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African Spirituality in the Novels of Tina McElroy Ansa

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
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AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY IN THE NOVELS OF TINA MCELROY ANSA

By

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ABSTRACT

A connected narrative is present in *Baby of the Family* (1989), *Ugly Ways* (1993), *The Hand I Fan With* (1996), *You Know Better* (2002), and *Taking After Mudear* (2007)--the five novels of contemporary author Tina McElroy Ansa. That narrative involves the African-American woman's quest for belonging in an increasingly complex twentieth and twenty-first century South. Additionally, that quest tends to include a coalescence of the sacred and secular through ancestral communion, an aspect of West African spirituality.

The central aim of this study is to argue the importance of Ansa's novels being included in the conversation about the relation between current African-American women's fiction and African spirituality and in the canon of African-American literature. The rationale for this argument is that Ansa is one of a few African-American authors, and authors in general, who are able to claim possession of a canonical narrative throughout their body of works. Furthermore, this study will assert that many of Ansa's themes/depictions compare to those of the African-American women writers who are presently embraced in the discussion of the juxtaposition between the spirit and material worlds in African-American women's fiction. This study is in conversation with Cheryl Wall and other theorists and researchers who offer an embracement of African spirituality as a survival mechanism for African-American women in patriarchal society. This study also addresses W. E.B. Du Bois' idea of double consciousness and Homi Bhabha's third space. Finally, this study aims to contribute to that conversation by concluding that Ansa's texts demand a rethinking of black female identity and the public and private spaces in which black women find themselves.

INTRODUCTION

A connected narrative is present in *Baby of the Family* (1989), *Ugly Ways* (1993), *The Hand I Fan With* (1996), *You Know Better* (2002), and *Taking After Mudear* (2007)--the five novels of contemporary author Tina McElroy Ansa. That narrative involves the African-American woman's quest for belonging in an increasingly complex twentieth and twenty-first century South. Additionally, that quest tends to include a coalescence of the sacred and secular through ancestral communion, an aspect of West African spirituality.

Ansa, herself, is a native of the region that figures so prominently in her novels. She was born in Macon, Georgia, attended Spelman College in Atlanta, and currently resides on St. Simon's Island (Carroll 17). Her residing there is of note, for St. Simon's Island is a part of the Sea Islands, a region "located along the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia, extending almost 400 miles from the southern border of North Carolina to the northern border of Florida" (Twining and Baird 387). In fact, the Sea Islands and their lore figure into many African-American women writers' works that deal with West African spirituality, including Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* (1982) and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1998). As Mary A. Twining and Keith E. Baird point out in "Introduction to Sea Island Life" (1980), the Sea Islanders, "although native to the United States, actually manifest in their speech, customs, and general manner of life, features which show greater affinities to the Afro-Caribbean population and to the indigenous African peoples than do other Americans of African origin" (388). Some of these cultural retentions and affinities include the West African practices and beliefs regarding ancestral communion and spirit possession. Thus, the argument may be made that authors such as Shange, Naylor, and even Ansa situate their novels in these Southern spaces because the spaces allow the authors to conjure aspects of the African past.

Many scholars, including Kamau Keymayo ("Ancestral Communion in Contemporary African American Literature" 2004) and Cheryl A. Wall (*Worrying the Line* 2008), have directed attention to the purpose and

meaning of the intersection between contemporary African-American women's fiction and African spirituality. These researchers and others tend to be in agreement regarding the presence of African spirituality in the works of African-American women writers and, to a certain extent, the explanation for that existence. Nonetheless, the scholars acknowledge that those presences tend to be in different forms.

In "Africanism in African American Life and History" (2004), Jacob U. Gordon examines the role African culture played and continues to play in the lives of African-Americans. He suggests that Africanisms are present in many forms of the African-American culture, including its literature. In his discussion, Gordon cites the 1926 work of Newbell Puckett titled *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. According to Gordon, Puckett's work was one of "the first anthropological studies to examine African carry-overs found in the South" (13). Additionally, Gordon notes that Puckett discusses "preservation of African traits in African-American burial customs, folk beliefs, and religious philosophy, including belief in ghosts, witchcraft, voodoo, and conjuration" (13). These are all traits of African spiritualism that tend to frequent African-American women writers' works, especially those with Southern settings.

Keymayo, a contributor to Gordon's *The African Presence in Black America* (2004), adds to his discussion of the existence of African spirituality in African-American women's literature, focusing on ancestral communion, particularly. In "Ancestral Communion in Contemporary African American Literature," Keymayo defines the communion as "the ways authors use the presence or absence of ancestors in their characters' search for harmony and balance" (222). He rationalizes that ancestral communion is used to help the main characters in the works of fiction deal with the *identity crises* they experience living as African-Americans in a white, male dominated society.¹ Furthermore, a communion with nature may be read as communing

¹ Kamau Keymayo writes that "eschewing the western phantasmagorical connotations of :ghosts and goblins,~ and their viewpoint of nature as something to be conquered or controlled, an Afrocentric approach assumes connectedness with nature's visible and unseen manifestations. Building on a cyclic, rather than linear, worldview with a fundamental ethos of :I am because we are,~ the ancestors and other natural/supernatural forces emerge as

with the ancestors because "communion with nature suggests a sharing and using of spiritual energies more so than a strict reliance on physical and material properties. Spirituality transcends religion, informs people's traditions and rituals, and links them to nature" (232). Thus, since the African ancestors were in tune to nature, a person's being in tune to it, too, connects him or her to the ancestors(232); this connection, rather, facilitates a communion between the spiritual and secular worlds.

Wall, also, discusses the intersection between the sacred and the secular in African-American women writers' fiction. She suggests the reason for the intersection is Black women writers' attempts to forge a connection between the past and the present. She notes that "memory, music, dreams, and ritual"(9), oftentimes forms of African spirituality, are frequently included in these writers' works. Wall concludes that the intention of that inclusion is a collective desire on the part of the African-American women writers to develop some means to combat the racism that Black women tend to face—that these African-American women writers are trying to suggest that "the best defense against the destructiveness of racism . . . is the formation of a cultural identity derived from an understanding of history"(6). Wall intimates that for these writers that understanding is based on a revisiting of their cultural past, in particular the use of ancestral practices and rituals, such as the ones Gordon mentions.

The central aim of this study is to argue the importance of Ansa's novels being included in this conversation on the relation between current African-American women's fiction and aspects of African spirituality. One rationale for this argument is that Ansa is among a select group of African-American authors who are able to claim possession of a canonical narrative.² Many scholars who address African spirituality in Black women's fiction tend to merely examine a

spiritual and social guides to be consulted and communed with, rather than sources of fear or material inheritance. Afrikan cosmology is concerned with other issues and manifestation that connect to and support ancestral communion. See Kamau Keymayo, "Ancestral Communion in Contemporary African American Literature." *The African Presence in Black America*. Ed. Jacob U. Gordon. New Jersey: Africa World Press, Incorporated, 2004: 231. Print.

² Other authors include Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor.

sampling of writings, not one author's collection of novels as this study aims to do. Thus, those scholars neglect the relevance of an author devoting her body of work to the topic of African spirituality. A study of Ansa's canon demonstrates the significance of Ansa employing African epistemology in all of her novels as well as shows how her works intersect with and add credence to the theories regarding the presence of African spirituality in African-American literature. Moreover, Ansa's being a present-day writer adds to the relevancy of the study, for the suggestion may be made that her narrative is reflective of African-American women's current struggles to find a sense of self in society; and through her texts, she is, perchance, suggesting that a combining of the spirit and material worlds is a way for them to do so.

Ansa's five novels will be examined to demonstrate the consistency with which Ansa uses ancestral communion as a method to disrupt monolithic representations of the black female self and develop a sense of identity necessary to survive in a white, patriarchal society. For this study, ancestral communion consists of a person of the secular world emulating/sharing an ancestor's actions, mannerisms, and/or beliefs, sensing an ancestor's presence, and/or talking to a member of the spirit world be it through that person initiating the communication with the spirit or vice versa. The study will show that Ansa employs ancestral communion to highlight the necessity and benefits of linking the spirit world to the living world. The ancestors are provided "voice," be it through them actually verbalizing their anguish and/or *experiences* or having their advice reflected in the female character/characters' growth and development. The members of the living world, meanwhile, are able to achieve balance and a sense of self.

This study is in conversation with Wall and other theorists and researchers who offer an embracement of African spirituality as a survival mechanism for African-American women in patriarchal society. This study also addresses W. E.B. Du Bois' idea of double consciousness and Homi Bhabha's third space. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois discusses the concept of double-consciousness. Du

Bois characterizes double-consciousness as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (7), a "twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (7). Theorist Homi Bhabha extends the idea of duality with his concepts regarding third space and hybridity. For Bhabha, "cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of self to Other" (35-36). As Maxine Montgomery clarifies, through some African-American women writers' characters, there exists an

idyllic space . . . inextricably connected with the feminine and is analogous to Third Space or what Homi Bhabha describes as the in-between area located outside of predetermined cultural and geographic limits where the postcolonial subject attains an unbound identity that refuses allegiance to singularly constructed notions of individuality (36-39). Here one is permitted to acknowledge and, ideally, embrace the multiple subjectivities necessary in the attainment of a hybrid self. (xvii)

With Ansa's canon, the author offers a dichotomous existence and the eventual possibility of hybridity as means for African-American women to obtain self and autonomy.

Several social, cultural, and historical factors have shaped twentieth century African-American women's writing. These factors include the Feminist, Civil Rights, and Black Arts Movements along with the black women's literary renaissance of the 1970s and its focus on the African-American woman's experience in white America. Ansa writes against this backdrop, for these factors seem to influence her fictionalization of the Black woman's quest for self-identity.

In actuality, a trajectory reflective of this influence is present throughout Ansa's entire canon. *Baby of the Family*, Ansa's first novel, examines the idea of double consciousness and what happens when the African-American woman remains ambivalent to her self-identity. The novel is set in the fictional town of Mulberry,

Georgia, in the late 1940s and early 1950s and includes elements of a traditional bildungsroman while tracing the coming-of-age process of Lena McPherson. Chapter One of this study, "A Caul and Coming of Age—Cultural Ambivalence in *Baby of the Family*," asserts that Ansa complicates Lena's development by uniting the spiritual and secular worlds in order to challenge patriarchal views as well as singular representations of Black female identity. By having Lena be born with a caul, Ansa problematizes the Eurocentric coming-of-age experience: The character reaches maturation but remains ambivalent, located in an intermediate space between Africa and America.

Chapter Two, "Just a Little Help from a Spiritual Hand—Self Discovery in *The Hand I Fan With*," and Chapter Three, "Voices of the Present Speaking for Those of the Past—The Mutual Benefits of Ancestral Communion as Seen in *Baby of the Family*, *The Hand I Fan With*, and *You Know Better*," discuss the benefits of both an African and American identity. With *The Hand I Fan With*, Ansa reexamines Lena McPherson, *Baby of the Family*'s protagonist, this time allowing for a coalescence between Lena's two selves. Chapter Two argues that as a result of Lena's communion with Herman, a spirit, Lena obtains a balance between the spiritual and secular worlds. In addition, she finally realizes that a representation of the black female self other than the one presented by patriarchal society is not only obtainable but also acceptable. Meanwhile, Chapter Three maintains that even though ancestral communion does promote the novels' protagonists' establishments of their selves, the protagonists, in turn, provide the ancestors with voice. Additionally, Chapter Three points out that through the communion the histories of the ancestors and the voiceless they represent are finally heard, and Ansa's canonical story's connection of the past to the present is continued.

With *Ugly Ways* and *Taking After Mudear*, which focus on three daughters, Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth Lovejoy, and their relationship with their recently deceased mother, Mudear, Ansa seems to be leaning towards the notion that a hybridity between the two selves must occur for an African-American woman to achieve true autonomy. Chapter Four of this study, "Communing with Mudear—Female

Autonomy in *Ugly Ways* and *Taking After Mudear*," offers a reading of *Ugly Ways* and *Taking After Mudear* as companion texts. The chapter contends that *Ugly Ways* and *Taking After Mudear* are similar to Ansa's others in that the main characters are searching for a sense of balance in their lives. It argues, nevertheless, that a noteworthy difference is the manner in which that balance is established. While the ancestors in *Baby of the Family*, *The Hand I Fan*, and *You Know Better* act as tutelaries and spiritual guides, Mudear's spirit does not impart conventional guidance and wisdom to her daughters. Instead, she challenges patriarchal society by redefining mother-daughter relationships as well as herself. Furthermore, Mudear speaks mainly to the reader. In fact, not until the end of *Taking After Mudear* do the daughters actually have a reciprocal conversation with the spirit of their mother. The chapter explains that although a direct communication between the protagonists and the spirit world is not accentuated in these latter two novels in the same manner that it is in the ones previously discussed, ancestral communion is still evident through the daughters' unknowingly sharing many of Mudear's mannerisms and beliefs and sensing her spirit's presence. Additionally, the chapter contends that it is through Mudear's revelations to the reader that she, akin to Ansa's other spirits, obtains autonomy and voice, and that though an *encouraging* communion does not transpire between Mudear and her daughters, it is due to the daughters' interactions with her, all the same, that they, too, reminiscent of Ansa's other female protagonists establish a sense of self.

This project surveys Ansa's challenge of patriarchal society's monolithic depictions of the Black female self. The "Conclusion" of this study asserts that through her novels' use of ancestral communion Ansa contributes to the scholarship concerning African spirituality in African-American literature. Finally, this study concludes that Ansa's texts demand a rethinking of black female identity and the public and private spaces in which black women find themselves.

CHAPTER ONE: A CAUL AND COMING OF AGE -- CULTURAL AMBIVALENCE IN *BABY OF THE FAMILY*

Set in the fictional town of Mulberry, Georgia, in the late 1940's and early 1950's, Tina McElroy Ansa's *Baby of the Family* traces the coming-of-age of Lena McPherson. The novel includes elements of a traditional bildungsroman, such as the protagonist's development from a young child to a teenager. However, Ansa complicates Lena's coming-of-age by coalescing the spiritual and secular worlds in order to challenge patriarchal views as well as disrupt monolithic representations of the black female self. By having Lena be born with a caul, Ansa problematizes the Eurocentric coming-of-age experience: The character reaches maturation but remains ambivalent, located in an intermediate space between Africa and America.

From the moment Ansa introduces *Baby of the Family*'s protagonist, emphasis is placed on Lena's being "a lucky baby"¹ and a "special child" (1). In fact, Lena is considered so special that one of the attending nurses at the hospital where she is born merely wishes for Lena to "open her eyes" (16) and just look at her since, according to the nurse, "it's supposed to be good luck for a child like that to look at you" (16). What the nurse is referring to is Lena's being born with a caul, a thin layer of skin that a few babies are born with covering their faces and that gifts the bearers with supernatural abilities, sometimes including the ability to commune with spirits.

Lore surrounding cauls and caulbearers has survived for centuries in European as well as African and African-American cultures. For instance, "at least two fictional characters were veiled: [Charles] Dickens' David Copperfield in England and [Ole Edvart] Rølvaag's Peder Victorious Holm in America" (Rich 3). Additionally, even in the 1950's folklorist Christina Hole wrote of sailors in London attempting to buy cauls because of a belief that "no ship that contains a caul [would] sink at sea" (412-413). Significant to my argument, however, is the fact that even though the belief in cauls' supernatural powers is

¹ See Tina McElroy Ansa, *Baby of the Family*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1989:1.Print.

present in Eurocentric cultures, "the cultural inscribed value of the caul in black America is linked to traditional West African beliefs" (Haynes 57). Thus, Lena's being born with a caul, a facet of West African spirituality and folklore, connects the protagonist to an African past. This suggestion is further solidified by Ansa's own words. In *I Know What the Red Clay Looks Like*, Ansa discusses the rationale behind making Lena a caulbearer. Ansa states that

having her [Lena] see ghosts and all that, [sic] was to snatch back our culture that really comes from Africanisms that tell us to respect and make reference to our ancestors, to make a connection between those who are living and those who have passed on. I really want to give these beliefs a sense of reverence. (qtd. in Carroll 22)

Although Ansa's characterization of Lena as a caulbearer does pay homage to Ansa's ancestors, the characterization also posits the protagonist between two worlds, African and American, spiritual and secular, or a third space.

In addition to the caul, Lena's mother, Nellie, also complicates Lena's coming-of-age. Once Lena is born, Nurse Bloom, the hospital's head nurse and a former country midwife, performs a ritualistic process that she deems necessary to preserve Lena's caul so that Lena will benefit from its powers. Upon completion of her ritual, Nurse Bloom takes tea that she has steeped from Lena's caul to Nellie for the mother to give to the infant. Nurse Bloom then instructs Nellie on the powers of a caulbearer, telling the mother that one of them is the ability to see ghosts. Nurse Bloom goes on to explain that there are two types of ghosts:

'one is the peaceful and harmless kind that appear before you just the way they were on earth, natural-like, and they can be helpful, too. Then there's the other kind, and they can scare you plenty. Some of them look like death itself, some don't have any heads or any feet, or their heads are turned around on their shoulders.' (29)

Nurse Bloom tries to impart to Nellie that the caul tea, however, will aid Lena with the visions, explaining that the tea will "blind [Lena]

to any of those scary kinds of ghosts, so she won't be terrorized by those spirits'" (29). Nurse Bloom reveals that as a caulbearer Lena cannot completely escape seeing spirits, but if Lena does drink the "tea, it will just be the harmless kind she'll see. Nothing that'll ever scare her'" (29). Nellie is flattered by the attention Nurse Bloom dotes on Lena and humors Nurse Bloom by taking the tea and preserved caul from her. Meanwhile, inwardly Nellie considers the nurse's advice "old timey ideas" (27) and the tea an example of "old-fashioned potion shit" (33). Thus, when the nurse leaves Nellie and Lena alone in Nellie's hospital room, Nellie pours the concoction into a vase of flowers instead of giving it to her daughter and eventually burns the caul.

Ansa uses Nurse Bloom to represent the African culture that Lena is situated between and the respect it once received from African-Americans.² Hence, by Ansa depicting Nurse Bloom as a midwife, Ansa is bestowing that same honor on her. Furthermore, Ansa is mirroring a technique practiced by other African-American women writers who use lay midwives in their works to "[reaffirm] the validity of orality and cultural performance, [engage] the complexities of a socio-literary process, [and contest] categories through African based cultural traditions" (Lee 9). Such is the case with Ansa's employment of Nurse Bloom in the discussion of the two worlds that Lena and African-Americans, in general, must negotiate.

