

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: "SOMETIMES FOLK NEED MORE": BLACK WOMEN WRITERS DWELLING IN THE BEYOND

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The 1970s were a prolific era for Black women's writing. During what is now referred to as the Black Women's Literary Renaissance, Black women writers worked to center Black women's experiences in American and African American literary "traditions" that had theretofore excluded them. This project examines how more recent writing by Black women signifies on the issues and concerns that defined the Renaissance, particularly issues of historical recovery and Black male sexism. Despite the progressive nature of the Renaissance, Black women consistently found that their work was at odds with what Farah Jasmine Griffin calls, "the promise of protection," propagated by Black Nationalism. In response to this patriarchal promise, writers like Toni Morrison, for example, created characters, who like Sula Peace, chose a space of solitude over the patriarchal offer of "protection." I argue that contemporary Black women writers are re-thinking spaces of solitude, and instead

proposing a “promise of partnership” that is grounded in a critical gender consciousness.

“Sometimes Folk Need More”: Black Women Writers Dwelling in the Beyond” is an interdisciplinary study of *reformed partnership* in the cultural productions of four contemporary Black women writers. Appropriating Homi Bhabha’s concept of “dwelling in the beyond,” I discuss how these writers imagine a productive and secure space for intra-racial, heterosexual dialogue in Toni Morrison’s, *Paradise*, Erna Brodber’s, *Louisiana*, Kasi Lemmons’ film, *Eve’s Bayou*, and Danzy Senna’s short story, “The Land of Beulah.” Each of these texts suggest that not only do promises of protection leave characters needing “something more,” but that previous narratives of kinship and family that were a hallmark of Black women’s Renaissance era writing, leave the characters needing “something more,” as well. As the texts interrogate familial and heterosexual relationships, they consistently conclude that “the more” is a reformed heterosexual partnership that is grounded in unmotivated respect.

“SOMETIMES FOLK NEED MORE”: BLACK WOMEN WRITERS DWELLING
IN THE BEYOND

By

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Preface: “Jump at the Sun”: A Little German Lady and Sula

Women

To refuse to veil one's voice and to start 'shouting', that was really indecent, real dissidence. For the silence of all the others suddenly lost its charm and revealed itself for what it was: a prison without reprieve.

~Assia Djebar, Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade

I'm taking my freedom...I'm livin' my life like it's golden.

~Jill Scott, “Golden”

The paradox of a project focusing on Black women needing something more is that it is not dedicated to a Black woman at all. This project is dedicated to my Oma, Elly Schuldt Boothe, a little German woman whose immense spunk taught me at an early age to always demand more, even if I could not necessarily have it in that instance. The irony of such an assertion is that regrettably, in the 22 years that I knew and adored my grandmother, I never told her how much I admired her spunk. I never knew how. Despite her giving endlessly to others, those who did and did not deserve it, her interior life rarely seemed accessible to me. As I write this, I find myself, perhaps selfishly, wishing I had had even more from her. I wish I had had more access to her interior life—not just little snippets, some of which I have to work incredibly hard to conjure up. I always knew she loved me, because she would often tell me that she loved me as I was leaving her house during our goodbyes. But that knowledge of love did not bridge the silence that I now feel dominated our relationship.

My grandmother lived in and escaped a German work camp during World War II, survived the loss of two children, and reconciled never seeing any of her

family again. After leaving Germany with my grandfather, she remained married to him, yet he was not the man she thought he was. My grandmother had to accept the reality that the fairytale life she dreamed about as a romantic young girl belonged only in the pages of storybooks. Often, she had little to say about herself. Instead my most vivid memories of her are of hustling, and I do mean hustling, to do things and get things for others. And then there are also those memories of her standing in the kitchen, puffing on a cigarette, irritated and cussing about my grandfather or someone else who had rubbed her the wrong way. No, she never told me directly to “jump at the sun,” but everything about the way she lived her life, finding happiness in small things and hollering when things just were not right, said to “jump at the sun.” I inherited her hustle and her hollering.

I just wish I knew more of her. She has “visited” me twice since her passing on September 25, 1997. Both visits were during my pregnancies. After each visit, I cried—uncontrollable crying for a woman who rarely cries. The second visit, on December 14, 2005, which I remember the most clearly, had next to no dialogue. I entered her backyard and found her working in a far corner, something I had not seen her do since I was a small child. I don’t think she spoke, but she motioned that I had forgotten to close the gate, which was one of the many small infractions that would set my grandfather off. For whatever odd reason, she strode over to that side of the yard and began to jump the fence. Her jump was not made with the agility and lightness of a youth, but it was something I could easily imagine her doing—even past 70 she possessed a youthfulness of body and spirit that surpassed some young

adults. The visit ended with me picking up sheets of paper from the lawn filled with poetic prose eulogizing her. And then came the tears, really the sobbing.

I know little about the interpretation of dreams—by interpretation I mean the folkloric, not the Freudian. I am nonetheless confident in my interpretation. I am certain that she was not only telling me to “jump at the sun,” but to also be sure that the child I was carrying would know how to do so too (and maybe she was also offering some pre-consolation for my doctor’s visit the next day when I would be told that the child I just knew this dream was confirming was a girl, was in fact going to be another boy!). Perhaps most importantly, she wanted me to be sure that my children had full access to my interior life. And perhaps she wanted me to know that interior lives do not have to be on display in order for others to have access to them. I say perhaps, because that assertion does not stop me from wanting more of her interior life. Finally, after the short time we had with her after learning she had an advanced-stage cancer and the awful way my grandfather and her children’s relationship disintegrated in her final days, she also wanted me to see her life as fulfilled and not tragic.

While my life as a Black woman has much to do with why I produced the research project that I have produced, there is also an unexpected factor—a little German woman who hustled and hollered. I did not know any Black women who represented “towers of strength,” as Trudier Harris calls them, until I was well into adulthood. I must note that while I have always perceived my mother to be a strong woman, I never considered her strength in a racialized manner largely due to her “white” phenotype and general sensibilities that exude a multicultural and multiracial

consciousness, rather than a “Black” consciousness. So then, I did not encounter so-called strong Black women until graduate school. I certainly had many and varied experiences with Black women prior to graduate school; those experiences, however, produced little sense of self in me. In fact, my sense of self really took form between the space of my admiration for my Oma, coupled with my enchantment with the Black female characters I encountered in Black women’s writing, and my encounter with what I later called the “Sula Women” during my first year of college.

My enchantment with Sula Peace, the protagonist of Toni Morrison’s novel, *Sula*, was short-lived. The enchantment quickly turned to disappointment once I thought carefully about Sula’s character and determined there was nothing empowering about dying all alone and having nothing but illness to show for your life. This sentiment was heightened during an independent study when I read more Black women’s writing and recognized some common themes: Black women characters consistently seem unfulfilled, they often died tragically, and they did not seem to have productive relationships with Black men, whether a father, husband, brother, or employer. I needed more from these characters, particularly since I had experienced productive relationships with Black men—my father and brother. For this reason, it was a pleasant surprise when almost ten years later contemporary Black women writers who created characters who were not lonely and ill fulfilled my need for something more.

Despite my disappointment with Sula Peace, the women upon whom I bestowed Sula’s namesake occupy a special space in my memory. These women, like my grandmother, had tongues like sailors and let everybody know when they did

not like something, but unlike my grandmother, they had a sense of entitlement—a sense that they were indeed phenomenal women. These women had no fear of leaving men who were intimidated by their entitlement or men who tried to silence their booming voices. I write this very conscious of Trudier Harris’s essay that superhuman black women characters are a disease that produces illness in those around them, but phenomenal is not always about being Maya Angelou’s mythic and superhuman Black woman. You have to love yourself before you can begin to truly love others. That is the lesson Sula Peace learned, and that is the lesson the Sula Women taught me.

Unlike Oma, the Sula Women had a sense that wrongs had to be broadcast beyond the kitchen and telephone conversations. I will never forget how these women almost did not graduate because they plastered warnings across campus about a male student who the university’s judicial council had found guilty of sexual harassment, a man that same judicial council chose not to expel from the university. According to the university, he posed no threat to the larger female student body. The Sula Women recognized that the administration’s irresponsible decision was actually saying that since the assault was upon a Black woman, they felt white women, the much larger female student body, were in no danger.

I was eighteen-years-old then, and until that point, I had never felt a kinship—a sisterhood—with Black women; I had never felt the courage to unveil my voice and shout—to let my repressed inner self out. Black men despised these women who showed me how to shout because they had “big mouths,” and even worse, they slept with White men when they felt like it. They were equally hated by most Black

women because they did not believe in standing by a sexually deviant Black man simply because he was Black. They exemplified a different kind of Sula—a Sula I could embrace.

As I sit and think about the Sula Women and my first year of college, I realize that they not only represented an alternative Sula, they represented an alternative Black woman. Although I self-identified as “Black,” once I realized that I was in fact “Black” (probably much later than most “Black” children), even as a pre-adolescent child, I had the sense that I was always culturally and socially outside of “blackness.” In grade school I was banned from the double-dutch corner due to my lack of rhythm. In my “ghetto”—ghetto in the colloquial sense—middle school I found myself under constant attack from both Black and White students with whom I shared nothing in common. My college prep high school was safe, but I nonetheless did not fit the militant, race consciousness profiles of other Black students, and while I was not taunted, I continued to feel like an outsider. When I arrived at college, I thought I was perhaps paranoid when it seemed that small groups (Denison University had no large groups of Black students) were observing me from a distance. It was not long before I learned that these small groups were indeed discussing me, or at least they were debating whether I was one of those Black folk who did not “associate.”

Having arrived on campus several weeks early for volleyball pre-conditioning, and being the only Black woman on the team, I had apparently disappointed my fellow Black students when I chose to eat lunch with White people. My failure to sit at the “Black table” in the dining hall and hangout with Black people, spurred a visit from the “chief-minister-of-blackness” to determine whether I was a “sistah” or a

sellout. My point here is that the Sula Women were never concerned about my Black authenticity. Having the benefit of a twelve-year retrospective, I realize that they themselves were not “authentically” Black in the eyes of our more authentic Black sisters and brothers, though perhaps tolerated until they really unleashed their voices and began shouting. In addition to sleeping with White men, at least half of the Sula Women had Diasporic roots, they were mostly middle class, and they were either from large, metropolitan cities, or they had traveled outside of the U.S. Their hybrid ethnic and cultural identities coupled with their loud, threatening voices prepared me to finally enter a space—a home space—in my doctoral program in which race finally mattered much differently among my cohorts.

I discuss Oma and the Sula Women alongside my own race and gender coming of age, because this dissertation delves into Black women’s literary and filmic characters’ need for “something more” on a variety of levels. So while the exigency for this project is spurred by a new paradigm emerging in contemporary Black women artists’ cultural productions, I could not have identified and articulated that new trend in the manner that I do in the following pages without having experienced what I recount here. Furthermore, the line “jump at the sun” that I borrow from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is an apt iteration of the “dwelling in the beyond” that titles this project. Jumping at the sun, like dwelling in the beyond, addresses the need to not only think about race and gender in the temporal mode that these phrases suggest, but to also think about spatial implications. In this sense, both phrases indicate a sense of hopefulness that the characters in the texts I examine do not have to be tethered within spatial or temporal

boundaries that prohibit them from imagining a home space that is welcoming and secure where they too can live life like it's golden.

Dedication

Major Gilbert A. Boothe and Elly L. Schuldt-Boothe
My grandparents. Despite the very different geographies that produced you, you both
inspired me to take on this journey.
You are always here in spirit.

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Every great accomplishment incurs debt. This project is indebted to the following individuals and institutions. I could not have completed this project without the steadfast love and support of my family. My parents, Edward and Dianna Poindexter, continue to make sacrifices that allow me to grow. I am blessed by their selflessness and wisdom. My husband and greatest ally, Andy, has embarked on so many journeys with me, and I was graced with his support and unrelenting partnership during this long journey. Furthermore, his insistence that we must balance life with “play,” assured that my mind was preserved during this arduous process—at least most of the time. My bundles of joy, Seth and Isaac, are my greatest accomplishments, and they ensure that I never forget the most important things in life. I am privileged to have in-laws, Barb and John, who treat me like a daughter. I am particularly grateful to Barb for raising a profeminist son. Along with my parents and in-laws, my children were often left in the trusted care of my siblings, Jason and Natalie, so that I could work without them on my lap.

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Introduction: Toward a Black Feminist Partnership

People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.
~James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village"

Sula Peace generated consternation during the shaping of my own Black feminist identity. I did not want to embrace Sula's loneliness; I did not see anything heroic about it. My position on Sula is ironic, because I obviously found something admirable about her behavior when I bequeathed my college cohorts her name. What I now realize is that *choosing* solitude in 1973 was indeed heroic, just as the choices that the Sula Women made twenty years later in 1993 were also brave. The manner in which I re-define Sula Peace through the Sula Women is a signifying convention in Black feminist criticism, and the Sula Women are a contemporary appropriation of Sula Peace that participates in a shifting Black feminist aesthetic at the cusp of the twenty-first century.

This project examines how the cultural productions of four contemporary Black women writers contemplate the possibility and limitations of intra-racial, heterosexual partnership as an alternative to solitude. The shifting Black feminist aesthetic, then, is rooted in the sense that there is something more than owning your loneliness as Sula Peace did. Contemporary Black women writers are re-thinking Sula's loneliness and instead considering how *reforming* partnership between Black women and Black men might construct a more productive home space for working toward a "beyond race" state.

I will layout the historical context for a reformed partnership and its evolution in Black women's writing more extensively in a moment, but first I want to present a cultural example that highlights the exigency for this project. In his 1990 introduction to his much needed and important critical anthology, *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asserts that "Much has been made—too much—of the supposed social animosities between black men and women and the relation between the commercial success of the black women's literary movement and the depiction of black male sexism" (2). Gates justifies his dismissive commentary when he goes on to suggest "Perhaps some media commentators have been titillated by the notion of a primal black fratricide-sororicide" (2). Such an uncritical and dismissive comment on the issue is ironic during an era of intense debate on speaking for "others."¹ It is true that specific Black women writers tended to be accused consistently of inaccurate and even malicious depictions of Black men.² The controversy over Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is perhaps the most famous instance of this.³ It is also true that every Black male reader/critic did not find Black women writers' depiction of Black men troubling; Michael Awkward, for example, has made a concerted effort to map out a space for Black male feminists within Black feminist criticism. These truths, however, do not mean that the "social animosities"

¹ See for example, Anne DuCille's "The Occult of Black Womanhood" in *Skin Trade*, Linda Alcoff's "The Problem of Speaking for Others," or Michael Awkward's "The Black Man's Place(s) in Black Feminist Criticism," all published during the 1990s.

² Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, and Ntozake Shange were singled out most frequently for committing various crimes against Black men/Black manhood.

³ For critical discussions of reactions to *The Color Purple* see Deborah McDowell's "Reading Family Matters," David Wyatt's "Alice Walker," and Jacqueline Bobo's "Sifting Through the Controversy: Reading *The Color Purple*."

can be made null and void so simply. We can contrast Gate's comments to Deborah McDowell's in "Reading Family Matters," written in 1989, just one year prior to the publication of *Reading Black*.

McDowell expresses the opposite position of Gates. She insists that she writes because "Mainly, we see men telling *their* stories about the writings of black women but seldom a counter-response from a woman" (119). McDowell's exigency is echoed in Ann DuCille's essay, "Phallusies of Interpretation: Engendering the Black Critical 'I'" in 1993.⁴ DuCille follows suit and addresses "the supposed social animosities between black men and black women" as she examines "what's at stake in a race-conscious, gender-bound criticism in which 'black is beautiful' is the only truth—the sole story...we are allowed to tell" (63). On the one hand, Gates, a Black man, is suggesting an issue is moot and over-hyped, while on the other hand, McDowell and DuCille, two Black women, are arguing that the issue has really not even begun to be addressed appropriately, because Black women's responses to the issues have not been interrogated adequately. My point here is not to imply overt sexism on Gates part, but rather to note the position of power he assumes when he rules the issue void.

The opposing positions I address here are significant to the aims of this project. The exhortations in McDowell's and DuCille's critical scholarship in the early 1990s is inherent in the creative works produced by Black women during that decade, and can even be found earlier in such work as Barbara Smith's pivotal essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977) and the foundational anthology *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's*

⁴ This essay was republished in DuCille's collection of essays, *Skin Trade*.

Studies (1982). Black women were neither ready then to stop addressing the issue, nor are they willing now to concede that the social animosity is a myth propagated by a white media. Furthermore, the fact that Gates was obviously *listening* to his Black female cohorts (as evidenced in multiple editorial projects on Black women's writing), but not always *hearing* what they were saying, is indicative of the dialogue that is integral in reforming partnership. The writers studied in this project consider the possibility and limitations of a dialogue that works toward correcting the damaged rapport caused by too many monologues—which in this case become conversations with one's self. In doing so, their work might release Black America from at least one of the trappings of history that the James Baldwin epigraph asserts is inescapable. Ultimately, despite messy, complicated endings, these writers present texts that are hopeful that there is an escape from a vexed history and they make it clear that a critical gender consciousness is a prerequisite for that escape.

“*Sometimes Folk Need More*” is a study of *reformed partnership* in the work of four contemporary Black women writers: Toni Morrison's, *Paradise*, Erna Brodber's, *Louisiana*, Danzy Senna's short story, “The Land of Beulah,” and Kasi Lemmons' film, *Eve's Bayou*. The title *Sometimes Folk Need More* is a line from Lone DuPres in *Paradise*, a line that symbolizes not only the way that solitude does not sustain characters, but also speaks to a need to move beyond a kinship-centered historical recovery paradigm prevalent in Black women's writing during the 1970s and 1980s. Both solitude and kinship-centered historical recovery leave characters needing “something more.” The paradigm shift that “sometimes folk need more” invokes suggests that Black female characters “need more” than family genealogies

to sustain them, and that foregrounding kinship and community have failed them in significant ways. One of the aims of this project is to examine how some contemporary Black women writers work to deconstruct the notion of race-based communal and/or familial harmony that many texts sought during the Black Women's Literary Renaissance.⁵ Instead, the texts I analyze point to fissures and tensions, particularly those surrounding intersections of gender and race that emerge when respect between men and women is not achieved. If half the "community" or family remains subjugated, then the beyond race rhetoric that has become popular (and male dominated) during the last decade can never hope to be more than a dream deferred.

The "something more," then, becomes a reformed partnership that is grounded in a critical gender consciousness that allows both female and male characters to "dwell in the beyond." With these writers' hopefulness in mind, I have deliberately selected the term *reformed partnership* to frame this project. I find "partnership" to be the most compelling term to describe what contemporary Black women writers seek. In a partnership each member is liable—each partner has a responsibility and investment in the success of the enterprise. In this case, the enterprise is a heterosexual relationship that is conscious of each partner's raced *and* gendered subjectivity. This partnership is not merely a corporate endeavor and bound by legal contracts and it does not pose the same commitment as civil contracts like marriage. Instead, it is a relationship that is invested in and characterized by an unmotivated respect that results in mutual cooperation, and an inherent sense that both parties are

⁵ In her work on Black women and migration Darlene Clark Hine notes that the family and domestic space are often overlooked reasons as to why Black women migrate.

ultimately responsible for the success of the partnership. Furthermore, “reformed” is defined as, “to improve by alteration, correction of error, or removal of defects; put into better form or condition...to put an end to (a wrong)” and “a change for the better; an improvement.”⁶ When put together, *reformed partnership* is a platonic or sexual relationship between Black women and Black men that works toward repairing the discord that erupted during the Black Nationalist era. The method for repair is a critical gender consciousness that is grounded in unmotivated respect, which in turn produces the mutual cooperation and responsibility that puts the fractured relationship into repaired form. Reforming partnership ultimately provides an opportunity to dwell in the beyond. It is important to note that reformed partnership is approached differently in each text. The context of the relationship varies in each text—sexual, platonic, or abstract and metaphorical. The method of repair, however, remains constant in each text regardless of whether the partnership is framed by marriage, business, or community.

In order to effectively pursue a reformed partnership, Morrison, Brodber, Lemmons, and Senna must interrogate what it means to be “Black” at the close of the twentieth century, as they imagine what a critical gender consciousness might look like. It is imperative that their work consider contemporary de/constructions of Black identity, because for many Black women activists “both antiracism and antisexism [are] pressing battles to be waged simultaneously.”⁷ Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis emphasize that both sexual and racial politics were important, interlocking

⁶ American Heritage Dictionary. Online

⁷ Kimberly Springer, Living for the Revolution, (Durham: Duke UP, 2005) 31.

factors for most Black women activists during the 1970s, because they “did not separate their fight for women’s rights from issues affecting the entire black community.”⁸ Thus, the work of Morrison, Brodber, Lemmons, and Senna considers the affect of what I call “beyond race” discourse on Black intra-racial heterosexual relationships.

The civil rights and Black Power discourse that infused Black cultural criticism during the 1960s and 1970s was replaced by a beyond race discourse in the 1980s and 1990s. As a cultural studies project that focuses on contemporary Black women’s writing and a shifting Black feminist aesthetic, this project privileges the popular culture perspective on moves beyond race. The late 1960s and the 1970s were the age of Black Pride. A *soul aesthetic*, or what literary and cultural critic Wahneema Lubiano calls “the cultural arm of Black Power,”⁹ influenced the music, poetry and drama, art, and the physical appearance of Black Americans. In response to the persisting segregation, violence, and inequality, soul functioned as a deeply rooted folk aesthetic that was invested in solidarity, community, empowerment, and the survival of what William Van Deburg calls “an exclusive racial confraternity,” even though such homogeneity was a myth. The post-soul era, as the 1980s and 1990s have been dubbed, are marked by a break with the homogenous black aesthetic that dominated the previous era. Desegregation, deindustrialization and African Diasporic migration to the United States are key factors in the epistemological shifts

⁸ Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis, To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans, (New York: Oxford UP, 2000) 553.

⁹ Wahneema Lubiano, “Standing in the for the State: Black Nationalism and ‘Writing’ the Black Subject,” Is it Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism, ed. Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002) 156-164.

that mark the post-soul era. During the post-soul era, cultural critics in academic institutions and popular culture began critiquing and deconstructing notions of “blackness” that were homogenous and perpetuated the myth of a monolithic Black identity. The post-soul era, then, is an era that considered critically the efficacy and usefulness of identity politics and authenticity.

For the purpose of this project I find the *post-soul aesthetic*, an aesthetic cultivated in the post-civil rights and post-Black Power era, to be a useful concept for approaching and understanding the role played by race and gender in the texts I examine. African American cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal borrows the term *post-soul* from Black popular culture critic Nelson George. Neal expands George’s definition and uses it “to describe the political, social, and cultural experiences of the African-American community since the end of the civil rights and Black Power movements.” Neal specifically locates the beginnings of the post-soul era with the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* case in 1978, and he identifies “children of soul” as people born between the 1963 March on Washington and the *Bakke* case (3). The *post-soul aesthetic*, then, is a language that Neal argues allows him “to better critique the postmodern realities that confront the African-American ‘community’ ... as it renders many ‘traditional’ tropes of blackness dated and even meaningless” (2-3). Examining how Morrison, Brodber, Lemmons, and Senna interrogate blackness through a post-soul aesthetic is critical to understanding these writers’ pursuit of “something more” than kinship and family genealogies that falter over time. Ultimately, in order to deconstruct traditional notions of African American community, it is necessary to also interrogate constructions of “blackness,” as

espoused by Neal and other cultural critics, the post-soul aesthetic provides a framework to consider the complexities and multiplicity of blackness. Furthermore, such an interrogation “of the fluidity of the communities to which we belong and the relative freedom to explore these identities” (177) is a necessary component to understanding how to dwell in the beyond.

The concept of dwelling in the beyond arises out of my own appropriation of Homi Bhabha’s use of that phrase as a heuristic device for understanding and embracing the in-betweenness of the post colonial subject.¹⁰ I invoke the idea of dwelling in the beyond as an imaginative blueprint for Black women and Black men to navigate the present without harping on the past or deferring to the future. The beyond in each text, then, is a raced geography, but it is one that the characters can negotiate more hopefully and successfully through a critical gender consciousness that produces unmotivated respect despite ideological, social, and cultural differences. As an imaginative blueprint, then, dwelling in the beyond privileges the present and creates the possibility for a messy, but homely space where one can do as Toni Morrison advocates in her Nobel Prize lecture, “take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period.”¹¹ Perhaps in taking the time to do these things, Black America might be able to imagine a home space that is “a-world-in-which-race-does-not-matter”¹² and approach beyond race imaginings more

¹⁰ Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture, (New York: Routledge, 1994) 1-3.

¹¹ Toni Morrison, “Nobel Lecture,” http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html, 7 Dec. 1993.

¹² Toni Morrison, “Home,” The House that Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997) 3.

expansively. The process toward reforming partnership and the home space that emerges is different in each work I examine. Despite the differences, all of these spaces embody a sense of security that is only possible through what Morrison calls “unmotivated respect” for one another’s differences.

This chapter examines the immediate cultural history that precedes these texts, focusing on the years 1965-2000. I consider how the Civil Rights, Black Nationalist, and Black Feminist movements influence themes in these texts, paying close attention to the call and response relationship between these texts and texts produced during the Black Women’s Literary Renaissance (hereafter referred to as BWLR). As informants, I selected two writers, Morrison and Brodber, born before the 1960s and 1970s social movements and two writers, Senna and Lemmons, born in the post-Civil Rights era. I blend the so-called old with the new partly because of Toni Cade Bambara’s insistence that “we keep talking to and arguing with each other in order to clarify our goals and our visions,”¹³ but also because this blending addresses one of the current concerns in Black feminist discourse regarding possible generational rifts between second wave and third wave Black feminists. A multi-generational study provides a space to consider differences and similarities and offers a more nuanced understanding of new directions in contemporary Black feminist thought.

The attention to a reformed partnership in these four texts has much to contribute to literary studies, women’s studies, Black studies, and other fields concerned with power dynamics and the intersection of race, sex, and gender.

¹³ Quoted in Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Conflict and Chorus: Reconsidering Toni Cade’s *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, *Is It Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, ed. Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002) 127.

Moreover, as texts that have received little close analysis, examining these texts provides a broader scope for the understanding of Black women's cultural productions. In many ways, this project is indebted to the cultural work of Toni Morrison. Morrison played a key role in the genesis of the BWLR. During her ten-year editorial tenure at Random House she published Gayl Jones, Angela Davis, and Toni Cade Bambara. She wrote best-selling novels and she inspired a younger generation, particularly Gloria Naylor, and more recently Kasi Lemmons. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. rightly asserts, "Her productivity, vision, and craft established the movement's pace."¹⁴ For these reasons, this project is framed by those contributions.

Historical Overview

While my overview of the cultural history of Black women's lives and scholarship begins in 1965, it is important, however, to note the social and political climate of the preceding decade, 1954-1964, as the events and changes occurring during that decade are critical to the post-1965 era. The 1950s was a period of prosperity and upward mobility for most white Americans. Stable nuclear families and drug-free communities are often nostalgic markers of the 1950s. For most Black Americans across the nation, but particularly in the South, this was however not the case; their lives were framed by rigid racial segregation, the threat of white violence at voting polls, and significant economic disparity. There was massive white resistance to the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* declaration that separate but equal education was unconstitutional—by 1960 only seventeen school systems in the South were desegregated. After the Supreme Court's *Brown II* in 1955

¹⁴ Henry Louis Gates Jr., Introduction, Reading Black, Reading Feminist, (New York: Meridian Book, 1990) 3.

white violence increased, especially at voting polls, and Black protest went into full effect. Between 1954 and 1964 significant acts of racial violence intensified, as in the lynching of Emmett Till (1955), President Eisenhower's ordering federal troops to enforce school desegregation in Little Rock, AR (1957), rioting when James Meredith enrolled at the University of Mississippi (1962), the assassination of Medger Evers in Jackson, MS (1963), the death of four schoolgirls in the bombing of the 16th St. Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL (1963), and the abduction and murder of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner by the Klan in Philadelphia, MS (1964).

Protest and resistance from many brave Americans who championed equality and justice met the racial violence during this decade. Although many black churches and civil organizations had been planning and organizing before Rosa Parks was arrested in 1955 for refusing to give a white man her seat (in the rear) on a Montgomery, Alabama bus, her action is often seen as inaugurating the Civil Rights Movement in 1955. The arrest of Parks catalyzed the Montgomery Bus Boycott. A variety of activist organizations were formed during this decade, including Martin Luther King Jr. and other religious leaders organizing the SCLC and the founding of SNCC. Significant attention was devoted to voter registration, which resulted in a critical Black vote helping to elect John F. Kennedy to office (1960), the twenty-fourth Amendment to the United States Constitution being ratified, the outlawing of the poll tax (1964), and the enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And finally, a critical victory for the movement was Lyndon Johnson's Civil Rights Act of 1964, which is often thought of as the culmination of the civil rights movement.

I begin this cultural history in 1965 for several reasons. First, it is the first year after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the first year that the government asserted Black people had a legal right to vote. Thus, this was a year when Black Americans ideally ought to have been beginning to experience the possibility of cultural assimilation. Second, it begins a decade of race riots, assassinations, and violent resistance to inequality and white supremacy that proved the ideal of equality and justice had not been met through legislation. Third, a memorandum Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote while serving as assistant secretary of labor in the Johnson administration was leaked to the press. The memorandum would later be published as “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” but it is popularly known as the “Moynihan Report.” This report has had a well noted and significant bearing on intra-racial gender relations between Black Americans.

While my intention is not to rehash the various responses to the report, it is important to address briefly the content of the report in order to demonstrate its relationship to reforming partnership. In March of 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan proposed that the Negro family was in jeopardy of never achieving equality if attention was not directed toward the problems of the inner city, specifically the breakdown of the black family that was resulting from juvenile delinquency, drug addiction, and poor performance in school. He urged the Federal government to direct its attention toward “the establishment of a stable Negro family structure” if it ever hoped for Black Americans to have the potential to achieve equality. Moynihan cites dissolved marriages, illegitimate births, female-headed families, and increased welfare dependency as proof of the Black family’s instability. He attributes this

unstable family structure to a dehumanizing U.S. slave system, liberty but not equality after emancipation, urbanization, unemployment and poverty, and the wage system. According to Moynihan all of these factors are felt most forcefully by the Black male who is emasculated and therefore denied his “presumed” place in the social unit of American life—at the head of the household. Numerous Black sociologists, historians, and activists were infuriated by Moynihan’s claims despite the fact that much of his analysis was based on the work of earlier black scholars, like E. Franklin Frazier. Although black social scientists and black historians’ opposition to Moynihan’s conclusions were warranted, such opposition obscured the ultimate goal of the report, the elimination of poverty and unemployment in the black community through intense enforcement of civil rights laws.

Of all the noted concerns, the concern with female-headed families has the most relevance for this project. The report emphasizes the destruction inherent in matriarchal structure: “In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.”¹⁵ The negative attention devoted to a black matriarchy elicited the greatest critical response out of all of his claims. For many male scholars, acknowledging a black matriarchy disrupted what literary scholar Deborah McDowell calls the “black

¹⁵ “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” U.S. Department of Labor, <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm>

family romance.”¹⁶ Historians like Herbert Gutman and John Blassingame argued that Moynihan was ignorant of the historical prevalence of two-parent black homes. Black women scholars, especially feminists, were perturbed for a different reason; they took issue with the connection that was being made between race, gender, and class. Patricia Hill Collins’ point in *Black Feminist Thought* resonates with Francis Beale, Pauli Murray, Diane K. Lewis, and Brenda Eichelberger’s refutations of the myth of Black matriarchs.¹⁷

Black women’s failure to conform to the cult of true womanhood can then be identified as one fundamental source of Black cultural deficiency...being employed when Black men have difficulty finding steady work exposes African-American women to the charge that Black women emasculate Black men by failing to be submissive, dependent, “feminine” women. (Hill 74)

A line from Huey P. Newton’s 1967 essay, “Fear and Doubt” reinforces the dangerous matriarch thesis and affirms the alarm raised by Hill Collins.

he [the black man] feels that he is something less than a man....Often his wife (who is able to secure a job as a maid, cleaning for white people) is the breadwinner. He is, therefore, viewed as quite worthless by his wife and children. He is ineffectual both in and out of the home. He cannot provide for, or protect his family....Society will not acknowledge him as a man” (qtd. in Matthews 240-41)

¹⁶ Deborah E. McDowell, “The Changing Same”: Black Women’s Literature, Criticism, and Theory, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995).

¹⁷ Francis Beale, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” in *The Black Woman*; Pauli Murray, “The Liberation of Black Women” in *Words of Fire*; Diane K. Lewis, “A Response to Inequality: Black Women, Racism and Sexism,” in *Signs*, and Brenda Eichelberger, “Myths About Feminism.”

The sense that Black women who work, most often because they have no choice, emasculate Black men and ultimately endanger Black America framed the gendered power dynamics that constituted a significant element of the Black Nationalist movement.

The concern with economically and socially dominant Black females that Moynihan raised coincided with the re-birth of Black Nationalism during the mid-1960s. Increasing white backlash and violence toward racial integration and civil rights legislation nurtured growing resistance to King's dream of racial integration through nonviolent resistance. Such resistance created an appealing space for a younger generation of civil rights workers to gather a following based on active resistance and separatism that opposed King's passive and integrationist agenda. Malcolm X's 1964 declaration that "Revolutions are never based upon love-your-enemy, and pray-for-those-who-despitefully-use-you. And revolutions are never waged by singing 'We Shall Overcome.' Revolutions are based on bloodshed" was an emblazoned precursor to the "Black Power"¹⁸ rhetoric that would reign for the next decade. The "Black Power" slogan was adopted officially in 1966 when the chairman of SNCC, Stokely Carmichael, popularized it when SNCC and other organizations completed James Meredith's one-man "march against fear" after he was shot and wounded. While Black women and Black men often worked side-by-side and shared leadership positions during this decade, there was also significant heterosexual antagonism that was evidenced in literary texts, literary criticism, Black

¹⁸ Darlene Clark Hine et. al, *African-American Odyssey*, 2nd ed., (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003) 545.

feminist discourse, and in the popular media over the next two decades.¹⁹ The fundamental debates and concerns within Black feminist discourse focused on historical recovery, Black women's dual subjectivity, Black male sexism, and to a lesser degree, the exclusionist nature of white feminism. Literary texts by Black women writers reflected these tensions and developments.

Talking Back: Black Feminist Discourse

The 1970s were a prolific era for Black feminist cultural productions. Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* were all published in 1970. These texts initiated a call for the critical examination of Black women's lives and Black women's cultural productions. In that same year, the literary calls were echoed in culture when the first copy of *Essence—A Magazine for Today's Black Woman* hit the newsstands and Angela Davis made the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List. These cultural moments and the politics that circumscribe them resonate with the "Black feminist criticism" that Barbara Smith insists is imperative in her groundbreaking essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." This era marks a point when a critical mass of Black women writers, activists, intellectuals, and students began insisting, like Smith, that the "politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers." Their insistence produced a wealth of literary texts during a period that Joanne M. Braxton calls "the literary rebirth of

¹⁹ For historical analyses of the heterosexual antagonism prevalent during this period see Kimberly Springer's edited collection *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: Contemporary African American Women's Activism* and Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin's *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*.

black women writers,” or, what scholars often now refer to as, the Black Women’s Literary Renaissance.

