THE SPACE OF THE SOUTH AND SELF-
DEFINITION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN
RETURN MIGRATION NOVELS OF THE POST-
CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

A Dissertation

presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

SHELLI ELIZABETH HOMER

Dr. Christopher N. Okonkwo, Dissertation Supervisor

MAY 2014

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the graduate School, have examined the
dissertation entitled

THE SPACE OF THE SOUTH AND SELF-DEFINITION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN
RETURN MIGRATION NOVELS OF THE POST-CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

presented by Shelli Elizabeth Homer,

a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Christopher N. Okonkwo

Professor Elaine Lawless

Professor April C. E. Langley

Professor Wilma King

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to express my gratitude to my committee members, Elaine Lawless, April C. E. Langley, and Wilma King for their time and valuable feedback throughout my entire degree process. I would like to thank my adviser Christopher N. Okonkwo for his endless encouragement and support through the long process of developing, researching, and writing this dissertation. During the writing of this dissertation, my beloved writing group kept me setting goals and moving forward, and offered much needed moral support; so, thank you for your stability Brianne Jaquette and Meagan Ciesla. There were also countless swimming pool, kickboard conversations with poet Melissa Range that helped me work through my ideas about the South and southern literature. I would also like to acknowledge Matthew D. Brown and Tracy Butts who set me down the path of this dissertation many years ago by introducing me to many of the writers in this study along with the traditions of southern American literature and African American literature.

Finally, I want to thank my family for their constant support of my college education over the past twelve years. Thank you to my mother, Renna Pehle, for always being a phone call away and occasionally subsidizing my income. Thank you to my step-dad, Gary Pehle, for a five year subscription for monthly massages to keep my stress levels down as I pursued this degree. Thank you to my brother, Sean Homer, for years of unsolicited advice that have gotten me to this point. Thank you to my sister-in-law, Kathy Keays-Homer, for attending ALL of my graduations; you are pretty special. And, my

apologies to my dog, Lacey, for missing some walks when I was in the writing zone.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	v
CHAPTERS	
INTRODUCTION.....	1
1. THE BLACK WOMAN’S BODY AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN RAYMOND ANDREWS’S <i>BABY SWEETS</i> AND ALICE WALKER’S <i>MERIDIAN</i>	41
2. URBAN NORTHS AND RURAL SOUTHS IN PAULE MARSHALL’S <i>PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW</i> AND TAYARI JONES’S <i>LEAVING ATLANTA</i>	85
3. COMMUNITY-DEFINED IDENTITY AND THE SOUTH IN RANDALL KENAN’S <i>A VISITATION OF SPIRITS</i> AND TINA MCELROY ANSA’S <i>UGLY WAYS</i>	129
4. INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY FROM THE SOUTH IN GLORIA NAYLOR’S <i>MAMA DAY AND TONI MORRISON’S HOME</i>	176
CONCLUSION.....	218
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	221
VITA.....	234

ABSTRACT

My dissertation examines the representation of the return migration in African American novels across the last five decades and argues that these return migration novels are distinct from earlier migration narratives and, as such, do not fit within the available critical frameworks developed from Great Migration literature. Historically, the return migration occurred throughout the south-to-north Great Migration, but the literature does not present the possibility of a successful return to the South until the mid-1970s, which is where my project begins. My critical approach brings together W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of double-consciousness and theories of place in order to understand the importance of the region of the South in contemporary African American literature. I argue that the significance of the South in African American return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era goes beyond its function as the site of the ancestor, as others have posited. The South, in a state of redefinition following the Civil Rights Movement, provides a fluid space where values of community and individualism relative to identity can be reconciled through the return migrant's connection to that space.

My project begins by considering the impact the Civil Rights Movement has on the conceptualization of the return migration. I focus on Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) and Raymond Andrews's Muskhogean County Trilogy, *Baby Sweet's* (1983) in particular, which revise the history of the Civil Rights Movement and black women's actions at the local level. My second chapter looks at the conflation of the urban with the North and the rural with the South in the American imagination. I argue that Paule

Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta* (2002) challenge these dichotomies as their characters attempt to reconcile the two disparate spaces in order to understand their place-based identities. The third chapter considers the presence of community in the representation of the South and its impact on the individual's identity in Tina McElroy Ansa's *Ugly Ways* (1991) and Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989). The communities presented in these texts show the struggle between internal desire and external expectations that, I argue, at times hinder characters' abilities for self-definition. The final chapter and culmination of my project brings together Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) and Toni Morrison's *Home* (2012) to show successful returns which center on the characters' abilities to balance the community-defined identity and the individual identity.

