

TO WALK OR FLY? :
THE FOLK NARRATION OF COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY IN TWENTIETH
CENTURY BLACK WOMEN'S LITERATURE OF THE AMERICAS

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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My dissertation focuses on the function of black vernacular myths and rituals in three primary women's texts of the Americas: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), Simone Schwartz-Bart's *Pluie et Vent sur Telumee Miracle* (1972) and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). My project codifies how the black vernacular expressions of mythology and ritual are used to negotiate power between the individual and their community. Specifically, I trace how the women in these texts used resources of the black vernacular tradition as social and cultural collateral to empower themselves within an alternative system of values that simultaneously validates self and communal worth. Analyzing the transnational myths of the Flying Africans/Ibo Landing--myths of newly-arrived Africans escaping slavery by flight or by walking on water back to Africa, I contend that the performances of these myths and dance rituals not only created kinship bonds but also provided opportunities for expanding the parameters of community.

This writing grew from the limits of the Black Arts Movement (1960-1970) when the male-dominated discourse on the black vernacular traditions focused on creating a

voice distinct from, and often in conflict with, the prevailing white literary establishment. Simultaneously, Second Wave Feminism left women of color outside of the discourse on social justice and their definition of womanhood. I argue that these black women authors responded to this marginalization within their affinity groups by employing folk traditions to observe intra-communal dynamics. Doing so created a model of internal reflection that both revealed the seeds of internalized dominant/subordinate ideologies and served as an alternative method to record the impact of the larger social structure of domination.

These authors located black women's knowledge and power in liminal folk spaces in their novels. Taken together, they introduced a metaphor for black women's positioning in the Black Arts Movement and Second Wave Feminism; folk traditions from this insider/outsider perspective became tools to navigate and critique systems of domination. These texts provided dramatizations of a black feminist perspective, navigating black women's experiences of intersectionality, thus employing folk knowledge as a means to create new possibilities from historical traditions.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother, Earline V. Tolbert who didn't live to see this dream come to fruition, but had no doubts that it would because she had believed in my dreams before I was born. It is also dedicated to my partner, Donald Jurkoic and our children Makai and Silas, who inspire me to fly.

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To Walk or Fly?: The Folk Narration of Community and Identity in 20th Century

Black Women's Literature of the Americas

All change and progress from within comes about from the recognition and use of difference between {and among} ourselves—Audre Lorde

In my dissertation, I examine how black vernacular expressions of mythology and ritual are employed to narrate the dialectic between individual and community in twentieth century black women's literature of the Americas. I focus this dissertation on the depictions of mythology and ritual in three primary women's texts of the Americas: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), Simone Schwartz-Bart's *Pluie et Vent sur Telumee Miracle*¹ (1972) and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). I have chosen to look at this relationship through the lens of black vernacular expressions because of the privileged position that vernacular expressions bear on issues of both local and transnational representations of identity. Moreover, the vernacular tradition also serves in the recognition, identification and communication between those local and transnational nodes of identity affiliation. I focus on the function of mythology in black women's literature of the Americas, bearing in mind Zora Neal Hurston's argument in "Characteristics of Negro Expression" that the variety of black folklore/mythology shows the adaptability of black culture.² Hurston explores the integration of various subjects into the oral tradition as confirmation of the sustainability of the folkloric/mythological tradition. One might also note that the reoccurrence of the same myths in different locations within the Americas also demonstrates a synchronicity of experience that validates the existence of a sustained cultural dialogue among its African descendants. I take this idea a step further by emphasizing that the adaptability of the mythic and ritual

traditions also serves as a method of expanding community to include diverse and often marginalized peoples.

This study concentrates on the myths of the Flying Africans and Ibo Landing, which gained currency during slavery when the oral tradition circulated stories of newly-arrived Africans escaping the brutality of slavery by aerial flight or by walking on water back to Africa. The majority of critical attention that focuses on these myths in literature, or oral tradition, portrays flight, as well as walking on water, as representing the suffering of Africans enslaved in the Americas and their subsequent strategy for gaining agency. For example, critics such as Dorothy Lee center on Morrison's ability to "draw on specific Afro-American Legends of Africans who could fly and who used this marvelous ability to escape from slavery in America, that is, literally to transcend bondage."³ This view is elaborated on by contemporary folklorists like Fred Meeting, who traces the meanings of flight and walking on water to range from the "psychological protection and release" from slavery, to the special knowledge/wisdom that Africans had but only needed to tap into the "revolutionary tradition among slaves" to physically escape bondage.⁴ Other literary critics like Michael Awkward point out how the female *difference* in the retelling of these archetypal myths has emphasized how escape is seen as an individual act rather than a communal act, having clear repercussions for those left behind.⁵ Although I agree with Awkward's argument on Morrison's appropriation of the story having an "accompanying sense of social responsibility," I would elaborate on this from a Black Feminist perspective, which refunctions black vernacular traditions as a tool of critique of both intra-ethnic dynamics and the larger social structure of domination. Consequently, in these texts, the female characters who are the bearers of folk wisdom

engender their communities with organic wisdom, social critique and the valorization of diversity.

Since these myths resonate with multiple communities, I explore the various narrations of these myths considering the adaptation, refunctioning and reinvestment of these myths within their geo-political traditions. I look at these myths in the context of Joseph Campbell's "ethnic idea," wherein the mythic image binds the individual to society and serves the function of both defining the values of the community and of locating it.⁶ I assess the usefulness in viewing the myths of the Flying Africans and Ibo Landing through their function of negotiating the relationship between individual and community in the literature. I am interested in how these mythological stories are performative within the literature, in that the very utterance of these stories creates the dynamic of community building and locates the individual's role within that community.

Another component of black vernacular expression that I explore is the role of ritual in the dialectic between the individual and the community. I use the term "ritual" to denote the particular repeated secular and sacred events that are performed in the context of a real or imagined audience and that carry a symbolic significance in the texts. I will limit my focus on ritual to dance, song, storytelling, domestic rituals (such as house-blessings, marriage, death rites and home relocation/migration) and spiritual/religious practices that function to affect kinship bonds. I argue that in specific black women's texts, these overlapping expressions of ritual complicate the assumption of continuity that scholarship on ritual has used to link ritual to tradition. In doing so, these ritual moments in the texts become compelling locations from which to observe changes within community. I investigate how black women's literature uses the narration

of ritual as a strategy to give voice to the edges of black community, and in doing so how they redefine the parameters of community to make space for marginal identities.

Why Vernacular Traditions?

Historically deemed as foundational to the African descendants' world-view, vernacular traditions have been seen as the site from which to extract social theory on black identity on both local and transnational levels in the twentieth century. In many ways, appropriating the vernacular/folk tradition⁷ in black literature is what has connected the disparate literary trajectories amongst the African Diaspora. Intriguingly, writers have both used it as literary inspiration or as a baseline to write against, but it is always an element to be negotiated with, in both the literature and the criticism. Houston Baker defines the vernacular tradition in expressive terms as those "arts native or peculiar to a particular country or locale."⁸ In the case of the African diaspora, the black vernacular traditions transcend a particular nation or community. Therefore, these traditions are an intriguing site from which one can see both local and transnational identifications. The black vernacular tradition includes, but is not limited to: spiritual ritual, customs, oral tradition (folklore, myth, superstitions, spoken-word, sermons, legend, the dozens and toasts), archetypal characters, writing in dialect, and secular and religious music (spirituals, gospel, blues, jazz, rap and work songs). Because there are so many variations within the subject of the black vernacular/folk traditions, I will be using Thomas Nigel's broad definition of folklore,

Folklore is the dramatization of the psychic essences that bind a people. It is therefore the sum total of the rituals, practices, and behaviors undertaken with community sanction to reinforce the beliefs, the values, and the attitudes of a community. Thus, all culturally recognizable codes constitute a part of the culture's folklore.⁹

For the purposes of this dissertation, I concentrate on myth/folklore and spiritual ritual in regards to the texts as the modes of cultural expression that create a space that engenders internal critique and mediates intra-ethnic change.

Critique of Black Arts

It is important to discuss these three texts from a comparative mode of analysis because they speak to a particular time period of writing in the Americas. These authors are writing after the Black Arts Movement in the U.S. and the Black Nationalist literary movement in the Caribbean [1960-1970], when employment of vernacular traditions functioned to create an oppositional and post-colonial black identity by the male writers of those movements. Critics such as Tejumola Olaniyan discuss the complexity of the Black Arts Movement: “[W]e could still say of the movement that never in the tradition was there such an irruption so simultaneously inward—an uncompromising critique of black culture itself—and outward—a re-visioning of the relationship with the larger social structure, in both national *and* international dimensions.”¹⁰ The simultaneity of this inward/outward gesture privileged writers who explicitly linked nationalist politics with art and focused on the frontier relationship between blacks and whites. Writers such as Amiri Baraka in his Black Nationalist period exemplified this moment through his prose:

The Black Artist’s role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report and reflect so precisely the *nature of the society, and of himself in that society*, that other men will be moved by the exactness of his rendering and, if they are black men, grow strong through this moving, *having seen their own strength, and weakness*; and if they are white men, tremble, curse, and go mad, because they will be drenched with the filth of their evil.¹¹

Although the Black Arts Movement created a prescriptive formula for the new Black Aesthetic that shifted the literary discourse of authenticity from the folk tradition to the

political sphere, it was overtly gendered male and sexualized heterosexual in its politics of cultural nationalism. As illustrated in the above quote, nationalism became about reclaiming manhood, the artist is male and his conflict is with white males.

The issue of Black women's role in the cultural revolution of the sixties and seventies became a contested site between black men and women that was exploited by reports like Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965) who ascertained that, "At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family."¹² Moynihan's argument asserted that the matriarchal structure of black families was the leading cause for the deterioration of the black family. Black women were characterized as castrating, domineering and emasculating to black men because their social domination positioned them as head-of-households and as workers in an economy of domination. The normalization of white family structures created a divide between black men and women when it came to their roles within the revolution.

Many black women writers, artists and activists responded to this male-gendered politics of cultural nationalism by directing their discourse directly to black men, as Frances Beale illustrates in her essay, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," asserting:

Those who are exerting their "manhood" by telling Black women to step back into a domestic, submissive role are assuming a counter-revolutionary position. Black women likewise have been abused by the system and we must begin talking about the elimination of all kinds of oppression. If we are talking about building a strong nation, capable of throwing off the yoke of capitalist oppression, then we are talking about the total involvement of every man, woman, and child, each with a highly developed political consciousness. We need our whole army out there dealing with the enemy and not half an army.¹³

There were multiple responses to this gendering of nationalist discourse. Writings like Gale Stokes' "Black Man, My Man, Listen!," Toni Cade Bambara's "On the Issue of Roles" and Fran Sanders' "Dear Black Man," and many others, endeavored to bridge this intra-ethnic divide.

Within the genre of the novel, black women focused on the presentation of black vernacular survival strategies rather than the protest form of other literary genres. This sea shift took place in the sixties with novelists like Margaret Walker and her work *Jubilee* (1966). Her novel marked a reflective literary moment that harked back to the black vernacular traditions of slavery in order to highlight tried and true survival mechanisms for black communities. This was a great risk during this time period because of the literary climate of absolute valorization for the protest novel. Because writers such as Richard Wright created the literary foundation of the Black Arts Movement, an inherited attitude of dismissal for what he termed *folklore fiction* became pervasive. Wright famously critiqued Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for being counter-revolutionary and of the minstrel tradition.¹⁴ It was perceived as a lack to have the black community as your sole focus in the context of the revolutionary struggle. But other black women novelists also had, if not a reflective approach to the integration of vernacular traditions, then a progressive approach to them. This internal focus became thematic in many of the black women novelists of the period.¹⁵

Morrison, Schwarz-Bart and Marshall also respond to and challenge the Black Arts and Black Nationalist politics of authenticity and its uses of "folk knowledge" in literature.¹⁶ These writers respond by integrating a Black Feminist perspective in their symbolic uses of vernacular tradition in their literature. Through the intimacy of family

or community, these writers highlight those cultural practices that both bear the scars of living within a system of domination and establish those kinship relations. Morrison, Schwarz-Bart and Marshall use this literary technique as a different way of recording the impact of the larger social structure. I assert that these authors' lack of explicit positioning of their texts within the larger social structure is a strategic response, indicating a new shift from frontier relations to internal cultural dynamics. Black feminist writers such as Toni Cade Bambara corroborate this focus in the seminal text *Black Woman* (1970), as illustrated in her revolutionary proclamation:

Our art, protest, dialogue no longer spring from the impulse to entertain, or to indulge or enlighten the conscience of the enemy: white people, whiteness, or racism; men, maleness, or chauvinism; America or imperialism...depending on your viewpoint and your terror. Or energies now seem to be invested in and are in turn derived from *a determination to touch and to unify. What typifies the current spirit is an embrace, an embrace of the community and a hardheaded attempt to get basic with each other.*¹⁷

This focus on internal dynamics was a political strategy of self-empowerment and marked a new approach to black liberation. As a method to mark a gendered difference within black literature, these women writers use black vernacular tradition to re-prioritize a new Black Aesthetic, shifting focus away from protest and essentialized proscriptions of blackness and, instead, refocusing on internal community dynamics. Rather than focusing on white racism, these novels by women expose internal differentiation as a part of Black Feminist politics. I argue that these reflective moments of internal differentiation in these texts launch a critique on the Black Art and Black Cultural Nationalism Movement's lack of representation of the black woman's experience.

Critique of Feminism

As black women were articulating their feminist voice within the black liberation movement, they were simultaneously responding to Second Wave Feminism. Second Wave Feminism was structured on the values of equal pay, equal access to the workplace and education, reproductive rights, sexual liberation, and recognition of the inequity and invisibility of women's work in the home. As the mainstream Feminist movement sought to create equality in male and female roles, much of the literature that fueled this movement consisted of recovered novels from the turn of the 20th century and socio-psychological literature, including: Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929); Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899); Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892); and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Because the women's movement had remained publicly dormant from the twenties through the early fifties, these influential texts from First Wave Feminism were widely circulated. The new foundational manifestos of Feminism began with texts like Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (1953) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which questioned the biological determinism at the foundation of patriarchy. This movement mainly concentrated on works by white middle-class women and, therefore, took its lead from the needs, goals and issues of that particular group which revolved around domestic issues of the nuclear family.

Writers and activists, such as Kate Millett, defined the focus of Second Wave Feminism. In her seminal text, *Sexual Politics* (1968), she defines the chief culprit in women's oppression:

Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. Mediating between the individual and the social structure, the family effects control and conformity where political and other authorities

are insufficient. As the fundamental instrument and the foundation unit of patriarchal society the family and its roles are prototypical.¹⁸

Social isolation, economic dependency and work distribution within the nuclear family unit became the tools of oppression within feminist circles. Political scientist, writer and attorney Jo Freeman sharpened the feminist critique of patriarchy, in her essay “The Women’s Liberation Movement” (1971), asserting, “The feminist perspective starts from the premise that women and men are constitutionally equal and share the same human capabilities. Observed differences therefore demand a critical analysis of the social institutions which cause them.”¹⁹ The critical writers and activists of the time period took up the social institution of the family as a core issue to women’s liberation ideology.²⁰

Not until the anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) was published, were black women’s voices acknowledged and included as one of the voices within Feminism, and that was limited to three voices out of fifty-three women’s perspectives and writings. Due to this absence, black women writers and activists felt the need to create their own forum to discuss oppression from their own unique perspective. The anthology *The Black Woman* (1970), created a space for black women’s voices to be heard and to hear each other. The editor Toni Cade Bambara contextualizes this need of generating an alternative space, stating:

And the question for us [black women] arises: how relevant are the truths, the experiences, the findings of white women to Black women? Are women after all simply women: I don’t know that our priorities are the same, that our concerns and methods are the same, or even similar enough so that we can afford to depend on this new field of experts (white, female). It is rather obvious that we do not. It is obvious that we are turning to each other.²¹

This collection of poems, essays and stories included a diversity of black women’s voices and concentrated on the issues most relevant to black women. Those issues ranged from

valorizing the black pride, issues of poor, standardized Victorian ethos, and critiquing the sexism they saw in the Black Liberation Movement and the racism in Second Wave Feminism. This collection of black women's writings created a moment of dialogue where Nikki Giovanni and Audre Lorde's poetry, Paule Marshall's short stories, Frances Beale's essay "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," and social worker Helen William's study "The Black Social Worker's Dilemma," came together in concert to proclaim their issues relevant, if not only to each other.

The lack of black women's texts, culture and history within white feminist discourse engendered black women writers in the seventies and eighties to document those elements. Cheryl Wall discusses this preoccupation, "To a great extent, the urgent preoccupation with history in the writings of black women in the 1970's and 1980's registered alarm at the potential loss of a history that had never been accurately recorded."²² Morrison, Schwarz-Bart and Marshall's novels mark this moment in literary history. All three authors use the untold survival stories of slavery and post-emancipation as the historical foundation of their novels. All three authors use the mythological slave tales of the Flying Africans to ground their stories of black women's survival. Although, it must be said, in each text the myth of the Flying Africans serves a different purpose: for Marshall, it reconnects blacks within the diaspora and the diaspora back to Africa; for Morrison, it explains and bridges a divide between black males and black females; and for Schwarz-Bart, it functions as a symbol of Africa in the Americas without the gesture of return. As these writers use this myth to meet different objectives, the reader is indoctrinated into the untold history of slavery which created these tales. These authors also employ the history of sharecropping and the Great Migration from the cultural

reservoir of knowledge. Morrison and Schwarz-Bart give particular detail to the severe lives of those who attempted to make a life within the sharecropping system; Marshall and Morrison go into great detail about the cultural sacrifices made in the Great Migration. These larger histories serve as the context for these novels about black women and their efforts to piece together families/communities and their own identities which bear the scars of that history.

These three women writers are also responding to and challenging western feminist articulations of womanhood and the issues which oppress women. As Second Wave Feminism articulated patriarchy within the family structure as the core of their oppression, black women's issues of classism, racism and relations with men fell outside of those articulations. As this resulted in an internal marginalization of black women within the feminist movement, black women's writing focused on representing those other silenced oppressions within their experience of being a woman. This black feminist's perspective was best stated in the Combahee River Collective's declaration:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.²³

Striving to articulate methods to deal with the simultaneity of those oppressions becomes a political gesture in the novels of Morrison, Marshall and Schwartz-Bart.

To represent the experience living within multiple systems of oppression, these authors locate black women's knowledge and power in liminal folk spaces in their novels. In *Song of Solomon*, the navel-less folk heroine Pilate is characterized as physically existing outside of all communities and standards of womanhood. In *Bridge of*

Beyond, Ma Cia, the conjure woman of the text and folk resource for the heroine Telumee, lives alone in the mountains as a maroon on the margins of the community. And in *Praisesong for the Widow*, Aunt Cuney, who is the receptacle of folk wisdom for the protagonist Avey, also spiritually and mentally exists outside of the community in Tatem. Taken together, they introduced a metaphor for black women's positioning in both Second Wave Feminism and the Black Arts Movement. This gesture of linking black women's knowledge and power to liminal vernacular sites as a method of critique of mainstream feminism is not limited to the genre of the novel. Notable black feminists of the seventies were making this part and parcel of their message to white feminists. This is best illustrated in Audre Lorde's "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," when she responds to the radical feminist's book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978). Lorde asks,

Where was Afrekete, Yemanje, Oyo and Mawulisa? Where are the warrior-goddess images of the Vodun, the Dohomeian Amazons and the warrior-women of Dan? // The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those boundaries. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries, either. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference.²⁴

In the same spirit of the distinguished Audre Lorde's efforts to give voice to these mythic traditions, Morrison, Schwarz-Bart and Marshall's texts mimic the black woman's experience within these political/social movements by shifting folk knowledge to the margins of the community. Through employment of vernacular tradition, these texts provide dramatizations of the position of black women and their experiences regarding multiple levels of oppression.

The Power of Folk Literacy

Black vernacular tradition as used in the novels of black women writers becomes a literary strategy of both resistance and empowerment. Because writing about intra-cultural dynamics tends to privilege elements of black vernacular traditions, the signs, symbols and language of folk traditions create a site where only those who are familiar are able to gain full access. I use Veve Clark's idea of *diaspora literacy* as a context for looking at the use of vernacular traditions in these novels. Clark explains diaspora literacy as, "[T]he ability to read and comprehend the discourses of Africa, Afro-America and the Caribbean from an informed, indigenous perspective."²⁵ Taking Clark's lead, I use the term *folk literacy* to speak to the ways in which Morrison, Marshall and Schwarz-Bart use black vernacular traditions as tools of social negotiation to gain agency.

Folk literacy in the novels of these writers creates an alternative system of empowerment that validates self and communal worth. Within a system that originates from their own cultural milieu, in which women are empowered as the cultural bearers of tradition, folk literacy validates the identity of the folk heroines of all three novels. When discussing the novels of Marshall and Morrison, Barbara Christian writes about them redefining womanhood:

Finally, black contemporary women writers are challenging the very definition of woman and are beginning to project their own definitions of themselves as a means of transforming the content of their own communities' views on the nature of woman and therefore the nature of life.²⁶

Morrison, Marshall and Schwarz-Bart's texts all introduce the reader to women who are diverse in their representations of black women and who redefine how black women can live, survive and/or thrive in this world. Strategically, they do so while simultaneously

validating their diverse communities, which don't always return the favor. Through their employment of folk literacy, these writers assert models of black feminism that ultimately redeem alternative systems of value, from which to empower women of color, in particular. The significance of this approach to women's empowerment is that it submits another model of societal order that doesn't separate black women from their cultural roots in efforts of asserting their womanhood.

Not only does the folk tradition in these novels validate those communities, but it also functions to expand those kinship bonds to include the diversity of black identity. Through the literary metaphor of *webs* that is used as part of the folk tradition in *Bridge* and *Praisesong*, these writers continually gesture towards expansion of the community. In this context, black vernacular tradition takes on a distinct flexibility. Hortense Spillers articulates this alternative understanding of tradition within black women's fiction:

‘Tradition,’ as I would mean it, then, is an active verb, rather than a retired nominative, and we now are its subjects and objects. Quite correctly, ‘tradition’ under the heard of a polyvalent grammar—the language of learning woven into the tongue of the mother—is the rare union of bliss toward which African-American experience has compelled us all along.²⁷

Spillers' assertion that, “Traditions are not born. They are made,”²⁸ contextualizes these authors' appropriation of ritual and mythic traditions for the purpose of expanding and diversifying notions of blackness and womanhood, thereby creating space for marginal identities which circulate within those liminal sites. I explore how the female re-telling of those myths and rituals incorporates marginalized black identities while simultaneously serving to re-define the parameters of community. In all three texts, those who circulate folk knowledge are outside of the general, accepted norms of the black community yet, through the medium of the folk tradition, it functions as a strategy of

community building from the position of the margin, creating new possibilities from historical traditions.

In these novels, folk literacy also functions to resist internal and external domination. As a tool to navigate black women's experiences of intersectionality,²⁹ the folk tradition also becomes an alternative space from which women can negotiate and critique systems of domination. Folk traditions from this insider/outsider perspective become tools to negotiate the intra-communal domination. These authors engage vernacular traditions, in the service of balancing uneven power dynamics.

In light of these literary efforts toward both community building and diversifying, this project also examines the intersections between these texts, as they employ signifiers of folk knowledge that bridge different black cultural experiences in the Americas. I demonstrate how these texts appropriate folk knowledge that dramatizes issues of mobility in order to represent regional or transnational movements and intersections amongst African Diasporic communities. Morrison, Schwarz-Bart and Marshall's texts all use the literary trope of a journey to connect their characters to the folk tradition and their various communities. Through these journeys, all of the main characters are indoctrinated into the folk knowledge which reconnects kinship bonds. Using James Clifford's idea in *Traveling Cultures*, that cultures become *rooted and routed*³⁰ as a theoretical basis for the fluidity of culture and how it is transmitted, I trace the various journeys that are taken in these novels, and track the procurement of folk knowledge along the way.

Introduction Notes

¹ The English translation of the novel's title is *Bridge of Beyond*. Throughout this Dissertation, I will be referring to this text as *Bridge* except for Chapter four, which is in the original French. Therefore, in that chapter I refer to it in the original title *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle*, and shorten it to *Pluie et Vent*.

² Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," *Signifyin(g), Sanctifying', & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, Gena Dagel Caponi, ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999) 298.

³ Dorothy H. Lee, "Song of Solomon: To Ride the Air," *Black American Literature Forum* 16 (1982): 64.

⁴ Fred Metting, "The Possibilities of Flight: The Celebration of Our Wings in *Song of Solomon*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, and *Mama Day*," *Southern Folklore* 55.2 (1998): 145-168.

⁵ Michael Awkward, "'Unruly and Let Loose': Myth, Ideology, and Gender in *Song of Solomon*," *Callaloo* 13 (1990): 482-498.

⁶ Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (New York: Viking Press, 1959) 462.

⁷ Throughout this Dissertation, I will use the terms "folk" and "vernacular" tradition interchangeably. I will also use the term "folk knowledge" to denote the characters that possess a holistic understanding of an element of the vernacular tradition.

⁸ Houston A. Baker Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 2.

⁹ H. Nigel Thomas, *From Folklore to Fiction* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 1.

¹⁰ Tejumola Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 22.

¹¹ Amiri Baraka, "The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation," *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, William J. Harris, ed. (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1995) 169. (emphasis added)

¹² Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, March 1965).

¹³ Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," *The Black Woman*, Toni Cade Bambara, ed. (New York: The Penguin Group, 1970) 93.

¹⁴ Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1977) 241.

¹⁵ Toni Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1974); Maya Angelou's *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969); Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975); and June Jordan's *His Own Where* (1971), were all written in the same time period and also have an introspective concentration of dynamics within black communities.

¹⁶ What I mean when using the term "folk knowledge/tradition" is precisely the black vernacular expressions of mythology and ritual given that they have been historically deemed as the sites from which to extract social theory on black identity and world-view.

¹⁷ Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: Penguin Group, 1970) 7 (emphasis mine).

¹⁸ Kate Millette, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970) 33.

¹⁹ Jo Freeman, "The Women's Liberation Movement," *Recent Sociology No. 4: Family, Marriage, and the Struggle of the Sexes*, Hans Peter Dreitzel, ed. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1972) 201-216.

²⁰ The writers and activists that were most influential in defining the goals of the movement included but were not limited to: Pat Mainardi, *The Politics of Housework* (1970); Jo Freeman, *The BITCH Manifesto* (1972); Judy Syfers, *Why I Want a Wife* (1971); Radicalesbians, *The Woman Identified Woman* (1970); and Shulamith Firestone, *The Women's Rights Movement in the U.S.: A New View* (1968).

²¹ Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: Penguin Group, 1970) 10.

²² Cheryl Wall, *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005) 7.

²³ Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds., "A Black Feminist Statement—Combahee River Collective," *This Bridge Called My Back* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981) 210.

²⁴ Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981) 94, 97.

²⁵ Vèvè Clark, "Developing Diaspora Literacy," *Out of the Kumbula*, Carol Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, eds. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990) 304.

²⁶ Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelist* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980) 252.

²⁷ Hortense J. Spillers, "Cross Currents, Discontinuities," *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, Majorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 260.

²⁸ Spillers 250.

²⁹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, feminist law theorist, came up with the term *intersectionality* to discuss women of color's experience of multiple intersecting oppressions in her essay, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color," *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, Martha Albertson Fineman and Rixanne Mykitiuk, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1994) 93-118.

³⁰ James Clifford, "Traveling Cultures," *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1992) 96-116. Clifford expands on this idea in his book, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Chapter 1: The Literary History of Black Vernacular Expression in the Americas

Chapter one is an overview devoted to tracing how the discourse on black vernacular expressions in the Americas has developed over the 20th century within literature. I take into account that these texts are situated within local literary and geo-political contexts. Yet, I will be emphasizing moments of transnational cultural exchange. This establishes a framework for the subsequent comparative discussions of the texts. Creating a methodology that accommodates local specificity and transnational currents, I conceptualize my argument within the cultural movements of post-emancipation, migration/immigration, nationalism. In my effort to discuss the changes that occur in the specific vernacular traditions, I make a distinction between the *folk* vernacular traditions that emphasize African continuities such as ring shouts, conjure traditions, folklore (Anancy and Trickster tales) and sacred rituals with their accompanying music and dance, and *urban* vernacular traditions, such as the blues, jazz, calypso and cultural expressions (e.g., the dozens and the accompanying iconography of urban sites) in areas such as barber shops, Rastafarianism and street corners where the circulation of vernacular traditions has its greatest expression. These changes in the content of the vernacular traditions take place throughout the Americas and have several parallels as black populations migrate and emigrate to the metropolises of the U.S. and Europe. In these changing contexts, the practice of black vernacular traditions remains salient.

The U.S. Vernacular Tradition in Black Literature

The vernacular tradition has functioned in various ways in 20th century US literature. At the turn of the century, blacks were asked to prove their worthiness of full participation into US secular life. Competing mythologies of the inability of African descendants to be “civilized” dominated the consciousness of the writers and artists. Authors felt the weight of responsibility for racial uplift and, as they had access to larger audiences, writing became a method of debunking racist stereotypes and misinformation about the black masses in a public sphere. Writers grappled with their approaches to racial uplift, ranging from attempts to represent the lives of the black uneducated masses to representing the accomplishments of the elite. In this context, the use of vernacular traditions in literature often served as a crucible to measure the divide between the black elite and the black masses and acceptance of black writers within the US literary tradition.¹ Because the conscious use of black vernacular traditions in literature was seen as an indication of primitivism in the dominant cultural discourses, this same gesture within the black literary tradition indicated an attempt to bridge the gap between the black educated elite and the uneducated masses. Therefore, to be accepted within mainstream U.S. literary circles, meant the abandonment of elements of the vernacular tradition, only to be replaced with the form, structure and content of Anglo-American literary traditions. Consequently, using the vernacular tradition in literature became a choice of audiences for writers, addressing their own culture or the dominant culture.

At the outset of the twentieth century, those writers who incorporated elements of the black folk traditions, often did so with a consciousness of racial uplift. Shunning the fears of accommodationism, and confirming racial stereotypes and pathologies, writers

such as W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Charles Chesnutt and Paul Lawrence Dunbar saw the vernacular tradition as a cultural reservoir of knowledge with universal appeal. In particular, Du Bois makes the initial call at the turn of the century for universal valorization of the folk tradition in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903):

And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but not withstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.²

Du Bois opened each section of his text with a spiritual, which served to unite his multi-genre text through the spiritual strivings of the slave songs. Du Bois presented these folk traditions as an inheritance from Africa that was transformed in the US. Therefore, his discourse on the folk tradition sought to both record the cultural dislocation of the slave trade while also positing the songs as the accomplishments of African Americans and the heritage of the nation at large. Du Bois used this claim of cultural heritage to establish an organically American identity for the black population and, in doing so, questioned the nation's claim of democracy as it denied it to who he saw as the most *organic*³ Americans. Thus, the documentation of the vernacular traditions in literature was used to establish a written history for African Americans, from which to claim peoplehood and full citizenship.

At the turn of the century, women writers such as Frances Harper also negotiated the use of the folk tradition. Although Harper's most popular novel, *Iola LeRoy or Shadows Uplifted* (1893), responded to the trauma of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras, fighting against mammy images of uneducated women as a method of racial uplift,

she was also a folklore collector and poet who integrated folk tropes into her non-standard collections of poems and ballads. Her work, *Sketches of Southern Life* (1888), is in an oral tradition structure and can be seen as a model for black women's poetic tradition as stated by Carolyn Perry and Mary Louise Weaks, "*Sketches of Southern Life* is an interconnected series of narrative folk poems and ballads whose roots can be found in the oral tradition of southern slaves and whose legacy is continued in the poetry of Margaret Walker and Maya Angelou."⁴ In *Sketches*, Harper employs vernacular language to introduce the voice of Aunt Chloe, a slave woman that loses her children but turns to her faith to survive this loss. In *Sketches*, she also includes prose such as *Shalmanezzer*, *Prince of Cosman*, a parable of survival in the folk tradition. In the context of her feminist peers, black women writers/activists such as Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson, Anna Julia Cooper, Lucy Delaney and Victoria Rogers Albert, Harper wrote in the abolitionist tradition on the worthiness of blacks in general and women in particular. Harper stands out for her variety of writing while continually shifting her focus from white audiences to black audiences. In tracing the black vernacular tradition, Frances Harper became a transitional figure who responded both to the racial and gender degradation from the white literary establishment by creating counter images of black women within Victorian standards while also celebrating the folk structure and tropes in her poetry and prose.

As the position of African Americans changed, so did the understanding of the function of the vernacular tradition in literature. From 1900-1917, employing the folk tradition came under criticism from African Americans for creating a sentimental image of the pre-Civil War era and an accommodationist image of blacks. Proponents of the

tradition argued that use of the vernacular traditions in literature served more as a critique of the chaos of the Reconstruction Era and masked critiques of black/white relations rather than nostalgia for the tenets of slavery.⁵ As African American writers often shunned the folk traditions in their efforts to create racial pride, the white public demanded more uses of the idiom of folk-poetry. This distinct divide in audiences likewise created a divide amongst writers. It was during this time period that the vernacular tradition was seen as both the downfall and the savior of African American arts and letters.

As the Reconstruction Era announced greater mobility for African Americans, it produced a scattering of the communities that perpetuated the black vernacular traditions.⁶ Texts such as Jean Toomer's *Cane* were seen as a "swan song" for the African American folk because it spoke to the moment that the south was beginning its transformation.⁷ Vernacular critics such as David G. Nicholls, credit the Great Migration with the proliferation of the vernacular tradition in the late 1920's asserting, "[the] practice of conjuring up an African-American folk thus produced a compelling vision of collective origins for metropolitan African Americans."⁸ The idea of collective origins via the vernacular tradition, sustained urban blacks that filled the northern ghettos seeking work. Consequently, black writers nostalgic for the richness of black folk culture in the rural south often referenced the folk traditions as a means of reconnecting with that sense of a holistic community that was maintained through the isolation of segregation.

Texts such as *Conjure Woman* by Charles Chesnutt became highly circulated, due to their successful integration of southern vernacular language, folklore and belief systems. Chesnutt was able to valorize archetypal characters, such as Uncle Julius as a

trickster figure, without celebrating the plantation life that served as a context for this figure. In his text, the vernacular tradition is used to both mark the establishment of a folkloric tradition and an authentic slave reality, while also masking critiques of black/white relations. It is at this moment in history that former slaves and their descendants are still seen as less-than-human and therefore without a sense of history, mores, or traditions. In this context Chesnutt, asserts the black folkloric tradition in his literature as a response to these claims; in essence using it to help establish a black world-view and history. He used the vernacular tradition to reveal the texture of life as a slave; showing the establishment of familial bonds, social stratification amongst the slaves, the cruelty of slavery and sites of resistance. References to characters like a *conjure woman* mark an alternate system of beliefs and values that is juxtaposed to the slave owner's system of values, and at bear minimum it forces the reader into the awareness of two distinct worlds: one of the slave and one of the slave owner.⁹ At the turn of the century, writers such as Chesnutt draw on the vernacular tradition to etch out the foundations of black identity in the US through a different technique than those writers who took the road of racial uplift through re-socializing blacks into the American standard of the time period (i.e., Victorian standards).

As other African American writers of the day adopted European modes of expression to prove their humanity and impact, those writers who followed Du Bois and Chesnutt, such as James Weldon Johnson, looked within to claim their space on the American literary landscape. This reflective stance allowed for reclamation of elements of black culture that were subsumed into popular culture and an assessment of spiritual and social aspirations of the black culture. But even proponents such as Johnson grapple

with the function of the folk tradition in literature. In the preface to his text, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1921), Johnson spends the majority of the preface valorizing the folk traditions, yet he also recognizes the literary limitations of forms such as the Negro dialect because of the way it had been stereotyped, as he contends:

What the colored poet in the United States needs to do is something like what Synge did for the Irish: he needs to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without....*He needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor; a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thoughts, and the distinctive humor and pathos, too, of the Negro, but which will also be capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations, and allow of the widest range of subjects and the widest scope of treatment.*¹⁰

Johnson's strategic shunning of rural Negro dialect in his literature became a model for a type of Negro literature that maintained the racial flavor while also maintaining standard literary form. In the literary tradition of Du Bois, Johnson continued to center black vernacular tradition as foundational not only to Negro identity but to an *authentic* American identity as well.

In the context of creating an image of African Americans for several distinct audiences, the translation of the African American experience became a highly contested field. African Americans were being asked what is distinctly *African American* about their art, music and literature. Therefore, the goal became recognizing and bringing to the fore, the African American literary and artistic *tradition*. It is within the competing strategies of black identity formation and racial uplift that vernacular traditions became associated with the notion of an authentic black essence. Ironically, this essence changed with the population it was said to describe. As African Americans moved up north, so did the content of vernacular traditions in literature.

As the Harlem Renaissance began in the early 1920's, the influence of the new urban life of migrating blacks changed the symbols of the folk tradition in literature. The iconic folk traditions of spirituals, folktales and ring shouts that grounded southern black communities adapted to the needs of an urban community, creating the blues, jazz, the hipster as well as the numbers men and beauty parlors/barber shops as some new elements of the vernacular tradition in literature.¹¹ As the content of the vernacular tradition changed with the changing times so did the uses of it in the hands of black writers. Alain Locke best captures this transitional moment in the uses of the folk tradition in his seminal collection of essays in *The New Negro* (1925):

...they [our poets] have shaken themselves free from the minstrel tradition and the fowling-nets of dialect, and through acquiring ease and simplicity *in serious expression, have carried the folk-gift to the altitudes of art.*¹²

Locke clearly distinguishes this group of new writers' goals and intentions in their appropriation of the "folk-gift," from the previous generation of writers who either shunned it or used it to make historical claims of identity. In the *New Negro*, ancestralism sought out continuity with the folk tradition, as defined by Professor Bernard Bell:

Out of a sense of loss, a feeling that the times were out of joint and the soul was under siege by destructive forces, a romantic longing for a freer, more innocent time and place was born. This imaginative vision was of a time and place where rhythms of life were closely linked to nature and one's essential humanity was unquestioned; it invoked a prelapsarian, precolonial time and place that fostered a feeling of harmony and peace with one's ancestors, one's self, and one's progeny.¹³

In attempts to avoid the confines of stereotyping and simplifying of the African American experience, Locke and some of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance sought to raise the

folk tradition to the “altitudes” of high art. In doing so, these writers employed it in various ways from exploring art-for-arts-sake to universalized protest literature.

Although the majority of writers from the Harlem Renaissance didn’t incorporate the folk tradition, those writers who did often did so with a mindset for social change and/or to validate the wisdom and nature of the folk spirit. Writers such as Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown and James Weldon Johnson utilized the folk tradition for a range of literary affects. Johnson’s writing became emblematic of the *New Negro’s* shift in the use of the folk in literature. In Johnson’s poem, *The Creation: A Negro Sermon*, he captures the *racial flavor* of the folk idiom within Standard English:

And there the great God Almighty
 Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
 Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
 Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand;
 This Great God,
 Like a mammy bending over her baby,
 Kneeled down in the dust
 Toiling over a lump of clay
 Till He shaped it in His own image;
 Then into it He blew the breath of life,
 And man became a living.
 Amen. Amen.¹⁴

Other authors, such as Sterling Brown, use the Negro dialect to tell a story of the inequities of slavery and sharecropping, his poetic voice serving as a testament to the range of folk wisdom. Throughout Brown’s poetry, he employs the folk tradition in various ways, from narrating multi-tiered stories that invoke old folk heroes in “The Odyssey of Big Boy” to celebrating the influence of the blues in “Ma Rainey.” Likewise, Hughes introduces his audience to the potency of the blues in the poetic form in his landmark poem “The Weary Blues.” His integration of the musical structure of the blues form into poetic verse marked a unique amalgamation of folk form and content into

literary structure. Hughes developed his distinctive understanding of the folk traditions in an effort to create hope for social change and to expand the perceived ability of art. In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926) he states these goals,

[T]o my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering ‘I want to be white,’ hidden in the aspirations of his people, to ‘Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful’?”¹⁵

Hughes is able to accomplish this through using black culture as his raw material for creativity, and vernacular traditions proved foundational to expressing both his creativity and his social politics.

As those few writers of the Harlem Renaissance celebrated and embraced what they saw as their cultural inheritance, employment of the vernacular traditions became the mark of difference in a new cosmopolitan approach to black arts and letters. The international attraction of Harlem for the African Diaspora leads to the global recognition of shared vernacular traditions across cultures. The realization of local traditions and realities being reflected in literature further validated a global connection amongst African descendants. In the urban settings, writers re-contextualized their work within the global arts movements of Europe and Africa. This new Pan-African perspective became part of the consciousness of many writers during the Harlem Renaissance. “By and large, the New Negro turned to Africa and African American folklore for the authenticity and authority of a usable ethnic past.”¹⁶ This is evidenced in the quasi-manifesto of the movement—*The New Negro*, as the collection symbolically ends with a piece by Du Bois called “Worlds of Color.” In this essay, Du Bois talks about the Negroes’ role in international affairs. Incited by his attendance of the Third Pan-African Congress, Du Bois catalogues the Negro’s lot in: Portugal, colonial Africa, Belgium,

France, England and World War I. As he notes the broad range of treatments of the Negro abroad, he launches a critique of the American Negroes' situation, and calls for a true Pan-Africanism with an uneven emphasis on the leadership of American Negroes:

Led by American Negroes, the Negroes of the world are reaching out hands toward each other to know, to sympathize, to inquire. / We face, then, in the modern black American, the black West Indian, the black Frenchman, the black Portuguese, the black Spaniard and the black African a man gaining knowledge and power and in the definite aim to end color slavery and give black folk a knowledge of modern culture.¹⁷

This international shift created a space in the literary circles for the hybridization of folk traditions. Writers such as Claude McKay of Jamaica gained cultural collateral from his international approach, employing the folk traditions of blacks in the U.S., Europe and the Caribbean, to both his literature and poetry.

McKay is the embodiment of this transitional moment in black literature. Writing from France, in his first novel (a folk romance), *Home to Harlem*, the reader is introduced to those urban adaptations of the folk tradition. His characters of the urban streets valorize the blues and jazz clubs of Harlem and rural peasant life is swapped for urban ghetto life. In *Banjo*, he continues his celebration of vernacular traditions by privileging the main character Banjo, who is, in essence, a traveling blues man embedded with the wisdom of folk culture. But in this text he expands his internationalism by setting the story in Europe at the crossroads of the African Diaspora in the twenties. The vernacular musical and dance traditions become characters in the text, serving to mask differences between members of the Diaspora and ultimately helping to build bridges of communication where there was no shared language.

All shades of Negroes came together there.//But the *magic* had brought them all together to shake that thing and drink red wine, white wine, sweet

wine. All the British West African blacks, Portuguese blacks, American blacks, all who had drifted into this port that the world goes through.¹⁸

The *magic* that McKay is referring to is the magic of the “Jelly Roll Blues” that incites dancing and a certain sense of shared knowledge, experience and origin. In McKay’s hands, folk traditions become a shared language of the Diaspora that serves as an aid in processing tragedy and grounding uprooted travelers. Claude McKay’s Caribbean roots, Ashanti heritage, American education and European perspective, embodied the Pan-Africanist changes in the uses of the folk traditions in literature.

Unlike other authors of the time period, Zora Neale Hurston had a unique status as a novelist, folklorist and anthropologist whose specialty was documenting the black vernacular traditions in the rural south and the Caribbean. In her literature, she continued in the Pan-Africanist tradition while also bridging the gulf between the black elite and the black masses in the U.S. Unlike most of Locke’s *New Negroes* of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston was both of the rural folk class and of the intellectual elite class. Dr. Cheryl Wall notes the absence of southern intellectuals in Harlem, “Zora Neale Hurston is the outstanding exception. Unlike Hurston, the literary women were mostly northern born and bred; they knew little of rural southern black culture, and what they did know they had been trained to deny.”¹⁹ Hurston’s commitment to the black communities of the south was also a commitment to herself and the role that vernacular traditions played in her life. In her first collection of black folklore, *Mules and Men*, she recognizes the impact that her cultural background had on her intellectual endeavors:

From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had know about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn’t see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my

garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that.²⁰

Hurston's lived experience of the black folk traditions shifted the discourse of the vernacular tradition away from high art/low art and narrowed the gap between the elite and the masses—to the discovery of one's own intimate knowledge of “negroisms” and how that informs how one walks in the world.²¹

Hurston ushered in a new moment in literary history for both the folk tradition and for women writers. Although there were other women writers during the Harlem Renaissance such as Anne Spencer, Marita Bonner, Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, Gwendolyn Bennett, Georgia Johnson and Helene Johnson, their engagement with the folk tradition was sparse at best. Dr. Wall discusses how the Harlem Renaissance was only a renaissance for male writers, while the female writers weren't privy to the same opportunities or flexibility of subject matter afforded to their male counterparts. Wall argues that the engagement with the vernacular tradition is a “hallmark of the Harlem Renaissance,” but that “The hesitation of women to experiment with these forms is certainly a major reason so many women have been consigned to the ‘Rear Guard’ of the period.”²² Ironically, even though Hurston employed vernacular traditions as foundational to her intellectual endeavors, she also remained relegated to the “Rear Guard.” Although Hurston was one of the few women afforded minimal recognition during the period, only recently during the 1970's did her work receive national recognition.

Hurston's self-imposed authority on *negroisms* created a model of female literary authority that went beyond the space of the vernacular tradition. Her insider status as an ethnographer within her own culture gave her the ability to write about black folk culture

from a first person perspective. Through this narrative technique, Hurston writes herself into the folklore, affirming herself as an additional storyteller within a masculine tradition.²³ In examining her texts, the goal of objectivity becomes secondary to expressing both her subject's humanity and her own voice. This model of authority opened the door for other female writers to reflect on their own experiences within vernacular traditions as possible topics that were worthy literary subjects. Novelist Alice Walker speaks of this shift of literary authority in Hurston's engagement with the folk tradition:

It gave her the authority to tell stories because in the act of writing down the old "lies," Hurston created a bridge between the "primitive" authority of folk life and the literary power of written texts. The point is that she *wrote them down*, thereby breaking the mystique of connection between literary authority and patriarchal power.²⁴

Hurston's ability to remove the black vernacular tradition from the isolation of the patriarchal literary tradition of the Harlem Renaissance created a new space within the folk tradition for the female voice and interpretation.

Hurston's "self-authorizing posture" in her works also affirmed the notion of an authentic black experience.²⁵ As evidenced in her essay, "The Sanctified Church," she distinguishes what an authentic black voice and way of being is in that it valorizes an essential black identity. This is most clearly seen when she speaks of the *neo-spirituals* of Fisk Jubilee, and the like, in comparison to *authentic* black church choirs, stating:

Glee clubs and concert singers put on their tuxedos, bow prettily to the audience, get the pitch and burst into magnificent song—but not *Negro* song. The *real* Negro singer cares nothing about pitch. The first notes just burst out and the rest of the church join in—fired by the same inner urge.²⁶

In the hands of Hurston, the vernacular tradition functioned to express the essence of black culture. And this black essence existed within its own system of values that was aesthetically codified in her seminal essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression.”

Unlike previous attempts to lay down the aesthetic markers of black culture, Hurston refused to cast the vernacular tradition within the matrix of slavery and discrimination.

For Hurston, Negro culture did not exist in opposition to, or in response to, white culture but rather it existed holistically within its own realm. In doing this, she posited a Negro epistemology in which the vernacular tradition created a constellation of Negro knowledge and values, validating the various modes of cultural expression. This created a blueprint for black vernacular traditions that maintained that there was an essential black identity that was not fully accessible to all African descendants.

Hurston was successful in asserting this epistemological system due to her unwavering focus on Negro culture. Unlike other writers of her day, Hurston took a brilliant look at isolated black communities, with each of her works concentrating on intra-ethnic dynamics. This concentration marks a gendered difference between Hurston and her male contemporaries. In focusing her literature on the folk tradition within isolated black communities, Hurston shifted the discourse on the vernacular from interracial themes to intra-ethnic themes. By doing this, she could offer critiques of black culture from an insider’s perspective, albeit veiled critiques. Dr. Wall further discusses how Hurston negotiated her position within the study and documentation of, what until that point had been, a masculine bias within the literary use of vernacular traditions, stating:

Although one could argue that Zora Hurston set out to honor her father’s art and that of the Eatonville storytellers, the history of her career is, to a

considerable degree, the history of her efforts to recover her mother's voice. Reflecting these dual motives, her evocation of African-American vernacular culture is always part celebration and part critique.²⁷

The reader is introduced to her feminist critique of male control of the vernacular tradition in her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The reader is witness as the main character, Janine, moves from bystander to actor on the folk stage of the Eatonville store porch, where folk stories are passed on and created:

Janine did what she had never done before, that is, thrust herself into the conversation. "Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised He was 'bout y'all (men) turning out so smart after Him makin' yuh different; and how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us (women) as you think you do. It's so easy to make yo'self out God Almighty when you ain't got nothin' tuh strain against but women and chickens."²⁸

In this excerpt, Janine is the creator of the folk tradition, and in that position of creator she has aligned women with God and diminished the male position of authority. In the text, this becomes a turning point for Janine to see herself as one who possesses folk authority and, therefore, a sense of selfhood. It is in Janine's authorship of the folk tradition that she gains this insight into her own subjectivity and formulates a critique of the masculine bias within the folk tradition. Hurston's seamless negotiation of folk culture in literature allowed her to both speak to and about black communities. The use of the folk tradition moves her from the margin to the center of the black literary tradition, giving her the opportunity to critique black culture from what is traditionally seen as its center.