The BWLR contested an accepted sense of “tradition” in American and African American literature that “all the women are white” and “all the blacks are men—a tradition that Gloria T. Hull’s edited collection of essays, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (1982), works to dismantle. Following Mary Helen Washington’s declaration that “tradition” is “a word that nags the feminist critic. A word that has so often been used to exclude or misrepresent women,”²⁰ Black women writers set out to make the lives of Black women central, rather than marginal in their texts. Paule Marshall calls this working “to set the record straight.” Two noted ways Black women writers worked toward centrality was by re-writing histories that neglected, obscured, and misrepresented Black women and by interrogating Black male sexism. The need to “set the record straight” was catalyzed by an “American” literary canon that ignored a black presence and by an African American literary “tradition” that was dominated by Black men who refused to see Black women’s writing as falling within “the tradition.” In *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, Marjorie Pryse calls Black women metaphorical conjure women, or “mediums” who “exploring the apparent anomaly of connection within a heritage of separation, ...challenge the authenticity and accuracy of an American history that failed to record their voices and a literary history—written by black men as well as white men—that

²⁰ Mary Helen Washington, “‘The Darkened Eye Restored’: Notes Toward a Literary History of Black Women,” *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke UP, 1994) 32.

has compounded the error of that neglect” (4). Black women novelists, poets, playwrights, and critics took on the task of debunking negative images of Black women as mammies, matriarchs, Jezebels, and Sapphires in literature, popular media, and scholarship. In doing so, the texts depict complex Black female characters. Just as Alice Walker contemplates how her mother's garden served as a creative outlet for her in “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens,” many other Black women writers also set out to correct the incomplete and inaccurate representations of Black women. Their work challenges a sense of the past from which Black women had been excluded, ignored, and misrepresented.

One approach Black women writers took to recovering a usable past was by constructing narratives that focused on kinship, family genealogies, and community. This work goes on in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975); Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977); Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983); and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982). These texts have a particular investment in reconnecting to ancestral pasts and they highlight the importance of recording it. Literary critic Barbara Christian notes that Black women writers begin looking to the ancestors and ancestral knowledge in order to create a space of centrality, safety, and community for Black women.²¹ Africa also became an important motif in Black women's journeys and struggles. The international vision of Black women's experience facilitated a newfound mobility for Black women in such texts as *Praise Song*, *Tar Baby*, and *The Color Purple*.

²¹ Barbara Christian, “Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women’s Fiction,” *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) 244-45.

In addition to setting the record straight by re-writing history, lost and forgotten texts were being reprinted during the 1980s in such series as, the Beacon Black Women Writers Series, Rutgers' American Women Writers Series, and the Oxford-Schomburg forty-volume Library of nineteenth century Black Women's Writing. The historical recovery texts and the reprint texts were complemented by a necessary and heretofore absent critical examination of Black female characters in writing by both Black women and Black men. Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970), Mary Helen Washington's, *Black-Eyed Susans* (1975) and *Invented Lives* (1987), as well as Mari Evans *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation* (1984) are the earliest collections of criticism and literature by Black women. Claudia Tate's, *Black Women Writers at Work* (1983) provides insightful interviews with Black women writers, Barbara Christian's, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition: 1892-1976* (1980) claims a literary tradition for Black women, as does Marjorie Pryse's *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (1985). Hazel V. Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* provides a critical analysis of nineteenth-century Black women's writing and feminist thought that is critical to understanding twentieth and twenty-first century Black women's writing. Cheryl Wall's *Changing our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women* (1989), Joanne Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin's *Wild Women in the Whirlwind* (1989), Michael Awkward's *Inspiriting Influences* (1989), and Houston Baker's *Workings of the Spirit* (1991) continue the dialogue on issues of historical recovery and self-definition in literature by Black women.

In addition to the recovery aspect of the BWLR, a second preoccupation was with interrogating Black male standpoints. Issues of respect and power consistently inscribed the tension between Black female and Black male writers/critics/activists; these issues are reflected in such texts as Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980); Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976); and Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1982). On an internal level, these texts display the tension between Black Nationalism and the emerging dialogue on Black women's roles as activists, leaders, partners, and mothers. On a more public level, these texts fuel what became an extraordinarily public debate in popular, white East Coast literary media and in academic and scholarly productions. Black women writers and critics took issue with the portrayal of Black women in fiction by Black male writers. They were concerned with what some thought of as phallogentric portraiture by Black male writers. A number of Black male writers and critics, conversely, responded that the literature produced by Black women during the BWLR was gynocentric and worked to emasculate Black men.

The success of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* in 1976 and Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* in 1978 catalyzed a rather ugly debate regarding the themes and intent of Black women's writing. Black male critics accused Black women writers of castration, emasculation, being sexually repressed, battering the Black man in return for popular media attention, and being brainwashed by white feminism. Deborah McDowell calls this upwelling the, "black women's

consumption of the fruit of feminist knowledge.”²² Black male scholars and critics like Robert Staples, Mel Watkins, David Bradley, Addison Gayle, Darryl Pinckney, and Ishmael Reed accused Black women writers of being unduly influenced by white feminism and thus being awarded by the white media, which explained Black women’s “unprecedented” literary popularity from the 1970s onward.²³ McDowell argues that these responses are grounded in a “family romance” that Black women writers are determined to de-romanticize. Thus, the status of the Black family romance is ultimately at the heart of the debate. The Black male opposition to Black women’s writing consistently reiterated family unity. When Black women writers depicted the heterosexual fissures and negative images of the Black family, especially negative acts performed by Black men, they betrayed the Black “community.” These Black women writers were not only airing Black America’s dirty laundry, so to speak, but they were also contesting sexual hierarchies that the responding male critics apparently did not view as problematic. The bottom line for the male critics was that race allegiance ought to trump awareness along sexual lines.

In “Reading Family Matters,” McDowell argues that the Black male readers of the debate possess gazes that are fixed on themselves—they mourn the black male writers’ loss of status as a result of black women writers’ being “midwived” by white feminists. According to McDowell, such a gaze produces a significant and old dilemma for Black America.

²² McDowell 128.

²³ Staples published a virulent response to Wallace and Shange’s work in his essay, “The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists,” published in The Black Scholar in March/April 1979.

While these male gazes are fixed on black women's texts, in which they seek to find idealized reflections of themselves, they fail to see...the meta-structure that has the naming power and in whose name and interests that power is secured. It is this looming, distant structure orchestrating and dominating this literary battle royal, this already fixed match between black men and black women. And one could argue that this fixed match reproduces an older meta-narrative written in the slave master's hand. In that narrative, as in this, the bodies/texts of black women have become the "battlefield on and over which men, black and white, [fight] to establish actual and symbolic political dominance and to demonstrate masculine" control. This attempt to control both black women's written *bodies* and their *written* bodies must be read and its service to the family plot interpreted, for that plot makes women permanent daughters content to transcribe their father's words. (137)

McDowell's remarks do two things. First, her remarks explain Black women writers' resistance to such an oppressive gaze. More relevant to this project, her remarks speak to the underlying premise of this project—beyond race discourse and dwelling in the beyond.

The urge to refigure the family plot is acted upon in Morrison, Brodber, Senna, and Lemmons' writing. Their writing depicts former constructions of kinship, family, and community by Black writers as problematic, if not detrimental toward any efforts to move beyond race toward a home space providing security regardless of race or gender. Reforming heterosexual partnerships, then, involves locating a secure home space. Post-civil rights cultural productions by black women have been

preoccupied with locating and recuperating a home space for black characters. *Sula*, *Daughters of the Dust*, *No Telephone to Heaven*, *The Color Purple*, and *The Women of Brewster Place*, are just a few examples of Black women's cultural productions that demonstrate a concern about Black America's trouble with finding a home place that Toni Morrison deems "snug and wide open."²⁴ Re-thinking home is key to reforming partnership. By doing so, home as a *space* is over-shadowed by home as a *mutually supportive relationship*. This thinking replaces the previous Black male search for a Black family that is not ruptured.

A Promise of Protection: The Evolution of Partnership

The historical and social context of this project emerges from the gender friction and discord that arose during the transition between the Civil Rights era and the Black Nationalist era. How I define dwelling in the beyond, as well as the trope of partnership that facilitates such a dwelling, is related to how I interpret the ways in which contemporary Black feminist discourse responds to the friction. Much of contemporary Black feminist discourse registers the need to move beyond race, but it is also conscious that such a move can only be made with "our whole army out there dealing with the enemy and not half an army," as Frances Beale contends,²⁵ and as Alice Walker echoes when she defines womanism as someone "committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female."²⁶ The appeal for solidarity espoused by Beale and Walker are dated 1970 and 1974 respectively.

²⁴ Toni Morrison "Home."

²⁵ Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," Ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. (New York: The New P, 1995).

²⁶ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. (1967, San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1983) xi.

Farah Jasmine Griffin provides an insightful analysis of these women's appeals and the friction they are responding to.

In "'Ironies of the Saint': Malcolm X, Black Women, and the Price of Protection" Griffin discusses what she calls "the promise of protection." Her discussion is useful because it offers a clear understanding of why some Black women reacted with vehemence to Malcolm's discourse, why others embraced it, and why some, like Griffin, acknowledge admiration for Malcolm's race politics while critiquing the impact of those politics on Black women and Black men. Furthermore, the phrase, "the promise of protection," provides a practical framework for considering the continuities and discontinuities that emerge between the BWLR and the contemporary moment.

The fact that Black women have been unprotected even in recent U.S. history and that Black men have shared their pain in the sense of their own inability to protect them is well noted. Griffin acknowledges this when she analyzes why a diverse body of Black women could/do find Malcolm X appealing. Like many of his fellow Black male nationalists, Malcolm X believed that Black women ought to occupy a subordinate and subservient position in heterosexual relationships. Griffin notes, however, that the promise of protection that Malcolm offered in return for subordination was one that many heretofore unprotected Black women found compelling; compelling because it created a space for them within the cult of true womanhood. Griffin is quick to point out the pitfalls of this promise for Black women when she argues that while "the woman gets protection; the man acquires a possession." Black women thus continue to be haunted by a past of domination, just

with different players. Griffin asserts that, “Malcolm’s promise of protection assumes a stance of victimization on the part of those who need to be protected without allowing much room for their agency in other spheres” (217). Positioning Black women as victims who need protection ultimately redeems Black men from a legacy in which their masculinity was always “suspect.” As Griffin notes, “Malcolm X’s promise of protection falls under the rubric of the ‘ideology of respectability.’ The protected woman is the ‘respectable’ woman. The man who protects her is the respected man” (219). So, while contention with Black matriarchs eliminates any place for them in the cult of true womanhood, the inability of Black men to provide and protect disallows them a place within the constructed notions of “true manhood.”

The promise of protection is not founded on any sense of mutuality. The respect it harps on is about Black men achieving patriarchal power like their white male counter-parts. Such a promise leaves no space for a partnership to germinate. In the 1970s Black women writers begin responding quite critically to the contradictions inherent in a promise to protect that inevitably stifles and subordinates Black women. In *Sula* (1973), Toni Morrison responds by constructing a Black feminist space of solitude. The patriarchal protection offered by Malcolm is rejected for a self-generated sense of protection. But of course the price, for Sula, is loneliness.

My reaction to *Sula* is driven by a reaction against her loneliness. Sula could not be my hero because I did not want to occupy a space so apart. It is important to note that by loneliness I am not referring solely to the lack of a romantic companion, but to a lack of companions or friends in general. Sula died with no friends, family,

lover, or even neighbors who would be “neighborly” toward her. It was only in 1993, however, twenty years after the publication of *Sula*, that someone like me could reject the loneliness Sula embraced and died loving. On her deathbed, Sula insists that Nel understand that she is not proud—she simply owns her loneliness. Nel challenges her by declaring, “...But you a woman and you alone” and Sula retorts, “Yes. But my lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely.” (142-43). Ownership of her loneliness was important in 1973, when women were fighting for and needed the independence and dignity of a self alone.

The solitude embraced by Sula was echoed four years later in The Combahee River Collective’s “A Black Feminist Statement:” “our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s but because of our need as human persons for autonomy.” Sula’s solitude was her choice, not a man’s choice, as was Nel’s “secondhand” lonely. While perhaps not appealing to many in my generation, the *choice* to be lonely represented a significant stride during the 1970s. Sula’s attention to herself and self-valuation engages in a radical way the limited but expanding choices available to Black women. It also represents a search for alternative forms of protection that would not strip women of agency. Loneliness became a form of protection that offered an alternative to the promise of protection involved in subordination and domesticity. Sula’s insistence on having her “mind” was something that hip-hop feminist Joan Morgan calls “a daughter of feminist privilege,” like me, could not see immediately as radical.

While Morrison selects a Black feminist space of solitude, just two years later, in *Corregidora*, Gayl Jones also interrogates the problems Malcolm's promise poses for Black women. The relationship between Ursa and Mutt demonstrates how the promise of protection "places the woman in the hands of her protector—who may protect her, but who also may decide to further victimize her" (Griffin 217). Ursa and Mutt's volatile and painful relationship is a classic example of one of the ways in which slavery continues to haunt African Americans in the present; particularly, in regards to heterosexual and communal relationships. The final lines of the text register the need for what Elaine Scarry calls, "a language of agency" that can work to not only repair the psychological wounds catalyzed by slavery, but also work to repair the wounds festering from the failures of "the promise." The lines attend to the way that both wounds complicate the "possibility of love between black women and men" after slavery (Wall 117).

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

"Then you don't want me."

"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you."

"Then you don't want me."

"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you."

"Then you don't want me."

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

He held me tight. (185)

Because he cannot escape his past, through most of the narrative Mutt exemplifies the protector who decides to further victimize. Because Ursa cannot escape her past, she searches futilely for a language of agency until the concluding lines above. Mutt and Ursa's painful reconciliation is a clamor for a dialogue that works toward understanding the power dynamics in heterosexual relationships differently. Such a dialogue might eliminate the need for spaces of solitude, or at least offer a more healthy alternative. Ultimately, the final lines of *Corregidora* are a plea for a reformed partnership that is grounded in "unmotivated respect." Ursa and Mutt's painful pleas demonstrate a need for a relationship in which each individual accepts a responsibility for the other's well being, both physically and mentally. Ursa and Mutt yearn for a reformed partnership, but the reader can only speculate as to whether or not they will formulate one.

A reformed partnership is a dream deferred in *Corregidora*, but the dream begins to materialize in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Beloved* is critical to a discussion of the evolution of reformed partnership in that it symbolizes Morrison's efforts to go back to the past and correct the relationship. The partnership that is formed between Sethe and Paul D can be understood as repairing the past that haunts Ursa and Mutt. Unlike Ursa and Mutt, Sethe and Paul D practice protecting one another. Furthermore, protection in *Beloved* is not limited to heterosexual relationships. When *Beloved* requests that Paul D "touch me on the inside part and call me my name" she is asking for a collective and reciprocal exorcism of a past that haunts the present. The diseased past that *Beloved* wants to be cured of produced so much physical and psychological pain that the pain itself had no voice until black women artists began

recovering that past in novels like *Corregidora* and *Beloved*. Morrison attempts to cure the diseased past when the community encircles Sethe and exorcises the disease that *Beloved* represents. This act not only frees Sethe, but it also frees the community, allowing them not to dwell in the past, but rather to understand the past so they can experience the present differently. And when Paul D says “You your best thing, Sethe,” he voices in a loving way the need to found any relationship on a healthy and hard-won love of self.

A Promise of Partnership: Toward Achieving a Hope Deferred

A reformed notion of partnership did not just suddenly materialize; it was formulated and contemplated over time and it will continue to shift and change over time. The insistence that the status of Black women be a marker of racial progress, or the ability to move beyond race, is not a new convention either. From the race women of the nineteenth century to the Black feminist of the second and third wave, the intricate link between progress and partnership has always been paramount—racial politics and sexual politics are interconnected.²⁷ While the partnerships in each text vary, there are several constants. The success of the partnership relies on unmotivated respect. The cultural history that I map here provides a rationale for the “damaged” rapport between Black women and Black men that Morrison, Brodber, Senna, and Lemmons attempt to improve. These writers work to improve the rapport by displacing patriarchal protection that strong men bestow upon weak women, replacing it with a partnership that requires mutual respect, and very important,

²⁷ See Barbara Smith’s “Toward A Black Feminist Criticism” and Kimberle Crenshaw’s “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.”

mutual protection. Furthermore, the concept of partnership implies that all involved have an investment in the “contract.” As Griffin noted, the logic of Malcolm’s promise was grounded in mutual gains, but those mutual gains were inequitable; Black women were stripped of agency. A promise of partnership, as opposed to protection, restores agency to Black women—in a partnership Black women have the space to act for themselves, as well as for others. In a partnership, Black men have the right to protect Black women, as well as protect their own masculinity, but without a sense of inherent dominance. And Black women offer a protection of their own to Black men, as well.

A reformed partnership creates a space in which both Black women and Black men can negotiate the respectful interconnectedness of love, of what Frank Kermode describes as, “the power by which we apprehend the opacity of persons to the degree that we will not limit them by forcing them into selfish patterns” (144). Regardless of the partnership, what holds true in each text is that in order for the partnership to actually form, all parties must take responsibility for the other’s well being—they must be willing to perform the reciprocal act of touching one another “on the inside part,” which is the selflessness that Kermode notes is necessary to challenge us to join historian Robin D. G. Kelley in his “belief that the map to a new world in the imagination” (2). This is a difficult endeavor that is not always achieved and even when it is achieved, it is not without complications.

One way that Morrison, Brodber, Senna, and Lemmons attempt to counter some of the complications inherent in reforming partnership is through the creation of what I call *visitors*. There are other narratives by contemporary Black women writers that

contribute to reforming partnership; however, visitors are not a trope that other writers use to reform partnership. This is one reason I find it productive to place the selected texts in dialogue with one another. Visitors are liminal figures who attend to the “something more” that is needed when tropes of kinship, family, and community fail to meet the needs of those who pursue them. They are agents of repair whose goal is to help the characters they visit imagine a partnership that is grounded in unmotivated respect and imagine a home space that is “a-world-in-which-race-does-not-matter.” Ultimately, they work to repair that inside part that needs touching due to the “damaged” rapport of the recent past and the turbulent U.S. racial history that fostered the damage. It is important to note that like those visited, visitors are also damaged by the past, so the “touching” is mutually beneficial. Perhaps the most famous visitor-figure is Beloved in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. She is the quintessential liminal figure who works as an agent of repair for an entire community.

A significant point about visitors is that they are always from outside of the community, which reflects the authors’ efforts to deconstruct romantic and homogenous notions of Black community. In each text they simply appear, sometimes with vague origins and other times with no explanation at all. Their “outsiderliness” creates a quality of otherworldliness that seems to account for the type of knowledge they bring to the partnership. They request that the visited “take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period.” They provide the opportunity to know familiar, yet unknown knowledge that has the potential to revolutionize their sense of security in the present and also their comfort in the partnership. The knowledge that the partnership gains is a blueprint for living

life in the present, or dwelling in the beyond. Each text differs in its approach, but like the original roots of the beyond, every text relies on a spiritual essence as a means of fusing belief systems.

The acquisition of knowledge that occurs when the partnership is reformed attends to the “something more” that family and kinship could not fix. *Paradise* provides a compelling example of the connection between acquiring a new kind of knowledge and reforming partnership. When responding to Consolata Sosa’s discomfort in *Paradise* with the “magical practice” of “stepping in,” Lone DuPres tells her “Sometimes folk need more.” Later, Consolata justifies “stepping in” as the only means of sustaining Mary Magna’s life: “yoking the sin of pride to witchcraft, she came to terms with it in a way she persuaded herself would not offend Him or place her soul in peril. It was a question of language. Lone called it ‘stepping in.’ Consolata said it was ‘seeing in.’ Thus the gift was ‘in sight’.” (247). Lone Dupres argues that folk sometime need to acquire critical knowledge from elsewhere, from locations and experiences often disregarded by the dominant culture. Thus, visitors offer the visited the opportunity to think differently about the present, the future, and about their shared past—they facilitate dwelling in the beyond.

I begin my study with a story set during the Black Nationalist era. *Chapter One* considers how Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1998) draws on the trope of incest to rethink community through a Diasporic lens. In my analysis of the intersections of community and incest, I focus specifically on Consolata Sosa’s pursuit of reformed partnership with Deacon Morgan (and by extension Ruby). I argue that Consolata’s concept of partnership is one rooted in an irretrievable primordial past; whereas,

Deacon's concept of *protection* finds any form of partnership—corporate, romantic, civic, or social—repugnant and a threat to his sense of patriarchal power and racial superiority. The “black family romance” Deacon embraces and that Consolata idolizes fails both characters. It is only through a familiar visitor that Consolata acquires a different way of *knowing* that enables her to locate a home space that is complicated and demanding, despite not achieving the unmotivated respect necessary to reform partnership.

Erna Brodber's *Louisiana* (1994) shares the theme of Diasporic community building with *Paradise*. Brodber constructs the field of anthropology as a literal Diasporic home space for people of African descent in the Americas. The field of anthropology becomes a form of knowledge that facilitates the making of a Diasporic home space that fosters reformed partnerships. Where *Paradise* could only hope for a future reformed partnership, *Louisiana* presents a reformed partnership that is grounded in unmotivated respect. The critical gender consciousness that facilitates such relationships, however, is riddled with complications that trouble the bliss of Diasporic home spaces and reformed partnership. Brodber constructs a successful reformed partnership, but the partnership is not sustained, because the protagonist, Ella, develops a debilitating disease that immobilizes and silences her. The themes of anthropology, Diaspora, and partnership in this text draw strong parallels to the anthropologist, folklorist, and writer Zora Neale Hurston and Hurston's most noted protagonist, Janie Crawford. These parallels demand that Black women writers not only rethink community, but also rethink the expectations they place on their female characters.

The first two chapters attend to the manner in which two contemporary writers born prior to the Civil Rights movement pursue reformed partnership. The final two chapters attend to how two writers born after the Civil Rights movement pursue reformed partnership. Dividing the project in such a way allows for the dialogue Bambara implored Black feminist to continue across differences and generations. Such a dialogue reveals that Lemmons and Senna's pursuit of reformed partnership responds back to Morrison and Brodber's texts, as Lemmons and Senna want *more choices* than the choices Morrison and Brodber imagine for their characters.

Eve's Bayou (1997) breaks from the Diaspora consciousness trope that dominated both *Paradise* and *Louisiana*. In *Chapter Three* Kasi Lemmons reconfigures community through her critical analysis of the geographic space that frames and polices various constructions of blackness. As Lemmons does this, she works skillfully to not only reform partnership, but to also provide her female characters with a more expansive array of choices. In contrast to the "packing" Convent women and the illness-stricken Ella, *Eve's Bayou* approaches reformed partnership through a variety of transgressions that challenge her audience to think critically and introspectively about history, race, and gender. In this chapter I argue that in *Eve's Bayou* Kasi Lemmons produces a reformed partnership that is sustainable and provides more choices by signifying on a raced and gendered U.S. history through transgressive tropes—incest and murder—that challenge how we *see*.

Danzy Senna's "The Land of Beulah" (2000) is a perplexing text when analyzed through the lens of reformed partnership. Unlike the texts examined in the previous chapters, "Beulah" is set in its own present. This contemporaneousness

accounts for the way in which Senna challenges the pursuit of reformed partnership in the previous chapters and *the* pursuit of reformed partnership in general. In *Chapter Four* I argue that Senna refuses to consider the possibility of reformed partnership in a place where race is geography. Senna draws on Black eschatological beliefs in “the beyond” in order to challenge readers and scholars to consider how racial mixture might complicate rather than foster a move beyond race or what Senna has referred to as “the end of blackness.”²⁸ Such a consideration demands that a critical re-mapping of race and its persistent preeminence in the twenty-first century must accompany the critical gender consciousness that fosters reformed partnership.

The *Coda* provides a preliminary and exploratory critique of factors beyond those that Senna’s work speaks to that might complicate Black women writers’ pursuit of reformed partnership. Specifically, I consider the future of Black feminist criticism and the location of contemporary Black women writers in the academy, and how these two factors affect pursuits of reformed partnership. Borrowing Ann DuCille’s trope of “historical amnesia” to describe the inevitable disappearance of the Black woman writer once her 1990s “bonanza” came to an end, I consider this cultural moment that seemingly marks the end of that bonanza. In doing so, I discuss Black Women’s studies as a field and I contemplate the challenges that moves toward global and transnationalist discourse pose for Black Women’s studies. As a means for better understanding these challenges and the ways these discourses intersect and diverge, I analyze the soul aesthetic in the recent film *Dreamgirls* (2006).

²⁸ Claudia M. Milan Arias, “An Interview with Danzy Senna,” (*Callaloo*. 25.2 : 2002) 447-452.

Chapter 1: “Home Is Not a Little Thing”: Diasporic Sensibilities and Struggles for Autonomy in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*

...the key to any heaven is language

~Cornelius Eady, "Paradiso"

The juxtaposition of Ruby, Oklahoma to the neighboring Convent in *Paradise* epitomizes the danger of rebuilding the master’s house with the master’s tools. Some critical scholarship on *Paradise* attends to the Black Nationalist ideologies that limit Ruby’s ability to escape its past;²⁹ there is not, however, any that offers an in-depth analysis of how Morrison writes the Black Nationalist narrative through a paradigm of incest. Morrison critiques Black Nationalism and the racially isolated community that it fosters as incestuous, which reflects her preoccupation with constructing secure home spaces for racialized Americans. The “promise of protection,” then, that Ruby offers submissive and proper women becomes doubly problematic when viewed through an incestuous lens. It reveals the trouble that arises in homogenous communities. It also suggests that there are ugly repercussions when a nation within a nation experiences marginalized citizenship.

In *Paradise* Morrison explores various strategies that might offer the possibility of reformed partnership in lieu of the solitude that Ruby and the Convent represent. The space she constructs for a reformed partnership is a Genesis sort of

²⁹ Candice Jenkins in “Pure Black: Class, Color, and Intra-racial Politics in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*” and Richard L. Schur in “Locating Paradise in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory” both engage Morrison’s critique of a nationalist aesthetic.

space, a paradise, where women and men have the choice to believe or not to believe in the possibility of “unmotivated respect” within heterosexual relationships. The paradise that Morrison offers her characters is ultimately “right at their feet” —a paradise that requires the dweller possess both a critical gender consciousness and the acceptance of alternative forms of knowledge in order to be at home. *Paradise* explores the possibility and limitations of imagining paradise right here, right now.

I begin my close readings with *Paradise*, because it critiques explicitly the historical moment that produced it. As I noted in the previous chapter, *Beloved* presents a reformed partnership, but the construction of community in that text occurs in a nineteenth-century past. Morrison, Brodber, Senna, and Lemmons present partnership and community as two interconnected concepts that must be rethought in order to move beyond race, as the Convent women unconsciously wish to do and as Ruby consciously wishes to do. In this narrative Morrison re-writes the gender friction between Black women and Black men that arose during the immediate post-Civil Rights era. The Convent women represent, in the same sense, the Black women writers, activists, and intellectuals who challenged Black male sexism during the 1970s and 1980s. Ruby, read as male despite the presence of women, represents the Black male writers, activists, and intellectuals who were threatened by Black women’s voice and newfound success in the public realm.

It is necessary to digress briefly and explain my assertion about the Convent women being “black,” as I am aware that readers’ perception of their race varies significantly. I read all of the Convent Women as possessing African ancestry, even the “white girl” who the men shoot first. Ruby is an isolated, homogenous town that

thrives on a Black Nationalist rhetoric of purity. Surely if white women had attended one of their weddings and slept with one of their boys, there would have been cause to make note of it, just as they noted the lost white family during the blizzard. The problem with the Convent Women is that they are not 8-rocks—thus they are not racially pure; they are not subservient—thus they are whores; and they do not need men—thus they are a threat to the patriarchal ideals that fuel nationalist discourse. Therefore, I understand the “white girl” to be a facetious descriptor that registers disapproval of either a racially mixed-phenotype or some way of being that is not stereotypically “black.” The Convent women, then, are all Black women who want autonomy and possess transnational sensibilities as opposed to nationalist sensibilities during an era that praised racial purity, or at least preached it.³⁰

The irony of this situation is that both the Convent women and Ruby are searching for a secure home space in the present; their method for pursuing such a home space is inevitably tragic. The Convent women’s and Ruby’s desire to be homed conjures both figurative and physical incest. As I analyze incest, and its often closely related counterpart, miscegenation, I focus specifically on Consolata Sosa and Deacon Morgan. I argue that Consolata’s concept of partnership is one rooted in an irretrievable primordial past; whereas, Deacon’s concept of *protection* finds any form of partnership—corporate, romantic, civic, or social—repugnant and a threat to his sense of patriarchal power and racial superiority.

Consolata and Deacon have different goals as they construct home. Consolata wishes to *return* to the past through kinship with Deacon, while Deacon is adamant

³⁰ In *Black Macho & The Myth of the Superwoman* Michele Wallace declares that many Black male activists were not so radical in the bedroom when she insists that sexual relationships between these Black men and white women were prevalent.

about *escaping* the past through selective memory. Consolata's desire to return to the past is represented most significantly by her affair with Deacon, which she foolishly believes will reconnect her to her roots and provide a kinship that is markedly absent in the Convent she now calls home. I argue that unbeknownst to her, Consolata's affair with Deacon is a futile search for partnership in a town where such gender relationships are prohibited and disdained. Consolata's need for "something more" is fulfilled by a visitor who offers her the partnership she needs. Once she has this encounter, Consolata understands life and home differently; she gains "insight" and can shed her sense of homelessness. Deacon's insight unfortunately comes only after the brutal massacre of the Convent Women. Deacon responds to Consolata's desire for kinship with great consternation, because being racially mixed, female, and an outsider, Consolata violates all that Deacon holds sacred. Deacon's insistence on maintaining an isolated, homogenous community that embraces fully the "black family romance" obstructs his vision and prevents him from dwelling in the beyond. Through Consolata's insight and Deacon's blindness, Morrison troubles desires for paradisiacal homes, and instead challenges her readers to "return to the present" and embrace the pleasures and displeasures of a home that is complicated and demanding.³¹

My flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him.

I frame my discussion of Consolata's search for home and a partnership with Gigi's obsessive search for the stone copulating figures in Wish, AZ and the entwined

³¹ Toni Morrison, "Nobel Lecture," http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html, 7 Dec. 1993.

trees in Ruby, OK. The entwined trees operate as an elusive visual metaphor of the radical reconciliation Black America sought in the post-WWII era and the reconciliation that is inherent in a reformed partnership between Black women and Black men. Gigi's search represents the quintessential longing for love and belonging that haunted many post-Civil Rights Black communities.

After running her finger down columns in the telephone directory and finding no one in the area with Mikey's last name, Rood, Gigi gave him up.

Reluctantly. The eternal desert coupling, however, she held on to for dear and precious life. Underneath gripping dreams of social justice, of an honest people's guard—more powerful than her memory of the boy spitting blood into his hands—the desert lovers broke her heart. Mikey did not invent them. He may have put them in the wrong place, but he had only summoned to the surface what she had known all her life existed...somewhere. (64)

Gigi begins her journey toward the Convent after witnessing the shooting of a young Black boy during a Civil Rights protest. The investment that Gigi has in the intimacy and reproduction inherent in the copulating stone figures and entwined branches is informed by the failures of U.S. democracy to protect its Black citizens from violence and disenfranchisement, as well as its failure to regard them as full citizens. Gigi does not just end up at the Convent because she is searching for entwined branches and rhubarb pie; she ends up at the Convent because she is desperately searching for solace from a tumultuous U.S. racial climate and unfulfilled, heterosexual relationships. The copulating rock formation and entwined trees represent Gigi's

attempt to come to terms with her sense of dislocation. They are expressive of her efforts to locate a space in which she can reinvent herself and reconcile the past.

As a marker of longing, the entwined trees not only represent Gigi's discontent with a failed democracy, but they also represent Consolata's efforts to reconnect with her Afro-Brazilian roots.³² Consolata wants to be rooted in and entwined with something that gives her stability and a sense of belonging. Thus, she attempts to relocate the lost home, Brazil, through her affair with Deacon Morgan. Her rescued-kidnapping from a port in Brazil and subsequent life-long, indentured servitude in an Oklahoma Catholic "school" effectively render Consolata homeless. Her homelessness seems reversed miraculously when she meets and enters into a brief affair with the weaker Morgan twin. The sense of locating a space that is "snug and wide open," one consummated at the foot of "two fig[less] trees growing into each other," is abruptly shattered when the sense of home and sameness that Deacon restores to her is terminated almost simultaneously by Deacon's omniscient twin, Steward, and Consolata's disturbing act of biting Deacon's lip.

Even before her affair with Deacon, Consolata believed there was an innate sameness between her and Ruby residents. During one of her and Mary Magna's trips to Ruby for pharmacy supplies, Consolata senses "Something unbridled was going on under the scalding sun." Consolata and Mary Magna arrive during the infamous derby race that dubbed Stewart and Deacon's nephew, "K.D.," because he

³² Oddly, I have come across several articles on *Paradise* that simply identify Consolata as being from South America, when the text clearly invokes Brazil. Mary Magna and the other nuns spend twelve years in a Portuguese Order of nuns. Brazil is the only South American country colonized by Portugal. Furthermore, after being visited, Consolata leads the Convent Women through an initiation that mirrors closely the Afro-Brazilian religion candomblé.

rode his horse and won the race as if he was competing in the Kentucky Derby. It is at the moment of K.D.'s victory that Consolata hears the faint "Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha," sounds that represent her erotic and communal desire for Deacon and Ruby. These sounds are followed by "a memory of just such skin and just such men, dancing with women in the streets to music beating like an infuriated heart, torsos still, hips making small circles above legs moving so rapidly it was fruitless to decipher how such ease was possible." Despite the fact that these men were laughing and running instead of dancing, and living in a hamlet rather than "a loud city full of glittering black people, Consolata knew she knew them" (226). This Diasporic consciousness will be discussed later in this chapter; however, it is necessary to note that Consolata's attraction to Deacon is not simply erotic, but laden with a cultural re-memory of a primordial past that she wants to return to.

Consolata and Deacon's relationship changes irrevocably when she invites him to her *house*:

'There is a small room in the cellar...I will fix it, make it beautiful. With candles. It's cool and dark in the summer, warm as coffee in the winter. We'll have a lamp to see each other with, but nobody can see us. We can shout as loud as we want and nobody can hear. Pears are down there and walls of wine...do it' she urges him. 'Please do it. Come to my house.' (237)

As Deacon ponders her invitation, Consolata bites his lip, and hums over the blood she licks from his lip. The humming and licking more so than the biting itself, repulse and scare Deacon. "He'd sucked air sharply. Said, 'Don't ever do that again.'

But his eyes, first startled, then revolted, had said...who would chance pears and a wall of prisoner wine with a woman bent on eating him like a meal?" (239).

Dear Lord, I didn't want to eat him. I just wanted to go home.

Deacon's response to Consolata's longing for kinship, and ultimately what he perceives to be a hybrid reproduction of his "pure" self, strikes a fear in him.

Consolata's belief that she shares a sameness or kinship with the people of Ruby offers a productive way of interpreting the lip biting as something more complicated than post-celibacy zeal. Despite being displaced from her homeland and culture for thirty years, Consolata not only remembers that home and culture when she encounters Ruby residents, but she also mourns the loss. Consolata is driven by this longing when she naïvely and perhaps unconsciously attempts to regain the feeling of kinship that she lost in her dislocation by biting Deacon's lip and licking the blood. Deacon's disdainful reaction leaves Consolata bemoaning the loss of both her primordial self and the loss of Deacon, her connector to her cultural roots, when she admits, "Dear Lord, I didn't want to eat him. I just wanted to go *home*" (emphasis mine 240).

Consolata's belief that she shares a sameness with Deacon and by extension Ruby itself, culminates in a love-struckness that takes on an "edible quality." Consolata attributes this "edible quality" to the thirty years of celibacy after the "dirty pokings her ninth year subjected her to" (228). The edible quality of her love-struckness, however, is much more complicated than simply being a response to rape. When Mary Magna scolds Consolata to forget the man that led her astray, Consolata wants to respond, "Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha, she wanted to say, meaning, he and I are

the same” (241). Consolata sees no difference between the black people in Ruby and those she remembers dancing in the streets of her homeland. For this reason, she believes that by doing what she perceives to be *re*-establishing a kinship with Ruby through Deacon, she can in fact return to the past and move beyond the boundaries of the present.