INTRODUCTION

Robert Foster found financial success and walked taller in a land more suited to him. But he turned his back on the South and the culture he sprang from. He rarely went back. He plunged himself fully into an alien world that only partly accepted him and went so far as to change his name and assume a different persona to fit in. It left him a rootless soul, cut off from the good things about the place he had left. He put distance between himself and his own children, hiding his southern, perhaps truest self. [...]

Ida Mae Gladney had the humblest trappings but was the richest of them all. She had lived the hardest life, been given the least education, seen the worst the South could hurl at her people, and did not let it break her. She lived longer in the North than in the South but never forsook her origins, never changed the person she was deep inside, never changed her accent [...]. She took the best of what she saw in the North and the South and interwove them in the way she saw fit. [...] She lived in the moment, surrendered to whatever the day presented, and remained her true, original self. Her success was spiritual, perhaps the hardest of all to achieve. And because of that, she was the happiest and lived the longest of them all.

- Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*

Isabel Wilkerson closes *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010) with her reflections on the outcomes of those at the center of her study. In this final analysis, Wilkerson draws attention to the different types of success and failure experienced by her Great Migration subjects. She takes specific notice of the relationship between the spaces of the North and the South and the migrants' identities. Robert Foster's success in the North comes at the cost of "hiding his southern, perhaps truest self" by distancing himself from the South, changing his name, and assuming a persona. Ida Mae Gladney, on the other hand, "remained her true, original self" by maintaining her connections to the South and its culture, and melding her experience of the North and the South to her benefit. Gladney's ability to reconfigure her knowledge of the North and the South and maintain a clear sense of self is not the experience black writers of Great Migration novels generally focus

on. Instead, black writers during the Great Migration represent characters that move to the North and attempt to distance themselves from their southern connections due to the very immediate threat of Jim Crow laws and lynchings associated with the South at the time of their writing.¹ Foster's experience, then, is much closer to those Lawrence Rodgers identifies of Great Migration novels in *Canaan Bound* (1997). Rodgers, like Wilkerson, sees the importance in the connection between place and identity "Because who one is relies on possessing a sense of one's place in the world [...] the process of migration is indelibly tied into the broader quest for identity. The Great Migration novel plumbs the depths of this relationship between geography and identity" (4). The outcomes of Great Migration novels, however, frequently depict the character's displaced or fractured identity as a result of being unable to find that place in the world.

My dissertation looks at African American return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era in which characters' returns to the South in the literature parallel a historical reverse migration of African Americans to the South, much like the characters migrating to the North during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century mimic the historical Great Migration to the North, Midwest, and West. Whether the returns are failures or successes, return migration narratives all seek an understanding of the self and a place in which to situate that understanding. In exploring the return migration novels that followed the Great Migration narratives, my project commences where Rodgers's study of African American Great Migration novels concludes. I will be looking at the role of the South in self-definition in selected post-Civil Rights era African American return migration novels. The novels I examine in this dissertation span the five decades since

¹ Bernard Bell identifies "obligatory Jim Crow episodes" (98) as a feature passed along between the literary movements that occurred during the Jim Crow era, especially during the first half of the twentieth century in his study *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987).

the Civil Rights Movement: Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), Raymond Andrews's *Baby Sweet's* (1983), Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), Tina McElroy Ansa's *Ugly Ways* (1993), Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta* (2002), and Toni Morrison's *Home* (2012).² The focal texts range from canonical *Mama Day* to the currently out of print and thematically unsettling *Baby Sweet's*, and include understudied texts by established writers such as *Ugly Ways* and *Home* alongside *Leaving Atlanta* which represents the concerns of a new generation of black writers. Additionally, to my knowledge, these texts have not been discussed in relation to one another, nor with respect to the return migration. I am classifying these illustrative texts as return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era. I define a return migration novel as a novel in which a journey occurs from the North to the South—this is not simply a directional north-to-south movement, but a transition between spaces that symbolize conceptions of the North and the South—and the outcome of the southern return involves a grappling with place and one's identity.

African American Migrations: A Historical Review

African American migrations have been a focus of much scholarly attention. Scholars have labeled and documented these migrations in various ways.³ Some of the broader versions of African American migration are those of Daniel M. Johnson and Rex R. Campbell's *Black Migration in America: A Social demographic History* (1981) and Ira Berlin's recent study *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations*

² Raymond Andrews is perhaps the least known of these authors. As Trudier Harris notes, "his imitation of Hemingway [via his suicide in 1991] unfortunately has not earned him the same critical or objectionable accolades" (*South of Tradition* 91).

