the house cause your titties funny shaped. Or your rice is always gummy.” Her husband’s “ugly ways” force her to alter her life. She chooses not to be a wife or mother, at least not in the traditional sense. She considers everything she has: “a nice home, three daughters Annie Ruth, Betty, and Emily who would soon be old enough to help with chores—cooking and cleaning and sewing—and a husband with a job and whom she knew well. And a beautiful garden…” (106). Mudear leaves, but only in spirit, not in body.

Donna Aza Weir-Soley in Eroticism, Spirituality and Resistance in Black Women’s
Writing, argues that staying in a marriage for the sake of security is just a new paradigm for slave labor (72). Ansa, however, devises a spiritual plan that will allow Mudear to sustain herself, and, rather than be enslaved as Weir Soley suggests, find freedom for herself and family.

Ansa transplants Mudear from the home to the garden, a space where Mudear’s spirit can be free. As a part of Mudear’s change, Ansa presents the imagery of the biblical lily: Mudear “spent most of her days lying in her throne of a bed or in a reclining chair or lounging on a chaise lounge dressed in pretty night clothes or a pastel house coat” (15). Like the lily, Mudear does not have a care in the world, yet she is taken care of: “they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (Matthew 6:28). All in all, the imagery shows that, instead of Mudear being the patriarchal mother who takes care of everyone, everyone instead takes care of her. She lives her life just the way she wants, which includes, as the girls describe, lying around and sleeping in pretty pajamas during the day, and awake at night working in her garden (15). She separates herself from her husband in spirit. She does not cook, clean, say kind words, attend events, or even leave the house. In the garden she finds freedom and power. Betty notes, “I noticed that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty” (241).

Ansa integrates earth’s production with the maternal figure and makes Mudear like fertilizer, making things grow, and a product of cultivation/change. By shifting Mudear’s spirit from the home into the garden, Ansa draws a distinction between the traditional mother and Mother Earth. Ansa alters the domestic space and makes it ground for Mudear to function like the cycle of life in the garden. Mudear, like Mother Earth, does as she pleases: the girls work hard like soldier ants and man struggles internally as he silently wishes to control her. In the garden, Mudear is able to successfully produce: “her late night gardening had produced prodigious results” (29). The reliance of the garden on Mudear for production implies that the woman’s ability to

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2 The garden as a spiritual space between women and earth is also seen in works by Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mother’s Garden” and The Color Purple and Gloria Naylor’s Bailey’s Cafe
change herself by herself is essential to her family’s growth. Additionally, the change indicates that, in order to alter the parameters of wife and motherhood, the maternal space must be self defined.

Rendering earth as a perfect maternal space overshadows the male character in *Ugly Ways* and highlights feminine power. Ansa works within the patriarchal narrative earth as female, yet she uproots male authority over earth by not allowing Ernest to fertilize, farm, or even tend to the garden. Most interesting is that the Love Joy home instead receives literal male “fertilization” along with male banishment.

Ansa employs two scenes of banishment, one in which a “big pushy” woman in the bar is banished from male conversation, and shortly after Ernest’s friend is banished from the Lovejoy’s home (47-49). By juxtaposing these two scenes, Ansa emphasizes the extent to which Black women and Black men are at odds with one another in marriage when hegemonic ideas about the home are perpetuated. Ernest tries to enforce Western ideals of male domination. Ernest exemplifies the attitude that hooks describes of the Black male quest to earn recognition for his manhood. Ernest buys into the patriarchal myth that, just because he was born male, he has “an inherent right to power and privilege” (hooks 101). He enlisted a friend to come over for a TV repair and drink only to have him get too drunk miss the bathroom and urinate on the floor (50). After his friend is banished, he wants desperately to establish/reestablish his male authority in the home: “He even thought of calling for help. The police? His lodge brothers. Somebody” (50). Metaphorically, the friend marks the house as officially male territory, but not the way Ernest wants it. Ernest would now be relegated to the home as oppressive.

In this instance, Ansa inserts a view of how sexism impacts the status of Black women. bell hooks focuses her essay, “The Imperialism of Patriarchy,” on sexism, claiming that, during the Feminist Movement, White women failed to realize that White upper class men were not the only men who had the power to oppress, and White women were not the only women who were oppressed. Poor men and lower class men also reveled in the privilege to oppress women. Furthermore, because of the constant attention on White males as chauvinistic, they became “scapegoats,” and attention was drawn away from the fact that oppressed Black males could also oppress Black women.
hooks admonishes that sexism among Blacks existed well before American slavery, but rule by White colonizers worked to reinforce notions of superiority. Though Black men experience racism, it does not stop them from learning White male sexist behaviors. Men in general are socialized into sexism at very early ages. Early on, the privileges and status that comes along with being a male are understood (hooks 102). Thus, racism is not the only oppression that Black women must endure (hooks 88).