While Consolata wants to retrieve the ancestral past, Deacon steadfastly works to escape it, and if possible, erase it. Clearly, Deacon registers no “Sha sha sha” for Consolata or the historical or ancestral past that she invokes. Deacon’s and by extension, Ruby’s, insistence on only remembering a certain past that is frozen in time is understandably troubled by this racially mixed, foreign, seemingly aggressive woman who ultimately attempts to inject his “safe,” utopian memory with a counter-memory that is disruptive and discomforting. The sameness that is inherent in Consolata’s construction of her counter-memory incites fear in Deacon, because it reminds him of Ruby’s Disallowal by other all Black towns, and ultimately, connects both him and Consolata to an African ancestral past that he loathes. Furthermore, Deacon’s act of recoiling is indicative of the Black Nationalist view of aggressive Black women as emasculating.

Deacon’s interpretation of Consolata’s biting and blood licking is driven by a fear of contamination and abhorrence of heterogeneity. Just prior to the Convent ambush, Deacon remembers Consolata as

an uncontrollable, gnawing woman who had bitten his lip just to lap the blood it shed; a beautiful gold-skinned, outside woman with moss-green eyes that tried to trap a man, close him up in a cellar room with liquor to feeble him so

they could do carnal things, unnatural things in the dark; a Salome from whom he had escaped just in time or she would have had his head on a dinner plate.

That ravenous ground-fucking woman... (279-280)

Deacon does not fear Consolata's invitation to the cellar. Deacon fears Consolata herself, because she and the lip-biting represent a threat to the isolating boundaries that Ruby perceives as utopian. Deacon's fear of contamination is further propelled by the fact that Consolata is a woman and that she is racially mixed. In Deacon's emphatic rejection of an African ancestral past, he also rejects any notion of an African or Diasporic identity. Thus, Deacon would never believe that he and Consolata share any sameness. For Deacon Consolata represents the threatening 'other' who destroys boundaries.³³ Her lip-biting was not simply sexual foreplay; rather, it reflected her desire to reproduce her [mixed-race] self and also the dangerous, covenant-breaking reproduction that Steward fears:

How off the course Deek slid when he was looking in those poison and poisoning eyes. For months the two of them had met secretly, for months Deek was distracted, making mistakes and just suppose the hussy had gotten pregnant? Had a mixed-up child? Steward seethed at the thought of that barely averted betrayal of all they owed and promised the Old Fathers. (279)

As Erik Dussere notes, women who transgress "the law" are particularly dangerous because it is through them that racial purity is lost. In regards to Ruby specifically, Dussere acknowledges, "The community's racially pure wholeness is built upon the fear and abhorrence of female sexuality; in order to regulate the exchange of blood,

³³ Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iverson, eds, Cannibalism and the Colonial World, (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1998) 6.

women must be excluded or brought into the circle of incest” (106). Thus, Deacon and Steward’s sentiments echo a national social, historical, literary, and legal narrative that conflates miscegenation and incest in order to maintain white supremacy, or in this case, 8-rock-black supremacy.

In that case...everything that worries them must come from women.

Consolata forces Deacon to acknowledge his problematic construction of his own racial and cultural identity—a construction replete with contradictions. At the heart of Deacon’s consternation is a fear of hybridity that Ruby wholeheartedly believes will disrupt the “utopian” home they worked so hard to fashion. Ruby assures itself that its utopian home is indeed perfect in a variety of ways, but the most significant is their opposition to racial mixture.

In *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Representations of Interracial Literature*, Werner Sollors situates the urge to conflate miscegenation and incest against a literary, historical, and legal paradigm of racial supremacy and fear. Sollors presents a remarkable in-depth analysis of this urge largely through close readings of a broad spectrum of nineteenth century literary texts. While the textual analysis itself is tangential to my analysis here, several of Sollors’ points and his final conclusion are relevant to understanding Deacon’s fear and contempt for Consolata. From a legal aspect, Sollors notes that “Charles W. Chesnutt reported that the Mississippi law of 1880 prohibiting miscegenation called interracial marriages “incestuous and void,” and that, an article in the constitution of Mississippi, repealed in 1987, also decreed that “the marriage of a white person with a Negro or mulatto, or person who shall

have one-eighth or more of Negro blood, shall be unlawful and void” (299, 315)³⁴.

Sollor offers two primary explanations for these juridical decrees. The first explanation is that within the U.S. slave “system of maternal descent that sustains hereditary slavery and the patriarchal belief that kinship is established through the father” there arose a significant reality that unknown miscegenation could lead to unknowingly committing incest (316-18). Slave masters’ forced sexual relations with enslaved women created the imminent danger of incest between his legitimate and illegitimate offspring. The second explanation is one of catachresis—the rhetorical confusion of one word for another. In this case it was a problem of confusing “intermarriage” with “incestuous marriage.” Sollors quotes Robert K. Merton stating:

Incestuous marriages are often termed *intermarriage*. This would appear to be an instance of the rhetorical fallacy of catachresis, in which one term is wrongly put for another. Its source is possibly the following. In lay language, the term intermarriage commonly denotes those marriages which *deviate* from *endogamous* norms. This attribute of *non-conformity and group disapproval* has come to the identifying characteristic of intermarriage. Hence, incestuous marriage—surely at the polar extreme from inter- (group) marriage—which is also commonly *condemned*, comes mistakenly to be assimilated to the category of intermarriage, which is interpreted as tabooed marriage. (315)

³⁴ These references are mere examples of a plethora of laws and injunctions that governed interracial relationships and marriage in the United States.

However, factoring *race* into Merton's rhetorical scenario reminds us that the conflation of miscegenation, a made-up term to denote racial mixture, and incest is much more than simply a rhetorical fallacy.³⁵ Sollors concludes:

Miscegenation is the true horror to any radical ethnocentrist, and incest is the metaphor through which this horror can be (partly) expressed, for there is a general, widely shared sense of *that* taboo. The paradoxical equation, 'amalgamation is incest,' was set up not in the hope of discovering a human law, but in order to make hybridism seem as 'heinous' as incest. (320)

Sollors' analysis of the conflation of miscegenation and incest, and the horror that miscegenation symbolized for a white supremacist nation, provides a provocative, paradoxical template for reading Deacon's consternation surrounding the lip-biting and Steward's fear of hybridity. Debra J. Rosenthal also notes, "The merging of blood, which threatens to dissolve difference, represents a loss or destabilization of identity. A body that claims both whiteness and otherness threatens the foundation of white supremacy" (6).³⁶ More explicit to Consolata and the Morgan twins' relationship, Rosenthal asserts, "Nowhere is the anxiety of miscegenation concentrated greater than in the female body. Women's bodies bear the evidence of miscegenation, with race literalized as a woman's 'issue'" (6).³⁷ Deacon's perception that Consolata desires to re-produce her visibly mixed-race self, as well as the possibility of her and Deacon's sexual encounters resulting in a biological

³⁵ Sollors explains that in 1863 George Wakeman and David Goodman Croly made up the word "miscegenation" (from the Latin *miscere*, "to mix," and *genus* "race").

³⁶ It also threatens notions of Black authenticity, hence the Morgan's consternation, as well as current cultural debates on mixed race identity.

³⁷ Debra J. Rosenthal, Race Mixture in Nineteenth-Century U.S. and Spanish American Fictions: Gender, Culture, and Nation Building, (U of North Carolina P, 2004).

reproduction, threaten to effectively dissolve the racial “purity” Ruby perceived in their 8-rock *covenant* with God. No adultery. No scattering. No racial mixing. These are the unwritten laws that the Morgans believe seal their deal. Not only does Consolata represent “the dung” Ruby left behind, she also threatens to break every law Ruby lives by.

The paradox here is that Ruby is the embodiment of incestuous relationships. While the residents might not commit adultery, they inevitably are steeped in incest. Ruby’s population is composed of nine large intact families: Blackhorse, Morgan, Poole, Fleetwood, Beauchamp, Cato, Flood and both DuPres families. In order to maintain their supposed racial “purity” they marry each other. There is a hint of this incest in the first half of the text when we learn that Dovey and Soane are sisters and sister-in-laws. Since there is no blood mixture, however, the doubleness of their relationship might not seem too odd. Later, Richard Misner notes:

The Morgans always seemed to be having a second conversation—an unheard dialogue right next to the one they spoke aloud. They performed as one man, but something in Deek’s manner made Misner wonder is he wasn’t covering for his brother—propping him the way you would a slow-learning child. (62)

The suggestion that Steward is propped like “a slow-learning child” could speak to his and Dovey’s barrenness, which could ultimately be attributed to the genetic deficiencies and sterility common with incest.

In the chapter titled, “Patricia,” it becomes clear that the gossip, information, and secrets that parents complain Pat Best is asking their children to divulge is about

more than just maintaining one's privacy. In her would-be historical record Pat notes that the Morgans are not as prolific as they once were:

There wasn't much space beneath the K.D.—Arnette entry, but she thought they probably wouldn't need more. If it lived, the baby they were expecting would certainly be an only child. Arnette's mother had only two children, one of whom had only fathered defectives. In addition, these later Morgans were not as prolific as the earlier ones. (191)

She also notes a connection between “scattering” and fertility:

Elder [Morgan] died leaving his wife, Susannah (Smith) Morgan³⁸, with six children—all of whom moved from Haven to northern states. Zechariah would have hated that. Moving would have been “scattering” to him. And he was right, for sure enough from then on the fertility shriveled, even while the bounty multiplied. The more money, the fewer children; the fewer children, the more money to give the fewer children. (193)

Thus, Ruby's incestuous behavior plays out as “incest in the name of purity or pseudo-aristocratic lineage,” particularly through the Morgans' attempts to produce more money and control the financial and social lives of their neighbors. “Royal incest” is certainly a more comforting way of understanding a behavior that holds such a strong social taboo, than to recognize its eugenic nature. It is not thoroughly comforting for Pat whose discomfort registers most emphatically when after nearly a page and a half litany of intermarriage and ultimate incestuous marriages, she ends at the Poole family acknowledging, “But two others of those thirteen children Billie

³⁸ K.D.'s birth name is Coffee Morgan Smith, so his father married a Morgan just as his uncle married a Smith.

Delia is in love with, and there is something wrong with that but other than number and the blood rules I can't figure out what" (197). Despite Pat's feelings of exclusion based on her father breaking the 8-rock law and marrying a light-skinned woman from outside the community, she remains an 8-rock nonetheless. Her inability to fully recognize the inherent problem in Ruby's social relations lends credence to Sollors' notion: "After all, the notion of racial 'purity' has an incestuous valence and is based on a program for the future... This position implies that since miscegenation must be avoided at all cost, incest (racially enlarged) becomes an ideal almost by necessity" (322).

Ruby's ideology creates allusions to a reversed notion of Charles W. Chesnutt's "future American." In "The Future American: What the Race is Likely to Become in the Process of Time" (1898) Chesnutt presents a utopian illusion that privileges amalgamation.³⁹ Chesnutt believed that black Americans' social and economic progress depended on amalgamation and that amalgamation could be effectively hastened through U.S. imperialism:

The adding to our territories of large areas populated by dark races, some of them already liberally endowed with Negro blood, will enhance the relative importance of the non-Caucasian elements of the population, and largely increase the flow of dark blood to the white race, until the time shall come

³⁹ "The Future American: What the Race Is Likely to Become in the Process of Time," in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz III, and Jesse S. Crisler Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

when distinctions of color shall lose their importance, which will be but the prelude to a complete racial fusion. (E&S, 135)⁴⁰

Jean Toomer expresses similar sentiments toward race and mixture in his poem, “The Blue Meridian” (1936). Toomer insists that he is a member of the American race, and refuses to privilege any one of his “bloodlines.” In his poem Toomer:

...conceives of the ‘blue’ race—a synthesis of African, Anglo-Saxon, and American Indian races—as the signal metaphor of his complex position on his own racial composition... At the heart of Toomer’s poem is his advocacy of deliberate racial blending... as a means to transcend the boundaries of race ideology and fulfill evolutionary progress toward human perfection. (Hawkins 150)⁴¹

Both Chesnutt and Toomer’s ideologies privilege the construction of an identity based on racial mixture—a privileging that stands at odds with Ruby’s racial purity dogma. In signifying on Chesnutt and Toomer by reversing their racial ideologies in Ruby, Morrison emphasizes that “home” must be redefined as a space where all bloodlines and nations are recognized by none are privileged.

Ruby’s steadfast compliance with the reversed “future American” model—a model advocating racial purity—is complicated further by the fact that in spite of their “royal” incest, Morrison leads us to believe that Ruby itself has an indigenous

⁴⁰ Chesnutt later adopts an anti-expansionist rhetoric when he recognizes that little is being done at home to uplift non-white Americans. This political shift is strongly influenced by the Spanish American War and U.S. expansion to the Philippines.

⁴¹ Stephanie L. Hawkins, “Building the ‘Blue’ Race: Miscegenation, Mysticism, and the Language of Cognitive Evolution in Jean Toomer’s ‘The Blue Meridian,’” Texas Studies in Literature and Language 46.2 (2004): 150.

heritage that is reflected in the Black-horse name and the straight, heavy, black hair that never seems to get absorbed by the 8-rock blackness. Pat Best reflects that she

...married Billy Cato partly because he was beautiful, partly because he made me laugh, and partly (mostly?) because he had the midnight skin of the Catos and the Blackhorses, along with that Blackhorse feature of stick-straight hair.

Like Soane's and Dovey's hair, and like Easter and Scout had. (198-99)

This indigenous presence, must necessarily be ignored, because Ruby shares the reversed sentiment of white supremacy's twisted relationship with incest—Ruby fears that its racial purity will deteriorate due to racial mixing, and then what would its residents be left with? Their perceived racial superiority is all they have left in a nation that says you are not good enough to be fully incorporated citizens—a nation in which the racially marginalized work incessantly to find a way to transfer their marginalization onto someone else.

Scary things not always outside. Most scary thing is inside.

Ruby's and especially Deacon's desire for racial purity represents a paranoia in which miscegenation is a "reminder of repressed, forbidden motives" (Hulme 322). Peter Hulme explains, "Looked at another way, incest—real or symbolic—may be a *prerequisite* for anything like 'racial purity' or 'race' to emerge. Hence racial fantasies may on the first level express horror at miscegenation as if it were incest, but on a second level reveal a deep and necessary yearning for incest" (322). This deep and necessary yearning materializes when during K.D.'s wedding ceremony he dotes on "that Gigi bitch" who "he had loved for years, an aching humiliating, self-loathing that drifted from pining to stealth" (Morrison 147). Similarly, it consumes

Deacon and Consolata's relationship and it re-emerges when Steward shoots "the white girl first," a girl whose "whiteness" is surely facetiously imposed on her by a town who would have expelled her if she was truly "white" (1).⁴² Deacon and K.D.'s privileging of racial purity while yearning racially (and sexually) impure female bodies create a self-loathing that both men project on to the women. Gigi and Consolata stand in stark opposition to the women of Ruby who "did not powder their faces and they wore no harlot's perfume"—women who are not slack or sloven, neglecting to begin canning in a timely manner (5, 143). Deacon and K.D.'s desire for difference, in this case racial impurity, is at odds with Ruby's unwritten law of incest. Deacon in particular is tormented by the horror he is instructed to feel toward miscegenation and the pervasive desire for racial mixture that permeates his mind and body.

Consolata's transgressive acts are not the only root of Deacon's fear. His fear is also rooted in his own uncontrollable desire for racial impurity. In "The Cultural Logic of Late Cannibalism," Crystal Bartolovich draws on Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's assertion in their study on transgression:

The bourgeois subject continuously defined and redefined itself through the exclusion of what I marked out as 'low'—as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating. Yet that very act of exclusion was constitutive of its identity. The low was internalized under the sign of negation and disgust... But disgust always bears the imprint of desire. (223)

⁴² I am not alone in my belief that there is no "white" girl at the Convent. My graduate school cohort, Jesse Scott, and I have discussed this issue at length. Additionally, Richard Schur echoes this belief in his essay, "Locating Paradise in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory."

The truth of disgust bearing the imprint of desire is epitomized by Deacon's impression and remembrance of nineteen Negro ladies in an unnamed prosperous Colored town. Beginning in 1910 Big Daddy and his brother Pryor began traveling to other Colored towns to "examine, review and judge" them. During one of the later trips, Deacon recalls that he and Steward watched nineteen creamy-skinned, well dressed, immaculately coiffed Negro ladies pose for a photograph. As the women passed Deacon and Steward the twins simultaneously fell off the railing they were sitting on and proceeded to wrestle, which garnered them the smiles they desired. As an adult, Deacon reminisces, "Even now the verbenia scent was clear; even now the summer dresses, the creamy, sunlit skin excited him" (110). These vivacious women embody the separation the founding fathers encountered when they embarked on their journey, walking from Mississippi and Louisiana to Oklahoma. These hopeful men and women who thought they were escaping the division between free and slave and rich and poor were inconsolably disappointed to find "... a new separation: light-skinned against black" and thus, "The sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain" (194). Deacon's enrapture and desire for the nineteen ladies with creamy and luminous skin goes against everything that Ruby stands for and believes in. Deacon's inability to reconcile these "warring ideals" is evident in his fascination with the nineteen creamy-skinned women and later with his initial captivation with Consolata and her "amazing" mint-leaf-green eyes.

Although Deacon's contempt for Consolata would suggest that it was she who seduced him, the opposite is true. He is the one who arrives at her garden, inviting her to enter a forbidden courtship. In this sense, Deacon is the quintessential snake in

the garden. Deacon's interest in Consolata began at the same derby race at which she determined she already knew the people of Ruby. The moment was marked by an unspoken mutual eroticism:

It was while Consolata waited on the steps that she saw him for the first time. Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. A lean young man astride one horse, leading another...His hips were rocking in the saddle, back and forth, back and forth. Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. Consolata saw his profile, and the wing of a feathered thing, undead, fluttered in her stomach...Just as she opened the passenger door he passed again. On foot, running lightly, eager to return to the festive know of people farther down the road. Casually, perfunctorily, he looked her way. Consolata looked back and thought she saw hesitation in his eyes if not in his stride. Quickly she ducked into the sun-baked Mercury, where the heat seemed to explain her difficult breathing. She did not see him again for two months of time made unstable by a feathered thing fighting for wingspread...in the end. *He came to her.* (226-227 emphasis mine)

Morrison's language here, as well as in her later description of Consolata's cellar preparation draws on Haitian vodoun and offers a complementary reading to the incestuous analysis above.

The "Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha" that permeates Consolata and Deacon's relationship and is representative of Consolata's desire for Deacon needs further exploration. The first "Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha" is in direct correlation with Deacon's sensual horseback riding, suggesting that the "shas" have a connection to horses as well. "Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha" sounds like the soft, guided movement of

a horse being ridden and the brushing movement of the horse's mane and tail.⁴³ The fact that Consolata associates Deacon with a sha-sound resonates with vodoun spirit mounting—the *loa*, vodoun god, mounts the *cheval*, human. Morrison intentionally develops Consolata's characteristics as parallel with the vodoun Goddess of Love, Ezili, and at odds with her.⁴⁴ Joan Dayan explains that Ezili is a goddess who is unique to Haiti—a “New World” goddess who has no precedent in Yoruba or Dahomey. Dayan contrasts spirit possession and slave master possession to explain Ezili's relationship to the function of memory:

Most often, the experience of being entered, inhabited, and seized by a spirit is described as being mounted (as the horse is by the rider). I want to think[ing] about the ways in which a word like *possession*, so powerful in the Western imagination, becomes in the figure of Ezili something like collective physical remembrance. The history of slavery is given substance through time by a spirit that originated in an experience of domination. That domination was most often experienced by women under another name, something called ‘love.’ (56)

In other words, Ezili is a phenomenon of the Americas’ “contact zone”—a phenomenon born out of cultural syncretism. Unlike, Damballa or Ogoun, she had no pre-existence as a Yoruba or Dahomey deity; rather, she was born on Haitian soil in response to “New World” needs. Her birth is catalyzed by a slave system in which

⁴³ This sound is also the name of an indigenous Brazilian dance. The sha, sha, sha is the sound the dancers shoes make as they move across the ground.

⁴⁴ I cite Joan Dayan's description and interpretation of Ezili, but it is important to note that her spelling of Ezili, Iwa, and vodou are somewhat uncommon. Although I cannot account for her choice in spelling, I can say that Erzulie, loa and vodoun are more common spellings than those employed by Dayan.

Black women's bodies are denied sanctity. Thus, according to Dayan, when Ezili enters a woman or man, "together they re-create and reinterpret a history of mastery and servitude" (60). Like Ezili, Consolata wants to repair the damages produced in the contact zone. She wants to be homed and reform intra-racial heterosexual partnership through her relationship with Deacon.⁴⁵ She desires the new form of knowledge that is created when Ezili enters a man or woman and re-creates and reinterprets history and by doing so creates a space in the present for a critical gender consciousness that redefines home and community. The home and community that Consolata desires, however, is at odds with every body of knowledge that shapes Deacon's understanding and location of "home."

Just as Ezili demands luxurious offerings from her devotees, Consolata offers Deacon luxuries when she invites him to her house and offers him pears, fancy wines, pillow slips crammed with rosemary, and linen sheets rinsed in hot water steeped in cinnamon in cellar room that sparkles "in the light of an eight-holder candelabra from Holland and reeked of ancient herbs" (237). What was intended to entice Deacon in fact repulses him and he insists that: "...a beautiful, golden-skinned, outside woman with moss-green eyes that tried to trap a man, close him up in a cellar room with liquor to enfeeble him so they could do carnal things, unnatural things in the dark" (280-81). Although slavery is what catalyzes and shapes Ruby's Ur-narrative, the present generation does not want to re-create and reinterpret their history. This is evident in the ugly Oven debate between the teenagers and the grown folk, as well as in Dovey and Patricia's responses to what Africa means to them. So then, it is not the

⁴⁵ Morrison's invocation of Ezili and the contact zone that she represents, is similar to her approach to reforming partnership in *Be/loved* when she roots the reform in a slave past.

implied romance that Consolata is offering Deacon that makes him buck; rather, it is the absolute danger that is involved in the consummation of a home and partnership that she proposes.

Although I am not arguing that Consolata embodies fully Ezili's attributes, it is productive to consider the attributes that they do share. Ezili is often described as the pale goddess of love, as virginal, and as prostituted. Consolata is subjected to "dirty pokings" during her ninth year; yet after thirty celibate years, she has a sort of virginal essence when she commences the affair with Deacon. Dayan draws upon Ezili's contradictory identities when she discusses "love" and mulatto mistresses. She argues that as the lwa of love "Ezili demands that the word be reinvented" (60). In her own words, Dayan explains how a Victorian "cult of true womanhood"⁴⁶ positioned white women as pure, chaste, and virtuous, while black women were positioned as lustful and impure, creating the space for white men to violate black women without accountability. She argues, however, that mulatta women's in-betweeness "somehow became the concrete signifier for lust that could be portrayed as 'love' ...if, in the perverse ethics of the planter, the spiritualized, refined images of white women depended on the violation of black women, the bleached-out sable Venus accommodated both extremes" (56-7). The mulatta mistress thus became the ideal; white men viewed them as sexual, yet pure and beautiful. Their duality as prostitute and lover often placed mulatta women in vulnerable positions. "In the crossing and unsettling of enforced (and contrived) duality, the free woman of color would be served, fed, honored, and adored, and at the same time excluded from

⁴⁶ See Hazel Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist. New York/Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.

marriage, threatened by poverty, and often abandoned” (57). As the pale, virginal, goddess of love Ezili interrogates what “love” means in Diasporic life. Dayan’s perception of Ezili as interrogator and Consolata’s mimicry of her attributes provides an interesting space to examine how Dayan’s argument intersects with Morrison’s discourse on “love” in *Paradise*.

I do not intend to give an in-depth review of critical discourse on “love” in Diasporic and post colonial cultures, but I do want to make note of “love’s” emergence in a variety of critical discourses. In *Methodology of the Oppressed: Theory Out of Bounds*, Chela Sandoval employs Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* to argue that romantic love, combined with risk and courage, creates the possibility for social change. In *Race Matters*, Cornel West argues that black people must replace nihilism with a “love ethic”: “Self-love and love of others are both modes toward increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one’s community. These modes of valuation and resistance are rooted in a subversive memory—the best of one’s past without romantic nostalgia—and guided by a universal love ethic” (29-30). bell hooks has an entire series on “black love.” In *All About Love: New Visions*, hooks insists that the nation is moving away from love and alludes to paradise: “When angels speak of love they tell us it is only by loving that we enter an earthly paradise. They tell us paradise is our home and love our true destiny.” These disparate discourses on love are not so different. Each is entrenched in concepts of self-love, respect, and forgiveness. *Paradise* falls squarely in the center of these concepts. In reference to Christ’s crucifixion, Richard Misner

contends, “This execution made it possible to respect—freely, not in fear—one’s self and one another. Which was what love was: unmotivated respect” (146).

Morrison has a clear investment in interrogating the idea of love. Her most recent novel is titled *Love*. The idea of loving one’s children to death consumes *Beloved*, which is about the “freedom” to love. After a heated debate with Pat Best over the relevance of Africa to Ruby, Richard Misner concedes that Ruby loves their children to death (210). Consolata’s analysis of the Convent women is that they are full of “foolish babygirl wishes,” which do not bother her nearly as much as their hopes for love:

One by one they would float down the stairs...to sit on the floor and talk of love as if they knew anything at all about it. They spoke of men who came to caress them in their sleep; of men waiting for them in the desert or by cool water; of men who once had desperately loved them, or men who should have loved them, might have loved, would have.” (223)

Penny and Clarissa, the Arapaho Indian girls detained at the Convent, view Consolata’s behavior as she prepares the cellar and eventually accepts that Deacon is not coming as “serious instruction about the limits and possibilities of love and imprisonment...” (238). These disparate references to love converge during Senior Pulliam’s and Richard Misner’s matrimonial sermons at K.D. and Arnette’s wedding. Pulliam directs his sermon at Richard Misner and asserts, “Love is divine only and difficult always. If you think it is easy you are a fool. If you think it is natural you are blind. It is a learned application without reason or motive except that it is God” (141). In response, Misner unhooks the cross that hung on the rear wall of the church

and stands unspeaking before the congregation hoping that his silent demonstration will convey the necessity of “unmotivated respect” for any relationship to thrive. Out of all this discourse on love emerges a truth: Ruby loved itself too much and the Convent women did not love themselves enough. In an effort to synthesize these disparities, Morrison presents *visitors* as an act of grace that offers Ruby and the Convent women the opportunity to reconcile their pasts so that they might learn “unmotivated respect” and self-love to sustain them in the present and hopefully facilitate partnerships that are grounded in a critical gender consciousness.

Someone could want to meet you.

Both Consolata and Dovey Morgan experience visitors. We first hear of Dovey Morgan’s visitor in Seneca’s chapter. This chapter opens with a vague reference to scratching on windowpanes and someone who never comes at night. Later, Dovey concludes that since she cannot determine which side of the Oven debate is correct, the teenagers or the grownfolk, she will bring the matter to “her friend” on his next visit. Dovey’s friend does not appear at the ranch outside of town that Steward is so proud of, but rather, he appears at a little foreclosure home on St. Matthews Street that Steward and Deacon never sold. It is this house, the house that “was close to her sister, to Mount Calvary, the women’s club,” and most importantly the place “where her Friend chose to pay visits,” that becomes “more and more home to Dovey” (88). There is “a sign” the first time Dovey’s friend appears. “Butterflies. A trembling highway of persimmon-colored wings cut across the green treetops forever—then vanished” (91). Later that same day, sitting under the trees decorated previously by butterfly wings, Dovey meets her friend for the first time as he is

cutting through her yard. Although she cannot identify him as a local Ruby resident, she begins speaking to him almost incessantly about the butterflies and the house on St. Matthews Street.⁴⁷ After that initial visit, Dovey's friend returns every month or two and Dovey finds more and more reasons to stay at the house on St. Matthews Street. Despite her joy in seeing her Friend, Dovey cannot help but think she talks nonsense when he comes:

Things she didn't know were on her mind. Pleasures, worries, things unrelated to the world's serious issues. Yet he listened intently to whatever she said", and although he "seemed hers alone...[B]y a divining she could not explain, she knew that once she asked him his name, he would never come again. (92)

Dovey's Friend takes on a presence that fills a void for Dovey. Dovey's void is marked by Ruby's inability to imagine its history differently as demonstrated through the teenagers' and grownfolks' volatile debate over the words on the lip of the Oven. Dovey's void is also marked by the unfulfilled partnership of her marriage to Steward Morgan. Steward has firm beliefs on a woman's place and duties—beliefs that leave Dovey always wanting more. Unfortunately, Dovey is so steeped in Ruby's nationalistic and patriarchal rhetoric that she is unable to cross the bridge between her "paradise" and the esoteric paradise that the visitor offers—a paradise that is imperfect, yet fulfilling. Butterflies mark Dovey's friend's first visit, a symbol of rebirth. After K.D. and Arnette take over the foreclosed house, Dovey's friend

⁴⁷ I believe it is worthwhile to argue that Dovey's visitor must not only have been black, but must also have had features that resembled Ruby residents. The towns' intolerance of outsiders would have surely led Dovey to feel alarmed if the visitor did not appear to be an 8-rock.

only comes to her once more "...in a dream where he was moving away from her. She called; he turned. Next thing she knew, she was washing his hair" and she awakes with shampoo suds on her hands (287). Dovey is so entrenched in Ruby's narrow ideologies that she is unable to recognize the intervention that her visitor offers her. She certainly is cognizant that he brings her a happiness that she cannot attain elsewhere, yet she misses all the signs. The partnership that her Friend offers her is so foreign that Dovey cannot even imagine the freedom it promises, and thus, she could never accept his invitation to embrace the partnership he offers.

Consolata's visitor is central to the opening and conclusion of the text, but his presence occupies a fraction of the textual space that Dovey's visitor is allotted. This is probably due to Consolata responding immediately to her visitor and understanding his intent, whereas, even once her visitor leaves, Dovey never understood his presence. Consolata's visitor's epiphanic visit catalyzes the Convent women's self-reinvention, which catalyzes Ruby's act of rage. Feeling the disappointment of unrequited love and the fear of dying alone, Consolata abandons God: "I'll miss You," she told Him. 'I really will.'" (251). Consolata's visitor appears in the next scene. He looks like a younger, male version of her: long, tea-colored hair and apple-green eyes. He insists that she knows him and he is from "far country." Upon his departure, Consolata transforms from Connie, the drunken, death-wishing woman in the cellar, to Consolata Sosa, the reverent, wizened woman who leads the Convent women through candomblé-based rituals of self-reinvention and reconciliation.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ For specific details on the initiation rites of candomblé see Robert Voeks, *The Sacred Leaves of Candomblé*, Rachel E. Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness*, and Shelia S. Walker, "Everyday and Esoteric Reality in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé."

Where Deacon failed to “home” Consolata, her visitor expels her feelings of homelessness, when he offers her the unmotivated respect she desires.

Down Here in Paradise

In conclusion, I want to first discuss Piedade and follow that discussion with a proposal for how scholars can interpret the Convent women’s deaths hopefully. In some ways Piedade seems like a visitor, however, her significance is understood more productively if we consider her the visitors’ muse rather than an actual visitor. Muse in the sense that Piedade functions as the mother of the visitors, but also, in the etymological sense of the term, memory. Morrison places Piedade at the head of a Diasporic pantheon of gods, orishas, loas, and saints charged with intervening in Ruby’s and the Convent women’s lives, offering them the opportunity to “take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period.”⁴⁹ This Diasporic pantheon coupled with unmotivated respect could repair the past, allowing the Convent women and Ruby to work on imagining a beyond in which both race and gender matter, but matter much differently.

Piedade’s consistent affiliation with the sea and water, particularly in the last page of the narrative, situate her as a muse of love and grace for subaltern people. The final page of the narrative describes a singing woman “black as firewood” seated next to a younger woman whose head rests on her lap. The black woman whose face is framed in cerulean blue trolls her ruined fingers through the younger woman’s tea brown hair, while the younger woman’s emerald eyes adore the black face. A beach full of sea trash, discarded bottle caps, a broken sandal, and a small dead radio playing the quite surf surrounds them. The black woman in cerulean blue is the

⁴⁹Morrison, “Nobel Lecture.”

infamous Piedade, Consolata's muse who simultaneously resembles the Yoruba priestess, Yemanjá, and the Virgin Mary. The woman with tea colored hair and emerald eyes is the born-again Consolata. During the massacre, Connie, dressed in blue and white, "stepped-in" and revived the "white girl," but Connie herself does not resurrect, instead she lives in this space with Piedade, "just yonder." When reading the final page of the text, Piedade's song sung on a beach amidst sea trash does not sound utopian or "homely." Particularly since her constant song throughout the text is reminiscent of Du Bois' "Sorrow Songs" that he tells us "...are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways." Yet, perhaps like the slaves' Sorrow Songs, Piedade songs are full of hope:

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope--a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. (188)

Despite the imperfection of Piedade's paradise and the sorrow that it can invoke, her song and liminal location offers the Convent women the opportunity to reconcile their need for a home where both race and gender matter, yet are rendered impotent. Perhaps Piedade's song is not sorrowful at all, but full of hope for those who understand paradise as being messy and those who recognize that there is a difference between feeling at home and being at home. And perhaps this space "just

yonder” offers the reader hope that the critical gender consciousness that is absent in Ruby’s construction of Paradise is not an impossible feat. Consolata does not form a partnership with Deacon and the Convent women do not garner Ruby’s unmotivated respect, but by the conclusion of the narrative everyone involved is challenged to think about their construction of home even if they cannot recognize home as more than an enchanting cellar or the embrace of a “Sha sha sha” man.

It would not be fair to address Consolata and the Convent women’s rethinking of home without also addressing Ruby’s potential to do so as well. Although the Convent women and Ruby can easily appear to be polar opposites, prior to the Convent women’s transformation, the Convent women were actually like Ruby in many ways. The most prominent way in which they were alike was in their apprehension of the present. While Consolata attempts to return to a repressed past, the Convent women and Ruby direct their energy toward escaping the scary nature of their pasts. The convergence of the Convent women and Ruby’s differences and similarities is the very point that allows for this text to be read hopefully. This hope can be seen most explicitly through the death of Sweetie and Jeff Fleetwood’s child, Save-Marie, and the eulogy that Richard Misner delivers at her funeral.

As Richard Misner comes to the conclusion of Save-Marie’s eulogy he advises his audience that God has given them a mind “To know that ‘what is sown is not alive until it dies’” (307). How this seemingly paradoxical declaration applies to the Convent women is somewhat clearer than how it applies to Ruby. The Convent women’s initiation into candomblé is a re-birthing process that produces women who are no longer haunted by their abusive and sorrowful pasts. Seemingly, the initiation

allows their old lives to die and their new lives to begin, exemplifying Misner's edict. Thus, the final chapter of *Paradise* is about alternative ways of thinking—alternatives for Ruby, alternatives for the Convent women, and most importantly, alternatives for the heterogeneous communities that interact with one another and react to their racialized existence in the Americas.

In addition to the new form of knowledge that the Convent women find in vodoun and candomblé, two other significant alternative forms of knowledge are presented. The first is at the very beginning of the text. The epigraph from “The Thunder: Perfect Mind,” a Gnostic text, opens *Paradise* with ideas that challenge most people's understanding of redemption.⁵⁰ The epigraph reads:

For many are the pleasant forms which exist in
numerous sins,
and incontinencies,
and disgraceful passions
and fleeting pleasures,
which (men) embrace until they become
sober
and go up to their resting place.
And they will find me there,
and they will live,

⁵⁰ Fifty-two religious and philosophical texts were discovered not far from Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945. The books had been buried in earthen jars for over 1600 years. They were written in Coptic, the language spoken by Christian Egyptians.

and they will not die again.⁵¹

There are two primary ways in which this passage challenges typical Western belief systems. First, it contradicts the Judeo-Christian notion that sins and disgraceful passions will bar the unrepentant soul from heaven. This passage suggests that men who embrace sins, incontinencies, passions and pleasures are admitted into the Holy Kingdom. The second challenge, which is really more of a radical disruption, is that the speaker of this text is female. Just as the suggestions in the text contradict Judeo-Christian doctrine, the female speaker's description of herself is a contradiction as well:

I am the harlot and the holy one.