Hurston repeats this pattern of critique in her novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, in which she makes a parallel between the plight of the Jews from Egypt and the plight of African Americans from slavery. In *Moses*, Hurston creates a folktale out of the forty

wandering years in the wilderness. Through these struggles, she posits a veiled critique of black passivity in the struggle for freedom. This sentiment is conveyed in Moses' statement to his followers, "This freedom is a funny thing," he told them. "It ain't something permanent like rocks and hills. It's like manna; you just got to keep on gathering it fresh every day. If you don't, one day you're going to find you ain't got none no more."²⁹ This example shows how Hurston is able to take a critical look at black society through the vehicle of black vernacular traditions. Her functional use of the folk tradition set a precedent for other women writers and students of the vernacular tradition. Her collections of the raw folk material served as fodder to both ground her creative/intellectual energy and inspire countless contemporary writers "to reveal that which the soul lives by."³⁰

If one is to view Hurston as employing the vernacular tradition to reveal intra-cultural dynamics, then Richard Wright is her counterpart. Wright utilized the folk traditions to expose the exterior pressures that affected black culture. As mentioned previously, when reviewing Hurston's *Their Eyes Where Watching God*, Wright demeans Hurston's use of the folk as a "mistral technique,"³¹ to entertain whites. William Nash notes in Wright's review that, "he takes her to task for her failure to make use of her heritage to critique the socioeconomic disorder of the nation and of the South in particular."³² Wright concentrated on the core social, economic and psychological realities facing black men in a hostile world, rejecting any apolitical use of black folk culture, as illustrated in his most powerful novel, *Native Son* (1940). This sentiment is conveyed in how he frames the origin of the black vernacular tradition in his seminal essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937):

It was, however, in a *folklore molded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life* that the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complete expression. Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth; the whispered words of a black mother to her black daughter on the ways of men; the confidential wisdom of a black father to his black son; the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular; work songs sung under blazing suns—all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed.³³

Accordingly, one can assess Wright's use of the folk traditions in literature as a method of direct communication between the Negro artist and the Negro masses. Wright further argues that the Negro bourgeoisie, particularly of the Harlem Renaissance, shifted the discourse away from folk modes of expression and, therefore, abandoned the Negro masses and the "historic function" the Negro writer was to play in their lives. Wright contends that the historic function of the writer is to mould the lives and consciousness of the masses toward new goals through the use of the folk traditions, which hold recorded memories and hopes of the communal struggle for freedom.³⁴

As a writer, Wright was able to tease out the creative resistance and communal spirit that informed the folk tradition and use those elements of Negro consciousness to create political activism for the black masses. So much so that he is credited with helping to create the new genre of "protest" novels that helped engender the Black Arts Movement of the sixties. Wright's class/cultural nationalism created the literary scaffolding for the Black Arts Movement as he posited the role of the artist to be directly a tool of expression for the plight of the black masses and charged other writers to make protest a part of art. His politicized view of black life within the matrix of racism, poverty and cultural fragmentation led to an expansion of his reference point from the black masses in the U.S. to black experiences outside of the national borders. As his focus shifted to include the struggles of blacks in Africa and Europe, it did not carry

along with it the folk wisdom that was particular to the African American experience. Ultimately, Wright abandoned the prism of the vernacular tradition to shed light on the social conditions of the African Diaspora because of the necessity of a local folk tradition in a grassroots movement of political protest. And the naturalist tradition that he helped engender³⁵ in black literature had a pessimistic attitude towards the viability of the folk tradition in an urban context. Therefore, the harsh realities of urban life became the fodder of the protest literature.

Ann Petry's novel, *The Street* (1946), was influenced and often compared to Wright's realism within the naturalistic school of literature. *The Street* further illustrates the loss of the folk tradition as a resource to urban blacks. Petry's fleeting references to the folk tradition are used as what has been rejected from a black urban experience and, ultimately, what cannot rescue you from the street. Although the female protagonist, Lutie, has a grandmother who indoctrinated her in the folk tradition, sharing, "tales about things that people sensed before they actually happened. Tales that had been handed down and down and down until, if you tried to trace them back, you'd end up God knows where—probably in Africa."³⁶ Lutie prefers the mythology of the American Dream as represented by Benjamin Franklin's model of boot-strap idealism. Although there are urban root doctors as represented in the Prophet character, Lutie shuns this as part of the "powers of darkness,"³⁷ which is antithetical to her goals of achieving the light of the American Dream. Because the protagonist character has lost all cultural cohesion with the folk tradition, she replaces them with the urban laws of the street and the myths of the American Dream. Ultimately doing so leads her astray, resulting in her committing murder. This text illustrates the results of a loss of the folk tradition as an alternative

source of empowerment and as a way to negotiate systems of domination. Many of the black novels in the 40's -50's often illustrated the clash between cultures without folk interpretation or mediation.

Writers like Gwendolyn Brooks were able to translate the folk traditions in urban spaces, while merging them with Wright's political engagement and Hurston's intra-ethnic focus. Brooks operated in an urban vernacular tradition that privileged street slang, urban music and sites of vernacular culture in the north.³⁸ Brooks' literary voice is distinctly feminine in its privileging the relational dynamics within black communities and distinctly Northern in its translation of southern folk motifs into an urban setting. Brooks' employment of the folk tradition speaks more directly to the literary movement of "Barrackyard fiction" that was occurring during the same time period of the 1930's-1940's in the Caribbean. Both Brooks and the *Barrackyard* movement took to recording the lives of ordinary working people and the heartbeat of everyday life. Brooks was also influenced by U.S. writers who looked to valorize that which is most common, asserting, "I read Langston Hughes's *Weary Blues*, for example, and got very excited about what he was doing. I realized that writing about the ordinary aspects of black life was important."³⁹ Therefore, rather than viewing the folk traditions as mystical elements that needed to be interpreted to the black community, Brooks saw the folk as something that was created by all and accessible to *all* members of the black community.

Brooks expanded the discourse on the folk traditions by including all the diverse elements of black society in her representation. In Brooks' writings, the folk tradition included both positive and negative elements of black culture. Her refusal to limit the folk to a pastoral image of church folks and spirituals, allowed her to reveal the texture of

the black life in the city. In her collection of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), the locale is a black neighborhood in Chicago, and her subjects ranged from street people to churches, beauty salons, funerals, domestic abuse, discrimination and the blues. Brooks has a distinct style of poetry that combines some of the pathological elements in folk life that Wright emphasized at the border with white society, while also taking cues from writers such as Hurston by concentrating the majority of her work on intra-ethnic relationships that were mediated through folk traditions to mark a gendered difference. Brooks wrote about black people for black people, but rather than succumbing to the pressure to define what it means to be black, she took the opportunity to expand the possibilities of the black personality within literature.

Brooks' unique style reconciles the high and low aspects of the folk tradition. She neither claimed that the folk was an untouchable element of perfection within black culture nor did she proscribe to the absolute debasement of the folk personality due to the circumstances in which people survived. In an interview in her autobiographical collection of writings, *Report from Part One*, she speaks to her tendency to unite the high and the low of the folk tradition, when referring to the sources for her book-length poem *In the Mecca*, "I wish to present a large variety of personalities against a mosaic of daily affairs, recognizing that the grimmest of these is likely to have a streak or two streaks of sun."⁴⁰ It is in her ability to reveal the "streaks of sun" in the most banal of characters that marks a shift in the use of the folk tradition to a more accessible and inclusive model. Brook's inclusive model in her appropriation of the folk tradition created a literary bridge between Wright's functional use of it as a method of direct communication between the

Negro artist and the Negro masses and Ralph Ellison's leap to universalizing the African American folk experience.

In Ralph Ellison's seminal text, *Invisible Man* (1947), he uses the black vernacular tradition not as an end in itself, but rather to frame a conversation about a more universalized human condition in the Western world. Expanding on Richard Wright's use of the vernacular to reveal the social, economic and psychological results of racism on African Americans, Ralph Ellison used the prism of the vernacular to reveal a broader metaphysical state of mankind. Ellison strategically employs the folk to both mediate transformative moments in the text, and to indicate a parallel reality. Thus, this allows him to create multiple layers of existence that are both co-dependent and contradictory.

The creation of these layers lies in Ellison's distinctive use of the vernacular as a mediator in the text. The folk register leads into the moments of transition through pain, anguish, disorientation and finally into a new reality wherein a shift into a new consciousness or identity is completed. Although this use of the folk reveals the fluidity of identity, it also grounds the protagonist into a specifically southern black folk experience, which is translated across the Mason-Dixon into a northern black urban experience. These transitional moments of consciousness reveal the contradictions of black contemporary life in the U.S., while also calling into question the nature of human interaction. This is best illuminated in the epilogue of the text as he ruminates on this subject, "It's 'winner take nothing' that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our Fate is to become one, and yet many—This is not prophecy, but

description.”⁴¹ The protagonist comes to this type of philosophical conclusion by navigating his way through both black and white interactions by means of a folk wisdom, which grounds him in a stable tradition as it simultaneously mediates a shift into a new consciousness.

Likewise, Ellison also uses the folk register to identify another parallel reality, revealing the slippage between what appears and what is. This technique allows him to introduce his protagonist to a subjacent reality through the awakening of one’s sixth folk sensibility. It is this sensibility that buoys the character throughout his moments of dislocation and invisibility. This folk sensibility is best illustrated in the text when the protagonist is listening to a Louis Armstrong recording, “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue”:

Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he’s made poetry out of being invisible. /And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music. \ Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That’s what you hear vaguely in Louis’ music.

Invisibility gives the protagonist an extra awareness—the manifestation of the folk sensibility. It is at this point in the text that the protagonist is able to further equate this sixth folk sensibility to conjure a woman singing a spiritual, a slave being sold and a preacher giving a sermon on the “Blackness of Blackness.” It is through these textual moments that are mediated by the black vernacular tradition that the reader is exposed to the invisible world where the underbelly of history is revealed and the strengths and weaknesses of humanity exposed.

It is in these types of transitional moments that Ellison exposes the connections between black folk culture and the larger Western, specifically American, culture.

Because the search for identity is a distinctively American motif, Ellison engages this literary trajectory by having his protagonist navigate this search via the black vernacular traditions.⁴² His full articulation of this literary strategy is addressed in his collection of essays, *Shadow and Act* (1964), which harks back to the vernacular theories of Du Bois' and Johnson, who used the black vernacular tradition as entrance into an organic American experience.

The history of the American Negro is a most intimate part of American history. Through the very process of slavery came the building of the United States. Negro folklore, evolving within a larger culture which regarded it as inferior, was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him.⁴³

Ellison reiterates the use of black cultural heritage as socio-political tool to claim full citizenship. But he also goes further in his use of the folk to register the multiple realities in which African Americans understood humanity and its limitations.

Margaret Walker's novel, *Jubilee* (published in 1966 but written in the 40's and 50's), harks back to the complete, unquestionable valorization of the black vernacular tradition. In her novel, a work of historical fiction, she tells the stories that were passed down to her through the oral tradition of her grandmothers. Set in the period from slavery to Reconstruction and told from a slave's perspective, Walker set out to write a folk novel, as she states, "I always intended *Jubilee* to be a folk novel based on folk material: Folk sayings, folk beliefs, folkways. As early as 1948 I was conceiving the story in terms of this folklore."⁴⁴ This goal is evident throughout her text: from the

structure of the text echoing Hurston's use of folklore as the language and the ethic that rules the narrative to Du Bois' structure in the *Souls of Black Folks* by beginning each chapter with a spiritual hymn. The folk tradition in Walker's text ranges from the archetype of the conjure woman's power over both black and white communities, dialect, medicinal remedies, songs, myth, ritual to spiritualism, ancestor worship and black sermons. All of these elements of black vernacular traditions serve as survival methods to Jubilee's community and serve as sites of resistance. H. Nigel Thomas places Walker in the tradition of Hughes, Bontemps and Ellison, "[W]ho use folklore in their fiction to reveal the psychology of black American survival."⁴⁵ Barbara Christian notes that, although Walker's novel uses stereotypical images of black women, such as the mammy, the evil conjure woman, the mulatta and the concubine, she states that they, "have been greatly revised, their images transformed not only by the historical appreciation for the realities of slavery, but also by an acknowledgment of and a respect for black culture."⁴⁶ Margaret Walker makes a conscious effort to illustrate the primacy of women's folk culture through the culinary arts, midwifery and quilt making. Charlotte Goodman notes that Walker emphasizes bonds between black and white women and "dramatizes the ways in which women within the black community were vitally connected to one another."⁴⁷ This introduces a gendered shift in the use of the folk tradition; Walker employs folk traditions in the service of valorizing black culture as a whole and women's culture specifically. Walker, like Hurston, did extensive research on the black oral tradition, historical accounts of slavery and primary accounts from the Civil War which she integrated into the slave narrative of *Jubilee*.⁴⁸ In *Jubilee* and her other works of poetry such as "For My People"⁴⁹(1942), Walker posits black vernacular traditions as

historical survival methods that served slave ancestors and become the reservoirs of hope for future generations.

In other literary circles, James Baldwin becomes the counterweight to Richard Wright because of Wright's mentoring relationship to Baldwin and because of his direct response to Wright's work in "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949). In this essay, Baldwin acknowledges the goal of the protest novel, to "bring greater freedom to the oppressed," but he also points out their limits, stating, "They [protest novels] emerge for what they are: a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream."⁵⁰ Baldwin critiques Wright's *Bigger Thomas* because, "he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human," emphasizing that one need not battle for humanity, only accept it.⁵¹ Baldwin's novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) emerges as a dramatization of southern folk traits transplanted and transformed in the urban north experience. This post-Great Migration novel is steeped in the folk rituals of the black Pentecostal church with its Calvinistic foundations. Folk sermons, biblical metaphors of salvation, the rhythmic cadence of the narrative form, conversions and visions of black spiritualism are all juxtaposed to the social myths and rituals of urban life such as the blues, jazz, numbers men, hipsters and playing the dozens. Bernard Bell marks Baldwin as reviving folk traditions, arguing, "[T]he most significant development in the tradition of the Afro-American novel between 1952 and 1962 was the rediscovery of myth, legend, and ritual by Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin."⁵² Moreover, Bell notes that for these authors folk traditions are the tools of their interplay of realism and modernism. Baldwin walks a thin line in his use of ritual and spiritual folk traditions of the black church. They indicate

both continuity and constraint, they are both what has been the key to historical survival and may be the architect of the downfall of black diversity and individualism. Baldwin's spiritual tradition is used to "establish and reinforce a common ethnic bond" from slavery to urban ghettos, but they are also used to oppress the black community that is desperate for deliverance.⁵³ It is notable that the black spiritual tradition in Baldwin's novel lacks adaptability for both an urban setting and outside the matrix of slavery. Ultimately, Baldwin is able to extract the spirituality of the black religious institutions that fortify those transplanted with a sense of spiritual continuity, while rejecting those elements of constraint.

The Black Arts Movement changed the nature of black literature through the shifting of the reference point of the literary trajectory. Rather than comparing black literary works to other literary works in the Western tradition, black literature during the sixties looked specifically to the black pantheon of writing to formulate its identity. This cultural nationalism was manifested in the *Black Aesthetic* as a "corrective" methodology that turned Negroes into African Americans and that made the lives of black people better; it convinced black artists to write for black audiences and compared it to other black artists.⁵⁴ Both the Americanization and the universalization of the black struggle that writers had formerly been striving for through the vernacular tradition were called into question as goals. The artists of the Black Arts Movement felt that it was this striving for Americanization that caused the "twoneness" of Du Bois' double consciousness. If the vernacular tradition was to be used, it was not to claim an organic American identity but rather a distinct *African American* identity. The use of the vernacular tradition becomes selective and the themes of universality previously

valorized within the vernacular tradition are refocused to concentrate on the particularities of the Negro experience; universality may be present but is not the frame of reference. As a result of the diversity of these particularities, the use of the vernacular tradition becomes uneven. For example, writers like Ron Kerenga critiqued the blues as invalid because they taught resignation and acceptance of reality, and the revolution had come to change reality.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, writers such as LeRoi Jones used the blues as the cornerstone of racial memory and character and, therefore, well within the frame of revolutionary resistance.⁵⁶

In one of the seminal texts of the Black Arts Movement, *The Black Aesthetic*, Hoyt Fuller points out the new direction of black literature, “The serious black artist of today is at war with the American society as few have been throughout American history.”⁵⁷ The goal was a separation from the American mainstream; this was bolstered by the Black Power Movement and the Nation of Islam’s nationalists’ predispositions. The Black Arts Movement identified literary ancestors, such as Du Bois, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles Chesnutt, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Frantz Fanon, Alain Locke’s “ancestralism,” and Leopold Sedar Senghor as models and as the foundation for the black aesthetic of the Black Arts Movement. Houston Baker codified the movement’s use of the vernacular tradition as such, “Black Arts practitioners sought to combine the African American vernacular resonances of sermons, popular music, and black mass ‘speech’ into a rousing new form of poetry.”⁵⁸ In the sixties, the folk tradition expanded outside the borders of the U.S. to reach back to Africa and reclaimed those cultural resources with a Pan-African identification. Black Arts also had a decidedly international approach to black liberation, influenced by the Back to Africa

Movement of Marcus Garvey, the Vietnam War, the Bay of Pigs and the new independence of multiple continental African and Caribbean nations. All of these international political moments engendered an opportunity for identification with the globally oppressed.

Critics and their works such as Larry Neal's *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* "The Black Arts Movement" (1969), Hoyt W. Fuller's *Towards a Black Aesthetic* (1968), and Addison Gayle Jr.'s *The Black Aesthetic* (1971) mapped out the black aesthetic during the Black Arts Movement, via reflection on literature from the turn of the twentieth century and a focus on black activism. Larry Neal codifies the thrust of the movement:

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is politics; the other with the art of politics.

With this proscriptive method of judging black art, the Black Arts Movement became narrowly defined by the function of art in promoting the cultural revolution.

Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) is considered one of the fathers of the Black Arts Movement. A prolific writer, essayist, poet and playwright, his work traces the arch of the Beat Poetry Movement to the Black Nationalist period to Marxism and from his birth name of LeRoi Jones to his self naming—Amiri Baraka. Baraka's greatest use of vernacular tradition is in his use, analysis and documentation of black musical forms. His

book *Blue's People: Negro Music in White America* traces the history of black music from slave work songs through blues, ragtime, boogie woogie, bebop and jazz and the role they played in the life of African Americans. Baraka notes that both religion and arts from Africa were resilient in the American context because these cultural practices took place outside of the preview of the slave owner, "The Negro's religious music was his original creation, and the spirituals themselves were probably the first completely *Native American* music the slaves made."⁵⁹ Baraka goes on to discuss the development of the blues, "[I]f the blues was a music that developed because of the Negro's adaptation to, and adoption of, America, it was also a music that developed because of the Negro's peculiar position in this country."⁶⁰ Throughout Baraka's analysis of black music, he makes direct links to it being an expression of black life. For Baraka, black vernacular expressions of music narrated the changes in black America; connecting it to slavery, Emancipation, Jim Crow, the Great Depression, integration, the Great Migration and the Civil Rights Movement. In his later work on black music "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)" (1966), he goes on to reinforce his argument addressing R&B and jazz. In this work, he goes further by not only pointing out the functionality of music and the collective expression of black identity in America, but he asserts that new black music is also a "direct commentary on the scene it appears in."⁶¹ This becomes Baraka's critical thrust throughout the Black Arts Movement; each piece of vernacular art (both secular and sacred) serves as a critique on the position of blacks in a system of oppression, so much so that much of his writing during his nationalist period addresses white and black society directly, "Which is more radical than sit-in's. We get to Feel-ins, Know-ins, Be-ins."⁶² Baraka critiques the methods of the Civil Rights Movement,

ultimately declaring the movement as impotent in its request for full citizenship; replacing it with full protest *by any means necessary* in urban black vernacular language and a directive of how to be black in America.⁶³

The majority of the writers of the Black Arts Movement wrote in poetic form such as Askia Touré's *JuJu: Magic Songs for a Black Nation* (1970) and *Songhai!* (1972). Touré was a folk vernacular writer using myth and ritual to reclaim a glorious history in Africa that was disrupted by colonialism. As a self-defined *griot*, Touré focused his Afro-centric writing on those elements of black vernacular culture that would bring pride and a sense of holistic identity to the black masses. In his own words about his goals, "It also is an attempt to resurrect and restore to the African peoples our lost archetypes, symbols and images lost in the Maafa of slavery, the Middle Passage and the destruction of African civilization by colonialism and imperialism."⁶⁴ Resurrection of the folklore and myths of Africa, and his inclusion of diasporic, religious, historical and musical references as well as structure and cadence, led to his notoriety as one of the architects of the Black Arts Movement.⁶⁵ But, unlike some of his contemporaries of this time period, his focus on positive images led to a break with Amiri Baraka because Baraka's nationalist tendencies were anti-white and illustrated the negative images of blacks suffering in oppression.

Robert Hayden was another Black Arts poet who reveled in the folk vernacular tradition because he, like Hurston, worked for the Federal Writers Project researching black folklore. Drawing from that traditional well of vernacular mysticism in such poems as "O Daedalus, Fly Away Home" (1962), well-illustrated in this excerpt:

Night is an African juju man
weaving a wish and a weariness together

to make two wings.
O fly away home fly away
 Do you remember Africa?
O cleave the air fly away home
 My gran, he flew back to Africa,
 Just spread his arms and flew away home.⁶⁶

Hayden's other poems such as, "A Ballad of Remembrance," (1962); "Incense of the Lucky Virgin"; "Witch Doctor" and "Electrical Storm" also employed the historical rural tropes of black vernacular traditions.

Other poets in urban vernacular tradition included famed writer, poet, playwright and activist Sonia Sanchez, one of the few black women authors recognized as part of the Black Arts Movement. Sanchez's poetic and dramatic work is defined by a valorization of both orality and musicality; being performative by nature—that is meant to speak directly to black audiences. Such works include *Homecoming* (1969), *Love Poems* (1973), *We a BaddDDD People*, a play (1970), *Sister Sonji*, a play (1978). In her own words,

I decided along with a number of other Black poets to tell the truth in poetry by using the language, dialect, idioms, of the folks we believed our audience to be. The most fundamental truth to be told in any art form, as far as Blacks are concerned, is that America is killing us.⁶⁷

Like Baraka, Sanchez made many changes in her approach to black liberation throughout the movement. Initially she self-identified as an integrationist, following the precepts of Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Civil Rights movement. But, as many writers moved towards a more separatist stance, so did she by eventually joining the Nation of Islam. Regardless of her ideological shifts, her employment of black vernacular language was used to critique poverty, racism and sexism, within a nationalist dialogue. And the folk tradition was even more pronounced in her performances of

poetry, often using call-and-response, chants and musical accompaniments for her creative expression. Towards the end of the Black Arts Movement, Sanchez's focus became more internalized on the relationships between black men and black women in her spiritual autobiographies, *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (1973) and *I've Been a Woman: New and Selected Poems* (1978). Ben Fisler notes that in these two collections by Sanchez there is a desire to reconcile with "the literary monolith of masculinity."⁶⁸ Sanchez does this through a reversal of the black male body as the symbolic "vessel for the same romantic ego displacement that men have traditionally made of the female subject." In these poems, Sanchez does a unique balancing act to show the problematic nature of viewing the opposite sex as symbolic rather than material, while simultaneously praising male/female relationships. Her method of articulating this inside critique is through the mysticism, idiom and rhythm of the black vernacular traditions. At the end of the Black Arts Movement, Sanchez is one of the pioneers of a black feminist perspective that is working in concert with the black male voices of the movement.

Nikki Giovanni, like many of the writers of the Black Arts Movement, didn't use iconographic or archetypal folkloric elements in her writing, but rather employed the more subtle rhythms of vernacular speech and music of the urban setting. Giovanni's works also valorized performativity and orality as she often delivered her poems against the background of a gospel choir or jazz and blues quartets—her poetry working in dialogue with the musical accompaniment, even releasing several of these in mix genre albums.⁶⁹ Considered to be a militant writer of the movement, Giovanni's writing in the 60's-70's like *Black Feeling/Black Talk* (1968) and *Black Judgment* (1969) envisioned

violence toward the white world and toward the white values internalized by African Americans. Her poem, “The True Import of the Present Dialogue, Black v.s. Negro,” illustrates the vitriol of her sentiment:

Nigger
Can you kill. Can you kill. Can a nigger kill
Can a nigger kill a honkie. Can a nigger kill the MAN.//
Can you kill nigger Huh? Nigger can you kill.
Can you kill the nigger in you
Can you make your nigger mind die.//
Can we learn to kill WHITE for BLACK.
*Learn to kill niggers. Learn to be black men.*⁷⁰

Cheryl Wall notes that Giovanni only invokes gender in the last line of the poem, noting that the, “‘we’ has been masculinized through the ‘killing’ of the ‘white’ and the ‘nigger’” That the urgency of unity that Giovanni seeks is for ‘blackness *cum* manhood.’”⁷¹ The masculinist tendencies of Giovanni’s writing in these collections point to a subsuming of other oppressed identities within the Black Arts Movement. Although her later works dealt with women’s issues and relationships between women and men, Giovanni was named the *Princess of Black Poetry*⁷² during this time period because she expressed the ideological underpinnings of Black Arts and the limitations of black cultural identity, as blackness is equated with manhood.⁷³

The Black Arts Movement was less associated with fiction because it was more difficult (read: costly and time-consuming) to publish; the fiction ranged from urban vernacular in June Jordan’s *His Own Where* (1971) and John A. Williams novel *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), to a mixture of urban and folk vernacular in the short stories of James Alan McPherson such as *Hue and Cry: Short Stories* (1968) to the magical realism, African cosmology and African American mythological traditions of Henry Dumas’ *Ark of Bones, and Other Stories* (1970). Another important area of the Black

Arts Movement is in drama with plays such as Baraka's *The Dutchmen*, Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and Ed Bullins' *We Righteous Bombers* (1969), to name a few. These plays focused on the everyday life of blacks in urban settings, striving to deal with racism and classism and survival techniques to maintain a sense of authentic identity. These plays used an urban folk aesthetic that focused on the realism of the black experience in black vernacular dialect, usually in a revolutionary stance against the white establishment. Although autobiographies also played a significant role in Black Arts, such as Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), Hoyt Fuller's *Journey to Africa* (1971), El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) and Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968), the employment of the black vernacular tradition played a limited role in these works of non-fiction.

The Vernacular Tradition in the Caribbean:

Unlike the 20th century black vernacular traditions in U.S. literature, the Caribbean literary tradition is marked from its insemination by particular forms of nationalism. Although the vernacular traditions in the Caribbean had existed long before the social/cultural movements of nationalism began, it was not taken up as a subject in the literature of people of color until local nationalist and global Pan-African movements started taking place. Pre-independence Caribbean literature written during the 1900-1920's took European Classical culture as its model and, therefore, localized vernacular traditions were the antithesis of the subject matter worthy of the literary page. It was only at the turn of the twentieth century that the vernacular tradition began being well-documented by folklorists, who were cataloguing Negro proverbs, Anansi stories, humor, songs and language. Writer Anthony Boxill points to the positive influence that these

early folklorists, like Walter Jekyll and his *Jamaican Song and Story* (1907), had on the subject matter of writers such as Claude McKay.⁷⁴ The well-documented folk traditions became fodder for the creative minds of the region. In the 30's and 40's, these folk traditions were seen as revealing an authentic Caribbean identity, unmarked by the colonial project and, therefore, perfect for the inspiration of a nationalist/independence movement. Ironically, during the same time period in the U.S., the folk tradition was privileged because it showed the markings of the imperial project of slavery and, therefore, told the story of survival. Thus, the role of the folk traditions in both regions have been foundational notions of identity, but the function of these traditions have manifested according to the particular needs of each regional population.

Anglophone Caribbean

Twentieth century black literature in the English-speaking Caribbean is considered shallow at the beginning of the century and really begins in the forties and fifties. In *The Pleasures of Exiles* (1960), George Lamming states that, "The West Indian novel, by which I mean the novel written by the West Indian about the West Indian reality is hardly twenty years old."⁷⁵ This is a generally accepted idea by literary critics of Caribbean literature, not only because it is difficult to find documentation of the early literature, but also because of the definition of what qualifies as literary. Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh, editors of *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, note literary diversity as a reason for this dismissal, "Perhaps the unorthodox and diverse profile of early literary endeavor in the region is one of the reasons why and acknowledgement of a Caribbean literary history was slow to arrive."⁷⁶ Literary works such as Thomas MacDermot's (a.k.a. Tom Redcam) *Becka's Buckra Baby* (1903) and

One Brown Girl and—a Jamaica Story (1909); E. A. Dood's (a.k.a. E. Snod) *Maroon Medicine* (1905); and W.A. Campbell's *Marguerite: A Story of the Earthquake* (1907), all were written by white expatriates who took up Afro-Caribbean folk culture as subject matter for their historical fiction. These texts are all set in rural Jamaica, and use moments of creole language in the characterization of the black characters, but these writings are clearly from the perspective of outside observers and, therefore, don't have the indigenous qualities of vernacular literature. Writers like MacDermot often opened the door to valorizing vernacular traditions in the colonial metropolises and, as editor of *The Jamaica Times*, opened the literary door to indigenous writers like Claude McKay and De Lisser.⁷⁷

H.G. De Lisser's *Jane's Career* (1914), is considered one of the first novels by an indigenous Caribbean author. In this early novel, a peasant is given full status as a literary subject in this bildungsroman about a young woman leaving home and finding work in the city. Kenneth Ramchand states the importance of this text,

[T]he first West Indian novel in which the peasant is given full status as a human person capable of spontaneity and a delicacy of response to people and situations, and one involved in a range of thoughts and feelings hitherto denied in literature to the slave or ex-slave.⁷⁸

It is notable that De Lisser's female peasant protagonist is progressive during this time period and tracing her trials and tribulations from domestic worker to factory worker gives insight into a distinctly gendered oppression. De Lisser's integration of creole speech created an observance of the folk vernacular tradition, even if it lacked questioning of the status quo for the main character.⁷⁹

The vernacular tradition in Anglophone Caribbean literature becomes more visible in the *Barrackyard Fiction* that gained popularity in the 30's and 40's. It is only

at this transitional moment that recognition of a black vernacular tradition in literature takes place because it is during the search for a new independent identity. This independent identity is defined against the colonialism of the past, wherein one encounters the self as subject and, therefore, the nature of one's lived traditions and beliefs. *Barrackyard Fiction* laid the groundwork for the future boom of the vernacular tradition in the 70's by representing the disadvantaged in Caribbean society. Writers during this time period began "recording the heroic lives of ordinary working people—in Trinidad, the people of the barrack yards," this valorization of common folk lead to privileging the vernacular traditions that they practiced.⁸⁰ These traditions of the *common folk* included the ritual practices, beliefs, language, celebrations and stories as the subject matter within literary circles. Writers such as C.L.R. James with *Triumph* (1929) and *Minty Alley* (1936), along with Claude McKay's *Banjo* (1929), epitomized this celebration of the folk tradition.

In C.L.R. James' *Triumph* and *Minty Alley*, he began a conscious effort to concentrate on the slums of Trinidad or, as they called them, the *Barrack-yards*. His literary work with Alfred Mendez, who wrote *Pitch Lake* (1933), *Black Fauns* (1935) and *Afternoon in Trinidad* (1936), began the *Barrack-yards* literary genre in the twenties and thirties. This movement proved significant because it exposed the underbelly of those who were marginalized in the Trinidadian society. In *Triumph*, James traces the life of two women, Celestine and Mamitz, both whom are negotiating life with abusive men and with little to no economic opportunity. Within these women's lives the folk elements of black vernacular culture come into play when the women examine their lot in life and, "attributed to the evil and supernatural machinations of Irene, their common enemy."⁸¹

Mamitz, who is in a better situation, suggests to Irene, “If you could only cross the sea—that will cut any spirit that on you...Look the animal!”⁸² James records a cross-pollination between African spiritual beliefs/root work and Black Christianity throughout the story. With the primatizing of the minute details of poor women’s domestic life, through their vernacular language, a celebration of their techniques of collaborative survival was created. In *Minty Alley*, James focuses on a middle class male character, Haynes, who moves into the Barrack-yards and observes the clear distinction between the educated middle class and the uneducated masses. James paints a picture of the poor as being more in touch with life, while his own upbringing didn’t allow him to live an authentic life. James clearly valorizes the folk wisdom amongst the poor but eventually his protagonist is returned to his former impotent middle class status. Much of the barrack-yard fiction tended to be centered on women’s lives. Thus, not only were the poor made worthy of subjectivity, but the women were portrayed as literary subjects as well. James’ most famous work, *The Black Jacobins* (1938), used Haiti’s early independence (1804) as the context becoming a model of opposition to westernization and colonization. James emphasizes the folk religious tradition vodoun, that helped incite the revolution. Haiti’s independence inseminated writers throughout the western world with a sense of independent identity that is linked to nationhood.

Victor J. Ramja notes that barrack-yard fiction emphasized the dozens, biblical verses, folk sayings and reliance on the supernatural, stating, “Though James and Mendez portray the barrack-yards as squalid and impoverished, they emphasize the inhabitants’ resilience, vitality and zest for life rather than their misery and poverty.”⁸³ Barrack-yard fiction is considered the first celebration of vernacular culture in the West Indies, offering

insights into a West Indies identity. Because this genre of fiction drew from the world around them, writers such as V.S. Naipaul applauded these efforts, pointing out that they were a tradition in themselves since they didn't pull from other literary sources as inspiration and functioned as a "starting point" for his own literary endeavors within his own ethnic culture.⁸⁴

Other transnational barrack-yard writers included Claude McKay and Eric Walrond. Walrond was born in British Guiana, educated in Barbados and raised in Panama before leaving to the U.S. to work the black activist and literary scene in New York with the likes of Marcus Garvey and Charles S. Johnson. As a contributor to the Harlem Renaissance, writing "On Being Black" (1922), "On Being a Domestic (1923), and "Vignettes of the Dusk" (1924), he is associated with black literary traditions in different countries. His collection of short stories, *Tropic Death* (1926), which included works such as "The Wharf Rats" and "The Vampire Bat," is considered part of the barrack-yard tradition. Because Walrond was an international writer, he is distinct in his portrayal of barrack-yard culture due to the fact that his portrayal shifted between different locations in the Caribbean from Trinidad to Panama, and his subjects were from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds. In "The Wharf Rats," Walrond writes about Barbadians, Martinicans, Trinidadians, Tortola mulattoes and Asian-Caribbeans, offering a microcosm of the Caribbean but from a keenly specific focus on folk life at the margins. His writing, a combination of realism and magical realism, relished in the violence and risk of poverty and racism, and how it mangled lives that only survived, never thrived. Walrond's integration of vernacular culture focused on Caribbean

language and the spiritual elements of *obeah* and supernatural belief systems that framed the violence in his fiction. The power of *obeah* is clearly illustrated in “The Wharf Rat”:

And to question the verity of the *obeah*, to dismiss or reject it as the ungodly rite of some lurid, crack-brained Islander was to be an accursed pale-face, dog of a white. And the *obeah* man, in a fury of rage, would throw a machete at the heretic’s head or—worse—burn on his doorstep at night a pyre of Maubé bark or green Ganja weed.⁸⁵

Throughout his literary career, Walrond advocated for black literature to always be grounded in the folk tradition and valorizing those elements of black culture, “which may put the black culture in a disparaging light,” and rejecting those writers of racial uplift.⁸⁶ Although Walrond is often considered an African American writer, his literary inspiration and cultural background throughout the Caribbean transcends his identification with the Harlem Renaissance.

Claude McKay is another transnational writer that was addressed previously in this manuscript as a contributor to the Harlem Renaissance. His writing that referenced his Caribbean roots, “My native Land My Home” (1912); “A Midnight Woman to the Bobby” (1912); and “The Apple-Woman’s Complaint” (1912), all set the stage for the barrack-yard genre. McKay often wrote in the vernacular language of Jamaica, emphasizing the rhythm and folk wisdom of the common folk and their challenges in a corrupt and racist system. His adept use of the Jamaican vernacular is shown in his poetry of this time period:

While me deh walk ‘long in de street,
Policeman’s yawning’ on his beat;
An’ dis wud him cheifta’n say—
Me mus’n’ car’ me apple-tray.
Ef me no wuk, me boun’ fe tief;
S’pose dat will please de police chief’
De prison dem mus’ be wan’ full
Mek dem’s ‘pon we like ravin’ bull.⁸⁷

Although considered one of the leading writers of the Harlem Renaissance, the vernacular that he is referencing is not from a U.S. perspective but rather that of his home roots in Jamaica. It is interesting to note that, regardless of the original reference point of a localized vernacular tradition, it appealed to black audiences in the U.S., Europe and the Caribbean, emphasizing Veve Clarks' articulation of *diasporic literacy*.

Writers such as McKay and Roger Mais served as bridges between the barrack-yard genre to the nationalist anti-colonial movement in the Caribbean. And in the same manner as in the United States, this nationalist movement also called on writers and artists to create a national literature and culture. Mais was a journalist who wrote essays, plays, poems and novels from 1940-1953 that centered around the issues of self-determination, folk culture and rejection of colonial rule. His novel, *The Hills were Joyful Together* (1953), written in prison for the denouncement of Churchill, is an illustration of his amalgamation of politics, art and folk culture. Taking a cue from the barrack-yard writers, Mais focused this novel on the *yards* of Kingston, Jamaica, where the working poor survived. Mais illustrated prominence of the oral tradition in these yards to spread the local news, the integration of Afro-Christian spiritualism and the vernacular language of the characters created a realist portrait of the injustices of the poor. As an international writer, he worked with Richard Wright in France and is considered to be part of the genre of protest literature. Likewise, in his second novel, *Brother Man* (1954), he devotes the novel to documenting the folk Rastafarian movement in Jamaica as a nationalist call of separatism and self-determination but that was based on a cultural system of knowledge and history that was embodied in the Rastafarian movement. Through their focusing on the disenfranchised of black Caribbean culture

and their attendant vernacular culture, the writers of the barrack-yard genre expanded into the global nationalist debates and Marxism which heavily influenced the black writers of the U.S., Africa, Europe and the Caribbean. This literary sentiment of nationalism was carried on through writers such as Vic Reid, author of *The Leopard* (1958) and *New Day* (1949), written in Jamaican creole, and A.J. Seymour, editor of the nationalist literary journal *Kyk-Over-Al* (1945-1961), based in British Guiana, that published countless authors who struggled to negotiate issues of language and identity. In the West Indies, the discourse on vernacular traditions in literature was continuously focused on the use of authentic language as an expression of identity within the literature.

During the 1950s-1960s, the first waves of labor emigration from the English-speaking Caribbean took place and many writers found themselves in the “homeland” of their colonial educations. Writers turned to vernacular traditions in the Caribbean as an alternative source of historical truth because of the urge to suspect the *Master Text*⁸⁸ of colonial history and its representations of local Caribbean identity. London became a crossroads for Caribbean writers, creating an environment that forced colonial emigrants to reflect on the limited opportunity in their homelands and the second-class citizenship that they experienced in the colonial metropole. The available representations of local Caribbean identity were of a savage people that were civilized by benevolent colonists. The images available in the metropole of Caribbean immigrants were of people who lacked culture and clumsily affected the culture of the colonist. These experiences, coupled with the indiscriminant treatment as one ethnicity, infused writers with a sense of place and identity. This sense manifested in both a Pan-Caribbean regional identity that often spawned into an even larger Pan-African identity, while also bolstering country-

specific national identities.⁸⁹ Cultural recuperations of vernacular traditions became the reservoir that fed these constructions of identity. The vernacular traditions of the islands became conduits for the mutual recognition of shared cultural heritage as well as distinct cultural manifestations of that heritage, resulting in a “West Indian” identity in London, and pushes for independence in the islands.

Writers from the first wave of labor migration from the Anglophone Caribbean created a dialogue about West Indian identity that was set against the backdrop of the colonial metropolises. Works such as Samuel Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), shifted the context of vernacular traditions to the U.K. More in alignment with the writing tradition of McKay, Selvon concentrates on the crossroads of new black emigrants arriving in London and the inevitable conflict between their folk traditions and the colonial tradition. Ashley Dawson distinguishes Selvon from other writers of the same time period such as George Lamming and his work *The Emigrants* (1954), because he didn’t look back nostalgically to the Caribbean but rather looked at this first generation of immigrants in Britain for creative inspiration. In her text, *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (2007) Dawson locates Selvon’s valorization of vernacular traditions, expressing, “Selvon used vernacular Caribbean speech patterns and scabrous popular cultural forms such as calypso,” in his novel. In the same manner that the Great Migration in the U.S. led to urbanized vernacular expressions in literature, so did the emigration of black West Indians to England. In Selvon’s novel, his protagonist, Moses, seeks to understand his life in this new European context, but he only seeks to do so through the tried and true folk traditions that he has brought from the Caribbean. Written in Jamaican creole, this novel

signified a shift in uses of local vernacular traditions transplanted into a different context, yet remaining a black indigenous expression even in Europe as an example of the exile literary tradition translated through the folk tradition. This shift that Selvon signified is significant because it is through this secondary experience of dislocation (the first being slavery), that the ideas of cultural origin that engender ideas of recuperation of folk traditions is beginning to be recognized as fragmented. This sense of fragmented tradition is the gateway into the celebration of the hybridized notion of Caribbean identity.

Wilson Harris, coming from multi-ethnic/racial environments, becomes one of the bridges to that hybridized identification. His early poetry collections *Fetish Miniature Poets Series* (1951); *The Well and the Land* (1952); and *Eternity to Season* (1954), integrated the archetypal imagery (vodoun iconography), use of allegory (Anancy stories) and mythic plot structures (sacrifice and redemption). These vernacular explorations lead to his most famous novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), where he employs Christian mythology and universality between the races and African cosmological understandings of life and death. His essays attest to the primacy of folk tropes to his writing and the intermingling of the various ethnic communities of his homeland in Guiana, in “History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and the Guianas” and “Interior of the Novel: Amerindian/African/European Relations.” In *History*, Harris’ essay “Limbo Gateway,” makes a clear connection between vernacular practices of limbo and vodoun and the interior documentation of memory, history and loss.

The few women writers of this time period took a decidedly more direct path to asserting identity via vernacular expressions. Writers like Louise Bennett, who was a

folklorist and singer, epitomized valorization of the folk tradition in Jamaica. Creating several albums of folk songs and games,⁹⁰ Bennett took it upon herself to only write in dialect. Being prolific in her Anancy stories and poems,⁹¹ she became a cultural ambassador for Jamaica. Remarkably, Bennett not only passed down the folk stories of the past but she also created new folklore to explain modern Jamaica. Although Bennett's audience was diverse since she traveled Europe, the U.S. and Canada, her folk expression spoke directly to the masses in Jamaica, promoting self-pride and a holistic sense of cultural identity. Una Marson was also a prolific writer and poet during this time period. She waxed and waned between the stylistic extremes of Victorian literary structures and black vernacular language and rhythm in her writing. These disparate excerpts from Marson's poetry illustrate her range.

Jamaica (1930)

Thou fairest Island of the Western Sea,
 What tribute has the Muse to pay to thee?
 Oh, that some tender lay she could inspire.
 That we might sing they praises and ne'er tire.
 Oh lovely Island where the sun shines bright
 And scarce one week withholds her cherry light;

Kinky Hair Blues (1937)

Gwine find a beauty shop
 Cause I ain't a belle//
 The boys pass me by,
 They say I's not swell.//
 I hate dat ironed hair
 And dat bleaching skin.//
 But I'll be all alone
 If I don't fall in.

Marson demonstrates this transitional moment in West Indian literature, an internal war of identity. Varying in themes and stylistic approaches from vernacular-based to Victorian-

based and being rooted in the exile tradition of writers with pastoral views of her Caribbean homeland from the shores of England.

Much like the United States, Black Cultural Nationalism and a parallel Black Arts Movement takes place in the 50's-60's, in the English-speaking Caribbean. A proliferation of writing, music (Calypso), drama and folk arts ruled during these decades.⁹² With independence for countries like Trinidad and Tobago (1962); Guiana (1966); Jamaica (1962); and St. Lucia (1958-1979),⁹³ creates the post-colonial transition to independent nation-states that insemminates the literary artists to write the nation via the folk tradition. Writers such as Edward Brathwaite, Merle Hodge, Derek Walcott and Earl Lovelace make efforts to imagine what is at the core of their communities to define a nation. The internationalism of many West Indian writers in Europe--parallels the African American exodus to Europe. The writers in Europe distinguished the exile writers' experience from those who stayed in the West Indies. This began a discourse about chosen audiences, or lack thereof, and expectations from those audiences; questions of authenticity and the call for a local (indigenous) literature.

Writing flourished during this time period with novels, in particular. However, the discourse on nationalism and the rejection of colonialism pushed the primacy of vernacular creative expressions to the margins. Class issues, color variations, education levels, colonial indoctrination, socialism, communism, alienation, exile and escape all became themes of the creative novels written during the 50's and 60's. Andrew Salkey's work was an exception, *A Quality of Violence* (1959), was set in rural Jamaica during a drought, and the peasants look to the power of the *Pocomania*⁹⁴ sect to empower themselves. This text combines the folk traditions of Rastafarianism, myths and rituals of both Christianity and West African

religious practices and vodoun iconography. It pays tribute to these alternative methods of creating agency while also inciting violence, stereotypes and myths around the spiritual tradition of Pocomania. West Indian writers of the 50's who focused on folk traditions did so with varying goals.

Writer, poet and playwright Derek Walcott has been one of the most recognized West Indian writers globally. Walcott is best known for his ability to translate the vernacular rhythms and spirituality into his poems, while writing in Standard English—his technique echoes James Weldon Johnson's expressive qualities. Walcott's inheritance was both his colonial education and his multi-ethnic background that he used as a creative resource. Therefore, his writing embodied his post-colonial position. During this nationalist moment, through his early poetry collections in *25 Poems* (1949) and *Epitaph for the Young: XII Cantos* (1949), he seeks to discover a West Indies consciousness from the fragments of the colonial past and the mixed ethnic heritage. As the poet navigates the terrain of his homeland, he is seeking to reconstruct the West Indian identity. His plays, *Henry Christophe* (1950) and *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1967), center on the revolutionary aspects of removing the colonial power and the internal struggle of self-hatred and the search for identity that comes through recognition of the mythical tradition of your ancestry. He also created three folk plays: *The Sea at Dauphin* (1954), *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1957), and *Malcochon* (1959). These plays all dealt with the peasants of the West Indies, using a poetic lexicon that assimilated standard English and Creole (both English-based and French-based); *Ti-Jean* is based on a West Indian folktale. Walcott's vernacular strength lies in his translation of folk languages and the use of universalizing mythical traditions to speak to the specificity of the West Indian nationalist struggle.⁹⁵

Edward Kamau Brathwaite, poet, essayist, and historian, responds to Walcott's fragmentation and takes it a step further toward recreating the whole in the creolized form through poetry. Brathwaite is an international figure, living in London, Ghana and the U.S. Therefore, these global locations play themselves out in his literature. In his seminal work, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (1973) which included "Rites of Passage" (1967), "Masks" (1968) and "Islands" (1969), Brathwaite employs vernacular traditions throughout the African diaspora. Michael Dash analyzes the themes in *Rites*:

The poems of *Rites of Passage* are clustered around the theme of spiritual dispossession. They are an attempt to remove the amnesia about historical events in the West Indian psyche and create an awareness of the historical injustice perpetrated in the region and the blind materialism of the present.⁹⁶

The sense of loss is a reoccurring theme in the nationalist writings of the sixties. In the epigraph to *Rights* this loss is made clear:

If I forget you, o Jerusalem,
Let my right hand wither;
Let my tongue cleave to the roof
Of my mouth. If I do not remember you;
If I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.⁹⁷

The violence of transplantation and his experience of living in Ghana leads him to privilege his African connection over his European one.⁹⁸ Brathwaite's travels have lead to a new sense of recognition of those African elements buried in the Caribbean cultures.⁹⁹ In *Masks*, continental African vernacular rituals, religions, histories, myths and even tribal languages are the subject of the work. The range of folk iconography, rhythm and spirituality is evident in the poem "Libation":

Nana frimpong
take the blood of the fowl
drink take the eto, mashed plantain,
that my women have cooked

Eat
and be happy
drink
may you rest
for the year has come
around
again¹⁰⁰

African scholar Ayo Kehinde notes that “Libation” engenders an “incantatory verse of prayer and invocation.”¹⁰¹ The last portion of the trilogy, “Islands,” returns to the author’s homelands in the Americas, which becomes Brathwaite’s focus for the next two decades. His realization is that African diasporic identities must create themselves anew in the New World with the plurality of their existence. Abiola Irele analyzes the “Islands” collection as situating “the African antecedents of common folk to that overwhelming vigour of life and expression which is their special contribution to the heritage of the islands, to the identity of the Caribbean.”¹⁰² One of Brathwaite’s major contributions to the privileging of the folk is through his rejection of the term dialect and articulation of *nation language*.

[I]t is an English that is not the standard, imported, educated English, but that of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility, which has always been there and which is now increasingly coming to the surface and influencing the perception of contemporary Caribbean people.¹⁰³

Brathwaite continues in this trajectory as his writing becomes more about historical documentation of those African continuities that express themselves distinctly in their New World setting as he writes about Jazz, calypso, Rastafarianism and nation language. Brathwaite’s work sets the stage for the Créolité literary movement that also privileges folk traditions and nation language.

Sylvia Wynter, writer, critic and dramatist, is one of the few women writers recognized as part of the Caribbean literary canon pre-1970. Her novel, *The Hills of Hebron*

(1962), takes on the post-colonial challenge to write the nation as she not only illustrates the possibilities but also critiques the limitations of the creative expressions of nation at that independence moment. Shirley Toland-Dix, codifies the issues she addresses in the novel:

Among the theoretical inquiries she incorporates into the novel: an interrogation of the role of the artist and the intellectual in emerging nations, her rejection of mono-conceptual frameworks, her engagement with the role of groups most marginalized or liminal within societies, and a suggestive investigation of gender dynamics within the black community. *The Hills of Hebron* is experimental, complex, and paradoxical, both epic narrative of the nation and critique of the extant vision of the nation.¹⁰⁴

Wynter becomes a pioneer of black feminist thought with an early critique of the masculinist field of national literature and the affects of exile on the Caribbean writer. These creative discussions of nationalism took place in the journals of the region, considered an indigenous space for the diversity of writers.¹⁰⁵ But Wynter's most influential writings were her early critical essays that centered on issues of vernacular traditions. In her essay, "Creole Criticism: A Critique" (1973), she posits folk culture as "the only living tradition in the Caribbean," concluding that a national literature can only be established if it used the folk culture and people as an exclusive resource.¹⁰⁶ She went on to celebrate and analyze Caribbean folk culture in, "Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards the Interpretation of Folk Dance as Cultural Process" (1970) and "One Love: Aspects of Afro-Jamaicanism" (1972). Wynter's impact on the ontological systems at work in critical literary analysis has had tremendous reverberations within writing communities throughout the Diaspora.

Francophone Caribbean

At the turn of the century in the French colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe and Guiana, the colonizing policy was one of assimilation. This policy had at its core the *civilizing mission* of the benevolent lords of the empire. Therefore, the vernacular traditions

represented something that would disadvantage anyone who was seeking to better his or her lot. The practice of performing traditional songs, dances, folktales, and mythology or ritual rites was a step away from becoming French unless, of course, these were traditions straight from the colonial center. Consequently, these local practices became socially outlawed and equated to a primitivism that was defined in opposition to French civilization.