In addition to Ansa's using Nurse Bloom to represent the African culture that Lena, as a caulbearer, is posited, Ansa also uses the character to challenge patriarchal society.³ By the time Lena is born

² According to Valerie Lee, "the first black lay midwife came to America in 1619, bringing with her a knowledge of health and healing based on her African background. With the growth of slave communities in America and slavery's emphasis on the breeding of human chattel, black lay midwives performed important roles. They were everything from herbal to ritual specialists. Delivering babies was respectful, ancient work, and African American lay midwives, as well as the early midwives of most cultures, earned respect for their skills." See Valerie Lee, *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double-Dutched Readings*. New York: Routledge, 1996: 6. Print.

³ See Valerie Lee's discussion in *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers* of the use of grannies by African-American women writers as a way to subvert patriarchal authority.

and in order to survive in her evolving society, Nurse Bloom is no longer a midwife and works at St. Luke's Hospital, the only black hospital in Mulberry. In fact, she is one of the most revered nurses at the hospital. Even Dr. Williams, the hospital's owner and a symbol of contemporary society as demonstrated by the fact that he practices Western medicine and makes sure that "his hospital [has] as much modern equipment as he could acquire" (Ansa 4), defers to Nurse Bloom in regards to the care of Lena. When Lena is born, she brings "with her a touch of the supernatural into a place that owed so much to the scientific"(3), Dr. William's avant-garde hospital. Thus, even though Dr. Williams is a product of current society and emulates many of its views, when it comes to Lena's birth

he [gives] no thought to the techniques he had learned at Meharry [Medical School]. Seeming to forget his usual delivery-room procedure formed over nearly a quarter century of practice, he [turns] the next two minutes into a ritualized dance [orchestrated by Nurse Bloom] that [has] nothing to do with modern medicine.(5)

Instead, he and his other nurses merely stand back and watch Nurse Bloom's ritual. In other words, although Dr. Williams is an agent of patriarchal society, he still disavows his power and agency out of deference for Nurse Bloom and the African culture that she and her care of Lena's caul represent.

While Nurse Bloom represents the African culture and offers challenges to patriarchal society and representations of the black female self, Nellie, on the other hand, embodies that society and, in particular, African-Americans who have assimilated into it. Ansa exemplifies Nellie's assimilation by constantly describing Nellie as a product of modern society. Moreover, Laura Haynes observes that Nellie espouses middle class sensibilities that serve as counterintelligence to the storehouse of mother wit dispensed by Nurse Bloom. Several characteristics reveal the level of social status Nellie has attained. She is a

homemaker, her husband is an entrepreneur, her children attend private school, and her home is adorned with fine furnishings. (66)

Because of Ansa's characterization of Nellie and Nurse Bloom, one may infer that Nellie's refusal to give Lena the caul tea represents factions of modern-day African-American society denying their African culture, as represented by Nurse Bloom, in an attempt to assimilate into the Eurocentric society in which they live.

As Ansa uses Nellie to represent the dominant culture, Ansa also establishes a dichotomy between Nellie and Miss Lizzie, Lena's grandmother and Nellie's mother-in-law. That dichotomy is first established while Nellie, still in the hospital, compares her mother-in-law to Nurse Bloom. While musing to herself about Nurse Bloom's instructions regarding Lena and the caul, Nellie states to the nursing Lena

there's no reason anybody but us needs to know anything about this [referring to the instructions provided by Nurse Bloom about the caul and the fact that Nellie plans not to heed them], not anybody, not Nurse Bloom, not your grandmama, especially not Grandmama, you know how she is about all this old-timey stuff, she's almost as bad as Nurse Bloom. (Ansa 33-34)

Nellie's comparison of Nurse Bloom and Miss Lizzie suggests that Miss Lizzie, akin to Nurse Bloom, is connected to her African culture.

The contrast between Nellie and Miss Lizzie is best symbolized, however, by the differences Lena observes later in her childhood between the women's bedroom furniture and sewing machines: Lena notes that when "walking into [her] grandmother's room was like stepping back into another century. Lena's own mother was very modern" (35). In describing the women's two sewing machines that sit "catercorner to each other" (46), Lena notices that "one was an old Singer in a sturdy, weathered walnut cabinet with a wrought-iron base and a worn foot-pedal, that her grandmother used. The other machine was also a Singer, but it was the newest model they made, in a modern oak cabinet" (46); fittingly, the newer model belongs to Nellie.

Unlike Nellie, Miss Lizzie does not seem to desire validation from modern patriarchal society. This assertion is further exemplified by the fact that even though Miss Lizzie lives with Lena and Lena's family "for the twelve years that Nellie and Jonah"(112), Lena's father, are married, Miss Lizzie still espouses views and ways shaped by an African heritage. Jillian Jimenez notes that in African cultures elders were held in high esteem, and that tradition was continued once Africans were brought to America as slaves(526) as evidenced in the "respect given to the grandmother in the postslavery life of African Americans"(527). Jimenez adds that one of the functions of these grandmothers was to pass on their family's history, sometimes tracing that history "as far back as Africa"(533). Also significant is that, according to Jimenez, some of these stories would include "conjuring spirits or seeing 'haunts'"(532). Jimenez's description of the role of grandmothers can easily be applied to Ansa's characterization of Miss Lizzie.

For instance, Miss Lizzie acts as a tutelary and griot for Lena as well as Lena's brothers Edward and Raymond. Even though Miss Lizzie's husband dies the year of Lena's birth (Ansa 103), Miss Lizzie keeps his memory fresh in her grandchildren's minds. She frequently passes on stories of her husband's life, including his working for the railroad. While telling these stories, she mentions that he wanted his ashes to be spread in New Orleans, one of his favorite cities that he traveled to while working, yet "after he died, [she] couldn't do it, couldn't bring [herself] to let what was left of him to be thrown on some cold steel tracks"(104). Thus, she instead keeps his ashes in an "urn on the dining-room mantel"(105). Additionally, Miss Lizzie tells her grandchildren that since she denied her husband's wishes she has been "wait[ing] for him to come haunt [her]"(104), a remark to which Nellie frequently replies, "The children know there aren't no such thing as ghosts haunting you. I don't know why you insist on rehashing those old tales"(105). Miss Lizzie's comment about her dead husband possibly "haunting" her shows her belief in ancestral communion, an aspect of the West African culture. Meanwhile, Nellie's quick and fervent retort yet again demonstrates her denial of that same culture.

In addition to believing in ancestral communion, Miss Lizzie accepts and practices folk remedies and myths as shown in her attempt to cure Edward's stuttering. To the horror of Nellie and her middle class values, one night while Edward is attempting to read, Miss Lizzie "hit[s] him square in the mouth with a fat greasy piece of raw meat with stiff black hairs sticking out all over it" (109). Miss Lizzie defends her using the cow tongue in an attempt to halt Edward's stuttering by explaining that "if you hit the person right in the middle of a stutter, I know it works, seen it work lots of times" (110). Instead of relying on modern medicine to cure Edward, Miss Lizzie turns to folk beliefs, yet another facet of the African culture. Miss Lizzie's actions as well as Nellie's reactions to them reinforce that, for Ansa, Nellie embodies the contemporary African-American who denies aspects of her cultural identity in order to survive in patriarchal society while Miss Lizzie represents the African-American who embraces her duality of being African and American, spiritual and secular.

Ansa's effort to coalesce the spiritual and secular worlds in an attempt to challenge patriarchal views and deconstruct interpretations of the black female self is relevant to Du Bois' idea of double consciousness in addition to Bruce Dickinson's elaboration on it. Dickinson argues that for

Du Bois the essence of a distinctive African consciousness was its spirituality, a spirituality based in Africa but revealed among African Americans in their folklore [such as the mythic caul], their history of patience and suffering, and their faith. In this sense, double consciousness related particularly to Du Bois's efforts to privilege the spiritual in relation to the materialistic, commercial world of white America. (301)

For Ansa, the opposition of Nellie and the grandmother as well as Nurse Bloom epitomizes the Eurocentric/secular and African/spiritual worlds that Lena is situated between during her maturation. The women represent the "warring ideals" (Du Bois 7) Lena and many African-

American women, in general, must face to construct their self identities in a White world.

Although Lena's grandmother plays an influential role in Lena's life, Lena's mother's indoctrination in patriarchal society plays an even greater one, since it reflects the ideas of modern society. As mentioned earlier, Lena comes of age in the novel. However, since Lena has an ambivalent relationship with an African heritage due to her mother's beliefs and the mores of the dominant culture, Lena is afraid to tell others about her visions of spirits. Lena's first encounter with a spirit occurs with the ghost of Miss Lizzie's daughter. One day after giving Lena a bath, Miss Lizzie leaves her alone in her bedroom where the inquisitive child decides to investigate the portrait of Miss Lizzie's dead daughter hanging over Miss Lizzie's bed. Through a series of events, the spirit of the dead baby attempts to pull Lena into the portrait. A struggle then ensues between the two with Lena calling to her family for help. Once the family members arrive to comfort Lena, the spirit disappears. However, when Lena tries to explain to her family what transpired, she goes into "convulsions" (Ansa 41) and hears the spirit warn her "that's what you get for telling" (41). Lena's experience with the spirit is extremely relevant to her coming of age, for it shapes the entire process. Because of the illness that befalls her when she tries to tell of her encounter with the spirit, along with her fear of her family's reaction to the encounter and her latter ones, she never tells anyone of her spirit communions:

Lena [knows] the way most people reacted to such talk—even her own family, who claimed to know her better than anybody else in the world. They talked of her being born with a veil over her face and of her seeing ghosts over her shoulder and of putting the magic on things, but they did not really believe in half the stuff they talked about.
(186-187)

Ironically, as a result of Lena's secrecy, the spirit's attempt to pull her into the portrait somewhat foreshadows the "pulling" Lena experiences during her adolescence. Throughout her coming-of-age, she

becomes unable to discern between what is real and what is false, what is ethereal and what is earthy; she cannot negotiate between her African and American selves. Instead, she is constantly torn or "pulled" between the secular and spiritual worlds.

Lena's inability to discern between the secular and spiritual worlds is evident when she first meets Sarah, the little girl who eventually becomes her first friend, and Mamie, who later becomes Lena's beautician. When Lena initially meets Sarah, Lena is not certain if Sarah is real or a ghost. One day while Lena is playing alone, a little girl calls to her. At first, Lena is happy to see the little girl. However, Lena quickly remembers the incident with the portrait. Thus, she feels Sarah "could very easily rise from the dusty ground where she stood and soar into the treetops"(71). Lena experiences a similar instance of unknowing when she meets Mamie.

Mamie is one of the many young women who have worked at Delores' beauty salon, where Lena gets her hair done. When Lena first sees Mamie, Lena simply stares at her. The suggestion can be made that one of the reasons that Mamie entralls Lena is that Mamie represents the African culture that Lena as a caulbearer is connected to yet forbidden from by her mother and the dominant society's values. To Lena, Delores' "new young helper look[s] . . . like a warrior, with her broad hands and strong-looking arms and legs"(179). Lena also notices other aspects about Mamie, such as Mamie's "deep deep, dark skin that gleam[s] with the patina of natural oils" (180) and the fact that Mamie is a "lowland geechee"(180) "from a point of the Georgia coast between Savannah and a town too small to have a name Lena recognizes"(179). Mamie's appearance and her being a "geechee" implies that she is a descendant of Africans. The term *geechee*, also synonymous with *Gullah*, refers to a group of people who are descendants of African slaves and who reside in the coastal areas of north Florida, South Carolina, and Georgia(Jarrett and Lucas 2). Noteworthy to this study's argument is that Charles Jarrett and David Lucas assert that "the Gullah people have retained extensive African sources in their speech and folklore. . . .[M]any aspects of Gullah culture are derived from African sources including religious beliefs,

stories, arts and crafts, songs, and proverbs" (4). Thus, one may argue that Ansa uses the character to embody the African culture, and Lena's fascination with Mamie along with the fact that when Lena first sees Mamie "[i]f Delores had not just introduced her, the girl might have suspected Mamie of being a ghost" (186) shows that Lena feels a connection to the African/spiritual world, as represented by Mamie, yet at the same time experiences a disconnect from it. The same connection and disconnect is evident in Lena's initial encounter with Sarah.

Perhaps the most substantive example of Lena's cultural ambiguity Ansa provides is Lena's encounter with Rachel, the ghost of a slave whom Lena meets while she is on vacation with her family on the Georgia coast, possibly even the same area from which Mamie hails. While the rest of her family is asleep, Lena is drawn to a part of the beach where they are vacationing. It is there that she encounters Rachel, who tells Lena of her plight as a slave. Rachel reveals that all she ever wanted was to be able to have some time to herself on the beach. However, since she was enslaved, her captors denied her that privilege. To free herself from her captivity, Rachel allows the tide to drown her in the spot that she tells her story to Lena. Once Rachel finishes telling Lena her story, Lena feels "in her heart there [is] something she still [has] to share with Rachel, just as the woman had shared her story with her" (167). Hence, Lena tells Rachel that Miss Lizzie told her that African-Americans do not "belong on the beach" (167). Rachel quickly admonishes Lena for believing such ideas and tells her to never let anyone tell her where she and other African-Americans do and do not belong. Christopher Okonkwo contends that

in making the biblically named Rachel appear to Lena as a full-bodied human being, a speaking, self-reflective subject, Ansa humanizes both Rachel and the other African slaves abstracted in Lena's (print) ed history books. A compact and complete slave narrative spoken/written by herself, Rachel's autobiography transfers back to her the right of self-authorship. Most importantly, however, Rachel's self-directed and subversive death by drowning

inscribes into both her narrative and *Ansa's* the theme of (gendered) and racial protest. It performs in the story the political tasks of cultural mourning, racial historiography, and intergenerational concordance that [Kathleen] Brogan finds exemplified in works by August Wilson, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall. (158)

Okonkwo's contention is extremely relevant to this chapter's argument. As previously noted, Lena's secrecy about her spirit communion represents her denial of an African/spiritual self in an attempt to fit into the American/secular world. The communion with Rachel, however, exemplifies just how distant Lena is from an African self. As Rachel tells her story, it is evident that Lena knows her historical text's versions of African/African-American history. Nonetheless, that history is not personal for Lena. Rachel, somewhat, personalizes that experience for Lena, as evident when Lena's brothers find her on the beach after her discussion with Rachel. Raymond and Edward chastise Lena for wandering off on the beach by herself. Lena takes their chastisement to be similar to her grandmother's admonishment about African-Americans not belonging on the beach. Surprisingly, her reaction to such an idea is now more reflective of her conversation with Rachel than her grandmother's beliefs that Lena once seemed to share. Lena tells her brothers, "I belong down here on this beach. This ocean is just as much mine as anybody's. It's yours too, Raymond. We colored folks, we belong on the beach. . . .I belong anywhere on this earth I want to be" (170). Lena's reaction shows that her communion with Rachel has situated her closer to her African self, even if momentarily.

With the novel's final chapter, Lena takes an even closer step toward reaching maturation and possibly establishing a balance between an African/spiritual and American/secular self. *Baby of the Family* concludes with the death of Miss Lizzie and Lena's communion with her. During this communion, Miss Lizzie apologizes to Lena for not recognizing how great Lena's powers as a caulbearer are. Furthermore, she attempts to aid Lena in coming to terms with her cultural

ambivalence. While Lena and her grandmother are communing, Lena reveals how out of place and torn she feels because she is able to see spirits. Miss Lizzie attempts to reassure Lena by telling her that being a caulbearer is a "gift" (265) and that Lena should not be ashamed or fearful of her abilities. This is the first time Lena acknowledges her ability to anyone, signaling her possible acceptance of her role as a caulbearer and African/spiritual self. As earlier noted, Miss Lizzie seemed to bridge the secular and spiritual worlds in her life. Thus, it seems only fitting that Ansa would employ the character in an attempt to get Lena to do the same.

Baby of the Family ends with Miss Lizzie's spirit leaving and Lena pulling her nightgown tight "and back to show her figure" (265). Lena's admiration of her budding figure suggests her physical maturation. Nonetheless, the reader is left to ponder if Lena's physical coming-of-age includes her adhering to Miss Lizzie's reassurance and coming to terms with her caul and duality. That answer—that Lena does not embrace her spiritual side and continues to remain ambivalent throughout much of her adulthood-- is not provided until Ansa's *The Hand I Fan With*, which follows Lena's life as an adult and will be discussed in a latter chapter. It is not until that novel that Lena finally embraces her caul and what it represents: her duality. However, the ambivalence that Ansa provides in the young Lena contributes to this study's argument, for Lena's undecidedness represents the uncertainty Ansa suggests African-American women face in patriarchal society when they are unsure of their self-identities.

CHAPTER TWO: JUST A LITTLE HELP FROM A SPIRITUAL HAND— SELF-DISCOVERY IN *THE HAND I FAN WITH*

In *Baby of the Family*, Ansa examines Lena's coming-of-age, yet problematizes that experience, however, by making the character a caulbearer. Throughout the novel, Lena is unable to come to terms with the duality that her caul represents, and the novel concludes with her remaining ambivalent to her spiritual and secular identities. With *The Hand I Fan With*, Ansa reexamines her protagonist, this time allowing for a coalescence between Lena's two selves. This chapter argues that as a result of Lena's communion with Herman, a spirit, Lena obtains a balance between the spirit and mortal worlds. In addition, she finally realizes that a representation of the black female self other than the one presented by patriarchal society is not only obtainable but also acceptable.