I am the wife and the virgin.

I am the m[oth]er and the daughter [...]

I am the barren one and the one with many children [...]

I am the bride and the bridegroom[...]

I am she who is called Life and you have called Death.

I am she who is called Law and you have called Lawlessness. (The Thunder)

These paradoxes resemble those of the “new world” goddess of love, Ezili, discussed earlier. As noted before, Ezili offers a striking parallel to Consolata. The narrator's promises and self-description in “Thunder” sound familiar as well. As Consolata's muse or orisha, Piedade, the woman who “sang but never says a word,” makes similar

⁵¹ The translation I consulted differs somewhat from whatever translation Morrison consulted. My translation reads:

For many are the sweet forms that exist in numerous sins
And unrestrained acts and disgraceful passions, and temporal pleasures,
Which are restrained until they become sober
And run up to their place of rest.
And they will find me there,
And they will live and they will not die again.

promises of re-birth and eternal life for Consolata and the Convent women, women who are broken, abused, and used. Piedade, like the divinity in “Thunder” also does not represent the traditional and perfected divine. The combination of the paradoxes and the conception of salvation that is antithetical to Judeo-Christian doctrine resonate with Morrison’s alignment of Christianity, candomblé, vodoun, Catholicism and Gnosticism. The fact that Morrison does not privilege one belief system over the other speaks to Lone’s assertion that “sometimes folk need more.” But it also speaks to the spiritual and linguistic dilemma that Consolata found herself facing when Lone cajoles her to “step in.” Consolata resolves that it is really “seeing in” and “thus the gift was ‘in sight.’ Something God made free to anyone who wanted to develop it” (247).

The distinction Consolata makes reflects a different way of understanding knowledge, which is indicative of the purpose of the divine speaker in “Thunder” and also explains the paradoxes. The paradoxes push the hearers to unravel the divinity’s mysteries and understand how a harlot can indeed be holy and how a barren woman can have many children. There are those who simply hear the words of the divine and then there are those who receive the words with a divine knowledge—a knowledge that is heterogeneous by nature and invested in alternative ways of knowing. This alternative that is grounded “in sight” is well received by Consolata and the Convent women, but scorned by Ruby. Insight is about knowing oneself. The Convent women come to know themselves through the initiation and lessons that blend a cross-cultural matrix of knowledge. Ruby remains firmly grounded in a

narrow and limited knowledge base that disables them from living in the present, as well as disallowing them to know themselves.

It is useful to note that the divinity in “Thunder” offers more than just divine knowledge; she also affirms the need for partnership as opposed to kinship:

I am the bride and the bridegroom.

It is my husband who begot me.

I am the mother of my father and the sister of my husband.

And he is my offspring.

I am the servant of him who prepared me and I am the lord of my offspring.

But he is the one who be [got me] before time on a day of birth and his is my offspring in time, and my power is from him.

I am the staff of his power in his youth and he is the rod of my old age

The relationship between the divine and her husband is one of mutual giving and shared power. Such sharing and mutuality are necessary for a partnership to thrive and endure. In order to be comfortable in conceding power and capable of holding power, it is essential to know one’s self.

The second alternative form of knowledge is when Anna Flood and Richard Misner doubt the “mass disappearance” of the Convent women and go to the Convent and inspect the sight. During their investigation, Anna decides to fight the chickens for five umber colored eggs that she thought were fresh, which Richard wraps with a white handkerchief. After retrieving these eggs from the henhouse Richard and Anna see what one describes as a window and the other describes as a door:

It was when they returned...that they saw it. Or sensed it, rather, for there was nothing to see. A door, she said later. "No, a window," he said...They expanded on the subject: What did a door mean? what a window? Focusing on the sign rather than the event; excited by the invitation rather than the party. They knew it was there. Knew it so well they were transfixed for a long moment before they backed away and ran to the car...

Speculating about:

Who saw a closed door; who saw a raised window. Anything to avoid reliving the shiver or saying out loud what they were wondering. Whether through a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised, what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? (305)

The retrieval of the eggs and the vision of a door/window are pivotal occurrences that address Ruby's potential for rethinking home. Through a syncretic epistemology the Convent women develop a sense of home and community that allows them to know themselves, love themselves, and ultimately, to dwell in the beyond. The sense of home they develop, however, is neither a nationalist/isolated location, nor is it a location rooted in a return to a primordial or lost homeland as is a frequently reoccurring trope in Black women's writing. Instead, home is contingent upon movement and unfamiliar, yet homely spaces. The closed door/raised window, then, is indicative of an alternative way to live in a *racial house* that dwelling in the beyond offers Anna and Richard. In her essay, "Home," Toni Morrison ponders "how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home" (5). She explains that

if she must "... live in a racial house, it was important [...] to rebuild it so that it was not a windowless prison into which no cry could be heard, but rather an open house, grounded, yet generous in its supply of windows and doors" (4). Morrison creates this door/window in the henhouse so that the Anna and Richard can remain hopeful and perhaps lead Ruby toward a different way of understanding home. Such an understanding would lay a foundation for the unmotivated respect that is necessary for reformed partnership.

Whether Anna and Richard saw a closed door or a raised window is not significant, the invitation and inquisition about what is on the other side is central to understanding the alternative that that unknown space offers. The Convent women found a "something more" that was not partnership, but the "something more" also was not Sula's solitude. Now, Anna and Richard, not 8-rocks, but extensions of Ruby nonetheless, are also offered an alternative. We can only speculate on Richard and Anna's decision; however, the fact that immediately after Richard's eulogist claim that "what is sown is not alive until it dies" he sees the window in the garden once again and "felt it beckon toward another place—neither life nor death—but there, just yonder, shaping thoughts he did not know he had" allows us to speculate hopefully. To hope that Ruby, like the Convent women, can indeed embrace alternatives and be redeemed from the past.

While the Convent women's resurrection and Anna and Richard's invitation can be read hopefully, Morrison disallows such a tidy closing to her narrative. The Convent women return packing guns, brandishing swords, and are decked out in military fatigues. Unaware of their return, Billie Delia questions:

“When will they return? When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town?...A backward noplac ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where; who had seen in lively, free, unarmed females the mutiny of the mares and so got rid of them” (308).

Despite the Convent women’s apparent preparedness for war, I do not interpret their return as one bound up in acts of revenge; rather, I would argue they understand that the space “just yonder” where unmotivated respect reigns is not yet fully accessible. So then, while they do not always have the choice to choose a partnership, they also are not willing to dwell in solitude. They recognize that the only way to dwell in the beyond is through an active and persistent effort to do so.

Chapter 3: “The Matrix of Many Things”: Diaspora, Anthropology, and Gender in Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*

At best, history is about power, a story about those who won.

~Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*

Paradise and *Louisiana* share the common theme of Diaspora consciousness.

But both texts go beyond such consciousness to provide characters with the “something more” that kinship and family tropes failed to provide during the Black Women’s Literary Renaissance. Both texts work to redefine community in a way that offers female and male characters the opportunity to have a dialogue. Through the trope of incest, Toni Morrison depicts Diaspora consciousnesses as a hopeful, but fallible model for achieving a reformed partnership. The fallibility of Diaspora consciousness and the challenges of reforming partnership are evidenced by the contested relationship between Diaspora and nation-state in *Paradise*. Ruby’s unwillingness to treat the Convent women with unmotivated respect and the violence that results from the lack of respect echoes Morrison’s point about the pursuit of Paradise in her Nobel Prize lecture. Morrison proposes that the conventional wisdom that the Tower of Babel fell due to the confusion caused by workers who spoke many languages as opposed to one monolithic language ought to be reconsidered. She ponders whether “the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period.”

In contrast to *Paradise*, *Louisiana* is successful at achieving the unmotivated respect needed for reformed partnership. Erna Brodber works diligently not to erase nation from Diaspora. By doing so, she presents a home space that is Morrison's "a-world-in-which-race-does-*not*-matter." Unlike Ruby, all of Brodber's characters embrace the alternative forms of knowledge that Diaspora consciousness offers them. This is most evident in the character of Ella, the protagonist. She mobilizes the field of anthropology—a field that has a troubled history with racially and ethnically marginalized people—as a literal Diasporic home space. Brodber redefines anthropology as a redemptive site that enables Diasporans to consider their cultural identity beyond the constraints of race and feel at home in the Diaspora. The field of anthropology functions as a critical element in the shaping of the partnership that ensues between Ella Townsend Kohl and Reuben Kohl. Ultimately, Brodber redefines anthropology as a form of knowledge that facilitates the making of a Diasporic home space that fosters reformed partnerships. The home space that is constructed and the partnership that is achieved in this text, however, are also riddled with complications.

Louisiana is not unlike many of the historical recovery narratives produced by Black women during the 1970s and 1980s. The premise of the narrative is grounded in the need to tell an untold story that adds to, if not corrects, the larger historical narrative of the Americas. Scholars have attended to Brodber's efforts to construct a Pan-African community by positioning Garveyism at the root of the narrative. In "Reconnecting the Caribbean-American Diaspora in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* and Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*," for example, Cynthia James presents a

nuanced analysis of how Brodber immortalizes Garvey and Garveyism in order to emphasize the cross-cultural connections between West Indians and Black Americans in the United States. There is, however, another narrative that is presented simultaneously to the Pan-Africanism narrative—a narrative that heretofore has not received scholarly attention. A second cross-cultural connection that Brodber makes is the parallel between Ella and anthropologist, folklorist, and writer Zora Neale Hurston. Ella also resembles Hurston's most noted protagonist, Janie Crawford. These parallels complicate the seeming bliss of Diasporic home spaces and a partnership grounded in unmotivated respect. Thus, the first part of this chapter analyzes home and partnership and the second part analyzes what is lost in the formation of home and partnership.

In the field, Ella learns to question Western constructions of history and productions of knowledge, much like Hurston's insistence on recording and revering folk culture when such work was far from en vogue. She acquires this knowledge once she sees that anthropology is complicated by gender. Ella, like her real-life parallel, Hurston, has to make a choice between work and love. Her work is to be a "soothsayer of the past." But this work eventually leads to her death, to the loss of her love. Despite achieving a reformed partnership that is grounded in unmotivated respect, Ella develops a debilitating illness that immobilizes and often silences her. This is a troubling ending for a text that offers such an admirable example of reformed partnership.

I analyze the parallels between Ella and Hurston in an effort to make sense of Brodber's difficult ending. I argue that when Brodber signifies on Hurston, she is

suggesting that a critical gender consciousness and a dialogue grounded in unmotivated respect is just the first step in reforming partnership. An additional necessary step is for Black women writers to rethink how they imagine and represent their female characters. Once the partnership is reformed, the burden of care must be more equitable. While Reuben respects Ella and their relationship is mutually supportive, no one in Ella's community seems to recognize the burden of care they have placed upon *her*. As a soothsayer, Ella becomes Trudier Harris' "tower of strength," and the result is a failure to attend to her own needs and desires.⁵² Ultimately, Ella's community, like Hurston's, does not offer her mutual protection; she is not afforded a space of her own. Ella's predicament reinforces contemporary Black women writers' insistence that to "dwell in the beyond" all parties must take responsibility for the others' well-being. They must be willing to perform the selfless and reciprocal act of touching one another "on the inside part." The parallel between Zora Neale Hurston's life and work and Ella's work demonstrates that perhaps Black women writers need to reconsider how they develop their Black female characters and what they demand for those characters.

Anthropology and the Literary Narrative

Ella Townsend is a Columbia University graduate student in the Department of Anthropology. Her parents are Jamaican immigrants who not only give up their Jamaican cultural identity to pursue the "American Dream," but who also fail to develop any significant relationship with their only child. As an anthropology

⁵² Trudier Harris, "This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Character," Literature and Medicine 14.1: (1995), 109-126.□

graduate student, Ella is commissioned by Franklin D. Roosevelt's Work Project Administration (WPA) to record the history of the Blacks of Southwest Louisiana. She arrives in Franklin, LA with predetermined notions of science, knowledge, and truth that are challenged by the local culture. Shortly after arriving in Franklin, LA, Ella is joined by her future-husband and fellow anthropologist, Reuben Kohl. Ella's fieldwork is unexpectedly complicated when her informant, Sue Ann Grant-King, a.k.a Mammy, dies before completing their interview sessions. Anna's death, however, becomes of little consequence when Anna and her long-dead Jamaican friend, Lowly, begin speaking to Ella from the dead. Only at the novel's end does Ella with the aid of Reuben, and the deceased "venerable sisters," as she came to call Anna and Lowly, piece together Anna and Lowly's stories. In doing so she learns that Anna was a psychic and Black Nationalist UNIA organizer. The uncanny nature of Ella's relationship with Anna and Lowly challenges Ella's Western epistemological framework, particularly, how she defines truth. The greatest challenge to Ella's understanding of truth is the alternative forms of field research and methodology that she learns under the tutelage of the venerable sisters.

Traditional anthropology has something of a haunting affect on previously colonized people throughout the world. Anthropology's "colonial" reputation conjures visions of spectatorship, consumption, and exploitation. Such visions might suggest that previously colonized and marginalized groups would find the field of anthropology to be a critical space for revisionist work. Despite the revisionist potential, even in the post-independence era of postcolonial nations and the post civil rights era of the United States, anthropology remains a conspicuously white-male-

dominated field of study. To be more specific to the concerns in this particular chapter, let us turn our attention to the paucity of black women in the discipline. In “Seeking the Ancestors: Forging a Black Feminist Tradition in Anthropology” A. Lynn Bolles reveals, “So-called American anthropology developed in the antebellum period (1840s) and evolved into an academic discipline during the 1880s. From then until the 1980s, the number of Black women in the discipline has not moved beyond the low double digits” (25). According to Bolles, aside from a general devaluation of black women’s work in academe, an additional reason for black women’s invisibility in the field is the persistent disdain of “native anthropology”—marginalized people studying themselves.⁵³ A primary example is Melville Herskovits’ insistence that African Americans were unable to be objective enough to conduct fieldwork in Africa, because “they were too close to the cultures” (45n). In “Discipline and Practice: ‘The Field’ as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology” Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson also question this continuing prohibitive practice: “Is it merely coincidence that anthropology’s boundaries against folklore, ethnic studies, and sociology are constructed in such a way that scholars of color so often fall outside the boundaries of what is considered to be “real” anthropology?” (30). What begins as a bleak analysis, however, reveals a glimpse of promise, when Bolles goes on to cite an increased visibility of black women anthropologists during the 1990s.

Considering the 1990s burgeoning black women’s presence in anthropology, it is not ironic that Erna Brodber publishes *Louisiana*, a literary narrative that is grounded in anthropology and folklore, during this period (1994). Brodber

⁵³ For further reading Bolles suggests Faye V. Harrison, “The Persistent Power of ‘Race’ in the Cultural and Political Economy of Racism,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 47-74.

strategically positions *Louisiana* in contemporary black feminist anthropological discourse, while also positioning this narrative within the second rise of the black woman's literary cannon during the 1970s, the Black Women's Literary Renaissance. Thus, like the timing of the novel's publication, the mysterious delivery of Ella Townsend-Kohl's manuscript to the editors of The Black World Press in 1974 is also not a coincidence. The editors note, "Its arrival was well timed, perhaps well planned. Our small black woman's press, like all other publishing houses was looking for works on and of black women" (3) is indicative of the increased recognition and valuation of black women's cultural productions during this period. Utilizing these two key points of entry, black feminist anthropology and the black woman's literary cannon, Brodber constructs *Louisiana* as a counter-narrative that challenges anthropological, sociological, and ethnographic research methodologies' efforts to represent "truth." Brodber calls into question how Western thought determines what is real while interrogating Western constructions of history and productions of knowledge.

As a trained sociologist who teaches abnormal psychology to Caribbean social work students and a novelist who writes a narrative that delves in the metaphysical, draws cross-cultural connections between Black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans, and memorializes the legacy of Marcus Garvey, Erna Brodber is the quintessential "race woman" of the late twentieth century.⁵⁴ Brodber's efforts resonate with the "racial uplift" work of many turn-of-the-twentieth century Black American women who

⁵⁴ It is important to note that Brodber, like Hurston, complicates the term "race woman" by not investing in nationalist ideologies in the ways that many previous race women have.

worked passionately to uplift the race when Reconstruction failed.⁵⁵ It is important to note that Brodber, like Hurston, complicates the term “race woman” by not investing in nationalist ideologies in the ways that many previous race women have. This resonance stems from what Brodber refers to as an early race consciousness that made her feel her “business was to serve my race.” She elaborates:

My sociological effort and therefore the fiction that serves it, unlike mainstream sociology, has activist intentions: it is about studying the behavior of and transmitting these findings to the children of people who were put on ships on the African beaches and work up from this nightmare to find themselves on the shores of the New World. It is my hope that this information will be a tool with which the blacks and particularly those of the diaspora will forge a closer unity and, thus fused, be able to face the rest of the world more confidently. (164)

In *Louisiana* Brodber’s activist intentions are carried out in the field, literally. She uses her classrooms filled with Caribbean students as a space to instruct and contest dominant discourses.

A. Lynn Bolles suggests that due to its interdisciplinary nature and flexible boundaries, anthropology is a useful space for Black women’s counter-narratives, or efforts to “set the record straight.” While Brodber utilizes the interdisciplinarity and flexible boundaries of anthropology, she does not do so to “set the record straight;” rather, Brodber sees her work as self-instructive more so than “corrective.” In her essay, “Fiction in the Scientific Procedure” Brodber explains that she thinks of herself

⁵⁵ Black women’s club movements were a popular space for such racial uplift work. Many of these women paid particular attention to education, suffrage, temperance, and sometimes lynching.

as a sociologist who employs fiction writing as part of her sociological method. This was particularly true when she wrote her first novel, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* as a case history for students who were offered no Caribbean case studies in their course work. Brodber asserts:

Anthropology has tried very hard to present people and cultures whole...Generally speaking, these works are researched by people outside of the cultures and are directed by concerns not at all those of the researched...Accountability has not been to the people researched but to fellow academics. It has been my position that the native social scientist cannot operate in this way. She/he is part of the polity examined, and the conceptual framework within which she/he works as well as the way the data are presented have to take this into consideration. (166)

Brodber's work strives to give accountability to the people. Her political agenda in *Louisiana* is indeed corrective, as is the agenda of many "native" anthropologists; however, its greater significance lies in its self-instructive quality. As the "native" anthropologist, Ella enters a new world where she learns a different history—one that deconstructs master narratives and makes visible Diasporic cultural connections. During her instructive apprenticeship with Anna, Lowly, and Madam Marie, Ella not only acquires an alternative view of history, but she also learns to distrust the laws of so-called science. Under the divine care of this trinity of women, Ella allows herself to embrace the unreal and shirk investments in an irrecoverable past.

The Transference of Souls: Ring Shouts, Exorcisms and the Unreal

Among the minimal scholarship on *Louisiana* no attention is allotted to a close reading of the text. For this reason, as well as the fact that the narrative structure is difficult in an all most esoteric manner, this first section of the chapter will provide a close reading that explicates the text in a manner that fosters a better understanding of my argument. Ella's experience with the venerable sisters, Anna and Lowly, results in two initiations, the "transference of souls" and "getting over." The "transference of souls" occurs when Anna dies and leaves her soul with Ella, thus enabling Anna to communicate with Ella from the dead. The transference happens in two parts. First, Ella explains, "By the next morning, November 11th 1936 I was no longer just me. I was theirs. The venerable sisters had married themselves to me—given birth to me,--they would say" (32). Early on Ella recognizes the transference of souls as "a journey into knowing and [that she] was resisting as first timers sometimes do" (38). Ella's understanding of the *real* must be dismantled in order for the sisters to utilize fully her body as a vessel; for the sisters' goal is to offer Ella an alternative form of knowledge that dissolves her feelings of loneliness and displacement. Thus, the second part of this first initiation occurs at Anna's funeral when Ella shouts out, "*Ah who sey Sammy dead.*" Reuben Kohl, Ella's bi-racial, Congolese lover and future husband, reveals to Ella that when she shouted at the funeral, the congregation encircled her, doing "a kind of shoe patter accompanied by grunts" which calmed her into a faint.

The performance Reuben describes is the ring shout, a circular, African shuffle dance accompanied by singing or shouting to a rhythmic beat. As the

participants move counter-clockwise, the tempo accelerates resulting in a frenzied ecstasy. Noted fiction writer and cultural critic, Ralph Ellison, calls the ring shout “Americas first choreography.” Moreover, Arthur C. Jones explains that not only was America’s first choreography born out of the ring shout, but Americas first musical tradition, African American spirituals, were also born out of the ring shout:

Not yet fluent in the language of their captors or spiritually ready to adopt that language as their own, enslaved Africans required a new linguistic medium to communicate their commitments to each other and to the spirits...Eventually, the shouts and moans developed into the songs that are now called spirituals.⁵⁶

The ring shout is an inherently syncretic form of worship and communion. It blends elements of West African worship with those of Western Christianity as a means to escape, if only temporarily, the trials of enslavement. This example of syncretism fulfilling “New World” needs is reminiscent of Morrison’s syncretic blending of Catholicism, Protestantism, vodoun, candomblé, and Gnosticism in *Paradise*.

Both historically and in *Louisiana*, the ring shout functions as a conversion process. According to Jones, “The conversion process was gradual, and the result was a creative blend of African traditions and Christianity, creating a new, transformed religion different in form and substance from the religion of the slave holder.” As performed on Ella, the ring shout has two primary functions. First, it exorcises the Western science that informs her understanding of the laws of what is real, which allows her to cease resisting the transference of souls and be possessed fully by the “dead” sisters. The exorcism provides one element of the “something

⁵⁶ Arthur C. Jones, *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

more” Morrison’s Lone DuPres insists folk sometimes need. The exorcism enables Ella to follow Morrison’s instruction and “take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period.” In doing so, Ella is prepared to construct a home space that allows her to dwell in the beyond. Home for Ella, then, becomes a space of communion where she reunites with the Africanisms that her parents traded for the “American Dream.” The ring shout, an act that Ella, the classically trained anthropologist, would have once viewed as “primitive” and “savage” like so many anthropologists before her, is the act that enables Ella to understand her cultural identity differently. This different understanding offers her a path toward freedom from Western epistemologies and from her obsession with her unknown past.

How She “Got Over”

Newly exorcised and incorporated into the fold, Ella believes she is ready to be the venerable sisters’ horse. Ella rather absentmindedly explains to Reuben, “I had been officially entered. I was going to be, if I was not already, a vessel, a horse, somebody’s talking drum” (46). The horse that Ella refers to invokes the vodoun spirit possession by which the Loa, or spirit, mounts the human like a horse. The completion of the first initiation, what Ella refers to as her rite of passage, results in Ella and Reuben moving from Franklin, LA to Congo Square in New Orleans. During slavery, slaves gathered at Congo Square on Sundays to sell produce, dance, sing, and commune. It is also where Madam Marie Laveau, the infamous vodoun priestess, was rumored to dance with her snake. During the time this narrative is set, Congo Square had become a central stomping ground for black jazz musicians. Not

so ironically, Ella and Reuben are sent to stay with a woman named Madam Marie, who owns a boarding house in Congo Square and provides psychic healing for West Indian sailors and travelers who frequent the New Orleans ports. Once in Congo Square, Ella becomes a horse not only for the venerable sisters to tell their story through, but also for a Diasporic assemblage of sailors and travelers who seek their history.

Although Brodber incorporates a visitor in this text—Reuben—ancestor figures occupy a significant presence as well. Anna and Lowly are an ancestral presence in the narrative—they are the undead past. Anna and Lowly act as agents of counter-memory in a way similar to that of Lone Dupres in *Paradise* when they act as instructive guides who reveal her past to her. Anna and Lowly are history embodied in ghostly form, rather than anatomical form like the visitors—they enable the possessed to produce counter-memories that complicate notions of progress perpetuated by European imperialism and Enlightenment ideologies. Anna and Lowly want Ella, their horse, to “set the record straight.” Anna resists Ella’s initial data collection, because she is emphatic that her story is a collective story. Her story must necessarily include the voices of her friend Lowly and husband Silas, as well as the voice of Ella, Reuben and the West Indian travelers. Thus, the trauma of slavery and displacement that connects them all is transformed into a powerful medium for community and counter-memory. As I noted before, visitors are not concerned with establishing cohesive historical narratives; however, it is important to note that the emergence of visitors does not dispel the need for ancestors.

Having been initiated into the realm of the unreal, Ella still has to “get over” her resistance to know her past and her reliance on science in order to appreciate fully the venerable sisters’ purpose for her. The second initiation, referred to as, “getting over,” is also catalyzed by the singing of lines from the call and response song, “Ah who sey Sammy dead.” Sailors in Madam Marie’s parlor sing the song this time. Just as the men sing, “Sammy dead, Sammy dead, Sammy dead oh,” Ella’s head grows big, her shoulders rock, her body slides from her chair to the floor, and she begins to speak, first a re-memory from her Jamaican past as a nine-month-old baby, and next as a prophetic oracle, revealing each sailor’s past until she tires, exhausted (88-89). This parapsychological experience solidifies Ella’s purpose—not just her purpose as a “celestial ethnographer” or “soothsayer of the past,” but also her need to “give thanks and press on.”

Ella’s conversion is not just about gaining access to the repressed history of the larger Diasporic community that Anna is invested in, it is also about Ella gaining access to her own personal past that her parents forced her to repress. After she has “gotten over” and with the help of Reuben’s insight, Ella recognizes that she has been carrying around a burdensome past, full of resentment and disappointment. She has always felt sorry for her parents who, “seemed to me they had lost the art of babymaking for they had made no one else to warm them, to keep their company and to fill the space between them” (38). Despite her sympathy, Ella never “got over” her parents and her mother in particular, cutting her off from her past. Upon “getting over” and seeing the first 18 months of her life in St. Mary’s, Jamaica with her grandmother, she is angered that her mother left her no “life-line”—no “door...for me

to say thanks to those people who had cared for me in those crucial years” (92). Ella’s ultimate act of “getting over” is facilitated by Reuben when he convinces her that there is no use in going back to New York to confront her mother and “destabilize” her. Reuben explains that Ella can only morally destabilize her mother if she was willing “to devote time to her helping her reassemble herself.” Instead, Reuben encourages Ella to “give thanks and press on.” By heeding Reuben’s advice, Ella officially “gets over” her past and is ready to attend to her life in the present. Ella’s getting over is in fact learning how to be at home in the Diaspora. Having let go of the past, Ella is prepared to examine her life in the present differently. She is ready to accept her cultural in-betweenness and disconnection from her parents’ homeland as something that is full of possibility, rather than representative of a loss.

The Matrix of Many Things

Reuben is exceptionally influential in Ella’s “becoming.” Because his presence is critical and because plurality and inter-connectedness is the moral of Anna’s story, it is necessary to examine how and why Reuben fits into Brodber’s political agenda. Reuben operates as a balance to the ancestral presence that Anna and Lowly represent. Anna and Lowly offer Ella a cohesive historical narrative, however, this in itself is not enough to enable her to “get over” the past—in order to feel at home, she needs more than access to the past. As a visitor Reuben offers Ella what the sisters’ knowledge cannot—knowledge of how to live in the present. It is only through Reuben’s presence and guidance that Ella is able to imagine a reality beyond the historical past and beyond the Eurocentric paradigms that consume her. Similarly, Reuben is only able to feel secure in the present and comfortable with his

in-betweeness and unknown history through witnessing Ella's transformation. The emphasis on kinship and family that made both Ella and Reuben feel alienated and dislocated is terminated by the companionship that their partnership produces.

Like Consolata and Dovey's visitor, Reuben appears and disappears rather mysteriously. He is a "man wandering in search of connection" (42). Reuben arrives in the United States trained in German Sociology with virtually no past to speak of. He only knows that a priest transported him from the Congo to Europe when he was three. He has no memory of his parents. Despite his seeming displacement in the United States, Reuben exudes the same familiarness of Consolata's visitor.⁵⁷ Upon Ella's death the reader, like the editors of *The Black World Press* can only conjecture that Reuben returned to the Congo. Reuben exhibits the evanescence of the *Paradise* visitors when he vanishes once his work is done. The relationship between Reuben and Ella, however, differs from the relationships in *Paradise* in a significant way; it is a relationship of mutual giving. Both Reuben and Ella give one another new life. In this sense, their relationship embodies the partnership that is facilitated by visitors, rather than the instruction and guidance supplied by ancestors like Anna and Lowly.

Although much of the narrative focuses on Ella's "getting over," Reuben also experiences some conversions. Reuben is something of a paradox. Early in the text, Ella boasts that Reuben is the more authentic anthropologist:

My Reuben is still an active student of Anthropology, and more authentic than I, having passed all the requisite stages preliminary to the award of a

⁵⁷ The townspeople in St. Mary's are convinced that Reuben is the reincarnated Reuben Cole, an older white man who had been their ten years prior to Ella and Reuben's arrival trying to organize the local sharecroppers into a union. He was run out of the area by the landowners and their lackeys. Determined that Reuben Kohl and Reuben Cole were one in the same, the townspeople revere him.

doctorate, having seen field work in his native Europe, and in Ceylon, while I have been slipped into formal studies sideways on the experience clause, ably supported by the absence of others of my race to step forward. (34)

Reuben has been in field, and not just doing nativist fieldwork like her, but doing the real

thing—studying people who are different than himself and doing his fieldwork outside of his homeland. Despite Reuben’s academic training and authenticating fieldwork experience, it is Reuben who postulates the hypothesis that Mammy had passed leaving her soul with Ella. Furthermore, it is Reuben who chastises Ella when she is reluctant to accept her supernatural experiences as being unreal, unexplainable phenomena:

--How unfortunate when we realize that we are nothing more than the people!—
This was meant to tell me that I was a hypocrite, pretending to take race seriously, pretending to take the field’s sense of itself seriously but balking when that explanation was applied to my own behaviour; that for all my race consciousness I was making a distinction between myself and the people around me and who was I. (35)

The inherent difference between Ella and Reuben is that Reuben is “forever in search of knowledge;” whereas, Ella is content with static forms of knowledge that reinforce her intellectual and cultural comfort zone. Because Reuben is in search of knowledge, he is more receptive to alternative epistemologies. His unknown, “unhomed” history leaves him always “wandering in search of a connection” (42).

Just as Ella experiences a rite of passage through the transference of souls, Reuben also experiences a rite of passage. Louisiana functions as a “site of memory” for Reuben; the very essence of the landscape, culture, community, and most important, the music, conjure the unconscious for Reuben. New Orleans is an ideal location for conjuring a Diasporic unconsciousness. As a U.S. city that has experienced Spanish, French, and English rule, as well as being part of the extended Caribbean, New Orleans is a border space. It is a space that is betwixt and between the U.S. and the Caribbean with remnants of an African past and elements of indigenous culture that make it a geographical space that conjures a variety of cultural memories. New Orleans also offers Reuben access to the jazz that he only had limited access to in Europe. In this text, jazz operates as a critical element in a Diasporic matrix. Jazz becomes a metaphor for the continuities between home-seeking Diasporans and also for Reuben’s “becoming.” Ella describes Reuben, Madam, and the West Indian men’s relationship with jazz in a way that emphasizes how jazz is more than a genre of music: “... and he tries jazz with all of him, voice hitting voice, hand hitting hand, heel hitting shin, all in its own time, held together by one chord” (123).

In order for Ella to “become” the “celestial ethnographer” and “soothsayer of the past,” she first had to let go of her entire understanding of knowledge, truth, life and death. I argued earlier that Reuben encouraged Ella to “give thanks and press on,” rather than dwelling on a past that she cannot remedy. After she has “gotten over” he helps her reconcile her calling and make sense of her newly-appointed role, explaining that what she does is “the matrix of many things” (130). The significance

of Reuben's role is not just in Ella's life, but in the life of this text as well. From the early stages Reuben assists Ella in transcribing the tapes, and once she is too weak to complete the manuscript he does the work for her. Reuben takes the responsibility for seeing to it that the transcriptions are turned into a manuscript and that the manuscript is delivered to "the 'right' publisher at the 'right' time" (4), thus, passing on Ella's life-line to the larger Diasporic world. Reuben ultimately helps Ella, which also helps him self, to negotiate a present that is haunted by the past. By doing so, Reuben himself becomes an instrumental element in "the matrix of many things." In this instance I am referring to the type of matrix that is synonymous with womb. Reuben's newfound Diasporic home space allows him to metamorphose from homeless to homed. As a Diasporic home space, anthropology operates as a matrix that transforms Western epistemologies and temporalities so that Diasporans can redefine themselves and locate a home space in the present. For Reuben this means that for the first time in his life he is not only part of a majority, but he also feels an inherent connection to the people. According to Ella, his ability to commune with and *touch* blackness makes him anew. After spending time in Congo Square, she is "convinced that Reuben was right: he had found his family; he had found his tall oak with capillaries doubling back to home" (79).

The Curse of the Witch of Endor and the Losses of Female Prophets

While the knowledge-sharing of the venerable sisters and the reformed partnership with Reuben effectively get Ella over and allow them both to dwell in the beyond, an issue remains: female prophets and barrenness. In a narrative that focuses on the re-production of knowledge and re-membering of obscured or

forgotten histories, it would be problematic to overlook the fact that this text is filled with childless women. It demands that we examine closely what constitutes reproduction and life in this text. Ella's "getting over" is followed by several changes. She stops pressing her hair, begins reading the Bible, becomes a vegetarian, and trades her slacks for loose-fitting, tunic-like dresses. Studying the Bible, Ella discovers a parallel between herself and the story of the Biblical prophet Elijah/Elisha. The connection Ella makes is significant, because it helps her to understand her role as a soothsayer of the past. Ella's conversion takes place in what Madam Marie refers to as "the fullness of time." Madam Marie is quick to note that she herself and Mrs. Forbes were unsuccessful at getting Ella over—it is Madam Marie's West Indian men who get Ella over. Ella is initially perplexed by the notion "in the fullness of time," and Madam Marie's assertion that there's another way (99). Unsure of what the "other" way is Ella proceeds to do things her way, making a parallel between Elijah passing Elisha his mantle and the venerable sisters riding Ella as their horse. Ella is not sure how to interpret this Biblical parallel or the additional Biblical parallel that Anna, Lowly and she symbolize a holy trinity. It is not until she ponders the difference between Elijah/Elisha who produced holy prophecies and the witch of Endor who is chastised for calling Samuel up from the dead to prophesy for King Saul that she develops an understanding of the "other" way Madam Marie refers to. Ella's epiphany is that prophets wait for God, which is what Elisha did when he waited for Elijah to pass him his mantle, and what the witch of Endor failed to do when she acted on man's orders instead of God's. To suggest that the "other" way relies on receiving orders

from God is an alternative way of understanding Christianity, because unlike theological interpretations of the witch of Endor where she is condemned for acting as a medium, guided by satanic forces, Ella's interpretation does not castigate her. Ella's interpretation allows for a spiritual space in which African spiritualities and Western Christianity mingle, producing a syncretic episteme—a way of knowing that reconciles these often-conflicting spiritualities. So, while Madam Marie and Ella's activities conjure vodoun, Brodber complicates Diasporic belief systems even further by syncretizing vodoun, making it a way of life that constantly changes in order to meet the needs of its practitioners.