The shedding of an assimilated identity and the recuperation of an authentic folk identity becomes an aspiration of the poetry in Negritude (mid 1930s-1960). This rejection of assimilation within the poetics of Negritude was both a cultural and a political stance against colonialism. Writers such as Leon Gontras Damas, a poet from French Guiana, argued that true assimilation could not happen. Instead, he reflected on the position of the American Negroes who revealed the truth of the adage that when your skin is black there is never a true assimilation. The French policy of assimilation followed the American paradigm, demanding blacks to assimilate but refusing to allow them to be fully assimilated. It is out of this realization that the Negritude poets sought to reveal the myths within the European culture and discover their own true identities.

In the course of interrogation of the effects of assimilation, the Negritude poets realized the internal alienation from their true identities, which manifested in estrangement from the folk traditions. The identification with African American authors from 1920 to the 30's such as Hughes, Brown, Wright, McKay and Johnson, as well as their employment of the American folk traditions such as spirituals and the blues, also informed the desire of the Negritude poets to connect to a Negro folk identity. Local theorists, such as Frantz Fanon, further bolstered the belief that the loss of original culture (i.e., folk traditions) via colonization was the crux of the black identity problem. Fanon went so far as to define the

colonized as, “[E]very people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality--.”¹⁰⁷ However, what is remarkable about the Negritude movement is that, rather than searching within their local island cultures for this original local folk identity, the Negritude poets sought to recoup the vernacular traditions of continental Africa.

Rehabilitating continental African vernacular traditions featured prominently in the imaginings of the poets as a method of reconstructing an original identity. For the majority of the francophone West Indian writers, dislocation serves as a catalyst for further interrogation into the African heritage and vernacular tradition. The imaginings became more advanced because the urgency of this identity under siege is now twice-removed from the origin. The Negritude poets from the West Indies cultivated the fragments of African vernacular traditions to construct a vivid re-memory of Africa. The effect is a notable aggressiveness in the re-writing of the only past that they have known--slavery, and a completely fictionalized recollection of the Motherland. It is through these recollections that they connect to a larger African Diasporic consciousness. This is best illustrated throughout the poetry of Damas, writing in a traditional rhythmic pattern of beating African drums, Damas evokes both the spirit of Africa and the history of slavery in his poem, “They Came That Night”:

They came that night as the/ tom/ tom/ rolled/ from/ rhythm/ to rhythm/
the frenzy/ of eyes/ the frenzy of hands/ the frenzy/ of statue feet/ How
many of ME ME ME/ have died/ SINCE THEN/ since they came that
night when the/ tom/ tom/ rolled/ from/ rhythm/ to rhythm/ the frenzy...¹⁰⁸

Damas’ lucid imaginings of the moment of European violations brings the poet into an analogous identification with the first continental slaves. This identification comes through the African vernacular tradition. It is through the drumming that Damas is able to bridge the

gap between the Diasporic Africans and the Continental Africans, emphasizing the collective imagination of all descendants of Africa. In his rhetorical question of “how many of ME ME ME have died since then?” the powerful reiteration of the first person pronoun sets up a metonymy between the poet and his people. As he is pluralized, so are the experiences of all black people, regardless of their particular lot in life. The global consciousness of Negritude is produced through the narrativizing of the colonial past as a unity of suffering, the losses of black lives, the African vernacular traditions and an authentic black identity.

The critics of Negritude are often the kindred of the movement, engendering the subsequent literary movements of Antillanite and Créolité. Both of these movements re-focused the location of an authentic Caribbean identity from Africa to a New World setting. This gesture privileged localized vernacular tradition as central to the Caribbean character. Writers like Édouard Glissant and the members of the Créolité movement of the late eighties (Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant) also suffer from the same cultural issues, lack of a collective identity and history, and the same political environment (departmentalization/neo-colonialism) that Césaire addresses in his poetry. These cultural theorists are the direct offspring of writers of the Negritude movement. Therefore, their response and critique of Negritude seems most suitable, as evidenced by the claim in the manifesto of the Créolité movement, *Éloge de la Créolité*, declaring “We are forever Césaire’s sons.”¹⁰⁹ These sons of Césaire respond differently to cultural dislocation. By interrogating local history and traditions, they are able to re-establish New World vernacular tradition as the building blocks for an organic identity.

In Glissant’s seminal work, *Caribbean Discourse (Le Discours Antillais)*, he addresses the shortcomings of the Negritude movement and asserts a new approach to

constructing a Caribbean identity. Glissant establishes a shift away from Negritude's focus on cultural authenticity and origin. Where Negritude looked to continental Africa as a source of identity via vernacular traditions, Glissant's focus is here in the New World where the history and culture is fragmentary and hybrid by nature which is contrary to Césaire's mapping out of the distinctions between the true identity of the Negro and the affectations of the assimilated Negro. This then results in treating these two identities as mutually exclusive. Glissant integrates the extremes between Self and Other and claims a "necessary and disalienated relationship with the Other."¹¹⁰ This intervention functions to unite the fragmented Negro that Césaire valorizes through acceptance of all aspects of the Negro personality, even the elements learned from the oppressor. For Glissant and the Créolité writers, Africa does not encompass the plurality of their hybrid identities, as the manifesto pronounces:

Negritude replaced the illusion of Europe by an African illusion./ It was a necessary dialectical movement, and indispensable development. But it remains a great challenge to step out of it in order to finally build a new yet temporary synthesis on the open path of history, our history.¹¹¹

As evidenced in this quote, the Créolité writers see Negritude as a necessary transition in removing their identities out of the European/African dialectic. Likewise, these writers reject the notions of purity that the Negritude poets strove to recover (specifically Senghor) in the essentialized African identity. Although they also resist assimilation, rather than positing a monolithic, pure identity, they see fragmentation as a resistance to the homogenizing effects of neo-colonialism (Glissant). Contemporary theories like Glissant's *Antillean Discourse* and the *Créolité* movement utilize themes of Negritude that bring them closer to themselves. For instance: valorization of the folk, orality, the connection to the land and an anti-colonialist politic. But these writers also transcended Negritude to address the proliferation

of mutated identities and the multiple histories that collided and exchanged, creating identities that are constantly en route while also integrating a specified regionalism to their discourse which empowers them to proclaim: “Ni Européens, ni Africains, ni Asiatiques, nous nous proclamons Créoles.” “Neither Europeans, nor African, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles.”¹¹²

Conclusion

Although all vernacular tradition decries a certain desire to define the self and the values that one lives by, each national colonizer, whether it was the French, British, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch or American, had a distinct method of imperialism that made the re/production of the vernacular tradition an enemy to the empire. All vernacular traditions represent what is native and distinct to a particular locality. Therefore, in the colonial imagination, these things represented all that was primitive in the America's. Conceivably, it was the nature of the European colonialism/imperialism that outright rejected real integration while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the history and culture of African descendants that created the nationalist context of the vernacular tradition as a pure medium.

Because the colonialism/imperialism was intimate in its possession of the colonized, these traditions played a double role in the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. At once, the folk traditions were both a reinforcement of absolute difference (primitive vs. civilized), which maintained the uneven power dynamics while also being the protector of self-hood, which encumbered efforts to dominate. Therefore, the very practice of the vernacular tradition could be seen as an affront to domination. That which was rejected most severely such as language, ritual and custom, became the touchstone for

political and cultural resistance in the literature. In some cases, such as in the U.S., it became the indigenous creations that supported entrance into full citizenship.

In the modern era, this issue of identity can never be completely reconciled since one can never fully discard all elements of assimilation, such as language, nor recuperate all folk traditions that were lost through colonization, displacement and slavery. Therefore, the arch of creative writing in vernacular traditions has lead to two different destinations: one that claims the primacy of African ancestral roots and one that has recognition of the natural hybridity of folk practices. During the first half of the century (1900-1970), both ideological paths lead to the construction of national and diasporic identities.

Regardless, what is painfully apparent in my coverage of the literary history of black vernacular traditions in the Americas is that the space for women writers is small, at best, and nonexistent, at worse. Although women are central characters in the vernacular fiction, and we know that as the cultural bearers they played a crucial role in the preservation and circulation of the folk, their voices are silenced as the architects of this tradition in literature. The following chapters seek to give voice to those female architects, as both creators and subjects; to see how a gendered difference might play itself out in a context of protest and national literature. What is the desired audience? What are the goals? And how do these female authors construct identity through the employment of folk traditions?

Chapter 1 Notes

¹ David G. Nicholls, *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) 2. Nicholls states that the gap between elite black culture and the black masses was often filled by translating across the divide using the folk.

2 W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk" (1903) *Three Negro Classics*, by James Weldon Johnson (New York: Avon Books, 1965) 378.

³ Du Bois 220. Du Bois asserted that what made America American were the things the Negro offered, stating, "[T]here are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the America Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave."

⁴ Carolyn Perry & Mary Louise Weaks, eds., *The History of Southern Women's Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002) 167.

⁵ H. Nigel Thomas, *From Folklore to Fiction* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 8-9. Thomas gives a complete listing of works written about black writers and the problems they faced using folklore in early works of the twentieth century.

⁶ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964) 80. Ellison speaks more aggressively about the wholeness of Negro folk culture being "shattered" by the Great Migration.

⁷ Ellison 21.

⁸ Nicholls 3.

⁹ Robert Farnsworth, *The Conjure Woman* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969) xv. In the Introduction, Farnsworth speaks of the discreteness between the black and white world. Emphasizing that the occult world assists the slaves in dealing with some difficulties but that ultimately the "white man's arbitrary power is stronger and more destructive" than any occult practices.

¹⁰ Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: WW Norton & CO, 1997) 881. (emphasis mine)

¹¹ George Kent, "Langston Hughes and Afro-American Folk and Cultural Tradition," *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture*. (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972) 73.

¹² Alain Locke, ed., "Negro Youth Speaks," *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968) 48. (emphasis mine)

¹³ Bernard W. Bell, *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004) 112.

¹⁴ "The Creation," *The Book of American Negro Verse* (Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1922); Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, Inc., 1925) 138-141.

¹⁵ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie McKay (New York: WW Norton & Co., 1997) 1271.

¹⁶ Bell 106.

¹⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Worlds of Color" *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, Alain Locke, ed. (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968) 412-413.

¹⁸ Claude McKay, *Banjo* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929) 46. (emphasis mine)

¹⁹ Cheryl Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 5.

²⁰ Zora Neal Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper & Row, 1935) 1.

²¹ Hurston 1. Hurston uses this term to connote the world-view of Negroes.

²² Wall 13.

²³ Wall 145. Wall discusses this narrative technique in terms of Hurston's performance of the text, noting that Hurston is doing the storytelling even when she is documenting her male storytellers.

²⁴ Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985) 11-12.

²⁵ Wall 30.

²⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (New York: Marlowe & Co., 1981) 80-81. (second emphasis mine)

²⁷ Wall 145.

²⁸ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937, 1990) 70-71.

²⁹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (Harper Perennial, 1939, 1991) 268.

³⁰ Hurston, *Mules* 3.

³¹ Wright, Richard. "Between Laughter and Tears." Rev. of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. *New Masses* 5 Oct. 1937.

³² Nash, William R. "Harlem Renaissance," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*. Jay Parini, ed. 4 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³³ Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing" *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, Nathan I. Huggins, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press. 1976, Orig. 1937) 396 (emphasis mine).

³⁴ Wright 397, paraphrased.

³⁵ Writers influenced by Wright's naturalism in the 1940's: William Attaway (*Blood on the Forge*, 1941); Chester Himes (*If He Hollers Let Him Go*, 1945); and Anne Petry, *The Street* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998 [1946]).

³⁶ Petry 15-16.

³⁷ Petry 137.

³⁸ Sites such as beauty parlors, street corners, off-track betting locations, churches and apartment stoops.

³⁹ Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Report from Part One* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972) Interview with Editor Ida Lewis, *Essence Magazine*, Spring 1971, 170.

⁴⁰ Brooks, Gwendolyn. Interview, 189.

⁴¹ Ellison 546.

⁴² For further reading on this topic, Ellison's *Shadow and Act* and George Kent discuss Ellison's understanding of black folklore within an American and Western experience in *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture*. (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972) 152-163.

⁴³ Ellison 172.

⁴⁴ Margaret Walker, *How I Wrote Jubilee and Ether Essays on Life and Literature*, Maryemma Graham, ed. (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990) 62.

⁴⁵ Thomas 140.

⁴⁶ Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelist* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980) 72.

⁴⁷ Charlotte Goodman, "From Uncle Tom's Cabin to Vyry's Kitchen: The Black Female Folk Tradition in Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*," *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker*, Maryemma Graham, ed. (University of Georgia Press, 2001) 239.

⁴⁸ Graham 239.

⁴⁹ In *For My People*, Walker employs folk heroes such as Big John Henry, Stagolee, Two-Gun Buster and Trigger Slim. For a more complete overview of Walker's work, refer to Eugenia Collier's "Fields Watered with Blood: Myth and Ritual in the Poetry of Margaret Walker," *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, Mari Evans, ed. (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984) 499-510.

⁵⁰ James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Notes of a Native Son* (Beacon Press, 1955) 18-19.

⁵¹ Baldwin 23.

⁵² Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970) 233.

⁵³ Bell, *The Afro-American Novel* 226.

⁵⁴ *The Black Aesthetic*, Addison Gayle Jr., ed. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971) xxiii.

⁵⁵ Ron Karenga, "Black Cultural Nationalism." *The Black Aesthetic* Addison Gayle Jr., ed. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971) 38.

⁵⁶ LeRoi Jones, "The Changing Same." *The Black Aesthetic*, Addison Gayle Jr., ed. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971) 121.

⁵⁷ Gayle Jr., *Aesthetic* xviii.

⁵⁸ Houston Baker, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. & Nellie Y. McKay, eds. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997) 1797.

⁵⁹ LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963) 42.

⁶⁰ Jones, *Blues People* 66.

⁶¹ Amiri Baraka, "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, William J. Harris, ed. (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991) 196.

⁶² Baraka 209.

⁶³ For examples of this critique in Baraka's writing please see his collections: *Black Magic Poetry 1961-1967* (1969) and *It's Nation Time* (1970).

⁶⁴ Askia M. Touré, *Dawnsong! Epic Memory of Askia Touré*, introduction by Joyce A. Joyce. (Third World Press, 1999).

⁶⁵ James Smethurst, "Not surprisingly, music is (and has always been) a particular touchstone for Toure's work, which invokes traditional African music and dance, spirituals, ring shouts, gospel, r & b, bebop, and free jazz (including a tribute poem to Sun Ra). "Dawnsong!: The Epic Memory of Askia Toure. - Book Review," *African American Review*, 11 Sept. 2009

⁶⁶ *Norton Anthology* 1506.

⁶⁷ Sonia Sanchez, "Ruminations/Reflections," *Black Women Writers (1950-1980) A Critical Evaluation*, Mari Evans, ed. (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984) 416.

⁶⁸ Ben Fisler, "Sonia Sanchez," *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers*, Yolanda Williams Page, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007) 499.

⁶⁹ Giovanni's albums during this time period include: *Truth is on its Way* (1971); *Like a Ripple on a Pond* (1973); and *The Way I Feel* (1975).

⁷⁰ Eddie S. Glause Jr., ed., *Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 172-3. This is an excerpt from the poem.

⁷¹ Cheryl Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks: the Prose and Poetry of Cheryl Clarke 1980 to 2005* (Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006) 337.

⁷² First given that name by Ida Lewis, Editor of *Encore*.

⁷³ Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 39. Harper is a great resource to trace the link between black identity and masculinity from a homogenizing affect to contemporary internal differentiation.

⁷⁴ For an overview of late nineteenth-early twentieth century writing in the Caribbean that did concentrate on the plantation era and the folklore of the slaves, mostly written by whites, consult Anthony Boxill's, "The Beginnings to 1929" in Bruce King, *West Indian Literature*. (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1979) 37. Boxill speaks of the folklorists' works of the early twentieth century such as: Martha Beckwith's *Jamaica Anansi Stories* (1924), *Jamaican Proverbs* (1925), E.N. Woolford's *Sidelights on Local Life* (1917), Graham Cruickshank's *Negro Humour, being sketches in the market, on the road and at my back door* (1905). Also Edward Brathwaite's "Creative Literature of the British West Indies During the Period of Slavery," *Savacou* 1 [June 1970]: 46-73.

⁷⁵ George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) 68.

⁷⁶ Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh, eds. *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*. (London: Routledge, 1996) 14.

⁷⁷ Donnell and Welsh 28.

⁷⁸ Donnell and Welsh 30.

⁷⁹ J. Downing Thompson, "The Novel Before 1950," *A History of Literature in the Caribbean: English and Dutch-speaking Countries*, Albert James Arnold, ed. (The Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2001) 119.

⁸⁰ Stefano Harney, *Nationalism and Identity: Culture and the Imagination in a Caribbean Diaspora* (London: Zed Books, 1996) 22. This is a direct quote from Harney paraphrasing from Reinhard Sander, *The Trinidad Awakening: West Indian Literature of the 1930's* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1998).

⁸¹ C.L.R. James, "Triumph," *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh, eds. (London: Routledge, 1996) 87.

⁸² James 87.

⁸³ Victor J. Ramja. "Short Fiction," *A History of Literature in the Caribbean: English and Dutch-speaking Countries*, Albert James Arnold, ed. (The Netherlands: John Benjamin Publishing Co., 2001) 204.

⁸⁴ V.S. Naipaul, "Jasmine," *Times Literary Supplement*, June 4, 1964. repr. In *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (New York: Vintage, 1984) 26.

⁸⁵ Eric Walrond, "Wharf Rats," *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977) 1198.

⁸⁶ Louis J. Parascandola, ed., "*Winds Can Wakeup the Dead*": *An Eric Walrond Reader* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998) 131.

⁸⁷ McKay, Claude. "The Apple-Woman's Complaint," in *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*. Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh, eds. (London: Routledge, 1996) 67.

⁸⁸ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) 211. White speaks of the Master Text as classic texts that posit their meaning-content as universal and authoritative, not questioning the process of meaning production.

⁸⁹ Harney 23.

⁹⁰ *Jamaica Singing Games* (1953); *Jamaican Folk Songs* (Folkways Records, 1954); and *Children's Jamaican Songs and Games* (Folkways, 1957).

⁹¹ *Verses in Jamaican Dialect* (1942); *Jamaican Humour in Dialect* (1943); *Anancy Stories and Poems in Dialect* (1944); *Jamaican Dialect Poems* (1948); *Mi's' Lulu Sez: A Collection of Dialect Poems* (1949); and *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse* (1950).

⁹² Arts institutions were founded during this time period like Little Carib Dance Co. in Trinidad, Jamaica School of Arts and Crafts and the National Dance Theater Company. Sandra Pouchet Paquet, "The Fifties" *West Indian Literature*, Bruce King, ed., (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1979) 64.

⁹³ St. Lucia went through a long transition of becoming independent, beginning with becoming a part of the West Indies Federation (1958), then transitioning into becoming an associate state of Britain (1975) and finally becoming wholly independent in 1979.

⁹⁴ A Jamaican folk religion that is an amalgamation between Christianity and West African traditions, spirit possession is a central feature of the Pocomania sect. The Cumina sect has rituals characterized by drumming, dancing and spirit possession.

⁹⁵ *Malcochon* (1959) was based on Kurosawa's film *Rashomon*; *The Sea At Dauphin* (1954) was inspired by Syng's *Rider's to the Sea* that was considered a Greek tragedy in Irish form. In his epic poem *Omeros*, he invokes the lives and voices of the people of the Caribbean through Greek myth and epic, drawing on Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. For more on this universalist mythological tradition in Walcott's work, see Paul Breslin's *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁹⁶ Michael Dash, "Edward Brathwaite," *West Indian Literature*, Bruce King, ed. (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1979) 217.

⁹⁷ Edward Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 3.

⁹⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989) 35.

⁹⁹ Stewart Brown, ed., "Writin in Light: Orality-thru-typography, Kamau Brathwaite's Sycorax Video Style," *The Pressures of the Text: Orality, Texts and Telling of Tales* (Great Britain: BPC Whatons Ltd. 1995) 126-127.

¹⁰⁰ Edward Brathwaite, *The Arrivants*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 91-2.

¹⁰¹ Kehinde, Ayo "Edward Brathwaite's The Arrivants and the Trope of Cultural Searching," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* Aug. 2007.

¹⁰² Irele, Abiola. "The Poetry of Edward Brathwaite," *Third Ife Festival of the Arts* 4-18 Dec. 1970: 22.

¹⁰³ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature," *Roots* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993) 266.

¹⁰⁴ Shirley Toland-Dix. "The Hills of Hebron: Sylvia Wynter's Disruption of the Narrative of the Nation" *Small Axe* 25 Feb. 2008: 58.

¹⁰⁵ Those literary journals included: *The Beacon*—Trinidad; *Bim*—Barbados; *Focus*—Jamaica; *Kyk-Over-Al*—Guyana; *Caribbean Quarterly*—Jamaica.

¹⁰⁶ Wynter, Sylvia. "Creole Criticism: A Critique," *New World Quarterly* 5, 1973: 20.

¹⁰⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1967) 18. Original *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952).

¹⁰⁸ Ellen Conroy Kennedy, *The Negritude Poets* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975) 45.

¹⁰⁹ Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la Créolité* (Éditions Gallimard, 1989) 80.

¹¹⁰ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989) 169.

¹¹¹ Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, *Éloge* 82.

¹¹² Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, *Éloge* 13.

When spider webs unite they can tie up a lion—Ethiopian Proverb

Chapter 2: To Walk or Fly: Transnational Currents and Webs of Diversity

In this chapter, I investigate how Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* produces a transnational reading through literary signifiers of mobility. I also consider the *web/thread* literary motif that is used in this text as a metaphor for kinship within the black community and as the foundation for a transnational reading of this novel. Through close analysis of the geographical journeys of the protagonist Avey Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow*, I argue that the metaphors of travel used in this text speak to a larger community than the local. I examine the Diasporic encounters and reference points and I argue that Marshall is writing from a local space that is continually gesturing toward a global space within the black world and, in doing so, expands notions of community and critiques essentialized notions of black identity proposed by the Black Arts Movement. I also map Avey's connection to the vernacular tradition that serves as a conduit to the larger African Diaspora, which in turn reaffirms a connection to an original root and, therefore, a continued connection to a diverse global community. Marshall does this by using the specificity of Caribbean folk culture as a bridge for the African Americans to reidentify with both African, Caribbean and African-American folk traditions. Doing so allows one location and national identity to open up possibilities for other diasporic identities. Belinda Edmondson addresses the main character, Avey, and her circular journey to her own cultural background, stating "She [Avey] has utilized the Caribbean experience to effect her completion as an *African American*."¹

Although Avey's Caribbean experience does serve as a launch point from which she begins her intra-cultural journey, I argue that in the context of identity formation, cultural bridges between members of the African diaspora tend to claim the global community as a path to emphasize the specificity of the local identity. I will also be exploring how ritual is employed as a strategy for diversifying community within the African diaspora.

Piers, Boats and Diasporic Signifiers of *Return*

Marshall's literary employment of boat piers in the Caribbean, New York and Tatem become transnational signifiers of multiple *returns* in the text. These locales give Avey the occasion to be reflective, allowing her the opportunity to connect with parallel personal experiences of her past, while also serving to host Diasporic encounters. The reader is first introduced to this node of cultural affiliation through a memory that is sparked by Avey witnessing the Carriacou Out-Islanders piling into boats to attend the annual excursion back to their homeland. It is in this context of observing another culture's ritual *return* that Avey unearths her own memories of similar American and African rituals of return.

During her second visit to the pier in Grenada, Avey sees the throng of Out-Islanders moving toward the boats, but this time it seems more familiar, "less strange" because she is able to reference a node of cultural affiliation. The moment on the pier in the Caribbean becomes a Diasporic encounter for Avey, signifying one of many ritual returns; significantly this first metaphoric return is back to continental Africa. It resonates with Avey because it recalls images, sounds and colors of Africa -- an Africa that she only knows through a movie screen. Africa becomes a reference point for Avey

through the medium of her daughter, Marion, who retraces the Middle Passage making a ritual return to continental Africa in efforts to do community outreach. Marion exposes Avey to the rituals and images of Ghana through her film documentation of her travels. Therefore, these are the initial images that Avey recalls as she witnesses the Out-Islanders. Marion's connection to the folk rituals of both African American and continental African cultures is potent in this context of Avey's identification of diasporic connections. In the text, Marion is characterized as the opposite of Avey in terms of her connection to black vernacular culture — as Avey unconsciously disconnects from those elements of the vernacular culture, Marion seeks to privilege those vernacular connections in her life. Therefore, it is significant that the first associations that Avey has to understand the Out-Islanders, and their ritual return to Carriacou, is through her own family as represented through Marion.

Ironically, Marshall characterizes the conception of Marion as representative of a loss of connection to the folk element in Avey's life. As the unplanned child that Avey unsuccessfully attempted to abort, her pregnancy with Marion brought on a depression that ultimately brought on her loss of a spiritual connection--as represented in the vernacular traditions--to herself and the people in her life, including her husband Jerome. It was during this pregnancy that she fell into a paranoia born of the depression that resulted in her interminably questioning Jay's fidelity, until he finally broke on that "near-fatal day."² As Jay shifted to meet her aggression with the same, this argument took them to the breaking point of their relationship. The vernacular tradition fell victim that Tuesday night, as a casualty to the challenges of their relationship. After that night, the small vernacular rituals: listening to the blues, yearly returns down south, believing

the story of the Ibos, telling jokes, dancing and that secret casual language that sustained and protected them disappeared and these things were replaced by the new rituals of the upwardly mobile: formal language as Jay turned to Jerome, university classes, studying and extra jobs.

This loss of their connection to the elements of the vernacular tradition is clearly noted in the text:

The yearly trip south became a thing of the past following that Tuesday in the living room. So did the trips they used to regularly make over to Harlem to see their old friends, and the occasional dance they would treat themselves to. All such was soon supplanted by the study manuals, the self-improvement books, the heavy sample case containing the vacuum cleaner. And the man Jay used to become at home, who was giving to his wry jokes and banter, whose arms used to surprise her as they circled her from behind, gradually went into eclipse during the years following that near-fatal day.³

Marion's very existence in Avey's belly brought them to the brink of survival as a couple and their efforts to persevere through the strain of supporting an expanding family on meager incomes, marked the beginning of the end of their connection to elements of the vernacular tradition and to each other. Therefore, the fact that Marion is characterized as working within the rejected elements of the black community with her "sweetest lepers," and traveling throughout the Diaspora to places like Brazil and Ghana doing community work, allows her to embody global black vernacular traditions and valorize those within Avey's family.⁴

Consequently, Marion represents both a cautionary figure for the unconscious loss of connection to the global black vernacular traditions and a representation of a conscious reconnection to those traditions. Therefore, as Avey attempts to reconcile the images of the Out-Islanders with something that is familiar to her in effort to understand this

cultural ritual, it is important to note that the first reference point that she uses consists of African images of rituals that Marion exposed her to. Even those images of African myths and rituals serve to signify unity within the diverse ethnicities of Ghana.⁵ In this way, Marion becomes a bridge of return/reconnection to those aspects of the vernacular tradition which serve as global diasporic reference points for Avey.

The diasporic encounter on the pier in Grenada not only links her to images of Africa, but also to personal memories of voyages she had taken as a child in New York. She remembers waiting with her family and community on a pier to embark on the Robert Fulton for a boat ride up the Hudson. These ritual journeys that her family and community took paralleled the journey of the Out-Islanders as a special occasion which required annual purchases of new clothing and traditional food to mark this ritual moment whose purpose was to reinforce communal bonds. These traveling journeys signify the prevalence of continual movement of African descendants throughout the Diaspora. As she recalls in Grenada, “[T]he surging crowd, the rapidly filling boats, the sheen of sunlight on the water were reminiscent of something. And slowly it came to her, *drifting up out of the void* she sensed in her: the annual boat ride up the Hudson River to Bear Mountain.”⁶ This memory that Avey is able to recover is filling the *void* that she has been plagued by since the Aunt Cuney-inspired unease came upon her before she abandoned the cruise ship. As Avey is able to connect her experience as a child in New York to the experiences of the Out-Islanders on their annual excursion in the Caribbean, she is able to fill the void that she is experiencing through realigning those two realities. A reconnection between the black experience in North America and the black experience of the Caribbean heals the historical cultural disruption created by the Atlantic slave trade

both on an individual level and on a larger communal scale for all blacks in the Americas.

Marshall takes this metaphor even further than the New World when she defines the unspoken goal of the social event up the Hudson River:

And they weren't just going to this place, wherever it was, whatever its name, just to loll on the grass and eat fried chicken and potato salad and to nap or play bid whist during the afternoon heat. But to lay claim: "*We gon' put on our robes and shout all over God's heaven!*" Boat rides up the Hudson were always about something that momentous and global.⁷

It is clear that this communal ritual, regardless of the particulars of its experience, engendered an opportunity for the participants to lay claim to each other and to proclaim that diverse communal identity to a global audience. The function of this ritual is to both define individual and communal identity on both a local and global scale.

The memory of her ritual family boat ride up the Hudson River unlocks another memory of her Aunt Cuney and the rituals of the Gullah in Tatem. As illustrated in the text,

[W]aiting for the Robert Fulton to heave into sight, she would have the same strange sensation as when she stood beside her great-aunt outside the church in Tatem, watching the elderly folk inside perform the Ring Shout.⁸

This is the third reference point that Avey uses to understand the Out-Islanders and their return. It is noteworthy that it is from this vantage point, outside the church and outside the Ring Shout circle, that Avey uses to connect to her experience in the Caribbean.

In many ways Avey's experience on the pier in Grenada embodies her insider/outsider role within the communities she navigates. In Tatem, she occupied that role because she came from the north to be indoctrinated into the traditions of the south via her Aunt Cuney. In Grenada, she is a tourist, marking her as an observer but the Out-Islanders have marked her as a participant in their ritual, and she eventually becomes a

conscious participant. Finally, on the pier in New York, because of Avey's youth, she functions as an observer of this communal ritual who imagines herself as a participant via the connection to her parents along with the instinctual kinship she feels with the diverse groups of African Diasporic subjects.⁹ This participant/observer, insider/outsider status gives Avey fluidity within both her personal identity and her communal identity. Writer Stacy Morgan advances this insider/outsider identity construction:

[I]n their retelling by subsequent generations of African Americans these narratives [stories of Ibo Landing] actually can engender a sentimental attachment to place. Framing specific diasporic places as sites of resistance at least as much as generating empathy for an African ancestral home, the performance of these narratives maintains a sense of identity which is both "inside" and "outside" of broader American and African identities simultaneously.¹⁰

Marshall's positioning of Avey allows her the possibility to connect disparate communities of the African Diaspora through these nodes of cultural affiliation while also giving her enough distance to recognize the essentialized notions of black identity. Through Avey's insider/outsider status, the reader is able to see both the specificity of each particular ethnic community in the text and the confluence between them.

Ibo Landing, like the other piers in New York and Grenada functions as a location for Diasporic encounters, reconnecting rituals and members of the African Diaspora. The location of Ibo Landing has particular significance in the text because it is linked to the mythic story of the Ibos:

[T]he Ibo's Landing and Flying Africans narratives constitute a touchstone of African American identity in the Sea Islands region. In particular, these narratives engage issues attendant to the "origin" of African American culture if one interprets this historical moment of origin as deriving directly out the Middle Passage and arrival of Africans in the Western Hemisphere.¹¹

This story reveals the theme of return as it outlines the Ibo's arrival as slaves in the Americas. Through their special powers of foresight they saw their fate in the future brutality of slavery. They resisted this future of subjugation and insisted on self-determination through miraculously walking on water back to Africa.¹²

As Ibo Landing acts as another pier for diasporic encounters, it also functions as an international reference point of return through the oral tradition associated with this space. These moments on the piers, like Ibo Landing, privilege themes of mobility and return that serve to trace Diasporic cultural affiliation. The reader is transported from the Caribbean (e.g. Grenada, Carriacou), to West African Ghana, to the American North (New York) and American South (Tatem); ultimately even the final reference point in the South brings the reader full circle by gesturing back toward Africa as Ibo Landing represents the locale that the slaves departed from to walk back to Africa. "In these tales, the rhetorical figures of slavery and resistance to slavery provide generative points of reference for the narrative construction of identity."¹³ Folklorists and ethnographers see the Ibo story as an *origin* narrative, claiming an African ancestry in "direct contestation of considerable societal pressures to downplay this aspect of their heritage."¹⁴ Marshall capitalizes on this origin narrative to ground her protagonist in a place and a people. These piers represent metaphors of travel that function to reconnect the elements of the African Diaspora through their rituals of deliverance and return.

Webs of Kinship and Creation

The web/thread metaphor used in *Praisesong* is another distinct way Marshall dramatizes the cultural and historical connections between African Diasporic subjects. The reader is taken on this international journey through Avey's childhood memory of an

intimate moment of community connection, as she recalls her memory on a pier in New York:

As more people arrived to throng the area beside the river and the cool morning air warmed to the greetings and talk, she would feel what seemed to be hundreds of slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her. *And the threads went out not only to people she recognized from the neighborhood but to those she didn't know as well, such as the roomers just up from the South and the small group of West Indians.*¹⁵

As the transnational symbolism of the pier traces a history that reveals the diversity of the black experience in the Americas, the web metaphor works to create bridges between those disparate experiences.

The web as a literary metaphor expresses the traces of cultural affiliation, which are mobilized in negotiating both local and transnational identity. The connection that Avey feels to the community she is both familiar with and those that she doesn't know but yet still feels connected to, is a transnational moment in the text. In this instance, Avey feels a sense of community with those around her. It is important to note that Avey is only able to access that community around her through first accessing her own personal identity within her family dynamic. This boat ride is an annual family event that affirms Avey's sense of her individual identity. It is from observing her parents together during this communal excursion that she gets her own sense of who she is. As Avey watches her parents embrace, her young mind is able to make the connection that she and her brothers were born from that embrace. As the text illustrates:

That night, standing and watching them along with her brothers and the other children crowded near the bandstand, she had felt her body flush hot and cold in turns, and she had understood something for the first time, the knowledge coming to her like one of the stars above the boat *bursting in a shower of splintered light inside her*: simply, that it was out of this

holding and clasping, out of the cut-eyes and the private smiles that she and her brothers had come.¹⁶

Avey's revelation comes to her from reading the private language of her parents as they dance. Her knowledge of this connection is characterized as a *splintering light*, denoting its potential for expansion. It is within those primary connections that Avey is able to recognize the potential of extending her sense of community. This is a transformative moment in the text; it is that possibility of family extending itself through this private language, that Avey realizes she can be the source of that expansion.

Indeed, this annual excursion sponsored by the "neighborhood social club"¹⁷ brought together the diverse community of blacks in New York. As Avey is able to see herself as the source of creating community, she imagines *hundreds of slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her*,¹⁸ and that sense of kinship is extended to the rest of the community. It is in the context of the intimate familial embrace that one is able to turn that connection/affiliation outward to encompass both those that share your same experience and those who don't but still are part of one's community. As a child, Avey felt this invisible connection to "roomers just up from the South and the small group of West Indians whose odd accent called to mind Gullah talk and who it was said were as passionate about their rice as her father."¹⁹ These two geographical areas: the American South and the West Indies are of primary significance as they signify two New World destinations of the Atlantic slave trade. Moreover, within the text they represent Avey's connection to her extended family in Tatem, South Carolina as embodied through Aunt Cuney and her own efforts to (re)connect to the experience of the Out-Islanders in Carriacou. The web that connects her from her site of origin (navel) and source of life

(heart), to representatives of the American South and the West Indies, bridges the cultural connections between these sites.

These connections are clear throughout the text as the reader discovers that it was the accents of the Caribbean that lead to her first dream of her Aunt Cuney on the cruise ship. Likewise, it was those West Indian accents from her annual excursion that lead her to reconnect to the memory of the Gullah talk from her own family down south.

Marshall uses language as a transnational reference point of cultural affiliation within the African Diaspora.²⁰ In the lecture “Language is the only Homeland,” Marshall speaks directly to language acting as a transnational link in her novels. She identifies this use of language as being a by-product of sitting in the kitchen and listening to discussions and story-telling techniques used by her mother and her friends -- the Mother Poets -- the literary mentors of her childhood:

All that talk on an afternoon about Garvey and his ships, the constant references to Africa, the West Indies and poor beleaguered Ethiopia; all those discussions of national and international events pertaining to the race, fostered in me at an early age a sense of being connected to a vast world of peoples of colour, whose struggles were mine also. The Mother Poets made that world part of my consciousness from the beginning. Later, it would become central to my thinking as a writer. Because of them, I could never view the concept of self-liberation and personal empowerment apart from the larger liberation and empowerment of the group, community and nation.²¹

Although dialect serves as a cultural point of affiliation throughout the novel, it is just a starting point of black vernacular culture. Food, song and dance are also classified as part of the private language of black vernacular culture that Marshall also uses as a way to read kinship connections throughout the Diaspora. There are multiple paths of diasporic reconnection in the novel and the access to those paths runs through the world of vernacular culture.

The web that emerges from Avey's navel also gestures the reader toward a blood connection to her origins, both her familial roots and a connection that goes even further back to her African ancestors. It is significant that the web metaphor is employed in the context of a pending boat journey, since it is during *the* boat journey (the Middle Passage) that these various black identities originally connected. This moment on the pier reenacts the original embarking of the diverse Africans who were assembled by colonial powers to fuel the Atlantic slave trade. The kidnapped Africans, who sailed the Middle Passage, did not share the same language or ethnicity but yet they did share the same fate. Through that voyage across the Middle Passage, they became one community who would forever be united through this one historical moment regardless of their eventual dispersal throughout the Americas and Europe. Although Avey's annual trip down the Hudson does not have the bitter reality of the Middle Passage, it does reflect a moment of transnational recognition of the diversity of the African Diasporic community. Through this reflective stance, Marshall inserts intra-ethnic diversity into the global conversation of black identity.

This diversity further plays out as Marshall uses the web metaphor not only to connect the various sites within the Diaspora but also to give texture to the various Diasporic experiences. She does this by characterizing the web as indiscriminately connecting to those on the pier. Avey notes that the threads that emanate from her "even" enter the rowdy, disreputable types. This recognition of her inability to choose whom she is connected to speaks to the basis of that web connection. It is not necessarily based on national origins or actual family bonds; it is a connection that is born of a racial identification that is produced through a shared historical experience and an active

political will. These cultural connections are also founded on the primacy of shared values and the foundational relationship between those values and the ideology and aesthetics created from those values and history. This diversity is illustrated as Avery goes into more details about the web, “She visualized the threads as being silken, like those used in the embroidery on a summer dress, and of a *hundred different colors*.”²²

The symbolic use of the multicolored threads connecting the protagonist to the various members of the Diaspora further enhances this depiction of the diverse texture of the Diaspora. This metaphor speaks to the modes of connection throughout the Diaspora being as diverse as the members themselves, including cultural, linguistical, experiential and geo-political specificity. This shared historical experience of duress creates particular patterns of cultural negotiation, which is revealed in a Diasporic aesthetic. Through the web metaphor, Marshall is able to mediate and validate both the diversity within the Diaspora and the kinship.

In Marshall’s dramatization, she also emphasizes the reciprocal nature of that transnational connection. The reciprocity of that recognizable connection reveals another component of what creates that sense of community for the Diaspora. As Avey goes on to note,

Then it would seem to her that she had it all wrong and the threads didn’t come from her, but from them, from everyone on the pier, including the rowdies, issuing out from their navels and hearts to stream into her as she stood there...²³

The reciprocal nature of her connection to the others, returns the reader to the ability of this community to expand, not only from the protagonist’s active will, but also from the larger community toward the individual. If we take that supposition to its natural conclusion, then one could deduce that it is not enough for a member of the African

Diaspora to recognize a node of cultural affiliation in order to feel membership in that community; it is also necessary that members of the Diaspora mutually recognize those reference points of affiliation as part of their community. This moment of reciprocal recognitions is based on a folk literacy that is identified on both ends of the thread. In the text, one can surmise that diasporic membership is extended out to you if you have the ability to recognize reference points and are recognizable. In this sense, claiming an African Diasporic identity becomes a point of political will for both the individual and the global black community.

Marshall further substantiates the nature of that communal connection as she characterizes Avey as clearly *recognizable* during that transnational moment on the pier in Grenada and in New York. Avey is actually unsettled because of the assumption of kinship shown toward her by the Out-Islanders:

There was a familiarity, almost an intimacy, to their gestures of greeting and the unintelligible words they called out which she began to find puzzling, and then even faintly irritating the longer it went on. The problem was, she decided, none of them seemed aware of the fact that she was a stranger, a visitor, a tourist, although *this should have been obvious from the way she was dressed and the set of matching luggage at her side*. But from the way they were acting she could have been simply one of them there on the wharf.²⁴

The reader witnesses the heroine's unfounded assumption that her class has somehow made her unrecognizable to other Diasporic subjects. Heidi Macpherson in *Women's Travel Writing and the Politics of Location: Somewhere In-Between* speaks to this moment as Avey, "wraps her middle-class status about her like a cloak, fending off racial allegiances that disturb her carefully maintained distance."²⁵ Although Avey maps her class as distance and is clearly uncomfortable with this level of intimacy and recognition, it is her mutual recognition of the Out-Islanders that helps to initiate her emotional

reconnection to her own past and distinguish the parallels between the African American and Afro-Caribbean experiences.

Marshall continues to uncover the depth of the reciprocal nature of the Diasporic community as she characterizes the web functioning as “lifelines” to young Avey.²⁶ Her trust in the strength of those reciprocal connections in the text is portrayed as secure enough to risk her life on as she imagines jumping out into the Hudson river, even though she can’t swim and trusting that, “The moment she began to founder those on shore would simply pull on the silken threads and haul her in.”²⁷ At a young age, Avey has confidence in the certainty and reliability of this relationship. Her statement reveals her connection to these Diasporic identities as potential salvation. Moreover, Avey deduces that the security of that connection indicates a sense of kinship between her and those on the pier, as Marshall describes Avey’s perception of that moment:

While the impression lasted she would cease being herself, a mere girl in a playsuit made out of the same material as her mother’s dress, someone small, insignificant, outnumbered, the object of her youngest brother’s endless teasing; instead, for those moments, *she became part of, indeed the center of, a huge wide confraternity.*²⁸

It is in this instance of mutual recognition and reclamation that Avey is able to shift her identity from her limited family role into the center of the larger communal identity of the African Diaspora. Again, mutual recognition allows the protagonist to expand her sense of community and renegotiate her role within that community. Mutual recognition of those transnational nodes of affiliation is a prerequisite for membership in the African Diasporic community and allows for the Diasporic subject to negotiate the dialectic between the individual and the community.

Towards the end of the novel, Marshall returns the reader to these moments of Avey's expansion of kinship webs, but this time Avey has matured. When Avey joins in as a participant to the Carriacou Big Drum ritual, these feelings of kinship resurface:

Now, suddenly, as if she were that girl again, with her entire life yet to live, she felt the threads streaming out from the old people around her in Lebert Joseph's yard. From their seared eyes. From their navels and their cast-iron hearts. *And their brightness as they entered her spoke of possibilities and becoming even in the face of the bare bones and the burnt-out ends.*²⁹

During this instance, Avey is again receiving these lines of cultural recognition from another community that she originally feels foreign to. Through accepting their invitation to participate, Avey reconnects to her inner child, who remains responsive to the mystical nature of the world around her. It is clear from the quote above that these diverse threads that connect Avey to the larger diaspora are *signifying* survival methods.³⁰ The *possibilities and becoming* that these strands speak of, mark a diversity inherent in the complex racial, spiritual and cultural negotiations that take place for a community to survive.

To Walk: A Journey to the Self and the Signposts of Cultural Memory

Avey's road to self-discovery is littered with the amalgamation of both local and transnational signifiers of black identity. Each mutually recognizable Diasporic encounter in the text allows for the protagonist to identify parallels within the Diasporic experience and illuminate the particularities of her own ethnic experience. Because these transnational sites of affiliation produce culturally specific reference points of understanding, from the pier in Grenada Avey is also able to reconnect with her memories of her ritual return down south to Tatem to visit her Aunt Cuney. The rituals of Tatem are also connected by the literary trope of mobility, and another transnational

pier -- Ibo Landing -- which links them to the larger African Diasporic community.

Within Avey's family, her annual trip down south is seen as a ritual reclamation of her identity by her great-aunt Cuney. Marshall registers this ritual reclamation of identity, through reporting that as young Avey makes the trip down south, her identity transforms from Avey to *Avatara*, her birth name. This transformation also signifies a shift in Avey's role within the community -- similar to her experience on the pier in New York -- as she travels south there is an expansion from her role within her immediate family to a larger role that she plays within the community of Tatem. In Tatem, Avey is primarily identified through her connection to Aunt Cuney and by extension to her great-great-great grandmother, Avatara. Avey must negotiate the history of her family in Tatem to understand the extended role of her identity down south. Marshall reveals this extended role of Avatara to the reader through further emphasizing the trope of mobility in Aunt Cuney's and Avey's ritual trek out to Ibo Landing. Aunt Cuney is able to reconnect Avey to these histories by way of a walking meditation out to Ibo Landing, which affords her the opportunity to teach Avey the rituals, folklore and history of that community.

In the text, Marshall narrates Tatem as an alternative space with an alternative system of values, as represented by Aunt Cuney. Cuney's ritual walk out to Ibo Landing and the cultural information she passes onto Avey is testimony to "another way of knowing things."³¹ Toni Morrison discusses how these realms are not always recognized by the larger society as having intrinsic cultural knowledge that could benefit the whole of society; that this was "discredited knowledge" because "Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was 'discredited.'"³² She goes on to note that those who enacted, "the press toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from

that kind of knowledge as possible.”³³ In this text, this other way of knowing functions in an alternative space that equates communal folk knowledge to *credited* forms of knowledge. The reader is first introduced to Aunt Cuney through Avey’s dream that links Cuney to the specificity of her location -- Tatem:

Yet there she had been in her sleep, standing waiting for her on the road that lead over to the Landing. A hand raised, her face hidden beneath her wide-brimmed field hat, she was motioning for her to come on the walk that had been a ritual with them during the Augusts she had spent as a girl on Tatem Island, just across from Beaufort, on the South Carolina Tidewater.³⁴

Rather than creating a purely fictional location, Marshall bases Tatem on the real location of the Sea Islands off South Carolina, which carries heavy symbolic weight within African American cultural history. Marshall’s use of this location as an icon of the deep South is important in the context of black cultural identity in the U.S. Rather than using a well-known southern town or city to locate the protagonist’s southern roots, Marshall uses a unique site with an uncommon history in the U.S. The Sea Islands are distinguished in the African American pantheon of communities as one such locale that has the special notoriety of maintaining more of an untouched cultural continuum because of its physical isolation from the mainland. In the same way that segregation maintained a certain isolation of Black communities – which, in turn, maintained an intimate knowledge of shared identity and strife -- the Sea Islands occupy a space where the past and the present meet to create a particularity of experience distinguished from other experiences of blackness in the U.S. The physical isolation and stigmatization of the islands created both a linguistically, culturally and historically distinct ethnic community of African Americans, the Gullahs/Geechee.³⁵ Due to some aspects of self-sufficiency, the Gullahs were able to keep a firm hold onto their dialect, folklore and

spiritual beliefs, in contrast to their southern counterparts who were dispersed in the Great Migration and challenged to learn new ways of being. Writing in the late early eighties, Marshall's use of this location introduces the reader to a different history of blacks in the U.S. who are not only connected to the land of the South but who also maintain a vibrant cultural connection to continental Africa. The Sea Islands are communities which exist at the crossroads of these two cultural realities, refusing to sacrifice either and actively preserving both.

Tatem serves as a specter marking the site of dislocation for an *old diaspora* that mobilized in efforts to escape the history of slavery.³⁶ In the text, the memories of the South are distinguished because of the stark differences between Avey's northern existence in the urban center of New York -- and the rural realities of the Sea Islands. Her annual return to the South creates a path to some of the buried history of the South and her own personal history that is passed onto to her. Tatem is both home and not home for Avey, both familiar and strange. The mention of a geographical return to the South conjures up images of pastoral comforts and the remnants of slavery. For Northern blacks, the South functions as a psychic reference of nostalgia and regret; it is simultaneously what they are attracted to and repulsed by; things familiar and things actively forgotten. Aunt Cuney represents all that the South symbolizes of the past and as a critique of Avey's present life in the North. Marshall's characterization of both Tatem and New York allows both sites to become characters in the text and Avey must negotiate with the symbolic weight of these locations throughout her search for selfhood in the novel.

Her movement through the community of Tatem parallels the markers of African American history and her own personal history. Marshall narrates Avey as both an individual and a representative of the collective as she takes the reader through this journey that reconnects Avey to both individual and communal elements of her identity. Avey's journey is both psychic and physical as she follows her great-aunt through the markers of history that they pass on the physical trek out to Ibo Landing. This trek is ritualized through the rich oral tradition that has marked Aunt Cuney as the bearer of culture -- the person who must pass the story on. And just as it has marked Aunt Cuney in Avey's mind, it has also marked Avey as the sole audience and repository of that oral tradition.

Throughout the ritual walk, Avey is introduced to historical markers in Tatem. Although these markers seem to indicate localized historical moments, indeed these are transnational signifiers of a shared history and Diasporic identity. The first physical historical marker they cross is the former property of Shad Dawson -- representing the inequities of black life in a white world. Owning a large track of land, Dawson was victimized by institutional racism:

The first leg on their walk took them along the road which bordered the large wood belonging to their neighbor, Shad Dawson. Once past the wood which Shad Dawson was to lose eventually to the white man in Beaufort whom he had entrusted to pay his taxes for him...³⁷

The lack of recourse for Mr. Dawson speaks to the many institutionalized injustices that survive in the contemporary setting. His loss of hard-won land in the south, dramatizes the limits of personal agency even for those blacks who were able to acquire resources. It also gestures toward the inequities that have taken place in the negotiations between whites and blacks worldwide, with residual suggestions of continental Africans losing

land to colonizers through institutional manipulations. This moment in the text plays in stark contrast to Avey's current northern experience of being part of the land owning black bourgeois of New York.