The Hand I Fan With commences with a prologue titled "Clear Flo'," referring to the Ocawatchee River that Mulberry is located alongside and the changes that a 1994 flood causes to the river and the region itself. Before the flood, the river is "usually, perennially, historically, almost always a red muddy, sometimes nearly ocher color."¹ After the flood, though, the river experiences sporadic instances where it runs clear(1). Furthermore, the flood precipitates other changes in the region, such as

a record number of Mulberry babies . . . being created and born,. . . flowers. . . growing and pollinating with strange hybrids, forming new creations; long-dead perennials. . . coming back to life;[and even] [m]igrating birds, especially duck. . .stopping in the area in record numbers.(2)

While the flood does bring such positive and unusual occurrences to the region, for many of the residents of Mulberry, these occurrences are also somewhat marred by the destruction the flood causes,

¹ See Tina McElroy Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Incorporated, 1996: 1. Print.

including "property loss . . . in the hundreds of millions of dollars" (5) and the death of over twenty-three people(5). Moreover, and significant to this study's argument, is the fact that the residents of Mulberry feel that even though they suffered because of the flood's initial waters, "Lena McPherson alone, it appeared, weathered the storm that brought the floods to her hometown without any repercussions"(5). The majority of the residents think that because Lena is a caulbearer "she got it made"(5) and is "blessed"(15), a belief that at the beginning of the novel Lena fails to share, in contrast, considering her caul "more of a curse than a blessing." Ironically, while assuming that Lena is unscathed by the flood, the townspeople fail to realize that the change in the Ocawatchee River coincides with the change that Lena endures throughout the course of the novel. Just as the river undergoes a rebirth, so does Lena experience a transformation, one facilitated by her acceptance of the duality of her American/secular and African/spiritual selves.

Noteworthy to mention is that from Ansa's introduction of the now forty-five years-old Lena, the character's acquiescence of her duality is intertwined with ancestral communion and nature. Kamau Keymayo provides a possible explanation of Ansa's employment of such a technique. Keymayo asserts that in an Afrocentric approach to literature, which can be argued is the one taken by Ansa, there is a connection between nature and spiritualism.² Such is the case with the spirit Herman, for even though he later becomes Lena's lover, he also acts as spirit guide to Lena while she is on her journey of self acceptance. Herman's initial introduction to the reader and Lena, nevertheless, is in the guise of a breeze, one of nature's most simplistic forms. In the novel's first chapter, Lena is driving down the road when a breeze tickles the nape of her neck(Ansa 7). The

² According to Kamau Keymayo, "[A]n Afrocentric approach assumes connectedness with nature's visible and unseen manifestations. Building on a cyclic, rather than linear, worldview with a fundamental ethos of 'I am because we are,' the ancestors and other natural/supernatural forces emerge as spiritual and social guides to be consulted and communed with, rather than sources of fear or material inheritance. See Kamau Keymayo, 'Ancestral Communion in Contemporary African American Literature.' *The African Presence in Black America*. Ed. Jacob U. Gordon. New Jersey: Africa World Press, Incorporated, 2004: 231. Print.

breeze does not startle Lena, for this is not the first time it has "visited" her. In fact, it "has been toying with her there for a week or so" (8). Lena is merely "bothered and distracted" (8) and "almost [has] to stifle one of her deep throaty giggles" (8) that the breeze evokes from her. Furthermore, instead of Lena being alarmed by this unusual happening, "the tender gusts [remind] her of tenderness mixed with lust" (8). Lena's reaction is of note because later in the novel the revelation is made that Herman has been in love with and watching over Lena for years.

The reason Ansa chooses such a form for Herman's initial contact with Lena is, as Keymayo observes,

nature and its phenomena, the tangibles as well as the unseen forces, become a part of the spiritual. Communion with nature suggests a sharing and using of spiritual energies more so than a strict reliance on physical and material properties. Spirituality transcends religion, informs people's traditions and rituals, and links them to nature. This same link was a part of the ancestors' beings and through our connectedness to nature we can connect with their spirits. (231-232)

As earlier stated, Lena sees her being a caulbearer as a curse, in particular the ability to commune with spirits that her "veiled" birth provides. Hence, she probably would not be as predisposed to Herman had he at first appeared to her in his spirit form as she is with him appearing as a breeze. Nonetheless, his appearing to her as such still connects her to her African/spiritual self since that self, akin to the breeze, is rooted in nature. Therefore, as Lena is interacting/connecting with the breeze and is subsequently experiencing a sense of arousal from that interaction, she is also unbeknownst to her aiding in the establishment of her first true sense of balance between the American/secular world that she has longed to be accepted into and the African/spiritual world that she has denied for much of her life. Through her communing with the breeze, she is actually communing with her ancestors.

Additionally imperative to this study's premise is the fact that Herman's coming to Lena is not a random act. Even though all of her life Lena has loathed being a caulbearer and the connection to the spirit world that her caul has provided her, she, participates, although begrudgingly, in a ritual with her best friend, Sister, to "hoodoo . . . up a man"(Ansa 11). One night while Sister is visiting Lena before heading on a trip to West Africa, she and Lena get drunk and "high" off of home-brewed liquor and "joints" that Sister has smuggled into the country from Guadeloupe and Jamaica, respectively. In their states of intoxication, the pair burn candles, perform chants, and conduct other rites all in the name of "summon[ing] up a man for Lena"(104). More importantly, this act and Lena's willing, although somewhat intoxicated, participation in it is the first time that Lena actually embraces the spiritualism that her caul bestows on her. As Herman later tells Lena, her willingness to participate in the rituals shows that she actually does believe(157) in the world that she has so long distanced herself from.

At this point it is necessary and relevant to provide a brief discussion of why Lena is willing to use spiritualism to conjure up a man. Frankly put, she is lonely. All of her immediate family members are dead: Her older brothers, Raymond and Edward, both die of heart attacks before their fortieth birthdays(13). Meanwhile, her parents, Nellie and Jonah, are victims of a fatal plane crash that Lena foresees, but is too afraid to tell. The fear is a combination of her not wanting people to know she has such visions, dreading how people will react to her because she does, and fearing that the vision about her parents will come true. Also, whenever Lena tries to be intimate with a man, she is plagued by images:

[W]hen they touched each other intimately or kissed deeply [,] . . . the man's thoughts and past came seeping out for Lena to hear and see right there as he inched his hand up the darker skin of her inner thigh. She would steal her hand right on the buckle of his pants or the flap of his zipper, trying to forge on, to concentrate on the act. . . .The same scene had happened so often in her twenties and

even into her thirties that she had just finally given up on getting past some kissing and fondling and stroking. It was finally too frustrating for her. (108)

Because Lena is unable to come-to-terms with the "seeing" that the caul provides and people's possible reactions, she avoids creating new intimate or close relationships, with the exception being Sister, her friend whom she makes at Xavier University in New Orleans and who is accepting and encouraging of Lena's powers as a caulbearer and of the spirit world, in general. It is through the relationship that Lena establishes with Herman, however, that she is finally able to assuage her sense of disconnect and lack of intimacy.

Deborah McDowell argues that in their attempts to counter negative depictions of African-American women many early African-American women writers created "static, disembodied, larger-than-life characters. These early black heroines are invariably exemplary, characterized by their sacrifice and by their tireless labor for the collective good. But probably their most cherished and enduring mark is their chastity" (284). Ansa's initial characterization of Lena seems reminiscent of these early African-American heroines' depictions. Several contemporary African-American women writers have sought to deconstruct the ideologies and portrayals that their foremothers shaped, and this study posits that Ansa is a participant in that deconstruction. As such, she characterizes Lena as an African-American woman more concerned with the welfare of others than herself to suggest that the protagonist and the African-American women Lena represents need to define themselves on their own terms and not based on patriarchal society's. In fact, in "A Letter to My Readers," Ansa writes that *The Hand I Fan With* "is a woman's story of giving too much to others without thought for self. It is the story of how many of us women live our lives in a rush of accumulating and sacrificing" (467). To find evidence of Lena's "sacrificing," one needs only to examine how much Lena does for her community: She keeps "The Place," the bar and grille that her deceased parents once owned, thriving in a downtown area that is greatly suffering due to urban revitalization so that their former patrons may have a place to feel "at home." She

provides sustenance and sometimes financial assistance to Mulberry's "throwaways, runaways, forgotten children of foster care and no care" (28) who often wait for her outside of The Place. Furthermore, she [makes] phone calls to older folks who didn't sleep much . . . [Sends] flowers or fruit or money for a sick customer or celebrating child or an ambitious elementary school teacher. In addition to advice and succor, she [gives] tangible gifts to those she [loves] and [feels] responsible for—a box of steaks, a set of tires, rent money.(39)

The list of activities that Lena does for the residents of Mulberry is countless, so much so that one of the residents even remarks, "Shoot, Lena McPherson the hand I fan with"(40). To the residents of Mulberry who Lena provides for, the saying indicates her importance in their lives. However, Nagueyalti Warren notes that Ansa believes the phrase "signifies the African American woman [as represented by Lena] as object"(365). In other words, while Lena is doing so much for the residents, they fail to see her as an actual person with feelings, which is possibly why they fail to notice how discontented she really is. Instead, they merely see her as an impersonal provider or entity. Moreover, in "mothering" to all, the childless Lena is adhering to the role of caregiver ascribed to her by patriarchal society, yet she is failing-- other than materialistically with items such as her one of a kind car and designer clothes-- to truly provide and care for herself. Thus, she and Sister conclude that their conjuring up a man will be an opportunity for Lena to do, even if just a little and merely on a carnal level, for Lena. They are oblivious to the fact that their actions also will ultimately lead to Lena's self-actualization.

Herman's finally making himself known to Lena and her acknowledging him provide Lena with one of her most monumental steps towards that self-actualization. Almost all of Lena's life "she [has] felt in danger of being enveloped, eaten up, consumed by that other world that she knew existed"(Ansa 174), the spirit world, yet even after Lena finds out that Herman is a part of that world, she does not become fearful of him. A few days after the ritual to bring forth a man, Lena is home taking a shower when she hears a voice call to her

outside of the stall. The voice basically explains to Lena that he is Herman, a spirit who has come to answer her desire for a man.

Surprisingly, considering Lena's past reactions to spirits, she seems more intrigued and flattered by Herman's admission than disconcerted.

Following Herman's revelation, Lena

thought back to the meetings she had had with other ghosts when she was younger. How her heart had raced, how the hair on her arms had stood on end, how sometimes she had felt dizzy at the sight of a headless body or huge animal or a mist or vapor covering and smothering everything in its sphere. But this time she was different. Lena felt just a little anxious, like before a blind date. (151)

As opposed to being afraid of this spirit as she has been of the ones who have visited her over the years, Lena is curious and actually leaves the shower stall so that she may formally meet him. Her confronting Herman represents her, to a certain extent, confronting a part of herself, for as a spirit, Herman represents the spiritual/African identity Lena has denied.

Subsequently, Lena's interactions with him provide further evidence of her acceptance of her duality. When Lena walks out of the stall, Herman greets her in the form of a vapor, "nearly transparent, translucent" (155). As she stands in front of him marveling at his presence, "[h]e became more and more real, more and more solid, more and more firm, more and more precise, more and more tangible right there before her eyes as if fed by her seeing him" (156). Even during Herman's metamorphosis from a spirit to a man, Lena remains unwavered. Instead, she is at ease with Herman, so much so that shortly after meeting the two consummate their relationship with their night of sex ending with them professing their love for each other and Lena pledging to be Herman's woman. Lena's behavior is significant because the comfort she feels with Herman, a spirit, suggests a possible "comfort" growing inside her with the spirit world. Herman validates this assertion when he tells Lena "'if you don't truly open your heart to belief and, Lena, whether you know it or not, you did indeed open you heart to me 'cause we sittin' here talkin' to each other'" (159).

As Herman points out, Lena's "talkin'" to him demonstrates a willingness on her part to commune with a spirit, an action that, other than with the spirit of her grandmother shortly after the older woman's funeral, Lena previously would not have done freely.

Lena's relationship with Herman translates into her interactions in the secular world. Because her relationship with the spirit does somewhat provide her with a sense of acceptance of being a conduit for the spirit world, she no longer seems as consumed with being accepted by patriarchal society and adhering to its rules and mores. For Lena, being situated between the spiritual and secular worlds has been daunting. For example, when she was younger, her dreams were plagued by images of spirits. In her adulthood, she does not suffer those same dreams, yet her adult ones are still troublesome:

Sometimes, Lena felt she had just exchanged one type of haunting for another. Demons of one sort or another came to haunt and worry and plague and menace her. The images of money and responsibility and her people flew and danced and spun around her head into the wee hours. Solving problems in her head, taking care of people before the need arose, paying taxes on time, reminding other people to pay *their* taxes on time, helping to find jobs for folk, matching homes to people, buying and selling property. Until Herman showed up, Lena had just about accepted the demons would be there to haunt her forever. (214-215)

Before Herman, Lena is consumed with doing for others and living up to society's expectations of what her contributions to it should be. However, once Herman shows up and helps Lena develop a sense of her spiritual self, she also begins to establish a balance between her spiritual and secular worlds.

In "Chinaberry," Herman voices the magnitude of that balance as he tells Lena, "'Lena, you he'p a whole heap a' folks out all the time. Doin' all kinds a' thangs. You ain't got to sacrifice *yo'se'f* too. You ain't got to do nothin', baby. We used t' say back in my day, 'All I gotta do is stay black and die.' And that's all *you gotta do*. Stay black and die'" (249). With Lena establishing a connection with

her spiritual self, as represented by Herman, she heeds his words and puts them to practice. Prior to Herman's arrival, Lena overextends herself caring for the community, and she, somewhat, continues that behavior at the onset of their relationship. Yet as their relationship/communion grows, so does her ability to balance her interactions between the two worlds. Accordingly, "more and more, Lena found herself setting some new previously unheard-of-limits"(248). For instance, instead of continuing to work every day at Candace Realty, the real estate agency that she owns, Lena now defers more of the agency's responsibilities to her employees and ultimately sells the agency to them. Also, now when people insist on her help, she "suggest[s] that the needy person get in touch with someone at Candace Realty or at the church or at the bank or at one of the service organizations she supported. She even gave them the name of the specific person to see to get the job done"(334). Once, Lena catered to the residents' needs, and her life revolved around theirs. Presently, she learns to tell them no if their desired favors infringe on her time with self and/or Herman. More importantly, she directs them to depend on themselves instead of her.

Herman uses the time gained from Lena's reclamation of her life as "teaching moments." A significant amount of Lena and Herman's bonding occurs on her estate in the woods and includes his teaching her about the land that she owns. Since Lena has always been so busy doing for others, she never really has taken the time to embrace the land. Thus, Herman educates her on the importance of noticing the simple aspects of life and nature. The couple engages in activities -- such as picking and eating blackberries and wild mushrooms--that encourage Lena to finally take pleasure in the earth's bounties and nature itself. Gradually, Lena even notices that through the outdoor activities that Herman has her partaking in, she is drawn more and more to the earth, that "the further she pulled herself away from the things of the world--her possessions, her businesses, her shoes, her dependents, her visits, even her gifts and acts of kindness--the nearer she drew to the peaceful, serene spirit of the world itself"(325). As Rachel Stein notes,

Voodoo ritual and [other African-derived beliefs similar to the ones Lena practices] offer black women an alternative spiritual model that counters the colonial hierarchies that operate in the denigration of black women as nature incarnate. Through rituals that locate the sacred within nature and within female sexuality, Voodoo challenges the degradation of black women.(1)

Hence, Lena's sexual encounters with Herman and her exchanging of energy with nature afford her the balance between her spiritual and secular selves that Lena has been in dire need of her entire life.

The culmination of that balance's establishment is seen as she sits under a tree and begins "again to think comfortably about her mother and father and the other dead members of her family, chuckling to herself how she was like this one or that one" (Ansa 313). Before Herman's arrival, it is extremely painful for Lena to reminisce about her parents and siblings, much less other ancestors, for the memories make her feel extremely lonesome. Presently, with Lena's newfound sense of balance and oneness, no longer is she engulfed with those same distressful emotions she once had when thinking about her dead family members. Instead, she now seems able to value those memories. That value is possible, for a connection with nature may be read as a communion with the ancestors. Thus, Lena's new appreciation of nature represents her compliance with engaging her ancestors and the spirit world. More importantly, the appreciation is symbolic of Lena's acceptance of the duality of her African/spiritual and American/secular selves.

Perhaps the paramount illustration of Lena's coalescence of her two selves occurs after Herman leaves her. Exactly one year after he appears to Lena in human form, Herman remorsefully returns to the spirit world even after Lena's incessant pleas for him not to. Lena rationalizes that since magic initially called Herman forth maybe it can bring him back. Shortly after Lena, in vain, performs a ritual to prove her belief in the spirit world in hopes that her doing so will once again call Herman forth, Keba, one of her horses, goes into labor. Lena had agreed to have the horse impregnated only after

Herman's coaxing and assumed that he would be present when Keba went into labor. Since he is not, Lena's first response is panic. Nonetheless, she composes herself by thinking of "her mother and her grandmother and her Grandies and all the women who had been through this ordeal to bring a child into the world"(447). Thoughts of her dead foremothers and the connection she now feels to them calm Lena's worries, and she uses that now admitted connection to help the horse deliver: Lena "calls on all her powers of faith and belief and love and gratitude She call[s] in all that Herman [has] told her and taught her and shown her since he had shown up a year before and concentrate[s] on Keba and her predicament. Then like a breeze, Herman [is] right there at her shoulder"(447). Herman, subsequently, coaches Lena through the final stages of Keba's foal's birth. Lena's calling on the spirit world to aid her in bringing life into the material world is the final step in her acceptance of her duality. She has finally acknowledged her connection to the spirit world. As a result, several spirits, including her family members, watch and praise her on helping deliver the foal. In response,

she marvel[s] at the wonder of her transformation and the gift of her family of ghosts. It surprise[s] her just how comfortable she [is] with all these ghosts appearing and disappearing around her. Some [are] family. Many [are] friends. A couple she [does] not recognize right off, but she [is] not a bit afraid of or confused by any of them. They all [seem] to have a place. And she [does], too. The specters she now [sees] all around the stables [do] not seem to upset the horses [in her stable], even the newborn, one bit. And she [can't] remember just when she had become so comfortable with the spirit world.(451)

Prior to Herman's coming to her, Lena would have been beyond frightened by the sight of all the spirits watching her. As a result of the lessons she has learned from Herman, she is, instead, thankful and no longer feels alone. Since Lena finally embraces the spirit world and her duality, she recognizes that she will always have Herman and her family members in her life. As a consequence, Lena now begins

to think "that the birth caul [and the connection to the spirit world that it provides her] had indeed been a gift"(458) and not the curse she had so long thought them to be.