The above analysis of syncretism is significant to my examination of childless women in this text. Lowly dies young and childless. Anna and Silas have children late in life, but the children die. Ella contemplates her seeming barrenness after her first and tenth years of marriage and ponders whether prophets are permitted to have children. Unlike the famed, Marie Laveau who birthed 15 children and passed her practice on to her daughter and namesake, or Elijah who passed on his prophethood to Elisha, it would seem that Ella is left with no one to pass on her story to. Even the childless venerable mothers gave birth to Ella when they passed on the “life-line” to her. The venerable sisters, as well as the West Indian travelers and sailors deplete literally Ella's energy and strength. By the time she finally pieces together the complete “story,” Ella is bedridden and fragile, inflicted by some unidentified, apparently terminal illness. It would seem that Ella is devoured by the needs of the sisters and the men. This intense consumption is yet another lesson for Ella—another lesson that Reuben assists her in translating. He not only makes the point

that they are both too consumed in their own activities to be attentive parents in the traditional sense of biologically reproducing and raising offspring, but he also points out that she has already become a mother: “‘What you do is the matrix of many things,’ he tells me. It doesn’t spell ‘mother’ though. Nor does it really spell ‘horse’” (130). Reuben’s revelation enables Ella to understand motherhood outside of patriarchal constructs, just like she now understands history, science and truth outside of Western discourses. Ella is like the “mother” Piedade presents in *Paradise*. Like Piedade, Ella produces Diasporic continuities.

As inviting as it is to read Ella’s barrenness as fruitful for the African Diaspora and her death as divine, doing so would be problematic. In “The Body of the Woman in the Body of the Text: the Novels of Erna Brodber,” Denise deCaires Narain argues that “In taking on her role as seer, Ella’s sexual presence is de-emphasized and her body represented as the asexual vessel through which the community can find expression and healing...Brodber suggests that the woman’s body operates as vessel or vehicle for the powerful delivery of the word which can ‘reborn’ the black diasporic community” (113-114). This is true. Ella is a mother who births Diasporic truths; she inverts the conventional production of knowledge and history, which are productions that are white and male, and instead presents them as black and female. However, her inversion raises the question of what is lost in that endeavor. Before Ella “gets over,” she makes it a point to mention her powdered sheets that are ever awaiting sexual pleasure: “One thing led to another and another to another much to the delight of the no-longer-sweet-smelling sheets. They clapped their hands for joy” (34, 42). These references that seem somewhat

imposed into the text are rather bewildering. Aside from seeming misplaced, they would also be highly inappropriate in the 1930s. An unwed man and woman living together would certainly have had a stigmatizing affect, especially in a small, rural town; yet, aside from Madam Marie's puzzlement over the bedroom arrangements for Reuben and Ella in her boarding house, no attention is paid to Ella's improprieties. So, yes, as Narain notes, Ella's sexual presence is de-emphasized as she takes on her role as a seer. Narain, however, does not address the complications inherent in Brodber's de-sexualization of Ella.

The problem is not that Ella does not birth a child who can pass on this Diasporic legacy that the sisters reveal to her, because it is convincing that Ella's child so to speak is the manuscript that is delivered to The Black World Press. The complication arises from the fact that Ella's personhood and literal life cannot be sustained in her process of becoming. While she is freed from her past, she quite literally is consumed by the way the past haunts the present, creating all the West Indian men who need her to give them their history. As the men's vessel, her body cannot contain all of their needs and maintain its strength. As the venerable sister's horse, her body is literally ridden to death.

Re-Membering Zora

The case of Ella's debilitating infirmities and ultimate death could potentially suggest that what seemed to be a liberatory text is in fact reaffirming hegemonic and patriarchal values, or at least, that the narrative cannot escape hegemony and patriarchy. Hence, I propose that we return to the issue of the haunting affect of traditional anthropology on the previously colonized world with which I began this

chapter. Ella's de-sexualization and death can be understood productively if viewed as Brodber signifying on the anthropological and creative work of Zora Neale Hurston. Bolles notes that while significant work has been published on Hurston's literary narratives, little work has been done on her anthropological studies and contributions. Just as Ella becomes a ghostly figure for the Black World Press who must confirm her existence, Hurston was a ghostly figure in the literary world until Alice Walker recovered it in the 1970s. It is not my intent to perform anything close to a full-fledge analysis of Hurston's life, fiction, or contributions to anthropology. I simply want to identify several parallels between Ella and Hurston that will exemplify my assertion that a reformed partnership relies on more than unmotivated respect. Although Reuben and the Diasporic community that Ella fosters revere her as a wise mother figure, they do not reciprocate the care she bestows upon them. Their failure to reciprocate disables Ella from having the choice to choose between work and pleasure, which is the root of her metaphorical and physical barrenness.

When selecting Columbia's graduate program in anthropology, Brodber was being quite strategic. Columbia was Dr. Franz Boas' institutional home during the 1930s when Ella is sent to collect data in Franklin, LA and when Hurston is sent to record the folklore of her hometown, Eatonville, FL. Hurston defied the conventions of her times and spent a significant portion of her writing career living in controversy. While there are many points that can be made regarding Hurston's controversial life, the main point I want to make here is the fact that she was invested in preserving and privileging Diasporic folk life during time periods when

such privileging clearly was not en vogue. Her work on folk life in Florida and Louisiana in *Mules and Men* and folk culture in Jamaica and Haiti in *Dust Tracks* were two of many sources of consternation for Hurston. In the introduction to Alice Walker's collection of Hurston's work, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*, Mary Helen Washington refers to the 1930s as simultaneously being Hurston's meridian and the beginning of her "intellectual lynching" (16). Critics during this time wanted images of exploitation and terror—images that Richard Wright and other protest writers were glad to produce during the 1940s. Hurston did not believe black writing must necessarily dwell in the mode of racial protest or that her characters must be "tragically colored." According to Washington, "Hurston was determined to write about black life as it existed apart from racism, injustice, Jim Crow—where black people laughed, celebrated, loved, sorrowed, struggled—unconcerned about white people and completely unaware of being 'a problem'" (17). In other words, Hurston strived to present black people as human first.

This desire on Hurston's part was reflected in many ways, but one specific way that intersects with Ella's fieldwork is the parallels and contradictions of the recording machine. When Ella attempts to return the once valuable, but then dated recording machine to the Anthropology Department at Columbia University she realizes that not only was there no record of her having it, no one wanted it. The refusal of ownership of the recording machine is symbolic of the devaluation of "nativist" fieldwork. While working as an investigator for Carter Woodson at the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History Hurston expressed a desire to

purchase a recording machine “so that she could record what really had happened in black history” (Hemenway 95). The irony here more so than the parallel is that with her recording machine Ella unwittingly recorded “what really had happened in black history” and was initially quite perplexed by it. The parallel then is that Ella and Hurston produced and valued stories that were generally deemed invaluable during their lifetime. It is not until the 1970s when both women’s work is rediscovered that it becomes noteworthy scholarship.

A notable difference in the life of Hurston versus that of Ella is the virtual absence of partnership. In the foreword to Robert E. Hemenway’s biography of Hurston, Alice Walker notes that though Hurston enjoyed men, she did not need men (xv). Hemenway expounds on this topic when he discusses her brief marriage to Herbert Sheen. Based on her autobiographical accounts in *Dust Tracks* Hemenway concludes that “two people deeply in love could not share their careers” (96). The sporadic and unconventional career that Hurston embraced simply did not present itself as a strong foundation for a 1920s marriage. Furthermore, Hurston herself was convinced that the marriage interfered with her work, and thus felt obliged to chose work over the man whose own mother Hurston claims did not love him as much as her (96).

Herbert Sheen is not the only example of Hurston losing an opportunity for partnership. Perhaps more so than Sheen, the poet Langston Hughes established a friendship with Hurston during the Harlem Renaissance. Their friendship grew into a partnership when they helped organize the quarterly *Fire!!* during the summer of

1926, and they were known to travel together on occasion.⁵⁸ It seemed that the partnership would continue to grow when they began co-writing the script of a play, *Mule Bone*. Hurston created the tale, dialogue, and title while Hughes was to be responsible for the narrative structure and filling out and polishing the language. Hughes and Hurston's fallout is complicated by a couple of factors that are tangential to my point here. Basically, Hurston felt Hughes betrayed her friendship when he proposed expanding the duties of their typist, Louise Thompson.⁵⁹ The relationship eventually ended with attorneys and accusations of theft and dishonesty from both parties.⁶⁰ Despite the ugliness of the fallout both Hurston and Hughes seem to have lamented the bad ending. Hurston reportedly, "told the writer Arna Bontemps that she still woke up in the night, crying" over the incident (Cohen 180). Hughes re-membered Zora in "The Blues I'm Playing," a short story in the 1934 collection, *The Ways of White Folk*. The story is about a black pianist who rebels against her white patron and begins playing the blues. Rachel Cohen notes that "the story had the author's tenderness for them all, for the artist, and the manipulative patron, for Hurston and for his younger self...and the art they would have made had they stayed friends" (180).⁶¹ The story concludes with the lyrics:

O, if I could holler

⁵⁸ Fire!! was a quarterly that was geared toward the younger "Negro" artist, and was intended to offer an alternative aesthetic to that of W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke.

⁵⁹ Hurston had three gripes about Thompson that she expressed to Hughes in a letter. The first was that Hughes wanted a three way split with Louise. Second, he proposed paying Thompson a higher than normal typist fee. Third, he proposed Thompson be made the business manager of the Broadway production (Hemenway 141).

⁶⁰ For more details on the fallout see: Robert E. Hemenway's Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography and Rachel Cohen's A Chance Meeting: Intertwined Lives of American Writers and Artists.

⁶¹ Rachel Cohen, A Chance Meeting: Intertwined Lives of American Writers and Artists, 1854-1967, (New York: Random Books, 2004).

Like a mountain jack,
I'd go on up de mountain
And call my baby back.

Clearly, both Hurston and Hughes regretted the dissolution of their friendship, though neither ever attempted a resolution.

Over sixty years later Erna Brodber offers Hurston and Hughes the resolution and sustained partnership they both longed for. Ella and Reuben like Hurston and Hughes work together to produce art that embraces the past at the same time that it works to free black people from the bonds of the past. Ella practices the art of soothsaying while Reuben is “learning to jazz and getting acquainted with the blues” (Brodber 53). Like Hurston and Hughes, Ella and Reuben are also invested in folk culture. Although *Louisiana* was published over sixty years after the Hurston-Hughes fallout, the novel itself is set contemporaneously with the fallout. This detail can be more fully understood by also briefly examining Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Since Alice Walker’s recovery of *Their Eyes*, as well as her rediscovery of Hurston, many scholars have heralded *Their Eyes* as a feminist text. Walker’s edited Zora Neale Hurston reader, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*, is published by the Feminist Press. Shirley Anne Williams claims that Janie’s “individual quest for fulfillment becomes every woman’s tale” (qtd. in Wall 75). Despite these claims and the pro-feminist enrapture with Hurston that continues to prevail, Mary Helen Washington made a critical argument that complicates such claims in her 1987 essay, “I Love the Way

Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands’: Zora Neale Hurston’s Emergent Female Hero,” and then again in her 1989 introduction to *Their Eyes*. In the essay Washington argues, “And while feminists have been eager to seize upon this text as an expression of female power, I think it is a novel that represents women’s exclusion from power, particularly from the power of oral speech” (237). Washington notes two scenes in particular where Janie ought to have a voice and does not: when Tea Cake beats her and in the courtroom.⁶² Washington explains this paradox of a woman who purportedly has found her voice, yet is silent as the conundrum of the questing hero being a woman. In her introduction to *Their Eyes* Washington notes that during a December 1979 MLA session titled, “Traditions and Their Transformations in Afro-American Letters”, Alice Walker countered Stepto’s assertion of silencing insisting, “...women did not have to speak when men thought they should, that they would choose when and where they wish to speak because while many women *had* found their own voices, they also knew when it was better not to use it” (xii). Similarly, Michael Awkward later argues that when Janie tells Pheoby her story Janie’s story becomes a communal one and that Janie “is choosing a collective rather than an individual voice” (xii).

Like Washington, I too am inclined to remain uncomfortable with Janie’s silence at such crucial times. Tea Cake arrives in Janie’s life at a time when she is lonely and desiring “something more” than the material possessions her husband left her and more than the communal life of Eatonville can provide her with. Like the visitors in *Paradise* and *Louisiana*, Tea Cake simply appears with a familiarity that

⁶² Washington notes that Robert Stepto was the first critic to raise the question regarding Janie’s voice.

is almost uncanny. “Seemed as if she had known him all her life” (94). Tea Cake literally has nothing to offer Janie other than a partnership grounded in unmotivated respect, which is something that neither of her husbands would have ever entertained. So I think feminist criticism is fair in arguing that with Tea Cake, Janie becomes her own person; nonetheless, the inescapable point remains that “What *Their Eyes* shows us is a women writer struggling with the problem of the questing hero as a woman and the difficulties in 1937 of giving a woman character such power and such daring” (Washington, *Their Eyes*, xiv). Hurston is unable to construct a full-fledged partnership between Janie and Tea Cake because of her own inability to fully imagine a voice for Janie. So, we end up with a writer and a character who possesses no language to demand a partnership and no way of fully imagining such a relationship in 1937. Hurston’s limited imagination and Janie’s lack of voice, however, should not obscure *Their Eyes*’ remarkable insight. Despite her failures, Hurston recognized the need for a balance between community, kinship, and history when such a balance was not sustainable.

Brodber addresses voice and partnership in a perplexing manner. It is perplexing because while Ella’s interior life is not overshadowed by Reuben’s life, Ella does represent Reuben’s quest for blackness, which is a quest that ultimately exoticizes Ella. When Reuben encourages Ella to be receptive to Anna’s advances, Ella questions why she should become some “hoodoo woman to satisfy his search of the exotic?” (42). She later acknowledges Reuben’s quest for blackness, “The academy was white but here in the United States of America he could at least hear, see and, having found me, touch blackness” (53).

In addition to becoming immobile and unexplainably fatigued, Ella nearly loses her voice by the narrative's end. So, not only can she not write, she can barely speak either, leaving Reuben the full responsibility of writing/speaking for her. Brodber attempts to downplay this dependency with Anna's insistence and Reuben's eager reiteration that the story is a communal narrative. Anna is insistent that it took herself, Lowly, Silas, Ella, Reuben, Madam Marie, Mrs. Forbes, and the seamen to tell the story. While such an assertion may sound appealing on the surface, it ultimately reflects a problematic romantic ideal. I do not believe the communal voice we hear at the conclusion of *Louisiana* effectively celebrates Diaspora consciousness and community. I am also hesitant to interpret the conclusion as some form of tribute to Hurston in which the critic can interpret Ella's silence and untimely death as libratory. Instead I would argue that even in 1994 Brodber struggles to locate a space and sustain a partnership that provides her female protagonist with something more—that elusive safe space that Morrison searches for where both race and gender matter but are rendered impotent. Albeit, I will acknowledge that Brodber constructs a male counterpart who is more appealing and convincing in his interest in a partnership with Ella, as opposed to the constant objectification that Janie remained under even when married to Tea Cake. I must also acknowledge that in writing *Paradise*, Toni Morrison seems no more able to provide her female protagonists with sustained heterosexual partnerships for the text ends with women offering one another the mutual protection that constitutes a reformed partnership.

The less than encouraging conclusions of *Their Eyes* and *Louisiana* are marked by the similarity of barrenness. Arguably, Ella and Hurston produced fieldwork. Fieldwork in the case of recording and celebrating black culture is certainly a form of reproduction; however, it is a form of reproduction that falls on the work side of the work-love binary. Ella and Janie are fulfilled characters, and as Hemenway and Walker argue, Hurston found fulfillment in her work. But there is a price. Where are the next generations of “women-warriors” who demand something more? Where is the next generation who will continue to pursue and attain both work and love as a choice for black women? It is plausible that Ella’s mysterious debilitation is a metaphor for the women prophets like Hurston whose work was devalued by the mainstream and often even the marginal culture. Thus, it is ironic that Ella’s lifeline that “her men” supposedly help to sustain withers and leaves her immobile much like one would imagine Hurston’s last days as she died of malnutrition. Even though Rueben assures the readers that Ella did not die in obscurity similar to Walker’s revelation that Hurston did not either, for both women’s funerals are attended in significant numbers, the fact that Brodber saw it fitting to extinguish Ella’s life after she sustained the lives of men remains problematic.

I have no provocative explanation for the tragic-romantic conclusion Brodber created. I will however propose that perhaps the setting of the text itself is too romantic. Following Hurston’s lead in *Their Eyes* Brodber sets *Louisiana* in the bayou, a location that shares a similar sort of history as the muck in which Janie finds temporary security. The bayou and the muck become a space beyond race.

According to Susan Willis the “muck”, “suggests something of a primal never-never land, more south than the rural South ... a mythic space ...”⁶³ As part of the extended Caribbean, Louisiana, and New Orleans in particular, also suggest something of a primal “never-never land” where the African Diaspora can meet and revel in its endless continuities—at least as depicted by Brodber. New Orleans is a land where syncretism and transculturation can be observed in every aspect of culture and life. For these reasons I would contend that perhaps the seemingly ideal locations that transcend Eurocentric cultural values and provide the space for an imagined return to a pre-contact past—a-world-in-which-race-does-*not*-matter—ultimately foil Hurston’s 1937 efforts, as well as Brodber’s 1994 efforts. I would not say that Ella and Janie do not acquire “something more,” because there is evidence that they do; however, they do not convincingly achieve the partnership that more and more contemporary black women artists are searching for if not demanding in their artistic productions.

Considering these parallels, losses, and shortcomings, I conclude by arguing that Ella’s de-sexualization and death is a concern that must be examined critically by scholars. While Brodber is illuminating a reality of many black women’s experiences, that reality needs to be imagined differently just as Brodber challenges readers to imagine history, truth, and community differently. The fact that Ella’s work results in her death reaffirms Hurston’s troubling assertion that Black women are “mules of the world.” Although it is encouraging that Brodber creates female

⁶³ Susan Willis, “Wandering: Hurston’s Search for Self and Method,” eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah, Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present, (New York: Amistad, 1993).

and male characters who register the need to reform heterosexual relationships in order to have any hope of dwelling in the beyond, her investment in an old and debilitating paradigm for representing Black womanhood limits access to a home space beyond race. Constructing Black women as “towers of strength” not only racializes them, but also disallows them the opportunity to choose how much or how little of themselves they want to give. Ella has fleeting moments when she seems to ponder her lack of choice, but she never pushes the issue and instead she consistently returns to her obligation to give to others.

The next two chapters on “The Land of Beulah” and *Eve’s Bayou* interrogate my concern with how Black women writers imagine their female characters and the significance of mutually supportive relationships. It would be unfair, however, to conclude without acknowledging the strength of *Louisiana* as a culturally libratory text. I impose my own feminist reading on *Louisiana*. Brodber does not make such proclamations regarding the intent of her work. She is invested in Diaspora-centered texts that liberate Diasporans from Euroncentric ideals. Her intervention in Western constructions of knowledge, her troubling of our belief in science, and her emphasis on collective cross-cultural counter-memory is a reconciliatory effort to assist her Diasporic readers and students in “getting over” “that state in which your body is depressed into physical collapse and something else is activated” (98). On these levels, then, her acts of deconstruction and reunification offer her Diasporic characters the something more folk sometime need; it offers them access to a home space where race matters, but matters differently. Brodber’s desire for black people around the world to “get over”—to find the “something more”—effectively reclaims

several fields, both the literal geographic locations of black people and the discipline of anthropology. By doing so, she constructs anthropological fieldwork as a home space for people who have a contested relationship with it. For her characters, the field becomes home. In Gupta and Ferguson's analysis of "field" and "home" they point out: "...the field" is most appropriately a place that is 'not home'..." (13). Brodber's reappropriation of these fields produces a "matrix of many things"—a home space that embodies multiple epistemologies and temporalities that may be used to explore "cures" for inequality, and more specifically, for the silences surrounding Diasporic history, culture and life.

Chapter 3: The Sight/Site of Transgression: Seeing “Something More” in *Eve’s Bayou*

The past is not dead; it is not even past.
~William Faulkner

My spirit comes here to drink.
My spirit comes here to drink.
Blood is the undercurrent.
~Joy Harjo, “New Orleans”

Such endings that are not over is what haunting is about.
~Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*

It is difficult to separate my voice from this project, as my subjectivity positions me as scholar, analyzing the discourse, and also as participant, experiencing what I analyze. I was born in 1975 in the wake of the post-Nationalism era and I came of age during a critical moment for Black feminist thought and Black women’s cultural productions. “*Sometimes Folk Need More*” is an interdisciplinary project that follows a tradition of Black feminist scholarship that remains aware of the self’s relationship to the theory. The last two chapters of this project turn from novelistic representations of reformed partnership to the work done by popular culture. The way I have divided this project does more than create the opportunity for cultural analysis. The division provides a space to indulge Toni Cade Bambara’s request that “we keep talking to and arguing with each other in order to clarify our goals and our visions.” Toni Morrison and Erna Brodber were born during the pre-Civil Rights era and Kasi Lemmons and Danzy Senna were born in the post-Civil Rights era. Lemmons and

Senna's work is a double-voiced response that demands even "more" than Morrison and Brodber's generations—they want more than Sula's solitude *and* more than the Convent women and Ella's death—they want *more choices*. The "more" for the post-Nationalist Black feminists, then, requires that they approach reformed partnership different than their predecessors.

In *Eve's Bayou*, Kasi Lemmons reforms partnership by presenting characters that contrast sharply with Hollywood film and mass-market fiction types, as well as with Morrison and Brodber's characters. Mozelle Batiste and Julian Grayraven epitomize reformed partnership; their partnership is grounded in unmotivated respect and mutual protection. Most importantly, while events in Mozelle's life have been tragic, Mozelle herself is not tragic like Ella, because she is given choices. Through Mozelle and Julian, and particularly through how they contrast with Louis and Roselyn Batiste, Lemmons "invites the audience to look differently."⁶⁴ This film then, is about *seeing* on multiple levels. The reformed partnership and rethought characters are part of Lemmons' larger project of correcting a U.S. patriarchal and cultural memory that makes stereotypical and essentialist notions of black identity acceptable and in all too many cases, celebratory. Lemmons troubles how we see—how we see ourselves as Black women and Black men, how we see race as diverse U.S. citizens, how we see the past, especially its ramification on the present, and finally, how we might see differently. As a result of troubling how we see, Lemmons locates a safe home space for her characters that allows them to dwell in the beyond. Before discussing the film, I want to first offer a brief narrative synopsis and then consider how issues of production might enable this film, and not necessarily the

⁶⁴ bell hooks, Black Looks: Race and Representation, (Boston: South End P, 1992), 130.

generation of the writer, to produce a narrative that does not just work toward a reformed partnership with choices as *Paradise* and *Louisiana* do, but one that seemingly achieves it.

Eve's Bayou is set in 1962 in an unnamed Louisiana Parish, probably a commutable distance north of New Orleans. The film has been categorized as a coming-of-age story, Southern gothic, and a Black family film. The opening shot of a man and woman having sex against a wall in the dark and its reflection through a child's eye does not fully prepare the viewer for the woman's voice over that declares, "The summer I killed my father, I was ten years old." The remainder of the opening voice over explains the Batiste family's lineage. The now grown Eve Batiste explains that her great-grandmother, also named Eve, cured her slave master, General Jean-Paul Batiste, of cholera. In return for saving his life, General Batiste freed Eve, giving her Eve's Bayou. Eve goes on to add facetiously, "Perhaps in gratitude she bore him sixteen children."

The film is structured around the lives of Louis Batiste (Samuel L. Jackson), a physician and philanderer, his wife, Roselyn (Roz) Batiste (Lynn Whitfield) who is disappointed in her marriage yet remains the exemplary 1960s wife, and their children, Eve (Jurnee Smollett), Cisely (Meagan Good), and Poe (Jake Smollett). Louis' sister, Mozelle (Debbie Morgan), also occupies a central role in the plot of the film and in the Batiste family. As a psychic counselor, sometimes-voodoo practitioner, and a "black widow" who has buried three spouses, one because of infidelity, Mozelle is a complicated foil to Louis. They are both perceived by their

community to be healers—Louis steeped in conventional Western medicine and Mozelle committed to a syncretic mix of “old” and “new” world cures.

The event in the film that critics and scholars have devoted the most attention to is Cisely’s revelation to Eve that their intoxicated father molested her one stormy evening. Being acutely aware of her father’s philandering and fearing the threat that it poses to her family, Eve seeks out the local voodoo priestess, Elzora (Diahann Carroll), paying her \$20 to kill her father. Louis ultimately “falls on his own sword,” as Elzora insinuates might happen to him, without the work of voodoo. The husband of a woman with whom he had been having an open affair shoots him outside a bar. After her father’s death Eve finds a letter he had written to Mozelle expressing his concern that Cisely had attempted to seduce him, attributing her behavior to adolescent confusion. When confronted by Eve, Cisely admits that she really does not know what happened on that stormy evening. The two sisters embrace and cry together as Eve forgives Cisely, and they both forgive their father for having been unable to give them everything they need. The film ends as they submerge the letter in the bayou and Eve’s voice-over repeats the opening lines of the film, this time omitting the reference to killing her father and instead expressing the complicated nature of memory and its relationship to the past.

We are the daughters of Eve and Jean-Paul Batiste. I was named for her.

Like others before me, I have the gift of sight, but the truth changes color, depending on the light, and tomorrow can be clearer than yesterday. Memory is a selection of images, some elusive, others printed indelibly on the brain.

Each image is like a thread, each thread woven together to make a tapestry of intricate texture. And the tapestry tells a story, and the story is our past.

A Forethought on Audience—Seeing What You Want to See

One of my personal film-viewing experiences two years prior to the release of *Eve's Bayou* (1997) speaks to how issues of market and audience can facilitate or inhibit film as a narrative production that intervenes in political spheres. Prior to viewing the film adaptation of Terry McMillan's best-selling novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, I was skeptical about the quality and content of her work. The quality issue was no doubt nurtured by my English studies instruction on the difference between "high" literature and "low" mass-market fiction—McMillan's popular fiction being "low." I had never read one of McMillan's novels (and I was dumbfounded when a good-hearted friend gave me one as a birthday present), but judging by her books' popularity in the 1990s, particularly prior to Oprah's Book Club, I just knew they were the literary equivalent of Soap Operas. I felt like my suspicions were proven correct after viewing *Waiting to Exhale*—I needed to exhale, because the Black women's lives I saw represented in the film were not lives that I registered as liberating or exuding the feminist consciousness that the film's marketing suggested it emitted. I found the women's obsession with finding a man to be pathetic. I wondered if perhaps I was being too cynical when the friend that I watched the movie with explained quite simply, "Simone, that's real—that's how Black women's lives are." I wish that I had insisted that she explain "how" that movie depicted Black women's lives in some "real" way.

My need for explanation was satisfied by bell hooks' critical essay on the film, "Mock Feminism: *Waiting to Exhale*."⁶⁵ In this searing critique hooks lambastes the film and McMillan when she writes:

It's difficult to know what is more disturbing: McMillan's complicity with the various acts of white supremacist capitalist patriarchal cultural appropriation that resulted in a film as lightweight and basically bad as *Waiting to Exhale*, or the public's passive celebratory consumption of this trash as giving the real scoop about black women's lives. 53

hooks, like me, was flummoxed that some Black women understood the denigrating representations of both Black women and Black men as "real" and even celebratory in the case of the Black female characters. She declares, "Nothing was more depressing than hearing individual black women offering personal testimony that these shallow screen images are 'realistic portrayals' of their experience" (57). So, when I went to see the second film adaptation of one of McMillan's novels, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, released three years later in 1998, I was not holding my breath in anticipation of any feminist breakthroughs in film. I was not surprised, but I was once again perplexed by my friends' responses to the film. I watched *Waiting* with a pharmacist-friend, so I somewhat arrogantly excused her response to the film as reflective of one who has not been trained to think critically about culture; I watched *Stella* with Black Studies graduate school cohorts—critical thinkers on race matters and presumably gender matters—who I assumed would at least see the film as a troubling fiction. I was wrong; their primary response, after envying Angela

⁶⁵ bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 52-59.

Bassett's body, was that they would not mind getting their groove on with actor Taye Diggs, Bassett's young love interest in the film.

In "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" bell hooks refers to my movie viewing cynicism as an "oppositional gaze"—a way of viewing that Black women spectators have developed as a form of resistance that allots them agency—the power to resist, disrupt, and re-invent—as doubly marginalized viewers in a racist and sexist culture. Hooks argues that some Black female spectators find that "looking too deep," or consciously identifying "with films...made moviegoing less than pleasurable; at times it caused pain" (121). After the first dose of McMillan along with some other "black" films during the first half of the 1990s, my oppositional gaze urged me to take a break from "black" film, which resulted in me missing *Eve's Bayou* at the box office. I first viewed it alone in my home and only after a friend persistently insisted that I must see it. Despite being hailed the film of the year by many critics, Kasi Lemmons' *Eve's Bayou*, an independent film, was not the box office hit that McMillan's Hollywood films were. Furthermore, when I consult my Black female friends about their reaction to the film, they hail it as good, not because of the hope it projects that they can "have it all," but because it is, well, so odd. I attribute the paradoxical relationship between "good" and "odd" to be an issue of *sight*.

Film and cultural scholar, Jacqueline Bobo notes "whether we as filmmakers or as critics, agree with the sentiments expressed by members of the audience, it is important to consider their reactions within the totality of their lives."⁶⁶ Bobo's

⁶⁶ Jacqueline Bobo. Black Women As Cultural Readers (New York: Columbia UP, 1995) 70.

emphasis on audience is directly related to her experience interviewing Black women about their reactions to the film adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

Upon completing her research and interviews Bobo concludes, "It is a mistake to value the comments of the critics at the expense of a more wide-ranging examination of the ways in which audiences make sense of cultural products...The ideal is a thinking audience."⁶⁷ My film-viewing companions were a certain type of thinking audience—they were relating to the heterosexual drama in *Waiting* and they were wishing for the romantic bliss of *Stella*. My thinking and their thinking diverge, however, in my insistence that the reformed heterosexual partnership that lies at the heart of their optimism can only be achieved if they begin thinking differently about themselves. This is the beauty of Lemmons' narrative and directorial prowess—with creativity and skillful intellect she offers oppositional spectators a gaze that resists, transgresses, and "creates alternative texts that are not solely reactions"⁶⁸ in order to convincingly celebrate Black feminism while challenging essentialist notions of Black authenticity.

My fellow Black female spectators are not the only ones with selective vision. Just as many Black female spectators apparently utilized selective viewing in order to achieve visual pleasure when watching the McMillan films, my students also are susceptible to selective viewing of *Eve's Bayou*. Many of my naïve students consistently marvel at the Batiste family's wealth and accomplishment in a film that is set in 1962. This is the same year James Meredith integrates the University of Mississippi, only two years after the sit-in movements begin, and only one year

⁶⁷ Ibid 73

⁶⁸ hooks, *Black Looks* 128

before the March on Washington, the assassination of Medger Evers, and the infamous Alabama church bombing. When I teach this film, many white students breathe a sigh of relief when they realize that this unfamiliar film is not yet another indictment of white denial of Black Americans' full rights of citizenship. Many Black students feel a sense of hope seeing a seemingly unmolested, affluent Black family going about its life during the heart of the Civil Rights Movement. The film gives both Black and White students the unintentional assurance that we are a nation no longer stratified by Du Bois' color line, if in fact it ever existed. My students' responses to *Eve's Bayou* are not isolated. The tenderness of their youth does not fuel their naïveté. I say this because numerous film critics, life-seasoned men and women, also insist on viewing *Eve's Bayou* as a race-neutral film that engages "universal" issues like infidelity, dysfunctional families, sibling rivalry, youthful naïveté, oedipal complexes, and murder.

The various "universal" transgressions that this film encapsulates, particularly the "incest scene," act as distractions to a much more significant transgression that Lemmons is attempting. *Eve's Bayou* emerges at a time in Black-directed film history when strategies of Black visual representation, as well as criticism of Black films, began undergoing dramatic transformations. Valerie Smith explains that the shift was marked by a shift away from the "positive/negative" debate, and toward films that worked to offer "alternative, truer representations of African Americans" than those presented, say, in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*.⁶⁹ Stuart Hall refers to this shift as one preoccupied more with the diversity of the black experience rather

⁶⁹ Valerie Smith, Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video, (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1997), 1.

than its homogeneity (qtd. in Smith 4).⁷⁰ Lemmons recognizes the shift when she explains that “I would like to see movies where the black female characters act like real women, the women that I know, the women in this room — our mothers, our sisters, our friends. A well-portrayed, well-rounded female character with depth.”⁷¹

As a film that is attuned to issues of diverse representation, *Eve’s Bayou* baffled many film reviewers and viewers alike. This is evidenced by the discussions questioning whether it is in fact a “black film” and the urge to de-racialize the film as “universal.”⁷² The category and universality debates suggests that many viewers simply have no knowledge base with which to understand and decipher the new images of Black culture and the transgressions that Lemmons presents. It also means, as Mia Mask asserts, that viewers are stuck on “the hegemony of whiteness as the locus of universal humanism.” This belief leads Mask to point out that

Just because *Eve’s Bayou* provides a picture of the Creole bourgeoisie doesn’t mean these people--or this film--cease to represent an African-American experience. Most reviewers remain unaware of how fully entrenched most colored folks are in middle-American values and are therefore more likely to praise such films than critique them for a dependence on generic conventions.

(27)

⁷⁰ This shift is also reflected in the debates in [Black Film Review](#).

⁷¹ Ernest Hardy, “I, Too, Sing Hollywood: Four Women on Race, Art and Making Movies,” [LA Weekly](#), 18 October 2000 <<http://www.laweekly.com/general/features/i-too-sing-hollywood/5356/>>.

⁷² In “Remembering and Repeating in *Eve’s Bayou*” Kimberlyn Leary presents a conflicted interpretation of *Eve’s Bayou* when she first declares that the film “Tells something of a universal story” and then later proclaims that the film possesses “a unique African-American sensibility” that makes it a *black* film (195, 196). Mia Mask’s review essay, “*Eve’s Bayou*: Too Good to Be a ‘Black’ Film?”, addresses the film’s crossover appeal, noting that film critics “Reinscribe[s] the hegemony of whiteness as the locus of universal humanism” when they insist on celebrating *Eve’s Bayou*’s universal accessibility (26).

Mask's point echoes Lemmons' acknowledgement that she wanted "deep Southern glamour" in the film, because it was a reality of her childhood.⁷³ Because most viewers are entrenched in what George Lipsitz refers to as a "possessive investment in whiteness" and the ever-prevailing visual economy of race, most viewers cannot imagine that such a Black family existed in 1962.⁷⁴ Thus, they also cannot imagine transgression beyond the literal. Such lack of imagination distorts their view and ultimately obscures any productive understanding of transgression in the film. It becomes impossible to imagine sexual transgressions like adultery and incest that reflect anything more than phallogentric dominance and Oedipal desire.⁷⁵ This lack of insight unquestionably guides the minimal scholarship devoted to a film that was the highest-grossing independent film at the U.S. box office in 1997. Moreover, with few exceptions, when *Eve's Bayou* does receive scholarly attention, the analysis consistently attends to interpreting the incest and adultery transgressions as bound up in patriarchal constructs of power and desire.⁷⁶ Some scholars are also compelled to cast their "did it-didn't do it" verdict (as are many viewers, especially my students).⁷⁷

⁷³ George Alexander, Why We Make Movies: Black Filmmakers Talk About the Magic of Cinema, (New York: Harlem Moon, 2003), 259.

⁷⁴ George Lipsitz, The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998).

⁷⁵ It is interesting that when marketing her film, Lemmons initially described her intended viewing audience as Black college graduates. Because such assertions quickly ended her meetings with film executives, she switched her intended audience to that of *Waiting to Exhale*. She surmises that the "cha-ching" factor proved much more effective (WWMM 261-262).

⁷⁶ For an exception see, Michael Awkward's "Black Male Trouble: The Challenges of Rethinking Masculine Differences," Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner, (New York: Columbia UP, 2002) 290-304.

⁷⁷ I find this discussion of fault to be just as unproductive as the strong urge to debate who the "white girl" is in Toni Morrison's Paradise.

I find this discussion of fault to be just as unproductive as the strong urge to debate who the “white girl” is in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*.