When one juxtaposes the two land owning males in the text, Mr. Dawson and her late husband Jerome, they stand in sharp contrast. Jerome identifies himself as a black man who would never trust his fate to the white world. This contrast is revealed in Jerome's statement, "That is the trouble with half these Negroes you see out here. Always looking for the white man to give them something instead of getting out and doing for themselves..."³⁸ Even when experiencing clear-cut discrimination from white institutions as an up-and-coming accountant, he ultimately sees the discrimination he suffers as his fault for being "naïve" in counting on white society to be fair when it is "their country."³⁹ Avey's personal history is distinguished by this physical and psychic move from being one of *them* -- the Dawsons of the world, who live in Brooklyn on Halsey St., in Harlem or down South in Tatem, verses being one of the upwardly mobile who live in North White Plains and who sacrificed elements of themselves to have their *own*. Ironically, economic class divisions serve to both limit and increase the mobility of the protagonist. On one hand, the reader is witness to this sacrificial choice as Avey and Jerome's connection to their past -- yearly journeys to the South and their regular trips to see their friends in Harlem -- were forfeited to concentrate on having their *own*.⁴⁰ On another hand, Avey's privileged position as part of the New York black bourgeoisie is what gave her the ability to go on those annual cruises down through the Caribbean. And although the way that Avey maps class as distance is beyond the scope of this dissertation, Dawson's former property stands as a symbol of the distance traveled by

Avey to negotiate the inequities of black life in a white world and the losses and gains of those negotiations.⁴¹

Avey's journey of psychic and physical reconnection continues as her Aunt Cuney walks her past another symbolic marker in Tatem -- the Church/school -- the formal institution of black communities and the center of black social, cultural and spiritual life in the Americas. The southern Black Church resonates as one of the only sites of limited freedom within the south because of its approved religion shared by the white majority -- Christianity. What is significant about the church in Tatem is that it hosted the Ring Shout. Historically, the amalgamation of the Church and the Ring Shout crosses the traditional division between Christianity and vestiges of African spiritual rituals that have been traditionally seen as unholy in the Americas. Christianity was given to the slaves to replace African spiritual rituals, so the use of both spiritual traditions in tandem speaks to the surviving alternative space created by the slaves and maintained by their descendants. Margaret Creel discusses the origins of the Ring Shout, noting, "The background of the Gullah Ring Shout, a manifestation of possession trance, was West African in origin and an important characteristic of the initiation process."⁴² This African traditional ritual was transplanted to the Americas, and transposed into the Christian ritual traditions. Creel goes on to further speak of the role that the Ring Shout played within the Gullah slave communities and how they mixed both the African and the American ritual traditions to come up with their own alternative space of value and spirituality:

Thus, the shout ritual, among other things, can be seen as a cathartic which enabled slaves to act out tensions, anxieties, and suppressed facets of themselves in an approved manner. While Gullahs considered the shout to be a religious, even Christian practice, it was their own creation. At the

Praise House, shouts only took place after service had ended and the benediction announced. Also, while Gullahs sang Methodist and Baptist hymns at the praise meetings, when time came for a shout, the slaves sang only their own spirituals.⁴³

Although these two spiritual traditions have long lived side-by-side, supplementing each other, Creel identifies a cultural distinction between the ways in which the Christian and African American rituals were practiced. James Weldon Johnson most famously talked about the spiritual distinction of the Ring Shout within black communities, as he reflects:

I remember, too, that even then the “ring shout” was looked upon as a very questionable form of worship. It was distinctly frowned upon by a great many colored people. Indeed, I do not recall ever seeing a “ring shout” except *after* the regular services. Almost whispered invitations would go around, “Stay after church: there’s going to be a ‘ring shout.’” The more educated ministers and members, as fast as they were able to brave the primitive element in the churches, placed a ban on the “ring shout.”⁴⁴

Significantly, Johnson points out the internal class divisions within black culture as the background context for the eventual permanent separation between the Christian church and the Ring Shout ritual. Therefore the cultural significance of the Ring Shout becomes paradoxical. It signifies African cultural survivals, an amalgamation of Christian and African spiritual traditions that functions as a survival strategy, and an intra-ethnic point of divergence based on class and education.

Within the text, the integration of the Ring Shout within the Church equates both spiritual traditions -- one is not unsanctioned and marginalized within the community. As a result, both spiritual practices are validated in the African Diaspora’s psyche, both from the cultural origin in Africa to the current lived experience in the Americas. In the text, Cuney lets it be known that she values both equally as she juxtaposes the oral tradition of the Ibos to Christianity, equating both systems of faith. This is best illustrated when Aunt

Cuney is questioned by Avey about the impossibility of the Ibos walking on water. Aunt Cuney retorts:

AUNT CUNEY: "Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday School book your momma always sends with you?"

AVEY: "No, ma'am."

AUNT CUNEY: "I din' think so. You got any more questions?"⁴⁵

This response equates the black oral tradition to the western Christian tradition, ultimately positing both as fundamental truths to their respected communities and, therefore, seen as beyond questioning.

Through employing the myth of Ibo Landing, Marshall further validates an alternative system of belief and value that is specific to a black cultural identity in the New World. This literary move also actively validates the codependence of this relationship between the West and Africa. This narrative gesture asserts that neither tradition is whole on its own for New World Africans, but each tradition's fate and survival is necessarily linked to the other. Sterling Stuckey writes about the symbiotic nature of this relationship, "In short, African and European political as well as religious ideals at times mingled and were united, the one preparing the ground for the other."⁴⁶ Marshall is able to address these cross-cultural relationships through her narration of the church that hosts the Ring Shout and Aunt Cuney's relationship to both the Ring Shout and Ibo Landing.

Marshall's unification in the narration of these of these two distinct spiritual traditions, the Ring Shout and Christianity, can be seen as a strategic fusion of the two disparate aspects of the African Diasporic spiritual identity. One might deduce from this positioning, that the Ring Shout being held in the church is a metaphor of African Diasporic cultural identity. Inasmuch as the vernacular traditions and rituals based on

African survivals, serve as the centralized building blocks for the New World interpretations of community and spirituality. Accordingly, in the text, the connection between what was and what is serves as a mandatory requirement for a holistic sense of community for Avey and by extension within the African Diaspora.

Marshall takes intra-ethnic diversity a step further in her narration of Aunt Cuney as an outsider to this model of merged spiritual traditions. The symbolism of the church is complex as it both unites and divides different components of African Diasporic identity -- functioning as both the salvation and the condemnation of black communities. Marshall distinguishes the equivocal symbolism of the black church through her characterization of Aunt Cuney's marginalization within the church. Avey gets introduced to the Ring Shout through her Aunt Cuney's marginalization to it:

Some nights, though, when they held the Shouts she would go to stand, unreconciled but nostalgic, on the darkened road across from the church, taking Avey with her if it was August. Through the open door the handful of elderly men and women still left, and who still held to the old ways, could be seen slowly circling the room in a loose ring.⁴⁷

In the text, Aunt Cuney's position is outside of the church looking in because she had been "caught 'crossing her feet' in a Ring Shout being held there and had been ordered out of the circle."⁴⁸ Aunt Cuney's improvisation in the Ring Shout is historically significant. The Ring Shout is characterized by the participants shuffling in a circle while singing spirituals. Like many rituals, the steps are methodical, rhythmic and timeless.⁴⁹ Creel speaks about this consistent element of the Ring Shout within the Gullah tradition, "The steps never changed and even after freedom the shout was not altered by maneuvers that might have been learned at a "worldly dance." A watchful leader made sure that the feet were never crossed."⁵⁰ This is an important moment in the

text because Aunt Cuney is the bearer of the oral tradition in the text, and her position outside of the circle is emblematic of Marshall recording a historical shift toward marginalization of folk knowledge based on difference even within the alternative spaces of black communities.

The *new* step Aunt Cuney attempts to integrate into the Ring Shout is symbolic of a difference that she represents in her community. Interestingly, Creel discusses how it was actually the Methodist and Baptist missionaries seeking to convert the Gullah slaves, who imposed the hard and fast rule against crossing one's feet, because elements of "worldly entertainment" were strictly forbidden within their forms of Christian worship. If one is to view Aunt Cuney's transgression within the historical context, then her integration of a dance move into this spiritual exercise can be viewed as a reclamation of the African tradition of dance within worship, and a rejection of the imposed New World limitations on her spiritual expression. When Aunt Cuney is caught crossing her feet she first resists the rejection of the community by denying her difference. Then she quickly shifts to validating the difference by contextualizing it within the Christian tradition itself:

But she had refused to leave, denying at first that she had been dancing, then claiming it had been the Spirit moving powerfully in her which had caused her to forget and cross her feet. She had even tried brazening it out: 'Hadn't David danced before the Lord?'⁵¹

As shown, Aunt Cuney first suggests that it was the potency of the spirit which moved her to transgress. This implies that her spiritual encounters move her beyond the earthly practices into some closer communion with her spirituality. Her second explanation is that she indeed is honoring the Christian tradition as she refuses to acknowledge the crossing of the feet as a transgression but rather as aligned within the Christian tradition

as she parallels herself to David's offerings to God. Cuney's explanations are interesting in that they offer insight into both the limitations and possibilities for diversity within the African-American cultural identities. I offer that Cuney's transgression symbolizes a black feminist difference in literature by inserting change in cultural traditions and validating them within the tradition itself. Cuney's improvisation functions to expand notions of the vernacular tradition and rejects the notion of a static tradition. This gesture offers an introduction to new ways of thinking and being that both challenges and reaffirms traditions. It is Aunt Cuney's efforts to introduce this change that speaks to Marshall's strategic identification of diverse intra-ethnic identities as she refunctions the folk tradition to embrace internal differentiation within the black community. Through this literary move, Marshall not only introduces diversity within her narrative of black communities, but also calls into question elements of the status quo within the discourse of black identity.

However, this positioning on the parameters of community doesn't extract Aunt Cuney or Avey from membership within the community. On the contrary, her marginalization allows her to pass on the tradition to Avey and to have considerable influence as she imparts the information. As Avey stands by her side on the outskirts of the church and learns the music and the movements of the Ring Shout, she continues Aunt Cuney's interpretation of the nature of the Ring Shout, as the text bears out:

It wasn't supposed to be dancing, yet to Avey, standing beside the old woman, it held something of the look, and *it felt like dancing in her blood*, so that under cover of the darkness she performed in place the little rhythmic trudge.⁵²

Moreover, Aunt Cuney's outsider position creates opportunity for the cultivation of the oral tradition regarding Ibo Landing as she ritualizes the space "[making] the Landing her

religion after that.”⁵³ For Aunt Cuney, the story of Ibo Landing becomes her ontological belief system that she passes down to Avey and that Avey passes down to her family, “Back home after only her first summer in Tatem she had recounted the whole thing almost word for word to her three brothers, complete with the old woman’s inflections and gestures.”⁵⁴ And as religion rescues people from the chaos of secular life, the ritual walk out to Ibo Landing and the oral narrative that accompanies it also functions to create a sacred space that functions to both empower Cuney and create a safe space with an alternative system of values. Faith in Aunt Cuney’s ontological belief system, represented by the Ibo story, potentially delineates those who maintain a connection to the black vernacular forms of authority from those who adopt the authority of the larger social structure. For example, Jerome claims early in his marriage to Avey that he believes Aunt Cuney’s story of Ibo Landing. His identification with the story reveals his connection to the south, perhaps indicating maintenance of one’s own cultural roots and authority. This was, of course, before the loss and disconnection between Avey and her husband and the eclipsing of his own identity in the struggle to achieve the American Dream, trading one mythological tradition for another.

In the shadow of the church with its validation of a parallel system of value, stands another testament to folk knowledge -- the home of “Doctor” Benitha Grant. The presence of the “Doctor” is significant, as confirmation of the need for an alternative system of communal support. The following text indicates the Dr. as a cultural resource:

There was the drab-gray, unpainted bungalow of “Doctor” Benitha Grant, which she had enlivened with a crepe myrtle bush—all red blossoms—at the door and a front yard bright and overflowing with samples of the herbs she used to treat the sick and ailing. During Avey’s first summer in Tatem she had instantly stopped the pain and swelling of an insect bite on her arm with fennel picked fresh from the yard.⁵⁵

Benitha Grant was trained as a *doctor* through folk knowledge, and uses her medical tools of homeopathic plants and herbs to treat her patients. This folk knowledge that is passed down through a vibrant oral tradition is not recognized by the Western medical system. The roots of this knowledge were born in Africa, transplanted to the New World and specified to the American landscape. In the context of the Jim Crow South, Dr. Grant's folk knowledge of herbs maintains the health of a community that lacks access to the health care institutions. However, this central role in the black community continues to exist today, serving to treat the sick and ailing that are invisible to the official health care system and as a testament to an alternative system of medicine that is more closely aligned with nature and religion. In the text, Dr. Grant is a *root worker*; in the context of the African diaspora these doctors often served multiple functions within a community.

Albert Raboteau traces this medical tradition in the antebellum south:

It [magic] is intimately related to medicine in traditional African belief because illness and death are not due to "natural" causes alone but to "spiritual" causes as well. It is the priest-diviner-herbalist, or 'root doctor,' versed in the use of herbs, barks, leaves, and roots, to whom one goes for a diagnosis of these causes and for prescriptions to ameliorate illness.⁵⁶

Raboteau goes on to trace these traditions throughout the Americas and states that it "believes a coherent world view of spiritual power, in which religion, magic, and medicine are embraced as one."⁵⁷ Therefore, as the community of Tatem deems Benitha Grant the title of *Dr.*, it is important to recognize the alternative world view that she represents within the diaspora. Consequently, it is meaningful that this alternative medical system in Tatem is simultaneously a response to marginalization within the larger society and a marker of a different epistemological system.

Next, on their journey through Black history and culture is the home of Pharo and Celia Harris. This home with its “dusty yard” filled up with “rusted washtubs, scrubboards and iron kettles from the years she had taken in washing and all the broken plows, pitchforks, hoes and the like from his sharecropping days.”⁵⁸ This graveyard to domestic labor traces the history of life during Reconstruction. These symbols tell the story of the limitations of work options for blacks, as domestic labor and sharecropping defined black access to the economic system. It is interesting to note that the Harrises don’t have a large piece of land to couple with their tools of the sharecropping trade, but rather just a small “vegetable garden out back,”⁵⁹ a clear indication of the fruitless nature of sharecropping. Moreover, the abandonment of these domestic tools also reveals the history of the Great Migration, when African Americans left the South to free themselves from the living history of slavery, in search of new economic opportunity in the North.

Marshall also chronicles the history of slavery and the Civil War as Aunt Cuney takes Avey through an inactive plantation, “the largest plantation of sea island cotton thereabouts. ‘*War is cruelty and you cannot refine it*’: General William Tecumseh Sherman on his march of blood and fire up from Atlanta. The huge field had fallen victim to the pillaging and had never been replanted.”⁶⁰ The mere existence of this plantation is due to the slave trade, as the labor of the slaves, imported from Africa and scattered throughout the Americas, toiled the land. This direct reference to the General Sherman’s *March to the Sea*, recalls some of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War, when he marched from Atlanta to Savannah, destroying anything that could be used as a resource to the Confederacy. History deems his gutting of Georgia as the beginning of the end for the Confederacy. This literary reference documents a turning point in the

Civil War, when the South suffered serious losses of infrastructure, resources and human life that were never fully regained.

Aunt Cuney also takes Avey through a “low-lying rice field that had been more recently abandoned,”⁶¹ this too references one of the economic engines of slavery. In efforts to diversify their crops, planters in the coastal Carolinas took up rice cultivation, which sustained them throughout colonialism. During this time period, it was understood that the slaves coming from West Africa had the experience and the skill set to cultivate rice, so it became an alternative crop to both cotton and tobacco.⁶² Rice could not be grown everywhere in the South, so this becomes a very site specific reference to the history of slavery in the Carolinas. Rice was a crop that was introduced to the American colonies through the slaves brought there. “Ironically, this crop was quickly adopted by their white owners, who used the profits to buy more African workers.”⁶³ This paradoxical history of the slaves, bringing trades to the Americas and having it used to keep them enslaved is a point that is not lost in Aunt Cuney’s historical trek. The narrative evidence that this rice field had been “more recently abandoned” points to the efficacy of this colonial engine and how the colonial enterprise used every resource of the slave labor.⁶⁴ Thus, by Aunt Cuney taking Avey through the land that still bears the scars of black oppression, she educates her through the oral tradition on those silent and often invisible indicators of the struggle for emancipation. By doing so, Avey also becomes a contemporary witness to that history and to the survival of African Americans.

The journey to get to Ibo Landing moves through markers of historic change in American culture, in general, and in black life specifically. Shad Dawson’s experience of institutionalized racism functions as a cautionary tale of the limits of justice for blacks,

with or without resources. Avey's engagement with the church in Tatem documents the institution of black spiritual and communal life both past and present -- connecting both African and American ritual traditions, while also offering Avey a third option of a non-institutionalized spiritual tradition of veneration for Ibo Landing. The alternative world view, as represented by Doctor Benitha Grant's root working trade, works as a living testament to the marginalization of blacks during Jim Crow and as a signature of African survivals translated in the Americas. Meanwhile, the home of Pharo and Celia Harris, with the discarded emblems of sharecropping and domestic labor, tells the historical limits of black economic agency during Reconstruction in the U.S., specifically, which translates to the circumscribed options of employment for the larger diaspora. Until then, Marshall ultimately leads the reader to the purpose of the Atlantic slave trade -- to be the economic engines of the plantations, with the accompanying history of domination and the sacrifices of emancipation.

All of these moments in the text are local expressions of the transnational reality of African descendants. These transnational signifiers culminate in the story of *Ibo Landing* -- the ultimate journey to reconnect Africa to the Americas in which the reader is left with the mythic image of the Ibo's return to Africa by walking on water. The story of *Ibo Landing* is a local variation on a transnational theme of return to Africa. The story of *Ibo Landing* encompasses both Avey's personal history and the larger history throughout the Atlantic slave trade. Avey's annual ritual return to Tatem reconnects her to the landscape that her ancestors toiled and lost their lives to, and to the oral tradition that survives in their absence. The journey is part of the myth as it creates the context in which the myth circulates and functions. It is in the ruins of the South that this myth

survives and has cultural capital within the black community. The telling of the myth in this context serves as a reminder of those who lived and still live the legacy of slavery. It is in this environment that the myth functions to validate the local social order. The community of Tatem represents an alternative space that is validated throughout the journey and through the myth of the Ibos.

For Avey, Ibo Landing represented a primary connection to her great-aunt Cuney, her source of origin. Aunt Cuney carries heavy symbolic weight in the text as an ancestor. Toni Morrison maintains that it is indeed the presence of the ancestor that distinguishes African American Literature, describing ancestors as a “sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom.”⁶⁵ Even more significantly, Morrison asserts that in contemporary fiction, “the presence or absence of that figure determined the success or the happiness of the character.”⁶⁶ Marshall’s novel bears witness to Morrison’s literary analysis as the reader observes Avey’s literal and psychic struggle with Aunt Cuney. Moreover, Cuney represents a direct connection to the original Africans from Ibo Landing. As she renders the oral tradition of Ibo Landing, it serves to trace kinship from her great-grandmother Avatara, who as a child witnessed the miracle for herself, to Avey. The story of *Ibo Landing* functions in the context of a formal cultural and familial indoctrination of Avey. As the story is qualified through the matriarchy of her family, “‘cording to my gran,”⁶⁷ it creates a direct connection between Avatara and Avey. This connection is further distinguished when it is revealed that Avatara laid claim to Avey, in a dream before she was born and, therefore, she was to be named after her.⁶⁸ Aunt Cuney’s storytelling is performative in the text, striving to give

Avey a sense of place, belonging, *herstory* and identity, while taking her on the journey to Ibo Landing and passing the story on to her.

As the journey to get to the Landing gives Avey the historical and cultural context in which to understand the story of the Ibos, Aunt Cuney's rendition of the story integrates Avey into this mythological tradition:

It was here that they brought 'em. They taken 'em out of the boats right *here where we's standing*. Nobody remembers how many of 'em it was, but they was a good few *'cording to my gran' who was a little girl no bigger than you when it happened.*⁶⁹

Aunt Cuney's emphasis on the site of the Landing operates to place Avey in the same position as the captured Africans. What is more, the witnessing of the event by Aunt Cuney's *gran*, not only serves to trace a line of kinship to this event, but to also validate Avey's as being old enough to experience such a profound cultural expression of resistance. Therefore, as a child, Avey is given entry into Aunt Cuney's spiritual world to both bear witness and validate this story, just as her great-great-great grandmother did as a child. This is evidenced in the text as Avey responds to her Aunt's rhetorical question of "[D]o you know what the Ibos did?":

'I do.' (It wasn't meant for her to answer but she always did anyway.)
'Want me to finish telling about 'em? I know the story good as you.'
(Which was true. Back home after only her [Avey's] first summer in Tatem she had recounted the whole thing almost word for word to her three brothers, complete with the old woman's inflections and gestures.)⁷⁰

Though her telling, Aunt Cuney gives Avey a sense of authority within this oral tradition, creating the possibility and responsibility for Avey to pass this story on to others.

This testimony, passed down through her family as an heirloom, survives as living proof of the validity of their familial connection to the vernacular traditions, reaffirming

their link to the original root of the African Diaspora. Avey is entrusted with the story and the unnamed responsibility that comes with the knowledge of it, as Marshall relates,

Moreover, in instilling the story of the Ibos in her child's mind, the old woman had entrusted her with a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty-bound to fulfill. It had taken her years to rid herself of the notion.⁷¹

It is this moment in the text when the reader realizes that the telling of the story of the Ibos is multi-functional in the life of the protagonist, Avey. As Cuney reinscribes the story of the Ibos -- within their familial context, with the brutality of slavery, the reality of resistance and the continuing connection to Africa -- she elects Avey to be the bearer of that cultural memory. The novel dramatizes Avey's struggle to figure out her untold obligation to this distinct oral tradition and this literary tension unfolds as a struggle to understand her own personal and communal identity through the vernacular traditions in her life that she is taught through her indoctrination in Tatem.

As Aunt Cuney tells Avey the story of *Ibo Landing*, she integrates the present into her historical account, including Avey and herself, into the bygone history of the Ibos while also reiterating the struggles of those who came after the Ibos. This is clearly illustrated in the text and is worth quoting at length:

And the minute those Ibos was brought on shore they just stopped, my gran' said, and taken a look around. A good long look. // And they seen things that day you and me don't have the power-to see. 'cause those pure-born African was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one. The kind can tell you 'bout things happened long before they was born and things to come long after they's dead. Well, they seen everything that was to happen 'round here that day. *The slavery time and the war my gran' always talked about, the 'mancipation and everything after that right on up to the hard times today. Those Ibo's didn't miss a thing. Even seen you and me standing here talking about 'em.*⁷²

The story is told as a living record of history, with the flexibility to integrate the issues and identities of the past and present. In this way, the rendering of the story of *Ibo Landing* becomes a site where Avey is both taught the history of Ibo Landing and becomes part of that historical trajectory. The significance of Marshall focusing on the identity construction of her main character, around a story that changes with every reiteration of it to include the current storyteller, is profound. Marshall's text bears out Zora Neale Hurston's anthropological observations on this practice, "Negro folklore is not a thing of the past. It is still in the making. Its great variety shows the adaptability of the black man: nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low for his use."⁷³ The simultaneity of passing on tradition while improvising on it engenders diversity within communities. In the text, entrance into this oral tradition comes through individual election by a member of the community deeming you worthy of hearing it. Through the folklore of Ibo Landing, Marshall creates a space for new identities to be integrated into the stories of the past. The performance of the story functions as a site for the transference of history, culture and innovation.

Aunt Cuney's belief in the fantastical elements of the Ibos story marks her difference within her community. She faithfully accepts the story passed on to her by her *gran'* as verified historical fact, as expressed in her narration:

But chains didn't stop those Ibos none. Neither iron. The way my gran' tol' it (other folks in Tatem said it wasn't so and that she was crazy but she never paid 'em no mind) 'cording to her they just kept on walking like the water was solid ground. Left the white folks standin' back here with they mouth hung open and they taken off down the river on foot. Stepping. When the realized there wasn't nothing between them and home but some water and that wasn't giving 'em no trouble they got so tickled they started in to singing.⁷⁴

Because Ibo Landing becomes her religion, she is loyal to the validity of the story and practices this ancestor worship. Although the community singles her out as *crazy*, her faith in the supernatural power of the Ibos marks her as a member of an alternative system of belief. This becomes significant in the text because Aunt Cuney comes to represent that which is still connected to Africa in Tatem. Like her own grandmother who declared, “Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos...,” signals a familial belief in the power of the Ibos.⁷⁵ Her recognition of the Ibo’s supernatural powers marks her continuity with a continental African cosmology that she is passing onto Avey; a cosmology that gives access to models of resistance. Marshall’s characterization of Aunt Cuney as being outside of the norm in Tatem, asserts another layer of diversity within African-American culture, which seeks to validate a continuous spiritual connection to their African ancestors.

Shuffling In the Margins & Dancing In the Circle

One could view Marshall’s privileging of Aunt Cuney’s ancestor worship as a nod to other African diasporic spiritual traditions that are not mainstream yet identify a certain continuity of African cosmology in the Americas. The religious sects of Candomblé in Brazil, Santería in Cuba, Shango in Trinidad and Voudou in Haiti all venerate the supernatural powers of the ancestors. Raboteau documents these diasporic spiritual traditions and links them to historic acts of resistance:

Religion played a significant role in the early slave revolts led by Macandal and Biassou. Under one rebel leader, Hyacinthe, fifteen thousand slaves went into battle, supported by the belief that their chief had the power to render bullets harmless and confident that if they died on the field they would return to Africa.⁷⁶

In these various spiritual traditions, a pattern emerges where *some* of the Africans have the ability to access powers that render them unassailable to the powers of their white captors. Those that possess this power often are less assimilated and, therefore, have a more direct link to continental Africa. In Marshall's story of *Ibo Landing*, Aunt Cuney notes this connection to Africa, "'Cause *those pure-born Africans* was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one."⁷⁷ This ability to see *differently* is exactly what Aunt Cuney is trying to teach Avey to do, even in the face of her own community's disbelief. In this context, Aunt Cuney distinguishes herself in two ways. First, she places herself and Avey in the category of those who are born outside of Africa who don't have the power to *see in more ways than one*, while simultaneously placing herself in the special spiritual category of those who recognize and validate those Africans who possess this power. Aunt Cuney's veneration for Ibo Landing is contrasted to those who do the Ring Shout in the church of Tatem which is further contrasted to those up north who take part in urban rituals, such as the boat ride up the Hudson, which connects them all to a larger African diasporic identity. Doing so creates a variation of identifications with one's African origins, with multiple possibilities of African diasporic identity formation.

Marshall's narration of Avey's experience of the Carriacou Big Drum ritual validates the diversity of those variant paths of identification. Like Aunt Cuney's ritual tale of Ibo Landing, this Big Drum ritual also seeks to include the diverse identities of African descendants everywhere as evidenced in the text during the Beg Pardon opening of the ceremony:

And the makeshift drums that had been silent all along began a solemn measure. Arms opened, faces lifted to the darkness, the small band of supplicants endlessly repeated the few lines that comprised the Beg Pardon, *pleading and petitioning not only for themselves and for the*

*friends and neighbors present in the yard, but for all their far-flung kin as well—the sons and daughters, grands and great-grands in Trinidad, Toronto, New York, London...*⁷⁸

Unlike most ritual ceremonies that are, more or less, closed to outsiders and function as an affirmation of a specific localized communal identity, the Big Drum ritual invites outsiders *into* the circle, to represent their own specific ethnic identity. People, who perhaps don't know the full significance of the ritual, are, nonetheless, not exempt from participation in either a physical way like Avey or a spiritual way like the non-present kin who are brought into presence through familial recognition. The integration of the diverse voices of the diaspora is further illustrated through the nation dances.

The nation dances in the text replicate a progressive model of identity formation for the African diaspora. During the initial conversation that Lebert Joseph has with Avey, he asks, "What's your nation?"⁷⁹ This question was asked as a way of connecting through the specificity of one's ethnic tradition, not as a means to create division.⁸⁰ The reader is witness to this as each nation dance joins into the Big Drum ritual, as Avey observes:

As the dances continued to unfold she discovered they followed a set pattern. First, from around the yard would come the lone voice—cracked, atonal, old, yet with the carrying power of a field holler or a call. Quickly, to bear it up, came the response: other voices and the keg drums. And the one or two or sometimes three old souls whose nation it was would sing their way into the circle and there dance to the extent of their strength. Saluting their nations. Summoning the Old Parents. Inviting them to join them in the circle. And invariably they came. A small land crab might suddenly scuttle past the feet of one of the dancers. // Sometimes it was nothing more than a moth, a fly, a mosquito. In whimsical disguise they made their presence known. Kin, visible, metamorphosed and invisible, repeatedly circled the cleared space together, until the visible ones, grown tired finally, would go over to lead the drummer...⁸¹

The structure of the nation dances is steeped in global black vernacular traditions: call and response, the treatment of drums, voices and dance as synchronized conversations, ancestor worship, libations, dance and belief in metamorphosis. Even within the specificity of the Carriacou's Big Drum ritual, it displays these transnational nodes of cultural affiliation. Although Avey could not understand the language of the voices, she recognizes these emotional moments of cultural affiliation -- leading her to the larger meaning of the ritual, as Avey meditates, "It was the essence of something rather than the thing itself she was witnessing."⁸² These nation dances echo cultural kinship and validate specific ethnic lineages, functioning to *remember* fragments of a collective culture.⁸³

After the space is created for the specificity of ethnic identity within the diaspora, significantly the largest dances in the Big Drum ritual are the Creole dances -- for those with or without a nation. The Creole dances are, in effect, a system for integrating change into the communal identity. Although run by the elders, the energy of the creole dances reflects the youth of the community:

With the shift to the creole dances the mood in the yard changed and it began to fill up. From around the corner of the house came a number of *new arrivals, most of them young people* Milda's age. *They might have been standing all along in the dark moat of the yard front or on the road beside the straggly fence, waiting for the music to 'turn brisk.'*⁸⁴

As the text demonstrates, there is a large part of the community that sat outside of the nation dances. When Avey ponders about those who were *on the road or in the dark moat of the yard*, she, in essence, asks the reader to also consider those on the outside and their pathways into tradition. The Creole dances are an invitation to *all* members of the diaspora to participate; in particular those for whom the ghost of memory haunts by its absence but yet the political will for communal identity remains.

The Creole dances are of a more secular nature, indicating their status as a product of cultural fusion. Lorna McDaniels documents the shift that takes place in the creole dances, “The distinguishing elements of the Creole dances include an uplifted stance, the extension of the winged skirt and partner dancing.”⁸⁵ The dances of the Big Drum ritual thus far, in the text and as practiced, have been individualistic by nature, utilizing call-and-response to integrate both the audience and the drummers. The introduction of partner dancing, often of the sexually expressive character, suggests the both literal and figurative path to cultural creolization.

The Big Drum ritual’s Creole dance structure can be seen as a metaphor of New World identity construction for African descendants, reflecting the basic elements to compose a holistic sense of identity. In the text, Marshall describes the physical makeup of the Big Drum ritual during the creole dances:

*To restrain the young people perhaps, the older folk—those who had dominated the fete earlier—were dancing on the perimeter. Lebert Joseph, Rosalie Parvay, the barefoot woman with the braids who had opened the nations dances—all were there. And in sober counterpoint to the jump-up, they were performing the rhythmic trudge that couldn’t be called dancing, yet at the same time was something more than merely walking.*⁸⁶

The older folk who remember the nation dances make up the boundary of this cultural community. As cultural gatekeepers, they serve as the foundation of the ritual and of the community; functioning as both a marker of the limits of the community and as a counterpoint to the vitality of the Creole dances in the center. As counterpoint, they are in dialogue with the youth in the center establishing, “a harmonic relationship while retaining their linear individuality.”⁸⁷ The balance between passing on tradition and innovation/creolization is met within this functional ritual of survival. Significantly, this

dance structure has situated the people who oversee the traditions on the outskirts and the young people who represent the diversity and change of the community on the inside of the circle. Again, as a progressive model of identity formation, Marshall references a tradition that not only incorporates change but also valorizes those changes by symbolically centralizing them as part of the energy that fosters cultural continuity.

Marshall takes this opportunity in the text to transition Avey into the Big Drum ritual. Given that this dance on the edges of the ritual is characterized as a *non-dance*, this becomes Avey's entrance into it because it harkens back to the shuffle of the Ring Shout in Tatem.⁸⁸ When Avey overcomes her reluctance and responds to the open invitation to join the dance, it is a transformative moment in the text:

Finally, just as the moving wall of bodies was almost upon her, she too moved—*a single declarative step forward*. At the same moment, what seemed an arm made up of many arms reached out from the circle to draw her in, and she found herself walking amid the elderly folk on the periphery, in their counterclockwise direction.⁸⁹

Avey's *single declarative step forward* is the physical translation of her conscious political will to identify with the participants of the ritual and, by extension, the members of the larger diaspora. Avey's decision is one that is made after both she and the Carriacou community have mutually recognized traces of cultural affiliation amongst them; and none are so readily recognized as the performances during the Creole dance. When Avey joins in, the members of the community recognize her non-dance as the "Carriacou Tramp."⁹⁰ Simultaneous to their cultural identification of her, Avey is experiencing a spiritual moment of recognition that connects her back to her experiences with Aunt Cuney outside of the church/school in Tatem witnessing the Ring Shout.

Marshall narrates this occasion as a threshold moment for Avey. As she joins in the specific ethnic ritual of the Carriacou Tramp, she reconnects with the specificity of the rituals of the Sea Islands. As she recalls, her and Aunt Cuney's marginal position as witnesses outside of the Ring Shout is transposed onto the instance she joins in the Big Drum ritual. But rather than identifying with her Aunt Cuney, Avey seeks to fulfill her youthful desire to be part of the larger community, as she relates:

Standing there she used to long to give her great-aunt the slip and join those across the road. She had finally after all these decades made it across. The elderly Shouters in the person of the out-islanders had reached out their arms like one great arm and drawn her into their midst.⁹¹

Avey's longing to be a part of the Ring Shout circle is achieved through the Out-Islanders' invitation into the Big Drum ritual. Yet again, it is important to note that Avey's full spiritual integration into the communities of Tatem and Carriacou comes at the instant the Creole dances are performed. I interpret this as a gesture toward acknowledging those diasporic rituals that have space for innovation and creolization, while they simultaneously venerate that which has been the foundation of cultural identity, by speaking to Avey of the "possibilities and becoming in the face of the bare bones and the burnt-out ends."⁹²

Avey's response to these *possibilities* is to assert her own individuality into the ritual. Avey begins to dance with "something of the stylishness and sass she had once been known for."⁹³ Marshall characterizes Avey as finding an internal language of dance that at once reconnects her to the vernacular traditions of her past and the diasporic tradition she is participating in:

Yet for all the sudden unleashing of her body she was being careful to observe the old rule: Not once did the soles of her feet leave the ground. Even when the Big Drum reached its height in a tumult of voices, drums

and the ringing iron, and her arms rose as though hailing the night, the darkness that is light, her feet held to the restrained glide-and-stamp, the rhythmic trudge, the Carriacou Tramp, the shuffled designed to stay the course of history.⁹⁴

At this threshold moment, Avey seems to have learned a different lesson from her Aunt Cuney. Avey avoids marginalization by maintaining a rootedness to tradition, while also integrating her innovation on tradition. Surprisingly, Avey stays on the outside of the Creole dances with the elders, marking her as the new root of her distinct family tree. This is further validated in the text as Legbert and all the other elders of the Big Drum ritual perform a “reverential bow” to her.⁹⁵ Avey’s shift into the new position as the *root* of her own ethnic tradition is even more poignantly revealed in her response to the question, “And who you is?” and without shame or embarrassment she states, “Avey, short for Avatara.”⁹⁶ Her clear statement of identity places her squarely within her own spiritual tradition that was passed down to her from her Aunt Cuney through her great-great grandmother Avatara who laid claim to her in a dream before she was born.

Aunt Cuney’s transference of a *different way of seeing* allows Avey to accept the duality of her identity and to work as a bridge to these diasporic experiences. It is with a sense of social responsibility that Avey finally understands her connection to the collective unconscious of the African Diaspora. And from this position, Avey also becomes a site of expansion of that community, creating her own map of return through the paths that have brought her to this place of understanding. As she leaves Carriacou, she becomes a source of the kinship web as she volunteers to deliver letters to the grandchildren of Legbert in Canada.⁹⁷ The text reveals how Avey longs to connect the taxi driver in Grenada to the Out-Islanders with their veneration for the excursion and to African Americans through her stories of Halsey St. rituals and *Ibo Landing*.⁹⁸ Her

desire to function as the bridge between these disparate experiences in the diaspora is fueled by her own new sense of holistic identity. And like the story of *Ibo Landing* and the Big Drum ritual, she has carved out space in her story for the diverse and fragmented identities that have survived the rupture of the Middle Passage and the system of domination that followed. This is best illustrated in her approach to expanding the knowledge of the African descendants:

Nor would she stop with the taxi driver, but would take it upon herself to speak of the excursion to others elsewhere. Her territory would be the street corners and front lawns in their small section of North White Plains. And the shopping mall and train station. As well the canyon streets and office buildings of Manhattan. *She would haunt the entranceways of the skyscrapers.* And whenever she spotted one of them amid the crowd, those young, bright, fiercely articulate token few for whom her generation had worked the two and three jobs, she would stop them. // As they rushed blindly in and out of the glacier buildings, *unaware, unprotected, lacking memory and a necessary distance of the mind* (no mojo working for them!), she would stop them and before they could pull out of her grasp, tell them about the floor in Halsey Street and quote them the line from her namesake...⁹⁹

Avey's journey of return through Carriacou ultimately leads her back to her own territory in New York. In her web, there is no place too sacred or secular to be included in her confraternity, there are limitless possibilities echoing traces of Hurston's analysis of the vital adaptability of Negro folklore because of its openness to all aspects of life.¹⁰⁰ She is seeking to protect those *unaware* descendants by giving them the *necessary distance of the mind* that Aunt Cuney passed down to her.

Fully invested in the future, Avey identifies the youth in her life as being the key to continuity, centering them in her quest and mimicking the structure of the Big Drum ritual. With echoes of *Ibo Landing*, she desires to give black youth the tools to recognize and validate those other ways of knowing. Her journey of cultural rehabilitation

reconnects Avey with her immediate family as she vows to ask her daughter Marion, “*Pa’doné mwê*” (Beg pardon) in her best Creole language and enlist her to the cause.¹⁰¹ Additionally, she would connect to the future generation and appeal to the marginalized elements of the black community through sharing the story of the excursion and the Ibos with her grandchildren and Marion’s *sweet lepers*.¹⁰² Memory, oral tradition and inclusiveness would protect all that would hear the story and ensure they would not lose their “center,” lose what “sustained” them and keeps them “aligned” as Avey continually expands her web of community.¹⁰³

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have argued a clear case for recognizing diversity as a foundational element of African diasporic identity formation and survival in Paule Marshall’s text *Praisesong for the Widow*. I embark upon this objective from several approaches, all of which operate through manifestations of the black vernacular traditions that are overlapping in nature. To start with, Marshall’s use of multiple piers in the text, throughout time and space, create a literal space for *inter-* and *intra-*cultural dialogue. These literary piers function as spaces for diasporic encounters that are initiated through language and stories. These piers function as transnational signifiers of mobility that spiritually and physically work toward emphasizing the importance of creating literal spaces for identities in the diaspora to connect and exchange cultural traditions. By creating this space within her literature, Marshall validates the potential value in *inter-/intra-*cultural dialogue for engendering clarity of one’s own identity.

In a contemporary setting, the significance of this gesture in the age of globalism cannot be overstated. As we simultaneously experience disconnection and connection

through modern technology, novels like *Praisesong* solicit a moment of reflection within our *imagined communities*,¹⁰⁴ to valorize those spaces where diasporic encounters can occur. As we lose the physical space for community to take place, Marshall gives us license to seek out new avenues of *sharing space* to initiate an opportunity of community building that is based on mobility. In doing so, she situates the reader on a pier in New York, Grenada and a landing in Tatem, not to launch them to other shores or receive them back home, but rather to just *be* in the space of the crossroads, to dialogue with those who reside there, those who have just arrived and those travelers who are passing through.

The second argument in my literary analysis centralizes on the theme of community building at those crossroads. In those venues of shared space, the complicated work of community building takes place. Marshall employs a web metaphor to discuss the power of kinship within the diaspora, but that kinship is not a given to those who meet at the crossroads. Instead, Marshall calls attention to the necessary *reading* of those transnational nodes of cultural affiliation, in order to create those webs of kinship. Clarke's articulation of *diasporic literacy* serves as a foundation to achieve the goal of community building.¹⁰⁵ Membership to the African diaspora can be a complicated matter. Through her characterization of Avey, Marshall asserts that it is not enough to be *recognizable* but one must also recognize and translate those nodes of cultural affiliation into one's own cultural traditions. As Avey quickly finds out, communal membership comes through access points within one's own particular ethnic history, employing those mutual cultural practices to link themselves to the larger diaspora. This is illustrated in the text when Avey's witnessing of a Caribbean ritual reminds her of the symbols and rituals of Africa (Ghana) Marion exposed her to. As a

result, those recollections spark her own personal memories of African-American rituals in New York that further link her to her southern roots and the particular rituals of the Gullah who are linked through the oral tradition back to continental Africa. Therefore, Avey experiences the reality of this community membership: one enters into it from one's own specific experience, this community is diverse by nature, and that one can be the source of the expansion of community or the community can claim you as part of its expansion, but one must recognize nodes of affiliation and be recognizable. Hence, these moments of mutual recognition of values, rituals and traditions substantiate the underlying structure that constitutes the African Diaspora -- above and beyond a shared history of slavery and displacement.

Another more subtle argument that I hope is revealed through my literary analysis is the necessity, within diasporic community building, of an active political will to identify. This is demonstrated in the text through Marshall's narration of Avey as both recognizing and recognizable within the diaspora yet remaining outside of the circle of kinship. It is only when Avey makes that *single declarative step forward* to participate that a holistic sense of communal membership is achieved. This transformative moment for Avey marks the culmination of her journey of self-identification. Her political will to identify becomes one of the most noteworthy elements of community building within the African diaspora. As global African descendants become less recognizable due to racial creolization, the active will to identify creates an alternative pathway to communal identification -- ultimately expanding the opportunities for community building and those who have access to the diaspora.

My final argument concentrates on the role of black vernacular rituals in communal survival. Through my close reading of the *telling* of the story of *Ibo Landing* and my reading of the structure of the Big Drum custom, both rituals establish a method to integrate contemporary identities and thoughts. As progressive models of identity construction, these rituals create space for innovation while paying homage to the continuation of custom. Social historian Eric Hobsbawm addresses these social tactics in his seminal work *The Invention of Tradition*, as he notes:

‘Custom’ in traditional societies has the double function of motor and fly-wheel. It does not preclude innovation and change up to a point, though evidently the requirement that it must appear compatible or even identical with precedent imposes substantial limitations on it. What it does is to give any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history.¹⁰⁶

Marshall reflects this practice and its attendant focus on the function of tradition for the contemporary community; by focusing on the integration of future generations and centralizing the themes of flexibility and innovation as manifested in the Creole dances and the story of *Ibo Landing*. The myth of *Ibo Landing* will always expand to incorporate contemporary trials and tribulations of the black community that the Ibos had the foresight to see, including the present storyteller. Likewise in the Big Drum customs of today, the Creole dances are still the largest portion of the ritual, maintaining the structure of the elderly shuffling on the outside and the youth dancing and innovating on the inside of the circle. These two progressive cultural models, give opportunity within tradition to improvise and incorporate the *new* while filling in the gaps of knowledge created by dislocation and domination -- guaranteeing long-term communal survival and creating an environment for the “possibilities and becoming”¹⁰⁷ for African descendants.

Chapter 2 Notes

¹ Belinda Edmondson, *Making Men* (London: Duke University Press, 1999) 164.

² Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York: Plume, 1983) 116.

³ Marshall 116.

⁴ Marshall 16. Marion uses this term to refer to the students that she works with who have been rejected from all public schools as being impossible to teach.

⁵ The Golden Stool represents national unity within the diverse communities of the Asante nation, part of modern Ghana.

⁶ Marshall 188 (emphasis mine).

⁷ Marshall 192.

⁸ Marshall 190.

⁹ I will address the kinship connection on the pier in New York in the section on Webs of Kinship and Creation.

¹⁰ Stacy I. Morgan, "Dust tracks Untrampled by the Dianosaur of History: The Ibo's Landing and Flying Africans Narratives as Mythic Counter Memory," *Sycamore: A Journal of American Culture* (Spring, 1997) 12.

¹¹ Georgia Writers' Project. *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Coastal Negroes* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986 [1940]). Collection of interviews with the Sea Islanders regarding the stories of flying Africans.

¹² Morgan 1.

¹³ Morgan 1-2.

¹⁴ Morgan 2.

¹⁵ Marshall 190 (emphasis mine).

¹⁶ Marshall 189-190 (emphasis mine).

¹⁷ Marshall 188.

¹⁸ Marshall 190.

¹⁹ Marshall 190.

²⁰ Other authors have written extensively on Marshall and her use of nation language. Please see Simone A. James Alexander, "Racial and Cultural Categorizations of Language: The Evolution of Kamau Braithwaite's Nation Language in the Fiction of Paule Marshall."

²¹ Marshall. Lecture "Language is the Only Homeland: Bajan Poets Abroad," the Nineteenth Sir Winston Scott Memorial Lecture, Frank Collymore Hall, Barbados, 28 Nov. 1994. She speaks of the central theme in all of her texts as "women defining an and freeing fulfilling the self—sometimes healing the self, all crucial steps along the path the self-knowledge and personal empowerment."

²² Marshall 191 (emphasis mine).

²³ Marshall 191.

²⁴ Marshall 69 (emphasis mine).

²⁵ Heidi Macpherson, "Women's Travel Writing and the Politics of Location: Somewhere In-Between.," Kristi Siegle, ed. *Gender, Genre, & Identity in Women's Travel Writing* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2004) 196.

²⁶ Marshall 191.

²⁷ Marshall 191.

²⁸ Marshall 191 (emphasis mine).

²⁹ Marshall 249.

³⁰ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York Oxford University Press, 1988). I use the term signifying in the same way as Gates articulates as the rhetorical strategies that each literary text utilizes.

³¹ Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," IN Marie Evans, ed., *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation* (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 343.

³² Morrison 343.

³³ Morrison 343.

³⁴ Marshall 32.

³⁵ Salikoko Mufwene, "The Ecology of Gullah's Survival," *The Legacy of Ibo Landing*. Ed. Marquetta L. Goodwine & the Clarity Press Gullah Project (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, Inc., 1988) 176-177. Speaking to both the geographic and social isolation

fostering the preservation of this distinct community and how pressure to assimilate doesn't exist for those who don't venture outside of the Gullah community.

³⁶ What I mean here is that there is an old diaspora that was created during Reconstruction during the Great Migration and a new diaspora that is occurring today with the advent of globalism.

³⁷ Marshall 33.

³⁸ Marshall 131.

³⁹ Marshall 135.

⁴⁰ Marshall 116.

⁴¹ Macpherson 196. Macpherson discusses how Avey uses class to protect her from even racial allegiances.

⁴² Margaret Washington Creel, "*A Peculiar People*": *Slave Religion and Community -- Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York University: New York, 1988) 299.

⁴³ Creel 298.

⁴⁴ James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: The Viking Press, [1925] & Kessinger Publishing [2006]) 33.

⁴⁵ Marshall 40.

⁴⁶ Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory & the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press 1987) 49.

⁴⁷ Marshall 35.

⁴⁸ Marshall 33.

⁴⁹ Stuckey 10-12. Stuckey documents both continental African and African American variations of the Ring Shout.

⁵⁰ Creel 299.

⁵¹ Marshall 33.

⁵² Marshall 34-35 (emphasis mine).

⁵³ Marshall 34.

⁵⁴ Marshall 38.

⁵⁵ Marshall 35.

⁵⁶ Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, 2004(revised edition)) 14.

⁵⁷ Raboteau 35.

⁵⁸ Marshall 35.

⁵⁹ Marshall 35.

⁶⁰ Marshall 36.

⁶¹ Marshall 36.

⁶² Stuckey 103.

⁶³ “Colonial Economy,” *The Reader’s Companion to American History*, Eric Foner & John A. Garraty (Eds.), 1991, Web. 13 Jul. 2009.

⁶⁴ Marshall 36.

⁶⁵ Morrison 343.

⁶⁶ Morrison 343.

⁶⁷ Marshall 37.

⁶⁸ Marshall 42.

⁶⁹ Marshall 37 (emphasis mine).

⁷⁰ Marshall 38.

⁷¹ Marshall 42.

⁷² Marshall 37-38.

⁷³ Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” *Negro: An Anthology*. Cunard N. & Ford H., eds. (Continuum International Publishing Group, [1933 original publ.] 1996) 27.

⁷⁴ Marshall 39.

⁷⁵ Marshall 39.

⁷⁶ Albert Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, 2004 (revised edition)) 26.

⁷⁷ Marshall 37 (emphasis mine).

⁷⁸ Marshall 236 (emphasis mine).

⁷⁹ Marshall 167.

⁸⁰ Other authors have written extensively on Marshall and the diaspora. Please see: Abena P.A. Busia, "What Is Your Nation? Reconnecting Africa and Her Diaspora through Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," and Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelist*.

⁸¹ Marshall 238-239.

⁸² Marshall 240.

⁸³ Lorna McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou: Praisesongs of Rememory of Flight* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1998). McDaniels does a thorough documentation of the Big Drum ritual and how it is used to bond, integrate and reconstruct society and family.

⁸⁴ Marshall 242 (emphasis mine).

⁸⁵ McDaniel 25.

⁸⁶ Marshall 246 (emphasis mine).

⁸⁷ *Second College Edition The American Heritage Dictionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982, 1985) 331. Definition of counterpoint.

⁸⁸ Marshall 246.

⁸⁹ Marshall 247 (emphasis mine).

⁹⁰ Marshall 248.

⁹¹ Marshall 249.

⁹² Marshall 249. In the section Webs of Kinship and Creation, I cover the final web motif that is used in the novel during Avey's integration into the Carriacou Big Drum ritual. This web indicates kinships within a diverse diaspora.

⁹³ Marshall 249.

⁹⁴ Marshall 250.

⁹⁵ Marshall 251.

⁹⁶ Marshall 251.

⁹⁷ Marshall 253.

⁹⁸ Marshall 254.

⁹⁹ Marshall 255 (emphasis mine).