This chapter supports this study's argument that for Ansa an African-American woman's survival in patriarchal society is determined by that woman's embracement of a complex, hybrid self—one not tied to singularly defined notions of identity. Ansa writes that "Lena had lived her life in an efficiently schizophrenic way, using and enjoying the gifts of the caul, on the one hand, and pretending that there was no such thing on the other"(225). It is not until Lena establishes a balance between her African/spiritual and American/secular worlds that she establishes that same balance in herself. Ansa seems to be utilizing Lena as a model for African-American women. Once Lena accepts her African self, she is able to define her life on her own terms--what Ansa suggests African-American women should do-- and not those that Mulberry ascribes.

**CHAPTER THREE: VOICES OF THE PRESENT SPEAKING FOR THOSE
OF THE PAST-- THE MUTUAL BENEFITS OF ANCESTRAL
COMMUNION AS SEEN IN *BABY OF THE FAMILY, THE HAND I FAN
WITH, AND YOU KNOW BETTER***

A predominant motif in Ansa's canon is the African-American female's search for a sense of self converse to the one ascribed by patriarchal society. Her protagonists in *Baby of the Family*, *The Hand I Fan With*, and *You Know Better*—with the latter novel being discussed further in this chapter-- demonstrate that that self is often rooted in an interrelation between the spiritual and secular worlds. In the novels, it is by means of a communion with the ancestors that the main characters achieve an awareness of their own identities. This chapter maintains that even though ancestral communion does promote the novels' protagonists' establishing of their selves, the protagonists, in turn, provide the ancestors with voice. Additionally, the chapter points out that through the communion the histories of the ancestors and the voiceless they are representative of are finally heard, and Ansa's canonical story's connection of the past to the present is continued.

Baby of the Family focuses on Lena's coming of age and futile attempt to come to terms with being a caul bearer. Since one of the powers of Lena's caul is the ability to communicate with spirits, they frequently visit her, including Rachel, a slave who commits suicide to escape her servitude. When Lena is seven years-old, she and her family vacation along the Georgia coast. One morning while the rest of her family members are still asleep, Lena ventures off onto the beach, unknowingly ending up in a location where Rachel sits waiting for her. Rachel views the encounter with Lena, a bridge between the spirit and secular worlds, as an opportunity to tell *herstory* at last, a story that Rachel has suppressed since her suicide. Rachel shares this belief as she rhetorically asks Lena, "'Do you know how long I been waiting for somebody like you to come along so I can tell them all of this, so I can share some of this?'" (Ansa, *Baby of the Family* 164).

Rachel goes on to recount the life she and other slaves endured, informing Lena that “‘[y]ears and years ago we peoples, black peoples, was all slaves up along in through this chere area. All up in through Georgia and down on through Alabama and ‘ssippi and on up the coast, too’”(159). Rachel adds that even though her parents were skilled craftsmen, her mother being a seamstress and her father a blacksmith (162), the couple could never take advantage of their skills. Because they were slaves, their possibilities and dreams were stifled. In “American Stories of Cultural Haunting: Tales of Heirs and Ethnographers,” Kathleen Brogan notes that “the ghosts in recent African-American literature... signal an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history” (150), and such may be argued of Rachel and her revelations. By means of the communion, Rachel exposes Lena to a part of African-American culture that Lena and, perchance, the African-American women embodied by her know of only through the textbooks they have read if at all. Moreover, Rachel is finally able to voice the brutality that she and the slaves she represents suffered, including the degradation of being “‘strip[ped] down mother-naked’”(Ansa, *Baby of the Family* 162) and “‘beat[en] till the blood run down round they feets and [the slaves] stand in puddles in they brogan shoes’”(162-63). Rachel also discloses the measures some slaves took to flee slavery, which, in her case, was drowning herself on the beach where she meets Lena. Elena Shakhovtseva observes that Rachel tells “Lena her story in a mode of ‘slave narratives’ of the nineteenth century,” for akin to those narratives, Rachel provides a firsthand account of slavery’s atrocities.

Ansa’s use of the convention is significant, for it connects her work to those of her African-American foremothers and contemporaries who have tried to pass on as well as preserve their people’s histories through their texts. Toni Morrison asserts

that the novel is needed by African-Americans now in a way that it was not needed before—and it is following along the lines of novels everywhere...; parents don’t sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new

information has to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is in the novel. (340)

Hence, she and other African-American women writers use their novels and other literary works to examine and pass on these often undocumented accounts of the African-American experience. Most notably, "when the ghost in Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) speaks of her life in the grave in terms appropriate to the slave ships, she clearly becomes more than an externalization of one character's longing and guilt; her return represents the return of all dead enslaved Africans" (Brogan 152). Therefore, through the ghost, a version of the slaves' unspoken and unknown tales is told. Additionally, when the folktale of slaves walking on water and or taking flight in order to return to Africa appears in works such as Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1996) and is even reiterated by Ansa's Rachel, the authors are doing more than merely mirroring each others' literary techniques. They are acting as griots by providing their ancestors with voice and telling their histories.

This oral tradition of storytelling practiced by Ansa in *Baby of the Family* is continued in *The Hand I Fan With*, particularly with the spirit Herman, who acts as a guide and tutelary for the now adult Lena during her journey of self discovery. Herman is born during a period of time and in a location similar to Rachel's. Nonetheless, through him, Ansa offers a telling of an African-American experience quite unlike Rachel's, yet still requiring of a voice of the present in order for that experience to be actually heard. Herman spends a year with Lena on her estate in the woods, helping her establish a balance between her spiritual and secular selves. While doing so, he does his own self-reflecting, including discussing with Lena his parents' escaping slavery and his being born free. Since Herman is born and lives during the 1800s and at the point that Lena meets him she is still not fully aware of her African self and culture, she assumes that he was a slave in his worldly life. To her and probably because of her lack of knowledge of her people's histories, there seems to have been no other possible existence for African-Americans during that timeframe. Herman acknowledges that his mother and father did at

one point live as slaves, but reveals that they were able to escape from the Georgia plantation they were on and find freedom living in Florida with the Seminoles. Herman adds that one of his family's traditions was to

'sit 'round the fire at night in the woods in Flor'da, and [his parents] usta tell [him and his sibilings] about that night and the plans they made fo' the run fo' freedom. How they prepared, keepin' some a' they little vittles saved back. Who they told the truth on the place and who they had to lie to till the moment they left. Who they left behind. How it hurt that they couldn't take everybody. How everybody wouldn'a wanted to go, to take the chance, if they could have. How good and scary it felt to leave, to just set foot off the place. (Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With* 183)

The steps that Herman's parents take to run away are ones that were taken by many slaves in that same effort, but seem alien to Lena, as evidenced by her feeling "as if she had stepped into a history lesson" (183) while listening to Herman's story. This study posits that Lena's reaction embodies Ansa's rationale for having him tell Lena of his and his family's lives. Because the early existence of many African-Americans was never recorded, Lena and those she symbolizes are unaware of the part of the African-American experience represented by Herman. Herman's storytelling emphasizes that fact while also giving voice to that fraction of African-Americans' unheard history.

As Helen Lock contends in "'Building up from Fragments': The Oral Memory Process in Some Recent African-American Written Narrative," "through memory, perceived in both oral and literate terms, [many African-American authors] aim to reconstruct the absences and silences of oral history that are contained within the official written record" (109). This argument is further demonstrated in *The Hand I Fan With* as Herman continues his account of his family's life in Florida with the Seminoles. He tells Lena

'The Indian tribes 'round down south, you know, they didn't play, neither. Seminoles waged three wars wid this country

fo' they freedom. But, Lena, everything they used in everyday life, they made it pretty. Remind me a' *my people*. Them Indians and us black folks was good to each other. But ya'll don't know nothin' bout that, do ya'll?' Herman sounded sadder for humanity than exasperated with local black folks.(184)

The life that Ansa has her character describe is not one of fiction but instead one several escaped slaves from areas such as Georgia and North and South Carolina found in Florida. In "Finding Freedom in Florida: Native Peoples, African Americans, and Colonists, 1670-1816," historian Patrick Riordan examines the lives these runaways established with the Seminoles. He writes that

Blacks lived in habitations similar to those of their Indian hosts, surrounded by fields of up to 20 acres. They dressed like the Seminoles, owned and used hunting rifles, and planted their fields in common as the native peoples did. Although some blacks were in submissive relationships to Indians, it is misleading to describe the relationships as slavery in the sense understood by Americans in the early 19th century.(39-40)

When the African-American experience during and before the early nineteenth century is considered, many conclude it was an existence primarily comprised of the denigration associated with the American institution of slavery, and for the majority of African-Americans, it was. However, that was not the sole experience. There were others such as the alliance formed between African-Americans and Seminoles that Riordan and Ansa discuss.

Unfortunately, as Herman expresses in his remark about Lena and others' lack of knowledge and his exasperation over that lack, the connection between Native Americans and African-Americans is often unvoiced and unrecognized. Lena's comments after Herman finishes his narrative attests to this suggestion: "'It's interesting.' She reassured him. 'You are right. I hardly ever think about Native Americans in a real sense. And I got their stuff all around here'" (Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With* 185), referring to the furnishings in her

home. Since Lena is unaware of the bond between African-Americans and the Seminoles as well as significant aspects of the two groups' histories in general, she simply has been able to appreciate the Seminoles from an aesthetic standpoint and not for their cultural and historical relevance. Through Herman's narrative nevertheless, Lena learns about the three wars the Seminoles fought in order to preserve their freedom in Florida in addition to the sanctuary they offered African-Americans who were attempting to do the same. Moreover, Ansa and her character provide voice to an aspect of the African-American experience that is oftentimes voiceless.

Even though the spirits in *You Know Better* are born in a different era than Rachel and Herman, they, too, are representative of those subject to marginalization and in need of voice. The novel focuses on three generations of the Pines women—LaShawndra, the daughter; her mother, Sandra; and LaShawndra's grandmother, Lily—and consists of sections narrated by each character's persona. Through the characters' interactions with the spirits of Miss Moses, Nurse Joanna Bloom, and Miss Liza Jane, the Pines women connect with their histories, restore their familial bonds, and find their lost paths. Furthermore, the spirits voice their own often unheard stories and those of the African-Americans whom they represent.

"Faith," the novel's first part, focuses on Lily, the family's matriarch, and begins with her "scouting around the streets of [a modern-day] Mulberry, Georgia,"¹ at 1 a.m. on a Saturday. She is looking for her "almost nineteen-years-old" (13) "only grandchild" (1), LaShawndra. That Friday night while Lily is sleeping, she is awakened by a hand on her shoulder (17) "and a voice that [sounds] like Yahweh speaking to Moses in the desert [saying], 'Get up and go forth!'" (18), referencing the Bible's Exodus when God informs Moses to go into Egypt to tell Pharaoh to free the Israelites from their state of subjection. The significance of Ansa's use of the biblical allusion is twofold: First, just as Moses saves his people from bondage and delivers them to the *Promised Land*, Ansa will have the aptly named Miss Moses

¹ See Tina McElroy Ansa, *You Know Better*. William Morrow, 2002: 8.

eventually deliver Lily from her judgmental ways and to a better understanding of herself and those around her. Secondly, akin to Moses' acting as voice for the voiceless Israelites during his audiences with Pharaoh, Lily's communion with Miss Moses will allow the characters too to provide voice for a marginalized and unheard group of people, a fact that will be discussed more at a later stage in this study.

Additionally relevant is that ever since Lily was a child, she and her mother have believed that Lily has a special "insight." That insight included Lily's being able to predict events and heal her grandmother's arthritis by "laying hands" on the older woman(18), an action that, according to African-American folklore, "represents the transmission of a miraculous power that heals, restores, and transforms all it touches"(Brown 77). Lily's acceptance of these perceived abilities is noteworthy, for as Yvonne Chireau postulates,

African societies were organized around belief in a wholly sacred reality, which was manifested both by the material realm of the senses inhabited by human beings, and by the realm of the unseen, inhabited by spirits, ancestors, and the dead. Traditional African religions were oriented toward the invocation of these powerful otherworldly forces for various purposes, including the prediction of the future, the explanation of the unknown, and the control of nature, persons, and events.(227)

In other words and based on Chireau's postulation, Lily's belief connects the character to the spirit world and her African self. The connection explains why Lily readily accepts the voice and hand as real and does not simply dismiss them as her dreaming; undoubtedly, she recognizes the possibility of a relationship between those of the spirit and mortal worlds. Ansa's characterizing Lily as connected to her spirituality and African identity is further of note, for the characterization somewhat counters the denial that Lena expresses before meeting Herman. This study suggests Ansa does this countering in characterizations to show the benefits of Lily and the African-American women she is representative of owning their identity and not

having to endure the transformative process that Lena, due to her cultural ambivalence, does. This suggestion is supported by the fact that even though Lily "yearn[s] to ignore that cold hand and that wake-up call" (Ansa, *You Know Better* 18), she, instead, adheres to the voice by getting out of bed, lighting incense, and praying "at [her] low altar" (19). The deference to the spirit world that she shows provides her guidance, for while praying, she learns that LaShawndra is "about to fall into deep trouble" (19). Additionally, the deference presages Lily's welcoming Miss Moses' being the spiritual "help" that Lily earlier calls on to be sent (29) as well as Lily's comprehension of the gravity of the spirit world actually intervening in her efforts to save her granddaughter.

As a result of what Lily learns from her prayer, she gets dressed and drives to "The Club," a nightspot that many of the town's youth frequent; she hopes that she will find her granddaughter outside "looking for a ride" (3). Unfortunately, this is not Lily's first time "out looking for [LaShawndra]" (25), but it is the first time Lily has "been awakened at midnight by a cold hand and a loud voice to go out in the night and look for her" (25). The spirit intervention makes Lily desperate to find her granddaughter, for after having "that sudden ethereal wake-up call" (29), Lily does not "feel comfortable in [her] soul not knowing just where [LaShawndra] is and what she is doing" (29). The only person Lily spies in the now dilapidated downtown area where the club is located, however, is Miss Moses, whom Lily, a former teacher and principal and current school administrator, describes as "Mulberry's pioneering educator" (3). Lily's seeing Miss Moses acts as a calming force to her frenzied state, for even though Lily is desperate to find LaShawndra, the older woman's presence distracts her from that desperation. Foreshadowing Miss Moses' being the embodiment of the spiritual help that Lily prayed for, Lily's first response when seeing the elderly, blind woman standing on the street corner is blurting out "'Miss Moses?! Is that you? Good God, I thought you were dead!'" (3), which, unbeknownst to Lily at that time, Miss Moses actually is. Assessing the possibly perceived crassness of her statement, Lily then composes herself, apologizes for her

bluntness, and offers Miss Moses a ride, which the older woman accepts.

During their journey, Lily muses to herself that

I was beginning to feel so peaceful with that old lady riding shotgun with me in the car...that I was content for awhile to just drive up one street of Mulberry and down another If I had not been so worried about LaShawndra, I think I would have actually enjoyed the ride.
(57)

The serenity Miss Moses provides Lily is significant, for it affords Lily an opportunity to reflect on the role she has played in her granddaughter's life. That role has included Lily being a caretaker to LaShawndra and thinking of LaShawndra as her own child(66). That role has also been encompassed by Lily "taking [LaShawndra] to the elementary school when [LaShawndra] had barely turned five [years-old] to enroll her in first grade"(64), Lily "destroy[ing] copies of the truancy records in the trash can in her office, showing how many days LaShawndra had missed in ninth and tenth grades"(64), and as a principal, Lily asking some of LaShawndra's teachers to at least give her failing granddaughter "a barely passing grade in her junior year"(64). Through her self reflection, Lily wonders if her attempts to help LaShawndra may have actually harmed the girl and be partial cause of LaShawndra's being irresponsible. More specifically, Lily questions if she may have contributed to LaShawndra's referring to herself as a "little ho"(73), a contemporary term for *whore* and a reference suggesting LaShawndra's lack of self worth, and the girl's having the sole goal in life of becoming a dancer in music videos.

That questioning is intensified when, through Miss Moses' help, Lily remembers a phone conversation she had with one of her friends after an outing with LaShawndra, a conversation Lily now realizes that LaShawndra may have overheard. Of the flashback, Lily observes:

I saw myself on the phone in the kitchen talking to my friend Joyce about how LaShawndra had let me down again. This time it was in the area of hygiene. The night before—a hot, steamy middle Georgia night—LaShawndra and I had

decided to run out for some ice cream before the Dairy Queen closed. But we missed it because LaShawndra had spent so much time running around looking for a clean pair of jeans to wear.

I heard myself saying on the phone, 'Now, Joyce, you know you a *funky ho* if you can't wear your jeans but one time before you have to wash them'.(74-75)

Lily is shamed by what she said(75) and the likelihood that LaShawndra may have heard her say such disparaging words regarding her. Lily tells Miss Moses, "'I was sure LaShawndra didn't hear me when I said it. Oh, I wouldn't hurt her little feelings for anything in the world. She got little feelings, too! I wouldn't do that to my own baby grandgirl!'"(75). Rather than allowing Lily to continue being self-critical, Miss Moses, instead, provides her with mother wit,² telling Lily, "'everybody is somebody's baby'"(75). Miss Moses' commentary is pertinent, for as Morrison points out, "the ancestors [in African-American literature] are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom"(343). Such is the case with Miss Moses; although her words seem simple, they provide Lily with comfort and a sense of understanding. As earlier mentioned, both Lily and Miss Moses are educators. Thus, to a certain extent, they have somewhat shared existences. Furthermore, Lily reveres Miss Moses and the contributions she has made to the community. As a result, Lily is receptive to Miss Moses' knowledge and wisdom. Lily reveals this fact as she remarks that Miss Moses "made me feel like the Israelites, spending forty years in the desert on a trip that should have taken about eleven weeks. I was looking for guidance from anywhere I could get it. I

² 'a popular term in [B]lack speech_ that Alan Dundes defines as the 'kind of good sense not necessarily learned from books or in school, _ a 'connotation of collective wisdom acquired by the experience of living and from generations past is often expressed in folklore._ See Alan Dundes, *Mother Wit: From the Laughing Barrel*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1990: xvi. Print.

was open . . . you know. To being led wherever I was meant to be" (Ansa, *You Know Better* 94). Although when Lily and Miss Moses first meet, Lily is out searching for her *lost* granddaughter, through Lily's interactions with Miss Moses, Lily now realizes she too is lost and in need of guidance.