The obsession with transgressions coupled with the desire for a race-neutral universality prevents viewers and scholars from recognizing the much grander transgressions that Lemmons engages in. Lemmons asks audiences and scholars to “imagine otherwise.”⁷⁸ What she wants us to imagine is one particular history that can be re-membered productively in the present, but ceases to haunt those struggling to live in that present. Lemmons constructs this imagining around the representation of both her Black female and Black male characters—a representation that offers an alternative way of understanding sexual transgressions, as well as the seemingly absent presence of whiteness that actually guides them. First I will examine Lemmons’ alternative character representations, and then I will discuss how these characters assist in an interpretation of the transgressions that offers an alternative to patriarchal and hegemonic readings.

Superwomen and Black Macho

Part of a critical gender consciousness is not just thinking about heterosexual dynamics differently, but also rethinking how we see ourselves and what we demand for ourselves. In *Eve’s Bayou*, Lemmons’ conception of reformed partnership registers that the heterosexual rift between Black women and Black men is not just a gender issue, but also an issue of self. She demands that we think critically about Sula’s loneliness at the same time that we interrogate critically contemporary pursuits of “having it all” and the willingness of Black women to praise themselves for “doing

⁷⁸ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997) 5.

it all.” Perhaps when thought about introspectively, contemporary Black women might notice an unhealthy correspondence between “doing it all” and Zora Neale Hurston’s assertion that Black women are “the mules of the world.” On her deathbed, Sula argues with Nel about being alone, work, and having it all.

“You can’t have it all, Sula.”...

“Why? I can do it all, why can’t I have it all?”

“You can’t do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t.” 142

In some ways Sula’s response sounds like the Sula Women I admire and like the contemporary Black woman who strives to have it all. My hesitation to embrace having it all is not to suggest that Black women are not able to achieve certain goals because they are Black and women. I am suggesting that how we see ourselves might need some fine-tuning—fine-tuning that when put on screen left many viewers unsure of how to interpret the newly tuned product.

In order to situate the alternative character representations Lemmons presents, I will begin by examining two essays together, one on the representation of Black female characters in twentieth century Black authored narrative and the other focusing on “flexible theories of male difference.” Trudier Harris’ essay, “This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Character,”⁷⁹ calls on scholars to reconsider how both Black male and Black female writers’ depiction of Black female characters as strong, unbreakable,

⁷⁹ Trudier Harris, “This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Character,” Literature and Medicine 14.1 (1995): 109-126.

and unfeeling beings can in fact be destructive—can be a disease that dominates both Black females’ lives and the lives of their loved ones. She argues that as “towers of strength” Black women characters often become “malignant growths upon the lives of their relatives” (110). Because strength was once the only virtue granted to Black women, Harris notes that it became a dominant trope in Black fiction. Despite the agency and subjectivity that the “tower of strength” image bestows upon real and imagined Black women, Harris insists that it is time for this image to be deconstructed, because its continued presence is at “the detriment of other possibilities and potentially stymied future directions for the representation of black women” (110).

Harris performs an insightful close reading of both Black male and Black female authored fiction from 1942-1992. She completes her analysis of the disparate texts by noting that such “superhuman” depictions deny Black women characters access to a self that experiences leisure, breakdowns, and failures that are prerequisite for them to be seen as “complex, feeling human beings” (122). What I hear echoed throughout Harris’ essay is an encouragement, if not demand, for Black writers to develop more expansive and imaginative forms with which to depict Black women characters. I must note that while I appreciate Harris’ contention that Black fiction needs more diverse images of Black female characters, I do not advocate the erasure of “towers of strength” images from Black fiction. Such erasure operates as a subtle persecution of Black women who are dubbed “strong,” whether they seek the title or not.

When read together with “This Disease,” Michael Awkward’s essay “Black Male Trouble: The Challenges of Rethinking Masculine Differences,”⁸⁰ offers a counter point for understanding Lemmons’ deconstruction of both “superwomen” and macho men in *Eve’s Bayou*. Awkward begins with a review of mainstream feminist and Black feminist entanglement with essentialist and antiessentialist representations of women’s relationship to masculinity. In what he admits to be an encapsulated form he describes, “some of the race-conscious challenges black feminism of the 1970s posed for white, mainstream feminism” (294). His focus is preoccupied with insisting on the elimination of any prevailing conceptions of monolithic masculinity.⁸¹ Awkward’s essay is important to this chapter and important as a complementary reading to Harris’ essay because if writers are to invent new Black female characters, it would also make sense that new Black male characters must exist as their counter parts. Without this double invention, the new female characters would be doomed to revert back to inevitable past traditions.

Thus, in a brief analysis of *Eve’s Bayou*, Awkward argues that Louis’ character cannot be interpreted simply as a philandering, self-centered husband and father. Louis must be understood, Awkward insists, as “an extremely sympathetic portrait[s] of black masculinity” (297) that we cannot simply view as a man who “abuses his masculine power” (302). Awkward argues against such a view because he posits the film as less a cautionary tale about the dangers of patriarchy and more about the troubling relationship between memory and history.

⁸⁰ Michael Awkward, “Black Male Trouble”

⁸¹ Also see, Michael Awkward’s *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality*, especially chapter one.

Eve's Bayou presents Black female characters that “defy spatial and bodily limitations, commune with the dead, [or] die and continue to be sentient” (Harris 121), while they simultaneously disrupt the “superwoman” myth. They disrupt the myth through their awareness of their humanness—through their self-recognition of failures, weaknesses, and strengths. By presenting feeling, well-rounded black female characters, like Roz and Mozelle, who recognize the multiplicity of these qualities within themselves, Lemmons offers a way for black female characters to “be strong” without it becoming a disease that debilitates them or those they love.

Mozelle and Roz Batiste are sisters-in-law who possess strengths, weaknesses, and failures. They are not the strong Black women who induce illness in those around them or in themselves. This becomes particularly apparent if contrasted against the Batiste matriarch, Eve Batiste. The younger Eve explains in the opening voice over:

The town we lived in was named after a slave. It's said, that when General Jean Paul Batiste was stricken with cholera, his life was saved by the powerful medicine of an African slave woman called Eve. In return for his life, he freed her and gave her this piece of land by the bayou. Perhaps in gratitude, she bore him sixteen children. We are the descendants of Eve and Jean Paul Batiste. I was named after her.

The first Eve Batiste embodies the superhuman qualities that Harris is weary of. She bore and raised sixteen children, she is a landowner, and she had healing powers. She also had a “relationship” with her white master that registers Black women's debasement during slavery. The fact that this ancestral history is given up front suggests its importance to our understanding of the contemporary Batiste family.

Tenderness Is a Deeper Thing Than Cruelty⁸²

Roz Batiste tries to be an attentive wife and mother. She follows all the tenets of bourgeois culture. She is always impeccably dressed, hair coiffed, nails manicured, all while preparing meals, hosting parties, and raising three children under a classical Western rubric. In spite of the cultural values that she embraces, Roz recognizes that she does not “have it all.” The Black female characters that Harris critiques in her study typically struggle against significant economic limitations that contribute to their “disease.” Although Roz clearly enjoys a bourgeois lifestyle in which money is the least of her concerns, she recognizes the failures in her marriage. After learning of yet another of Louis’ shameless affairs, Roz explains to Mozelle that Louis has always known “how to fix things.”

I always wanted to be a doctor’s wife. When I first met Louis, I watched him set a boy’s leg that had fallen out of a tree. And I thought, here’s a man that can fix things. He’ll take care of me. He’s a healer. Louis swore that by the time he was thirty, he’d be a famous specialist. And doctors from around the world would come to him for advice. And I believed him. Because it seemed like he knew everything. So I leave my family and move to this swamp, and I find out he’s just a man. (42)⁸³

Roz’s revelation is significant because she reveals that she never viewed Louis as a partner. She viewed him as a caretaker, a healer. Her view of Louis is significant, because it demonstrates that financial gain and economic security do not enable the racially oppressed to transcend race. Such monetary gains do not facilitate the repair

⁸² Gayl Jones, Song for Annin (Detroit: Lotus P, 1981).

⁸³ I use the April 14, 1994, second draft of Eve’s Bayou script for quotations.

of racial wounds. As a refined Black woman, devoted wife, and dutiful mother, Roz works to repair the wounds caused by popular and persistent negative images of Black womanhood.⁸⁴ Roz recognizes that due to her desire/need to be “fixed,” she imposed superhuman powers on her husband that he could never possess—superhuman powers similar to those that Black-authored literature has imposed on Black women.

In addition to experiencing weaknesses and failures, Roz approaches mothering with a style that differs from the “tough-love” style Harris reports so many pre-1992 Black female characters directed toward their children in order that they themselves might become “towers of strength.” Roz locks her children in the house in the middle of a Louisiana summer because of Elzora’s ambiguous warning, “look to your children” and because of Mozelle’s vision of a child being hit by a train. This decision seems irrational to both Louis and the children; nonetheless, the efforts by Roz to protect her children are markedly different than the physical and/or verbal abuse and even murder that Harris describes. Even when Cisely repeatedly challenges her mother, Roz only once responds with force. After Cisely openly defies her mother’s house arrest by walking to town to visit her father, catching the bus to the beauty salon, and crossing the train tracks when walking back home, Roz slaps her impulsively. Cisely responds to the slap by giving her mother a defiant glare and walking away triumphantly as her mother stands in the doorway looking ready to crumple. Later that evening, Roz explains her actions to Cisely, offering her the explanation and assurance of love that Harris argues was absent in earlier texts.

⁸⁴ Roz has to work against the image of the asexual mammy and the hyper-sexualized Jezebel.

When I was your age, I was just like you. I thought I knew everything. Now, even the things I'm most familiar with seem mysterious to me. But I know *I love you*. And it's my job to protect you, as best I can. If you disobey my orders and leave this house again, I swear, I'll lock you in your room. (77)

Although Roz performs an isolated act of violence toward Cisely, the act is followed-up with Roz's efforts to explain her actions and verbally assure her daughter that she loves her. This scene presents a stark contrast to mothers like Mrs. Macteer in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* or Elizabeth Grimes in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, mothers who can show their children no softness with which to counter the "tough-love."⁸⁵ Lemmons creates a character in Roz whose strength does not overshadow her tenderness, softness, or the "complexity of [her] femininity and humanity" that Harris argues happens all too often with other Black female characters.⁸⁶ Roz's tenderness, softness, and the complexity of her humanity linger with viewers when after Louis' funeral, Roz, Cisely, Eve, and Poe are all in their mother's bed. Her arms embrace each of them as she experiences the happiness and unimagined "end" to her problems that Elzora insisted she "look to [her] children for."

Mozelle Batiste complicates matters because she is not a mother. The women Harris focuses on are all mothers; however, despite her childlessness, Mozelle is "motherly." In fact, her motherliness presents an interesting contrast to Roz. Mozelle has a particularly strong relationship with Eve. As the middle child, Eve often feels forlorn and rejected. In the opening scene, during her parents' party Eve shows clear

⁸⁵ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* and James Baldwin, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*.

⁸⁶ Harris 114

resentment that her father dances with Cisely in front of their guests while she only belatedly receives the promise, “From now on, we’ll dance at every party...” Feelings of resentment are also apparent when Eve taunts Poe, her mother’s “baby.” While Poe is the baby and Cisely is “the darling,” Eve, the precocious tomboy, consistently seems out of place in her immediate family. Mozelle steps in to provide Eve with motherly care and attention, to become the quintessential Southern “two mama.” But there are some things about Mozelle’s mothering that are rather untraditional. Mozelle shares with Eve the “gift of sight.” They both possess clairvoyance and other-worldliness that allows them to see what others cannot see. This shared gift draws them together instinctually in a manner different than a mother-child manner. Mozelle shares the sordid details of the deaths of her three husbands with Eve. Eve is Mozelle’s comforter after the death of Harry, Mozelle’s third husband. Eve arrives at Mozelle’s house the day after the funeral to ensure that Mozelle gets out of bed and is prepared for her clients. She combs her aunt’s hair and tries to convince her that she does not “look so bad.” It is as if Eve, the forsaken middle child, can on a certain level relate to the unprecedented losses Mozelle experiences through the death of her husbands—an understanding that is assumedly driven by her “gift of sight.”

In contrast to the tender relationship that is guided by Eve and Mozelle’s kindred spirits, there is another side that is marked by threats of violence. Mozelle never physically assaults Eve in the film, but she often threatens to harm Eve, as well as others. Mozelle is quick to threaten “I will kill you” or “I will do you harm.” Thus, it perhaps is not surprising that Eve, the ten-year-old protégé of Mozelle, makes

her own death threats, the most significant threat being when Eve seeks out Elzora to do voodoo on her father and kill him in retaliation for the pain she believes he caused Cisely. This shared tendency to threaten physical violence toward others presents an interesting contrast to Louis' non-physical acts of violence toward his family through his extra-marital affairs.

Signifying on a Dream Deferred

Louis Batiste is the dominant male character in *Eve's Bayou* and in the minimal critical scholarship on this film he receives most, if not all of the attention. This attention has merit; Louis is the leading man and Samuel L. Jackson, the most familiar actor in the film for most viewers, plays his character. Awkward's "Black Male Trouble" offers a thoughtful feminist analysis of Louis' character and actions, and D. Soyini Madison offers a compelling psychoanalytic interpretation of Louis' character in "Oedipus Rex at *Eve's Bayou* or the Little Black Girl Who Left Sigmund Freud in the Swamp."⁸⁷ Considering this attention, I will instead focus my analysis on a black male character who defies the monolithic constructions of black masculinity that Awkward critiques, as well as one who offers an important opportunity to examine black female characters who respond to Harris' call for reinvention.

Julian Grayraven arrives on Mozelle's front porch seeking a reading. He says he is far from home, though he does not reveal where home is. As he explains that he has spent the last year searching for his wayward wife, he admits that he has "no home to return to anymore." Julian operates as a visitor in this film for a variety of

⁸⁷ Madison performs a Freudian and Lacanian reading of the film drawing on theories of the phallus, and the mirror and jouissance.

reasons. Julian visits Mozelle differently than most of the visitors in previous chapters, however. With the exception of Reuben Kohl in *Louisiana*, all other visitors disappear just as elusively as they appear. Julian leaves Eve's Bayou abruptly, but only temporarily. He leaves to find his unfaithful wife so that he can divorce her and marry Mozelle. The exchange between Julian and Mozelle regarding the prospect of marriage is telling of the "something more" that Julian ultimately provides her with.

MOZELLE. Bad things happen to people that marry me... All my husbands die. And I like you too much to kill you.

GRAYRAVEN. Then I will die from loving you. It's inevitable.

MOZELLE. Julian, I'm serious. I think I'm cursed.

GRAYRAVEN. I will break the curse.

MOZELLE. I can't have children. I'm barren.

GRAYRAVEN. You're not barren, you're wounded.. here.. (he touches her heart) from loving too much... and from losing those you love. It's here that I will plant seeds.

The seeds that Julian plants are seeds steeped in a radical redefinition of terms. In his mind barren does not mean lacking, devoid or incapable. In his mind barren means wounded, which means that barrenness can be eradicated by being receptive to something different. His promise to plant seeds echoes Robin D.G. Kelley's assertion that "the map to a new world is in the imagination...any serious motion toward freedom must begin in the mind."⁸⁸ Julian's promise and interpretation of Mozelle's

⁸⁸ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, (Boston: Beacon P, 2002) 2, 5.

barrenness is particularly provocative if we read Mozelle's barrenness figuratively, as a lacking that is produced by racial wounds and the losses that are produced by those wounds, rather than the inability to reproduce offspring.

Julian plants the seeds of life. In the case of the Batiste family, life is synonymous with forgiveness and redemption, which is directly connected to the issue of incest in the film. In order to facilitate an alternative understanding of incest in *Eve's Bayou*, particularly how incest transgresses differently, I want to turn my attention to the epigraphs with which I began this chapter. I will then return to Julian and barrenness. Read together, the three epigraphs speak to the relationship between history, time, race, and power in the United States, and in the South in particular. The opening narration and cinematography of *Eve's Bayou* suggest that "the past is not even past." The narrator makes the jarring declaration that she killed her father during the summer of her tenth year, as well as presents a history of Eve's Bayou that is bound up in property, rape, and miscegenation. Such revelations acknowledge the same sense of death and haunting implicit in Joy Harjo's perception of New Orleans being a city steeped in blood and in Avery Gordon's proclamation about the interminableness of the past and its relationship to the present, a view that echoes Faulkner's claim. Furthermore, the draping Spanish moss, the murky bayou water, and the expansive sugar cane fields invoke an eeriness or uncanny effect that resonates with the narration. These three intersecting references help to articulate what I identify as the melancholic effects of slavery on those living in the present. Such historical residue makes it virtually impossible to identify discreet boundaries

between the past and the present as *Eve's Bayou* reveals when it signifies on William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (1942) in order to signify on her viewers.

Like Morrison and Brodber, who employ intertextuality in order to produce double-voiced texts that carve out a space for characters to work toward reformed partnership, Lemmons signifies on the white written text's haunting presence in the black imagination. By signifying on William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, Lemmons troubles audiences and scholars' inclination to read incest in this film literally. My purpose in discussing *Go Down, Moses* is not to perform a close reading of the text, but to identify and analyze a significant intertextuality between Faulkner's text and Lemmons' film. My primary interest with *Go Down, Moses* is in the chapter, "The Bear." "The Bear" is a hunting story that is circumscribed by the geographies of race. "The Bear" analyzes racialization as "part of the normal, and normalized, landscape"⁸⁹ of the United States through issues of land ownership and environmental stewardship, the vanishing wilderness, the pervasiveness of white privilege, and the always-troubling union of miscegenation and incest.

Isaac "Ike" McCaslin is shamed by the connections between his family history and the destruction of land, as well as the rape and incest that was performed in order to maintain power and ownership of the land. His uncles' old ledger books that reveal that Isaac's grandfather, Carothers McCaslin, fathered his daughter with his slave, Eunice, and later fathered his granddaughter with the child he fathered with Eunice particularly appall Isaac. Eunice kills herself out of the complex emotions arising out

⁸⁹ Aubrey Kobayashi and Linda Peake, "Racism Out of Place: Thoughts on Whiteness and an Antiracist Geography in the New Millennium," Annals of the Association of American Geographers 90.2 (2002): 392-403.

of this family history. As a result of Ike's shame he repudiates his grandfather's monetary legacy and rejects his birthright to the land, deferring it to his cousin, McCaslin Edmonds. In contrast to the unsolicited barrenness that the black women writers in this study have presented, Isaac chooses barrenness in an effort to eradicate his family's sins against nature and humanity. It is important to note, however, that the McCaslin incest would not have been viewed as transgressive, as would the Batiste incest. Slave women were property and had no bodily rights. Isaac views his grandfather's acts as transgressions because he views slaves as possessing an identity beyond that of property. Although the situation surrounding the incest differs in each text, the repetition is marked by a racialized American geography that never ceases to haunt the present—what Avery Gordon refers to as “such endings that are not over.”⁹⁰

While Mozelle and Roz do not induce illness in others or themselves, illness does abound in *Eve's Bayou*. The illness is indicative of a past that “is not even past.” In *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*, Sharon Patricia Holland asserts that, “we must hear the dead speaking in fiction ... and in culture ... [to] not only uncover silences but also [to] transform inarticulate places into conversational territories.” She invites scholars to “dwell in the space of death”, arguing that “Embracing the subjectivity of death allows marginalized peoples to speak about the unspoken—to name the places *within* and *without* their cultural milieu where, like *Beloved*, they have slipped between the cracks of language.”⁹¹ Holland calls this recovery act “raising the dead.” While the concept of “raising the

⁹⁰ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* 139.

⁹¹ Sharon Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. (Durham: Duke UP, 2000) 5.

dead,” speaking about the unspoken, is certainly an initiative that predates Holland’s text, the way in which she links death, speech, and language offers a productive framework for thinking about intertextuality and incest in *Eve’s Bayou*.

“Raising the dead” is one of the ways in which Lemmons challenges us to think differently about the present. Lemmons constructs this re-thinking around the representation of her black female and black male characters. Such a representation offers an alternative way of understanding the sexual transgressions, as well as the seemingly absent presence of whiteness that guides the transgressions. While Isaac’s discovery of family incest is Faulkner’s representation of what Toni Morrison calls “the ghost in the machine”—“for the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure- the meaning of so much American literature”⁹²—incest in the Batiste family almost does the opposite through its demand that the pervasive, undying presence of whiteness be acknowledged as a destructive force in this family, even in its seeming absence.⁹³ The alterations that Lemmons makes to her black female and black male characters allows for an interpretation of the sexual transgressions, particularly the incest, in a way that transcends patriarchal and hegemonic readings. Instead, the interpretation I will offer demands that incest be understood as a signifier that calls up the racialized geography inherent in Faulkner’s work, and that inevitably repeats itself in Lemmons’ film.

⁹² Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Michigan Quarterly Review 1989.

⁹³ In interviews Lemmons notes that studio people would ask her to put in a white character, even if that character was negative. Lemons declined steadfastly, insisting “This is *Eve’s bayou*.”

Lemmons signifies by playing on the so-called universality of “family matters” that elicited favorable approval from film critics. She also plays on the idea that incest is a universal social transgression, an unquestionably taboo act of love that all cultures reject. I am not suggesting that Lemmons, like Faulkner, is suggesting that incest and love are synonymous. I am arguing that like the slave narratives, Lemmons makes ““the white written text speak with a black voice, [which] is the initial mode of inscription of the metaphor of the double-voiced.”⁹⁴ In other words, the trope of incest in *Eve’s Bayou* functions as the “double-voiced” text that talks back to *Go Down, Moses*. My assertion here is that as employed by Lemmons, incest is no more than parody in *Eve’s Bayou*. Her “use of repetition and reversal (chiasmus) constitutes an implicit parody of a subject’s own complicity in illusion.”⁹⁵ When viewers and film critics understand *Eve’s Bayou* to be a universal, de-raced film, they are demonstrating their own limitations in interpreting meaning—they essentially are like the Lion in the narrative Signifying Monkey poem, “the Signifying Monkey is able to signify upon the Lion only because the Lion does not understand the nature of the monkey’s discourse [...] The monkey speaks figuratively, in a symbolic code; the lion interprets or reads literally and suffers the consequences of his folly, which is a reversal of his status as King of the Jungle.”⁹⁶ This is one of many reasons why it is dangerous to say that this is a film that “anybody can relate to.”

⁹⁴ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).

⁹⁵ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 240.

⁹⁶ Gates 241.

It is not fair to simply fault viewers and scholars for not understanding the nature of Lemmons' discourse. Without being placed in a cultural and historical context, the incest scenes are rather ambiguous and difficult to "read." The first version of the scene is presented from Cisely's perspective when she reveals to Eve why she needs to get away from their father. The same evening that Cisely defied her mother and left the house, Roz informs Cisely that she will wait up for Louis, ending what had become a nightly ritual for Cisely. It is a stormy evening, and when Louis returns home in the middle of the night, the argument that ensues is so loud that Cisely and Eve are awakened by their parents' voices. Louis and Roz are arguing about Cisely's behavior and Roz's knowledge that Matty Meraux has been hanging around Louis' office. When the arguing has concluded, Cisely disobeys her mother and goes downstairs to comfort her father; she fears that her mother's "nagging" might cause him to "divorce" the family. Louis is sitting in a chair, half passed out. Cisely approaches him from behind and begins massaging his shoulders, telling him she came to make him feel better. He takes one of her hands and guides her to the front of the chair to sit on his lap. She kisses him lightly on the lips in an appropriate manner. Then Louis leans forward and kisses her in a manner that is entirely inappropriate. Cisely pushes him away with her arms and knees, which causes him to relent and smack her, knocking her to the floor.

Louis' version of the events of that evening is much different. It is presented posthumously through a letter that he assumedly intended to give Mozelle. He was prompted to write the letter as a result of Mozelle accusing him of molesting Cisely. Eve discovers the letter and is infuriated with her sister, because Louis' letter makes

Eve feel betrayed by her sister. Louis describes the first kiss as “the sweetest kiss a daughter could give a drunk and guilt-ridden father—a kiss of redemption.” Then he says Cisely kissed him like a woman. In his startled state, he slaps her to the floor and she runs off. Louis wishes that he could have the moment back so that he could hold her and comfort her and discuss the situation with her—putting the boundaries back in place.

I have suggested that audiences’ and scholars’ heightened attention to these scenes are problematic, because such attention obscures a more significant transgression that I will address momentarily. But first it is critical to read these two scenes, which ultimately necessitates that I, too, cast a verdict. Cisely’s version of the event simply reinforces concerns viewers ought to already have picked up on. Cisely displays a classic Electra Complex.⁹⁷ She waits up for her father every evening and fixes him cocktails. She is envious when Eve receives his attention. She cuts her hair like her mother and accuses Roz of not being a proper wife to Louis. This behavior, as well as the stormy night scene, culminates in the arrival of Cisely’s menstrual cycle. Not quite in line with the Electra Complex, Cisely begins to develop her mother’s character type with the hope of keeping her father from divorcing his family, rather than with the hope of attracting a man similar to her father. When Louis slaps Cisely, she is jolted from her senselessness in the same manner that she hopes her sweet “kiss of redemption” will jolt her father from his philandering ways.

⁹⁷ The Electra Complex is said to be the counterpart to the Oedipus Complex in males. Drawing on his theory of “penis envy,” Sigmund Freud proposes that when daughters realize they do not have a penis, daughters become envious of their fathers’ penis and dream of becoming pregnant by him. These feelings create hostility toward the mother who the daughter was attached to prior to her revelation. The daughter resents her mother, because she believes the mother caused her castration.

The fact that so many audiences and scholars overlook the Electra Complex and are comfortable with reading Louis as a child molester is indicative of a society who readily accepts society's representation of black men as hyper-sexual beings.⁹⁸ The popular and historical hyper-sexualization of black men makes it easy for viewers and scholars to accept without interrogation that Louis is so sexually deviant he would even molest his own daughter. I contend that if these two scenes are not interpreted as the site of incest in this film, viewers will be able to appreciate a much more fruitful way of understanding incest in a racialized geography.

If incest is not indeed incest in *Eve's Bayou*, then what is it? The possible incest committed either by Louis or by Cisely, depending on interpretation, signifies upon black Americans' "transgressive" desire for incorporation into the U.S. body politic—to be viewed and treated as full-fledge citizens. Incest is used figuratively to represent black people's desire to be seen differently—not to be seen as immutable prototypes, but as complex, feeling human beings who desire "something more." This complex subjectivity spurs Claudia Tate to argue that "if we persist in reductively defining black subjectivity as political agency, we will continue to overlook the force of desire ... in the lives of African Americans."⁹⁹ *Eve's Bayou* depicts no overt signs of political agency; yet, "the force of desire" in the lives of the Batiste family remains overlooked. Critics and scholars have ignored the motif of the American Dream in this film, and particularly how such dreaming is inescapably

⁹⁸ In "Sisters, Fathers, and the Modern Ethnic Family: Double Happiness and Eve's Bayou" Eva Reuschmann argues that both Cisely and Eve have an oedipal competition for their father, but she does not actually discuss the Electra Complex.

⁹⁹ Claudia Tate, Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race (New York: Oxford UP, 1998) 10.

shaped and controlled by race. The Batiste family has seemingly achieved the American Dream. Upon casual observation, they fit squarely and comfortably into Southern bourgeois society. Such observations, however, obscure the very significant fact that there is so much residue—rape, incest, miscegenation—from a slave past that haunts the family in the present. Such hauntings effectively prevent full access to the American Dream. The hauntings in this film speak to contemporary discourse surrounding notions and efforts to move “beyond” race. The hauntings demand that we acknowledge the difficulty of transcending race in a nation whose very being still depends upon racial stratifications.

De railroad bridge’s a sad song in de air¹⁰⁰

Eve’s Bayou is set in a location where there is not only no physical “white” presence, but in a space that is isolated in virtually every possible way. The entire film is set in Eve’s Bayou. Other than Mr. Meraux’s professorship at Xavier University in New Orleans, Roz’s brief lament that she gave up everything to move to the swamp with Louis,¹⁰¹ and Cisely’s departure to live with her maternal grandmother, we have no sense that there is a world outside of Eve’s Bayou. The townspeople appear to be unharmed and unmolested by the turbulence of the Civil Rights Movement. There are no televisions or radios that connect their lives to the politics or culture of the outside world. Eve’s Bayou is an exceptionally insular, isolated community. Insularity focuses the viewers’ attention to the interiority of the characters’ lives and it helps viewers to accept the psychological bent through which they can fully appreciate the transgressions.

¹⁰⁰ Langston Hughes. Fine Clothes to the Jew. 1927

¹⁰¹ A draft version of the screenplay states that Roz is from Atlanta, GA.

This insularity ought to have raised the question of incest well before the “stormy night” scene in which we are left wondering who kissed whom. By incest here, I mean incest literally as an actual sexual transgression. For example, Elzora, the voodoo practitioner Eve asks to curse her father, explains to Eve that Louis’ wax coffin is buried “Down there where all them/Batistes is buried.” This explanation coupled with Elzora’s insistence that Mozelle is a curse, a black widow, on a surface level point to death, but can also be linked to familial incest. The Batiste family started out as a large family. Eve Batiste birthed sixteen children. In just three generations that large family seems to have vanished just like the families in Ruby dwindled over generations. Louis and Mozelle are the only children mentioned from their line, and Mozelle has no children. Her husbands keep dying as if some supernatural force is ensuring that she remain barren in an effort to obliterate the incest. In such a small, insular town, there is never any mention of extended family. Furthermore, when Roz locks the children in the house after Mozelle’s vision, Louis remarks that she has been in and out of mental institutions, suggesting a mental defect that could be linked to a pattern of incest. Considering the insularity and the seemingly unprecedented number of dead Batistes, it is plausible that the disease in the Batiste family is not “tower of strength” black women, but rather an unhealthy desire for one’s self. While the film does not provide enough evidence to argue that the incest is the “royal incest” that the McCaslins and Carrothers employ to maintain power, or the incest that Ruby perpetuates to maintain racial “purity,” the film does offer enough context to understand incest as a peculiar predicament of the Batiste family that precedes the “stormy night.” Thus, the physical incest in this film is not

bound up in two ambiguous scenes, the physical incest is staying home—a refusal to move out of the home space, and the body of the mother/sister/daughter.

Despite the isolation of Eve's Bayou, there is another outlet to the outside world that I did not mention above, the railroad, which helps illuminate the connection between death and incest in the film. The railroad is significant for understanding both the legacy of familial incest and figurative incest in the film. Railroads embody a dual symbolism.¹⁰² They are emblems of modernity at the same time that they are markers of technological and cultural imperialism. In *Dixie Limited: Railroads, Culture, and the Southern Renaissance*, Joseph R. Millichamp points out that on the one hand, for writers of Faulkner's generation, "The newly important rail network represented the reconciliation, prosperity, and sophistication necessary for a Southern literary flowering ..."¹⁰³ On the other hand, however, "African American writers from the days of the Underground Railroad through the great migration of the twentieth century saw the trains of the South as ambivalently situated symbols of both escape and entrapment."¹⁰⁴ Trains inevitably carried a mark of death for African Americans because the tracks were often laid with disproportionate Black convict labor.

Trains appear in two significant scenes in the film. The first scene is immediately following Mozelle's fortune telling by Elzora when Elzora insists, "I don't need chicken bones to tell your fortune, Mozelle Batiste. You're a curse. A

¹⁰² In "Remembering and Repeating in *Eve's Bayou*" Kimberlyn Leary briefly notes the significance of trains in the film, but her focus is on the tracks symbolizing Louis' transition from life to death.

¹⁰³ Joseph R. Millichamp, *Dixie Limited: Railroads, Culture, and the Southern Renaissance*, (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2002) 12.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid 20

black wider. Next man that marries you, is a dead man. Like the others. Always be that way” (45). Upon leaving the market area, Mozelle collapses after seeing a vision of what appears to be and sounds like a train rushing toward her and Roz. Based on this vision and Elzora’s insistence that Roz “look to her children” for comfort, Roz is sure that one of her children will be struck by a train if she does not keep them within the perceivably safe confines of their house. A bus, not a train, does eventually hit a child and the Batiste children are freed.¹⁰⁵

The second train scene occurs when Lenny Meraux confronts Louis and Matty in King’s Bar. Lenny is seen walking along side the train tracks in a dark overcoat and fedora that obscures his face. His gait is slightly askew, yet his determined stride reflects his intent purpose. His approach is marked by the distant sound of a train. As he continues to approach the bar, confronts Louis, and attempts to leave with Matty, the sound of the train becomes louder and louder. Finally, when Lenny shoots Louis, the train passes by them, drowning out other sounds and eventually obscuring our view.

The railroad becomes a significant connector between incest and death in this film. The movement of the train and the progress that it is indicative of creates a striking contrast against Eve’s Bayou the town, as well as the people. Lemmons signifies on “The Bear,” as the railroad in that text and in her film is a violation of the pristine and a challenge to static perfection. Eve’s Bayou is stagnant. Few people come and few people leave. The stagnation in Eve’s Bayou is reminiscent of the stagnation in Ruby, with the difference being that Ruby more successfully closed itself off from outsiders. The recurring presence of the train in Eve’s Bayou serves as

¹⁰⁵ Perhaps the child that is struck by the bus is one of Louis’ “outside children.”

a constant reminder of the impossibility of transcending the borders of the present. The trains, like Cisely's accusation of molestation, disrupt the Batiste family's sense of perfection and security, revealing not only a diseased past, but also a family that is socially dead.

Railroads can also be phallogentric symbols that represent patriarchal power. Louis is educated and accomplished, he has a family, property, and a certain degree of power in the community; yet, according to D. Soyini Madison he needs to be a "hero," he needs to be desired. Scholars are correct when they analyze the character of Louis as one that subscribes to patriarchal and hegemonic ideals. Such an analysis, however, does not attend to the sense of loss that Louis so desperately strives to retrieve. The Spanish moss and voodoo-enchanted forests do not cause the uncanny feeling that this film induces, the uncanny feeling is produced by the overwhelming racial geography of the setting. Louis attempts to transcend the racialized geography of his home space by trying to become Roz's healer and other women's hero—by being what Mark Anthony Neal refers to as a "Strong Black Man."¹⁰⁶ By doing so, he fails to attend to the present, particularly his family. Louis, like the 8-rock in *Paradise*, has failed to understand that "utopia is not a place that you can go; we are always only in the here and now."¹⁰⁷ His failure to understand this reality disables him from practicing a reformed partnership with any women in his life. Louis is so consumed with trying to escape the burdens of the past and be "strong" in the present that his efforts manifest into acts of transgression against his family. The most

¹⁰⁶ Mark Anthony Neal. *New Black Man*, (New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁰⁷ Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative*, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 6.

significant way that Louis transgresses against his family is in his failure to be the father and husband that his wife and children need, because he is too preoccupied with needing to be a hero. His preoccupation with heroism and failure to attend to his family makes it possible for his family to believe he is capable of harming his daughter.

Although Louis fails at partnership he should not be viewed through a purely negative lens. The racial wounds produced in the past that haunt the present drive his transgression against his family. His need to be a hero is bound up in a past that emasculated black men. Despite the inescapable history embodied in the past, Louis' death can be viewed as a redemptive act. His death provides the opportunity for his family to locate a safe home space in the present. This is most evident in his communication with Mozelle through a dream in which he grants her the *grace* she has searched for so desperately in each of her marriages. Mozelle has a dream in which she is flying and she sees a woman drowning from the corner of her eye—she realizes that she is the drowning woman. As she is contemplating whether she should save her, Louis' voice interrupts and says “don't look back.” Mozelle continues to fly and lets her other self drown. She wakes from the dream having decided to marry Julian. Carolyn M. Jones suggests that Louis' character has an additional redeeming quality in “Imagining Race and Religion in Louisiana.” When Louis pushes Eve out of the way of Lenny's gunfire, Jones argues, he performs a “redemptive repetition of his pushing, whether in anger or surprise, of Cecily (sic).”¹⁰⁸ Louis' death, or “fall on his own sword,” eradicates the Batiste family of the physical and figurative burden

¹⁰⁸ Carolyn M. Jones, “Imagining Race and Religion in Louisiana: Kasi Lemmons's *Eve's Bayou* and Barbara Hambly's *Benjamin January* Novels,” Religion in the Contemporary South: Changes, Continuities, and Contexts, (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2005) 113.

of incest that haunts the family. Louis' death alone, however, cannot perform this eradication completely, and neither can the "kiss of redemption" that he says Cisely bestowed upon him on the "stormy night." While Louis' presence in the film is marked by death and incest, Julian's presence is marked by life. Julian incorporates "art" into the Batiste family's imagination, and thus provides them the opportunity to imagine a map to the beyond so that they might find a safe home space.