Ansa allows Ernest to feel the oppression that Mudear suffered in the domestic space. Now that he possesses the home, he will own the coldness and the hurt she feels. He feels the banishment that disconnects him from his wife and children.

The banishment Ernest feels aligns him with the banishment of the woman in the bar. “Mens need to talk,” the big pushy,” woman is told, and the sentiment is also what Ernest begins to realize as he loses his authority and control. Ansa feminizes the statement “Mens need to talk.” When the statement is made at the bar, it suggests that a woman had no place in male conversation, but, restated by Ernest, it expresses a sincere need to talk. Ansa mocks male silencing of women.

Ernest is a victim of patriarchal socialization. He admits, “But that’s how things was then. Then, a man controlled his household, his wife, his family. Wasn’t even no big to-do about it. Just a couple of taps really to shut her up and let her know who was who and what was what” (97). Ernest changes dramatically. He is forced to look at himself. He begins to realize that the more Mudear gave, the more he wanted (97). When Mudear changed, so did Ernest; thus, he no longer places demands on her, and she does not permit him to do so.

In all occurrences, Ansa’s reproduction of the domestic space for Ernest holds numerous meanings. It affirms not only the importance of rejecting hegemonic ideas of domination in the Black family, but it also affirms the loss of ownership of male objects and the tools that had been used to perpetuate Black female oppression. hooks asserts that White male success is equated with his ability to effectively use his tools and technology to cause violence or to exert his power over others for the exploitation of capitalistic gains (hooks 92). On the other hand, “Masculine Power” for Black males is not much different; one may use his tools and technology to destroy a country and the other may use his limited resources to destroy his own community. Acts of violence, big
or small, work to oppress others and offer a sense of fulfillment in exerting whatever level of power one has.

Mudear reduces Ernest’s power including the power over their daughters. Ernest states, “These girls always did belong to Mudear” (17). Their father, though in the same household, had no voice in their lives; instead, Mudear’s voice cannot be silenced. Ansa uses the intrusive narration by Mudear to show that she single-handedly produces her three girls and the she reduced patriarchal control over their lives. The girls struggle to manage what Mother Earth yields. Mudear prepares her daughters for a patriarchal and male-dominated society by telling them they can be free when they prevent themselves from getting hurt and not to take a man’s behavior personally (107).

Mudear is criticized for her method of teaching her girls about men and freedom. However, Patricia Hill Collins shows the relevance of Black mothers teaching their daughters about patriarchal society. Collins suggests, Black mothers often produce daughters who are independent, and the opposition they face in rearing their daughters is substantial. They are seen as these powerful and over-protective disciplinarians who are given the challenge to raise Black daughters who must learn the survival skills that will allow them to “reject and transcend interlocking structures of race, class, and gender” (124-25). Mudear produces independent women, as their father proudly points out; they always had jobs, did not ask for anything, and did for themselves (99).

Mudear, however, is criticized for the lack of emotion she showed towards her girls. Emily sadly expresses that it is a “damn shame” when the only thing you can say good about your mother is that she killed a cat for you (63). Betty thinks about her mother’s delegation of all responsibility onto her: “Let Betty do it, Let Betty pick that up, she is big boned, Let?” (62).

Regardless of the daughter situations or pain, they are fine. Collins suggests that “emotional strength is essential, but not at the cost of physical survival. the very lives of daughters are at stake when they witness oppression by Western culture and seek to do something about it “ (125). Through Mudear’s change and maternal makeover, Ansa analyzes contemporary motherhood via the move beyond the girls’ emotional stability/instability to their survival. Her daughters, with the exception of Betty, never saw their mother oppressed. Though Mudear forces them to choose her, it
is not just her that Mudear wants her daughters to choose; she wants them to choose resistance. She tills the soil of their minds constantly, telling them, “A man don’t give a damn about you” (99). Mudear tells the girls:

A man no matter how much he love you will send you out to face the world alone, will sit by and watch your heart break, will let you work yourself into the grave taking care of him and then stand over your open hole and cry and yell, ‘Oh baby, why you have to leave me? Why you have to go before me? Aw baby, how you ‘spect me to live ‘out you?... before you cold he will be out looking for another fool woman to take care of him. (99)

The girls find their own center: Mudear dies, and Annie Ruth is pregnant. Emily is enraged about the pregnancy as the three sisters made a pact to never have children in fear of being like their mother. Their rejection of traditional motherhood underscores the perpetuation of Mudear. What Mudear actually does is leave the girls without the traditional model of what a mother is, which leads them to define motherhood for themselves. Betty already redefines motherhood as she creatively mothers her sisters. She tells them stories about life and tells them about Mudear before the change. Adopting Mudear’s sense of freedom, Betty, Annie Ruth and Emily are free to mother on their own terms.