Miss Moses continues that guidance as Lily ruminates about Sandra, Lily's daughter, and Charles, Lily's husband whom she has divorced twice, but who "tried so hard to satisfy and please her" (28). Sandra was nineteen-years old when she became pregnant with LaShawndra. The relationship that Sandra had with LaShawn, LaShawndra's father, dissolved shortly after the girl's birth. He and his family play a small, if any, part in LaShawndra's life. As Lily discloses, "Since LaShawn, even though Sandra has had plenty of dates, she can't seem to find any man that she values" (53). In fact, she has found reason to criticize and end every other relationship she has had. Through yet another flashback orchestrated by Miss Moses, Lily learns her relationship with Charles may have played a monumental role in Sandra's relationships with men:

I . . . could see myself being so hard on [Charles]. All of a sudden I winced, because I saw myself being a bit put off with him the night of that [dance] recital [when Sandra was five-years old] because he didn't take the time to run by the house and clean up before coming. I didn't mean to, I didn't mean to be so hard on him. I guess I did it without knowing.

Then, in a flash, I saw Sandra running around her first apartment. . . screaming and ranting and raving about some "dog" who had just had the nerve to come pick her up for a date late and not "properly dressed" for the occasion. Oh, God, I thought, did I have something to do with that? (95)

Because of her latest remembrance, Lily reexamines her actions and, yet again, becomes critical of herself, pondering why she treated Charles in the manner that she did and if she had been too judgmental when because of his gambling she divorced him the second time. Moreover, she wonders if Sandra's actions are reflections of her own.

To console Lily, Miss Moses once again offers advice, this time reassuring Lily that she did the best that she could(95).

As Lily and Miss Moses' journey draws to a close, Miss Moses makes her own revelation. She informs Lily that she had not come to Lily of her own choice. In fact, Miss Moses had been "on the other side enjoying [herself], walking through endless garden paths, visiting with folks [she] hadn't seen in decades, and the next minute [she] was standing"(99) on the street corner where Lily first saw her that night. Miss Moses goes on to tell Lily that, ironically, even though as a spirit she is now helping Lily, in her earthly life she was not spiritual:

Oh, I believed in what I could do and I believed in what human flesh and blood could do when we put our mind to it. I believed everybody should try to be a good person and do what they could for each other. But after my husband took sick and died so young before we even had any time together [referring to her husband's death ten days after they were married], I just lost belief in God and Spirit and your spirit going somewhere after you're dead. Shoot! I used to just chuckle under my breath at that.(98)

Miss Moses' disclosure encapsulates one of the dominant roles of ancestral communion in African-American literature. The spirits "function . . . to recreate ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and to press this new version of the past into the service of the present"(Brogan 151). It is through the ancestors' sharing of their past experiences that those of the present better themselves; in other words, those of the present and secular world learn from those of the past and spiritual world. In *You Know Better*, this learning is evidenced by the fact that Miss Moses' directive to Lily, "'Maybe, if you put your faith into action and really believe, then you can have a little more space in your heart for other people'"(101), actually seems to resonate with her. Lily gains the faith and belief that her spirit guide claims to have lost, for rather than Lily continuing her search for LaShawndra, the chapter

closes with Lily going home, putting LaShawndra in the hands of God and the spirit world, and calling Charles(102).

Lily's communion with Miss Moses also allows the characters to provide voice to a silenced population. During their ride, Lily recounts to Miss Moses a part of Lily's family's history that was told to Lily by her mother. According to Lily's mother, Lily's grandfather had been the only man on the plantation where he lived who was able to write and read(59). When he would come home from working in the fields, he would "find a whole pack of folks waiting on his front porch to have him read their bills and correspondence and write letters to relatives for them"(59). The oral tradition Lily and her mother use to tell of Lily's grandfather reflects the oral tradition utilized by Ansa and other African-American women writers to preserve and disseminate African-Americans' history. As Teresa Brown asserts in *God Don't Like Ugly: African American Women Handing on Spiritual Value*,

literature may be used to depict the historical, anticipated, real, or imagined events of a community or culture. . . . African American women write about the experiences of black people and the intersection of race, class, and gender. The African American female worldview defines the content, didactics (moral, philosophical, or religious themes), and cultural hermeneutic.(67)

Through the creation of Lily's grandfather's history, Ansa and her characters are using the novel to voice an often unrecognized struggle that many African-Americans, in particular Southern ones, endured to become literate.³ Ansa draws on Miss Moses' discussion of her life as

³ In *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, James Anderson addresses this struggle, noting that "from the end of Reconstruction to the late 1960s, black southerners existed in a social system that virtually denied them citizenship, the right to vote, and the voluntary control of their labor power. Black education developed within this context of political and economic oppression. Hence, although black southerners were formally free during the time when American popular education was transformed into a highly formal and critical social institution, their schooling took a different path." See James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988: 2. Print.

an educator in order to touch on this struggle. Miss Moses reveals that after she retired from the school system she taught adult literacy classes in her home. Unknown to Lily until now, her father was once one of Miss Moses' students. Even though he was an adult at the time, he was illiterate and wanted to learn how to read, partially so Lily would not be ashamed of him. Although Lily's father's desire elucidates Lily's judgmental nature, it also represents many African Americans' plight to become educated in a dominant society that deemed them inferior. Moreover, Miss Moses' anecdote speaks of the efforts the African-American women educators she symbolizes extended in order to help their people become literate. Additionally, the details she divulges about Lily's father's and the other adult students' attempts to learn to read address the labors taken by many African-Americans in their pursuit of literacy and equality. Finally, Ansa's construction of the histories expressed by Lily and Miss Moses provides voice and agency to a section of society and African-American history that has often remained enshrouded in silence.

The providing of voice and guidance continues in "Hope," *You Know Better's* second section. "Hope" is narrated by Lily's daughter and begins with Sandra encountering the spirit of Nurse Joanna Bloom. Sometime after Lily arrives home from her journey with Miss Moses, Sandra receives a telephone message from her mother, telling her to meet Nurse Bloom at Candace Realty Company, Sandra's place of work. In the message, Lily conveys the importance and immediacy of the meeting, touting Nurse Bloom's accolades of being a "trailblazing health professional, a legendary Middle Georgia midwife, a highly esteemed personage in [their] African-American community" (109). Thus, heeding her mother's request, Sandra proceeds to Candace, all the while falsely assuming the meeting is to show Nurse Bloom pictures of property; upon Sandra's arrival, Nurse Bloom, conversely, informs Sandra that she wishes to physically visit the locations, in particular, Greenwood Bottom, a place with which Sandra is vaguely

familiar. As a result of Nurse Bloom's request, the two will eventually head out on an "excursion"(116) of their own.

Before Nurse Bloom and Sandra's trip occurs and, perchance, to demonstrate Sandra's need for guidance, Ansa establishes aspects of Sandra's character for the reader, most notably her self-centeredness. While thinking back on the phone call she received from her mother regarding Nurse Bloom, Sandra divulges that it was not the first time her mother had attempted to reach her in the past "six hours"(110). In Lily's desperation to find LaShawndra, she calls Sandra, LaShawndra's mother, yet instead of Sandra answering the phone, she simply listens while her distressed mother leaves a message. Earlier on in "Hope," Sandra shares her rationale for such behavior, noting "I always have my answering machine on so I don't have to talk to just *anybody*. I can't believe that people used to let just *anybody* who had your phone number and a quarter come into your home whenever they felt like it. I tell you, I *live* by my answering machine"(109-110). Sandra's behavior suggests that at that moment she considers her mother and daughter to be just *anybody* and inconsequential; in other words, Sandra is so self absorbed that her sleep and state of being are more important to her than her daughter's welfare and her mother's worried condition.

The lack of concern Sandra expresses in regards to LaShawndra's welfare also stems from Sandra's resenting her daughter and blaming every negative aspect of her life on LaShawndra. Sandra was nineteen years-old when LaShawndra was born. In an attempt to bind LaShawn to his daughter and get him to "straighten up and take on his responsibility"(111-112), which for Sandra included his marrying her, she named LaShawndra after him. While admitting that her efforts did not work, Sandra states that

in retrospect, all [naming LaShawndra after LaShawn] ever accomplished was to *piss me* off every time I called her name. Truly, to this day, every time I say 'LaShawndra' it's like a dagger in my heart. I see that high-yellow Negro who was her father looking at me all big with his child as if we *both* were mistakes. Not just LaShawndra a mistake, but me, too!(113)

Because of LaShawn's treatment of Sandra, she sees her daughter as a blunder and treats LaShawndra as such. For instance, when Sandra is pregnant, she throws herself down the stairs of her parents' house unsuccessfully attempting to induce a miscarriage. Moreover, immediately following LaShawndra's birth and while LaShawndra and Sandra are still in the delivery room, Sandra senses that her baby is in distress and initially wants to "reach out" and try to help her (188). Sandra reveals, however, that just as she had that urge, she recalled the last time [she] had seen LaShawn and felt the sharp hurt again of seeing him duck into the doorway of a religious bookstore . . . when he had caught sight of [her] coming toward him. [She] felt that hurt in [her] gut right where LaShawndra had been and [Sandra] quickly withdrew her hand

that she had extended to help LaShawndra(188). The disdain that Sandra feels for LaShawn becomes reflected in her interactions with their daughter. Thus, Sandra never develops a real bond with her, and especially not the type that LaShawndra and Lily share.

Given that both Lily and Sandra were young mothers, with Lily also being nineteen years-old when she gives birth to Sandra, Lily and LaShawndra frequently intimate that the three of them tend to interact with each other as sisters, referring to Sandra "as 'the middle child'"(180). Sandra assumes this reference is an attempt by her mother and daughter to "team up and act as if [Lily] is the eldest, responsible one and LaShawndra is accepted as the baby, the spoiled one. And [Sandra] is the 'problem child'"(180). Hence, Sandra is offended by the implications she associates with the reference and, instead, prefers to belittle LaShawndra and think of her as a burden and embarrassment. Consequently, throughout LaShawndra's life, Sandra conveys these feelings to her daughter:

She might have been young, but I told her what kind of man her father was. I told her how hard and unpleasant it was to have a child at nineteen without a husband. I told her how the fun part of your life was over when you have a child out of wedlock the way I did. How difficult it is to

find child care on a part-time salary. I tried to tell her her life was going to turn out worse than mine. (161)

Sandra's words and actions reveal the disconnect she feels from her daughter, a disconnect that results in her readily accepting that LaShawndra "is at the head of [the] crowd" (178) of a "lost generation" (178) and cannot be helped. Never does Sandra admit to herself that she may be the cause of LaShawndra being the way that she is.

It is through the excursion with Nurse Bloom that Sandra finally begins to acknowledge the role she played in the way LaShawndra has turned out. This ride includes stops at Mulberry's farmers' market and St. Luke's Hospital. Also significant is that the journey culminates with a trip to Sandra's condominium, which Nurse Bloom is adamant about seeing. It is at Sandra's home that Sandra learns that even though she refused to give LaShawndra the code to her security system, feeling that her daughter is too irresponsible to have it, LaShawndra still somehow acquired it, used the code to deactivate the system, and stole items from her. These items include clothes, jewelry, and luggage, all of which Sandra concludes LaShawndra is planning to use for Freaknik, an event in Atlanta, Georgia, that Sandra assumes LaShawndra is attending. Sandra describes the happening as a scene of "Black girls riding around in convertibles, flashing their bare breasts and being groped in public on Peachtree Street" (151), one of Atlanta's most popular thoroughfares, and as "a hoochie-mama party" (181). Moreover, she is ashamed and embarrassed that LaShawndra has stolen from her and, reflexively, questions what type of daughter she has reared that would actually "'steal from her own mother'" (177).

Sandra's questioning is significant, for it is one of the few times she has given thought to her part in LaShawndra's behavior. Nevertheless, after doing so, Sandra somewhat minimizes her role, remarking to Nurse Bloom, "'I've never seen anything like this. Not in my family. LaShawndra don't care *nothing* about me, her own mother'" (179). For Ansa, "a vital part of African-American culture is a spirituality, the responsibility to tell the truth, looking to ancestors for behavioral guidance" (Brown 101). Thus, similar to Miss Moses being a provider of guidance to Lily, Nurse Bloom functions in

the same manner for Sandra, observing to her, "'It's not your concern whether or not she cares for you. The question is, Do you care for her?'" (Ansa, *You Know Better* 179). Nurse Bloom's statement and question are an attempt to help Sandra take responsibility for her part in LaShawndra's behavior. However, instead of Sandra acknowledging Nurse Bloom's efforts, she counters by arguing that since she, Lily, and Charles give LaShawndra "'everything she needs'" (179), LaShawndra is indeed fortunate, more so than many other girls in their community. Therefore, for Sandra, LaShawndra's behavior is incomprehensible.

Additionally, Sandra reacts by tearing up a picture of LaShawndra and throwing it into the fireplace. To Nurse Bloom, Sandra's actions represent Sandra trying to remove LaShawndra out of her life. Hence, Nurse Bloom informs Sandra, "'You can throw [LaShawndra] out of your life, but I promise you, you won't be able to throw her out of your heart'" (179). Nurse Bloom then goes on to disclose why she knows the wisdom she has shared with Sandra is true, revealing that when she was nineteen years-old she too became pregnant. Akin to Sandra, she decided to abort the pregnancy. However, unlike Sandra's attempt, Nurse Bloom's was successful. Since Nurse Bloom's grandmother was a midwife and Nurse Bloom had learned from watching the women who would come to her grandmother what would work to make her lose the baby, without telling her grandmother about the baby or her plans to get rid of it, Nurse Bloom mixed up and drank "a nasty-tasting greenish concoction" (183). Nurse Bloom then became sick, lost the baby, and remained guilt ridden and remorseful over her actions. As almost a penance, she became a midwife and finally a nurse at St. Luke's Hospital. During her narrative to Sandra, Nurse Bloom explains her dedication to being a delivery nurse:

'I brought countless babies into this world, in and out of a hospital But I never forgot the one I didn't have. And I never did become a mother. . . . Every baby I brought into this world reminded me of the one I didn't have. And I know I did some good on this earth. I know

it. But I could never throw that unborn child, my unborn child, out of my heart.' (183-184)

Nurse Bloom shares her story with Sandra hoping the younger woman will learn from her mistakes and realize that even though she may be able to physically remove LaShawndra out of her life the girl will have as much of a continued presence as Nurse Bloom's aborted baby does.

Furthermore, through Nurse Bloom's revelation to Sandra as with Miss Moses' to Lily, Ansa utilizes the spirit's commonalities with the one she is helping to reinforce the canon's theme of the importance of maintaining a connection between the spiritual and secular worlds, for those of the present are able to learn from the errors of those of the past. As a reinforcement of this point, although Nurse Bloom and Sandra seem like such different characters and their journey is quite contentious with Sandra feeling that Nurse Bloom is trying to *guilt her* into taking responsibility for LaShawndra's behavior, it is Nurse Bloom's sharing of this commonality with Sandra that finally encourages her to accept accountability for LaShawndra's behavior as well as find hope regarding LaShawndra's future and for their mother-daughter relationship.

Similar to Lily's ride with Miss Moses, flashbacks encompass Sandra's time with Nurse Bloom. After Nurse Bloom's disclosure, Sandra becomes bombarded by images of her belittling or ignoring LaShawndra instead of nurturing and providing her words of comfort as Lily did Sandra and continues to do with LaShawndra. One particular remembrance is of an eight years-old LaShawndra trying to cook Sandra breakfast. In the memory, Sandra does not thank her daughter for her efforts. She, instead, chastises LaShawndra for "burning up [the] only good Calphalon omelet pan" (186), to which LaShawndra mutters "'I was just tryna *please* you!'" (186). Immediately following that image, Sandra remembers a fair at her mother's school where she pretended that she did not know LaShawndra "when one of the other mothers pointed at LaShawndra and said, 'My God, look at that little one over there dressed just like a prostitute! Why would her mother let her come out of the house looking like that?'" (186). The recollections reiterate the many times Sandra has shunned or scolded LaShawndra when

the girl merely craved her mother's approval or needed guidance and, in the case of the incident at Lily's school, Sandra's support and defense. For Sandra, the realization of the mistakes she has made in rearing LaShawndra are difficult to bear, yet through Nurse Bloom's guidance, she does so.

Nurse Bloom emphasizes the importance of Sandra giving LaShawndra her "blessing sometime instead of always giving a curse" (192) as Sandra has done all of LaShawndra's life by judging the girl. In turn, Nurse Bloom offers Sandra her own blessings, an act that has such an effect on Sandra that her knees become weak, and she feels "warmth spread all over [her] body" (193). More importantly, through the spirit's aid, Sandra finally unburdens herself of the fault she places on LaShawndra as well as accepts her own culpability for LaShawndra's conduct. As Sandra explains,

I had opened up to [Nurse Bloom] in a way I had not even done to some of my best girlfriends who think they know *everything* about me...With her, I felt as if I had gone to confession. I always envied Catholics, who could go into a small enclosure not much bigger than a telephone booth, unburden themselves, and come out washed clean. I hadn't felt clean in years. Nineteen to be exact. (180)

For Sandra, talking to Nurse Bloom acts as a cleansing experience. Because of the connection she establishes with the spirit world Nurse Bloom represents, Sandra alleviates the bitterness and sense of hopelessness she has felt all of her daughter's life. Thus, as Sandra drives Nurse Bloom back to St. Luke's Hospital where someone is supposed to "be by there for [Nurse Bloom] at noon" (189), she admits "that it is the first time in her life, [she] truly longed to see LaShawndra's little face and wished she wasn't off somewhere" (191). Furthermore, upon arrival home alone, Sandra actually feels hopeful about LaShawndra's future and their relationship.