¹⁰⁰ Hurston 27. Hurston's quote is on page 37 of this manuscript.

¹⁰¹ Marshall 255.

¹⁰² Marshall 256.

¹⁰³ Marshall 254.

¹⁰⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹⁰⁵ Clark, "Developing Diaspora Literacy," in *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*. Carol Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, eds. (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1990).

¹⁰⁶ *The Invention of Tradition*. E. Hobsbawn and T. Ranger, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 2.

¹⁰⁷ Marshall 249.

Chapter 3: The Folk Negotiator and Critic

In this chapter, I will analyze how black women use the folk tradition in literature to negotiate power in the relationship between the individual and their community. Specifically, I will address Toni Morrison's use of the vernacular tradition in *Song of Solomon* which gives her folk heroines social and cultural collateral to negotiate within systems of domination, empowering themselves within an alternative system of values. By doing a close reading of Morrison's text, I will trace the characterization of Pilate and Circe as folk figures and analyze their employment of the folk tradition. This alternative system of values, delineated by the black vernacular traditions, creates a space that does what neither second wave Feminism nor the Black Arts Movement had been able to accomplish--simultaneously validate self and communal worth for black women.

Because many black women authors writing in the seventies and eighties were *echoing, revising and responding* to the environment created by the Black Arts Movement,¹ and Second Wave Feminism², I will be adopting Jean Billingslea-Brown's term "critical-aesthetic context"³ to discuss the textual world created by these movements that articulated the ideological and aesthetic environment of that moment in history. Black women writers responded to the limits of this critical-aesthetic context because issues of sexism, heterosexism and white middle-class values left black women simultaneously on the inside and outside of these movements. Writers such as Kay Lindsey articulated the black woman's precarious position:

As the movement toward the liberation of women grows, the Black woman will find herself, if she is at all sensitive to the issues of feminism, in a serious dilemma. For the Black movement is primarily concerned with the liberation of Blacks as a class and does not promote women's liberation as a priority. Indeed, the movement is for the most part spearheaded by males. The feminist movement on the other hand, is

concerned with the oppression of women as a class, but is almost totally composed of white females. Thus the Black woman finds herself on the outside of both political entities, in spite of the fact that she is the object of both forms of oppression.⁴

Efforts to negotiate this experience of identity took on many forms. Within literary circles, women of color tried to bridge this intersection of experiences through traditional pathways. An almost complete omission of lesbians and black women writers' texts from the critical-aesthetic context created an environment where black women were rejected as either the producers of knowledge or subjects worthy of inquiry. In some cases, this resulted in the complete condemnation of black women writers such as Robert Staples's work "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists."⁵ Women writers like Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Cherrie Moraga, Simone Schwartz-Bart, Audre Lorde and Sonya Sanchez, looked to their own cultural traditions to seek a literary liberation theory that would incorporate both their culture and their gender.

Morrison's literary approach to social empowerment shifts the focus of the critical-aesthetic context onto intra-communal relationships through the privileging of black vernacular traditions as a method to reveal uneven power dynamics and to critique systems of domination. This is best illustrated in the *Song of Solomon* by analyzing her enterprise of coupling the hero's journey into manhood with a ritualized process of validating *gendered* folk traditions within the text. What I mean by the term *gendered* folk traditions are the cultural traditions that are initiated, circulated and maintained within what are traditionally women's circles. Morrison creates a model where the hero's success is directly linked to his recognition and valorization of the knowledge and identities of the folk heroines. This literary technique allows Morrison to illuminate the marginalization of folk knowledge and the women who circulate it. Moreover, Morrison

illustrates how even though these women are marginalized they central roles to the survival of communal identity. It is through her narration of the symbiotic relationship between the folk knowledge of Pilate/Circe and Milkman's rites of passage into manhood that I read this approach to social critique via strategic coalitions as a possible alternative method to both Feminism and Black Art's Movement. This is due to their lack of inclusiveness of black women in their essentialist approach to social change and critique. Through the unification and juxtapositioning of black women's marginalized identities and knowledge with mainstream literary tropes such as the search for manhood and the western models of womanhood, Morrison is able to create an alternative space for valorization of self and communal worth for black women who remained outside of those accepted norms and traditions.

Through black women's distinct shift in the employment of the vernacular tradition, writers such as Morrison offer an alternative approach to the revolutionary struggle. Rather than using the vernacular tradition to critique western hegemony directly, Morrison uses it to reflect on the imbalances of power within black culture. This technique not only reveals the effects of racial discrimination between black and white, it also exposes the internalized complexities of domination betwixt and between the marginalized. Barbara Christian comments on how both Morrison and Marshall focus on the variation inside of black culture by stating:

Instead of defining itself in contrast to white culture, it emphasizes its own past, its own forms. White culture, of course, has an impact on these communities, for it inflicts psychic terror upon them. But the definition of the community does not come solely from its confrontation with white culture.// The result of this approach is that we arrive at an understanding of the larger configuration, black culture, by focusing on the particular, and, at the same time, we do not lose the richness that variations have to offer.⁶

By way of illustration, Morrison's literature uses the specificity of the Dead family to unearth uneven gender power dynamics. This manifests in the text by the marginal placement--both physically and socially--of the female characters who circulate the vernacular traditions; this is further complicated by Morrison's paradoxical insistence on characterizing the value of those women as central to both their communities and the hero of the novel. Furthermore, Morrison chooses these vernacular liminal⁷ spaces of the women, which are often overlooked and minimized in the secular world, to become the sites that maintain the very knowledge needed to elucidate the secular world. I argue that through Morrison's paradoxical marginal/central placement of the women who circulate the vernacular traditions in her text, she illustrates black women's contradictory significance within the Black Arts and Feminist movements. Moreover, I argue that this approach to the vernacular tradition is foundational to a black feminist perspective, creating a new model of strategic coalition building.

Pilate as Folk Heroine

Early on in the novel, Morrison characterizes Pilate as a folk archetype. From the first chapter, the reader is told about Pilate's miracle birth, which casts her as someone that defies earthly limitations, "After their mother died, she[Pilate] had come struggling out of the womb without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water."⁸ Pilate's miracle post-mortem birth is extraordinary, and this alone is enough to locate her within a folk archetype of miracle births.

But Morrison goes further to solidify Pilate as a folk character, permanently marking her with the physical anomaly of an *absence of a navel*; placing her in the category of the supernatural with limitless possibilities. As stated in the text, "It was the

absence of a navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal channels; had never lain, floated, or grown in some warm and liquid place connected by a tissue-thin tube to a reliable source of human nourishment.”⁹ This one physical *lack* forever bears witness to the memory of her miracle birth. Symbolically, the absence of a navel signifies the absence of a mother, and because Pilate has come into this world without a mother, her origins are always suspect. Morrison deftly chooses a human element that physiologically connects all the human species, the umbilical cord (navel), to set Pilate apart from all other human beings.

Not only does Pilate’s physiology distinguish her from all other humans, but it also causes her social isolation from multiple communities. The reader finds that it is the attraction and/or rejection of her body that ultimately leads to her expulsion from the various communities she has called home. Throughout her youth, Pilate is characterized as living betwixt and between multiple communities, placing her within the wandering blues tradition. The Blues as a matrix from which one extrapolates identity is best described by Houston Baker:

The blues are a synthesis (albeit only always synthesizing rather than one already hypostatized). Combining work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more, they constitute an amalgam that seems always to have been in motion in America—always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World.¹⁰

Pilate is an amalgam of these vernacular qualities as she travels from place to place, picking up skills and knowledge on the road; she becomes a human crossroads of these various vernacular traditions. Following in the mythic archetype of the *orphaned hero*, Pilate travels throughout communities of the Northeast and Southeast.¹¹ One of the first

places that takes in Pilate at the age of twelve is a preacher's family. Although the family gives her the only opportunity she had for a formal education, it was the preacher's attraction to her young body that led to her eventual rejection. As Pilate aptly describes, "But then the preacher started patten on me. I was so dumb I didn't know enough to stop him. But his wife caught him at it, thumbin my breast, and put me out."¹² It is his inappropriate attraction to her body that places her back on the road in search of her extended family in Virginia. This rejection gives Pilate an informal education about her body, sending a clear message that her body will be the battleground from which she will either be accepted or rejected or both.

Adding to Pilate's folkloric qualities, her absence of a navel continually calls her humanity into question, resulting in continuous social rejection. In her travels, Pilate encounters migrant workers who embraced her for her work ethic. Within this mobile community, she acquired a *root worker* mentor who also served as a mother figure. Indoctrinated into the folk trade of medicine, Pilate gains valuable tools of survival for both herself and her community while experiencing some acceptance. Also in this community, Pilate couples with a boy her age who feels that, "nothing about her ever surprised him."¹³ His acceptance of her *difference* did not translate to the rest of the community once her difference was revealed; her mentor even rejected her:

She was to leave. They were very sorry, they liked her and all and she was such a good worker and a big help to everybody. But she had to leave just the same. "On account of my stomach?" [Pilate said] But the women would not answer her. They looked at the ground. Pilate left with more than her share of earnings, because the women did not want her to go away angry. They thought she might hurt them in some way if she got angry, and they also felt pity along with their terror of having been in the company of something God never made.¹⁴

This is significant in the text because it is the female mentor/root worker--the person who maintains and passes on the folk tradition--who leads this expulsion of Pilate. This intimate rejection by someone, who represented both a mother figure and folk mentor to Pilate, mimics a pattern of intra-group marginalization. Consequently, it is this communal anxiety regarding Pilate's origins that solidifies her within the folk archetype.

Because Pilate is squarely located within the mythic tradition through her miracle birth, questionable human origins, physical signifier of difference, marginalized existence and perceived special powers, she is in a special social category in the text:

It isolated her. Already without family, she was further isolate from her people, for, except for the relative bliss on the island, every other resource was denied her: partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion. Men frowned, women whispered and shoved their children behind them. Even a traveling side show would have rejected her, since her freak quality lacked that important ingredient—the rotesque. There was really nothing to see. Her defect, frightening an exotic as it was, was also a theatrical failure. It needed intimacy, gossip, and the time it took for curiosity to become drama.¹⁵

Pilate's communal identity was produced through the agents of the oral tradition: gossip, rumor and mythology. That oral tradition dictated the terms of the relationship between Pilate and the community. In some ways, an identity built within the folk tradition has the limitlessness of mythology, while simultaneously relegating these identities to the margins as oddities to be feared. It is this fear that validated the simultaneous respect and rejection of Pilate's character, as seen in the mythology that surrounds her character:

[Pilate] was helpful to everybody, but who also was believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga—all on account of the fact that she had no navel.¹⁶

This shows how Pilate is both limited and empowered by the communal mythology. The fear Pilate inspires follows the historically ambivalent sentiments between conjures and

their communities, “since the same power which aided a client could just as easily effect harm and misfortune for a conjurer’s enemies.”¹⁷ Although she was denied the foundational relationships that most people cherish, she was also empowered and respected by the communal fear of her supernatural powers.

The Folk Transcendence of Gender

As Morrison’s central folk reference point in the text, Pilate is consistently characterized as a folk heroine outside the confines of gender roles. Pilate is a physically imposing woman, standing taller than most men and believed to be as strong as a man.¹⁸ In every way, she is the definition of an unbound woman: she is unkempt, she wears no shoes or bra, she has no man and is described as *woods-wild*.¹⁹ By centralizing Pilate as Milkman’s mentor, Morrison privileges her ability to transcend proscribed gendered limitations. Pilate represents an alternative version of womanhood that operates within a different code of values.

Morrison goes to great lengths in the text to characterize Ruth and Pilate as two distinct expressions of black womanhood that Milkman is exposed to. Each literary scene that both women occupy is distinguished by the polarity of their expressions of womanhood. From the first scene in the novel, Morrison places these two women in the same space but at the opposite ends of the spectrum, as she narrates, “The singer [Pilate], standing at the back of the crowd, was as poorly dressed as the doctor’s daughter [Ruth] was well dressed.”²⁰ Morrison’s juxtapositioning of Pilate and Ruth offers two manifestations of black womanhood, as Morrison reveals when these two women reconnect after years of estrangement:

They were so different, these two women. One black, the other lemony. One corseted, the other buck naked under her dress. One well read but ill

traveled. The other had read only a geography book, but had been from one end of the country to another. One wholly dependant on money for life, the other indifferent to it.²¹

Throughout the text, Ruth is characterized as the epitome of western middle-class standards of womanhood and Pilate is portrayed as establishing a folk alternative to those institutionalized standards. In many ways, the vast contrast that is expressed in the portrayals of Ruth and Pilate's articulations of womanhood represents intra-*gender* heterogeneity within black culture.

This intra-gender diversity offers something that Second Wave Feminism often lacked, a strategic relationship between women of different classed backgrounds. Although Ruth and Pilate had little more than family in common, they worked together on mutual goals, each valuing the other's skill set. This strategic collaboration is best illustrated in the text when Pilate intervenes in Ruth and Macon's loveless marriage.

Pilate uses her folk knowledge to help impregnate Ruth:

She [Pilate] gave me funny things to do. And some greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff to put in his food." Ruth laughed. "I felt like a doctor, like a chemist doing some big important scientific experiment. It worked too. Macon came to me for four days. He even came home from his office in the middle of the day to be with me. He looked puzzled, but he came. Then it was over. And two months later I was pregnant."²²

Pilate saves Ruth from her absolute isolation by helping her achieve a pregnancy through her root work, and continues to protect Ruth from Macon who wants to abort the pregnancy. This alliance is important because it leads to Milkman's successful entrance into this world as Ruth notes, "I wouldn't have been strong enough without her. She saved my life. And yours, Macon."²³ Pilate provides a safe harbor for Ruth and Milkman, one that could not be achieved through conventional means. Pilate offers Ruth alternative means of self-empowerment that her middle-class status does not give her.

Likewise, when Pilate's daughter Hagar dies, Ruth uses her class status to make sure that she receives a proper burial.²⁴ The significance of this act is clear in both Pilate's alternative folk world and the secular world. Both women utilize their particular skill set to aid the other when in need, serving as a model of a strategic collaboration within women's diverse experiences.

Healer, Bootlegger and Trickster

As a result of Pilate's engagement with the margins, she gains the tools that give her currency within that community. Her informal education maintains her status within the community; it is an education that included training in the *natural trades* of harvesting crops, *root work* and winemaking, all of which are operated outside the dominant power structures. Because her education is generated from folk knowledge, Pilate's skills in these natural trades feed into the communal mythology of her magical powers, in an alternative space where both the natural and the magical world coexist. In the text, Pilate operates as a bridge between the supernatural and the material world.

Denise Heinze emphasizes this strategic use of Morrison's mythology,

But Morrison's ultimate purpose in using the supernatural in art is not to prove its existence—her novels intentionally represent it ambiguously—but to create this ongoing dialectic between the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknowable, the signified and the Signified—the supernatural as a trope on reality.²⁵

Pilate's characterization as a link between *the known and the unknowable* offers her community an alternative view of survival, knowledge and power. This is significant in analyzing Morrison because her female characters' subjectivities are often found in this in-between space. An example of this is illustrated in Ruth Dead, who can only get the recognition and love she so desperately needs at the gravesite of her father. In the text,

women's subjectivity is recognized within Pilate and Circe's alternative ways of knowing. This is where black women's unique viewpoint that incorporates "the complex social, historical, and cultural positionality,"²⁶ can be acknowledged in all of its intricacy.

As the text demonstrates, because of her own rejection from mainstream life and her colloquial education, Pilate occupies the folk position of *healer* within the black community:

...[H]er alien's compassion for troubled people ripened her and—the consequence of the knowledge she had made up or acquired—kept her just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people.// [She] acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships.// She was a natural healer and among quarreling drunks and fighting women she could hold her own, and sometimes mediate a peace that lasted a good bit longer than it should have because it was administered by someone not like them.²⁷

Pilate's folk vocation of *healer* operated both in the sense of curative healer through her root work in homeopathic cures, and in the sense of a relationship healer through her mediation skills. This communal position exemplifies her central role to the health of the community. It is Pilate's position on the margins that informs her compassion for others and also consolidates her role within the black community. Her folk vocation and identity represents both what connects her to marginalized peoples and what disconnects her from the general population. Life on the margins is what has ultimately prioritized her life, given her purpose and secured her as a central value to her community.

Morrison portrays Pilate's alternative identity not only on the social margins of the black community but also on its the physical border. Morrison very literally depicts Pilate's folk life as having only one consistent component; it resides and circulates on the perimeter of the larger communal life of blacks. Pilate is a traveling blues woman,²⁸ complete with a sad blues tune, maintaining a physical positioning on the margins of the

general population during her wandering years. After her father's death, she and her brother took refuge at Circe's home which was also at the edge of town. Likewise, the one place she did settle into during her youth was an island *off the coast* of Virginia with a colony of Negro farmers.²⁹ This alternative community is illustrated in the text:

They did not mix much with other Negroes, but were respected by them and self-sustaining. And you could get to them only by boat.....//There were twenty-five or thirty families on that island and when Pilate made it clear that she wasn't afraid of work, but didn't like the mainland and the confinement of town, she was taken in.³⁰

This moment in the text marks a different response from Pilate to being marginalized. Previous to this time period, she was ousted to the periphery of the communities she lived amongst. Now, conversely, Pilate actively seeks the margins as the location from which she has the most control, a location of empowerment. Although this community was self-segregated, they most clearly represented the path that Pilate was to take for the rest of her life. It was here, detached from the general population, that Pilate felt most comfortable and found a new place to call home. Moreover, this island community was where Pilate had her longest relationship with a man, and where she bore her one and only child. Morrison skillfully creates Pilate's historical trajectory on the limits of the black community; from her first home with her father and her brother, on a farm that was on the *outskirts* of town, to her final home on the *edge* of the Southside. Her literal marginal existence is best illustrated through Morrison's description of Pilate's home that is located off of the grid, on the Southside of town called *The Blood Bank*:

...Pilate lived in a narrow single-story house whose basement seemed to be rising from rather than settling into the ground. She had no electricity because she would not pay for the service. Nor for gas. At night she and her daughter lit the house with candles and kerosene lamps; they warmed themselves and cooked with wood and coal, pumped kitchen water into a dry sink through a pipeline from a well and lived pretty much as though

progress was a word that meant walking a little farther on down the road.³¹// There were no street lights in this part of town; only the moon directed the way of a pedestrian.³²

As Morrison locates Pilate on the margins both physically and socially, this literary technique creates a physical boundary that characters must cross into to interact with her. Therefore, each character's interaction with Pilate is an act of conscious will to cross over into her alternative space.

As Pilate strategically seeks out the margin as a place of empowerment, the reader also witnesses her use of it as a site of resistance. Bell Hooks best speaks to it in her essay "Margin as a Chosen Place of Resistance":

I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility. This site of resistance is continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination.³³

In the text, Morrison simultaneously locates Pilate within both types of marginality that Hooks distinguishes. Pilate is clearly located in the margin imposed by the oppressive structures that communally rejected her, but as Pilate matures she also chooses the margin as a site of resistance. The reader traces Pilate's conscious journey as she seeks out the obscure Island community and then as she establishes herself on the outskirts of the south side as a "small-time bootlegger."³⁴

Through this confluence of her own self-determination and communally imposed marginalization, Pilate is able to live outside of conventional life. Even her economic trade--making wine and whiskey--is a livelihood outside of the law and accepted norms of women and acts as part of the resistance to prohibition. As her female counterparts work as maids, nannies, prostitutes and seamstresses, Pilate is able to transgress gender

roles and legal boundaries through her strategic location outside the dominant power structure. As noted in the text:

Along with winemaking, cooking whiskey became the way Pilate began to make her steady living. That skill allowed her more freedom hour by hour and day by day than any other work a woman of no means whatsoever and no inclination to make love for money could choose.³⁵

Operating outside of these institutionalized power structures, Pilate is autonomous and, therefore, able to determine her own fate. Through her underground trade of liquor sales, Pilate has a clear-cut role within the community. Pilate's home is the location where people cross over into an alternative space of value, to participate in a black market. Her role as local bootlegger clearly subverts traditional economic power structures, and because she doesn't operate within these structures, she also doesn't answer to them.

Morrison depicts Pilate as a challenge to the status quo. As such, Pilate decides that the rules and values of the larger population don't apply to her. Morrison portrays Pilate's shift to an alternative set of values:

[W]hen she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. First off, she cut her hair. That was one thing she didn't want to have to think about anymore. Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her.// She gave up, apparently all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships.³⁶

Pilate consciously transgresses many social norms including: gender expression, behavior and vocation. As previously stated, Morrison uses Pilate's mythic identity to free her of the limits of mainstream power structures, ultimately allowing her to challenge the social apparatus of both womens' oppression and racial oppression. In doing so, Pilate offers an alternative system of values predicated on the value of every human and their relationship to each other.

The reader best observes Pilate's folk transgressions of sexual and racial oppression through her infamous encounter at the police station. Deftly employing elements of the black vernacular traditions in her negotiations with the police, she was able to secure the return of her "inheritance" and the release of Milkman and Guitar from jail. Pilate was able to empower herself in relationship to the authorities by personifying the classic *trickster figure* within the folk tradition. The African American trickster tradition is one born of necessity, the folk historian Lawrence Levine describes the trickster as such, "At its most elemental, then the trickster tale consists of a confrontation in which the weak use their wits to evade the strong."³⁷ He goes on to say, "The animals in these tales have an almost instinctive understanding of each other's habits and foibles."³⁸ Pilate's use of wit has the ability to invert the power dynamic using their own cultural habits against them in the police station, to "circumvent the 'blueprints' of white intentions."³⁹ As Milkman describes this trickster act, the reader is acutely aware of Pilate's abilities to use the white male expectations/limitations of black women as a point of departure in her act to retrieve her goods and free Milkman and Guitar, "She came in there like Louise Beaver and Butterfly McQueen all rolled up in one. Yassuh, boss. Yassuh, boss...."⁴⁰ The use of these two figures to describe Pilate's performance is critical to understanding Pilate's inversion of power. In this case, Louise Beaver and Butterfly McQueen both represent stereotypes of subservient and loyal mammy characters, which are asexual, mothers to the world and limited to domestic work for whites.⁴¹ Pilate, who operates outside of the dominant power structures, is able to use these racist and sexist archetypes to circumvent the established power of the white police. Milkman describes Pilate as embodying these archetypes, stating, "She didn't even look

the same. She looked short. Short and pitiful.”⁴² In a circumstance where all of the men (Milkman, Guitar and Macon Jr.) were powerless, Pilate was able to manipulate the situation through exercising a *folk vulnerability*.⁴³ Milkman comments on the strength of her vulnerability, “[O]pening herself up wide for their amusement, their pity, their scorn, their mockery, their disbelief, their meanness, their whimsy, their annoyance, their power, their anger, their boredom—*whatever would be useful to her and himself*.”⁴⁴ Milkman recognizes Pilate’s strength and sacrifice in her employment of her trickster act; moreover, he acknowledges that he directly benefited from her actions.

There are multiple translations of Pilate’s act, each depending on the audience.

Zora Neale Hurston in *Mules and Men* addresses this multi-voiced cultural practice:

The theory behind our tactics: ‘The white man is always trying to know into somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing be he sho’ can’t read my mind. I’ll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I’ll say my say and sing my song.’⁴⁵

Pilate’s story of her “lynched husband’s bones” is what she *sets outside of the door of her mind*, for the police to play with, while she concerns herself with freeing Milkman and Guitar. Pilate is successful in her trickster act as the police viewed her performance as her true identity, not detecting her adept *code switching*.⁴⁶ On the other hand, her black audience clearly recognizes her transformation, although they have various *reads* on her cultural code switching. Guitar lacks an appreciation for Pilate’s actions, stating, “She slipped into those Jemima shoes cause they fit.”⁴⁷ His inability to separate Pilate’s act from her true identity leads him to reject her efforts. Conversely, Milkman defends Pilate, responding to Guitar, “If she hadn’t been smart, both our asses would be cooling in the joint right now.”⁴⁸ He identifies the value in her alternative skill set, as he reflects,

“But nothing was like the shame he felt as he watched and listened to Pilate. Not just her Aunt Jemima act, but the fact that she was both adept at it and willing to do it—for him.”⁴⁹ Milkman’s admiration for Pilate’s sacrifice is evident as he acknowledges her skillful employment of code switching at the ready to assist him. While Macon, like Guitar, views her performance in a negative light, stating, “I told you she was a snake. Drop her skin in a split second.”⁵⁰ All three responses validate Pilate’s abilities to slip in and out of the trickster character and place different values on that folk ability.

Furthering her valorization of alternative *ways of knowing*, Morrison constructs her text by using both a literal and figurative portrayal of Pilate’s supernatural condition. Through her personification of Pilate’s connection to nature, Morrison continues to narrate Pilate’s kinship to the supernatural realm. In the text, Macon describes Pilate’s home as “rising from rather than settling into the ground.”⁵¹ Pilate’s house is described as smelling of pine and fruit,⁵² and having no back enclosure wall—open to the natural elements, inviting Mother Nature in to be included in her living space. This connection to nature was a continuation from her childhood, as she was described as, “[A] pretty woods-wild girl ‘that couldn’t nobody put shoes on.’”⁵³ Morrison’s depiction of the seamless relationship between Pilate and nature becomes one of the primary relationships of value within the Womanist tradition. Writer and editor Layli Phillips, validates this intimate relationship to nature as a strategic goal of the womanist tradition,

Thus, womanism seeks to reconcile three relationships: the relationship between people from different groups, *the relationship between people and the environment/nature*, and the relationship between people and the spiritual/transcendental realms. Womanist methods are those that intervene between or seek to heal wounds and imbalances at any or all of these sites.⁵⁴

Through her communal identity of *root worker*, Pilate heals that relationship between people and the environment. Likewise, within the folk traditions, this direct connection to nature is an essential identifying element of a *conjure woman*. The relationship between the environment and humankind is generated from an African ethos that Levine aptly describes:

Human beings could “read” the phenomena surrounding and affecting them because Man was part of, not alien to, the Natural Order of things, attached to the Oneness that bound together all matter, animate and inanimate, all spirits, visible or not. It was crucially necessary to understand the world because one was part of it, inexorably linked to it.⁵⁵

Morrison’s folk characterization of Pilate is steeped in symbolic references in the black expressive culture that gesture toward her ability to navigate multiple contextual terrains through both her links to the unseen world and her alternative skill set.

The Womanist Journey to Manhood

Morrison further lays the groundwork for the values of the Womanist tradition by intimately interlinking the male and female story lines in *Song of Solomon*. Through the fusing of Milkman’s quest for independence and manhood to Pilate’s physical and psychic journey back through the South, Morrison seamlessly creates a parallel between the main male character of the novel, Milkman Dead, and the folk heroine, Pilate Dead. Milkman’s journey to find the mythologized gold,⁵⁶ becomes an initiation into the gendered folk traditions. Morrison commands this literary device to create a path that aligns woman’s knowledge and traditions within the larger community, a community that is necessarily inclusive to males. This also becomes foundational to the Womanist approach as etched out in literary terms by Professor Obioma Nnaemeka,

Opposed to the gender separatism that bedevils feminism, womanism presents an alternative for black women by framing their survival in the

context of the survival of their community where the fate of women and that of men are inextricably linked.⁵⁷

Morrison embodies this Womanist value in her text as she links the success of the hero of her novel to the folk heroine and the two become inextricably linked. As Milkman seeks to escape the bonds of his family and achieve independence, his freedom is tied to his relationship with Pilate.

Morrison narrates Milkman's right-of-passage into manhood through a ritual process of validating gendered folk traditions. The reader is introduced to this literary technique when Milkman first meets Pilate. This initial encounter with Pilate shows the immediate association between Pilate's folk knowledge and Milkman's first exposure to the entitlements of manhood. As Pilate shares the family's oral history with Milkman, he assists her in making her illegal alcohol. In this vernacular site when Pilate is passing down folk knowledge, Milkman crosses many threshold moments. He is consciously defying his father's wishes by engaging with Pilate and crossing over into her alternative space, as the narrator reveals, "[N]ot the wisdom of his father nor the caution of the world—could keep him from her."⁵⁸ In Pilate's realm, he experiences many rites-of-passage into manhood:

Milkman was five feet seven then but it was the first time in his life that *he remembered being completely happy. He was with his friend, an older boy—wise and kind and fearless. He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud. And he was in love. No wonder his father was afraid of them.*⁵⁹

As Milkman is initiated into the folk traditions through Pilate, he experiences many milestones, including the bond of true friendship, happiness and his first love. Through the coupling of Milkman's journey into manhood with a female initiated indoctrination

into the folk tradition, Morrison creates an alternative space that is able to valorize womens' marginalized knowledge and identities within the larger cultural community as represented by men.

The task of aligning these gendered traditions is most fully realized by Milkman's quest to retrace Pilate's steps. Each chapter in his voyage brings forth an opportunity to either validate or reject the vernacular folk traditions. The first stop on this journey is to the home of Reverend Cooper, in Danville, the hometown of Pilate and Macon. For Pilate, Danville initially represented an idyllic and grounded youth on her father's farm, Lincoln's Heaven, where her brother and father nurtured her. This site is significant because it was the location where she received her first understanding of family and where she was torn from her family at such a young age, witnessing the murder of her father and the transition into being orphaned. It was both her most rooted time of life and her moment of greatest disconnection, as she states:

I was cut off from people early. You can't know what that was like. After my papa was blown off that fence, me and Macon wandered around for a few days until we had a fallin out and I went off on my own. I was about twelve I think.⁶⁰

It is from this primary moment of disconnection in Danville that Pilate begins her individual journey; accordingly, Morrison begins the hero's journey in the exact same place as the folk heroine of the novel. Paradoxically, this location is where Pilate loses track of the only family she has left, her brother Macon; it also becomes the place where Milkman will relocate lost aspects of his father, Macon. The reader witnesses Milkman's reintroduction to his father through the stories of the men in Danville, as Milkman realizes that, "He could not recognize that stern, greedy, unloving man in the boy they talked about, but he loved the boy they described and loved that boy's father..."⁶¹ As

Milkman begins his indoctrination into the oral tradition, he is able to walk back through time and be introduced to both his ancestors and his living family.

During Milkman's stay in Danville with the Reverend, his indoctrination into the oral history of his family continued. Reverend Cooper first validates the stories about his grandfather's murder and Pilate and Macon's survival that were passed down to Milkman mostly through Pilate's oral tradition. He authenticates these stories through his nonfamilial perspective and official communal status. Then the larger community joined in to complete the picture of Milkman's father and grandfather:

Four days at Reverend Cooper's house as his guest, and the purpose of long visits from every old man in the town who remembered his father or his grandfather, and some who'd only heard. They all repeated various aspects of the story, all talked about how beautiful Lincoln's Heaven was. Sitting in the kitchen, they looked at Milkman with such rheumy eyes and spoke about his grandfather with such awe and affection, Milkman began to miss him too.⁶²

It was through the telling of this oral history that the dreams of this community of men were ignited. Their personal stories were indelibly linked to the oral history and fate of the Dead men—the murder of Macon Dead Sr. marked, “the beginning of their own dying even though they were young boys at the time.”⁶³ His farm represented the actualization of the black man's potential, providing the community with an implicit invitation that a black man could achieve the American Dream:

A farm that colored their lives like a paintbrush and spoke to them like a sermon. “You see?” the farm said to them. “See? See what you can do? Never mind you can't tell one letter from another, never mind you born a slave, never mind you lose your name, never mind your daddy dead, never mind nothing. Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it. Stop sniveling,” it said.⁶⁴

Just as Milkman's grandfather's farm represented the achievement of full manhood to the men of the community, its stories also reconnected Milkman to his own journey toward manhood.

As a rite-of-passage into this male world, Milkman must also participate in the validation of the oral tradition of his family. This is most clearly seen in the text when the men of the town look to Milkman to complete the story of his family. In the oral tradition of call-and-response, this community of men narrates their fragments of the Dead family history and expect Milkman to respond in kind. Like a contagion, the oral tradition of the men also becomes the oral tradition of Milkman, as illustrated through the text:

Looking at Milkman in those nighttime talks, they [the community men] yearned for something. Some word from him that would re-ignite the dream and stop the death they were dying. That's why Milkman began to talk about his father, the boy they knew the son of the fabulous Macon Dead. He bragged a little and they came alive.⁶⁵

It is through this oral tradition--batted back and forth between Milkman and the men of the community--that they engage in a performance of mutual validation. Milkman gains a more holistic sense of himself by listening and participating in the oral tradition, allowing him to reflect his family's past and present:

Suddenly, in the midst of his telling, Milkman wanted the gold. He wanted to get up right then and there and go get it. *Run to where it was and snatch every grain of it from under the noses of the Butlers, who were dumb enough to believe that if they killed one man his whole line died.* He glittered in the light of their adoration and grew fierce with pride.⁶⁶

Through the oral tradition, Milkman gains familial pride which engenders him to participate in vindicating the murder of his grandfather, continuing the legacy of the Dead family and taking his righteous place in the patriarchal order. Prior to this juncture in the

text, Milkman's purpose in finding Pilate's gold was purely self-centered, he wanted to escape his family and life.⁶⁷ After he accepts the validity of the oral tradition, his motivation shifts to familial and personal vindication. Ironically, instead of disconnecting with his familial identity, which was his initial goal, he is reconnecting with it. In Danville, where Pilate was cut off early from her family, Milkman reconnects to his familial history and identity. And his participation in this oral event energizes him to continue his quest for Pilate's gold—his key to independence and manhood.

Circe's World

The second stop on Milkman's journey through folk indoctrination is the house of Circe, who represents his introduction to the supernatural realm. Circe was the midwife who witnessed Pilate's miracle birth and the tragic death of his grandmother, Sing. Circe, the only woman present at the bittersweet birth of a motherless child, was the natural maternal figure in Pilate's life. With both parents deceased, Circe was compelled to provide sanctuary to Pilate and Macon, serving as both an emotional and physical guardian. Circe is characterized as a timeless figure in the text, representing an ancestor figure for the Dead family. During Milkman's first encounter with Circe, he begins to validate her supernatural status, equating her image to his childhood dreams of witches⁶⁸—a western representation of the supernatural world. As seen in the text, Milkman questions the reality of his experience when he first sees Circe:

Milkman struggled for a clear thought, so hard to come by in a dream: Perhaps this woman is Circe. But Circe is dead. This woman is alive. That was as far as he got, because although the woman was talking to him, she might in any case still be dead—as a matter of fact, she *had* to be dead. Not because of the wrinkles, and the face so old it could not be alive, but because out of the toothless mouth came the strong, mellifluous voice of a twenty-year-old girl.⁶⁹

Milkman struggles to reconcile the inconsistencies of her age and mortality in his encounter with Circe. But as Milkman engages in dialogue with her, he accepts the paradoxical nature of her existence. Through Morrison's characterization of Circe's youthful voice transposed onto an elderly woman, she distills a timeless quality from Circe. Those inconsistencies serve as a testament to Circe's ancestor status and liminal existence between the world of the living and the dead.

Morrison has written and commented extensively on the importance of the ancestor figure in her work and this element also became foundational to Womanist literary practices. Within this text, and others such as Marshall's *Praisesong* and Swartz-Bartz's *Bridge of Beyond*, the ancestor figure also represents a valorization of the supernatural realm. Layli Phillips expands on this Womanist technique/value when she speaks on Womanism's goals of healing the imbalances between people and the spiritual/transcendental realms as one of the overarching characteristics that Womanism has developed.⁷⁰ Circe, like Pilate, is clearly linked to the supernatural world through her timeless existence; Morrison prioritizes this supernatural link with her female folk characters. As an ancestor figure, Circe resides in the liminal space between the living and the dead. Milkman must cross over into that alternative space of the supernatural world to find more of the silenced history of his family.

In the text, Morrison creates a physical manifestation of Circe's liminal existence to further mark her folk characterization. Her liminal existence is translated onto her living conditions, as such she resides on the outskirts of town, in an old overgrown home that mimics Pilate's home in its off-the-grid status. To demonstrate that Milkman is crossing over into this alternative space of the ancestor, Circe's home is a location that

can no longer be reached by a car and is almost inaccessible even on foot.⁷¹ Milkman's arrival at Circe's house demonstrates that he has left one world and has entered another, as the text illuminates, "He looked back down the path and saw the green maw out of which he had come, a greenish-black tunnel, *the end of which was nowhere in sight.*"⁷² Milkman travels through a tunnel created by nature and arrives on the other side--where Circe resides--and from Circe's space he is no longer in contact with the material world from which he came.

As Milkman emerges from this natural tunnel, he enters a world that has merged with nature. Akin to Pilate, Circe shares an intimate connection to nature. Circe's residence is covered with overgrowth on the outside and dogs have overtaken the inside—Nature governs both the inside and outside. Circe's only connection to people is through the animals that she tends. The animals function as her livelihood and as her only community. Morrison narrates the dogs as a counterweight to Circe herself, as Milkman notes, "Beside the calm, sane, appraising eyes of the dogs, her [Circe's] eyes looked crazy. Beside their combed, brushed gun-metal hair, hers was wild and filthy."⁷³ This juxtapositioning of the dogs and Circe creates a direct correlation between the two, further validating her status as folk character. In Circe's supernatural realm of value, the dogs also serve to protect and participate in her revenge on the Butlers, which I will elaborate on further in the chapter.

Circe is further characterized as a supernatural ancestor figure for the larger community that she was once a part of. Living just beyond the reach of the black community, Circe is believed to be dead by the entire town.⁷⁴ Moreover, Rev. Cooper notes the communal perception of Circe's age at death as being well beyond one hundred

years old; therefore like Pilate, Circe's communal identity also existed in the realm of the mythological.⁷⁵ The communal perception of Circe's timelessness, in conjunction to her role as midwife to the community, solidifies her status as a supernatural ancestor for the whole community. Therefore, within the text, for Milkman to be in the presence of Circe represents a connection to the ancestor. Circe's physical marginalization and spiritual association creates the alternative space where Milkman can continue his indoctrination into the values of the folk tradition.

Morrison continues to demonstrate this male coming-of-age story through female folk tropes in the text when Milkman has his first physical contact with Circe. At the moment of their physical embrace, when Milkman is first recognizing Circe as a supernatural entity, he also has an erection.⁷⁶ Morrison textually places this purely male response at the instance that Milkman is attempting to discern whether Circe is a dream or reality. His initial physical response to Circe is linked to his childhood dreams of witches when, "always at the very instant of the pounce or the gummy embrace he would wake with a scream and an erection. Now he had only the erection."⁷⁷ The absence of the scream marks his ability to overcome his fear of the supernatural, and his remaining erection further links Milkman's engagement with gendered folk traditions to his rite-of-passage into manhood.

As Milkman gets further acquainted with Circe, he experiences another encounter with a gendered folk trade—midwifery. Milkman's crossing over into the space of his female ancestor, who practiced this vocation, illuminates the unrecognized folk knowledge of women. Her skill set is portrayed as having value in an alternative world but not in mainstream life. In a reflective moment during their first encounter, Milkman

acknowledges Circe's expansive folk knowledge to pass on to the next generation, as he describes her, "Healer, deliverer, *in another world she would have been the head nurse at Mercy*. Instead she tended Weimaraners and had just one selfish wish that when she died somebody would find her before the dogs ate her."⁷⁸ By dramatizing Circe as a midwife, she becomes the literal portal of life within her community, serving as the central conduit to the future. In this capacity, she becomes of central value to her community. Yet in the winter of her life, she occupies this marginalized place, both literally and figuratively, on the outskirts of the community in her new role, birthing dogs. This dramatic shift in Circe's community—from the families that she nurtured to the dogs that she sells--further validates a continued black feminist perspective that reproduces the experience of simultaneously being both centralized and marginalized within a communal role. Circe's skills are distinguished as having intrinsic communal value, which Milkman acknowledges along with the realization that this value doesn't maintain currency in the dominant culture. This resonates as a moment of maturity for Milkman because he is not only validating her folk knowledge but also goes on to critique a society that doesn't recognize that wisdom.

Part of the folk wisdom that Milkman learns from Circe is that justice can happen via alternative means. Because Circe remains in the home of the family that murdered Milkman's grandfather, Milkman misreads this behavior as loyalty to the Butlers. However, Circe hastily imparts, her reasoning for staying is otherwise, "[Y]ou think I stay on here because I loved her, then you have about as much sense as a fart!"⁷⁹ After Mrs. Butler committed suicide rather than live a poor life, Circe sets out to avenge the murder through her folk justice. As such, Circe commits herself to being the sole witness

to the natural destruction of the home that the Butlers cherished, because in Circe's words:

They loved it. Stole for it, lied for it, killed for it. But I'm the one left. Me and the dogs. And I will never clean it again. Never. Nothing. Not a speck of dust, not a grain of dirt, will I move. Everything in this world they lived for will crumble and rot.⁸⁰

As Circe exacts her revenge on the Butlers, it is revenge born within her supernatural realm. There is an implicit assumption that although the Butlers have all died, Circe's folk justice reaches beyond the grave. Circe's desire to witness the natural destruction of the home has a direct correlation to her role in the household. Circe was charged to maintain and care for the home; her revenge is to abdicate that role, and overseeing her own deficit of maintenance.

Circe's folk justice is only recognized in an alternative space of black vernacular tradition, where it has currency and validation because of its efforts toward spiritual revenge. Reverend Cooper, representative of the black church, acknowledges Circe's successful efforts toward justice. When the Rev. questions Milkman's reasoning for returning to his father's hometown, he acknowledges Circe's endeavor:

Rev. Cooper: "You wouldn't be here to even things up, would you?" The preacher leaned over his stomach.

Milkman: "No. I'm passing through, that's all. Just thought I'd look around. I wanted to see the farm..."

Rev. Cooper: "Cause any evening up left to do, Circe took care of."

Milkman: "What'd she do?"

Rev. Cooper: "Hah! What didn't she do?"⁸¹

As another identity that circulates within the black vernacular traditions, Reverend Cooper validates the currency of Circe's spiritual revenge on the Butlers. In Circe's situation—in service to the murderers of her community—she is seemingly powerless, but she is able to empower herself through an alternative form of justice.

But this was not the first time that Circe was able to turn the balance of power with the Butlers; she also used her trickster skills to create a refuge for Pilate and Macon after they were orphaned. Circe also embodies the classic trickster figure in the black vernacular tradition.⁸² Circe's action of creating a safe haven for the victims in the home of the murderer without their knowledge reverses the balance of power between her and the Butler family. Circe uses her trickster skills by hiding the children in the last place that they would search—their own home. Circe uses the reliability of the Butler's racism, which manifests as an underestimation of Circe's audacity/boldness; and what would be considered her weakness—her absolute dependence on the Butlers—to empower herself to protect the children of the slain Macon Sr. In doing so, she consciously continues the Dead lineage, in direct opposition to the Butler's efforts to end it through the murder of the land-owning Macon Sr. As Macon Jr. and Pilate went on to have families of their own and Macon Jr. continued the land-owning legacy of his father, Circe gambles with her own stability to create temporary stability for Pilate and Macon Jr. During Milkman's encounter with Circe, he acknowledges the value of her sacrifice:

Here in this dim room he sat with the woman who had helped deliver his father and Pilate; who had risked her job, her life, maybe, to hide them both after their father was killed, emptied their slop jars, bought them food at night and pans of water to wash.⁸³

In crossing over into Circe's alternative space, Milkman gains an understanding of the value of her folk knowledge and skills. He learns that through the employment of her trickster skills, Circe is able to invert the imbalance of power between herself and the Butlers to her advantage. Circe's resourcefulness and resilience in the face of uneven power dynamics serves as a model of survival to Milkman during his journey into manhood.

Another significant element of folk knowledge Circe passes down to Milkman consists of the fragments of his family's oral tradition, which facilitates his understanding of his own evolution into manhood. Circe validates and supplements the fragments of oral tradition that he has acquired throughout his folk indoctrination. As Circe fills in the gaps of information on Milkman's ancestors, the reader is able to witness his ability to connect this knowledge to his own contemporary life experiences. This is illustrated when Milkman inquires about his grandmother:

Milkman: "Some friend of Reverend Cooper said she looked white. My grandmother. Was she?"

Circe: "No. Mixed. Indian mostly. A good-looking woman, but fierce, for the young woman I knew her as. Crazy about her husband too, overcrazy. You know what I mean? Some women love too hard. She watched over him like a pheasant hen. Nervous. Nervous love."

Milkman thought about this mixed woman's great-grand-daughter, Hagar, and said, "Yes. I know what you mean."⁸⁴

As Circe exposes Milkman to the nature of the relationship between his grandparents, he is able to see a reflection of his relationship to Hagar. Drawing parallels between Hagar and their grandmother, Milkman is able to better understand Hagar's fatal emotional response to his rejection and the role he played in her demise.

Circe also enlightens Milkman to the original names of his grandparents, which in and of itself becomes a transgression of the patriarchal order in the family. From her alternative space, Circe becomes the first member of the family who would dare utter Milkman's grandmother's name, *Sing*, since her death.⁸⁵ Because Macon Sr. forbids his family from saying his wife's name after her death, he effectually erases her identity from the family tree. Her children evidence this, as neither Pilate nor Macon remembered her name or knew much information about her. As Circe pronounces, "Sing. Her name was Sing,"⁸⁶ she breaks the silence surrounding his grandmother's identity, unlocking her free

Indian heritage and the significance of his own surname—Dead. This is textually consequential because it is Sing who insisted that Macon Dead Sr. keep the *Dead* name that was passed down to Milkman himself⁸⁷ because, as his father noted, “Mama liked it. Liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out.”⁸⁸ Circe reaffirms that Sing strategically insisted on the name *Dead* because, for her, the name signified a new beginning away from slavery in the Promised Land.⁸⁹ Through Circe’s efforts to acquaint Milkman with his grandmother’s identity, Milkman is better able to identify with his own ethnic heritage and identity. By virtue of Circe’s ancestor status, she is able to reveal this veiled family history. Ultimately, in passing on his grandmother’s name, Circe creates another gendered node of cultural affiliation in Milkman’s quest for manhood. By seamlessly narrating the grandmother’s efforts toward self-determination as intricately entwined with Milkman’s male responsibility to pass on the family name, Morrison supports her foundational literary technique of narrating a male coming-of-age story through gendered folk knowledge.

Circe continues her folk edification of Milkman by providing him with the next geographic locations on his folk indoctrination. One of the more concrete pieces of information Circe passes onto Milkman are the Virginian origins of his grandparents and the last location of his grandfather’s body—Hunter’s Cave.⁹⁰ As Milkman follows Circe’s guidance, he continues his parallel quest to retrace Pilate’s journey and these two locations become the next sites of Milkman’s pilgrimage. Circe gives him the exact location of the cave, which he believes holds the gold and, therefore, the key to his freedom. But with that information, Circe also reveals the fate of his grandfather’s body, which was also placed in Hunter’s Cave. Circe’s revelation of this fact creates an

opportunity for Milkman to further his folk initiation. When Milkman suggests that, in going to the cave, he might be able to bury the remains of Macon Sr. “properly,” Circe promptly gives him a lesson in the supernatural relevance of a proper burial, “Now, that’s a though worth having. The dead don’t like it if they’re not buried. They don’t like it at all.”⁹¹ Again, by virtue of Circe recognizing the presence of supernatural entities and their ability to both impact and be impacted by the lives of the living, she continues to elucidate the relevance of the supernatural to Milkman. In her insistence that Milkman prioritize burying of the bones to calm the spirits, she demands Milkman’s mutual recognition of these supernatural entities and that accommodating them become part of his journey. As Milkman continues his journey to Hunter’s Cave to find his manhood and freedom, each step is entwined with lessons in folk knowledge, which help him navigate through his transition into adulthood.

The parallel journey of the hero and the folk heroine is sustained through the trek to Hunter’s Cave. Through this journey, both Pilate and Milkman learn to recognize folk knowledge and integrate it into their lives. Pilate’s initial experience was with her brother Macon. After the murder of their father, they left Circe’s house and wandered freely in the woods. The woodlands become the location that Pilate and Macon had their first supernatural experience, as Macon describes it:

On the third day they woke to find a man that looked just like their father sitting on a stump not fifty yards away.// They would have called out to him or run toward him except he was staring right past them with such distance in his eyes, he frightened them. So they ran away.// Just before dark, when the sun had left them alone, when they were coming out of some woods looking around for the crest of the hill where they could see, perhaps, a farm, an abandoned shed—anyplace where they could spend the night—they saw a cave, and at its mouth stood their father. This time he motioned for them to follow him. Faced with the choice of the

limitless nighttime woods and a man who looked like their father, they chose the latter.⁹²

Pilate's experience of seeing her dead father in the woods and at the cave initially frightens her, but soon they realize that their father's ghostly presence is a guiding force, as Macon explains, "[P]erhaps he was simply looking out for them, showing them what to do and where to go."⁹³ Paradoxically, it is during the first moment of communication with their father's spirit in the cave that Pilate and Macon's relationship suffers a permanent rupture. As Pilate is connecting to her father's spirit, that utters, "'Sing. Sing,' in a hollow voice before he melted away again,"⁹⁴ she is disconnecting from her brother because of their disagreement about the stealing of the gold. This episode of spiritual communication, followed by their physical altercation, signifies a turning point in their relationship that resulted in their eventual estrangement. In the cave, as Pilate becomes alienated from her brother she also learns to recognize and trust the knowledge of the spiritual world. It is from this instance in the text that Pilate begins to maintain an intimate relationship with the ghost of her father, as his spirit becomes a guiding force throughout her lifetime.

Subsequently, it is through heeding her father's spiritual guidance that Pilate ends up returning to the cave three years later to atone for the murder in the cave. This is further illustrated in the text as Pilate relates her father's spiritual message:

'You just can't fly on off and leave a body,' he tole me. A human life is precious. You shouldn't fly off and leave it. So I knew right away what he meant cause he was right there when we did it. *He meant that if you take a life, then you own it. You responsible for it. You can't get rid of nobody by killing them. They still there, and they yours now.* So I had to go back for it. And I did find the cave. And there he was.⁹⁵

Pilate interprets her father's spiritual communications as another alternative economy of folk justice. This quote reveals an alternative spiritual worldview that suggests a continuous psychic connection between the living and the dead. This message resonates with Pilate because, as someone who circulates within the folk tradition, she both recognizes and responds to her father's spirit and this alternative form of folk justice. In doing so, she returns to the cave to collect the bones that she retains throughout her lifetime. In Morrison's narration of Pilate's relationship to her dead father, she furthers her illustration of the foundational value of connection to the ancestor that laid the groundwork for the Womanist tradition. Layli Phillips discusses this *spiritualized* notion within the Womanist tradition:

[W]omanism openly acknowledges a spiritual/transcendental realm with which human life, living kind, and the material world are all intertwined. For Womanist, this realm is actual and palpable, and the relationship between it and humans is neither abstract nor insignificant to politics.⁹⁶

Morrison's novel clearly operates within this worldview, as the spirit of Macon Dead Sr. is narrated as an additional character in the text. Pilate's ongoing relationship to her dead father and to the dead man in Hunter's Cave become important interactions and connections in the novel that demand the reader to blur the lines between the material world and the spiritual realm.