Ansa, completing the metaphor of the garden with the cycle of life and death, allows for change and the creation of a new maternal space for Mudear, Ernest and her daughters. Ansa’s use of third space in Ugly Ways looks at oppression in the lives of contemporary women. She positions her characters for change. Mudear changes, and she imposes this change on the rest of the Lovejoy family in her resistance to oppression. The garden serves as her space to become the enabling maternal figure and to change motherhood. After Mudear’s death, Ernest, Betty, Annie Ruth, and Emily come to accept Mudear spirit for who she is and as a result, they are able to function in life without oppression.
CONCLUSION

Black Woman

Don’t knock on my door, little child,
I cannot let you in,
You know not what a world this is
Of cruelty and sin.
Wait in the still eternity
Until I come to you,
The world is cruel, cruel, child,
I cannot let you in!

Don’t knock at my heart, little one,
I cannot bear the pain
Of turning deaf-ear to your call
Time and time again!
You do not know the monster men
Inhabiting the earth,
Be still, be still, my precious child,
I cannot give you birth!

Georgia Douglas Johnson

Georgia Douglas Johnson’s poem “Black Woman” is indeed an ode to the challenges of Black motherhood. Though the persona appears initially to reject motherhood, it is clear that the persona does not have a problem with being a mother. In fact, she has, already begun to mother the unborn child. She communicates with the child, and she takes ownership—“my child.” Like a mother, she works to protect the child and warns the child about the cruelty he or she will encounter in the world. Furthermore, she suggests that her mothering will indeed take place, but in eternity—third space. In this other space, the mother is given the power to control and dictate how and when she will mother. Since the traditional spaces assigned to Black motherhood are skewed by conditions of society past and present, an intermediate space is a less challenging place for motherhood and one that will allow her to mother on her own terms. This is how rememory and Third Space function as they relate to maternal loss.
The African American female novelists I have focused on in this study work through past oppression—symbolized by maternal loss—to create a maternal space, a third space that owes no allegiance to externally defined notions of female identity. They participate in a tradition of rememory where they reinvent mothers/motherhood on their own terms. Infusing empowered female protagonists, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Tina McElroy Ansa address issues that impact the interactions and relationships of African American mothers, underscoring the aftereffects of race, class, and gender oppression. Most significantly, they show others a revised vision of the world. The authors reveal the process of revision and change within the tradition of rememory. In addition, their own search for the literary mother leads them to the female bond of novelists who are contributing to one large conversation on Black motherhood. Each novelist offers a rendition of the maternal figure. Just as Georgia Douglas Johnson’s persons decides on her own space, Morrison, Jones, Walker, Naylor, and Ansa carve out spaces to locate the core of Black women’s reactions to their world. Each novelist’s maternal version serves to examine the past and demonstrate how women are to survive beyond it, introduces conventions to embrace men and women, and, ultimately, allows women to make their own decisions about motherhood.

To begin, there is the concern to teach African American daughters to survive and to resist in a racist, sexist, and classist society. The Black female protagonists in this study find themselves working arduously to resist traditional views that have kept their foremothers from being the women they wanted to be and from forming their own views about life and motherhood. Ursa Corregidora, for example, must work through the relationship between Great Gram and Old Man Corregidora and her own relationship with Mutt. She establishes what she believes about love, marriage, and motherhood. In this instance, she is able to see the psychological effects of rape and abuse, and she is provided with an opportunity to create her own space to confront her feelings. Subsequently, Ursa demonstrates that marriage is not able to sustain her entirely; therefore, she survives through revision and resistance which allow her to heal from the past and survive whole.
In turn, each novelist seems to introduce conventions that function to ensure the preservation of the entire African American community—both men and women. As Patricia Hill Collins consistently advances, Black women’s survival is closely connected to that of their community. Black women’s struggles for freedom and empowerment are an individual concern as well as a concern for the larger community: they survive so their families will survive, and they secure the survival of their families, so that they will survive. As a result, a deluge of depictions of intimate relationships between Black females and males reference the ways in which issues of gender cross with those of race and class. These writers express that, just as African American women and men have joined together in the past to fight racism and classism in the larger society, they should join together against manifestations of sexism in the Black community. As an oppressive power, the dangers of sexism extend to men and women. These novelists suggest that, by taking part in oppression, Black men commit themselves to Eurocentric ideas that have oppressed the African American community. Male protagonists like Mutt and Mr_. are examples of Black men who realize the ills of oppression and work to combat their own sexist attitudes.