In addition to Sandra and Nurse Bloom's journey restoring Sandra's hope, it also provides voice for a fragment of the African-American experience, in particular, the role of integration. In Nurse Bloom's anecdote regarding her pregnancy, she explains that her living

with her grandmother was a consequence of her mother going "up north to Detroit to get a job at one of the factories there . . . and never [coming] back for" (182) her. Nurse Bloom's explanation alludes to the Great Migration, a time from about 1915-1940 when African-Americans from largely rural southern areas migrated to northern cities (Crews) such as Detroit. The advent of World War I facilitated a change in the northern labor force. Many previous members of that labor force left it to become soldiers in the war. Additionally, "the turmoil in Europe disrupted the flow of immigrants from that area... Because Afro-Americans [sic] made up a large portion of the unskilled work force in the South and because of social conditions there, they became the targets of aggressive recruitment campaigns" orchestrated by businesses in the North that were in need of workers (Crews). Hence, African-Americans such as Nurse Bloom's mother left their oppressive lives in the South to fulfill that need. They also hoped to establish better lives for themselves in the North where racism was believed to be less blatant than it was in southern cities. A little known fact about the migration is that it had a decimating impact on several African-American families and southern communities. As Crews observes, migrating to the North

was not a simple matter for black Americans. . . . Afro-Americans [sic] had strong ties to the South [,] and migrating meant severing lifelong friendships and strong family bonds. Migrants rarely left in large groups. Sometimes, members of families might leave together, but more often individuals left alone. They usually departed with the expectation that they would return or would send for loved ones, but migrating always involved leaving behind loved ones for an uncertain future

and in Nurse Bloom's mother's case indefinitely. Through Nurse Bloom's narrative, she, akin to Miss Moses as well as *Baby of the Family's* Rachel and *The Hand I Fan With's* Herman, continues the oral tradition of storytelling, for Ansa uses the character's account to pass on a portion of a people's past.

This oral tradition in addition to the impact of integration on the African-American community is also evident in Nurse Bloom and Sandra's visit to St. Luke's Hospital, once the only hospital in Mulberry that African-Americans are allowed to patronize. St. Luke's plays a pivotal role in Ansa's canon: it is the hospital where *Baby of the Family* and *The Hand I Fan With's* Lena McPherson is born as well as *You Know Better's* Lily and Sandra. By referencing the hospital in all three works, Ansa traces the growth and decimation of the hospital and how those events coincide with the state of the black community. When Lena is born, St. Luke's Hospital is filled with the most modern equipment, and Nurse Bloom is a preeminent nurse there. When the spirit returns there with Sandra, the hospital has been totally demolished. The African-American members of the community now go to Mulberry Medical Center, which is the integrated hospital in the community and also where LaShawndra is born. According to Sandra, "[t]he city tore down [St. Luke's] to make way for a leg of the new expressway that came through town back in the seventies. But then they decided to go another way, and the lot still sat empty" (Ansa, *You Know Better* 118). The empty lot where the hospital sits is reflective of empty lots in many African-American, urban communities. Integration allowed for African-Americans to expand out of their own communities, but that integration, similar to the Great Migration, also led to many of those communities' devastation. Sandra and Nurse Bloom's trip to the hospital's lot attests to this fact.

You Know Better culminates with "Love." The final section focuses on LaShawndra and begins with her hitchhiking. As Christopher Okonkwo notes, LaShawndra "is a teenager who, when we encounter her, is literally *on the road*, . . . waiting to commence on what the novel . . . builds as a journey of spiritual conversion" (164). A couple of nights before, LaShawndra meets a male who tells her he can help her achieve her goal of becoming a dancer in music videos. Believing him, she gives him her key to the house that she shares with her "best girlfriend, Crystal" (Ansa, *You Know Better* 211), and Crystal's two children. The male does not use the key, however, to meet up with LaShawndra but to break into the house. While doing so, he startles

Crystal, a diabetic who has to be hospitalized as a result of her reaction to the break-in. LaShawndra, who is across town in bed with another male when the break-in and Crystal's subsequent hospitalization occur, is guilt-ridden over the incident. However, she does not accept responsibility for her role in it. Instead, she decides to hitchhike her way to Atlanta and a new life supposedly void of the memory of her conduct.

While LaShawndra waits alongside the highway, several cars pass by her. In fact, she even observes that "at first so many cars passed me by I was beginning to take it personal. It was like they didn't even see me. For real, I was beginning to think they were doing it on purpose to keep me from leaving Mulberry" (197-198). LaShawndra's observation appears valid, for the car that finally stops for her belongs to Miss Liza Jane Dryer, who, unbeknownst to LaShawndra, is the spirit of one of Lily and Sandra's former neighbors. As Sandra explains earlier in the novel, when Miss Liza Jane was alive she was considered

one of the most beautiful women in Mulberry. . . .[but] also a fast, fast, fast woman. She used to hang out in honky-tonks and juke joints drinking and juking and dancing and hanging on to first one man and then another. Shaking her butt in everyone's face. [Lily told Sandra Miss Liza Jane] acted this way into her sixties. (169)

Also worth noting is that Miss Liza Jane dies without any family or friends, and Sandra and Lily are the only people who attend the woman's funeral. Ironically, and, perhaps, foreshadowing the spirit's intervention in LaShawndra's life, while Sandra is reflecting on Miss Liza Jane, she notes that if LaShawndra continues to live her life in the manner that she currently is, "she might end up like that poor old woman" (170), referencing the spirit. Due to Sandra's description of Miss Liza Jane and Sandra's mentioning a connection between Miss Liza Jane and LaShawndra, the suggestion can be made that through the spirit Ansa is again employing a cohesion between the spiritual and secular worlds as a mode for guidance. Moreover, Miss

Liza Jane's past is drastically connected to LaShawndra's present and possible future.

That guidance and connection are demonstrated during the early stages of LaShawndra and Miss Liza Jane's ride. The ride is marred by examples of LaShawndra's lack of self respect. During their trip, LaShawndra frequently refers to herself and "'every other person [as] a 'ho' or a 'nigga' like it's nothing'" (236). Exasperated with LaShawndra's language, Miss Liza Jane finally chastises her, explaining to LaShawndra that "'words are powerful'" (238) and if she continues to refer to herself and others in such a manner LaShawndra will eventually "'start thinking that's all [she] and the people around [her] are'" (238). To LaShawndra, however, the references are not derogatory. As she explains to Miss Liza Jane, "'That's just what I call people. I don't mean nothing by it. Shoot, that what I call *myself!*[T]hat's what I am!And *everybody* say those words all the time! Everybody! Everybody even say 'em in videos and on the television and in movies and *everywhere!*'" (236-237). LaShawndra's justification results from the neglect LaShawndra has received from her father as well as Sandra's constant berating of her. The justification affords the spirit the opportunity to render advice and direction.

From first seeing Miss Liza Jane, LaShawndra is awed by the spirit's appearance, noting her immaculate dress and manners. While complimenting Miss Liza Jane, LaShawndra compares her to Lily, calling them "'big' women" (229). Elaborating, LaShawndra explains that "big women" are "women out there taking they place in the world, running schools and offices and stuff, on committees and doing yoga. . . .On television shows and radio call-in shows talking 'bout issues" (229). Later, she goes on to describe Miss Liza Jane as a "good-looking, sweet-smelling sister" (231) who is too "classy and correct" (263) to have "'been around like a little ho like'" (262-263) LaShawndra feels she has. LaShawndra falsely assumes that Miss Liza Jane's present appearance and demeanor are reflective of the older woman's past ones. Hence, in hopes that she may aid LaShawndra in a manner similar to how Miss Moses and Nurse Bloom were able to help Lily and Sandra,

respectively, Miss Liza Jane quells LaShawndra's false impression of her by revealing her own background. Additionally, Miss Liza Jane implores LaShawndra not to end up in the same manner that she did.

During her revelation, Miss Liza Jane reveals that while LaShawndra frequents "The Club" Miss Liza Jane used to be a regular at "The Place," the bar located directly under it. Miss Liza Jane adds that she "'was pretty and hot'" (313), but she "'didn't make no friends, no real friends, 'cause [she] didn't know how to treat them. Didn't know how to cherish them'" (313). In actuality, at one point Miss Liza Jane and LaShawndra's great-grandmother had been friends, "'as much of a friend as [Miss Liza Jane] was to anybody'" (314). Nevertheless, when LaShawndra's great-grandmother put aside her dignity and went to Miss Liza Jane one morning desperate to borrow money, Miss Liza Jane told her that "she didn't have it" (314). As Miss Liza Jane further discloses, her response to LaShawndra's great-grandmother was not true: "'It [the amount of money] wasn't much to me. I had it, and I could have given it to her. But I didn't feel like getting up and getting dressed and going downtown to the bank that early'" (314). As a result of Miss Liza Jane's behavior, she and LaShawndra's great-grandmother never spoke to each other again (315). The spirit's willingness to share her history with LaShawndra facilitates a connection between the two, for in addition to being able to have veneration for Miss Liza Jane, LaShawndra is also able to identify with her, an identification that LaShawndra does not have with Sandra and Lily.

Furthermore, LaShawndra notes that when she speaks to Miss Liza Jane she feels that Miss Liza Jane actually listens to what she has to say "instead of laughing" (263) at her the way LaShawndra believes Sandra and so many others in her life do. As a consequence of the spirit's actions, LaShawndra opens up to Miss Liza Jane and divulges that her true career goal is not to be a dancer in music videos as she has let everyone believe, but to become a lyricist. LaShawndra even muses to herself that "since [she] had been talking with Miss Liza Jane 'bout what [LaShawndra] thought and wanted to do, [her] little lyrics writing seemed more important, a little more real" (285).

Before meeting the spirit, LaShawndra feels that Lily is the only person who truly loves and has faith in her. Nonetheless, she knows that she keeps disappointing Lily. LaShawndra also recognizes that, at times, her grandmother, too, acts condescending and judgmental towards her. In particular, LaShawndra reflects on Lily's treatment of her when LaShawndra has attempted to cook: "Sandra *and* Mama Mama [Lily] be dogging me right in my face sometimes. Like I'm too stupid to understand what they be saying" (279). Since LaShawndra does feel that at times she is a disappointment to Lily, the interactions LaShawndra has with Miss Liza Jane are very different from the ones she has had with Sandra and Lily or anyone else in LaShawndra's life: The spirit listens to LaShawndra without judging and being critical of her, an experience that is very novel for LaShawndra.

LaShawndra addresses the ramifications of the experience's novelty as she observes that she has shared her true aspirations with Miss Liza Jane. LaShawndra states that "[n]ot only had [Miss Liza Jane] give [sic] me a ride, but I felt like we had bonded. Shoot, I told her more of my personal stuff in three hours than I had ever told Sandra in my *whole* life" (269). Significant to note is that LaShawndra's words echo Sandra's reaction to her own interactions with Miss Moses. Moreover, as Sandra's dealings with Miss Moses aided Sandra in establishing faith, LaShawndra's with Miss Liza Jane help the character establish the sense of self love and respect that she is direly missing. When LaShawndra first accepts Miss Liza Jane's offer for a ride, she is running away from Mulberry and to a falsely assumed escape in the forms of Atlanta. However, after their interactions LaShawndra is amenable to Miss Liza Jane's words of insight and encouragement that "'people change'" (318); thus, LaShawndra has that ability too. As LaShawndra remarks, several times Lily had shared with her advice and wisdom comparable to what Miss Liza Jane had, "'[b]ut with [Miss Liza Jane] it seem different and new and real and true'" (318). Indeed, LaShawndra is so moved by her exchanges with the spirit that by the end of her ride with Miss Liza Jane she is willing to return to Mulberry and accept culpability for her part in the break-in. As Okonkwo postulates, "Ansa arbitrates LaShawndra's

impasse in favor of 'Mulberry,' thanks mainly to the timely intervention of a vigilant ancestor. In so doing, Ansa harmonizes the spiritual and material terrains" (164). Hence, similar to LaShawndra's mother and grandmother, LaShawndra is able to create a sense of balance in her life because of the connection she establishes with the spirit world as represented by Miss Liza Jane.

As a result of *You Know Better's* protagonists' willing acceptance of the spirits' interventions, the novel concludes in a manner akin to *The Hand I Fan With*: Lily allows Charles back into her life; Sandra attempts to build a relationship with LaShawndra; LaShawndra freely returns back to Mulberry, accepts the blame for her conduct, and asks and receives forgiveness for it; and, most importantly, equilibrium is achieved in the lives of all three women. This chapter fits into this study as a whole, for it shows that throughout Ansa's canon, and particularly with *Baby of the Family*, *The Hand I Fan With*, and *You Know Better*, Ansa seems to argue that a link between the spiritual and secular worlds is a necessity for the African-American female's survival in contemporary society. Likewise, this chapter demonstrates that for her the building of that link can also allow for voice for the often silenced ancestors.

CHAPTER FOUR: COMMUNING WITH MUDEAR—FEMALE AUTONOMY IN *UGLY WAYS AND TAKING AFTER MUDEAR*

With *Baby of the Family*, *The Hand I Fan*, and *You Know Better*, Ansa offers a unique contribution to an understanding of the close relationship between Black women's fiction and folklore, focusing, in particular, on the need to establish balance through the West African tradition of ancestral communion. This chapter contends that this offering is continued in *Ugly Ways* and *Taking After Mudear*, yet it also points out that a noteworthy difference is the manner in which that balance is established. While the ancestors in *Baby of the Family*, *The Hand I Fan*, and *You Know Better* act as tutelaries and spiritual guides, Mudear's spirit in *Ugly Ways* and *Taking After Mudear* does not impart conventional guidance and wisdom to her daughters. Instead, she challenges patriarchal society by redefining mother-daughter relationships as well as herself. Also, Mudear speaks mainly to the reader. In fact, not until the end of *Taking After Mudear* do the daughters actually have a reciprocal conversation with the spirit of their mother. As this chapter will explain, although a direct communication between the protagonists and the spirit world is not accentuated in these latter two novels in the same manner that it is in the ones previously discussed, ancestral communion is still evident through the daughters' unknowingly sharing many of Mudear's mannerisms and beliefs and sensing her spirit's presence. Additionally, the chapter will argue that it is through Mudear's revelations to the reader that she, similar to Ansa's other spirits, obtains autonomy and voice, and that though an *encouraging* communion does not transpire between Mudear and her daughters, it is because of the daughters' interactions with her that they, too, establish a sense of self.

Ugly Ways, *Taking After Mudear's* prequel, begins shortly after Mudear's unexpected death. Annie Ruth, the youngest daughter, who lives in Los Angeles, California, and Emily, the middle daughter, who resides in Atlanta, Georgia, return to Mulberry to attend and plan their mother's funeral with their older sister, Betty, who still dwells in the town. Soon after the sisters reconnect, the fact that

there is discord in their lives and the source of that discord are revealed: to the daughters, Mudear¹ was a mother to them in name only. When the sisters are very young, she experiences what they, Ernest (their father), and the rest of Mulberry refer to as the "change,"² which is comprised of a transformation in Mudear's behavior, including her no longer leaving her home, discarding "physical household work. . . . [, and abandoning] any nurturing role"³ in her daughters' lives. Dominant society has created a social construct that suggests a model family consists of "a two-parent nuclear unit with a breadwinner father and a homemaker mother" (Hill 495) and in African-American homes a "myth[ic] self sacrificing black mother" (Brooks 3). Similar ideologies are, oftentimes, perpetuated in literature. As Ansa asserts, "'these kinds of characters become ciphers . . . so the Black mother isn't a person, and your feelings about motherhood aren't validated'" (qtd. in Peterson 54). Based on Ansa's assertion, one may argue that Mudear is a conduit of rebellion against the "super strong Black mothers" Patricia Hill Collins argues many African-American scholars delineate to counteract white patriarchal society's renderings of Black women (188). Mudear's willful abdication of domestic duties provides validation of this argument.

It is because of Mudear's "abdication of responsibilities" (Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 119) that Annie Ruth, Emily, and Betty are in need of a sense of balance and harmony in their lives. As is revealed in *Taking After Mudear*, when Mudear experienced her change, "she had simply decided to stop performing any household duties. And every day, Betty or one of the other girls made sure the task was done" (37). In doing the work that Mudear refuses to do, her daughters forgo traditional childhoods. Furthermore, as a result of Mudear's change, the community "pegged her and her family crazy, . . . gossiped about them, . . . [and] even scorned [Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth] when party lists and invitations to be local debutants were sent out"

¹ Mudear is a name derived from *mother* and *dear*. It is the epithet that Mudear insists her daughters use when referring to her. After her change, *Mudear* is the name Ernest uses when referring to her. *Mudear* is also the name Mudear called her own mother.

² See Tina McElroy Ansa, *Ugly Ways*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993: 50. Print.

³ See Tina McElroy Ansa, *Taking After Mudear*. St. Simons Island: Down South Press, 2007: 38. Print.

(Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 70). Due to such alienation and ostracism, Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth never develop appropriate socialization skills. This chapter contends that Ansa employs these protagonists' upbringing and behavior to contribute to her canon's discussion of African-American women's quests for belonging in an increasingly complex twentieth and twenty-first century South. Hence, the rationale for Mudear experiencing her change and allowing her daughters to forgo stereotypical childhoods is that Mudear "was not concerned with teaching her daughters how to bond with others For Mudear, relations with others, [sic] was unimportant. . . . Her concern was to mold her daughters into women who are independent, strong, and proud" (7), ones who would be able to survive in a patriarchal society.

Also of vast importance to this chapter's argument is that Mudear's being so focused on preparing her daughters to cope as Black women in a white dominated world parallels the works of many other African-American women writers, as does the fact that for Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth that preparation includes a coalescence of the sacred and the secular. In *Inspiriting Influences*, Michael Awkward asserts that African-American women writers inculcate "Black cultural 'spirit' into Western 'matter'" (10) as a means to claim their texts as their own. For Ansa, this infusion is seen in the use of ancestral communion throughout her canon. In fact, with Mudear, even before she dies, a form of communion exists between her and her daughters:

It seemed Mudear crept into [Betty's] thoughts at the most unexpected and inopportune times. . . . But [Betty] knew from talking with her sisters that Mudear did that with all of her girls. It seemed the kind of mother they had touched them all the way through their lives. Not just when they lived with her, not just when they spent time visiting her, but all through their lives. (Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 60)

This study argues that the reason Mudear is so present for them and this communion does exist is that the daughters see their mother as some type of omnipresent being. They, like their community, consider Mudear's ceasing to behave according to societal norms an oddity. However, unlike most of the residents of Mulberry and many of the

Lovejoys' family members, Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth do not think Mudear's actions are a result of her being mentally defective but because she has some type of supernatural qualities. Indeed, throughout *Ugly Ways* Mudear is equated to mythological beings, such as Medea and Pandora and the goddesses Yemaya and Giya. To an extent, as one would exalt a goddess, Ernest and the girls worship at Mudear's altar, providing her with the only connection she has to an outside world she has decidedly physically cut herself off from. Bennett points out that "around their mother [Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth] construct a mythical image that separates her, objectifies her, and dehumanizes her."⁴ Barbara Bennett's point and the daughters' exaltation of their mother are important for they imply that since Mudear is so powerful to her daughters in life it would be only natural and befitting for that power to continue after Mudear's death.