A Sunday Kind of Love

Kasi Lemons "invites her audience to look differently." The alternative view that she proposes gives the audience the choice, or at least the opportunity, to think about black life and culture more critically. Thus, the two different perspectives of what "really happened" on that stormy night and Cisely's belated admittance that she does not know what "really happened" is not just about an alternative way of understanding the past, but is also about an alternative way of *seeing* the past. It is similar to Consolata Sosa's discovery in *Paradise* that it is "a question of language." For Consolata, "seeing in" is a gift that is steeped "in sight." This idea of "in sight" enabling characters to suspend judgment in the face of ambiguous situations provides an insightful way to return to the character of Julian Grayraven and conclude this chapter.

The ambiguous ending of *Eve's Bayou* certainly does not cast Louis Batiste in the most favorable light. Louis' infidelity and eventual absence opens a space in the Batiste family, however, for a new social organization. This social organization relieves men like Louis from the need to be heroes, while also relieving women in the social organization from feeling obligated to be "towers of strength." This new social

organization, one that is neither patriarchal nor matriarchal, is steeped in partnership rather than kinship and it is guided by human fallibility rather than superhuman strength. Julian promises to plant seeds in Mozelle's heart. While this can be viewed as a patriarchal and phallocentric expression, it is nonetheless significant in the context of the Batiste family and its relationship to the past. Julian is able to "see in" and as Morrison's *Beloved* says, "touch [Mozelle] on the inside." So, like the visitors in the preceding chapters, Julian is able to provide the "something more" Mozelle and her family need, because he is able to *see* the "something more" they need. Julian is particularly successful at constructing a space in which he and Mozelle can embrace a partnership in which both partners can experience a life grounded in work and pleasure, not having to give up one in order to accomplish the other.

The opening and closing voice over suggests that like Mozelle, Eve is also receptive to being touched on the inside. "I have the gift of sight, but the truth changes color, depending on the light, and tomorrow can be clearer than yesterday. Memory is a selection of images, some elusive, others printed indelibly on the brain." The film begins with a voice over that admits, "The summer I killed my father...", but the closing voice over begins, "The summer my father said goodnight." The difference reinforces Eve's insistence that "truth changes color." In this instance the "truth" acts as an agent of reconciliation—it allows the past to be reconsidered through a different lens. Eve, like her aunt, learns how to dwell in the beyond—how to re-member the past in a way that allows her to become free from the past. Like the lesson Eve learns, the film itself seems to want to teach its audience a lesson as well.

The characters are not the only ones who learn lessons, for as I have reiterated throughout this chapter, *Eve's Bayou* intended to instruct its audience. To return to the paradox of Black female spectators then, there is a lesson here for them as well, because their sight is connected intricately to the sites of transgression in this film. As educated middle class or soon-to-be middle class Black women, my friends needed to celebrate Black women's experiences on the screen, regardless of how pathetic they might be, as a way of legitimizing their own raced and gendered experiences. What bell hooks, Jacqueline Bobo, and myself have observed about many Black female spectators is that they want the "Sunday kind of love" that Etta James croons out while Julian paints a portrait of Mozelle. If they hold out hope for that kind of love that "lasts past Saturday night" and one that takes them off of the "lonely road that leads to nowhere," then they just might have it all. But Lemmons' depiction of partnership and the insight required to gain it is more complicated than the sentimental lyrics of a love song, because Lemmons' partnership is bound by unmotivated respect. For this reason, even though Lemmons portrays a successful reformed partnership on the screen, her text seems to recognize the glamour and fantasy inherent in viewing. Thus, the invocation of incest is useful on two levels. First, it challenges the dominant culture to see the interconnectedness of its history and the history that haunts *Eve's Bayou* and the Batiste family. Incest also challenges Black female spectators to move out of the familiar home space—the body of the mother/sister/daughter—and to begin looking differently at how they view themselves. Lemmons' message to Black viewers in general, then, is that partnership can work, but we must look at it through a different lens. Through *Eve's Bayou*

Lemmons posits that understanding how to look differently not only facilitates dwelling in the beyond, but looking through a different lens also makes the “something more” that Black women writers are searching for accessible.

Chapter 4: A Soul Baby Hollers Back: Danzy Senna's "The Land of Beulah"

I didn't want to write a poem that said blackness is
Because we know better than anyone
That we are not one or ten or ten thousand things
Not one poem...
~Elizabeth Alexander, "Today's News"

I have selected Danzy Senna's short story "The Land of Beulah" as the final close reading, because it responds brazenly to the previous texts. No freeing alternative epistemologies. No romantic Diasporic communities. No "touching on the inside." No unmotivated respect, and thus, no reformed partnership. This text is critical to this project precisely because of all it refuses to deliver. It is through the absences that "Beulah" emits a call to the previous texts, challenging their pursuit and *the* pursuit of partnership.

Senna's ambivalence toward reformed partnership is rooted in the setting of the narrative. Unlike the texts examined in the previous chapters, "Beulah" is set contemporaneous to its publication date (2000), while the other texts are set between 1936 and 1976. These settings also pre-date the era in which the texts are published. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is one of the first texts to begin to depict what a reformed partnership might look like and it returns to the distant past to do so. The fact that all but one of the texts in this study also return to the past, suggests that these writers are not quite ready to tackle the cultural moment in which they are writing. Thus, it is

important to consider the difference that temporal setting makes; and to acknowledge that “Beulah” is the only text in which the partnership is rejected completely.

Although “Beulah” boldly questions the pursuit of partnership, and especially the methods Morrison, Brodber, and Lemmons use to do so, the narrative itself is deeply invested in the notion of reformed partnership. The irony of this investment, however, is that Senna refuses to consider the possibility of such an endeavor—reforming heterosexual partnership—in a place where race is geography. Through the mixed-race body of her protagonist, Jackie, a stray mutt named Beulah, and the Biblical paradise, Beulah Land, Senna offers a cautionary tale about the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in contemporary U.S. culture. Senna draws on Black eschatological beliefs in “the beyond” in order to challenge readers and scholars to consider how racial mixture might complicate, rather than foster, a move beyond race or what Senna has referred to as “the end of blackness.”¹⁰⁹ Such a consideration demands that a critical re-mapping of race and its persistent preeminence in the twenty-first century must accompany the critical gender consciousness that fosters reformed partnership.

Senna illustrates this re-mapping through Jackie’s interactions with Beulah, who represents the paradisiacal Beulah Land of the Bible as well as a black maid from a 1950s television sitcom, *Beulah*. Jackie has a love-hate relationship with Beulah, because Beulah’s multiple representations—inaccessible paradise, demeaned black maid, and abandoned mixed-breed dog—serves as a persistent reminder for Jackie that her “new face of America” does not offer her any sense of security in the

¹⁰⁹ Claudia M. Milan Arias. “An Interview with Danzy Senna.” *Callaloo*. 25.2 : 2002. 447-452.

present.¹¹⁰ Ultimately, her racially ambiguous phenotype complicates her search for a home space—a space where Toni Morrison states that “race both matters and is rendered impotent; a place...both snug and wide open.” The mixed race body in “Beulah,” then, becomes not the marker of moves beyond race, but rather a reminder of a present that cannot move beyond a past.

Although Senna does not present a reformed partnership or the possibility of one, she is considering critically the possibility and limitations of such work. Her pessimism is important, because it calls specific attention to and provides a provocative response to Morrison and Brodber’s attention to the transnational flow of culture that privileges a Diaspora consciousnesses as a means of refiguring racial geographies—making them snug and wide open spaces where people can “take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period.” Senna’s response suggests that the unmotivated respect that is necessary to reform intra-racial heterosexual partnership is especially necessary for the nation as whole. Jackie ultimately is a glaring example of how the psychological effect of racialized geographies renders such partnership elusive if the larger nation is not also invested in unmotivated respect.

The alienating and often violent U.S. geography that is mapped on Jackie’s body is a bold response to contemporary discourse that positions critical race studies as regressive, as Senna’s narrative seems to argue that scholar Paul Gilroy’s “radical non-racial humanism” and author Trey Ellis’s “cultural mulattoes” perhaps puts us no closer to a beyond race (or beyond gender state), making any “beyond” just as mythic

¹¹⁰ The November 18, 1993 cover of *Time* magazine featured a computer-morphed female face that purportedly illustrated the “new face of America.”

as Beulah Land. Senna's narrative offers a thoughtful post-soul counter to the older generation's somewhat romantic Diasporic-centering of community and the potential partnerships that can develop in such reconfigured communities. It also provides an interesting narrative contrast to Lemmon's visual culture production. For Senna, "something more" must first be a safe racial geography, or at least a feeling of security within a racialized geography. Then, perhaps, the "more" that Black women writers and their Black female characters yearn can be pursued more productively.

Beulah Land

"The Land of Beulah" is set in Brooklyn, New York. The protagonist of the story is simply named Jackie. She is the daughter of a jazz-singer White mother and a jazz musician Black father. They have been long separated. Her phenotype is racially ambiguous, disallowing a comfortable space on either side of the black-white binary. As a result, the narrative is consumed by her futile attempts and desperate hopes of finessing the color line. This is particularly true after her Black boyfriend, Kip, dumps her because she is not "black" enough. Being "recently single, unhappy, homeless for some land she couldn't quite remember," Jackie stumbles upon Beulah, an abandoned, lovely mutt with "shiny black fur, long satiny ears, and little brown dots above her eyes" (194-5). Beulah is left tied to a street sign with an extension cord. Jackie takes Beulah home, feeling sorry for her because she has a small hole between her nostrils and the dog's name reminds her of the maid on a TV land sitcom her grandmother used to watch. Jackie quickly finds her self consumed by Beulah, who always "wants more"—more of Jackie's time, attention, and money. Although Jackie finds herself obsessed with showering Beulah with toys and attention, she also

finds that she cannot control her urge to beat Beulah for each puppy-like act of destruction she performs in Jackie's apartment. Jackie attempts to remedy Beulah's behavior problems by taking her on daily visits to a dog park. During Jackie's attempts to care for and cure Beulah, she is befriended by a fellow dog-parker, she severs her relationship with her female friends in the city, and she stops attending to her appearance. All of these changes are marked by Beulah's presence in Jackie's life. Beulah forces Jackie to recognize the absences in her life, as well as the roots of the absences. By the end of the narrative, Jackie has abandoned Beulah in the dog park and has seemingly returned to her previous life.

In order to understand Senna's agenda in this short story it is important to know the history that Senna draws on. I will first layout the eschatological reference, and then analyze the relationship between the eschatological and the visual. In, "Beulah," Senna draws on general eschatological conceptions of Beulah Land, particularly those portrayed in the Bible, and the works of John Bunyan and William Blake. Beulah Land is a trope for "dwelling in the beyond" in "Beulah." Isaiah, the Biblical prophet, is referred to as "the evangelical prophet" because a significant portion of his book focuses on divine redemption. Senna draws on Isaiah 62:4, where Isaiah describes the restoration of Israel from Assyrian captivity. The verses that follow represent God's promise to Israel—a promise that echoes Piedade's promise to Consolata on the final page of *Paradise*, and a promise that haunts Jackie's subconscious.

The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow. You will be a

crown of splendor in the Lord's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the Lord will take delight in you, and your land will be married. As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you. (1106: 62:2-5)

Chapter 62 in its entirety refers to the "millennial kingdom" or the second coming of Christ. Within the context of Senna's texts Black Americans replace Judah as the people who are being redeemed, or receiving God's *grace* in the preceding verses. Beulah the place becomes a metamorphic variation of the Promised Land longed for in so many Black spirituals, as well as in Morrison's "snug and wide open" home space.

Although there seems to be no contemporary discourse on the presence of or significance of Beulah Land in theological texts that deal with Black eschatology or philosophical critiques of Black theodicy, Beulah Land occupied a significant space in late 19th century Black thought. A significant number of Black Baptist churches bear the eponym Beulah. Similarly, Amelia E. Johnson's poem "Color" references Beulah land, as does Clemmie S. Terrell's poem, "Beulah Land." The Protestant hymn "Beulah Land" is sung at funerals in the Caribbean. I would speculate that the lack of critical attention given to the concept of Beulah Land over the attention garnered by such liberationist ideologies as Ethiopianism, the Promised Land, and flying is due largely to the cross-cultural appropriations of Beulah Land. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) describes the land of Beulah as a sort of

beautiful waiting place for the pilgrims. In Blake's poetry, Beulah Land is the highest level of euphoria on earth. The Land of Beulah, or Beulah Land also figures prominently in Appalachian folklore and Bluegrass gospel music, and also finds expression in Holiness and Pentecostal doctrines and camp meetings. Thus, as a trope of oppression and redemption, Beulah Land's shared appropriations de-emphasize Black people's race-catalyzed struggles in this world. This shared appropriation could be a reason for its diminished presence in the Black cultural imagination.

Despite the seeming absence of this redemptive metaphor in contemporary Black cultural memory, Beulah continues to retain a contemporary presence in the names of Black Baptist churches founded around the turn-of-the-twentieth-century. Beulah Missionary Baptist Church in Decatur, GA, Beulah Baptist Church of Deanwood Heights in Washington, DC, and New Light Beulah Baptist Church in Hopkins, SC, are just a few churches that reference Beulah.¹¹¹ While these churches bear the namesake of Beulah it is interesting that the churches' histories do not note the significance of the name. The Pan African Orthodox Christian Church is an interesting exception.¹¹²

Further parallels between Senna's text and its Biblical referent are evident in the metaphor of the bridegroom. In Hebrew, Beulah means married. In Biblical discourse Christ is the bridegroom and the church represents His bride. According to Revelations, Christ will take His bride to heaven before the tribulation, or war of

¹¹¹ There are also many predominantly White churches that bear the name Beulah.

¹¹² The PAOCC, formerly known as The Central Congregational Church was founded in 1953 in Detroit, MI by Rev. Albert B. Cleage Jr. (Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman).

Armageddon. Similarly, Senna re-appropriates the bridegroom metaphor: Black Americans take on the role of the bride, while the United States government, and particularly the democratic ideals it professes, becomes the bridegroom. As such, in this “Land of Beulah,” Black Americans *ought* to be finally wedded to the state. They *ought* to finally be able to locate a place on this earth in the “here and now” that offers them the solace and grace that Black eschatology, theodicy, and reconciliation movements failed to fulfill. I emphasize *ought*, because Senna does not represent “the Land of Beulah” as neatly and concretely as her obvious parallels might suggest. In Senna’s story, the land of Beulah, or the dog park, becomes a liminal space like the Millennial New Jerusalem¹¹³ and the Bunyan Land of Beulah,¹¹⁴ suspended between the past and future, life and death. The space is also complicated profoundly by identity politics. Despite what might seem like neat and intriguing parallels between a Biblical paradise and Senna’s imaginative re-appropriation of that space in a Brooklyn, NY dog park, both gender and racial mixture disallow such nominal interpretations of place.

TV Land and Ethnic Notions

From the moment Jackie discovers Beulah’s name, she has a conflicted relationship with her. Jackie cringes at the abandoned mutt’s name, because it conjures memories of the TV land sitcom—*Beulah*—that held its controversial run on ABC from 1950-1953. Starring Ethel Waters in its first two years and Louise

¹¹³ The New International Version of the Ryrie Study Bible explains in the significance of New Jerusalem during the Millennium in a footnote: “During the Millennium the New Jerusalem (described in detail in Rev. 21:9-22:5) apparently will be suspended over the earth, and it will be the dwelling place of all believers during eternity...” (1976).

¹¹⁴ Bunyan describes the Land of Beulah as a beautiful, serene place that borders heaven. It is the area in which the Pilgrims await entrance into the Celestial City.

Beavers in its final year, *Beulah* was the first nationally broadcast weekly television series starring an African American.¹¹⁵ *Beulah* took on the typical mammy-role, solving *her* white family's problems and keeping them happy. In addition to servicing and accommodating "her family," *Beulah* devoted attention to her boyfriend Bill Jackson. Bill's professed devotion to *Beulah*, yet his consistent excuses for why they could not get married was a reoccurring comedic theme on the sitcom.

The memory of an exploited Black domestic from TV Land that is conjured by the nametag on an abandoned mutt's collar is not the only thing that discomforts Jackie. Senna draws a vivid connection between *Beulah* the domestic and *Beulah* Land itself that explains Jackie's response. "The name seemed demeaning somehow, like Aunt Jemima" (198). Just as the Biblical and mythic *Beulah* Land is the place where the chosen or righteous await the bridegroom (Christ), *Beulah* Land also represents a waiting place in "The Land of *Beulah*." In the specific case of Senna's allusions to *Beulah* the domestic, TV land represents a place within culture in which Black Americans wait for the bridegroom, the United States government and its democratic ideals to arrive and redeem them. During its brief airing, the show, as well as the actresses who played *Beulah* received significant criticism, particularly from John Crosby, a television critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, for perpetuating stereotypes. The opposition felt that *Beulah's* "firsts" should compensate for the stereotypes the sitcom perpetuated. Like *Beulah* the domestic, Black Americans are left in waiting, given small tokens to appease them. In other words, TV land's incorporation of African American characters seems like a space

¹¹⁵ Museum of Broadcast Communications,
<http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/B/htmlB/beulah/beulah.htm>

for reconciliation when in fact it is a space that reflects a deep-rooted anti-black sentiment in U.S. culture.¹¹⁶

Jackie sees herself as a microcosm of the Black American population who is waiting on a bridegroom to redeem her from her ambiguously raced position. Seeing no space for reconciliation, Jackie strikes out at Beulah, who persistently reminds Jackie of her inability to escape her own in-betweenness. Jackie resents the absence of a space in society for racially mixed people. She struggles with the dilemma of being neither white nor black in a society that operates under a rigid black-white binary. As a mixed-race mutt who bears specific symbols of slavery, Jackie recognizes her own pain in Beulah's vulnerability. This recognition of what Beulah represents spurs the beatings. The beatings are also spurred by a profound realization of self-hatred that Jackie had never recognized before.

Jackie had never thought herself ill tempered before. But that first evening, she walked into her bedroom only to find Beulah peeing on her bed ... Jackie felt something—a clicking in her brain. She'd never felt it before. In one swift motion, she picked Beulah up by the scruff of her neck and flung her to the floor ... Jackie kicked her sharply in the ribs ... Jackie hungered to do more, but Beulah ran ... (198-99)

Beulah the dog has been neglected and abandoned by those who should have cared for her. She is left *shackled* to a metal pole by an extension cord—the shackles invoking of captured Africans, soon to become slaves, and the extension cord conjuring images of lynching. A sign hangs around her neck that reads, “Take me

¹¹⁶ Although I believe television has a long and continued history of depicting Black characters in less than positive manners, I do concede that it was television images involving Black people and dogs that played a strategic role in spurring the Civil Rights Movement.

home. Ime Kold, Kute and Hongry” (195). The tag around Beulah’s neck, like the hole in her nose, is also reminiscent of slavery. The collar and tag around Beulah’s neck resemble the iron slave collars that were used to discipline slaves who were prone to running away, or who were considered runaway risks.

Like Beulah the domestic, Beulah the dog is unprotected and unrewarded for her service and loyalty. When Jackie abuses Beulah, the abuse represents her inability to locate a safe space, but it also represents her disappointment with the failures of democracy. Jackie is disappointed that the democratic ideals the United States touts are not applied equally to all of its citizens. She beats Beulah because the dog reinforces Black Americans’ inability to be free, protected and have equal access to opportunities. Beulah the domestic perpetuates mammy images of black women, firmly fixing their bodies in servile and subservient roles—roles that portray them as the dominant culture wants to see them. The dog’s abandoner(s) wants Beulah to be viewed in a manner that re-inscribes her subordinate position as well. Beulah wears a dog collar with a silver tag engraved with her name, yet there is no contact information. Thus Jackie concludes, “the dog’s former owners had wanted her identity ensured, but not her safe return” (198). The tag around Beulah’s neck serves as a constant reminder of her subordinate position. It lets her next owner know that despite her cute looks she is just another one of the stray mongrels running through Brooklyn, and therefore not worthy of the safety and security of knowing where home is.

Beulah the domestic and Beulah the dog force Jackie to revisit hurtful aspects of her recent relationship. Both Beulahs reflect one of Kip’s conciliatory break-up

remarks to Jackie when he argues that, “‘You can walk away from this any time.’ Kip had said out of the blue, sweeping his arm around the restaurant, although she knew it was blackness he was referring to. ‘For me, there’s no way out’” (197). Kip, a light-skinned black man who attended prep schools and is a stockbroker, attempts to negotiate the perplexities of his racial identity by adopting “negritude” late in college and by condemning race mixing. In spite of his academic and financial success, Kip ultimately realizes the impossibility of escaping race. Upon this realization, he dumps Jackie, who he wrongly believes is able to escape race, because Jackie’s skin does not register blackness. He shaves his dreads and begins dating a white woman. Kip’s resentment toward Jackie fuels her contempt for Beulah. Just as Kip is disheartened that his attempts to achieve the American Dream consistently fall short because he is a Black man, Jackie is frustrated that no matter how much she does for Beulah, Beulah remains unsatisfied—“she wanted more” (Beulah 207).

Before abandoning Beulah in the park, Jackie thinks that Beulah’s insane circles around a tree look like Little Black Sambo, running to escape the tiger. Ultimately, Jackie fears that if she continues running in circles that she will be like the tiger chasing Little Black Sambo and “she too would melt and disappear” (213). Jackie does not realize the fear of disappearing immediately, but she does recognize her inability to locate a safe space, which spurs her abuse of Beulah. Jackie’s abuse represents her frustration with the binary construction of black-white racial identities that further alienate her in a space where she would like to feel secure. Beulah performs a continuous, and what Jackie perceives to be malicious, destruction of Jackie’s apartment that prohibits even the interior space of her apartment from being

safe. Kip suggests that Jackie can escape race, failing to realize that race is geography, as well as an embodiment. Even if Jackie, “end[ed] up with a white boy named Andrew, an architect or maybe a painter” and moved to Nyack to live in a big farmhouse, she still would be a subject of and subjectified to the color line in spite of the “white” space she occupied. It is this reality that causes Kip such consternation. That reality becomes compounded for Jackie by the feeling that her racial ambiguity affords her no place in Kip’s or Andrew’s world. The compounding of this reality drives Jackie’s futile efforts to locate a safe space beyond the boundaries of race in the Dog Park.

Unable to stop abusing Beulah, Jackie takes her veterinarian’s advice that Beulah simply needs more exercise, and begins taking her to a dog park. Though Jackie initially describes the Dog Park inhabitants generally as people, her narrative attention is devoted only to Nan, the haggard thirtysomething/young fortysomething doctoral candidate who has been writing her dissertation on Victorian birth control methods for ten years, and The Weather Girls, a group of single, childless white women whom Nan hates because they have not given up hope on finding a man and because they own purebred dogs. Senna’s narrative leaves it unclear as to whether Jackie willfully omits the presence of men from the Dog Park or if they in fact were ever present. Either way, the park becomes an intimate feminine space that conjures the sweet pleasant air, singing birds and pretty flowers of Bunyan’s Beulah Land. It also invokes Pallas’ first response to the Convent in *Paradise*: “The whole house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too” (177). Pallas feels assured that the Convent offers a safe feminine space

from her recent experiences of rape and betrayal at the hands of men in much the same way Jackie feels safe from Kip's betrayal, the potential rejection of the imagined Andrew, and the grotesque behavior of her supervisor at the Swiss Bank. Jackie notes that despite everyone at the Dog Park being strangers, "there was an intimacy to their encounters, particularly in the mornings, before they had put on their business suits and makeup. They saw each other in the natural state ... the ways lovers see each other before the day begins" ("Beulah" 208). After becoming acquainted with Nan and the Weather Girls she concludes, "that while she could be a black girl or a white girl, depending on how she decided to fix her hair, she was always a woman" (209). Although Jackie registers the complex matrix of racial politics, she seems oblivious to gender politics, and particularly to the intersections of race and gender when constructing an identity.

The Wound Who Cries Out

Jackie's conclusion sounds as though the Dog Park is a libratory space. That liberation, however, is short lived. Beulah forces Jackie to recognize the intersections of her own gender, race and sexuality. Beulah is a mixed-breed dog that shares the name of an exploited black domestic, making her symbolize blackness and the racism associated with it in the United States. These symbols awaken Jackie to the egregiousness of thinking she can separate her raced, gendered and sexed identities. Not long after Jackie's voyage into the Dog Park, she begins a metamorphosis. She loses interest in her appearance. She stops taking showers and changing her clothes regularly. Her fingers are dirty, her hands are callused, and her feet are like hooves. She also stops waxing her legs. It would seem that Jackie stops being a "woman" in

the sense that she gives up on the “beauty myth.” Race, however, complicates Jackie’s abandonment of gender constructs. In essence, Jackie transforms into Beulah. Her behavior is even described as animalistic: “She would *scavenge* the dark street around her house for takeout [...] she wouldn’t bother to put it on a plate. She’d just *hunch* over the container it had been served in, *wolfing* down what she could [...]” (emphasis mine 210). This behavior marks the point when she stops wanting more and accepts defeat, accepts that there is no safe space for people who look like her.

Jackie’s metamorphosis is reinforced by Nan’s feelings of possessiveness toward Jackie. While Nan’s constant stream of advice and lover-like possessiveness could signify a mothering or lesbian theme, “hegemony” emerges as the most appropriate explanation for Nan’s possessiveness. First, Jackie describes Nan as sexless. Nan is completing a Ph.D. Historically, academe has been a white, male-dominated space. Furthermore, Nan’s area of concentration, Victorian studies, is not coincidental. Great Britain’s Victorian Era occurred during the height of the industrial revolution and British colonialism. Her research topic on Victorian birth control methods is significant because the Victorian era also marked a newfound concern with sexuality, the domestic sphere, and prostitution. This concern gave rise to the emphasis on purity and domesticity that produced the cult of true womanhood, which emerges simultaneously with the development of racial discourses that situated blackness as a sign of impurity and whiteness as its converse. Piety, purity, domesticity, and subservience—the cardinal virtues of the cult of true womanhood—served not only to define the boundaries of acceptable female behavior, but to also define Black women

outside of the realm of true womanhood while firmly inscribing elite and middle class White women within this paradigm.¹¹⁷ Despite pursuing a research topic that has radical implications for women and their bodies, Nan's topic also delves into an area that socially immobilized Black women.

Nan also invokes Charles Darwin's pseudo-scientific notions of racial hierarchies.¹¹⁸ Nan schools Jackie on Darwinian selection when she derides the Weather Girls' purebreds and assures Jackie that her and Jackie's "standard mongrels" had much better chances of surviving in the wild (209). Although Nan has some admirable attributes, many of her ideologies resonate with the racial science that subordinated people of African descent. Her desire to influence Jackie's thoughts, as well as her desire to control Jackie's behavior is indicative of the power the U.S. government employs to define and control its Black subjects through the interaction of legal and cultural discourse that rely on race and racial thinking for their validity.

Considering the suspicious nature of Nan's presence in the narrative, it is productive to ponder why Jackie is so drawn to her and even longs for her presence. Trauma theory offers an insightful method for interpreting Jackie's relationship with Nan. It is important to note, however, that in my turn to trauma theory, I am cognizant that reading racialized people as experiencing trauma can be problematic. When the

¹¹⁷ In Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment Patricia Hill Collins argues that the mammy figure effectively stripped black women of fertility and sexuality while buttressing the ideologies of the cult of true womanhood. Hazel Carby also offers an analysis of the effects of the cult of true womanhood on black women in Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist.

¹¹⁸ Darwin connected race to biological evolution. This connection not only bolstered Enlightenment ideologies concerning race, but also paved the way for eugenics.

text itself calls attention to this trauma, however, I believe it is fruitful and necessary to engage the discourse. This is particularly true of much mixed-race literature, as it rather consistently focuses on the psychologically damaging affects of being as Werner Sollors' calls it, "neither black nor white." So then, Cathy Caruth's interpretation of the compulsion to repeat catastrophic events as symbolic of a "double wound" provides a framework for critical analysis of Jackie and Nan's relationship. Freud ascribes the compulsion to repeat as sometimes connected to the desire to mask a traumatic event. Caruth draws on what Freud terms "traumatic neurosis"—the unwished for and yet somehow reconciling repetition of a catastrophic event—in order to analyze the literary resonance of Freud's Tasso example beyond the unwished for repetition.¹¹⁹ Trauma, then, is not limited to a single act but it is also a series of events. Jackie's life as a phenotypically white woman is a source of daily trauma, which for example, is exemplified in the context of her relationship with Kip. It becomes a source of trauma for him as well because it forces him to attend to his hyper-visibility that is read against her invisibility.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud draws on Tasso's romantic epic, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, as an example of behavior in the transference. During a duel, Tancred unknowingly kills his beloved, Clorinda, who is disguised in the armor of an enemy knight. After Clorinda's death, Tancred slashes at a tree when caught in a magic forest. The tree bleeds and cries out in the voice of Clorinda that Tancred has wounded her once again. Freud utilizes this repetition of the same fatality as

¹¹⁹ Here Caruth is referring to Freud's employment of Tasso's romantic epic, *Gerusalemme Liberata* in order to explain the logic of the "perpetual recurrence of the same thing."

evidence “that there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle.”¹²⁰

In her analysis Caruth asserts that the *voice* that cries out when it is paradoxically released *through the wound* is more striking than the inadvertent repetition. She argues that when the voice of the inflicted cries out the voice “bears witness to the past he [Tancred or the inflictor] has unwittingly repeated.” She concludes that the voice “witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know” (2-3). Caruth draws an etymological connection between trauma and wound and makes the point that in Freud’s text, “*trauma*” is a wound inflicted not only upon the body but also upon the mind.” As far as “double wounds” are concerned, Caruth explains that the first wound is not fully known until it imposes itself again through repetitive action. The second wound then proves that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4).

The most compelling aspect of Caruth’s double wound argument concerns the wound’s relationship to “the voice of the other.” As Caruth articulates it, this relationship provides a productive method for analyzing *racial wounds* in Senna’s text.¹²¹ As Caruth acknowledges the sensibleness in recognizing Clorinda’s voice [the wounded] as representative of “the other within the self that retains the memory

¹²⁰ Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, ed., *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 173

¹²¹ I am not sure who coined the term *racial wounds*, but aside from myself, J. Brooks Bouson also employs the term in *Quiet As It’s Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Bouson hopes that her scholarship will “aesthetically repair...deep and abiding *racial wounds*.”

of the ‘unwitting’ traumatic events of one’s past”, she also proposes a second option. Caruth states, “But we can also read the address of the voice here [...] as the story of the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (8). This second option provides key insight for interpreting Jackie’s relationship with Nan, as well as Jackie’s treatment of Beulah.

Both Beulah and Jackie represent the historical wound of slavery. The dog’s wound is represented through the hole in her nose, while Jackie’s wound is represented through her racially mixed body. Jackie responds to Beulah’s puppy-natured destruction of her apartment and personal belongings by throwing her, kicking her, slapping her, and jerking her leash too hard. The beatings become a ritual, something Jackie yearns for and feels exhilarated by. Prior to the first beating, Jackie notices a small, round hole between the dog’s nostrils. After feeling repulsion, then horror, then pity, Jackie begins to cry, “The hole was more than she could handle” (202). As she ponders who could have committed such a hateful deed the hole reminds “her somehow of slavery, of shackles and deformities too deep to ever heal” (203). The pity Jackie feels does not prohibit her from beating Beulah, but it does make her more aware of her own unhealed racial wounds, as well as her inability to remedy them.

Prior to encountering Beulah, Jackie feels companionless and homeless. She feels isolated by the polarized racial dichotomies that shape U.S. culture. Romantic notions of kinship and community fail to provide her with the partnership and home

that she seeks. Beulah is Jackie's visitor from the beyond who attempts to help Jackie imagine a home space where both race and gender matter and are "rendered impotent." Jackie's primary problem is that like Dovey and Soane Morgan in *Paradise*, Jackie also misinterprets and/or ignores all the signs, especially the signs from her visitor. Jackie seeks solace in the Dog Park and therapy from Nan, yet neither the park nor Nan provide satisfaction or safety. Much like the Convent Women in *Paradise*, Jackie needs to understand home and the safety entailed in that concept differently, or else she will remain the living dead, whether it is in a dog park or a midtown salon.

Beulah is "the other within the self" that retains the trauma of Jackie's ancestral past. The hole in her nose that makes Jackie weep because of its reminder of slavery clearly represents the first wound, the mortal wound that must be repeated in order to be assimilated into the conscious. Jackie's racially ambiguous body represents the second wound that was unassimilated in the first instance of trauma and can only be known when it returns to haunt the survivor in the future. Thus, Beulah is the wound that cries out "...in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). Jackie is so unsure of who she is and what she really wants that she fails to hear Beulah's voice and instead Jackie hears only Nan's voice. Freud notes that "suggestion"—the patient's submissiveness to the physician—helps remedy the compulsion to repeat (n174). But Jackie seeks Nan as a sort of false therapist—she hears Nan's voice instead of Beulah's—thus perpetuating the compulsion to repeat instead of accepting Beulah's "suggestion" that would help "loosen" the repression.

Caruth's "voice of the other" offers us a way of understanding both Beulah and Nan as "the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another" (Caruth 8). Beulah's relationship with the trauma of slavery is rather apparent. She represents the racial wounds that persist into the present through Beulah the domestic and Jackie's own *warring ideals* surrounding her racial identity. Jackie's difficulties reconciling the racial geography of the U.S. conjure Beulah's visitation. As a symbol of white supremacy, it is not as obvious how Nan possesses any trauma that is tied up with that of Jackie. A different sort of analysis offers a method for interpreting Nan's entanglement with Jackie's trauma.

Free Your Mind and the Rest Will Follow

In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng argues that one of the United State's greatest fallacies is the premise that "all men are created equal" when American history presents such a different story. She argues that the "exclusion-yet-retention" of racialized others creates a melancholic bind for dominant white America.¹²² The contradiction of the nation's founding principles—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—for marginalized racial groups affect both the oppressed and the oppressor. Cheng points out that the oppressor, or dominant white identity, cannot escape these contradictions, and thus shares marginalized people's racial melancholia.¹²³

¹²² Slave narratives also dedicated much attention to demonstrating the manner in which slavery was not only inhumane for the slaves, but also how it dehumanized the slave master.

¹²³ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001).

One of the reasons Cheng's work is compelling is because she emphasizes that privilege and power do not exempt White Americans from racial melancholia—it is a national melancholia that transcends the color line. By reading Nan through the lens of racial melancholia, and the guilt and denial of guilt that are entangled in the racialization process, we can understand how Jackie and Beulah's repeated-and-shared trauma is also shared with Nan. Such a reading relies on Nan's research on Victorian England, particularly birth control for its plausibility. Nan's work literally connects her with the origins of race, racial thinking, and their intersection with gender, inventions that will ultimately shape the United States' racial formation. Cheng reminds us that power and privilege do not exempt white American's from melancholia. Perhaps we should read both Nan and Jackie as a melancholic pair that lament the impossibility of racial purity in Americans, which would account for their disdain for the Weather Women and their purebred dogs. In other words, Jackie and Nan exist in the hole that is national melancholia that transcends the color line, literally Jackie and Nan, are the mutts of American history. Jackie's trauma necessarily forces her encounter with Nan. Thus, neither Beulah nor Nan nor the Dog Park can provide Jackie with an intervention plan that allows her to be comfortable in her racially mixed body.