Finally, attention is given to the power Black women have to revise their views on life and motherhood—to revise motherhood for themselves and to be empowered by it. Essentially, the novelists create powerful and active protagonists who move beyond loss to exhibit the transforming qualities of rememory and third space. Though the protagonists live in a world that they in many ways do not control, these women control their own realities and help others to do the same. In their situations, there is no either/or, but an approach that allows them to write and rewrite the rules as needed to fit their circumstances. Eva, Sula, Ursa, Eve, Shug, Mudear, and other protagonists reflect the interests of African American women by revising motherhood to fit their personal situations.

The need to survive, the embracing of the community as a whole including men and women, and the power to revise all work together as an underpinning of the implications of this study. The first is that this study offers another way to approach and to examine literary works by African American women. From this theoretical perspective, personal identity and community identity can be merged to understand how
Black women see themselves. With a knowledge of how African American mothers view themselves, scholars may be able to discuss Black women’s literature within a better context. The mothering ways of Eva, for example, could be read as attempts to save her family, not just as maternal selfishness. One could see the actions of Mudear in this way as well if they are looked at in terms of maternal loss, rememory, and third space. Rememory, with its attention to the history, beliefs, experiences, and concerns of everyday Black mothers, could be used as a tool to define the maternal narratives found in Black women’s writing.

Moreover, a focus on maternal loss as it connects with rememory and third space sheds light on Black women’s intimate relationships, particularly those between mothers and daughters. Feminist critics have dedicated significant efforts to analyzing the relationships mothers have with their daughters. However, the studies have, at times, been too limited—discussing primarily white, middle-class mothers and daughter and, often, not thoroughly able to speak to the issues facing Black mothers and daughters. Through further investigation of the maternal loss/oppression shared between generations of Black women, critics could analyze various responses in the changes and revisions of motherhood and note how they manifest in Black women’s fiction. In sum, critics could use maternal loss and its connection with rememory and third space as another way to theorize about biological connections between mothers and daughters and to study literary loss as well as literary bonds between Black female novelists.

Maternal loss also serves as a useful aid in the study of African American literature as a whole. For instance, it could be applied to the fiction of African American males as well as other African American literature that is concerned with mother-son relationships to examine their representations of Black maternal figures. Analyzing African American literature, Joyce Elaine King and Carolyn Ann Mitchell’s study raises a pertinent question in this regard: “How does a mother who is strong and self-sufficient enough to secure the family’s economic survival in a racist and sexist society raise a son to become strong and resilient in his own right?” (26). Since a son’s failure results in the cycle of heavy burdens being placed on mothers, the researchers make a compelling argument that mothers, independent of fathers, must equip sons to survive
successfully and to “develop the character, personality and integrity a Black male child needs to transcend hostile societal forces” (26).

Even though there are risks that are unique to Black men and women combating racial oppression, the fictional concerns of how mothers raise their sons and how mothers raise their daughters resemble one another. Both emphasize the dangers of living in a white supremacist society which creates difficulties in how Black women mother. Additionally, the dedication of energy to rearing children who are able to overcome obstacles and to establish their own space of empowerment applies to mother/son and mother/daughter relationships. Utilizing maternal loss to look at theoretical frames used to critique African American literature from various perspectives could provide further insight into the dilemmas and complications of Black mothering.

In conclusion, maternal loss, particularly as it relates to rememory and third space, could offer ways of theorizing African American literature. The writers in this project looked at the role of mothers and their relationships with themselves, their children, their lovers, and their communities. An examination of these relationships could allow for new and different ways to discuss literature. With this in mind, Black feminist criticism must continue to grow. Through maternal loss, the writers demonstrate that motherhood must continue to be envisioned and re-envisioned. Betty told her mother’s stories, allowing the girls to use their imagination about her. Other people also made up stories about what Mudear was doing in the house. Rumors floated about Shug having diseases, being dead, and sleeping around. Ursa writes and rewrites her songs. Sister Carrie and Sugar Man have their stories and opinions about Eve. Each of these characters was envisioned and re-envisioned by herself and by others. The writers in this research have been able to share their views by looking at the past and the future. African American female novelists constantly seek to provide the maternal figure with all she needs to survive.


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