Correspondingly, as Milkman proceeds to forge a path through the woods to Hunter's Cave, his physical trek serves as a ritual that further links him to the experience of his ancestors. During Milkman's endeavor to trace this aspect of Pilate's journey, he gains a better insight into his own life and the life of his grandfather, as he expresses during a self-reflective moment in the text:

He had no idea that simply walking through trees, bushes, on untrammelled ground could be so hard. Woods always brought to his mind City Park, *the tended woods on Honoré Island where he went for outings as a child and where tiny convenient paths led you through*. “He leased ten acres of virgin woods and cleared it all,” said the men describing the beginning of Old Macon Dead’s farm. Cleared this? Chopped down this? This stuff he could barely walk through?⁹⁷

As this quote illustrates, through this ritual journey Milkman makes direct parallels between his life in Michigan and his grandfather’s life in Danville. Milkman realizes that his experiences in nature were mediated by the economic privileges of his family, in comparison to his grandfather’s handicapped experience of being, “as ignorant as a hammer and broke as a convict, with nothing but free papers,” yet being able to purchase and clear these virgin woods.⁹⁸ Recognizing the accomplishments of his grandfather is a step toward Milkman identifying his own potential success as a descendant of this former slave who defied the odds.

Through Milkman’s journey to Hunter’s Cave, he experiences a shift of purpose in finding the gold, to his own form of folk justice. As he labors through the woods:

He thought of the pitiful hungry eyes of the old men, their eagerness for some *word of defiant success accomplished by the son of Macon Dead*; and of the white men who strutted through the orchards and ate the Georgia peaches after they shot his grandfather’s head off. Milkman took a deep breath and began to negotiate the rocks.⁹⁹

Milkman’s purpose shifts from a self-centered material escapism, to continuing the defiant success of his father and grandfather. These motivations place Milkman’s actions squarely within the folk tradition, as he connects his drive to find the gold to the oral tradition of his family and to the continuation of Circe’s spiritual revenge on the Butlers. Milkman indicates his desire to transform himself into both a producer and circulator of his family’s oral tradition. In doing so, he secures his position with both his male

forefathers and with the community of old men. Subsequently, the reader is able to witness Milkman's integration of Circe's folk knowledge regarding alternative forms of justice and his recognition of the power the oral tradition has in fueling his own journey toward manhood.

As Milkman continues tracing Pilate's journey, he travels to the ancestral home of his grandparents in Shalimar, Virginia, continuing his indoctrination into the folk tradition. In this rural town, Milkman encounters Solomon's store, the town center, where he is greeted and entertained by the folkloric oral traditions of the children of Shalimar. As he listens to the children's lyrics, he makes the connection to Pilate and her mantra song:

[H]e was surprised to hear them begin another song at this point, one he had heard off and on all his life. That old blues song Pilate sang all the time: 'O Sugarman don't leave me hear,' except the children sang, 'Solomon don't leave me here.'

Milkman is able to reference this song to Pilate, again realizing her efforts to connect him to his family's roots in Shalimar through the oral tradition and the blues. Again, without Pilate's introduction to this song, Milkman would have never recognized it in the children's game lyrics. Pilate's folk traditions serve as the conduits to Milkman's path to self-exploration and folk literacy. The reader is continually challenged to reconcile this male right-of-passage story, with the gendered symbols and values that are mapped out by the folk heroines. For Milkman, the oral tradition of the children's game lyrics reveals more missing pieces of the Dead's family history.

As Morrison depicts Milkman's familial history being passed on through these folk forms, she equates game lyrics and songs to an unwritten historical record, placing the oral tradition on par with the written word. Morrison privileges these cultural sites of

black vernacular traditions as sites of knowledge. Morrison asserts these cultural sites of knowledge as both relevant and as the only places to achieve a sense of holistic familial and cultural identity. Jean Strause speaks to Morrison's alternative *ways of knowing* through folk forms in her interviews about her upbringing:

[S]he [Morrison] absorbed the black lore, music, language, myths and rituals that give her prose its special flavor and tone. 'We were intimate with the supernatural,' she recalls. Her parents told thrillingly terrifying ghost stories. Her mother sang constantly. Her grandmother kept a dream book and played the numbers off it, decoding dream symbols to determine what number to bet on. Morrison's world, like the world of her novels, was filled with signs, visitations, ways of knowing that reached beyond the five senses.¹⁰⁰

As such, these vernacular locations that are often overlooked and minimized in the secular world become the liminal spaces that Morrison places the very knowledge needed to elucidate the secular world. Morrison creates a dependent relationship between the secular world and these sites of discredited knowledge within the black vernacular traditions. Allowing these folk traditions to become sites that bridge the fragments of the secular world, the folk tradition is used as a tool of understanding, to more adeptly navigate a fragmented experience of identity.¹⁰¹

Milkman's search for identity is a prime example of employing the vernacular tradition to facilitate his understanding of the world and his own identity within it. Milkman begins the novel adrift within the secular world—represented by his parents and their reliance on western standards of patriarchy and womanhood—with only fragments of knowledge. Until then, the characters that circulate the folk traditions will provide Milkman with the tools to navigate the secular world, eventually facilitating his own journey to self-hood. This text references the Reconstruction era, during which formal history did not register the life and death of an illiterate ex-slave and an Indian woman

who traveled with a “wagonful of ex-slaves going to the promised land.”¹⁰² Therefore, Milkman’s knowledge of his grandparents through these conventional western means is fragmented at best. Their identities were only given more depth when Milkman acknowledged the value of the folk traditions that were brought into his life through both Pilate and Circe. Thus, as Milkman traces Pilate’s folkloric path in search of gold, what is revealed to him are the tools to recognize the buried family legacy that he has been dislocated from. Ultimately, this folk reconnection to that family legacy is what aids him in his own personal search for manhood.

The Children of Solomon

Much has been written about Morrison’s use of the Flying Africans myth as a traditional symbol of resistance and transcendence of oppression.¹⁰³ I will be focusing on Morrison’s use of this multi-layered myth to both create kinship bonds and smooth over internal ruptures within the black community. Responding to Skerrett’s analysis of storytelling in the *Song of Solomon*, he notes that the song is only rendered, “[I]n emotionally charged circumstances.”¹⁰⁴ This proves true throughout the novel as Morrison uses the song about the Flying Africans to both open and close her novel, as both the first and the last word in her epic text. These performances of the song of Solomon serve as bookends to the novel, punctuating the circular pattern of the text within the mythological tradition and, by extension, the interconnectedness of black life.

From the opening scene in the novel, Morrison confronts the reader with a reenactment of the Flying African myth by Robert Smith’s attempt to fly off the roof of Mercy hospital. Mr. Smith becomes the embodiment of the myth as he declares in his written statement, “I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings.”¹⁰⁵ His

performance requires the community to bear witness, as co-creators of the folk tradition, just as their black ancestors did. Mr. Smith's reenactment of the myth is only made complete with the singing of the *Song of Solomon*, which speaks directly to this folktale. The performance of the song introduces Pilate into the novel and inextricably links her to folk tradition in the book. This moment in the text qualifies as a performance because she has a captive audience to listen, critique and respond to her song:

*O Sugarman done fly away
 Sugarman done gone
 Sugarman cut across the sky
 Sugarman gone home...*¹⁰⁶

Pilate's performance of the song unites the experience of Mr. Smith on the rooftop with Ruth's birthing labor, on the ground below. In this context, caught between watching a life leave this world and new life coming in, Pilate's song becomes the soundtrack for the inevitable tragedy and hopefulness of black life. Even workers from the hospital looked onto the scene and thought it a unified ritual of sorts, "Some of them thought briefly that this was probably some form of worship."¹⁰⁷ Pilate becomes the only witness to engage with the forces of life and death at the scene; by singing the song, she ritualizes the everyday tragedies and miracles of black life, bridging the ruptures of life and death within the black community. The performance of this myth not only impacts the community at large, through integrating Mercy hospital and the loss of Mr. Smith, but also makes an indelible imprint on the life of a child, Milkman—the first black child born in Mercy.¹⁰⁸

Mr. Smith's blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his

imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother.¹⁰⁹

As Milkman gets older, he reignites his dreams of flight, tapping into the promise of escape and self-determination imbedded in the myth. On his journey into manhood, Pilate gives him the song to go along with his dream, as he re-connects the pieces of his familial history.

Milkman's first exposure to the song of Solomon was through his initial encounter with Pilate, when she begins singing this song during a moment of tension between Pilate, Reba and Hagar. Sparked by Hagar's claim that, "Some of my days were hungry ones,"¹¹⁰ she indirectly questions Pilate and Reba's abilities to meet her emotional and/or spiritual needs. In lieu of further discussion, Pilate begins singing the song of Solomon, which functions to reaffirm the connection between Pilate, Reba and Hagar, regardless of the shortcomings of these relationships. This is illuminated best in the text:

Pilate began to hum as she returned to plucking the berries. After a moment, Reba joined her, and they hummed together in perfect harmony until Pilate took the lead: // When the two women got to the chorus, Hagar raised her head and sang too.¹¹¹

At this emotionally charged moment that has the potential to fragment Pilate's family, she re-asserts an element of the black vernacular traditions, doing so creates an emotional reconnection to supplant this familial disruption. In this same instance, the song marks Milkman's first sentiments of puppy love for Hagar, "Milkman could hardly breathe. Hagar's voice scooped up what little pieces of heart he had left to call his own."¹¹² The simultaneity of Pilate's familial reconnection and Milkman's initial romantic connection

is significant because the song mediates these bonds. Where words fail, the song communicates a primal connection that exists but cannot be articulated.

Milkman's final stop in Shalimar, Virginia is the pinnacle of his Womanist journey into manhood and from the moment he enters into this mountain hamlet, he is challenged by the centrality of the gendered folk traditions and a reintroduction to the song of Solomon. Milkman's Womanist path is evident from his first impressions of the town of Shalimar:

[T]he women with nothing in their hands. They sat on porches, and walked in the road swaying their hips under cotton dresses, bare-legged, their unstraightened hair braided or pulled straight back into a ball. // That's the way Pilate must have looked as a girl, looked even now, but out of place in the big northern city she had come to.¹¹³

The women of the town are his first signifiers that he has stepped into an alternative realm and he immediately makes the connection between this rural version of womanhood he was witnessing and Pilate. She has always represented an alternative form of womanhood for Milkman and his experience in Shalimar culminates in his full appreciation for this form of womanhood through his relationship with Sweet, his love interest in Shalimar. As Milkman's first observation about Shalimar was the "Pretty women," this sparked a negative cord in the men, ultimately leading to his fight in Solomon's store to prove his manhood. Milkman's ability to recognize the beauty in these natural black women signals a shift in his values. This is illustrated in the way that Milkman treats Sweet, markedly different than any other woman in his life up until then:

He soaped and rubbed her until her skin squeaked and glistened like onyx. She put salve on his face. He washed her hair. She sprinkled talcum on his feet. He straddled her behind and massaged her back. She put witch hazel on his swollen neck. He made up the bed. She gave him gumbo to eat. He washed the dishes. She washed his clothes and hung them out to dry. He scoured her tub. She ironed his shirt and pants.¹¹⁴

This is an important moment in the text, because up until this point, Milkman has only selfishly *received* from the women in his life, giving nothing and appreciating nothing. His behavior with Sweet stands in sharp contrast to the behavior his sister Lena catalogues for him, as she recites, “You have yet to wash your own underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee.”¹¹⁵ His self-centered approach to life and the women in it has ended in Shalimar at the apex of his folk indoctrination. His transformation has allowed him to see Sweet as beautiful and to equally serve her needs as she serves his. Yet again, his maturity into manhood is directly linked to his recognition of the value of women.

His exposure to the gendered folk forms up to this point in the text, creates his folk literacy, aiding him in discerning other black vernacular forms that he couldn’t have recognized prior to this journey and facilitating his negotiations with the secular world. Milkman’s folk literacy culminates in Shalimar as he recognizes the children singing Pilate’s song. When Milkman hears a different version of this song in Shalimar, it already conjures feelings of familial connection via Pilate. Consequently, the children’s game in Shalimar brings the song into context, resonating with Milkman as a piece of the puzzle in the story of his family. Joseph Skerrett discusses the storytelling function of Pilate’s song:

Milkman discovers when he gets to Shalimar, Virginia, Pilate’s song is also a kind of riddle. As he pieces together the clues from various informants, he realized that Pilate’s song is a variant of the chorus of a local children’s game, and that the game tells the story of his great-grandfather who ‘flew-off’ and left an orphaned son Jack, who was Macon’s and Pilate’s father.¹¹⁶

The knowledge that Milkman gains through the song positions him in the center of the mythological tradition. Through the historical information in the song, it is revealed that he is, in fact, a direct descent of the Flying African, Solomon. Milkman is able to use the skill set gained on his journey to *read* this song, connecting the fragmented histories that define him and his family as he decodes the children's song into the characters of the oral tradition he has been taught. Milkman experiences an internal shift, resulting in his recognition and valorization of those other sites of knowledge. However, he only does so through using Pilate as a rationalizing point of departure. The reader observes Milkman's transformation during his pilgrimage through these liminal sites mediated by women's folk knowledge, as he discovers the history of his family and, therefore, his own story.

Milkman's second visit to the home of Susan Byrd gives him the last piece of oral tradition regarding his flying African ancestors. After shying away from Milkman's inquiries the first time upon revisiting Susan Byrd, she reveals the truth of the family that she and Milkman share:

Oh, that's just some old folks' lie they tell around her. Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa. The one around here who did was this same Solomon, or Shalimar—I never knew which was right. He had a slew of children, all over the place.// *[H]e disappeared and left everybody. Wife, everybody, including some twenty-one children. // The baby and the wife were right next to him when he flew off. // It like to have killed the woman, the wife.// Anyway she's supposed to have screamed loud for days.* And there's a ravine near here they call Ryna's Gulch, and sometimes you can hear this funny sound by it that the wind makes. People say it's the wife, Solomon's wife, crying.¹¹⁷

In Susan Byrd's retelling of the myth, she emphasizes those who were left behind, like Solomon's wife Ryna and her twenty-one children, and the woman who took in the last child to raise as her own, Heddy--a distinctly gendered view. Michael Awkward, who

writes about Morrison's inscription of the "new," in her rewriting of the myth, asserts, "That [Morrison's] new grounding is represented by the apparent absence on the part of Solomon, the figure in the Morrisonian version who possesses the secrets of flight, [and] of an accompanying sense of social responsibility."¹¹⁸ This new version of the story encompasses the inevitable tragedy and hopefulness of black life, as seen in the tragedy of a family abandoned and the hopefulness of Solomon being able to escape slavery through flight back to Africa. The sense of social responsibility Awkward speaks of is the story of Ryna, Heddy and the twenty-one children who were left behind, who's descendants populated this town of Shalimar (Solomon) Virginia. From this point of view, the story of Solomon--memorialized in the children's game, blues song, and inscribed in the land through Ryna's Gulch and Solomon's Leap--functions to smooth over the historical rupture of loss in this small community and validate the kinship bonds of Solomon's ancestors.

Milkman becomes part of this communal story of kinship, reflecting on his own desires for flight that were realized in his great-grandfather Solomon. This communal recognition of loss is repeated by Sweet when Milkman shares the story of Solomon with her, as one of her first responses reveals, "Who'd he leave behind?"¹¹⁹ The women throughout the text emanate a sense of social responsibility for those left behind, which is further supported in the supernatural realm, as his grandfather's ghost dictates, "You just can't fly on off and leave a body."¹²⁰ Milkman learns what this message from the dead really means when Pilate forces him to contemplate who *he* flew off and left behind:

He had hurt her, left her, and now she was dead—he was certain of it. He had left her. While he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying. Who looked after those twenty children? Jesus Christ, he left twenty-one children! Guitar and the Days chose never to have children. Shalimar left his, but it

was the children who sang about it and kept the story of his leaving alive.¹²¹

Although Milkman already knew the fact of Solomon's abandonment of his family, previously he had only contemplated the wonder of his miraculous flight. Milkman's ability to acknowledge the *whole* story of Solomon only occurs when Pilate "punishes" him by putting him in her basement with a shoebox full of Hagar's hair,¹²² so that he could *have* a symbol of the life he had taken. Milkman draws immediate parallels between Pilate's loss of Hagar and Ryna's loss of Solomon that drove her mad and left twenty children to fend for themselves. Milkman's sense of his own social responsibility is the last step on his Womanist journey into manhood. This is illustrated in the text as Milkman walks away from Pilate's basement insisting that *he* take the box of Hagar's hair.

The last time the song of Solomon is sang in the novel it has transformative possibilities for Milkman. In the grips of death Pilate requests that Milkman "Sing a little something for me,"¹²³ as she lies on Solomon's Leap. He sang her signature song back to her, but with a gendered twist:

*Sugargirl don't leave me here.
Cotton balls to choke me.
Sugargirl don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me.*¹²⁴

Milkman's song reverses roles for Milkman, as *he* becomes the *improvisational bluesman*¹²⁵ who extends on the folk tradition by inserting Pilate as the famed Flying African. In doing so, he creates the possibility for mythic transcendence, which traditionally is never extended to women.¹²⁶ But even within the new gendered version of the myth of the Flying Africans, Morrison keeps a sense of social responsibility by

keeping Pilate grounded, “Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly.”¹²⁷ As Milkman witnesses Pilate’s last breath, he mourns for his mentor by taking on the role of the Flying African, “Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leapt. // For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrender to the air, you could *ride* it.”¹²⁸ The end of the novel demonstrates Milkman’s completion of his Womanist journey to manhood. Milkman becomes the keeper of the oral tradition, passing it on throughout the family and guiding Pilate to Solomon’s Leap in Virginia so that she can appease the spirits by burying her father’s bones (a lesson he learned from Circe)--the student visibly becomes a teacher. Milkman becomes a holistic individual, no longer limited to the goal of manhood but rather toward a complete sense of self-knowledge and communal responsibility.

Milkman’s flight off of Solomon’s Leap has the benefits of both New World Womanist wisdom and the knowledge of his African ancestors. He has learned to *surrender to the air* to gain access to flight, but, unlike his male ancestor Solomon, Milkman has the knowledge of his female ancestors on his side. Milkman’s surrender/sacrifice is not just in his own name, but also for those who need him and for the lives he now owns because he had a role in taking them in one way or another.¹²⁹ His leap echoes with traces of Circe’s folk justice of surrendering the house to the forces of nature and Pilate’s sacrificial surrender to the police to free him from jail, as well as Pilate’s surrender to the nature of her social alienation. Although Morrison leaves the result of Guitar and Milkman’s battle to the death ambiguous, the reader anticipates that with Milkman’s Womanist knowledge--that *you can’t just fly off and leave a body* and

that you can *fly without ever leaving the ground*--he lands on the other side of this challenge with both feet on the ground.

Conclusion

*I am black and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.
Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has gazed on me.
My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept!
Song of Solomon 1:5,6 (KJV)*

In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, the title of the novel initially leads the reader to one of the primary collections of the oral tradition--the Bible. The "Song of Solomon" in the Christian tradition is seen as an allegory of Christ's love for the church and, later in history, as an expression of the soul's spiritual union with God. As the novel unfolds, it is revealed that the title also invokes the transnational mythological tradition of enslaved Africans having the special powers to escape their enslavement through flight and return back to Africa. Accordingly, in the reader's encounter with the text, the western and African oral traditions are conjured simultaneously—creating multiple layers of meaning and history, particularly for African diasporic identities who find themselves steeped deeply in both oral traditions.

If we are to extend the Christian allegory of the biblical "Song of Solomon" to this text that bears its name, one could view the novel as a proclamation to African American self-worth, communal healing and self-actualization. The self-love is clear in the face of a negative gaze, "I am black and beautiful," while intra-communal dissonance seems to be revealed in the line, "My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards." And the recognition of the importance of self-actualization is

evident in the verse, “[B]ut my own vineyard I have not kept!” The maintenance of *one’s own* becomes a critical aspect of Morrison’s assessment of black culture at large. Given that the novel speaks to and about African Americans in a way that validates intra-ethnic dynamics, Morrison’s focus on the healing of Macon Dead’s extended family can be understood as inclusive to all African Americans. While the Black Arts Movement sought to heal the black community through racial pride and attack of the dominant white culture, Morrison chooses to heal through the intimate structure of the black family and small black communities. This gendered difference of approach is repeated throughout her writing career and through other women writing fiction during the same time period such as: Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker and Ntozake Shange.

Ultimately, black women authors like Morrison are responding the same ideological premise in both Feminism and the Black Arts Movement—essentialized notions of identity that cause intra-communal conflict. Black women authors writing in the seventies and eighties used the vernacular tradition in their novels to create an alternative system of values that honored all aspects of their identity. Their engagement with the folk tradition as an alternative system can be seen as a response to black women’s positioning in a racist and sexist society. From that position, these authors are able to launch a critique of essentialist discourse of the time period. That critique shifts the discourse from engagement with the *other* to engagement with the self, which results in validation of self and communal worth for women of color. Patricia Hill Collins champions the *outsider-within* perspective that black women have as bringing a new epistemological view of resistance to the “matrix of domination.”¹³⁰ The *Song of Solomon* dramatizes this black feminist perspective in its characterization of Pilate and

Circe as folk heroines, complete with alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge that go beyond their gender and racial proscriptions.

Primarily, Morrison enacts this shift of engagement through a focus on segregated black communities in this novel. Doing so concentrates the reader's attention on those relationships inside the community and what factors operate in those power dynamics. That is not to say that her characters are not affected by and responding to racism and sexism in a system of domination, but rather that her focus is on how those effects and responses figure prominently in the lives of those who share the same cultural background. Because intra-communal dynamics reflect those socially defined codes of behavior from the system of domination, it becomes a priority of black feminists to arrest the repetition of dominant/subordinate paradigms. The preeminent Audre Lorde saw this focus as the key to social change, as she states:

[T]he true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships.¹³¹

Therefore, Morrison focuses on male domination and white middle-class definitions of womanhood within the black community as sites of resistance; to root out dominant ideological systems that weaken the communal fight for justice.

In *Song of Solomon*, the employment of the folk tradition functions as a lens to identify those who are marginalized within those intra-communal spaces. Morrison is able to create a literary reproduction of the black woman's unique social positioning through her characterization of her folk heroines Pilate and Circe. The reader witnesses a strategic positioning of these women on the margins of the black community to reflect the treatment of black women's alternative knowledge and values within the larger society.

The emphasis on *close-to-the-bone* familial disconnection for both Circe and Pilate also traces the same path of intra-group marginalization that black women encountered in their affinity groups. This is demonstrated in the text when Milkman finds Circe abandoned by the community that she helped bring forth through her midwifery skills-- dogs replacing her community. Likewise, Pilate suffers multiple disconnections-- orphaned from her family, estranged from her brother and rejected from multiple communities *by women* as well as her ultimate close-to-the-bone disconnection with her daughter Hagar, who grows up with Pilate modeling alternative definitions of womanhood and self-worth. Nevertheless, Hagar fatally internalizes white middle-class standards of beauty coupled with the belief that a woman's value is solely based on the desires of a man. These instances of intra-communal disconnection, serve as a literary dramatization of those seeds of the oppressor, growing within the oppressed.

The integration of those marginalized identities is accomplished by strategically placing the knowledge needed to navigate and elucidate the mainstream, secular world in the hands of those who circulate folk knowledge. Through intimately interlinking the success of those who represent mainstream dominant forces with the knowledge and values of those who are marginalized, Morrison balances uneven power dynamics. This is illustrated throughout the novel as Morrison couples a male Bildungsroman through female-centered rites-of-passages. The development and growth of the main character, Milkman, is dependent on his exposure to the female folk heroines and his ability to validate and integrate their folk knowledge. As Milkman's heroic journey follows the signpost of Pilate and Circe's folk knowledge, Milkman finds his own path and voice. And through his own voice of male privilege, he shines a light on those who circulate the

folk tradition and the value of what Morrison calls the *discredited knowledge* of the black vernacular traditions.

Morrison goes further with this theme as she also allies women of means to those without, those with education are taught by those without education, the supernatural world grounds her characters in the reality of the material world and those who reside on the margins are central to communal survival. All of these seemingly oppositional relationships create strategic coalitions that integrate the marginalized as represented by the folk; validating their alternative systems of knowledge and values. The recognition of those alternative systems with their offerings of different definitions of womanhood and blackness, ultimately serves to valorize intra-communal diversity.

This strategic coupling also elucidates internalized dominant/subordinate ideologies and provides an opportunity to subtly critique systems that are based on those dichotomies. Pilate's ability to circumvent the system of male domination while still engaging with the individuals who benefit from it offers black feminists a nuanced approach to critiquing patriarchy that stands in sharp contrast to second wave feminists' strategies of disassociation or attack. This is illustrated in the text as Pilate's alternative folk trades function to keep her free from the vulnerabilities of both the sex trade and domestic labor but doesn't stop her from mentoring Milkman or reaching out to her brother Macon—a model of western capitalism and patriarchy. Therefore, a text like Morrison's has the ability to move the conversation of social justice toward the establishment of ideological models of empowerment that incorporated the realities of life at these intersections. In the current context of African diasporic discourse and identities, Morrison was a foremother in seeking creative opportunities for the

articulation of complex identities within a diverse culture and empowering those who suffer from discrimination both inside and outside their communities.

Chapter 3 Endnotes

¹ For the purpose of this dissertation, I define the Black Arts Movement as a literary movement (1965-1975) committed to establishing a distinctively black voice and aligning artistic creativity with political activism. It was closely aligned with the Black Power Movement and its separatist values that were often at odds with the white literary establishment. The writers associated with this movement: Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), Harold Cruse, Askia Touré, Larry Neale, Steve Cannon, Tom Dent, Al Haynes, David Henderson, Calvin C. Hernton, Joe Johnson, Norman Pritchard, Lenox Raphael, Ishmael Reed (at times), Lorenzo Thomas, and James Thompson. To get a complete overview of the movement, these texts outline the scope of it: *Black Fire* (1968), Baraka and Neal, eds.; *For Malcolm X, Poems on the Life and the Death of Malcolm X* (1969), Dudley Randall and Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs, eds.; *The Black Woman* (1970), Toni Cade Bambara, ed.; *The Black Aesthetic* (1971) Addison Gayle, Jr., ed.; *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1972) Stephen Henderson; *New Black Voices* (1972), Abraham Chapman, ed.; *Drumvoices, The Mission of Afro-American Poetry: A Critical History* (1976) Eugene Redmond.

² For the purpose of this dissertation, I will be defining the Second Wave Feminist Movement (1963-1975) that was structured on the values of equal pay, equal access to the workplace and education, reproductive rights, sexual liberation and recognition of the invisibility of women's work in the home. Much of the literature that created the basis of this movement consisted of recovered novels from the turn of the 20th century and socio-psychological literature, including: Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*; Simone de Beauvoir, *Second Sex* (1953); Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929); Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899); Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892); and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). This movement mainly concentrated on works by white middle-class women and therefore took its lead from the needs and desires of that particular group. To get an overview of the movement, the critical writers of the time period that were most influential in defining the goals of the movement include but are not limited to: Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1968); Pat Mainardi, *The Politics of Housework* (1970); Jo Freeman, *The Women's Liberation Movement* (1971); Jo Freeman, *The BITCH Manifesto* (1972); Judy Syfers, *Why I Want a Wife* (1971); Radicalesbians, *The Woman Identified Woman* (1970); Shulamith Firestone, *The Women's Rights Movement in the U.S.: A New View* (1968).

³ Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown, *Crossing Borders Through Folklore: African American Women's Fiction and Art* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1999) 21. Here she expands on Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s use of the word context to refer to the "textual" world that a black text echoes, revises and responds to in various formal ways in his text *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*. I want to use this to discuss the literary response to the critical-aesthetic context of Black Arts and feminism.

⁴ Kay Lindsey, "The Black Woman as a Woman," *The Black Woman: An Anthology*: Toni Cade Bambara, ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1970) 85.

⁵ Robert Staples, "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry. Black Feminists," *The Black Scholar* Mar.-Apr. 1979: 26-27.

⁶ Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelist* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980) 240.

⁷ The liminal spaces I speak of are in dreams, songs, games, links to ancestors and connections to nature.

⁸ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 27.

⁹ Morrison 27-28.

¹⁰ Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984) 5.

¹¹ This literary tradition of orphaned hero is seen in Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, Mark Twain's *Huck Finn*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Remus and Romulus and, of course, the story of Moses.

¹² Morrison 141.

¹³ Morrison 142.

¹⁴ Morrison 144.

¹⁵ Morrison 148.

¹⁶ Morrison 94.

¹⁷ Stacy Morgan, "Dust Tracks Untrampled by the Dinosaur of History: The Ibo's Landing and Flying Africans Narratives as Mythic Counter-Memory." *Sycamore: A Journal of American Culture* (Spring 1997) 7; Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley: Turtle Island Foundation, 1981) 30-37. Also addresses this issue of fear/respect for conjurers.

¹⁸ Morrison 38. When Milkman first meets Pilate he is shocked that her size is equal to that of his father.

¹⁹ Morrison 234. Pilate is described in Danville as, "a pretty woods-wild girl 'that couldn't nobody put shoes on.'"

²⁰ Morrison 5.

²¹ Morrison 139.

²² Morrison 125.

²³ Morrison 126.

²⁴ Morrison 316. Ruth goes directly to Macon and demands money for Hagar's funeral.

²⁵ Denise Heinze, *The Dilemma of "Double Consciousness": Toni Morrison's Novels* (University of Georgia Press: Athens and London, 1993) 159-160.

²⁶ Mae Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition." *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women*, Cheryl Wall, ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989) 35.

²⁷ Morrison 149,150.

²⁸ Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., "Recitation to the Griot: Storytelling and Learning in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*. Majorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 195. "And Pilate embodies the image of the black blues woman, for her song is not the spiritual of an old woman, but the sad, ever-relevant blues of the lost man, flown away, departed, leaving the beloved behind in suffering and in pain."

²⁹ Morrison 166. Circe lived in a mansion outside Danville.

³⁰ Morrison 146.

³¹ Morrison 27.

³² Morrison 28.

³³ Bell Hooks, "Margin as a Chosen Place of Resistance" *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) 153.

³⁴ Morrison 150.

³⁵ Morrison 150.

³⁶ Morrison 149.

³⁷ Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 106.

³⁸ Levine 106.

³⁹ H. Nigel Thomas, *From Folklore to Fiction* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 92. He delineates the multiple faces of the trickster figure.

⁴⁰ Morrison 205.

⁴¹ Christian 11-12. Christian also goes into the mammy character being marked as ugly, religious and superstitious, as well as instinctively acknowledging the superiority of whites.

⁴² Morrison 205.

⁴³ What I mean when using this term, is the ability for the trickster figure to use the precise element that is seen by society as their weakness, as strength.

⁴⁴ Morrison 210.

⁴⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, First Perennial Library Edition, 1990) 3.

⁴⁶ D. Greene & F. Walker, "Recommendations to Public Speaking Instructors for the Negotiation of Code-switching Practices among Black English-speaking African American Students." *The Journal of Negro Education* (73(4), 2004) 435. "[Code-switching] can involve the alternation between two different languages, two tonal registers, or a dialectical shift within the same language such as Standard English and Black English." "A linguistic tool and a sign of the participants' awareness of alternative communicative conventions." "[A] strategy at negotiating power for the speaker" and "reflects culture and identity and promotes solidarity."

⁴⁷ Morrison 224.

⁴⁸ Morrison 224 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁹ Morrison 209.

⁵⁰ Morrison 205.

⁵¹ Morrison 27.

⁵² Morrison 39.

⁵³ Morrison 234.

⁵⁴ Layli Phillis, ed., *The Womanist Reader* (Routledge: New York, 2006) xxvi

(emphasis mine).

⁵⁵ Levine 58.

⁵⁶ It was mythologized by his father and Guitar as the golden key to all of their personal issues.

⁵⁷ Oioma Nnaemeka, Womanism Bibliography
<<http://science.jrank.org/pages/8159/Womanism.html>>

⁵⁸ Morrison 36.

⁵⁹ Morrison 47 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁰ Morrison 141.

⁶¹ Morrison 234-235.

⁶² Morrison 234.

⁶³ Morrison 235.

⁶⁴ Morrison 235.

⁶⁵ Morrison 235-236.

⁶⁶ Morrison 236 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁷ Morrison 179-80. As Guitar fantasizes about the things that he could buy with the gold, Milkman only fantasizes about escaping his family and the community he grew up in.

⁶⁸ Morrison 239.

⁶⁹ Morrison 240.

⁷⁰ Phillips xxiv. Phillips goes on to also enumerate the other overarching characteristics of womanism: anti-oppressionist, vernacular, non-ideological, and communitarian. I will go into these other characteristics of womanism further in my argument.

⁷¹ Morrison 237. The boy who takes Milkman near Circe's house explains to Milk that the "car won't make it."

⁷² Morrison 238 (emphasis mine).

⁷³ Morrison 240.

⁷⁴ Morrison paraphrase 246.

⁷⁵ Morrison 233.

⁷⁶ Morrison 239.

⁷⁷ Morrison 239.

⁷⁸ Morrison 246 (emphasis mine).

⁷⁹ Morrison 247.

⁸⁰ Morrison 247.

⁸¹ Morrison 233.

⁸² Levine 106.

⁸³ Morrison 246.

⁸⁴ Morrison 243.

⁸⁵ Morrison 243.

⁸⁶ Morrison 243.

⁸⁷ Morrison 53-54, 243.

⁸⁸ Morrison 54.

⁸⁹ Morrison 243. Here, in the text, Circe states, “Well, he didn’t have to keep the name. She made him. She made him keep that name.” As she goes on further to explain that his grandparents were part of a “wagonful of ex-slaves going to the promised land.”

⁹⁰ Morrison 244-245.

⁹¹ Morrison 245.

⁹² Morrison 168-169.

⁹³ Morrison 169.

⁹⁴ Morrison 170.

⁹⁵ Morrison 208 (emphasis mine).

⁹⁶ Phillips xxvi.

⁹⁷ Morrison 250 (emphasis mine).

⁹⁸ Morrison 235.

⁹⁹ Morrison 250 (emphasis mine).

¹⁰⁰ Jean Strouse interview, "Toni Morrison's Black Magic," *Newsweek* Mar. 1981: 54; Jane Bakerman, "The Seams Can't Show: An Interview with Toni Morrison," *Black American Literature Forum* 12 Summer 1978: 56-60.

¹⁰¹ Look at Denise Heinze, argument of Morrison using fantasy to mitigate the "problem of double-consciousness."

¹⁰² Morrison 243.

¹⁰³ Georgia Writer's Project. *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Costal Negroes*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986 [1940] Julius Lester, ed.; Julius Lester, ed., "People Who Could Fly," *Black Folk Tales* (New York: Grove, 1969); John Bennett, ed., "All God's Children Had Wings," in *The Doctor to the Dead: Grotesque Legends and Folktales of Old Charleston* (1943); Virginia Hamilton, "The People Could Fly," *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*, Virginia Hamilton, Diane & Leo Dillon, eds. (Knopf, 1985); Paula Barnes, *Tradition and Innovation: Toni Morrison and the Flight Motif in African American Literature* (Garland Science, 2000); Gay Wilentz, "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature," *MELUS* 16:1 (1989-1990); Elizabeth A. Beaulieu, *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia* (Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003) 122; Susan L. Blake, "Folklore and Community" *Song of Solomon*," *MELUS* 7:3 (Fall, 1980) 77-82; Lislie Harris, "Myth as Structure in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *MELUS* 7:3 (Fall, 1980) 69-76; Wlfrid D. Samuels, "Liminality and the Search for Self in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *Minority Voices* 5:1 and 2 (Spring and Fall, 1981) 59-68.

¹⁰⁴ Skerrett, Jr. 199.

¹⁰⁵ Morrison 3.

¹⁰⁶ Morrison 6.

¹⁰⁷ Morrison 6.

¹⁰⁸ Morrison 5.

¹⁰⁹ Morrison 9.

¹¹⁰ Morrison 49.

¹¹¹ Morrison 49.

¹¹² Morrison 49.

¹¹³ Morrison 263.

¹¹⁴ Morrison 285.

¹¹⁵ Morrison 215.

¹¹⁶ Skerrett, Jr. 200.

¹¹⁷ Morrison 322-323 (emphasis mine).

¹¹⁸ Michael Awkward, “‘Unruly and Let Loose’: Myth, Ideology, and Gender in Song of Solomon,” *Callaloo*. 13:3 (Summer, 1990) 483.

¹¹⁹ Morrison 328.

¹²⁰ Morrison 328.

¹²¹ Morrison 332.

¹²² Although I don’t address the symbolism of Pilate giving Milkman a shoebox of Hagar’s hair, the theme of internalized conflict within black women of fitting within the western notions of womanhood is throughout this novel, but is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

¹²³ Morrison 336.

¹²⁴ Morrison 336 (emphasis mine).

¹²⁵ Skerrett 201.

¹²⁶ Awkward 484. He traces the ‘traditional’ versions of the Flying African myth and Western mythic systems, concluding that “masculinity has become a virtual prerequisite for participation in transcendent action.”

¹²⁷ Morrison 336.

¹²⁸ Morrison 337.

¹²⁹ Both Pilate and Hagar can be considered lives he was in some way responsible for ending.

¹³⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 225. “In addition to being structured along axes such as race, gender, and social class, the matrix of domination is structured on several levels. People experience and resist oppression on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions. Black feminist thought emphasizes all three levels as sites of domination and as potential sites of resistance.”

¹³¹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (California: Crossing Press Feminist Series, 1984) 123.

Chapter 4: Rituals that Bind

This chapter investigates the relationship between ritual, cultural transmission and intra-ethnic difference in Simone Schwarz-Bart's novel, *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle* (*The Bridge of Beyond*). I analyze this novel from the vantage point of engagement with black vernacular rituals and traditions. As the protagonist of the novel is characterized as a folk heroine and a model of survival to the larger community, her character and mentors can serve as both an illustration of Afro-Caribbean cultural identity and as cultural archetypes of survival. By employing black vernacular traditions, the women of the novel ultimately function as a *saving force* to their community.

It is appropriate to view this text through the lens of *woman as a saving force*, because becoming a model of survival is the protagonist, Télumée's, project throughout the text. As her grandmother, Queen without a Name, proclaims on her deathbed:

[É]coute, les gens t'épient, ils comptent toujours sur quelqu'un pour savoir comment vivre...si tu es heureuse, tout le monde peut être heureux et si tu sais souffrir, les autres sauront aussi.

Listen—people watch you, they always count on there being *someone to show them how to live*. If you are happy, everyone can be happy, and if you know how to suffer, the others will know too.¹

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham illustrates the role of “woman as saving force, rather than victim” in her analysis of black women's religious and social institutions during 1880-1920, when the severity of African Americans' spiritual and social condition called the women into service for the community.² Higginbotham notes black women's rejection of European models of womanhood, in efforts to assert their own counter-narratives of womanhood that were based on engendering an increased agency for both their culture and gender. *The Bridge of Beyond* speaks to a corresponding vernacular response to this

same critical moment in history when Afro-Caribbean communities were severely circumscribed by the prior system of slavery during the early years of freedom (abolition in Guadeloupe 1848). The black communities, in the text, are struggling in their negotiations between the European and the African social and economic structures, to understand their unprecedented position in the New World.

I analyze Télumée's role as an archetype of survival, through her engagement with the structures of domination--both internal and external--while emphasizing her strategic folk reconceptualizations of cultural responses to adversity, resulting in a reassertion of creative agency. I will concentrate in particular on her use of black vernacular resources to maintain spiritual integrity and edify the community.³ I center on how Schwarz-Bart's characters gain creative agency within structures of domination through black vernacular rituals, as these rituals function to intervene in self-alienation and communal alienation. I will be giving particular attention to how myth and ritual function as transformative sites that build communities through integration of marginal identities that operate on the periphery of black communal identity while resulting in *strategically* giving voice to the edges of the black community.

The myths & rituals I discuss in this chapter fall into three categories. The first category includes *domestic rituals*. I define these as rituals around domestic issues that function to affect kinship bonds, such as house-blessings, marriage, death rites and home relocation/migration. The second category includes *survival rituals*. These are rituals that focus on both individual and communal survival such as homeopathic medicine/healing arts, domestic agriculture and sorcery. The third category includes *survival myths*. These are stories, allegories, parables and myths that function to counsel

the listener on how to survive and gain agency within a structure of domination. In the text, I focus on the stories of the *White of Whites*, *Life is a River Allegory*, *The Man Who Tried to Live on Air* and the *Flying Africans*.

Writing in the critical era of the early seventies, Schwarz-Bart reflects back to an early post-slavery moment of social change in Afro-Caribbean history. Focusing on a family of women, the Lougandors, Schwarz-Bart characterizes her central subjects as folk heroines in the novel. In the geo-political context of following the prime of Black Cultural Nationalism (1950's-60's) in the English-speaking Caribbean and pre-Créolite (1980's) movement in the French Antilles, Schwarz-Bart dives deep into the literary soil of Guadeloupe, concentrating on the cultural specificity of the island. Privileging localized vernacular traditions as central to the survival of the Caribbean character, I assert that in doing so, Schwarz-Bart presents counter-narratives to her community, engendering them to seek out their own cultural resources to produce spiritual rehabilitation and retain creative agency while also emphasizing inter-ethnic diversity. In doing so, the reader witnesses the redefinition of the parameters of communal identity--serving as a female voice within the male dominated Antillante movement and a foremother to the male-dominated Créolite literary movement. Diversifying the discourse within these cultural movements to, not only look at the multiplicity of ethnicities and national backgrounds that create the amalgamation of the French Caribbean identity, but also the marginalized within that identity. Both those who are marginalized by their difference and those who suffer from self-alienation are the subjects of Schwarz-Bart's novel.

Schwarz-Bart concerns herself with the psychological and psychic state of black

identity both within a system of oppression and within the community of the oppressed. *Pluie et Vent* occurs in a setting where the ramifications of slavery are potent within the black communities of Guadeloupe who are striving to manage economically and spiritually within the thriving colonial economy of domination. In the novel, the persistent oppression of the blacks exists in two forms, both of which stem from the condition of slavery. The first, and most pervasive, oppression is an internalized enslavement, manifested as *self-alienation*. The self-alienation in the text is distinguished by a feeling or gesture of uncontrollability/helplessness in the characters, resulting in either a spiritual or physical death. More often than not in the text, this self-alienation is a result of cognitive dissonance between the way the characters desired to live their lives verses how they had to live their lives within the system of domination. Schwarz-Bart's self-alienation echoes Du Bois' *double consciousness*, as he articulates, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."⁴ And following Du Bois' lead, Schwarz-Bart's remedy to self-alienation is the use of folk resources.⁵ The second form of oppression in the novel is the external colonial project of economic domination, which is--at that historical moment--a powerful force in maintaining the superstructure of slavery under the guise of a benign economic colonialism. It is between these two mutually imbricated elements of oppression, that the heroines of the novel negotiate an intervention for themselves and their community through the black vernacular traditions.

There is an intricate relationship between the various communities of Guadeloupe and the Lougandor women who navigate its terrain. In many ways, the spiritual and

physical journey through Guadeloupe that the protagonist, Télumée, experiences traces the colonial history of the island. In her search for her own place on the island, she mimics the communal quest to lay down roots in the land stolen and occupied by the colonial oppressor. In this contemporary historical moment when blacks have been clearly understood as victims of slavery rather than beneficiaries of the civilizing assumptions of slavery, it is crucial to examine how Télumée transcends the victim status to empower herself and her community with creative agency.

Within the text, one of Télumée's first encounters with the external structure of domination is through her employment at Belle-Feuille as a domestic laborer. Due to the economic condition of Fond-Zombi, Télumée is forced to go outside of her community to seek employment. The only opportunities for employment reside in the hands of the white population of Guadeloupe, which Télumée has to work for because the “le pied d’argent poussait dans leur cour.” “root of the silver tree grew in their yard.”⁶ Yet, before Télumée even physically encounters the descendants of the *Blanc des blancs/White of Whites*, she is thoroughly indoctrinated into the history of this particular family through the oral history passed down through her matrilineage:

[C]’étaient les descendants du Blanc des blancs, celui-là même qui faisait éclater la rate aux nègres, juste pour décolérer. On prétend que tambour au loin a beau son, mais la mère de Reine Sans Nom l’avait entendu de ses oreilles, le fracas de leur tambour, et elle l’avait raconté à bonne-maman qui elle-même avait entrouvert ses dents, un jour, pour laisser passer l’écho de ces temps anciens, et c’était comme si je l’avais vu de mes propres yeux le Blanc des blancs, celui qui boitait, celui qui soulevait un cheval, celui dont les cheveux étincelaient comme soleil midi, celui qui te serrait un petit nègre dans ses bras pour le faire mourir.

These two descendants of the White of Whites, the one who used to burst a Negro's spleen just to relieve his own bad temper. They say a distant drum sounds best, but Queen Without a Name's mother had heard it with

her own ears, the din of this drum, and she told Grandma, and Grandma herself had unclenched her teeth once to give passage to this echo from the old days. *So it was as if I'd seen him with my own eyes*, the White of Whites, who could lift a horse, whose hair gleamed like the midday sun, who'd squeeze a little Negro in his arms until he died.⁷

Utilizing her cultural resources, Télumée is armed with the folk knowledge of the relationship between this particular white family and the blacks of the community.

Passage of the history of the *White of Whites* transfers the experience of Télumée's ancestors directly onto Télumée in a visceral way. As an affirmation to the survival of the oral tradition, Télumée doesn't need to experience this history of violence herself to understand the impact it has had on her people. Equipped with this folk knowledge, Télumée is able to understand the potential danger of the situation that she is about to enter.

Queen goes further in preparing Télumée for this encounter by giving her tools of survival through an allegory focused on external oppression. Queen advises Télumée, "La rivière qui déborde entraîne les grosses roches, elle déracine des arbres mais le galet sur lequel tu dois te fendre le pied, elle le laissera pour toi, là." "A river in flood sweeps away huge rocks, uproots trees, but the pebble which will cut your foot open—it leaves that there waiting for you."⁸ This allegory serves as an example of how Télumée should conduct herself in the home of the *White of Whites*. The suggestion is that rather than having a large presence that may be targeted in the home of the Desaragnes, Télumée should try not to be noticed—to be smaller than she is, a *pebble* that is not swept away in the flood. Within this economy of domination, Queen uses the oral tradition to advise Télumée on the potential dangers and methods of surviving those dangers and while maintaining agency.

Upon arrival at the home of the Desaragnes, Télumée is immediately faced with the Mistress's attempts at dismissing her humanity. Madame Desaragne reiterates a colonial mentality, expressing a belief in the natural savagery of blacks and the benevolence of the previous system of slavery. She relates these sentiments to Télumée stating:

[A]h, savez-vous au juste qui vous êtes, vous les nègres d'ici?...vous mangez, vous buvez, vous faites les mauvais, et puis vous dormez...un point c'est tout. Mais savez-vous seulement à quoi vous avez échappé?...sauvages et barbares que vous seriez en ce moment, à courir dans la brousse, à danser nus et à déguster les individus en potée... on vous emmène ici, et comment vivez-vous?...dans la boue, le vice, les bacchanals...

Ah, ah, do you really know who you are, you Negroes here? You eat, you drink, you misbehave, and then you sleep--and that's it. But do you even know what you've escaped? You might be wild savages now, running through the bush, dancing naked, and eating people stewed in pots. But you're brought here, and how do you live? In squalor and vice and orgies.⁹

This statement codifies the colonizer's perception of blacks, and the pervasive belief in the mutually beneficial aspects of colonization. It is interesting to note that this comment is made in the context of Madame Desaragne's inquiry and translation of Télumée's positive demeanor--the Mistress is provoked by Télumée's cheerfulness, because she is "à chanter et à rire, à sautiller," "singing laughing and skipping about."¹⁰ In other words, Télumée is not heading Queen's advice on being a *pebble* within an economy of domination; therefore, she has become a target. The Mistress's comments stand as an indication of the potent fear of black resilience after slavery, and it traces the general practice of *putting them in their place*, in effort to maintain the previous level of control allotted by slavery.

Her employer's attempts at degrading both her character and her culture, engender

a response from Télumée that is strategically formulated within the value system that was passed onto her. Télumée has been equipped with the tools to maintain an internal recognition of self-worth based on her cultural and spiritual resources, Queen Without a Name and Ma Cia. Although Télumée is working within an economy of domination in which her personal worth is socially defined in terms of her production in support of a colonial paradigm--Télumée is taught to utilize the resources of her own ethnic community to create an alternative economy of self-worth. These two different systems of value are also acknowledged by the employer, as illustrated in the Mistress's statement to Télumée, "[S]I vous êtes le verre en cristal de votre aïeule, ici, á Galba, vous n'êtes en cristal pour personne." " 'You may be your grandmother's crystal glass, but you're not anybody's crystal anything here.' " ¹¹ In the face of adversity, Télumée maintains allegiance to the black vernacular values she was taught as a child that were passed down to her through Queen and Ma Cia.

As Queen teaches Télumée techniques to avoid being targeted, Ma Cia teaches Télumée a different folk response to external oppression. This lesson is clear, as she instructs Télumée in their first meeting, "[S]ois une vaillante petite négresse, un vrai tambour á deux faces, laisse la vie frapper, cogner, mais conserve toujours intacte la face du dessous." "Be a fine little Negress, a real drum with two sides. Let life bang and thump, but keep the underside always intact." ¹² This method of survival advises Télumée on how to respond to conflict. It also suggests that disengagement from conflict, while protecting one's vulnerability, allows one to maintain an internal sense of integrity. This technique becomes Télumée's key to maintaining an internal recognition of self-worth within the text. This is illustrated in Télumée's internal response to the verbal castigation

of her employer, as she expresses:

Je me faufilais á travers ces paroles comme si je nageais dans l'eau la plus claire qui soit, sentant sur ma nuque, mes mollets, mes bras, le petit vent d'est qui les rafraîchissait, et, me félicitant d'être sur terre une petite négresse irréductible, un vrai tambour á deux peaux, selon l'expression de man Cia, je lui abandonnais la première face afin qu'elle s'amuse, la patronne, qu'elle cogne dessus, et moi-même par en dessous je restais intacte, et plus intacte il n'y a pas.