Unlike the Convent Women, Ella, and Mozelle, Jackie chooses not to dwell in the beyond. Jackie's choice reflects an inability to let go; ultimately, Jackie is unable to imagine a racial geography that defies black-white binaries, creating in-between spaces—spaces that inevitably challenge the construction of race itself. In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin D. G. Kelley suggests that “the map

to a new world is in the imagination” (2). In this project I call that new world “the beyond.” Jackie must first imagine a world in which race, gender, and sexual relations are reconstructed before she can appreciate the world in which she exists. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs echoes Kelley’s emphasis on the imagination: “She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (88). The need to be willing to imagine grace is apparent in the Convent Women and Ella’s conversions. They experience the interventional power of the beyond because they can imagine and see the grace Baby Suggs insists is there for the taking. Throughout the narrative Jackie is complicit with dominant cultural ideologies of race and gender. She is unable to disavow the one-drop rule that makes her feel isolated, and thus she can never imagine her self in a secure space outside of the U.S. black-white racial binary. Her inability to imagine a map to the new world means that she cannot accept her visitor, a material manifestation of the beyond designed to help the visited read the map they already possess.

Where Is the Love?

Jackie’s inability to disavow the one-drop rule is tied to her inability to love herself. The language of the narration depicts a very conflicted relationship. After beating Beulah for the first time, Jackie spends the evening showering Beulah with affection. “She’d never loved anyone more, and possibly never would” (199). Such a statement suggests that Jackie has never been loved with the depth and unconditional acceptance that she gets from Beulah. Jackie feels bad about abusing

Beulah and even doodles pictures of her when she is at work. Jackie's doting, if not romantic sentiments, do not however overpower her need to also exhibit aggression:

Even as Jackie kicked and beat and cursed Beulah, she loved her. Beulah was all that mattered to Jackie. Their relationship was one of extremes. Extreme hatred, extreme love. Violence seemed just another form of intimacy. Jackie wondered if you could truly love something without sometimes despising it. Jackie raged against Beulah, while simultaneously sacrificing everything for the beast. (207)

Beulah's unmistakable parallels with Beulah the domestic spur this love-hate relationship. But it is also spurred by Jackie's own self-hatred. She sees Beulah as a replication of herself. At moments she loves herself and thus she loves Beulah, but she cannot maintain the self-love because she is consistently mired in a past that compromises her ability to inhabit the present fully and satisfactorily. Beulah reminds Jackie of her racial ambiguity and forces her to acknowledge the persistence of the color line. Instead of emulating the unconditional self-love that is indicative of Beulah's forgiving and happy-go-lucky personality, Jackie abandons Beulah in the park. Jackie has no knowledge base with which she can incorporate Beulah's lessons of self-love, hence her return to the beauty salons and her previously dissatisfying life.

The abrupt and rather unsatisfying conclusion situates "Beulah" in an awkward position within post-soul discourse. We have a text, that true to cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal's articulation of the post-soul aesthetic, strives "to better critique the postmodern realities that confront the African-American 'community,'"

and “considers issues like...the proliferation of black ‘meta-identities.’” But there is also a strong sense of ambivalence grounded by the narrative. The tension is circumscribed by the politics of color and gender.¹²⁴ What we see in “Beulah” is the danger of any aesthetic that does not have an easily recognized and widely embraced view of gender. In the haste to move beyond essentialized notions of blackness and through efforts “to deconstruct popular assumptions of black identity,” the post-soul aesthetic ultimately excludes and fails women like Jackie.

The identity negotiations that are inherent in post-soul discourse attend exclusively to issues of class and environment, which obscures the prevailing intraracial divisions of hair, color, and bone. These divisions deny Jackie a sense of security in the supposed post-race U.S. geography. Attending to the ambiguous and alienating space the Jackie occupies would require that we consider closely whether the post-Civil Rights era has provided a space to deconstruct black identity as neatly and profoundly as cultural critics like Mark Anthony Neal and Trey Ellis, for example, would like us to believe. In his foundational, yet controversial essay, “The New Black Aesthetic,” Ellis coins the term “cultural mulatto,” which he defines as a black person “educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, [who] can also navigate easily in the white world” (235). According to Ellis it is these individuals who “fuel the NBA (New Black Aesthetic). Other scholars have noted the elitism inherent in Ellis’ definition of the NBA and its rather unmasked allusions to Alain Locke’s “New Negro.” But I am not critiquing his work in that manner. I do however think it is fruitful to point out that between 1989 when Ellis published his manifesto and 2002 when Neal published *Soul Babies*, which presents itself as the post-soul bible, little

¹²⁴ Neal 2-3.

changed rhetorically. Neal celebrates the “rich possibilities” beyond monolithic blackness when he asserts, “When we embrace these identities as part of our being, we are also conscious of the fluidity of the communities to which we belong and the relative freedom to explore these identities as part of our being...” (177).

Although my tone is somewhat facetious, I am not suggesting that Ellis and Neal’s work is not useful; instead, I am trying to emphasize the point Senna seems to harp on in “Beulah”—Jackie’s white phenotype seriously limits, if not prohibits, her access to this celebratory and “free” black identity that Ellis and Neal examine. Senna insists that the notions of “the end of blackness” that drive contemporary popular discussions of Black culture fail to interrogate the nuances of the prevailing intra-racial discord that remains very much invested in the hair, color, and bone ideologies that have persistently framed Black intra-racial politics. Ellis and Neal’s point about “the fluidity of the communities to which we belong” and critique of preoccupations with Black authenticity, fails to consider how phenotype factors into ideas surrounding Black authenticity. Jackie’s inability to navigate successfully the U.S. racial geography demonstrate that both mainstream and Black intelligentsia’s post-soul discourse think too narrowly about blackness in the post-soul era.

Jackie’s white phenotype is not the only factor that complicates her ability to benefit from mainstream culture or Black culture’s “racial progress.” When coupled with gender, Jackie’s white phenotype creates what Senna would have us to believe are insurmountable obstacles. This is most evident in the character of Beulah the dog. Keeping with the NBA’s predilection for parody as a method of deconstruction, Senna parodies the discord between Black women and Black men through Beulah.

The texts examined in the previous chapters all had a visitor who represented each writers' attempt to mediate the past gender friction and rethink community.

Consolata's "friend," Reuben, and Julian help those they visit to imagine a partnership that is grounded in unmotivated respect, and thus imagine a home space that is "a-world-in-which-race-does-*not*-matter."

There are some points that are significant to make here in regards to Senna's manipulation of this trope. Senna is sly in her response to the call for reformed partnership that her fellow Black women writers have already iterated. Senna does not select the fleeting green-eyed, tea-colored male counterpart to Consolata as a visitor, and she is also not inclined toward Brodber's still liminal, yet more fully developed visitor, Reuben, or the tender and sensitive Julian. Senna selects a canine as her visitor—a beautiful, yet peculiarly undesirable, homeless mutt. Such a selection is loaded. The mutt, Beulah, becomes more than just a signifier of an unattainable Paradise, a black maid, and Jackie's own mixed body. Beulah also mischievously represents Black heterosexual relationships. As a mutt, Beulah signifies on Mutt in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, Ursa Corregidora's husband who failed to protect her when his drunken, jealous rage results in her falling down a set of stairs and consequently losing their unborn child and her uterus. Both Jones' and Senna's wily signification alludes to Black women's association of men with dogs—an association that speaks to a perception of unfaithfulness and abuse that is a result of a singularly sexual view of women as disposable objects. As a representative, then, of Malcolm X's men who fail to protect, Beulah's offer of partnership is rejected,

because Jackie achieves no “insight” that allows her to imagine a partnership that is mutually reciprocal—one in which both parties protect one another.

By signifying on the contested relationship between Black women writers/scholars/critics and Black male writers/scholars/critics Senna, like her female contemporaries, seeks a promise of partnership. Unlike her contemporaries, however, she wants “something more” than the romance, nostalgia, and Diasporaness that fuels their reformed partnership. And unlike her soul baby cohorts, Senna wants to reconsider critically the all too often heteropatriarchal and unabashedly self-referential identity politics of the post-soul aesthetic. “The Land of Beulah,” then, is Senna’s way of “hollering back” to Black women writers like Morrison, Brodber, and Lemmons, and to cultural critics like Neal and Ellis. Senna’s narrative is a cautionary lesson about how a haste to dwell in the beyond can result in repeating past mistakes, as in the lack of gender consciousness that guided the 1960s Black aesthetic. Through her mixed-race trope, Senna works to intervene in post-soul discourse and illuminate the inseparableness of race and gender. She works to develop a more nuanced consideration of intra-racial identity politics that complicate Neal’s insistence that “we are also conscious of the fluidity of the communities to which we belong and the relative freedom to explore these identities as part of our being.” Fluidity and the freedom of exploration are not as easy to finesse for people like Jackie.

Coda: When and Where She Exits: Disappearing Acts in Black Women's Cultural Studies

Judging by production and sales of their books and movies, Black women writers won the battle royal that catalyzed thirty years ago. Literary and cultural critic Ann DuCille declared that amidst the politically correct multicultural moment of the 1990s, Black women occupied an exotic space in the academic and popular culture realm. She warned, however, "Historical amnesia may displace her at any time, but for now at least, the black woman writer is a bonanza" (92). The cultural and commercial capital that Black women writers represented in the mass media and within the walls of academe during the 1980s and 1990s have certainly waned. What I want to consider, then, is how this "disappearing act" might help us understand the possibility and limitations of contemporary Black women writers' efforts to reform partnership. How does the twenty-first century "historical amnesia" that DuCille warned about affect the critical gender consciousness that produces the unmotivated respect that allows Black characters to dwell in the long-sought-after post-racial beyond?

A starting point, and one that is directly related to Senna's critique, is the location of Black Women's Studies in the academy. Anne DuCille laments the lack of respect for the field of black feminist studies in her provocative essay, "The Occult of True Black Womanhood." She attests that "Much of the newfound interest in African American women that seems to honor the field of black feminist studies actually demeans it by treating it not like a discipline with a history and a body of

rigorous scholarship underpinning it, but like an anybody-can-play pickup game played on an open field” (95). DuCille’s lament is echoed in an interview Eveylnn M. Hammonds conducted with Beverly Guy-Sheftall in which both women discuss the absence of any prominent Black Women’s studies program(s) in the U.S., and Guy-Sheftall adds that “I think it’s also fair to say that most well-established African American studies programs do not have even what I would call a serious black women’s studies concentration.”¹²⁵ DuCille and Guy-Sheftall both make these poignant observations about the neglect of Black women’s studies during the late 1990s—two decades after Barbara Smith’s pivotal essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” laid the groundwork for what would become the field of Black feminist criticism/Black Women’s studies on institutional and public levels.

I do not think that these scholars are off-course in their observations of ways in which Black women’s studies is not taken seriously as a discipline. One need only to consider the most recent issue of *PMLA* dedicated to Nellie McKay. The issue proposes to account for feminist criticism today; however, except for the interview with McKay, the issue fails to address Black feminist criticism. I was sorely disappointed when I read the interview with McKay and it was not followed by a critical discussion of Black feminist criticism today (McKay’s interview focused on the birth of Black women’s studies in the academy). It would only seem appropriate that in an issue that highlighted the broader focus of “feminist criticism today” and that explicitly identified its intent as one that memorialized a key figure in the shaping of Black women’s studies, that something more would necessarily be said in regards

¹²⁵ Beverly Guy-Sheftall and E. M. Hammonds, “Whither Black Women’s Studies: An Interview,” *Differences* 9.3 (1997): 31-45.

to the discipline she shaped. Not one of the seven essays following the interview addressed Black women's/feminist studies, or even feminist issues for women of color in general, except for one self-ingratiating article discussing a White U.S. feminist's pen pal relationship with an Iraqi feminist scholar. Left to *PMLA*, it would seem that issues affecting Black women diminished significantly in the twenty-first century.¹²⁶

Of course issues affecting Black women did not diminish in the twenty-first-century. The troubled status of women's studies as a marginalized discipline and Black women's "precarious and dangerous" position "on the periphery of the already marginalized"¹²⁷ has something to do with Black women's vanishing. There is, however, a more critical factor that polices Black women's studies in the academy, a shift to a post-race paradigm during the 1990s.¹²⁸ This shift creates quite a dilemma for Black women writers in particular, and U.S. women writers of color in general. The post-race paradigm demands that how we assess cultural identity be rethought through a transnational and global lens that rejects U.S. centric scholarship that privileges U.S. exceptionalism. This shift fostered both academic and mass media acclamations and sometimes celebrations that the significance of race was declining. In line with this shift, then, cultural productions and theoretical frameworks that

¹²⁶ To be fair, I should note that many of the tomes and critical essays published during the 1980s and into the 1990s did historical recovery work.

¹²⁷ qtd. in Carby 11

¹²⁸ Paul Gilroy is perhaps the most noted proponent of post-race discourse. In earlier work, but especially in *Against Race*: Gilroy argues for a "radical nonracial humanism" instead of antiracist discourse. He insists that scholars reify race when they consistently acknowledge it as a social construction, but then continue to use the terminology.

privilege nation become viewed as regressive.¹²⁹ In the academic arena it manifests as back-to-feminism-as-usual in *PMLA* where women of color are back in their invisible location on the periphery, or it manifests as the “newfound” interest in issues like feminism and Islam or feminism and borders. Sandra K. Soto offers a compelling analysis of the dangers of placing feminist scholarship on U.S. women of color in contradistinction to transnationalism in her essay “Where in the Transnational World Are U.S. Women of Color?”

...just as it became clear that women’s studies finally needed to attend in a meaningful way to the critiques by feminists of color, a new body of scholarship suggests that a heightened engagement with the racialized dimensions of gender in the United States is fundamentally incommensurate—in fact, at odds—with the exigencies of understanding gender in a transnational world...the potentially vexed relationship between what here is configured as global versus local approaches to feminist studies is no superficial competition over women’s studies’ resources. Much more substantively, the answer to the question that titles this essay—Where in the transnational world are U.S. women of color? —threatens to be “nowhere” so long as women of color are conflated with the very problems that transnational feminists seek to redress. 121-22

The configuration of global versus local that Soto critiques is only one dimension of diminished attention paid to Black women’s studies.

¹²⁹ In “Literatures of the Americas, *Latinidad*, and the Re-formation of Multi-Ethnic Literatures” Katherine Sugg explains that “The January 2003 *PMLA* issue on ‘America, The Idea, The Literature,’ is an emphatic example of the former perspective, in which various critics posit transnational perspectives as more politically engaged and nationalist ones as conservative, or even regressive” (229).

A logical component of the post-race paradigm that now frames feminist cultural studies is the castigation of “race projects.” The term “race project” is rather nebulous, but it seems to be used to describe projects like Ann DuCille’s essay cited above—texts, arguments, and theoretical frameworks that privilege discussions of race in a manner that is invested in understanding the *inclining* significance of race, as opposed to the *declining* significance of race. It is difficult, if not impossible, to analyze the status of Black womanhood during any cultural moment without attending to her raced and gendered body. This of course is true of discussions on Black manhood too. So, for example, why is there a persistence in post-soul discourse to highlight all of the multifarious ways in which “black” is “black no more?”

This question is complicated and there are many diverging approaches to answering it. In the context of this project, though, I would like to turn to popular culture as a means of analyzing why the “race project” is regressive when placed in a post-race paradigm. A turn to popular culture is warranted, because while the state of Black women’s studies is in flux, the market for and interest in Black women’s popular cultural productions remains strong. Investigating popular culture, then, could offer an expanded understanding of reformed partnership in contemporary Black women’s writing. The importance of turning to the popular is also noted by feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins: “in contrast to feminist mobilizations of the 1960s and 1970s, their [hip-hop generation feminists of color] women’s movement

mobilization occurs not within bureaucracies of the state or higher education but within popular culture and mass media.”¹³⁰

“You should have listened”¹³¹

The 2006 film version of the 1981 Broadway musical *Dreamgirls* offers a telling lesson on the trouble with “race projects” during the post-race era. I will focus specifically on the film version of the musical, because its mass marketing and all-star cast—Jamie Foxx, Beyoncé Knowles, Eddie Murphy, Danny Glover, and a new star, Jennifer Hudson—make it more popular and accessible than its Broadway precursor. The storyline focuses on The Dreamettes’—Effie (Jennifer Hudson), Deena (Beyoncé Knowles), and Lorrell (Anika Noni Rose)—rise to fame under the management of a resourceful used car salesman, Curtis Taylor, Jr. (Jamie Foxx) amidst the birth of Motown. The Dreamettes get their big break as backup singers for Jimmy “Thunder” Early (Eddie Murphy), an early pioneer of the new Detroit Motown sound that blended soul and rock n’ roll. They eventually go solo in order to appeal to a broader audience than the Motown sound permits them to reach. As they crossover the color line, The Dreamette’s become The Dreams, and Effie is replaced for a more malleable, less soulful (and leaner) lead, Deena. *Dreamgirls* usefulness to my argument here is its interrogation of *soul*.

Jimmy “Thunder” Early is the quintessential “soul man.” Shortly before his fall from fame and his subsequent heroin overdose, Jimmy lost his *soul*, both literally and figuratively. As an artist who rose to fame during the 1960s soul era, Jimmy had

¹³⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006) 191.

¹³¹ Deena’s song, “Listen,” from *Dreamgirls*.

difficulty transitioning into and finding a musical space in the dawning of the post-soul era. Thus, in the middle of crooning the lines to “I Meant You No Harm” during a tribute to the equivalent of Motown and Barry Gordy Jimmy is unable to contain himself, and he breaks into “Jimmy’s Rap.”

Got a home in the hills, Mercedes Benz, hot swimming pool, got lots of friends
Got Clothes by the acre, credit to spare, I could wake up tomorrow and find nobody
there

But Jimmy want more, jimmy want more, jimmy want, jimmy want, jimmy want
more

Jimmy want a rib, jimmy want a steak, jimmy want a piece of your chocolate cake

And more than all that Jimmy want a raise, cuz

Jimmy got soul, Jimmy got soul, Jimmy got, Jimmy got, Jimmy got soul

Sooner or later

The time comes around

For a man to be a man to take back his sound

I gotta do something to shake things up

I like Johnny Mathis but I cant do that stuff

Cuz Jimmy got soul, Jimmy got soul, Jimmy got S-O-U-L soul

I cant do rock

I cant do roll, what I can do baby is show my soul,

Cuz Jimmy got, jimmy got, jimmy got SOUL

“Jimmy’s Rap” begins with a comic element until Jimmy drops his pants on national television during the final line and everyone sees just how pathetic is the loss of soul.

The opening of the rap celebrates the economic gain that certain Black Americans experienced during the early post-Civil Rights era as a result of legislative acts that sought to more fully incorporate Black Americans into the nation. The post-Civil Rights era afforded Jimmy the opportunity to abandon the “chitlin’ circuit” and become a crossover artist, finding success in Black and White popular culture. His crossover was at a price, however. He has a house, car, pool, friends, clothes, and credit, which are a big step up from the bus he toured on during his “chitlin’ circuit” era. As Jimmy’s rap reveals, his material success does not compensate for the loss of soul—double voiced as the cultural essence of “blackness” and literally his soul. African American cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal explains that “the concept of soul emerged as the most vivid and popular expression of an African-American modernity” and thus “as a ‘modern’ aesthetic, soul challenged the prevailing logic of white supremacy and segregation in ways that were discomforting and even grotesque to some, regardless of race or ethnicity.”¹³² William Van Deburg offers perhaps a more concrete definition of soul when he states, “Soul was the folk equivalent of the black aesthetic...a type of primal spiritual energy and passionate joy available only to members of the exclusive racial confraternity.”¹³³ The Black aesthetic that Jimmy was schooled in lost its appeal and maybe even its efficacy after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The fact that Jimmy, a soul singer, turns to rap to articulate his sense of loss is exemplary of the origins of rap as a form of political protest driven by Black youths’ denied access to full citizenship. For Jimmy, then, soul equates to

¹³² Mark Anthony Neal, Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic, (New York: Routledge, 2004) 4.

¹³³ Ibid 4

something essentially “black”—it is the essentialized “blackness” of Jimmy’s soul that the post-soul aesthetic seeks to correct, not necessarily a negative move, but an essential black soul is real for many people and therein lies the problem. In his rap, Jimmy declares that he cannot do the crossover thing like Johnny Mathis and he “cant do rock” and he “cant do roll,” because “Jimmy got SOUL.” Ironically, whether in a 1981 Broadway musical or in twenty-first century cultural discourse, the folk-rooted, “exclusive racial confraternity” of soul is at odds with full incorporation into the nation.¹³⁴

Jimmy’s lament over the loss of soul creates a double bind for Black women writers reminiscent of literary scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin’s critique of Malcolm X’s “promise of protection.” Malcolm’s promise was appealing because it afforded Black women a place within the cult of true womanhood. But as Griffin points out, it was dangerous because to be a protected woman meant a loss of agency. Soul provides Black women writers a safe space to resist heteropatriarchal systems of power that oppress and marginalize them racially, but soul is very much invested in and circumscribed by a nationalist paradigm that makes Black women vulnerable. The race project that is soul is bound up in a masculinity that becomes painfully evident when Jimmy emphatically exclaims “Jimmy got SOUL” and drops his pants, as if to prove that when “the time comes around for a man to be a man to take back his sound” he is capable—or to borrow from bell hooks’ critique of Black Power in Marlon Riggs’ documentary *Black Is...Black Ain’t*, that soul is a “dick thing.”

¹³⁴ It is also ironic that Eddie Murphy plays Jimmy “Thunder” Early, as his Hollywood career was founded on and sustained by his crossover appeal. Furthermore, much of the same could be said for Beyoncé Knowles who plays a soul artist who crosses over most effectively during the disco era that some critics insist ruined soul music.

Turning to an examination of the female figure in popular culture and her relationship to soul might offer a critical comparison of Jimmy's loss of soul, as well as a way of understanding Black women writers' dilemma in the post-race era. Effie offers a sharp contrast to Jimmy's loss of soul. She refuses to lose her soul and she is punished. Curtis Taylor Jr., a Black male who only sees them as a commodity, manages the Dreams. Having an acute awareness of the social changes and opportunity that was bound to come as a result of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement, Curtis sought to reconstruct the *Dreams* as pop rather than soul singers, giving the group a crossover appeal. In order to make the crossover successful and financially lucrative, Curtis replaces Effie's soulful voice with Deena's "colorless" voice. When Effie refuses the "promise of protection" offered by Curtis, she is simply dismissed from the group. Effie's response to her dismissal is unquestionably the most powerful performance in the film. When she belts out "And I'm telling you I'm not going" she is not just singing about "the best man I'll ever know," although she is *still* singing about a man. For Effie soul is a folk sense of community that bound people together based on a shared ancestry—"We're part of the same place/We're part of the same time/We share the same blood/We both have the same mind." There is the obvious romantic element in Effie's song, but at the heart of the lyrics is a story about identity politics and betrayal. As Van Deburg notes, soul is "exclusive racial confraternity." So then, while soul becomes a "dick thing" for Jimmy, soul is community for Effie. Like the heterosexual rift between Black women and Black men played out in public and academic settings during the 1970s and

1980s, Effie's contemporaneous song is informed by Black Nationalism at its most patriarchal.

Here we see the nationalist project that is soul in full effect. Unwilling to give up soul and unwilling to give up agency Effie, like Black women writers, is placed in a precarious predicament. Effie and Black women writers are moved out to the periphery—Effie in tenement housing after the abrupt ending of her career and Black writers having minimal roles in the shaping of contemporary Black cultural discourse and feminist discourse. These Black women's unwillingness to conform—to give up soul—speaks to the Black male writers' dominance in literary and critical production during the post-soul era and to lack of attention given to Black women's issues in transnational scholarship. Refusing to give up soul and agency leaves the contemporary Black woman writer being forced to occupy Sula Peace's space of solitude.

Black women writers during the 1970s and 1980s occupied a fraught space trying to negotiate the paradox of soul. For Sula Peace the alternative was her "lonely." What then is the alternative for contemporary Black women writers who do not want to lose their soul, but who also do not want to be further isolated (by White feminists or Black nationalists)? There is no definitive answer to this question, but every text examined in this project attempts one. Toni Morrison, Erna Brodber, Kasi Lemmons, and Danzy Senna rethink Sula's loneliness and instead consider the possibilities and limitations of reformed partnership. Over the course of my close readings of these women's texts it becomes painfully clear that reformed partnership is no easy task. *Paradise* leaves us with the hope of reformed partnership; *Louisiana*

concludes with a complicated reformed partnership; *Eve's Bayou* has some success with reformed partnership; and "The Land of Beulah" simply refuses to imagine such a relationship in the contemporary moment. As I see it, with the exception of "Beulah," the trouble with reformed partnership in these texts is intricately connected to a reliance on old models. Despite contemporary Black women writers' sense that Black female characters "need more" than family genealogies to sustain them, and that foregrounding kinship and community have failed them in significant ways (this is true for Effie too), these writers seem to fall victim to some of their critique. In other words, like Jimmy and Effie, they too find it difficult and potentially hazardous to give up their soul.

The perplexing relationship between a soul paradigm and a post-race paradigm must certainly play a role in the historical amnesia that proliferate cultural studies at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Perhaps the most productive way of assessing the pursuit of reformed partnership is to devote more critical attention to texts published during the post-soul era. I suggest this because although the "bonanza" has ended, there are still manuscripts being published on Black women's cultural history, and a notable number of these texts focus on Black women's literary productions. A consistent commonality in nearly all of the new work however is attention to the "usual suspects"—the usual suspects being the familiar, "canonized," and anthologized Black women writers. There are of course ways of approaching the usual suspects without doing a "race project," but more often than not themes of community, kinship, lineage, slavery, self-reliance, and Africanisms are the controlling themes of analysis—and often in reductive ways that simply conclude

community is important to Black women or an African rootedness creates agency for female characters. These are familiar themes and modes of analysis that emphasize for me the importance of moving outside the familiar.

It is ironic that the importance of moving outside of the familiar is evident in the oeuvre of the writer I use to frame this project. *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *Paradise* were instrumental in framing this project; thus, I was hopeful that Morrison's most recent novel, *Love*, might provide a way of concluding my discussion of reformed partnership, especially since the *New York Times* review declared it a sister novel to *Sula*. When I reread *Love* I gained some insight on what I wanted to say in conclusion, but the insight I gained was not the insight I anticipated. Rereading *Love* made it clear to me that this text is a repetition without a difference. I argued that *Beloved* sets the course for reformed partnership, and in *Paradise* reformed partnership is hoped for but a dreamed deferred. Reformed partnership is not an element in *Love* at all.

While we do not see reformed partnership materializing and being sustained in either of Morrison's most recent novels, in both we do see "houses of women." In fact, her oeuvre is full of houses of women. It is necessary to consider why Morrison not only returns to houses of women, but why in *Love* she seemingly privileges such spaces over reformed partnership. *Love*, like *Paradise* ends with women having no one to depend upon but one another, thus invoking a solitude that echoes Nel's tragic lament, "we was girls together." In regards to the parallels between *Love* and *Paradise* Anissa Janine Wardi writes, "Heterosexual relationships destroy both sets of friendships: Sula's affair with Jude, and Heed's marriage to Christine's grand-father,

Bill Cosey. Both sets of women come to realize, though late in life, that their strongest desire is for one another, not the men.”¹³⁵

Similar to *Love, Paradise* concludes with armed women who vow to protect one another. This theme also emerges in *Dreamgirls*, when Effie and Deena reignite their friendship after Effie acquires documents from Deena that incriminate Curtis. Effie uses the documents to assure that Curtis will relent from his efforts to foil her return to show business. *Sula, Paradise*, and *Love* connect powerfully with *Dreamgirls* as these narratives all foreground sisterhood as sustaining and strong. As presented in these texts, sisterhood would have allowed the women in each narrative to develop as independent and codependent sisters if a man had not disrupted their relationship with his own vision—one that required his heteropatriarchal control of the women. Ultimately, what these texts illustrate is that there are no material or cultural rewards for rethinking Black patriarchy; whether it is Christine and Heed or Effie and Deena or Sula and Nel or the Convent Women, these women implore Black men to *listen* like Deena pleads with Curtis —“Listen to the song here in my heart.” But the plea falls on deaf ears.¹³⁶

Eve’s Bayou and “The Land of Beulah” emphasize the dangers inherent in familiar home spaces, particularly when that space is the body of the mother/sister/daughter. Lemmons challenges her Black female spectators to move

¹³⁵ Anissa Janine Wardi, “A Laying on of Hands: Toni Morrison and the Materiality of Love,” *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 30.3 (2005): 201-18.

¹³⁶ If we are to stay in the realm of popular culture, popular music and its accompanying imagery would support this claim. Disempowered men who speak through their dicks metaphorically and lyrically are embraced by White culture and importantly, Black females—Beyoncé and Fantasia, for example—want a “soldier” and a “hoodboy”—not a man profoundly aware of the problematic of gender and the cultural productions of Black patriarchy as the answer to their victimized status.

out of this space when she writes a “different script” for her characters, and Senna demonstrates the stagnation that occurs when the feminine space of the dog park is propagated as a model for attaining “something more.” Female heterosexual friendship, then, renders Heed and Christine a tragic disappointment like Sula, but without the passage of time as a way of understanding it. I was disappointed with Sula during my undergraduate studies, because in 1993 I could not appreciate Sula’s freedom to choose in 1973. *Love*, however, is published in 2003, when owning one’s loneliness is no longer about a choice. The familiarity of *Love* emphatically ends Morrison’s pursuit of reformed partnership. To be fair to Morrison and other writers, it would be useful to consider whether the trope of sisterhood is an impediment to reformed partnership.

Familiar tropes like sisterhood can perhaps assist with an additional issue that contemporary Black women writers and scholarship on their writing contends with during this transnational era—the revival of black-male-in-crisis rhetoric. In what I perceive to be a controversial essay, at least for a self-proclaimed male feminist to write, Michael Awkward argues that

With few exceptions (particularly the work of some creative writers), generally self-described black feminist discourse remains unlikely to explore black masculinity except as a social, domestic, and intellectual force whose oppression of black women is energetic, self-conscious, and unremitting. Given the return of the black-male-in-crisis as preeminent concern, given Afro-America’s historical (if sometimes ambivalent) fetishizing of black maleness, black feminism’s capacity to impact black youth may be

determined, in part, by how successfully it addresses the other side of the gender divide...young or potentially sympathetic black men encountering black feminism must be able to find in it the possibilities for self-validation and self-affirmation...hence, I believe that because it has so thoroughly illuminated aspects of black women's situatedness in America and elsewhere, certain versions of black feminism might profitably begin to interrogate the nuances of black masculinity.¹³⁷

Awkward's acknowledgement that the black-male-in-crisis has retaken center-stage is yet another explanation for Black women writers' recent disappearing acts and it is echoed in Beverly Guy-Sheftall's warning, "When we talk about black men, we usually discuss how they have been disempowered racially, but we don't talk about their gender. We race black men, but we don't gender them. This is a critical issue that black feminist scholarship has to address."¹³⁸

These propositions would fall flat, however, if scholars moved outside of the familiar more often in their analysis of Black women's writing to unfamiliar spaces and unusual suspects. By doing so they might find paradigm shifts that are more aligned with Lemmons and Senna's work and that already do the work Awkward and Guy-Sheftall advocate. So then, in spite of what comes across as being an astounding lack of accountability for Black male theorists in Awkward's proposal—shouldn't Black women be able to find self-validation and self-affirmation in Black

¹³⁷ Michael Awkward, "Black Feminism and the Challenge of Black Heterosexual Male Desire," The New Black Renaissance: The Souls Anthology of Critical African-American Studies, ed. Manning Marable, (Boulder: Paradigm P, 2005).

¹³⁸ Guy-Sheftall 68

men's cultural productions too? —Awkward's proposal has merit even if Shirley Anne Williams's advocated such work twenty years earlier.¹³⁹

The first step toward moving out of the familiar for Awkward would be to consider how “Black feminism and the challenge of Black heterosexual male desire,” the title of his essay, might be read differently in a post-soul narrative as opposed to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Awkward obviously feels comfortable returning to Hurston's narrative, but such familiarity can be blinding. Perhaps if he explored unfamiliar spaces and writers, he might realize that young Black feminists, third wavers, like Joan Morgan, are echoing their feminist foremothers like Williams and their feminist forefathers like Awkward. As a self-proclaimed hip-hop feminist Morgan articulates that the personal is still political

White girls don't call their men ‘brothers’ and that made their struggle enviably simpler than mine. Racism and the will to survive it create a sense of intra-racial loyalty that makes it impossible for black women to turn our back on black men—even in their ugliest and most sexist moments. I needed a feminism that would allow us to continue loving ourselves the brothers who hurt us without letting race loyalty buy us early tombstones.¹⁴⁰

Morgan's honesty demonstrates that private problems are really public issues for Black feminists and interrogations of the nuances of Black masculinity are at the heart of contemporary Black feminist discourse. This contemporary discourse,

¹³⁹ In “Some Implications of Womanist Theory” Williams encourages Black feminist critics to perform a “thoroughgoing examination of male images in works of black male writers.”

¹⁴⁰ Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life As a Hip-Hop Feminist*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

however, often does not occur within the academy; it is a discourse rooted in popular culture. Its rootedness, then, guides the future directions for further developing this project.

Patricia Hill Collins in *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* notes that Black women in the hip-hop generation often “bypass scholarly venues and other traditional outlets for feminist thought. Instead, they express their feminist politics through mass media and popular culture venues of hip-hop culture—namely collections of personal essays, fiction, rap music, and spoken-word poetry” (161-62). Considering this trend, future directions for studying reformed partnership would benefit from an even more nuanced examination of popular culture—film, literature, and music—than what is presented through Lemmons and Senna’s work.

This would be particularly apropos considering Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s, a “second waver,” hesitation to believe Kimberly Springer’s, a third waver, assertions about third wave Black feminists activism. Guy-Sheftall admits, “I am not as convinced as Springer that young Black feminists are carrying on the legacy left by nineteenth-century abolitionists, antilynching crusaders, club women, Civil Rights organizers, Black nationalist revolutionaries, and 1970s Black feminists, though I would like to embrace her argument.”¹⁴¹ Considering Guy-Sheftall’s doubt, what are the generational continuities and discontinuities between the cultural productions of the second and third wave of Black feminists? What are the limitations and benefits

¹⁴¹ Beverly Guy-Sheftall, “Response from a “Second Waver” to Kimberly Springer’s “Third Wave Black Feminism?,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27 (2002): 1091-1094.

of developing a Black feminist aesthetic that is developed for a nonacademic readership?

These questions should be considered alongside an interrogation of Black men's profeminist rhetoric, especially the rhetoric of Mark Anthony Neal, Eric Michael Dyson, and Tyler Perry—theorists and cultural producers who claim a stake in the quality of Black women's lives. Do these men's cultural productions share an investment in reformed partnership? Is their work infused with the critical gender consciousness they profess or is there still a monologue reminiscent of Henry Louis Gates' assertion in 1990 that "Much has been made—too much—of the supposed social animosities between black men and black women." Is the satire that infuses Black men's post-soul writing indicative of new possibilities for a critical gender consciousness grounded in unmotivated respect or does it simply repeat an old paradigm? Does anything in Black men's profeminist work suggest that they realize what Anna Julia Cooper poignantly insisted one hundred-fifteen years ago? "Only the Black Woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me.*'"¹⁴² Cooper's insight regarding the measure of progress leads me to my final question regarding future directions for this project. Borrowing from Mary Helen Washington, a literary critic whose work has perhaps been pivotal in the inauguration of Black women's studies, I propose considering what happens to the post-soul aesthetic if you put Black women's social positions and cultural productions at the center?¹⁴³ Although we are now "post"-race,

¹⁴² Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 31.

we are not post-gender and I am certain there are some disruptions that remain.

Perhaps then the Black Woman might say we have entered the beyond.

¹⁴³ Mary Helen Washington, "Disturbing the Peace: What Happens to American Studies If You Put African American Studies at the Center?": Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 29, 1997, □American Quarterly, 50.1 (1998): 1-23□

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