This idea is additionally supported by the fact that Mudear does permeate her daughters' lives so--one way being the daughters constantly sensing her presence, which, as earlier noted, is a form of ancestral communion. Shortly after the daughters reunite, they venture to their parents' house to help their father plan Mudear's funeral. From the moment Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth enter the home, they sense Mudear's spirit, even in instances they would normally find mundane, including the house smelling "like red spicy cinnamon balls" (Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 16) that Mudear often ate and kept in a dish there. Also, when they try to distract themselves from thoughts of their mother by engaging in activities such as eating, comforting their father, or even thinking of thoughts "to say to each other that didn't involve Mudear [,they are unable to, for]... Mudear's presence, as always,[is] too strong" (20). Truly, her presence is so strong that Betty unconsciously acknowledges it in one of the actions she is unwilling to engage in while in her parents' home. A smoker, she

⁴ According to Barbara Bennett, "By making Mudear bigger than life as seeing her as 'some kind of powerful goddess who can strike [them] mute or dead for some minor transgression' (257), the daughters try to rationalize the lack of maternal love in their home and excuse themselves from dealing with a power they believe is too strong to overcome." See Barbara Bennett, "Making Peace with the (M) other." *The World Is Our Home: Society and Culture in Contemporary Southern Writing*. Ed. Jeffrey J. Folks and Nancy Summers Folks. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000: 193. Print

desires a cigarette to help relieve some of the stress she encounters over Mudear's death. Needless to say, the "idea of smoking *inside* Mudear's house never crossed her mind" (22). Although Betty knows Mudear is dead, for Betty, her mother's spirit is still extremely present as demonstrated by Betty's refraining from doing an act in her parents' domicile that previously would have compelled an alive Mudear to chastise her. Instead of smoking the cigarette inside of the house, Betty goes onto the back porch to smoke. Nonetheless, even when she does so she still feels Mudear's presence, for after Betty finishes smoking her cigarette and thinks about putting it out in the dirt in Mudear's cherished garden, a garden whose significance will be elaborated on later in this study, she stops "and instead slipped upstairs and flushed the butt down the toilet" (24). Betty's stopping herself suggests that though Mudear is dead Betty's actions are still dictated by her and the idea of her existence.

Equally significant is that Betty is not the only sister to sense Mudear's spirit in the house; Annie Ruth senses it too and also while engaging in an act that would have been considered taboo had Mudear still been alive. While in the family's home, Annie Ruth goes to use Mudear's personal bathroom, a bathroom that Mudear had forbidden all to use except her. When Annie Ruth opens its door

it was as if she were cocooned in a blanket of Mudear. It was as if over the years Mudear had been able to extract the essence, the spirit of herself and sprayed it cunningly placed throughout the house to catch some poor unsuspecting prowler, victim. . . . Essence of Mudear. That's how Annie Ruth imagined what was left of her mother. Like a perfume, Essence of Mudear in a fancy curved crystal bottle. . . . The feeling of her mother was so strong in the bathroom that Annie Ruth could almost see Mudear floating around the room spraying her Essence of Mudear all over the place.
(133-134)

Similar to Betty, Annie Ruth does a deed that had Mudear been alive the daughter would have been unable to do, and once again akin to her sister, when Annie Ruth performs the action, she is presented with

thoughts of her mother. These thoughts indicate that even though Mudear is dead Annie Ruth too continues to sense her mother's presence.

The daughters' sensing of Mudear's presence continues even after Mudear's burial. *Taking After Mudear* begins after Mudear's funeral and discloses that even though Mudear has been buried for several months she remains relevant for her family with her voice "still ring[ing] in her family's ears like a cursed echo that would not stop resounding. It was a voice that continued to drain her daughters and husband of any routine pleasure" (41). Even when the daughters intentionally try not to think about their mother and allow her to fill their thoughts and actions, she still does. After the funeral, Emily, Betty, and Annie Ruth promise each other to change their lives and "not to keep Esther Lovejoy [Mudear] and her memory alive by continuing the constant three-way conversation about her" (55) they previously would often have, and for awhile, they are successful in their attempts. When Mudear is alive, their conversations would primarily consist of them dissecting her and her treatment of them, and shortly after her funeral and their promise to each other, they once more begin to have such discussions. They also again start quoting her maxims along with noticing each others' similarities to their mother, such as Betty observing Emily's having a "beauty mark" (57) similar to Mudear's and Emily's noting Annie Ruth's laugh sounding "'exactly like'" (57) Mudear's. The daughters' recognizing these commonalities as well as continuing their discussions about Mudear and keeping her "words of wisdom" (42) pertinent too does the same for their connection with their mother. As *Taking After Mudear's* narrator observes, "It was as if Mudear were the deity of their lives and they the acolytes who kept the ceremonial temple fires burning with their resentful fascination" (54). For this reason, Mudear's being able to sustain this degree of influence over her daughters even after her death maintains a continuous bond and communion between them all.

This communion may further be discerned in Betty's, Emily's, and Annie Ruth's living by Mudear's teachings and recreating some of her behaviors, even if unconsciously. Though Mudear dies before narrative

action in *Ugly Ways* begins, she is able to see all of her family's interactions. Thus, she literally "speaks from the grave," providing commentary to the reader on her family's behavior in addition to her own life. During one of those communions, she reveals why she ceases to emotionally nurture her daughters. According to the spirit, through her actions she "[t]aught [her daughters] how to carry themselves. How to keep that part of themselves that was just for themselves to themselves so nobody could take it and walk on it. Tried her best to make them free. As free as [she] could teach them to be and still be free [herself]" (Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 34). In truth, to Mudear, by her redefining her position as a mother and wife (Green 3), she teaches her daughters to be self-sufficient and as free of the constraints of patriarchal society as she eventually is. One method Mudear employs and reveals through her communion with the reader is her ingraining in her daughters several adages to guide their lives—adages that she received from her own mother. Of additional note is that other times to gain wisdom "the girls just had to be swift enough to listen to her criticism and pick up suggestions she dropped in conversation" (Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 117). Regardless of the daughters' ways of seizing these mottos and hints, Annie Ruth's, Betty's, and Emily's entire lives are based on Mudear's words. As previously mentioned, even though Betty is scarred by her childhood, she still behaves as the reliable and sturdy oldest sister. Her reason for behaving as such is that

all [Betty's] life, Mudear had called Betty "big-boned"—"Betty is big-boned, let her pick that box up"—but she wasn't really big-boned. She was just about Emily's size only taller than the other two girls. But as with most things, she couldn't shake Mudear's image of her. . . . It seemed Betty had no hope of attaining the ability to see herself objectively. Mudear's image of her always overwhelmed her own self-image. (27)

Furthermore, Mudear delegates many of her household duties and responsibilities to Betty, saying, "Whatever comes up, Betty will handle it. Let Betty do it. Let Betty do it" (62). The mother's bizarre actions contribute to Betty's clouded self-concept. Hence, not only

does Betty take on the role of the stereotypical older do all sister, but also since Mudear refrains from nurturing her daughters, Betty accepts the role of the self sacrificing mother.

Unlike her sisters, Betty does not attend college. Rather, once she graduates from high school she begins working at a hair salon and uses the money she earns there to help support Emily when she goes away to college. Also, by time the youngest sister leaves for school, Betty has opened the first of her two beauty salons and pays all of Annie Ruth's college expenses. Moreover, when Emily and Annie Ruth graduate and move away from Mulberry to pursue their goals, Betty remains in their hometown and daily checks in on Mudear and Ernest. Keymayo hypothesizes that "ancestors' lives are reflected by their progeny" (252). This hypothesis is most definitely true for Betty, for in essence, she becomes the nurturing mother that Mudear refuses to be. Subsequently, Betty's nurturing of her sisters continues after Mudear's death. In *Taking After Mudear*, Emily, Annie Ruth, and the baby that Annie Ruth gives birth to in the novel move into Betty's house, and when the novel concludes, it is assumed that Betty will continue to be the primary nurturer of her sisters as the three of them rear Annie Ruth's daughter.

In addition to Betty's nurturing of her sisters being reflective of Mudear, so is Betty's becoming an avid gardener. Although Mudear ceases performing any household duties, she spends most of her time toiling in her garden, so much so that "next to the manicured lawns and thin rows of shrubbery surrounding the other houses [in the neighborhood she resides], her . . . home looked as if it had been picked up from a tropical plantation and dropped in place in a different zone" (Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 3). Opposed to showing the emotional nurturing towards her daughters that patriarchal society dictates she should, Mudear lavishes the cultivation and care on her garden:

Since [Mudear] feels that showing her love for [her daughters] may be detrimental to their success as independent women, she must displace her nurturing instincts by cultivating her flowers and vegetables. The

garden represents true freedom for Mudear and allows her daughters to see her as a mother. (Green 6)

Consequently, Emily, Betty, and Annie Ruth realize that Mudear provides her garden with the time and attention she refrains from giving them; and as a result of that realization, they are resentful of the garden and vow never to have gardens when they are adults (Ansa, *Taking After Mudear* 35). On that account, when Annie Ruth and Emily grow up they refuse to have any type of foliage in their homes, even plastic plants. Not until after Mudear's death does Annie Ruth even notice and acknowledge "'how truly beautiful and well laid out [Mudear's] garden is'" (Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 218). Betty's response to Mudear's garden, on the other hand, is different than her sisters'. Although she too does feel somewhat aggrieved by the attention Mudear bestows on the garden and abstains from giving them, all throughout Betty's life Betty also is awestruck by the garden itself and how at ease Mudear is in it, "during the day . . . giving off noxious fumes like carbon dioxide as she made everyone's life miserable in the house. Then, at night blossoming and exuding oxygen, coming to life and giving off life in her garden" (55). What all three sisters fail to recognize is that Mudear inherits this love of gardening from her own mother who too maintained "a big garden . . . and grew collards and turnips winter and summer" (88). This inheritance's importance is dual. First, it calls to mind Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Garden" in which Walker discusses the sense of space her mother creates while gardening and that Walker channels and conveys in her own endeavors (675). Since Mudear's and her mother's gardening, somewhat, provide them with space and identity in a misogynistic world, the women may be likened to Walker's mother and African-American women like her who were in search of self-definition in patriarchal society. More importantly, the gardening supports this study's premise regarding the role ancestral communion plays in that search, for Mudear's and her mother's gardening may be viewed as a form of communion.

Through Mudear's garden she carves out her own place and space in a male dominated world; since her mother lived during a time when

she too may have experienced oppression due to marriage and patriarchal society, the assumption may be made that their gardens' purposes are akin. In addition to Mudear's garden being "a symbol for the spiritual freedom that she possesses" (Green 5), her working in it is, to some extent, a communion with her mother and the African-American woman's search for place and identity. It also may be assumed that Mudear's adding a section to her garden "with nothing but white blossoms and whitish leaves so [her] family could see the garden at night the way [she] did" (Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 152) is so her daughters may share in the communion and sense of identity and space the gardening provides. The beginning of *Taking After Mudear* reveals that soon after Mudear's funeral Betty, the daughter who at an early age fairly recognizes a hidden significance behind Mudear's garden, hires a gardener "to begin putting in a myriad of plants and bulbs that produced white blossoms—tea olives, crepe myrtle, rose bushes, camellias, dogwoods, crocuses, tulips all around the edge of her house and down the long curving driveway that could be easily seen in the dark" (7) and whose description mirrors that of Mudear's white garden. In fact, eventually through the landscaper's and Betty's own toil, Betty creates a "fertile and fruitful [garden] that was actually beginning to rival her mother's legendary sumptuous garden" (8). When Annie Ruth moves into Betty's home, she spies the garden and too immediately sees the resemblance—asking Emily who has been living there longer than she has if Emily is "'just gonna' act like that garden's not out there growing around [them] like Mudear come back from the grave?" (11). Betty's garden echoing her mother's and Betty's becoming a gardener like her mother and Mudear's mother hint at the continuation of this communion and space through gardening for the Lovejoy women.

Perhaps the most evident manner in which Mudear's mannerisms and beliefs are reflected in those of her daughters and a communion is present is in Annie Ruth's, Emily's, and Betty's interactions with men. When Mudear and Ernest first marry, Mudear has romantic ideas about how their marriage will be. As her spirit observes in one of her asides to the reader, "*it sound foolish now, but I truly thought*

Ernest and me, our getting married was like a wedding of two forces. We would be joining forces, taking the best of both of us. . . . We was gonna take life by storm" (Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 107). Mudear's beliefs regarding marriage stem from her perception of her mother and father's relationship along with her viewing her mother as "a woman who always [had] a smile on her face. . . . [loving] her family and her life and it just [seeming] to love her back" (179). Mudear's ideas once more affirm a connection between her and her mother and a communion between them as represented through Mudear's initially mimicking her idealized image of her mother by trying to be a happy homemaker.

Unfortunately for Mudear, Ernest does not share her views regarding marriage, in particular the suggestion of their marriage being the union of two *equal* entities. On the contrary, he behaves exceedingly domineering towards Mudear with her acquiescing (126) to him "in all matters—money, the children, choices for dinner, or how to line the kitchen trash can in the most efficient way" (126). As Warren points out, Mudear quickly learns "that wives and mothers in a patriarchal and capitalistic society are not equal partners with husbands and fathers. Her part in the relationship seems more aligned to that of a servant" (194). Mudear's resentment of this alignment facilitates her desire for her change. In the same sense, she does not wish for her daughters to endure a fate parallel to hers. Hence, Mudear eventually develops and lives by the motto that "a man don't give a damn about you" (Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 106), drilling this saying into her daughters and, oftentimes, augmenting it by noting that "No matter how much he claim to love you, even the ones who will eat your dirty drawers don't really give a damn about you, not really" (106). Coincidentally, Mudear's saying is one of the first sentences Emily learns as a child, and to Mudear's amusement, Emily actually repeats it to Ernest. Emily's repeating the adage to him is noteworthy, for it is one of many instances of Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth sharing in Mudear's mannerisms and behaviors towards their father as well as engaging in this communion with their mother regarding men, in general.

Mudear believes masculine efforts render the subjugation she suffers, in her case in the form of Ernest, to limit female autonomy, which, for her, would be her space and freedom. For this reason, she disconnects herself from Ernest and tries to ensure that her daughters do the same. To orchestrate her daughters' disconnect from him, she issues them one of her dictums and then a command: "'You can't run with the hares and hunt with the hounds in this life. Choose'"(48). She likens her and Ernest's relationship with that of the animals and makes the daughters pick which one of the parents they wish to be equated with, and they do: her. For the girls, their siding with their mother and treating their father in a manner reminiscent of Mudear's is subconscious, yet it is also another example of them living by their mother's words and continuing their communion with her. After Mudear's change, she dismisses what Ernest says to her and instructs her daughters to the same, which they also do. As a result, by the time Emily, Betty, and Annie Ruth reach adulthood, "none of the girls really had conversations with their father, hardly ever bothering even to listen for his reply to their comments"(Ansa, *Taking After Mudear* 94).

Even though the girls seem oblivious to the rift between them and their father, Ernest is very cognizant of it. For instance, following Mudear's death while he is secretly watching his now adult daughters interact with each other, he concedes that the "girls always did belong to Mudear"(Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 17), and "there was so little he could claim in his own children"(53). To a certain extent, through Mudear's alienation of Ernest from his daughters she achieves revenge on him for his abuse of her(Whitney 38). More importantly, since as their father he is their first and main interaction with patriarchal authority, she tries to keep "her daughters from stepping into her footsteps, from being oppressed by the patriarchy"(38). Inevitably, Mudear's actions also ensure a bond and communion with her daughters in their independence from patriarchal dominance. To be more specific, not only is Mudear successful in establishing a schism between her daughters and Ernest but that division in addition to Mudear's adages regarding men and her example itself hinder Betty's, Emily's, and

Annie Ruth's relationships with other men in their lives too. This hindrance is seen in both Betty and Emily being divorced, Emily's "string of failed relationships" (Ansa, *Taking After Mudear* 156), and Annie Ruth choosing and throwing away lovers as she pleases.

Moreover, *Taking After Mudear* suggests this hindrance and the subsequent communion with their mother produced by it will continue to flourish after Mudear's death, for even though Betty discards Stan, her older, unfaithful lover, her keeping Cinque, the younger one, "was a reaction to the memories of Poppa [Ernest] ordering Mudear around in the old pre-change days. . . . [Cinque] would never be like Poppa had been in the old days" (114-115). Yet again, Betty's actions are a reflection of her ancestor's, Mudear's. Also, Betty's younger sisters, too, seem to plan to be vigilant in avoiding any behaviors they feel may allow for patriarchal authority to curtail their autonomy the way Mudear's initially was and that later brought about her change. On that account, at the conclusion of *Taking After Mudear*, the twice-divorced Emily remains unattached, and although several of Annie Ruth's former lovers inquire about her child's paternity, hoping that the daughter is theirs, Annie Ruth decides not to involve a man in her daughter's life but to rear the baby "alone with only her sisters' help and guidance" (196).