³ In this brief review of African American migration studies, I have organized the works thematically rather than chronologically to emphasize the different approaches scholars have taken when documenting the migrations.

(2010). Berlin divides African American movement into 4 Great Migrations that reflect spatial and temporal trends in history: 1) the transatlantic journey of the Middle Passage from Africa to America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, 2) the interior passage of slaves from the Atlantic Seaboard to the southern interior during the first part of the nineteenth century, 3) the northern migration of the twentieth century known as the Great Migration, and 4) the global immigration of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century of black populations from Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and Europe into the United States. Berlin's organization of African American migrations into four main trends provides a more concise view of African American migration that accounts for large historical movements of people. In their study, Johnson and Campbell take more nuanced sociological approach that divides African American migration in the United States into eleven movements. Like Berlin, their study accounts for the forced migration to America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the domestic slave trade that moved African Americans through the South. It is at this point that their study begins looking more closely at smaller trends in migration. They identify migration trends of the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the turn-of-the-century migration that was occurring prior to the Great Migration, most notably to Kansas. It is in their treatment of the Great Migration, however, that their categorization of waves of migration differs from those of other Great Migration scholars who break the Great Migration into two main waves: pre-WWII and post-WWII. Johnson and Campbell, instead, divide the Great Migration into six different movements, noting distinctive trends among the decades: post-WWI, the depression, WWII, post-WWII, the 1950s, and the 1960s. Since their study was thirty years prior to Berlin's, Johnson and Campbell end their account of African American

migration with speculation about the new trend of a reverse migration to the South, which was emerging in the 1970s.

Other studies focus on specific migrations whether connected to specific time periods or regions, and/or to internal and external migrations. Neither Berlin's nor Johnson and Campbell's studies account for emigrations from the United States, such as the three most significant back-to-Africa movements: the first occurring during slavery throughout the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, the second following southern Reconstruction at the turn of the century, and the third spearheaded post-WWI by Marcus Garvey's propaganda. Edwin S. Redkey's *Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890-1910* (1969), for instance, looks at the execution of the specific back-to-Africa movement at the turn of the century that involved the movement of African Americans to Liberia, which had been established in the first back-to-Africa movement, while Colin Grant's *Negro With A Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey* (2008) considers the post-WWI events that led participants in the Great Migration to continue that movement from the North to Africa. Internal migration studies on the post-bellum period, on the other hand, focus on specific internal migrations to the Midwest. Nell Painter's *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (1976) and Leslie A Schwalm's *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest* (2009) address African American migration from the South during the Civil War and following Reconstruction. They characterize these earlier movements as less planned, but as paving the way for future migrations, both small and large, by founding communities to receive later migrants.

The Great Migration has and continues to be of great interest to scholars. There have been numerous studies on the subject that approach it from both the perspective of a larger movement and individual experiences. Neil Fligstein's *Going North: Migration of Blacks and Whites from the South, 1900-1950* (1981) and Carole Marks's *Farwell—We're Gone and Gone: The Great Black Migration* (1989) both take broader and more popular approaches that view the Great Migration largely as a migration to the North. The edited collection *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South* (1991) compiles essays that examine individual push-and-pull factors of the Great Migration from labor and economics to violence and Jim Crow. Peter Gottlieb's *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930* (1987), James R. Grossman's *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (1989), and Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo's *Abiding Courage: African American Women and the East Bay Community* (1996) all look to specific cities to which migrants relocated and the effects they had on those cities. Timuel D. Black Jr.'s *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration* (2003) and *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's Second Wave of Black Migration* (2007), and Lisa Krissoff Boehm's *Making a Way out of No Way: African American Women and the Second Great Migration* (2009) are oral history collections that depict individual experiences of migration. Black spotlights black migrants to Chicago, while Boehm concentrates on black women migrants in several locations, though mostly in Michigan. Finally, Nicholas Lehmann's *The Promised Land: The Great Migration and How it Changed America* (1991) and Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* combine features of a comprehensive study of the Great Migration with individual personal narratives of those

who experienced it. Lehmann and Wilkerson both take into account the ending points of their subjects. Lehmann takes the Great Migration full circle by ending with the same Mississippi town he began his study with, not so much as a reflection on the return migration, but to consider how southern towns had changed over the course of the Great Migration. Wilkerson spent fifteen years conducting interviews aimed at uncovering why the migrants decide to leave their homes, families, and communities in the South for a new life in the North East, Midwest—mainly Chicago—or West. Although Wilkerson attributes these planned migrations to violence in the region and to the desire for better jobs, she identifies the desire for freedom as the most important reason.