I glided in and out between the words as if I were swimming in the clearest water, feeling the cooling breeze on my neck, my arms, the back of my legs. And, *thankful to be a little Negress that was irreducible*, a real drum with two sides, as Ma Cia put it, I left one side to her, the mistress, for her to amuse herself, for her to thump on, and I, underneath, *I remained intact*, nothing ever more so.¹³

Télumée employs the vernacular lessons that she has been taught from Queen and Ma Cia in this expression. Combining the river allegory of Queen with the drum metaphor of Ma Cia,¹⁴ she is fortified with folk knowledge to withstand the verbal attack of her employer, prompted by a line of questioning that started with the inquiry “[Q]ue savez-vous, au juste?” “[W]hat do you really know?”¹⁵ This survival gesture echoes Zora Neal

Hurston’s analysis of the cultural practice of the mask:

And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner: “Get out of here!” We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what he is missing. The Indian resist curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.¹⁶

Schwarz-Bart and Hurston take Du Bois’ *veil* and use it to their advantage. Du Bois used the metaphor of a veil to talk about the separation that blacks experience in the U.S., a separation between how African Americans were seen by white America and who they actually were as individuals.¹⁷ Du Bois also used this to articulate an experience of

invisibility in America. Schwarz-Bart uses this veil as a mask in her characterization of Télumée. Télumée puts on a mask to discourage her mistress from probing deeper, using her mistress's "knowledge" of blacks to amuse herself with.¹⁸ By not responding to her mistress, Télumée employs passive resistance to navigate away from further engagement with this representative of the external system of domination—a battle not worth waging. Télumée resists these external efforts to determine her identity and self-worth; instead, she turns to the measuring stick provided by Ma Cia and Queen.

Paradoxically, Télumée's spiritual integrity is contingent on an internal duality. The survival allegories that Télumée employs are dependent on establishing an internalized sense of duality. Queen's pebble allegory advises Télumée to be smaller than she is; in essence, to hide parts of her personhood. Ma Cia's drum metaphor suggests that Télumée create a hard exterior to deal with the world, while also keeping a part of herself separated from those harsh realities. These survival stories delineate the necessary boundaries between the colonial system of value and her internal system of value. There is a long history of duality within the black vernacular tradition, articulated most clearly by Du Bois within the context of race and nationality. Lee Wright also discusses this tradition in literature, "No doubt the need to mask in part explains the development of a discourse within the African American Community which by necessity was double-voiced and relied upon the act of signifying."¹⁹ If writers such as Du Bois and Ralph Ellison saw this duality as an element to be reconciled in order to gain a more holistic sense of identity, female writers such as Hurston and Schwartz-Bart saw it as an asset to maintain the spiritual integrity of one's identity. As a cultural marker for the New World African descendant, the ability to achieve spiritual integrity from a fragmented

consciousness functions as a reliable survival technique within systems of oppression.

During Télumée's childhood, Queen functions as the primary source of Télumée's survival mythology. Queen ritualizes these occasions of storytelling, distinguishing them as sacred moments of consequence. As Télumée describes:

Et puis grand-mère déposait précautionneusement sa carcasse dans la berceuse dodine, nous nous asseyions à ses pieds, de part et d'autre, sur de vieux sacs de farine, et après un de profundis pour ses morts, Jérémie, Xango, Minerve et sa fille Méranée, elle nous disait quelques contes sur lesquels s'achevaient nos jeudis. Au-dessus de nos têtes, le vent de terre faisait craquer les tôles rouillées du toit, la voix de Reine Sans Nom était rayonnante, lointaine, un vague sourire plissait ses yeux tandis qu'elle ouvrait devant nous le monde où les arbres crient, les poisons volent, les oiseaux captivent le chasseur et le nègre est enfant de Dieu. Elle sentait ses mots, ses phrases, possédait l'art de les arranger en images et en sons, en musique pure, en exaltation.

Then she would seat herself carefully in her rocker, we would take our places at her feet on old flour bags on either side of her, and *after a De Profundis for her dead—Jeremiah, Xango, Minerva, and her daughter Meranee*—she would bring our Thursday to a close by telling us stories. Above our heads the land wind made the rusty corrugated iron roof creak and groan. But the voice of Queen Without a Name was glowing, distant, and her eyes crinkled in a faint smile as she opened before us *a world in which trees cry out, fishes fly, birds catch the fowler, and the Negro is the child of God. She was conscious of her words, her phrases, and possessed the art of arranging them in images and sounds, in pure music, in exaltation.*²⁰

As the reader witnesses in the above quote, Queen's ritual of storytelling is a sacred moment presenting an alternative reality where the supernatural thrives, the human and animal world are infused and the humanity of African descendants is God-given.

Schwarz-Bart characterizes Queen as deliberately ritualizing the oral tradition, using it as the scaffolding that supports the development of Télumée's identity. Queen's ritualized moments of storytelling in the novel function to *place* Télumée within a specific familial tradition, as evidenced in Queen beginning this ritual by first paying homage to those

family members who have passed on. As she recognizes the sacredness of the dead, the sacredness of this communal practice is conferred upon the listeners, as they respond in call-and-response tradition. Queen ritually asks the *court* if they are sleeping and Télumée and Elie must respond enthusiastically for her to continue the story.²¹ Queen prefaces her stories to Télumée and Elie with the importance of the storytelling ritual, as she begins, “[A]vec une parole, on empêche un home de se briser, ainsi s’exprimait-elle.” “With a word a man can be stopped from destroying himself,”²² emphasizing the power of the stories to function as saviors, giving one faith in oneself.

Queen is committed to teaching Télumée the purity of her own self-worth. This echoes in the same tradition as Hans Mol articulates in his formulation of the black woman’s *sacralization of identity*.²³ Although Mol interprets this concept under the rubric of conversion, Télumée’s journey of creating self-worth and maintaining spiritual integrity through folk knowledge can be equally registered in this tradition, as restated by Kimberly Rae Connor:

Self-realization, Mol argues, is a sacred ideal, and to achieve selfhood one turns not to the chaos of the world but to one’s self and to a transcendent order symbolized in stories and religious traditions. The kind of whole-soul recovery of a sense of self indicated by conversion is incomplete if it does not include some integration into a history, a community, or a tradition.²⁴

Schwarz-Bart uses storytelling in the novel to reinscribe several histories onto the next generation. This narrative method continually reconnects the past with the present and the future. Even the structure of the novel reveals this commitment, Abena Busia best illuminates the significance of the structure of the novel by stating:

The novel is a chronicle history in two parts, and significantly Télumée begins her account with *her people*; she first tells the story of the

generations immediately preceding hers, so that when she reaches her own, she is already firmly a part of a people and a place. Télumée is very conscious of narrating the history of which her story is only part.²⁵

Through Queen's steadfast belief in the sacredness of Télumée's identity, she has given Télumée the ability to transcend the exterior attempts to formulate her identity. As illustrated in the text, Télumée achieves her *whole-soul recovery* through the use of her cultural and spiritual folk resources. Queen and Ma Cia ground Télumée in an oral tradition that both edifies her in the engagement with the external oppression of the post-Slavery period, and protects her from the internal oppression of self-alienation.

There are several survival myths retold in this novel; the one that Queen ritually returns to, in efforts to instruct Télumée and Elie, is *The Man Who Tried to Live on Air*. This is a story about a man who is so disgusted and depressed by the corruption of humankind that he valued his horse, *My Two Eyes*, above all else and let the horse do it's will. In efforts to escape his pain, the man mounts the horse, "[E]t se laissait emporter au gré de l'animal." "[A]nd let the horse carry him where it willed," ceasing to dismount from the horse.²⁶ Eventually, the man wanted to dismount the horse to follow a woman he loved, but by then the horse would not let him dismount, "La bête était devenue son maître." "The animal had become his master."²⁷ This is a classic survival myth about overcoming your obstacles as Queen reiterates to Télumée:

[M]a petite braise, chuchotait-elle, si tu enfourches un cheval, garde ses brides bien en main, afin qu'il ne te conduise pas. Et, tandis que je me serrais contre elle, respirant son odeur de muscade, Reine Sans Nom soupirait, me caressait et reprenait lentement, en détachant ses mots, comme pour les graver au fond de mon esprit...derrière une peine il y a une autre peine, la misère est une vague sans fin, mais le cheval ne doit pas te conduire, c'est toi qui dois conduire le cheval.

'My little ember', she'd whisper, 'if you ever get on a horse, keep good

hold of the reins so that it's not the horse that rides you.' And as I clung to her, breathing in her nutmeg smell, Queen Without a Name would sigh, caress me, and go on, distinctly, *as if to engrave the words on my mind*: 'Behind one pain there is another. Sorrow is a wave without end. But the horse mustn't ride you, you must ride it.'²⁸

Schwarz-Bart continually returns to this story as a survival refrain, "le cheval ne doit pas te conduire, c'est toi qui dois conduire le cheval," "the horse mustn't ride you, you must ride it." The assumption is that the life of African descendants is difficult by nature, but one must learn to manage the extreme emotional toll it takes on the spirit. Moreover it suggests that, within the challenges of life, one must assert agency where you can, refusing to become immobilized by fear, depression and/or uncertainty. This story functions to overcome the debilitating depression of life in a system of domination, as an allegory of a way to maintain agency even when one has internalized oppression. Queen is consistently preparing Télumée for the challenges of life through the folk tradition of storytelling.

The Jurisprudence of Conjure

Following in the footsteps of Queen, Télumée also uses Ma Cia as a cultural, spiritual and emotional resource. Because the Lougandor women pride themselves on being models of survival for the larger community, they refuse to burden the community with their grief. Therefore, Ma Cia provides them with a refuge and grief counseling when they have lost the ability to see through the pain of their experiences. When Queen or Télumée is spiritually lost it is Ma Cia who grounds them through her vernacular knowledge. Télumée best expresses the intimate relationship between the Lougandor women and Ma Cia, as she eloquently states, "Je me suis sentie nue et j'ai trouvé une voix et c'était celle de man Cia..." "I felt naked, I found a voice, and it was that of Ma

Cia."²⁹ And both women are only able to recover under the tutelage of Ma Cia's folk knowledge. Although Ma Cia serves the whole community with her folk knowledge, her relationship to the Lougandor women distinctly functions as an extended family. Ma Cia serves as a spiritual and vernacular resource that fortifies both Télumée and Queen with a spiritual wholeness that allows for them to survive and translate their personal tragedies into empowering symbols of women's perseverance.

Schwarz-Bart characterizes Ma Cia as an embodiment of the living ancestor role in the text, occupying a position as guardian of the community and ensuring continuity.³⁰ She does this through her narrating of Ma Cia as a traditional *conjure woman* with supernatural powers to: transform into animals, connect with the dead, cure the sick and perform sorcery. Albert Raboteau aptly describes the function of conjure for African descendants:

Primarily, conjure was a method of control: first, the control which comes from knowledge—being able to explain crucial phenomena, such as illness, misfortune and evil; second, the control which comes from the ability to act effectively—it was ‘a force which mankind can (or thinks he can) achieve almost every desired end...’; third, a means of control over the future through reading the ‘signs’; fourth, an aid to social control because it supplied a system whereby conflict, otherwise stifled, could be aired.³¹

These functions of conjure are clearly validated in the text. Ma Cia's traditional role as conjure woman within her community is illustrated when Schwarz-Bart first introduces Ma Cia through the local rumor mill. As Télumée expresses:

[J]’étais toujours intéressée lorsque les homes se mettaient à parler d’esprits, de sortilèges, du compère qu’on avait vu courir en chien, la semaine passée, et de la vieille man Cia qui toutes les nuits planait au-dessus des mornes, des vallons et des cases de Fond-Zombi, insatisfaite de son enveloppe humaine. Grand-mère m’avait déjà parlé de cette femme, son amie, qui côtoyait les morts plus que les vivants.

I was also very interested when the men started to talk about spirits, spells, a man who'd been seen the week before running about like a dog, and old Ma Cia, who flew about every night over the hills and valleys and cabins of Fond-Zombi, her ordinary human form insufficient for her. Grandmother had already spoken to me about this woman, her friend, who was closer to the dead than to the living.³²

As is displayed in this quote, Ma Cia is considered to be a woman who crosses multiple boundaries: between human and animal, the natural and the supernatural, the living and the dead; she is the boundary between the known and the unknowable. Although Ma Cia clearly inspires fear amongst some in the community, she is also central to communal survival, as Queen retorts:

Il ne faut pas juger man Cia.// Le plaisir des hommes c'est de prendre man Cia sous leur langue et de la faire voltiger á la façon du linge qu'on lance sur les roches de la rivière pour en faire tomber la crasse. C'est vrai que les gens en parlent avec crainte, car il y a toujours un risqué á prononcer ce nom: man Cia. Mais te dissent-ils ce qu'ils font lorsque leurs os se déplacent, lorsque leurs muscles se nouent, lorsqu'ils n'arrivent plus á reprendre souffle dans la vie?

It isn't for anyone else to judge Ma Cia.// Men take pleasure in winding their tongues around Ma Cia and tossing her about like the clothes we beat on the rocks to get the dirt out. It's true people are afraid to talk about her, and that it's dangerous to pronounce her name: But do they tell you what they do when they dislocate a bone, or have a muscle cramp, or can't get their breath?³³

As is expressed above, Ma Cia's human form does not limit her and her supernatural powers clearly challenge her own island community. Nevertheless, the community looks to Ma Cia when they are rendered helpless from health issues, grief, or an internal power struggle within the community. Fully operating outside of the external colonial power structure and her own internal communal hierarchy, Ma Cia becomes a symbol of an alternative system of resistance in the text.

Schwarz-Bart extends this symbol of resistance by locating Ma Cia deep within the forest. Living as a Maroon in the mountains, outside all the communities of Guadeloupe, Ma Cia becomes a female figure of resistance within the Pan-Caribbean experience.³⁴ This symbolic aspect of her character is important to note, because Maroon life is traditionally seen in the form of idealized male figures involved in various heroics. These figures are representative of an authentic African experience because of their history of resistance to colonizers and their intimate relationship to the land.³⁵ Ma Cia's role as conjure woman also further validates that alternative system of knowledge that the Africans brought to the New World that was discredited through slavery and colonization. Levine spoke to the importance of the role of conjure practices for black communities, "[C]onjure practice invited group identification by providing an alternative source of knowledge and power to that offered by the slaveholding class."³⁶ Ma Cia's abilities to metamorphosis into animals and grow wings to fly gestures toward a continual kinship to continental Africa.³⁷ Ma Cia occupies the role of the mythological Flying African in this novel, but with a distinctly feminist orientation. Unlike the typical mythology on the Flying Africans that I have covered in previous chapters, Ma Cia's flight is not an attempt at escaping colonial control by returning to the homeland; rather, she uses flight to oversee the island community. Schwarz-Bart references the flying Africans, mythological tradition of the Diaspora, but particularizes it within the Caribbean identity formation, a Creolization, if you will, that both focuses on what African descendants are here in the New World and their intra-ethnic dynamics.

After Queen's death, Ma Cia not only assists Télumée in finding peace in uncertainty, but she also takes on the responsibility of indoctrinating Télumée into the

vernacular trade of conjure. As illustrated by Télumée in the text:

...man Cia m'initiait aux secrets des plantes. Elle m'apprenait également le corps humain, ses nœuds et ses faiblesses, comment le frotter, chasser malaises et crispations, démesures. Je sus délivrer bêtes et gens, lever les envoûtements, renvoyer tous leurs maléfices à ceux-là mêmes qui les avaient largués.

...Ma Cia initiated me into the secrets of plants. She also taught me the human body, its centres, its weaknesses, how to rub it, how to get rid of faintness and tics and sprains. I learned how to set people and animals free, how to break spells and turn sorcery back on the sorcerers.³⁸

Through this thorough vernacular education, Télumée achieves a skill set that permits her to work the land and assist the community, which ultimately supplements her income and provides her with provisions for self-sufficiency and some sense of self-determination.

Ma Cia's ability to pass on her vernacular trade of conjure provides Télumée with another internal method of recognizing self-worth, and maintaining creative agency. This is a message of survival for African descendents in the New World, which the Lougandor women must translate to the community through modeling survival techniques.

When disease infects all of the animals of the community, Télumée is called upon to do more than model survival. They need her to actively engage the alternative world of knowledge passed onto her by Ma Cia. Following Ma Cia's transformation into a dog, the community actively calls on Télumée's folk skill set when their very survival is in question. By default, Télumée is anointed the new communal conjure woman:

Mais lorsqu'on m'amena des vaches écumantes, le garrot gonfle de croutes noires, je fis les gestes que m'avait enseignés man Cia et l'une d'abord, puis l'autre, les bêtes reprirent goût à la vie. Le bruit courut que je savais faire et défaire, que je détenais les secrets et sur un énorme gaspillage de salive, on me hissa malgré moi au rang de dormeuse, de sorcière de première. Les gens montaient à ma cas, déposant entre mes mains le malheur, la confusion, l'absurdité de leurs existences, les corps meurtris et les âmes, la folie qui hurle et celle qui se tait, les misères vécues en songe,

toute la brume qui enveloppe le cœur des humains.

[W]hen people brought me cows foaming at the mouth, their withers covered with black scabs, I did what Ma Cia had taught me, and first one and then another, the animals began to want to live again. The rumour spread that I knew how to do and undo, that I knew secrets, and with a vast waste of saliva I was raised in spite of myself to the rank of seer and first-class witch. People climbed up to my cabin to put in my hands the grief, confusion and absurdity of their lives, bruised bodies and bruised souls, the madness that screeches and the madness that is silent, the woes undergone in dreams, all the mist that enshrouds the human heart.³⁹

When the community is suffering and feels helpless in their loss of creative agency, they seek Télumée's accesses to the jurisprudence of conjure. Télumée's conjure abilities help decode the chaos of an existence in economic and social domination. Where there is a lack of basic social supports for the colonized, Télumée's alternative system of value functions as a saving force to the community, by asserting another institution to register black agency. Télumée is given the role of conjure woman, midwife, doctor and judge for the community. Nevertheless, even with this central role for the community, Télumée maintains a position on the margin of her community. And, ironically, it is Télumée's refusal to engage in a particular type of *witchcraft* that inspires fear in her community, as Télumée resist acquiring the conjure knowledge to convene with the spirits against particular individuals and the secret to metamorphosis.⁴⁰ This refusal furthered her isolation and eventually temporarily dislodging her communal function.

Télumée attains these survival mechanisms that aid her in maintaining internal integrity through her two vernacular resources, Queen and Ma Cia. Her process of recognizing self-worth (i.e., *sacralization of identity*) is only realized through the employment of her communal resources. Rejecting the dominator's construction of her self-worth, Télumée reasserts her own cultural agency. Basing an assessment of self-

worth within her own cultural and gendered paradigm is the key to transcending her oppression. Queen and Ma Cia provide T  l  m  e with these intra-ethnic reference points for both establishing her identity and surviving within a system of domination. Through her example, the community witnesses her personal resistance to oppression. The Lougandor women translate the horrors and afflictions of the community into a blueprint of methods of survival to transcend these immobilizing experiences. They utilize their cultural resources to overcome these negative experiences, with each generation edifying the next generation's struggle. My reading of Schwarz-Bart's social message of an intra-communal recognition of self-worth gestures towards an alternative model of retaining agency within the system of domination. Schwarz-Bart's engagement with relocating agency in the black community is one of the most powerful social messages she formulates in her project of social transformation. Accordingly, the reader is witness to T  l  m  e's learning curve as she strives to internalize these survival methods.

Bitter Sugar

Although T  l  m  e prevails in asserting her own cultural resources in her encounters with the Desaragnes, her engagement with the internal domination of the people in her community proves to be more challenging. T  l  m  e expresses the pervasiveness of this internal enslavement in her meditations, stating:

[J]e pense    ce qu'il en est de l'injustice sur la terre, et de nous autres en train de souffrir, de mourir silencieusement de l'esclavage apr  s qu'il soit fini, oubli  . J'essaye, j'essaye toutes les nuits, et je n'arrive pas    comprendre comment tout cela a pu commencer, comment cela a pu continuer, comment cela peut durer encore, dans notre   me tourment  e, ind  cise, en lambeaux et que sera notre derni  re prison.

I think of the injustice in the world, and of all of us still suffering and dying silently of slavery after it is finished and forgotten. I try, I try every night, and I never succeed in understanding how it could all have started,

comme plat du jour. Quant à Élie, le seul mot de canne le faisait entrer dans des transes, des fureurs incompréhensibles. Ses rêves de grand savant étaient loin, la douane s'était enfuie avec l'école, et le cabriolet, le costume à jabot, les robes de brocart à col châle avaient fondu dans la livre, d'arbres étranges, dépouillés de leurs feuilles, une carte de France, des vignettes figurant les saisons, et les curieuses petites lettres porteuses d'espérance, et qui se dissipaient déjà, se réduisaient à des ombres, elles aussi. Élie criait, jurait tous ses grands dieux que la canne ne le happerait pas, jamais, jamais il n'achèterait de coutelas pour aller dans la terre des blancs. Il préférerait plutôt se trancher les mains avec, il hacherait l'air et fendrait le vent, mais il ne ramasserait pas la malédiction.

[T]o bring in any money to speak of you had to go into the canefields, with their prickles, their wasps, their biting ants, and the foremen who were connoisseurs of feminine flesh. Grandmother herself ruled that out, saying my sixteen years were not going to provide them with their day's special. As for Elie, the very word cane drove him wild, filled him with incomprehensible fury. Elie railed and swore by all the gods the cane would never get him, he was never going to buy a knife to go work on the land of the white men. He'd rather use it to cut his own hands off, he'd hack the air and cleave the wind but he wouldn't accept that fate.⁴²

At this point in the text, both Elie and Télumée narrowly escape the fate of the canefields but the haunting presence of the sugarcane remains a factor in their lives. Télumée's escape from the cane leads her into a position of cultural, social and personal isolation as a domestic live-in laborer. While Elie's escape also leads him down a path of personal isolation, as a sawyer. Even though they are both initially exempted from work in the canefields, it comes at a very high price that they are willing to pay because it gives them economic agency to be able to have a choice about their means of income. Elie's employment as a sawyer puts him in a position of liberation from the colonial economic project because he is able to sustain himself and Télumée, ultimately expressing a sense of economic independence and control--this is a moment of his flourishing creative agency marked by his continual singing and building.⁴³ But this all changes for Elie and Télumée when the winds of fortune cease to blow on the community of Fond-Zombi, and

the internal alienation is signaled in the text by the absence of black vernacular musical traditions.

When the economy slows in Fond-Zombi, Elie becomes depressed by his unemployment and begins his downfall into self-alienation that is felt by members of the community, and most directly, Télumée. When Elie loses his function in the community, he also clearly loses his sense of self-determination and suffers from a loss of identity. This shift is also indicated by Elie's relationship to the vernacular tradition. Elie's character changes from indulging in the vernacular tradition through song and his daily meditation with nature, to isolation from those elements of the black vernacular tradition. Télumée comments on this loss:

Un soir qu'il semblait encore plus triste que d'ordinaire, je me mis à fredonner une petite biguine pour lui rappeler le bon temps. Mais il me regarda d'un air si scandalisé que je m'arrêtai net, cependant qu'il paraissait vouloir me dire : ne te rends-tu pas compte ma pauvre femme, que l'heure des chansons est terminée?

One evening when he [Elie] seemed even more depressed than usual I started to hum a little beguine to remind him of old times. But he looked so scandalized I stopped short. He seemed to be saying; 'Don't you realize, my poor Télumée, that the time for songs is over?'⁴⁴

This moment in the text marks a changing point in Elie, where he sails adrift, abandoning Télumée and their former life together. And the community responds to his loss of identity by renaming him the "Hunted One,"⁴⁵ indicating his new position as one who responds rather than dictates his own path, as he runs from his life not to it.

Elie's self-alienation becomes contagious as the members of the community are burdened with the reality of a lack of options for self-sufficiency. Elie gathers with those who have suffered the same fate, they lament the loss of their self-sufficiency and

relinquish their personal agency over to those who *hunt* them. As expressed by Elie, “Qui de vous peut me répondre, me dire exactement par quoi nous sommes poursuivis, car nous sommes pour suivis, n’est-ce pas?” “Which of you can answer and tell me exactly what we are hunted by—for we are hunted, aren’t we?”⁴⁶ Elie translates his feeling of economic helplessness into a metaphorical hunt of all blacks. Elie’s emotional expression of being aggressively pursued indicates his internalization of the fatalistic nature of black peoples’ lives; manifesting itself as helplessness and uncontrollability. This becomes his point of departure into self-alienation because he has surrendered his possibility for creative agency to the uncertainty of his fate. His co-worker, Amboise, remarks on the presence of an internal alienation in Elie’s comment, rebuking, “Ami, rien ne poursuit le nègre que son propre cœur.” “Friend, nothing hunts the Negro but his own heart.”⁴⁷ Elie’s refusal to acknowledge the truth in Amboise’s statement leads him to suffer a spiritual death as indicated by his loss of creative agency. Elie is hunted by the omnipresent colonial threat represented by the sugarcane fields. Ultimately, Elie’s internalization of this colonial threat leads to the disintegration of his relationship to Télumée. As a young man, Elie fails to reconcile the system of domination in which he lives, to the patriarchal ideals of colonialism to which he ascribes—he cannot be the type of man he wants to be in a system that doesn’t recognize him as such. Elie naïvely bases his identity on the external system of value, failing to use the alternative system of value that is offered by the women in his life, Queen and Télumée.

Likewise, Télumée is also challenged to retain her creative agency and emotional integrity when she is forced to work in the canefields. Coincidentally, Télumée becomes vulnerable to the internal alienation that the sugarcane fields represent when her folk

mentor, Ma Cia, abandons her. According to Télumée, Ma Cia, “se transforme en chien et disparaisse. Je sus alors que la protection des morts ne remplace pas la voix des vivants.” “[c]hanged into a dog and disappeared. Then I [Télumée] realized that the protection of the dead can’t replace the voice of the living.”⁴⁸ The protection that Queen gives her as an ancestor is distinguished from Ma Cia’s as more physical presence, as the house embodies Queen’s spirit. Ma Cia’s departure is a temporary one but Télumée cannot recognize it in her emotional state of despair. The enslavement of the sugarcane fields begins to convince her of her own helplessness in the face of her burden. Losing all hope in herself, she surrenders to her oppression stating, *Peu à peu, je me faisais maudite...// Et je me disais c’est là, au milieu des piquants de là canne, c’est là qu’un nègre doit se trouver.*” “Gradually I entered into the malediction, made myself accursed...// And I thought, it’s here, in the midst of the cane prickles, that a Negro ought to be.”⁴⁹ Télumée’s gained belief in the fatalism of the black population signifies her internal alienation.

This internal rupture is demonstrated in the text, as Amboise approaches Télumée with a joke, she reflects, “[J]e me demandée s’il voulait me faire rire moi-même, Télumée, Télumée du morne La Folie, ou s’il voulait faire rire une jeune femme sans espérance.” “I wondered if it was myself he wanted to make laugh, Télumée, Télumée of La Folie, or the young woman without hope.”⁵⁰ Without Ma Cia’s physical presence in her life, Télumée is unable to call on her own cultural resources to edify her sense of spiritual integrity. Télumée recognizes the spiritual death she has suffered in the canefields, becoming a woman without hope, creative agency or identity. This is significant considering Télumée’s inherited responsibility of being a role model of

survival by teaching others how to live.⁵¹ She becomes almost unrecognizable, literally becoming part of the *Brotherhood of Displaced* where she resides amongst, “nègres errants, disparates, rejetés des trente-deux communes de l’île et qui menaient la ne existence exempte de toutes règles, sans souvenirs, étonnements, ni craintes.”

“wandering Negroes, the motley rejects of the island’s thirty-two communes, who lived there exempt from all rules and without memories, surprises, or fears.”⁵²

However, Télumée does not fully succumb to her internal alienation, because her spiritual death is arrested by the community, through the reinsertion of black vernacular music and ritual. As Amboise returns to Télumée’s life, he begins a domestic courtship ritual that is marked by music that interrupts Télumée’s life of affliction in the canefields. In a moment of desperation, Télumée is literally rescued by Amboise’s song, as she describes:

Le lendemain, alors que je me tenais bien sagement à ma place, sur la terre, au milieu des piquants, j’entendis monter dans le ciel la voix d’Amboise et voici, une amertume me saisit et mon corps me pesa. Et puis l’amertume s’en alla et il ne demeura plus que la surprise d’entendre cette voix monter du milieu des cannes, car Amboise avait toujours dit que ce n’était pas sa sueur qui engraisserait la terre des blancs.

The next day, as I quietly occupied my place in the world in the midst of the prickles, I heard Amboise’s voice rise into the air, and bitterness smote me and my body weighed me down. Then the bitterness went, and all that was left was the surprise of hearing that voice rise among the canes, for Amboise had always said his sweat would never feed the white man’s soil.⁵³

Breaking his own moral code, Amboise comes to the canefields singing a folk song that cuts through Télumée’s despair. His tune demands a response in the black vernacular tradition, and the field laborers reply to his call, as does Télumée:

Mais soudain, je ne sus comment, ma voix me quitta et s’éleva très au-

dessus des autres, comme dans les temps anciens, perçante, vive et gaie, et Amboise se tourna vers moi avec étonnement, et mon visage était baigné de larmes. Et l'homme se détourna aussitôt et l'on entendit jusqu'à midi.

But suddenly, I don't know how, my voice escaped me and soared high above the others, piercing, lively, and gay, as in the old days, and Amboise turned toward me in astonishment, and my face was bathed in tears. And he at once turned away again, and the singing went on until noon.⁵⁴

When Télumée answers Amboise, she is baptized in her own tears and rescued from her affliction. Her voice, that was lost under the burden of labor, returns to her and she grabs the metaphorical web of communal kinship that Amboise throws out to her through the black vernacular musical tradition.

Webs of Kinship and Creation

Like Marshall's *Praisesong*, this novel also employs a web metaphor to articulate a cultural and communal kinship. In Schwarz-Bart's text, the history of the Lougandor women is woven into the destiny of the communities of Guadeloupe. In the context of Caribbean identity formation, it is important to note that this metaphorical expression of kinship is framed by Télumée formalizing her relationship to Elie through making a home together. To do so, Queen guides Télumée and Elie through the black vernacular ritual of a house-blessing. Schwarz-Bart's narration of this distinct Caribbean ritual of house-blessings is worthy of quoting at length:

Je montai vivement à l'échelle, attachai de bouquet à un chevron et des applaudissements retentirent, venus de la foule qui se tenait à distance, pour ne pas déranger notre intimité. // Elle fit feu, tira trois épis de maïs de son corsage et les fit rôtir à la flamme. Les épis cuits, elle les égrena entièrement et nous en fit manger, déversant le reste pour moitié dans une poche d'Élie, pour moitié dans mon corsage, entre mes seins, nous souhaitant autant de pièces d'argent que de grains de maïs.// Maintenant qu'il y a eu du feu et de la nourriture cuite, vous pouvez prendre possession de votre case.

I scampered up the ladder and tied the bouquet to a rafter: there was a burst of applause from the crowd, which had remained little way off so as not to disturb our privacy. // She [Queen] lit the fire, drew three cobs of corn out of her bodice, and roasted them in the flame. When they were cooked she stripped off the grains and gave us some of them to eat, then poured half the remainder into Elie's pocket and the other half down the front of my dress, between my breast, wishing us as many pieces of silver as there were grains.// 'And now that there is fire and cooked food, you may take possession of your house.'⁵⁵

In the context of social norms in the Caribbean, this ritual of a home christening functions to formalize common-law unions. This domestic ritual is a threshold moment for Télumée and Elie as they are communally recognized as a union, first by their guardians Queen and Old Abel, and then by the rest of the community.⁵⁶ Like most marriage ceremonies, this ritual transitions the couple from children of two distinct families to a unit of the larger community. As a result, this house-blessing ritual becomes a site where the community expands to create space for Télumée and Elie's new merging identities.

Prior to this ritual house-blessing, Télumée's family operates on the periphery of the population, operating as marginal identities. In the same tradition of the novels of Morrison and Marshall, Schwarz-Bart also characterizes her folk female heroines as residing on the edges of the larger community. These women writers deploy female folk characters on the margins for many reasons, shedding light on the primary relationship between margin and center in order to focus on intra-ethnic diversity and the communal healing that needs to be done. Prior to this rite of passage, Télumée's relationship to the community was characterized by the isolation of being raised on the outskirts of Fond-Zombi, with Queen. As in the case of Pilate in *The Song of Solomon*, Queen's periphery space is distinguished throughout the novel as being *in* the community but not *of* the community:

Elle avait posé sa case au bout de Fond-Zombi, en dehors de toutes les autres, à l'endroit même où commence la forêt, où les arbres viennent à la rencontre du vent et le portent sur les hauteurs. Les gens ne la comprenaient pas toujours, c'était un 'femme fantaisie', un 'lunée', une 'temporelle', mais tout cela ne l'amenait qu'à hocher la tête et sourire, et elle continuait à faire ce pour quoi le bon Dieu l'avait créée, vivre.

She [Queen] had put up her cabin at the far end of Fond-Zombi, *away from all the others*, at the spot where the forest begins, where the trees come to meet the wind and carry it up to the heights. The people still couldn't make her out: for them she was a 'freak,' a 'loonie,' a 'temporelle,' but all this only made her shake her head and smile, and she went on doing what God had created her for—living.⁵⁷

Whether it was Queen's isolation, emotional disposition or her economic class, she was clearly distinguished from the other women of the community.⁵⁸ Queen's distinction within the community is most prominently indicated in the text through her changing signifiers. The women in the novel name her multiple times, her name begins as her birth name Toussine, then she is named *Queen Toussine* and finally *Queen Without a Name*.⁵⁹ Both the community's need, and inability, to name Toussine, indicates her discrete social status amongst the general population. Queen's differentiation within the community translates directly to Télumée, as both her progeny and disciple.

As Queen presides over Télumée and Elie's house-blessing ritual, she indoctrinates Télumée into her communal identity as a coupled woman. Queen counsels her on the challenges of married life⁶⁰ throughout this vernacular tradition. As she warns Télumée:

[O]ndule comme un filao, rayonne comme un flamboyant et craque, gémis comme un bambou, mais trouve ta démarche de femme et change de pas en vaillante, ma toute belle; et lorsque tu craqueras comme le bambou, lorsque tu soupireras de lassitude et de dégoût, gémis et désespère pour toi seule et n'oublie jamais qu'il y a une femme contente de vivre.

Sway like a filao, shine like a flame tree, creak and groan like a bamboo,

but find your woman's walk and change to a valiant step, my beauty. And when you sigh with weariness and disgust, when you groan and despair for yourself alone, *never forget that somewhere, somewhere on the earth, there's a woman glad to be alive.*⁶¹

At this ritual moment, Queen cautions Télumée on the necessary resilience and bravery required of a married woman. As Queen prepares Télumée to endure hardship, one can read her sage advice as linked to Télumée's connection to the larger community. It suggests that relief from your own pain can be found by realizing that it is balanced by another woman's happiness. The knowledge of this emotional connection amongst women and the balance that women create for each other will be crucial to Télumée's survival.

In this context, the house-blessing ritual takes on a new meaning. When Télumée formalizes her union with Elie, her position in the community shifts. She narrates this domestic ritual as part of her own rite of passage into womanhood. And during this rite of passage, she begins to, quite literally, feel her connection to the larger community, as she states:

[I]l me semblait alors sentir quelque chose de subtil de nouveau qui se tissait autour de moi, autour de la case encoure surmontée de son bouquet rouge. Un jour, je m'ouvris à Reine Sans Nom de l'impression que je ressentais sous l'arbre de notre cour. // [S]aisissant un rameau desséché, elle se mit à tracer une forme à ses pieds, dans la terre meuble. On eût dit le réseau d'une toile d'araignée, dont les fils se croisaient sur de minuscules et dérisoires petites cases. // Tu le vois, les cases ne sont rien sans les fils qui les relient les unes aux autres, et ce que tu perçois l'après-midi sous ton arbre n'est rien d'autre qu'un fil, celui que tisse le village et qu'il lance jusqu'à toi, ta case. // Dès lors, songeant au fil qui flottait à proximité de notre prunier de Chine, je me mis à aller par la rue de Fond-Zombi avec naturel et aplomb, en dépit ma récent mise en case.

[I]'d feel as if something subtle and new was weaving itself around me, and around the cabin still wearing its red bouquet. One day I told Queen Without a Name about what I felt under the tree in our yard. // Picking up

a dry branch, she started to draw a shape in the loose earth at her feet. It looked like a spider's web, with the threads intersecting to make ridiculously tiny little houses. // *'You see, the houses are nothing without the threads that join them together. And what you feel in the afternoon under your tree is nothing but a thread that the village weaves and throws out to you and your cabin.'* // From then on, *thinking of the thread floating near our Chinese plum*, I began to go along the street in Fond-Zombi unself-conscious and assured, despite having set up house so recently.⁶²

Through this web metaphor, Queen enlightens Télumée to the importance of a communal connection to one's survival. As Télumée receives Queen's message, she experiences both a physical and emotional response to this feeling of communal kinship under her plum tree. Télumée is fortified by Queen's folk knowledge of kinship bonds, resulting in a change of demeanor, she becomes "naturel et aplomb" "unself-conscious and assured"⁶³ as she walks through the streets of Fond-Zombi. Through her union with Elie, Télumée becomes part of a larger communal entity, a link in the web. The day after this ceremony, Télumée exhibits this growth/extension, as she states:

[Je] ne plus être étrangère sur la terre. // Je regardai Fond-Zombi par rapport à ma case, ma case par rapport à Fond-Zombi et je me sentis à ma place exacte dans l'existence. Je me mis alors à faire mon café, á vaquer á mes petites affaires avec des gestes lents et précis, comme s'il y avait un siècle que je m'occupais de la sorte en ce même lieu, á cette même heure.

*[I] was no longer a stranger on the earth.// I looked at Fond-Zombi in relation to my cabin, and my cabin in relation to Fond-Zombi, and felt I was in my right place in life. Then I started to make my coffee and see to my other little chores with slow, precise gestures, as if I'd been doing these things at the same time and in the same place for a hundred years.*⁶⁴

Télumée finds a new version of home in Fond-Zombi. Her identity expands and transforms as she shifts to seeing herself both in relation to her larger community and within a historical trajectory of women's domestic rituals.

The community also expands to take in Télumée's isolated identity. Télumée's

communal transformation is best seen through the behavior of the women of Fond-Zombi. As Télumée's new home becomes part of the communal web, it is distinguished from the others as it begins to represent hope for the domestic dreams of their community. Far from being enigmatic, Télumée's life begins to be idealized by the other women of the community after the house-blessing ritual. This is evidenced in the text:

Les jours suivants ma petite case ne désemplit pas. Tranquille et fraîche au milieu de la savane, avec son bouquet de roses fanées, sur le toit, elle semblait attirer les femmes comme une chapelle solitaire. Il fallait qu'elles y entrent, qu'elles la visitent, la réchauffent de leur présence et y laissent ne serait-ce qu'une poignée d'icaques ou de pois doux. Le plus souvent, elles n'éprouvaient même pas le désir de parler, elles touchaient ma robe avec un léger soupir d'aise, et puis me regardaient en souriant, avec une confiance absolue, tour comme si elles se trouvaient dans l'allée latérale de notre église, sous la compréhension de leur saint préféré, celui qui éclairait les ténèbres de leur âme, les renvoyait vivre dans l'espérance.

During the days that followed my little cabin was never empty. Peaceful and cool in the middle of its plot, with its bunch of faded roses still on the roof, it seemed to attract the women like a lonely chapel. They had to go in, look it over, warm it with their presence, and leave some gift, if only a handful of coco plums or peas. Mostly, they didn't even feel any wish to speak, but just touched my dress with a little sigh of pleasure, then *looked at me smiling, with absolute trust, as if they were in the aisle of our church, looked down on by their favorite saint, who lit up the darkness of their souls and sent them forth to live in hope.*⁶⁵

As seen here, Télumée's home becomes a ritual site for the women of the community to revel in possibility--a place to both give and receive blessings. Because Télumée functions as a spiritual conduit for the other women, she gains a new role in the community. From this ritual moment on, Télumée's life begins to be the example that the community models itself on.

However, the web of kinship is tested as economic hardship hits Fond-Zombi. When Télumée is challenged by her abusive relationship with Elie, she no longer senses

the web connection to her community, stating, “[J]e voyais maintenant qu’aucun fil ne reliait plus ma case aux autres cases. Alors je m’allongeais a même le sol et m’efforçais de dissoudre ma chair.”_ “[I] saw there was no longer any thread linking my cabin to the others. Then I would lie on the ground and try to dissolve my flesh.”⁶⁶ Télumée’s sense of a loss of kinship to her community can be seen as an enabling force in her emotional self-alienation. Although Télumée doesn’t sense the connection to her community, the community remains connected to her as a steady witness to her despair. When Télumée is at a critical point in her depression, the women of the community come together to sustain her:

A quelques jours de la fête, les gens se mirent à passer et à repasser devant ma case, sans mot dire, afin de me prouver tout simplement qu’il ne pouvait y avoir de coupure dans la trame, et que j’avais beau vouloir voler et devenir grand vent, j’étais pourvue de deux mains et deux pied, tout comme eux. Et maintenant lorsqu’ils passaient devant ma cour, on eut dit qu’ils prenaient plaisir a rire encore plus fort, certains allant jusqu’à chanter des airs gais, des cantiques de délivrance, avec un enthousiasme tel que je me demandais s’ils chantaient seulement pour eux-mêmes. Ainsi les gens allaient et venaient devant ma case et de temps en temps une femme s’échappait d’un groupe, levait au ciel des bras suppliants et modulait d’une voix aigue...naissez, naissez pour changer nos destins...et l’entendant j’avais le sentiment étrange qu’elle me lançait un fil dans l’air, un fil très léger en direction de ma case, et il me venait alors un sourire.

A few days before the holiday people began to go up and down in front of my [Télumée’s] cabin without saying anything, just to prove to me that there couldn’t be a gap in the weft, and that however much I wanted to fly and become a wind I had two hands and two feet exactly the same as them. // So they went to and from in front of my cabin, and from time to time a woman would break away from a group, lift imploring arms heavenwards, and cry in a high-pitched voice, ‘Be born, come down to change our fates.’ And hearing her *I’d have the strange feeling the she was throwing me a thread in the air, throwing a light, light thread toward my cabin, and then I’d be visited by a smile.*⁶⁷

In this quote, the women of the community clearly make efforts to reconnect Télumée,

grounding her to a spiritual position in the community. The calls towards the heavens, and pleas for a savior to be born, serve as a connecting force for Télumée. Their communal calls for hope from the savior extend to hope for Télumée. These spiritual calls signify both the communal need for salvation and, by extension, for Télumée to also be born anew. These female discussion groups on the side of the road serve as *makeshift houses* within the kinship web, throwing out lines of rescue to Télumée through their domestic ritual.⁶⁸ Their dialogue amongst themselves is directed at Télumée, as they proclaim her destiny on Christmas Day:

Puis s'adressant directement à moi, depuis l'autre cote de la route, la bonne Adriana lança d'une voix vibrante, pareille a un cri : Télumée, cher petit pays, reste bien dans tes herbes, tu n'as pas besoin de nous répondre aujourd'hui ; mais une seule chose que je voulais te dire, en ce jour de Noël, tu aborderas.

Then, addressing me directly from the other side of the road, the good Adriana said in a vibrant voice that was almost a cry: 'Télumée, dear little countrywoman, you stay in your grass, there's no need to answer us today. But one thing I wanted to tell you this Christmas day: you will come to shore.'⁶⁹

As if directing a lost boat to shore, this circle of women use their folk skills of orality to reclaim Télumée as they affirm her humanity and inform her of Queen's failing health. Because Télumée's crucial communal role--as a site of hope--the women become personally invested in rescuing Télumée from her emotional demise, ultimately functioning as a *saving force*. Because Télumée represented their highest aspirations, one can deduce that if they are able to save Télumée, they might also be able to save themselves from this fate of self-alienation. Schwarz-Bart's use of the web metaphor frames these communal relationships, emphasizing the interconnectedness of their fates.

Creative Agency in the Here and Now

Reciprocating the intervention by her community, Télumée formulates a challenge to the way that the blacks view their future, empowering them with a counter-narrative of retaining creative agency in the development of their lives. In this immediate post-slavery moment, the structures of domination seek to both define the value, and control the destiny of the black community. As a result of these imperial efforts, there exists a communal fear of, and basic uncertainty, towards the future. This fear is best captured through the words of Amboise stating, “[D]is-mois le frère, quel élan sauvera du couteau le cabri attaché dans la savane?... et nous gens souriaient et nous nous sentions pareils au cabri attaché dans la savane, et nous savions que la vérité de notre sort n’était pas en nous-mêmes mais dans l’existence de la lame.” “ ‘Tell me brother, what energy will save the tethered kid from the knife?’ And everyone smiled, and we felt we were like the kid tethered in the field, and we knew the truth of our fate was not in ourselves but in the existence of the blade”⁷⁰ The reality of this statement functions as an immobilizing factor in the lives of the black community. The members of the community, who have this belief, ultimately experience a feeling of helplessness in the face of a fatal future. Télumée intervenes into this particular manifestation of the colonial legacy, offering her community a means for reviving and retaining agency.

Although, Télumée recognizes the legitimacy of the communal fear of *the knife*, she functions as a *saving force* in the community because she chooses not to focus on the fatalistic nature of black life. Instead, Télumée incorporates Queen’s survival allegory and focuses on the present as a site where agency can be reclaimed and celebrated. This alternative focus on the unique process of living/surviving is clearly illustrated in

Téluée's meditations on her own future, expressing:

Toutes les rivières, même les plus éclatantes, celles qui prennent le soleil dans leur courant, toutes les rivières descendent dans la mer et se noient. Et la vie attend l'homme comme la mer attend la rivière. On peut prendre méandre sur méandres vous appartiennent mais la vie est là, patiente, sans commencement et sans fin, à vous attendre, pareille à l'océan // Et je réfléchissais, supputais toutes choses, me demandant quelles courbes, quels méandres, quels reflets seraient les miens tandis que je descendrais à l'océan.

All rivers, even the most dazzling, those that catch the sun in their streams, all rivers go down to and are drowned in the sea. And life awaits man as the sea awaits the river. You can make meander after meander, twist, turn, seep into the earth--*your meanders are your own affair*. But life is there, patient, without beginning or end, waiting for you, like the ocean./ And I pondered, calculated everything, wondering *what loops, meanders, and gleams would be mine on my way to the ocean*.⁷¹

This illuminating natural metaphor of life displays Téluée's spiritual investment in the process of her life, rather than the prescribed fatalism, as uncertainty becomes her ally.⁷²

Being able to conquer this fear can be seen as an empowering factor within an economy of domination. Because the future is less applicable to register black agency, the opportunity to fulfill one's aspirations is located in the present--in a guaranteed living consciousness. This gesture traces an African cosmological understanding of time, that has secondary concern of the future and concentrates on the past and the "Now-moment" or rather, the *Zamini* and the *Sasa* as African religious philosopher, John Mbiti names them.⁷³ Téluée particularly valorizes Mbiti's understanding of *Sasa*, which he defines as:

[A] complete or full time dimension, with its own short future, a dynamic present, and an experienced past. *Sasa* generally binds individuals and their immediate environment together. It is the period of conscious living. On the other hand, *Zamini* is the period of myth, giving a sense of foundation or security to the *Sasa* period; and binding together all created things, so that all things are embraced within the Macro-Time.⁷⁴

Télumée expresses this notion of *Now-time* in her articulation of what the immediate future holds for her. Her focus on the present is not devoid of a future but, rather, her perception of the future is implied in her valorization of the process of *conscious living*. The future becomes dependent on the present to be realized, and is therefore recognized as inherently malleable, with its uncertainty representing potential opportunity. The transformation of the fear of uncertainty into an opportunity to unveil human “splendor” is beautifully narrated in Télumée’s final resolutions:

Je songe à la Reine qui aimait dire, autrefois, sur un certain sourire...la vie est une mer sans escale, sans phare aucun..et les hommes sont des navires sans destinations... et ce disant elle se rengorgeait, toujours, comme éblouie par l’éclat du faste de ‘incertitude, humaine. Je me demande sil les gens supportent cette incertitude, cet éclat étincelant de la mort. Pourtant, malgré leur légèreté vis-à-vis d’elle, et quoi qu’ils fassent, dans quelque directions qu’ils se démènent, qu’ils hachent ou qu’ils coupent, suent dans les cannes, tiennent la position ou la relâchent, se perdent dans la nuit de la soucougnantise, il demeure autour d’eux une sort de panache, Ils vont et viennent, font et défont au cœur de l’incertitude, et leur faste s’ensuit.

I think of Queen Without a Name, who used to say long ago with a smile: 'Life is a sea without a port and without a lighthouse, and men are ships without a destination.' And she would always be breathless as she said this, as if dazzled by the splendor of human uncertainty. I wonder if people can bear this uncertainty, the sparkling brightness of death. But despite their frivolity about death, and whatever they do, in whatever direction they bustle, whether they chop or cut, sweat in the canefields, hold firm or abandon, or are lost in the night of the senses, there is still a sort of air, a panache, about them. They come and go, make and unmake, in the heart of uncertainty, and out of it all comes their splendor.⁷⁵

Télumée’s valorization of the process of living invites the immediate future into the realm of the *now* to be realized. This focus allows her to be spiritually invested in living her present life with an empowered agency, rather than experiencing an immobilization due to the fatal construction of an inevitable oppression. This view of life is expanded upon

throughout the text, functioning as a means of extending agency to the black community. The belief in the potential opportunity presented in uncertainty has transformative possibilities for her community that is burdened with fear.

The Migration of Home: Relocating the Roots of Tradition

The reader continues to witness T  lum  e's unique transformative role in her community through Schwarz-Bart's sophisticated narration of the relationship between T  lum  e and her grandmother's house. The house of Queen Without a Name serves multiple purposes throughout the text but its primary function is as a location where Queen fostered and taught T  lum  e her values and her knowledge of the black vernacular tradition. T  lum  e was raised in this house and indoctrinated into the oral tradition that helped to sustain her spiritual integrity throughout the novel. Queen's house is a site associated with the foundations of T  lum  e's knowledge; it becomes the spiritual space in which she receives both protection and guidance from her ancestor.