It is through Mudear's revelations that she divulges the circumstances surrounding her gaining her independence and desiring her daughters to gain and maintain theirs. Also, by her communing with the reader, Mudear, analogous to Rachel in *Baby of the Family*, Herman in *The Hand I Fan With*, and even Miss Moses, Nurse Bloom, and Miss Liza Jane in *You Know Better*, achieves voice—the voice that was stifled in her marriage to Ernest. These other spirits together with the African-Americans whom they are representative of all lived during times when they were unable to tell their histories and experiences, and it is through the spirits' communions with their respective novels' protagonists that these ancestors are finally provided that opportunity. Mudear's circumstances are, relatively, comparable to these other spirits'. Mudear and Ernest's marriage exists at a time when most women were, to some degree, considered subservient to their

husbands. Since many African-American males were not allowed authority in white society, they craved and wielded that authority in their households with their wives and children as Ernest does in his before Mudear's change. As previously mentioned, Ernest would randomly put Mudear and their daughters out of the family home. Then, in order for Mudear and the girls to be readmitted, she and sometimes they would have to "apologize for whatever [Ernest] felt she had done to displease him" (Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 129). Mudear suffers other indignities in Ernest's attempt to quash her views on marriage and assert his power over her, including him psychologically and physically abusing her:

He slapped her a few times after they were married a couple of years. But that was how things was then, he thought. Then, a man controlled his household, his wife, his family. Wasn't no big to-do about it. Just a couple of taps really just to shut her up and let her know who was who and what was what. Most mens did that every now and then at the time, he thought. That's how it was then, it was a way to rule your house. You said something and your woman did it. If she didn't, you showed her that she better. People understood that then. (97)

Ernest rationalizes that his striking her is not a negative act, but merely his adhering to society's standards regarding the treatment of women as well as his trying to teach her to do the same.

From the moment Ernest and Mudear wed, he believes she does not behave in the manner that a woman should. For instance, her walking naked around the house they share, unashamed of her body and his observing it, "made him uncomfortable" (98); and "seeing her so capable, so able to take care of everything that was thrown her way [scares him]. She never seemed to buckle, but rather to steel herself and go forward" (97). In truth, when he would think back on the early years of their marriage, "he remembered his twenty-year-old mind trying to take all of Esther in, even before the change, and being overwhelmed by this woman he had married" (97). Given that Ernest did

feel so overwhelmed by Mudear and her behavior, at the time, he felt justified in his treatment of her.

Sadly, in many African-American households during the period *Ugly Ways* is set, Ernest's conduct towards Mudear would be considered typical, and many women would merely suffer without telling someone of the abuse or trying to end it. Nevertheless, Mudear does not follow that mode. As Patricia Hill Collins theorizes in *Black Feminist Thought*,

change can . . . occur in the private, personal space of an individual woman's consciousness. Equally fundamental, this type of change is also personally empowering. Any individual Black woman who is forced to remain 'motionless on the outside,' [sic] can develop the 'inside' of a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom. (129)

Mudear embodies these ideas. As the spirit explains to the reader, *at first when I made up my mind it was gonna be different, I had thought about just walking away. Leaving that house and that kitchen and everything and walking away free and clear of it all. But then I thought, why should I leave something that was mine? A nice comfortable house where I had three girls, two of them—and soon all of them—big enough to help with everything, the cooking and cleaning and sewing, and a man that I knew inside out who had a steady enough job. And the thought of leaving my garden at the old house . . . made me well up with tears. Leave all that? Just to go off and tackle the world by myself. Why? So, I decided to stay in body. But to leave in spirit and let my spirit free. So that's what I did. And never did regret it, either.* (Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 105-106)

Mudear frees her spirit by challenging dominant society's definitions of what a wife, mother, and African-American woman, in general, should be.

She uses Ernest's beliefs regarding gender roles and behavior as her own tools to redefine her position in their household. The entire time that Ernest abuses Mudear, she does not retaliate. In truth, the

only inkling of rebellion that Mudear shows is when she burns the okra for dinner every night. Instead, she patiently waits for the moment when Ernest is "exposed and open and down" (151). He provides that instance by not being able to financially provide for his family, an act Ernest assumes is a condition of being considered a man. One of Mudear's northern family members gets arrested and calls the couple in need of bail money. Ignoring Mudear's urgings not to lend the money, Ernest does so, "feeling duty bound to show all Negroes up 'nawt' that a colored man in the South could take care of himself, his family, and even his people who were stupid enough to migrate north" (173). In his attempt to *show-off* for Mudear's northern family members, Ernest, in actuality, jeopardizes his own family's welfare. Although when he provides the loan he has recently received a job promotion and actually has extra money, Ernest later becomes in desperate need of having the money repaid. For that reason, he tries phoning Mudear's relatives whom he loans the money, but they are never available to receive his calls and never respond back to them. Due to Ernest's being short of funds, by the time the cold weather months set in, he is unable to pay the gas and electric bills, and Annie Ruth and Emily become ill from living in an unheated house. Fearful of the girls possibly dying if they continue to dwell in a cold home, Mudear pays both bills with the "few dollars" (78) that she has. According to Ernest, "paying the bills . . . [is what] a real man did" (Ansa, *Taking After Mudear* 83). Therefore, having an unemployed Mudear be able to do what he is not is emasculating, for her ability along with his inability goes against his beliefs regarding gender roles.

Meanwhile, for Mudear her actions are liberating. Anthony Grooms examines Mudear's liberation, explaining that the "act empowers [Mudear] to realize that she can make choices" (654). To be more exact, paying the bills aids her in becoming a woman in her own self-defined position and role and not the one that had been previously attributed to her by Ernest and the patriarchal system that he represents. Furthermore, by Mudear being able to accomplish a feat that Ernest associates with authority and dominance, she exerts her power and agency while challenging his.

Initially, Mudear's redefinition of self and freedom are gradually revealed to her family. Her rebirth eventually becomes more blatant with her "choos[ing] to withdraw into a self-focused, self-created sphere of freedom in which she does only what she wishes to do"(654). For instance, during the early stages of Mudear's change, she sporadically performs her once every day household duties. For the family, the sporadicness is torturous, but for Mudear, the ability to determine what she does is empowering and yet another expression of her freedom:

Sometimes, for Mudear, doing just what she felt like doing meant cooking a good hot dinner every day for a week for her family. Some days, she even had it waiting for Poppa and the girls when they came home from school and work. But that was more cruel than not cooking at all because each time Mudear did something in the house like the old days, before the change, it got the girls' hopes up, made them believe in their mother, just to have their hopes dashed in the next day or so when they came home from school and found Mudear still lying in bed in her gown eating two bananas and reading a picture magazine. But most days, it meant fixing something scrumptious for herself while the girls and Poppa were away at school and work, then sleeping through dinnertime, leaving her family to fend for itself.(Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 208)

Through her inconsistency, Mudear reaffirms for herself and family that she now has the power and agency to do what she wants to and when. She has given "birth to the woman she wants to be, freeing herself from the role of wife and mother"(Brooks 75). More importantly, her newfound power and agency transverse established social constructions regarding gender roles.

As previously noted, early on in Mudear and Ernest's marriage, he rules while she is subservient. With Mudear's change, those circumstances vastly alter. Even "Betty began to sense a shift in the tension. . . .Sometimes, she would walk past by her parents' room and feel the floor almost tilt with the sudden contradiction her mother

would throw out at" (Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 127) Ernest. He, too, notices the switch, often wanting to exclaim "'Womens taking over my house!'" (47). Ernest is correct in his desired exclamation, for through her change, Mudear inverts the male/female dynamic (Green 5) with the dominator now becoming the dominated. Notably, Mudear visually demonstrates this fact for her family by eventually sitting at the head of the dinner table, a spot previously occupied by Ernest alone.

Relevant to this chapter's argument is the fact that even though Mudear does gain her independence she is still, to a certain extent, silenced. Although she is no longer brutalized by Ernest and ceases taking care of him and their daughters, she never vocalizes why she behaves in the manner that she does. According to Mudear, Annie Ruth, Betty, and Emily

were too young to remember how it was before [her change]. To remember it and appreciate how much better things were after that cold, no-heat-and-no-lights-in-that-freezing-assed-house day when I was able to be what I am. A woman in my own shoes. And they don't hardly remember their daddy any other way than his meek, quietly self he is now. I guess you can't completely blame the girls because they don't know what their Mudear has done for them. Practically all their lives—to show them a good example.
(Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 39)

Since Mudear believes her daughters have forgotten how their father used to be and would not understand her actions, she never discusses her change with them or Ernest's brutalization of her. Opposed to Mudear revealing to her daughters that she "did not want the girls to have to be dependent on a man, as she was, and neither did she want her daughters to have to depend on another woman, such as their mother" (Whitney 50), they are left to assume and speculate about her conduct while she keeps her thoughts and reasons to herself. Hence, Mudear's voicing to the reader the circumstances surrounding her change connects and likens her to Ansa's other spirits; for by Mudear doing so, she similar to them provides voice to her actions and life as well as to a marginalized part of African-American society—those

wives and women who suffered at the hands of patriarchal authority and those who sought and found autonomy.

Fittingly, this idea of voice is also connected to the novel's theme of ancestral communion: Just as Mudear must voice the details of her change and what lead up to it so too must the daughters voice the effects her change has on them. *Ugly Ways* concludes with Annie Ruth, Emily, and Betty going to Parkinson's Funeral Home, where Mudear's body is being prepared for the funeral. While there, they become very upset, knock Mudear's coffin over, and end up on the funeral parlor's floor with their mother's body sprawled in front of their laps. Instead of being taken aback by the mishap, "for the first time in their lives since the change, they all [look] Mudear directly in the face, and because she [doesn't] insult them or shoo them off, they [talk] to her. They all [speak] from the hurt in their hearts" (Ansa, *Ugly Ways* 268). Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth use the opportunity to voice to Mudear all of the feelings they were hesitant to reveal to her when she was alive. Their revelations are based on a conversation they have immediately before going to the funeral home and that, actually, precipitates the trip. The daughters have an argument about their and society's views of how a mother should be. During their discussion, Emily observes that

'It's like as long as we all keep talking and thinking like every black mother in the world is this great wonderful self-sacrificing matriarch. . . .it's like as long as we don't think about our mothers as anything but these huge black breasts oozing chocolate milk on demand, we keep all our demons in check.' (232)

Indeed, she and her sisters concede that they and society may have lofty and unrealistic ideas regarding motherhood. This concession leads to the daughters admitting that, to a certain extent, Mudear did help them with her adages and wisdom; her help was "just the basic, the real deal, the bottom line without the hand-holding, without the sympathy, without the 'umph, umph' that [they went] to each other for" (235) and that society suggests an atypical mother provide. Because of their realization about motherhood, Betty, Emily and Annie Ruth's

communion with Mudear at the funeral home becomes cathartic with them vowing no longer to be mad at her and to work on being "happy and peaceful and appreciative and joyful" (270)--establishing the balance in their lives they thought was missing because of her not nurturing them as they assumed she should.

Though the daughters make this proclamation, it is not until they have a reciprocal conversation and one-on-one communion with their mother that this balance is truly finally established. In *Taking After Mudear*, Mudear returns in the form of a cat to the secular world. The purpose for her return is so she may take Annie Ruth's daughter "under [her] wings" (Ansa, *Taking After Mudear* 233). Annie Ruth, Emily, and Betty thwart Mudear's scheme, and a climatic scene including a confrontation between Mudear's spirit, Ernest, Betty, Emily, Annie Ruth, and Annie Ruth's baby occurs. During the encounter, Ernest admits the role he played in Mudear's mistreatment of the daughters, and Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth finally stand up to their mother as well as let her know that they forgive her. Consequently, Mudear's spirit turns into a "glowing spinning swirl" (281) that Ernest dives into, and they both disappear, leaving their daughters with the

collective memory . . . that Poppa had finally, staunchly stood up for his girls and had made sure that they would be safe, as safe as he could make them. That his granddaughter could grow up and move on with her life without the fear that her mad peculiar grandmother would be haunting her for her entire existence. That his baby girl could raise her own daughter without the interference of ghosts of the past. That his oldest two daughters might actually have a shot at happiness and peace. (283)

The scene allows Mudear's spirit and her daughters to commune as Ansa's other novels' spirits and protagonist do, and the outcome is similar. *Taking After Mudear* ends with Annie Ruth, Emily, and Betty feeling "stronger and surer of themselves than they had ever been" (284). Through their communion with Mudear and their forgiving her during it, they finally relieve themselves of the discord in their lives and establish a sense of balance and harmony.

Taking After Mudear and *Ugly Ways* continue the narrative established in Ansa's other novels concerning the African-American woman's search for acceptance in the twentieth and twenty-first century South. Echoing many of her literary contemporaries, Ansa suggests that in order for African-American women to achieve that acceptance, a coalescence between the sacred and spiritual worlds must exist. In *Taking After Mudear* and *Ugly Ways* as in the other texts in Ansa's canon, the spiritual connection consists of ancestral communion. Although Mudear does not act as a spiritual guide as Ansa's other spirits do, she still functions in a similar role: It is in death that Mudear finally provides voice to the circumstances precipitating her change and the change's aftermath as well as to the African-American women whom she represents. Additionally, although she does not impart guidance and wisdom in the same manner that her spiritual counterparts do, her daughters' interactions with her are still transformative. Though the argument may be made that when Mudear is alive she emotionally neglects her daughters, her living her life as she defines it also helps them see that they need not rely on others to define themselves. In truth, Mudear is an enigma: Although she symbolizes what may happen to an African-American woman if she is pigeonholed and her personal freedoms stifled, she also may be seen as an exemplar for her daughters and the African-American women whom she communes with and she and her daughters represent. Through Mudear's challenging patriarchal society's ideas regarding gender roles, she demonstrates what it means for an African-American woman to reclaim her power and agency and truly be "a woman in her own shoes."

CONCLUSION

A connected narrative suggestive of the African-American woman's struggles to survive in the twentieth and twenty-first century South is present in Ansa's novels. That survival is made possible by the inclusion of African traditions, specifically ancestral communion, in her Eurocentric experience. That struggle is also reflective of the social, cultural, and historical factors that have shaped twentieth century African-American women's writing, including the Black women's literary renaissance of the 1970s and its focus on the African-American woman's experience in White America. Ansa writes against this backdrop, for these factors seem to influence her fictionalization of the Black woman's quest for self-identity with her characters moving from a dichotomous existence to a possible hybridity.

In fact, each novel in Ansa's canon reveals aspects of her move along a trajectory involving the move toward autonomy. *Baby of the Family*, the first of Ansa's texts, is similar to a traditional bildungsroman. Nevertheless, in order to demonstrate what it means to grow up an African-American female in the South, Ansa problematizes Lena's coming-of-age process. By Lena being born with a caul that gifts her with the ability to commune with spirits, the prospect of the spiritual and secular worlds being coalesced for her is provided. Furthermore, through Lena's communion with spirits such as the slave Rachel, Ansa continues the oral tradition that is present in the works of many African-American women writers of telling the story of the marginalized. This continuation adds to the intertextuality of African-American women's literature as that literature attempts to challenge patriarchal views as well as disrupt monolithic representations of the black female self. In fact, the argument may be made that Lena represents the choice Black women have of embracing the duality of the African and Eurocentric worlds. However, and possibly again representative of many Black women, by the time the novel concludes and Lena reaches maturation, she remains ambivalent to her spiritual and secular identities.

A progression may be seen in Ansa's novels, for while the young Lena denies her duality, her adult self embraces it. That embracement is showcased in *The Hand I Fan With*. As a result of Lena's communion with Herman, another spirit, she establishes a balance between the spiritual and secular worlds and becomes able to define her life based on her own terms and not the ones ascribed to her by the citizens of Mulberry, symbolic of patriarchal society. Additionally, she gives voice to Herman's experience. In allowing Lena to do so, Ansa accentuates the significance of connecting the present to the past as well as continues her contribution to the intertextuality of African-American women's literature and its tradition of providing authorial voice to the previously marginalized. Moreover, through Lena, Ansa demonstrates that for an African-American woman to survive in patriarchal society she must not deny her identity, but instead embrace the spiritual and secular: her two selves. The advantages of the Black woman's acceptance of African traditions in her life as a means of survival are echoed in *You Know Better* as are the ideas of oral tradition and giving voice to the voiceless. Thus, as a result of the protagonists' willing acceptance of spiritual interventions, the novel's main characters, too, achieve equilibrium in their lives.

Taking After Mudear and *Ugly Ways* maintain the suggestion that in order for African-American women to achieve self acceptance a coalescence between the sacred and spiritual worlds must exist. Although Mudear does not act as a spiritual guide as Ansa's other spirits do, she still functions in a similar role: It is in death that Mudear finally provides voice to the circumstances precipitating her change and the change's aftermath in addition to the African-American women whom she represents. Additionally, although she does not impart guidance and wisdom in the same manner that her spiritual counterparts do, her daughters' interactions with her are still transformative. Though the argument may be made that when Mudear is alive she emotionally neglects her daughters, her living her life as she defines it also helps them see that they need not rely on others to define themselves.

This study has several implications for literary criticism. With Ansa's novels, she offers a unique contribution to an understanding of the close relationship between Black women's fiction and folklore, focusing, in particular, on the novels' protagonists establishing a balance in their lives through the African tradition of ancestral communion. In the course of that focus, Ansa encourages the reader to question prevailing myths and stereotypes--those present in white as well as black societies--and presents African-American women with an alternative to the representations of the black female self that patriarchal society has provided them. For Ansa, that alternative is comprised of the duality of being both African and American. As a result, her characters evolve from one text to the next as they move towards an autonomous self. That self cannot be positively categorized. Instead, it is a hybrid self reflecting a coalescence between Africa and America. By embracing the hybridity, African-American women become able to define themselves as opposed to allowing others to define them. Ansa's use of elements from the Western tradition and folklore suggests that her texts gesture towards multiple genealogical sources, thereby resisting essentialist notions of a singularly constituted identity or African-only past. Additionally, Ansa's proposal of such an alternative looks back on the practices of her literary foremothers, for as Barbara Smith points out, "Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share."¹ These shared existences prompt African-American women writers to connect the African-American present to the African past as a means of paying homage as well as an offerance of a survival tactic for Black women in white patriarchal society. Ansa may be considered a vanguard, however, for she devotes her entire canon to the interrelation between the spiritual and secular worlds in African-American literature and the lives of African-American women, in general. Nevertheless, even though Ansa does so, she and her novels are rarely discussed. Thus,

¹ See Barbara Smith, 'Towards a Black Feminist Criticism,' *The New Feminist Criticism*. New York: Pantheon, 1985:174. Print.

this study contributes to the conversation concerning Ansa's canon and contemporary Black women's fiction, for the study underscores that because of how nuanced Ansa's writing is, especially with regard to the complex Black female voice, she makes contemporary literature, literature that is often overlooked, relevant in the continuum of the Black woman's ongoing struggle to survive in Eurocentric society. Her canon demands a rethinking of black female identity and the public and private spaces in which black women find themselves.

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