After Queen's death, the house can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of Queen's ancestral presence in T  lum  e's life. On her deathbed, Queen promises T  lum  e that her spiritual presence will always be felt, stating:

—Ce n'est pas ma mort qui me r  jouit tant, dit-elle, mais ce qui la suivra... le temps o   nous ne nous quitterons plus, mon petit verre en cristal...peux-tu imaginer notre vie, moi te suivant partout, invisible, sans que les gens se doutent jamais qu'ils ont affaire    deux femmes et non pas    une seule?

It's not death I'm so pleased about but what will come after. The time when we'll never leave each other again, my little crystal glass. Can you imagine our life, with me following you everywhere, invisible, and people never suspecting they have to deal with two women, not just one?"⁷⁶

Queen prepares T  lum  e for her spiritual transition into becoming an ancestor.

Prominent black social ethicist, Peter Paris addresses this supernatural state:

In the African worldview there is no death in the sense of radical separation from either the family or the tribal community. Rather, Africans believe that life is eternal and that its motion is not linear but cyclical. // Thus, to speak of such a process as death is a misnomer. Rather, departure from physical life marks a transition of the human spirit for the state of mortality to that of ancestral immortality.⁷⁷

Schwarz-Bart textually articulates an African world-view that recognizes the continuing relationship between the living and the dead. Through Télumée's physical relationship to the house, Queen's spiritual omnipresence is felt in her life. As Télumée moves from village to village throughout Guadeloupe, she takes Queen's cabin with her--literally taking her foundation/roots. Through a reference to a Caribbean-specific *chattel house* tradition Schwarz-Bart contextualizes the immediate post-slavery time period that she is addressing, when plantation workers created homes that could be moved because they did not own the land and by necessity needed to be mobile to accommodate their migrant work life.⁷⁸ With Télumée's entrance into this plantation culture, Queen's house takes on increased significance as her migrant spiritual presence is further evidenced in the text. Télumée acknowledges Queen's spiritual support in her new location as she states, "Depuis mon arrivée au morne La Folie, j'étais soutenue par la présence de Reine Sans Nom qui appuyait de moitié sur ma houe, étreignait de moitié mon coutelas, supportait de moitié chacune de mes peines de sorte que j'étais véritablement, grâce à elle, une négresse tambour à deux cœurs." "Ever since I'd come to La Folie I'd been supported by the presence of Queen Without a Name, who wielded half my hoe, held half my machete, and bore half my troubles, so that thanks to her I really was a Negress that was a drum with two hearts."⁷⁹ In Télumée's intricate journey through life, she carries with her one

constant element, the house of Queen Without a Name.

Télumée's retention of her ancestral foundation aids her in the different stages of development of her life. The house functions as a space to shelter Télumée in both a spiritual and a physical sense, fortifying the integrity of her identity throughout her journey. This house first served as a safe space for Télumée in her childhood when her mother abandoned her to follow a lover and she was left with her grandmother, Queen. Next, the house served as a classroom for Télumée's indoctrination into Queen's oral tradition of survival myths. Then, as Télumée matures, the house shifts into a refuge for Télumée when she moves in with her abusive husband, Elie. After Queen's death, the home takes on a different role for Télumée, primarily as a mobile site to comfort her in her grief and isolation just as it had been for Queen. Interpreting the house as an ancestral base for Télumée becomes a key to decoding her character.

Although Télumée lives most of her life alone in the house, this cabin becomes a metaphor for the *routedness* of the whole community. The continuity of this family's history could not be realized without the cooperation of the community. In the same manner that the community plays a strategic role in acknowledging Télumée's transformative abilities as *Télumée Miracle*, they also have an active role in helping her to sustain her connection with her ancestor. Although all of Télumée's moves are not narrated, the fact that she is a single woman who moves her cabin into four different communities, verifies the community's role in assisting her. The primary move from Fond-Zombi to La Folie is narrated as a community ritual:

Sur un coup de fouet l'attelage s'ébranla, la case de Reine Sans Nom se mit en route et traversa le village, suivie de tous ses autres biens terrestres, sa table, sa berceuse, ses deux paniers ronds emplis d'assiettes et de

casseroles, le tour porte en équilibre sur la tête des voisins qui m'accompagnaient. // La case déposée sur quatre roches, on but, on plaisanta, on décréta que j'étais une chanceuse et sur tout ce tapage destiné à cacher leur tristesse, les nègres de Fond-Zombi déboulèrent la côte du morne.

A crack of the whip and the team moved off, Queen Without a Name's cabin started out and went through the village, followed by all her other worldly goods--her table, her rocker, her two round baskets full of plates and saucepans, all balanced on the heads of the neighbors who were accompanying me. // Once the cabin was set up on four stones, everyone drank and joked and said how lucky I was, and after all this to-do, intended to hide their sadness, the Negroes of Fond-Zombi went off down the hillside.⁸⁰

This communal event indicates that Télumée not only benefits from taking her ancestral foundation with her but, also, from the spiritual affirmations of her community.

Therefore, regardless of her actual physical dislocation, Télumée avoids a spiritual loss because she is never disconnected from the community or her ancestor. As a forerunner to the immigrant experience, this gesture serves as a powerful statement of maintaining spiritual rootedness in the context of progress and/or change.

The link between the community and the house has other metaphoric implications in the text. The house becomes an embodiment of the interconnectedness between all of the communities of Guadeloupe. The movement of Queen's house reformulates the web kinship bond embracing the villages of Guadeloupe. It serves as a mobile center for the larger community, symbolically connecting the threads that create this island society. As stated earlier in this chapter, Queen Without a Name first informs Télumée of the interconnectedness of the villages, through her *web* metaphor. In the cabin's final resting place, La Ramee, it is literally the center of all of her former communities. In this central location, Télumée can relay the wisdom of her *living ancestor* role to all the communities

of Guadeloupe.⁸¹ This is illustrated in Télumée's satisfaction with the final location of the cabin, "La Ramée n'est pas La Ramée, il y a tout l'arrière pays dont elle est le cœur, Fond-Zombi, Dara, Valbadiane, La Roncière, le morne La Folie, de sorte que m'installant ici, le dos tourné à la mer, je fais encore face bien que de loin, à mes grands bois." "La Ramee is really not only La Ramee itself, but also the whole hinterland of which it is the heart--Fond-Zombi, Dara, Valbadiane, La Ronciere, La Folie--so that by settling here, with my back to the sea, I am still facing, even if only in the distance, my own great forest."⁸² Télumée and her cabin become a central core in Guadeloupe. Fulfilling her position in the community, she states that she is [U]niquement mon port d'âme, ma position de négresse que j'essaye de maintenir." "[O]nly trying to keep up my position as a Negress, *to keep up the way I carry my soul*."⁸³ Télumée maintains her connection to the community by empowering them with a legacy of spiritual survival.

Télumée's legacy of survival empowers each geographical move, engendering a metonymic understanding between her own endurance and the resilience of the whole race. As Télumée relates, "J'ai transporté ma case à l'orient et je l'ai transportée à l'occident, les vents d'est, du nord, les tempêtes m'ont assaillie et les averses m'ont délavée, mais je reste une femme sur mes deux pieds, et je sais que le nègre n'est pas une statue de sel que dissolvent les pluies." "I have moved my cabin to the east and to the west; east winds and north winds have buffeted and soaked me; but I am still a woman standing on my own two legs, and I know a Negro is not a statue of salt to be dissolved by the rain."⁸⁴ So Télumée experiences a *changing same*, but is never in a position of uprootedness; she literally takes her roots wherever she goes, avoiding a spiritual loss from dislocation.⁸⁵ Télumée is a continuation of the matriarchal trajectory started by her

great-grandmother Minerva. Télumée's addition to the Lougandor family trajectory consists of her own individual history of becoming *Télumée Miracle*, which is inextricably linked to her ancestors, as evidenced through mobilizing Queen's house. It is important to note here, that in Schwarz-Bart's characterization of Télumée as a progressive individual she always maintains this foundational connection to her ancestor.

The Road to Transcendence

In the novel, the path to transcendence is often fraught with detours of hard-learned lessons. One such instance is through the life lessons of Amboise, Elie's business partner and Télumée's second husband. Schwarz-Bart's characterization of Amboise reflects a journey that features marginality through multiple forms throughout the text. Toward the end of the novel, the reader is introduced to Amboise's history of marginalization. In his formative years, he spent time in prison and in France, which, in odd ways, were parallel experiences. These experiences impacted the way he viewed the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In prison, he learned self-hatred as he "avait fini par avoir le souffle coupé devant 'le noirceur' de son âme." "came to be horrified at the 'blackness' of his soul."⁸⁶ His time in prison inspired him to go and live in France for seven years where, immersed in his self-hatred, he learned another lesson about living in a system of domination:

Il avait eu beau aplatir ses cheveux, les séparer d'une raie sur le côté, acheter un complet et un chapeau, ouvrir les yeux tout grands pour recevoir la lumière, il marchait sous une avalanche de coups invisibles, dans la rue, à son travail, au restaurant, les gens ne voyaient pas tous ses efforts et qu'il lui fallait tout changer, tout remplacer, quelle pièce est bonne dans un nègre?

However much he straightened his hair, parted it on one side, bought a suit and a hat, he still went through an invisible avalanche of blows in the

street, at work, in restaurants. People didn't notice his efforts, didn't see that he had to change everything, for in a Negro what part is good?⁸⁷

As seen in this quote, Amboise learns that there was no way for an African descendant to fully integrate into the colonial system to become an equal. These two potent formative experiences lead him to cease his efforts at trying to live by external cultural rules, because there was no way to become acceptable. Furthermore, his inability to live amongst whites without violence led him to abandon a life of integration, and forced him to consciously seek the outskirts of society. As Télumée relates:

[I]l dit adieu à ses amis et s'enfonça jusqu'au plus profond des mornes de Guadeloupe, atteignit les contreforts de la montagne, loin des rues de la Pointe-à-Pitre, loin même des champs de cannes, loin de tout visage blanc. C'est ainsi qu'il devint scieur de long dans nos bois, à Fond-Zombi.

[H]e said goodbye to his friends and plunged into the farthest hills of Guadeloupe, reaching the foothills of the mountains, far from the streets of Pointe-à-Pitre, far even from the canefields, far from any white face. That was how he came to be a sawyer in our forest at Fond-Zombi.⁸⁸

Amboise resists the machine of colonialism, living in the woods and working off the land within the maroon tradition.⁸⁹ These multiple experiences of marginalization place Amboise in a position of occupying the margin of the margin, where he is bestowed with a special insight that became a valuable asset to the black communities of Guadeloupe.

Télumée describes his unique outsider perspective on black life:

Un étonnement calme et paisible devant la fantaisie du nègre, sa beauté de chose inachevée, en perpétuel jaillissement. Seul pouvait nous regarder ainsi un homme qui avait enjambé la mer, connu la tentation de se tenir à distance du pays, de le considérer avec des yeux étrangers, de le renier. Il disait que des mains ennemies s'étaient emparées de notre âme et l'avaient modelée afin qu'elle se dresse contre elle-même. Et maintenant les gens tendaient l'oreille, à cause de la façon dont il prononçait ces paroles, et certains même ouvraient de grands yeux, attentifs à saisir leurs vies en flottaison, vaguement éblouis.

[Amboise had a] peaceful astonishment at the Negro's vagaries, his beauty as of something unfinished, something perpetually springing into life. We could only be seen like this by one who had crossed the sea, and known the temptation of being far away from home, of looking at our country through foreign eyes, of denying it. He said enemy hands had got hold of our soul and shaped it to be at war with itself. And now people pricked up their ears and listened to him, because of the way he said all this, and some looked at him wide-eyed, vaguely dazzled, trying to see their wavering lives more clearly.⁹⁰

Given his transnational and prison experiences, Amboise serves as someone who can reflect the challenges of both internal and external alienation. Surviving both, he functions to clarify the relationship between the two forms of domination and to valorize the vernacular traditions that assist in navigating this treacherous spiritual terrain.

As he begins a relationship with Télumée, his presence continually engenders a reinsertion of the black vernacular traditions of survival. Schwarz-Bart's characterization of Amboise as a marginal figure in the text also serves to distinguish him as an alternative definition of manhood when compared to her characterization of Elie. As the two domestic partners to Télumée, they are distinct in their responses to the loss of economic agency. The reader is first introduced to Amboise as the older business partner to young Elie, as they work to make a living as sawyers outside of the colonial economic structures. As I stated earlier in this chapter, when Elie lost economic agency in his life, he became abusive in his inability to reconcile his definition of manhood within a system of domination. Contrary to Elie's response of abuse, Amboise joins Télumée in the sugarcane fields, protecting her from the dangers present in this colonial enterprise.

Télumée acknowledges this safety Amboise provides, stating:

Et en ces journées lumineuses, nul ne me dérespecta, comme il arrive, dans les cannes, car le sabre d'Amboise était mon ombrelle. Et puis un beau matin, l'homme déposa discrètement un paquet de ses cannes dans

mon lot de coupeuse, et je ne pus retenir mes larmes. Et son chant monta si haut ce matin-la que les commandeurs à cheval, dans le lointain, s'assurèrent de la présence d'une arme, sous les fontes de leurs selles.

And during those bright days none treated me with disrespect, as sometimes happens in the canefields, for Amboise's machete was my umbrella. And then one morning, he unobtrusively put a bundle of his canes in my heap, and I couldn't keep back my tears. And my singing soared so high that day that the overseers on horseback, some way away, made sure they had their guns in the holsters of their saddles.⁹¹

In this instance, Amboise enters into Télumée's life when she has lost all sense of her former identity. Télumée is empowered through Amboise's guardianship; he pieces her back together where Elie dismantled her. Furthermore, Amboise's protection of Télumée functions to reinsert the vernacular tradition into her life, as indicated by the song his actions inspire her to sing. As a marker of her reclaimed agency, Télumée's song inspires fear in the overseers as they witness the strength of her internal integrity. As Amboise returns to Télumée's life, he rescues Télumée from her despair with a song of transcendence.⁹² In contrast, when faced with the challenges of life in a system of domination, Elie loses his connection to the vernacular tradition.⁹³ Amboise's cultural maturity is implied as he uses folk traditions to overcome these same challenges.

When Télumée ultimately unites with Amboise in marriage, she surrenders to the power of black vernacular ritual to free her from her world of isolation. In the ritual drum circle, Télumée is reunited with her former community of Fond-Zombi which supports her in her new endeavor of marriage to Amboise. Télumée finds herself yielding to the call of the drum, as Amboise literally beckons her into the circle to reclaim the virtue of the vernacular traditions in her life. The power of this marriage ritual is worth quoting at length:

Je demeurai immobile devant le tambour. Les doigts d'Amboise bougeaient doucement sur la peau de cabri, semblant y chercher comme un signe, l'appel de mon poulx. Saisissant les deux pans de ma robe, je me mis à tourner comme une toupie détraquée, le dos courbé, les coudes relevés au-dessus des épaules, essayant vainement de parler des coups invisibles. Tout à coup, je sentis l'eau du tambour couler sur mon cœur et lui redonner vie, à petites notes humides, d'abord, puis à larges retombées qui m'ondoyaient et m'aspergeaient tandis que je tournais au milieu du cercle // et voici que mes mains s'ouvraient à la ronde, prenant les vies et les refaisant à ma guise, donnant le monde et n'étant rien, une simple spirale de fumée, accrochée dans l'air de la nuit, rien que les battements du tambour qui sortaient sous les mains d'Amboise, et cependant existant de toutes mes forces, de la racine des cheveux au petit orteil de mes pieds.

I [Télumée] stood motionless in front of the drum. Amboise's fingers tapped the goatskin lightly, as if looking for a sign, for the rhythm of my pulse. Seizing my skirt in either hand, I started to whirl like a top out of control, back hunched, elbows raised above my shoulders, *trying in vain to parry invisible blows*. Suddenly I felt the waters of the drum flow over my heart and give it life again, at first in a little damp notes, then in great falls that sprinkled and baptized me as I whirled in the middle of the circle. // *And now my hands were opening on all sides, taking lives and refashioning them as I pleased, giving the world and being nothing, a mere wisp of smoke hanging in the night air, the drumbeats issuing from beneath Amboise's hands, and yet existing with all my strength, from the roots of my hair right down to my little toes.*⁹⁴

During this rite of passage, Télumée combats the oppression of both internal alienation and external domination. As she attempts to avoid *invisible blows*, we are reminded of Amboise's lessons in the streets of France, as he navigated "an invisible avalanche of blows," sent his way by the colonizer.⁹⁵ As Télumée gets more engulfed in the ritual, she finds her creative agency in the rhythm of the drumbeat of Amboise--baptizing her anew, "taking lives and refashioning them as I pleased." In this moment of rebirth, Télumée's creative agency is not determined from her social status, but rather in her very existence, "giving the world and being nothing." Yet this sense of agency is embedded in a spiritual integrity that accepts every part of her being, "yet existing with all my strength, from the

roots of my hair right down to my little toes.”⁹⁶ This passage illuminates how Télumée is rescued from her spiritual death by the man who loves her and a communal folk ritual that validates her existence. Schwarz-Bart’s text employs these domestic rituals as transformative sites for the characters of the novel, functioning to both validate the local social order and as threshold moments of change.

It is in these ritual sites that the reader witnesses not only a change for the character, but also a change for the community at large. As Télumée expands to realize the inherent value of her personhood, regardless of her social and economic deficiencies, the community also expands to embrace both her and Amboise’s isolated identities. This is clear in the text as Télumée transcends her own identity to become bound within the larger communal identity:

Et la rivière coulait sur moi et je rebondissais, et c’était moi Adriana baissée et relevée moi Ismène, aux grands yeux contemplatifs, moi Olympe et les autres, man Cia en chien, Filao, Tac-Tac s’envolant devant son bambou et Laetitia avec petit visage étroit, et cet homme qu’autrefois j’avais couronné, aime, moi le tambour et les mains secourables d’Amboise, moi ses petits yeux de ramier aux aguets, pourchassé.

And the river flowed over me and I bounded and surged, and I was Adriana, down and up, and I was Ismene of the great pensive eyes, I was Olympia and the rest, Ma Cia in the shape of a dog, Filao, Tac-Tac taking off with his bamboo, and Letitia with her little narrow face, and the man I had once loved and crowned, I was the drum and Amboise’s helping hands, I his little hunted watchful dove’s eyes.⁹⁷

The symbolism of Télumée in the center of the ritual circle, transforming into the members of the various communities that she has been a part of, speaks volumes as to the relationship between her and the larger community. This moment of symbiosis between Télumée and the community takes place with both her allies and enemies, from both Fond-Zombi and The Brotherhood of the Displaced. In the text, these two locations are

significant because they represent both the center and the periphery of the black communities of Guadeloupe, respectively. During this ritual symbiosis, Télumée bridges these two perspectives of the black community and, likewise, these communities have come together to empower Télumée with their blessings and support. Télumée's personal battle with her internal and external oppression prepares her to address the communal issues in the larger social structure.

She attempts to address larger communal issues when she invites Angel Medard or, as the villagers called him "l'Homme à la cervelle qui danse" "the man with the dancing brain,"⁹⁸ into her life. Angel was a man with a physical (and possibly mental) disability which the community translated into evilness. Télumée saw past this disability and the harassment of the community to reach out to him in a public moment of marginalized identification, suggesting, "[V]ous m'avez bien mal regardée savez-vous ?... et avez-vous jamais remarqué que moi aussi, j'ai la cervelle qui danse ?" " 'You haven't ever looked at me properly, do you know that? Haven't you ever noticed I've got a dancing brain too?' "⁹⁹ Her invitation of mutual identification lead to him moving in with Télumée and her foster daughter Sonore, while the community feared her desire "pêcher en eau trouble, alors qu'il y avait tant de fonds clairs et transparents?" "to go fishing in those troubled waters, when there were so many that were clear and limpid?"¹⁰⁰ Eventually, Angel betrayed Télumée by kidnapping her beloved foster child Sonore, and sending her to the commune of Vieux-Habitants where Télumée was never to see her again. Télumée prepared herself for a defense against Angel returning to her home and when he attempted to attack her, it resulted in him fatally impaling his head on a table. Télumée's survival of this attack, and her ironic response to nurture him as he slowly

died, changed her in the eyes of her community, as they stated: “[C]hère femme, l’ange Médard a vécu en chien et tu l’a fait mourir en homme...// quant à nous, désormais, nous t’appellerons : Télumée Miracle...” “ ‘Télumée, dear, Angel Medard lived like a dog and you made him die like a man.// So as for us, henceforth we shall call you Télumée Miracle.’ ”¹⁰¹ Abena Busia discusses the ritual of naming in African communities that is used throughout the text, “This communal naming, an honour bestowed in many African communities, is an accolade of acceptance.”¹⁰² Télumée’s communal road to transcendence and acceptance comes from her ability to provide a bridge to the marginalized identities in the community, further serving as a role model of survival and expanding the parameters of the community.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the novel *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle* (*The Bridge of Beyond*) exemplifies different methods of increasing mental health and agency within oppression. In a world where the history of oppression will never stop recreating itself in the minds of the oppressed, these tools become increasingly more applicable in any contemporary setting. Poignantly, Schwarz-Bart writes this novel during a transitional time period--the early 1970’s--when the social movements of the Black Cultural Nationalism, Antilliane¹⁰³ and Feminism have marginalized black women. Moreover, she writes the novel about a transitional time period, at the turn of the twentieth century, when African descendants in the Americas had to initially assert their humanity in order to attain any agency. In this context, the significance of the vernacular principals asserted in the text have a global literary significance. Judylyn Ryan discusses these types of historical gestures in her article *Diaspora Literature*; she indicates the focus on the

“affirmative and culturally nuanced voice” of representation, stating:

To the extent that empowerment through affirmation of identity is the primary objective motivating this quest, there is a progressive detailing and assertion of first human identity, followed by an emphasis on cultural/racial identity, that leads to an embrace of other dimensions of identity, including nationality, class, gender, spirituality, etc.¹⁰⁴

One could assert that Schwarz-Bart’s reflective posture, in and of itself, creates a comparative analysis between these two significant moments of *negotiation within systems of domination*—on both an inter-cultural and an intra-cultural level. In my reading of *Téluée* as a saving force in Schwarz-Bart’s project of social transformation, there are three ideological arguments that I hope have been illuminated in the development of this chapter.

First, is a relativist’s argument of registering value. In the text, *Téluée* must recognize her internal self-worth in order to avoid internalization of externally relegated judgments. This method not only allows her to transcend her oppression, but it also creates a space for understanding and acknowledging different systems of creating value and meaning. Her gesture demands an inquiry into the cultural, spiritual, and/or historical principals that are fundamental to the ideological foundation of her internal system of value—as illustrated in her engagement with the black vernacular rituals and traditions of survival. This idea ultimately functions to validate the subjective consciousness as an empowering element in understanding how people define themselves within different cultural paradigms. As seen in the text, *Téluée* is able to integrate the folk knowledge that teaches her behavioral dispositions that prepare her for encounters within systems of domination while also giving her the tools to maintain her spiritual integrity and an internal recognition of self-worth. These elements of the black vernacular tradition that

were passed onto Télumée serve to create an alternative economy as a method of transcending the results of oppression.

Second, is the ability to identify potential opportunity and creative agency in static systems of domination. Télumée exemplifies this in her spiritual investment through her unique process of living and in her belief of the opportunity that lies in the unknown. This presents an alternative for anyone living without self-determination, where the fear of uncertainty can be an immobilizing factor. Télumée's belief in the potential of uncertainty, and its inherent malleability, gives access to agency rather than removing agency from the subject. Conviction in the power to manipulate one's uncertain destiny functions outside of social paradigms of domination to embrace the reality of conscious living. Recognizing that uncertainty can be an ally when one valorizes the present moment as the location to register agency generates the possibility of control or, at the very least, malleability of circumstance.

Third, is the ability to create new possibilities from historical traditions. Télumée's unique simultaneous retention of a spiritual rootedness in the midst of her personal progression in life--in the moving cabin--deconstructs the binaries. Her example frees us from the mutually exclusive binary between innovation or tradition, allowing one to incorporate these mutually imbricated categories into new options that are both rooted and routed. The significance of this gesture in a New World setting is potent. In the western view, a moving house is traditionally conceived of as a tragedy, it represents a complete destabilization of the domestic, which is based on fixity. In the U.S., even mobile homes are rooted in particular locales—rarely actually becoming mobile. The western significance of a moving house is inverted in Schwarz-Bart's text. In her

inversion, she addresses the issues of the African Diaspora--specifically the negotiations between dislocation and rootedness. As African descendents struggle to recover from the dislocation of the middle passage and seek to re-root themselves in the soil of the New World, Télumée's claim to the cabin of her grandmother signifies a conscious refusal to be spiritually or culturally uprooted. This gesture serves as a powerful statement of maintaining spiritual rootedness in the context of progress and/or change.

Télumée's moving house exemplifies an understanding of the spiritual imbalance that can be caused by losing the ancestor. Toni Morrison best elucidates the magnitude of the connection to the ancestor in an analysis of her own writing, asserting, "[If] we don't keep in touch with the ancestor that we are, in fact, lost. / When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection."¹⁰⁵ Télumée exemplifies Morrison's conscious historical connection. Télumée's moving house offers a link between the past, the present and the future. It engenders a new understanding of the implications that each generation has on the other, making them necessarily dependent on each other. The construction of her own autonomy is based on the reciprocity of her communal connections. Schwarz-Bart presents a model of success for the African descendant in the West in her illustration that the ability to proceed is predicated on the ability to look back to recognize and utilize the cultural resources that are necessary to improve the survival.

Simone Schwarz-Bart's intricate characterization of the women in *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle* is a monument to methods of survival as the title implies. While the text creates a specific model of personal transformation, it also refuses to limit access to

this mastery of personal transformation to fictionalized heroines. Télumée is strategically characterized as an ordinary woman who often loses her way on the path to survival and contentment. Many times in the text, Télumée is actually the beneficiary of the saving forces working throughout her community. Correspondingly, even within Télumée's role as a *saving force*, her talent lies in recognizing the brilliance of the ordinary. In Schwarz-Bart's narration of Télumée's journey to selfhood, she removes the choice between individual or communal valorization to elect both simultaneously, supplying the maximum support possible for both social entities and resulting in a more inclusive view of social relations.

Although the novel is often romantic in its imagery and illustration of black vernacular traditions, Schwarz-Bart doesn't fall into the trap of romanticizing the power of folk traditions. Ultimately, there are limits to the effectiveness of vernacular traditions within systems of domination. Télumée does not overturn the economic system of domination but she does survive them through her use of vernacular traditions. Schwarz-Bart strategically employs these myths and rituals to combat internal alienation, if not external domination. Although *Pluie et Vent* epitomizes Higginbotham's analysis of women as a saving force, it does so in a manner that does not exclude the general community from direct access to creating personal and communal change. The elements in the text that empower Télumée as a saving force are not her supernatural powers, but rather her recognition of her cultural resources. This recognition guarantees her survival and engenders all to seek out those cultural, historical and social resources that enable one to succeed on the path of personal and communal survival. *Pluie et Vent* creates a counter-narrative of self-empowerment through communal structures, creating a

transformative possibility for all people who desire transcendence of internal oppression.

Chapter 4 Notes

¹ All quotes are from the original French: Simone Schwarz-Bart *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972) 175. English version will be in brackets in the endnotes. *The Bridge of Beyond* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1982) [119]. (emphasis mine).

² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1993) 121.

³ Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 80. Levine addresses how folk magic and religion allowed African descendants a new source of power and protection, while preventing them from internalizing their slavery.

⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Book in an anthology); *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1997) 615.

⁵ Du Bois, 613-740. Du Bois clearly privileges the black vernacular tradition in *The Souls of Black Folk*, his most famous book, he begins each chapter with a verse from the African American slave spirituals and ends the book with a chapter on the *Sorrow Songs* calling these spirituals “the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.”

⁶ Schwarz-Bart 88. [57] (emphasis mine).

⁷ Schwarz-Bart 88. [57] English translation doesn't include the *one* having a limp.

⁸ Schwarz-Bart 88. [57]

⁹ Schwarz-Bart 93. [61]

¹⁰ Schwarz-Bart 93. [61]

¹¹ Schwarz-Bart 88. [57-58]

¹² Schwarz-Bart 62. [39]

¹³ Schwarz-Bart 94. [61-62] (emphasis mine).

¹⁴ Beverley Ormerod, *An Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel* (London: Heinemann, 1985) 121. Ormerod speaks about this as a variant of the sea/river imagery used in the context of Queen's survival tactics.

¹⁵ Schwarz-Bart 93. [61]

¹⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, First Perennial Library Edition, 1990) 2-3.

¹⁷ Du Bois 615. In anthology.

¹⁸ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964) 55. Ellison discusses the use of the mask for Negro literary characters, stating, "Very often, however, the Negro's masking is motivated not so much by fear as by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity.// [S]ometimes to challenge those who presume, across the psychological distance created by race manners, to know his identity."

¹⁹ Lee A. Wright, *Identity, Family, and Folklore in African American Literature* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995) xi.

²⁰ Schwarz-Bart 76. [48] (emphasis mine).

²¹ Schwarz-Bart 76. [49]

²² Schwarz-Bart 76. [48]

²³ Hans Mol, *Identity and the Sacred: A Sketch for a New Social Scientific Theory of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1976).

²⁴ Kimberly Rae Conner, *Conversions and Visions in the Writings of African-American Women* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994) 4.

²⁵ Abena P.A. Busia. "This Gift of Metaphor. Symbolic Strategies and the Triumph of Survival in Simone Schwarz-Bart's *The Bridge of Beyond*," *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, eds. (New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 1990) 290.

²⁶ Schwarz-Bart 78. [50]

²⁷ Schwarz-Bart 78. [50]

²⁸ Schwarz-Bart 79. [50-51] (emphasis mine).

²⁹ Schwarz-Bart 183. [125]

³⁰ Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 12. Raboteau extensively covers the manifestations of African religious/spiritual practices in the Americas. “It is believed that, as custodians of custom and law, the ancestors have the power to intervene in present affairs and, moreover, to grant fertility and health to their descendants, for whom they mediate with the gods.”

³¹ Raboteau 286.

³² Schwarz-Bart 54-55. [33]

³³ Schwarz-Bart 56. [34]

³⁴ Mavis C. Cambell, “Maroons of the Caribbean.” Report on the Americas, Vol. 25, 1992 *Questia*. <<http://www.questia.com/Index.jsp>>.

³⁵ James A. Arnold, “The Gendering of Créolité: the Erotics of Colonialism.” *Penser la Créolité*, Maryse Condé et Madeleine Cottenet-Hage, eds. (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1995) 29.

³⁶ Levine 63.

³⁷ Raboteau, 284. “The prevalence of the idea that conjure was African in origin, and that Africans were especially powerful conjurers indicates that slaves thought of hoodoo as their own separate tradition.”

³⁸ Schwarz-Bart 190. [130]

³⁹ Schwarz-Bart 226. [156-157]

⁴⁰ Schwarz-Bart 159. Here witchcraft as defined by the character, as the ability to communicate with the spirits. When Télumée refuse to take part in this, locals accused her of “paralyzing people’s wills and stealing the fruit of their cows’ bellies.”

⁴¹ Schwarz-Bart 244. [169]

⁴² Schwarz-Bart 83-84. [54]

⁴³ Schwarz-Bart 90. During Elie’s time of economic prosperity he ritually sang the Monsieur Durancinee song that celebrated the abundance of work he had:

A day’s work Monsieur Durancinee
A day’s work
What a long day Monsieur Durancinee
What a fine day
A day’s work Monsieur Durancinee

⁴⁴ Schwarz-Bart 145. [98]

⁴⁵ Schwarz-Bart. [101]

⁴⁶ Schwarz-Bart 147. [100]

⁴⁷ Schwarz-Bart 147. [100]

⁴⁸ Schwarz-Bart 195. [133]

⁴⁹ Schwarz-Bart 200. [137]

⁵⁰ Schwarz-Bart 205. [141]

⁵¹ Schwarz-Bart. [119]

⁵² Schwarz-Bart 186. [127-128]

⁵³ Schwarz-Bart 203. [139]

⁵⁴ Schwarz-Bart 204. [140]

⁵⁵ Schwarz-Bart 123. [81-82]

⁵⁶ Schwarz-Bart [80-82]. Text describes the house-blessing ritual and the roles of Abel, Queen and the community in the ritual.

⁵⁷ Schwarz-Bart 66. [41] (emphasis mine).

⁵⁸ Schwarz-Bart [10-11]. The text illustrates that Queen's "two-room house, their wooden veranda, their slatted shutters, and their bed with three mattresses and red borders" initially created bitterness within the impoverished community, accusing them of acting white.

⁵⁹ Schwarz-Bart. [14]

⁶⁰ Although Télumée and Elie never are married in the civic sense of being recognized by the government, for all intents and purposes they are married, because their own community's recognition of their union.

⁶¹ Schwarz-Bart 121. [80] (emphasis mine).

⁶² Schwarz-Bart 127-128. [84-85] (emphasis mine).

⁶³ Schwarz-Bart 128. [85]

⁶⁴ Schwarz-Bart 125. [83] (emphasis mine).

⁶⁵ Schwarz-Bart 131. [87-88] (emphasis mine).

⁶⁶ Schwarz-Bart [104].

⁶⁷ Schwarz-Bart 160-161. [109-110] (emphasis mine).

⁶⁸ Schwarz-Bart [110]. The text bears this out in its description of the women's circles, "They squatted on their heels in a circle, bolt upright, just as if they were in a house..."

⁶⁹ Schwarz-Bart 163. [111]

⁷⁰ Schwarz-Bart 219. [152]

⁷¹ Schwarz-Bart 81-82. [52] (emphasis mine).

⁷² Schwarz-Bart [127]. When Télumée moves to La Folie alone, she states this.

⁷³ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1969) 21 and 23.

⁷⁴ Mbiti 28-29.

⁷⁵ Schwarz-Bart 247-248. [172]

⁷⁶ Schwarz-Bart 174-175. [119]

⁷⁷ Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 52.

⁷⁸ Gilbert Kodilinye, *Commonwealth Caribbean Property Law* (Cavendish: Routledge, 2005) 8.

⁷⁹ Schwarz-Bart 195. [133]

⁸⁰ Schwarz-Bart 185. [126-127]

⁸¹ Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: Ancestor as Foundation." Maria Evans, ed. *Black Women Writers (1950-1980) A Critical Evaluation* (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 343. I use Morrison's definition of ancestor that is inclusive of the living: "[These] ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the

characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom.”

⁸² Schwarz-Bart 242. [168]

⁸³ Schwarz-Bart 243. [168] (emphasis mine).

⁸⁴ Schwarz-Bart 248. [172]

⁸⁵ Amiri Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, William J. Harris, ed. (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1991) 186. “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)” 1966.

⁸⁶ Schwarz-Bart 215. [149]

⁸⁷ Schwarz-Bart 216. [150]

⁸⁸ Schwarz-Bart 217. [151]

⁸⁹ Nicholas J. Saunders, *The Peoples of the Caribbean: An Encyclopedia of Archaeology and Traditional Culture* (ABC-CLIO, 2005) 174.

⁹⁰ Schwarz-Bart 219. [152]

⁹¹ Schwarz-Bart 205. [141] (emphasis mine).

⁹² I address Amboise’s rescue of Télumée through song, in the Bitter Sugar section of chapter four.

⁹³ I address Elie’s abandonment of the vernacular tradition in the Bitter Sugar section of chapter four.

⁹⁴ Schwarz-Bart 210-211. [145-146] (emphasis mine).

⁹⁵ Schwarz-Bart [150]. Amboise in the streets of France.

⁹⁶ Schwarz-Bart 210-211. [145-146]

⁹⁷ Schwarz-Bart 210. [145]

⁹⁸ Schwarz-Bart 230. [160]

⁹⁹ Schwarz-Bart 232. [161]

¹⁰⁰ Schwarz-Bart 232. [161]

¹⁰¹ Schwarz-Bart 239. [166]

¹⁰² Abena P.A. Busia. "This Gift of Metaphor: Symbolic Strategies and the Triumph of Survival in Simone Schwarz-Bart's *The Bridge of Beyond*," *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, eds. (New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc. 1990) 293.

¹⁰³ Caribbean writers began to criticize the movements of Negritude, Antillanite, and Creolite for their suppression of women writers (Arnold 1994, Condé 1995, Vergés 1995, Pineau 1995). Françoise Lionnet, "Introduction: The Politics and Aesthetics of Métissage," *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self Portraiture, Reading Women Writing* (Ithica: Cornell University Press) 1-29. Clarisse Zimra, "Patterns of Liberation in Contemporary Women Writers," *L'esprit Créateur* 17.2 (Summer, 1977) 103-14. James A. Arnold, "The Gendering of Créolité: the Erotics of Colonialism," *Penser la Créolité*, Maryse Condé et Madeleine Cottenet-Hage, eds. (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1995) 21-40.

¹⁰⁴ Judylyn S. Ryan, "Diaspora Literature." (Judylyn Ryan (self-published), 1996) 4-5. Ryan's analysis traces the inception of the African Diasporic literary tradition through the different historical movements.

¹⁰⁵ Morrison 344.

Conclusion: The Diversity of Tradition

Novels like *Praisesong for the Widow*, *Song of Solomon* and *Pluie et Vent sur Têlummée Miracle*, created the scaffolding for black feminist theory and Womanist¹ creative practices. This resulted in ultimately bearing out Barbara Christian's claim in her essay, "Race for Theory":

For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking.²

In this quote, Christian points out those elements of black vernacular traditions, including riddles and proverbs, are also part of black feminist theory. Throughout this dissertation, I have illustrated how Schwarz-Bart, Morrison and Marshall are all creating theory through their creative narratives by employing black vernacular traditions. Their theories were created before black women's literature was seen as a subject worthy of serious critical inquiry. As such, their literature responds to and revises the cultural and social debates of the time period. To discuss this time period, I will use Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown's term "critical-aesthetic context,"³ in which she uses this term to articulate the ideological and aesthetic environment created by the Black Arts Movement, black cultural nationalism and the Black Aesthetic. To this context, I would add Second Wave Feminism as a concurrent factor in this period's ideological and aesthetic environment. These three novels embody a formalized response to the critical-aesthetic context of the sixties and seventies.

The very titles of the novels serve as a foundational premise, asserting the primacy of folk traditions in each text. *Praisesong for the Widow* indicates a traditional form of African oral literature. A *praisesong*, as laudatory performance, has its roots in the African spiritual tradition of *griots*, those who maintain the oral history of families and communities through storytelling and songs. Marshall's signifying of this oral tradition in her title contextualizes the work of the novel; the protagonist Avey, after the death of her husband, reconnects to her cultural ancestry through the oral tradition that was passed onto her. The title of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* also signifies the oral tradition of storytelling, as it echoes the myth of the Flying Africans through the blues song of Pilate. This title does so while simultaneously gesturing toward the Christian biblical tradition in both the title and the naming of several characters, most significantly, the folk heroine Pilate—named after Pontius Pilate, famous for giving the order for Jesus' crucifixion. These biblical allusions not only create a subtext to the novel, but also establish the circumstances of this naming, as Morrison relates the situation of Pilate's naming in the text:

How his father, confused and melancholy over his wife's death in childbirth, had thumbed through the Bible, *and since he could not read a word*, chose a group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome: saw in them a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees.⁴

Morrison places the reader in the context of Reconstruction, where the illiteracy of Pilate's father becomes the background to understand her naming; throughout the text the practice of naming works on multiple levels.⁵ In Schwarz-Bart's novel, the title in both English and French relate to two different aspects of the author's objectives. In French, the title *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle* (Rain and Wind on Telumee Miracle)

indicates her role as modeling survival for the larger community. While the English title *Bridge of Beyond*, speaks to the bridge that Queen and Télumée crossed over when Queen brought Télumée home to raise her. In the text, *Beyond* indicates the spiritual and supernatural context of the text, as the communities of Fond-Zombi are described as,

De-ci de-là apparaissaient des cases appuyées les une contre les autres, autour de la cour commune, ou bien se tassant sur leur propre solitude, livrées à elles-mêmes, au mystère des bois, aux esprits, à la grâce de Dieu... La case de Reine Sans Nom était la dernière du village, elle terminait le monde des humains et semblait adossée à la montagne.

Little houses could be seen scattered about, either huddled together around a common yard or closed in on their own solitude, given over to themselves, to the mystery of the forest, to spirits, and to the grace of God. Queen Without a Name's cabin was the last in the village: it marked the end of the world of human beings and looked as if it were leaning against the mountain.⁶

The primacy of this spiritual and communal connection is seen in both the English and French versions of the novel. In the titles of these three texts, the reader witnesses the authors staking off the vernacular terrain from the outset of the novels; this is both their method of theoretical engagement and their message.

During the late seventies and early eighties, the novels of Morrison, Schwarz-Bart and Marshall were not the only sites where these vernacular methods and messages took place. There was a boom in black women's writing during this time period, in both the U.S. and Caribbean. Writers such as Alice Walker, who wrote *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1974) and Audre Lourde's biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), mapped out a new way of viewing black women's creative arts and their employment of vernacular methods to tell their own stories. Meanwhile, Gale Jones inserted the blues folk tradition as both a strategy of escape and

as evidence of the legacy of slavery in *Corregidora* (1975) and the African American folkloric tradition and oral idiom in *Eva's Man* (1976).

The late seventies through the eighties was a renaissance of sorts in the Caribbean for women writers. Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid was writing stories as early as 1978, which would become *At the Bottom of the River*, a collection that is haunted by the presence of Caribbean vernacular traditions through a distinctly female voice and perspective. This gendered folk voice most clearly pierces through in the first story, "Girl," setting a tone for the whole collection. There is also a diatribe, in the structure of a stream of consciousness--one mother's judgmental voice passing on domestic and folk knowledge to her daughter. Kincaid's rhythmic poetics are worth quoting at length:

This is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don't like, and that way something bad won't fall on you; this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man, and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up...⁷

Kincaid's prolific literary career is partially based on the intimate relationships of her characters and the weaving of Caribbean spiritual beliefs and folklore into her craft.

In 1980, Jamaican novelist, sociologist and Rastafarian, Erna Brodber was writing about navigating exterior formulations of womanhood in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*. The title of this story--a song based on a children's circle game--dictates the folk themes of the novel and oral structure. The reader is also introduced to the gendered folk symbol of the *kumbla*:

It is the egg of the August worm. It does not crack if it is hit. It is as pliable as sail cloth. Your kumbla will not open unless you rip its seams open. It is a round seamless calabash that protects you without caring. // You can see both in and out. You hear them. They can hear you. They

can touch you. You can touch them. But they cannot handle you. And inside is soft carpeted foam, like the womb and with an oxygen tent. Safe, protective time capsule.⁸ // But the trouble with the kumbla is the getting out to the kumbla. It is a protective device. If you dwell too long in it, it makes you delicate. Makes you an albino: skin white but not by genes.⁹

This idea of the kumbla captured the hearts and minds of many black feminist writers and critics and became a complex symbol for both the protective and confining strategies that black women used to navigate systems of domination.¹⁰ Brodber goes even further in her commitment to black vernacular traditions in her novel *Myal*, where the whole novel is devoted to the spiritual dilemma of blacks in colonial Jamaica and the U.S.--dramatizing the cultural disruptions in the African diaspora created by slavery and colonialism.

Another Jamaican novelist writing during the eighties was Michelle Cliff with her semi-autobiographical novel *Abeng* (1984) and *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), where she intertwines her personal history with that of the infamous maroon and obeah-woman, Nanny, “[W]ho could catch a bullet between her buttocks and render the bullet harmless, was from the empire of Ashanti and carried the secrets of her magic into slavery.”¹¹ In 1986, Guadeloupian novelist, playwright and critic Maryse Condé began reimagining the story of a historical black conjure woman in Puritanical New England and in Barbados in her evocative novel *Moi, Tituba, Sorcière Noire de Salem* (*I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*). This novel gives voice to the gendered reality of black vernacular traditions while critiquing the realities of imperialist and patriarchal discourses. All of these writers, and many others, opened the doors for female novelists by using black vernacular traditions for a variety of objectives ranging from being a tool for cultural solidarity and political struggle, as well as to gesture towards a philosophical system of beliefs and a metaphysical understanding, to navigating women’s experiences of “Intersectionality.”¹²

However, Schwarz-Bart, Morrison and Marshall stand out of the crowd as distinctly in conversation with each other, before there were models of their engagement with the folk traditions and in direct response to the critical aesthetic context that they were writing within. These three women novelists were harbingers of the current debates within feminism, regarding how women of color and women from developing nations navigate the “*matrix of domination*.”¹³ Feminist writers such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Angela Davis, Jacqui Alexander, Barbara Smith, Merle Woo, Patricia Hill Collins, Cherly Clare, Alice Walker, Nellie Wong and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have worked to challenge the imperial, capitalist, racist, heterosexist and classed aspects of U.S./Eurocentric Feminist theories for women of color. The effort to create strategic coalitions across a multitude of differences becomes the active political goal of many contemporary feminist thinkers. Morrison, Marshall and Schwarz-Bart give narrative voice to these ideas of unity in difference. As these women authors stress continuity and change as the dialectic that they speak from, they create a folk paradigm that incorporates social progress into specific cultural traditions. These literary efforts create a space within feminist discourse that accommodates the issues of women of color and women from developing nations.

In Morrison, Schwarz-Bart and Marshall’s literary compositions of diverse black identities only being fully revealed through black vernacular traditions, they served as forerunners to shape the current discourse regarding African diasporic identity formation. In contemporary discourse, black vernacular traditions have been deployed into the global political sphere by such critical theorists as Paul Gilroy and his engagement with “the vexed matter of black particularity.”¹⁴ In his own theoretical apparatus of the *Black*

Atlantic, he discerns both the connectedness and hybridity of the cultures of the African diaspora. Within his global articulation, he looks at different cultural, spiritual and linguistic nodes of affiliation based in both urban and folk black vernacular traditions. Likewise, the contemporary Caribbean literary movement of Créolité takes as its premise a valorization of diversity, as it defines itself as, “[E]xprimer une totalité kaléidoscopique, c’est-à-dire la conscience non totalitaire d’une diversité préservée.” “[E]xpressing a kaleidoscopic totality, that is to say: the nontotalitarian consciousness of a preserved diversity.”¹⁵ That diversity is claimed from the purview of an *interior vision*¹⁶ that demands itself as subject and privileges orality as its chosen mode of expression. This is clearly illustrated in the manifesto *Éloge de la Créolité/In Praise of Creoleness*, as it states:

Pourvoyeuse de contes, proverbes, « titim », comptines, chansons..., etc.,
l’oralité est notre intelligence, elle est notre lecture de ce monde, //
L’oralité créole, même contrariée dans son expression esthétique, recèle
un système de contre-valeurs, une contre-culture;

Provider of tales, proverbs, ‘titim’, nursery rhymes, songs, etc., orality is
our intelligence; it is our reading of this world, // Creole orality, even
repressed in its aesthetic expression, contains a whole system of
countervales, a counterculture;¹⁷

As these current debates deploy the tools of black vernacular traditions as the theoretical start-points in navigating individual and communal identity constructions, the works of Morrison, Schwarz-Bart and Marshall reverberate throughout current discourse.

When read together, the novels of Morrison, Schwarz-Bart and Marshall create a literary testament to the theoretical value of black women’s literature in the fight for social justice. Writing during a time period when the novel had fallen out of favor as a form of cultural expression for black writers, these women reclaimed the novel as a

repository of historical, cultural and survival methodologies. These novelists formed an early testimony to Morrison's assertion that,

[T]he novel is needed by African-Americans now in a way that it was not needed before-- // We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago.¹⁸

To employ vernacular symbols, structures and forms within a non-vernacular structure such as the novel proves to be a successful strategy for these writers. Black vernacular tradition in the hands of these authors plays the same instructive role as it has for centuries, but it also has the flexibility to incorporate the diversity of voices and issues from the *Black Atlantic*¹⁹ for centuries to come.

Conclusion Notes

¹ I use Alice Walker's term "Womanist" to denote the artistic articulation of a black feminist perspective.

² Barbara Christian, "Race for Theory," *The Black Feminist Reader*, Joy Jams and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, eds. (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000) 12.

³ Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown, *Crossing Borders Through Folklore: African American Women's Fiction and Art* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1999) 21.

⁴ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Vintage International, 1977) 18. (emphasis mine).

⁵ Many critics, including Morrison herself, have written extensively about the significance of naming in this novel, but this is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

⁶ Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972) 47.

⁷ Jamaica Kincaid, *At the Bottom of the River* (New York: Penguin Group, 1978) 5.

⁸ Erna Brodber, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (London: New Beacon Books, 1980) 123.

⁹ Brodber 130.

¹⁰ For more on the multivalent aspects of the folk symbols in Brodber's novel consult: Carolyn Cooper, "Afro-Jamaican Folk Elements in Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*," in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, Carole Boyce Davies and Elain Savory Fido, eds. (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1990) 279-281. Also consult Michael Niblett's "Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Caribbean Literary Field: Crossing boundaries in Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*," in *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, 2 (2008): 8. <<http://sta.uwi.edu/crgs/september2008/journals/MichaelNiblett.pdf>>.

¹¹ Michelle Cliff, *Abeng* (New York: Plume, 1984) 14.

¹² Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," in *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, Martha Albertson Fineman and Rixanne Mykitiuk, eds. (New York:

Routledge, 1994) 93-118. Crenshaw uses this term to denote the various ways race and gender intersect to circumscribe the lives of women of color.

¹³ Patricia Hill Collins uses this term, *matrix of domination*, to discuss how racism, sexism and classism are synchronized in systems of oppression in *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) 80.

¹⁵ Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la Créolité/In Praise of Creoleness* (John Hopkins University Press, 1990) 28 [89].

¹⁶ Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, [87]. Creolite posits an interior vision as mandatory for the “unconditional acceptance” of the diversity within and to reach a holistic sense of identity.

¹⁷ Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, 33-34, [95].

¹⁸ Toni Morrison, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, Mari Evans, ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1984) 340.

¹⁹ Gilroy uses this term as a theoretical framework for looking at the intercultural and transnational formation of black cultures.

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- 1991 University of Colorado--Boulder, English Literature, B.A.,

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- 2004-2007 Director of Diversity Education and Community Partner Liaison Peace & Diversity Academy.
- 2000-2003 NY Regional Project Coordinator, Early Childhood Education Programs, Anti-Defamation League (ADL).
- 2000, 2001 Teaching Assistant, Rutgers University, Comparative Literature
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