In his attempt to push scholarship forward, Stewart Tolnay's article "The African American 'Great Migration' and Beyond" (2003) gives a concise overview of the Great Migration followed by recent migration trends in need of further study. He notes the findings of previous scholarship, as well as the approaches future scholarship might take. Tolnay asserts that the various migrations in the African American experience "are better viewed as intrinsically linked, rather than entirely separate and unique" (228). In addition to this overview, Tolnay touches on the research on the return migration, acknowledging, significantly, a lack of scholarship on the topic and that the existing efforts contain conflicting information. There is currently a large gap in the scholarship on African American return migration to the South across the fields. He calls for more cross-disciplinary attention to the return migration, given its considerable though understudied impacts and also its direct connection to the Great Migration, on which scholars have focused the most.

In the early 1970s, newspapers began reporting on the return migration of African Americans from the North to the South. They announced and encouraged these reverse movements with headlines such as: “South Made Greatest Gains in Census” (1970), “Black Migration to South is Urged: Alabamian Says Plan Would Widen Negro Political Hold” (1971), “Blacks Return to South In a Reverse Migration” (1974), “Claim Blacks Going Back ‘Home’” (1974) and “85% of Rise in Population Found in South and West” (1975). The concept of a black return migration to the South⁴ was initially difficult for scholars to reconcile. In an analysis of return migration data at the beginning⁵ of the return migration, sociologists Larry Long and Kristen Hansen note a positive population growth in the South for the first time in decades based on census data from 1960-1970. Long and Hansen go on to conclude that there were larger numbers of white return migrants than black return migrants and that “Newspaper accounts have probably overplayed the role of return migration and underplayed the importance of decreased out-migration of Southern blacks” (612). The decrease in out-migration is an important factor to return migration. It provides larger and more stable communities for migrants to return and signals a decrease in the need to escape the South. The continuing increase in in-migration to the South during the decades following Long and Hansen’s study, however, showed that newspapers were not overplaying the role of return migration to the South,

⁴The United States’ Census Bureau defines the South as the 11 confederate states—Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas—along with Washington DC, Oklahoma, Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and West Virginia. This is the definition of the geographical South I will be using in this project because the historical and sociological studies I will be referencing gathered their quantitative migration data from the United States Census Bureau. Various arrangements of these 16 states and the District of Columbia are used in studies of the South, though most studies define the South in terms of 10-15 states.

⁵ It is also important to note that the return/reverse migration actually began with the Great Migration at the turn of the 20th century with small numbers of black migrants consistently returning to the South across the entire twentieth century, see Kevin McHugh’s “Black Migration Reversal in the United States” (1987). The beginning referred to here is the significant shift in the population census that shows positive population growth in the South for the first time since the start of the Great Migration out of the South.

but drawing attention to an important trend that represented a significant change in the South. Long and Hansen also note that white return migrants were returning to the region and heading to cities with employment, rather than returning to their states of birth; black return migrants, however, were more likely to return to their states of birth and poor rural communities. This migration to poor rural areas results in Long and Hansen claiming that black return migration was not as well planned as white return migration, which showed economic benefits.

Unlike the abovementioned views, anthropologist Carol Stack, the leading scholar on the return migration to the South positions black return migration as even more planned. She notes that black southerners had planned their returns before ever leaving the South. Her qualitative study *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South* (1996) is one of the more thorough undertakings on the return migration, with its focus on the experiences of actual returnees to rural North and South Carolina counties. She has a few earlier articles that also analyze the quantitative data of the return migration better than other scholars because of her interest in qualitative research. Stack does not simply use census numbers; she also interviews families and those returning to the South, which actually alters the census information of other sociologists. She does so by revising the definition of the term “return migrant.” In her article “Black Migration: An Expected Return” (1987), she addresses the issue that statistical information only inquires into the individual’s residency five years prior to each census, which limits the understanding of larger migration trends. Additionally, the label of “return migrant” is dependent on the individual’s birthplace being situated in the South, which Stack acknowledges as unreflective of second generation migrants, who are born in the North

but spend much of their lives in the South with family who did not move to the North. Stack's more nuanced approach to definitions of return migrants results in a larger number of reverse migrants being return migrants rather than new migrants.

In an interview with *The Root* after the release of her study on the Great Migration, Wilkerson was asked about the current trend of black migrants moving from the North to the South. She makes a distinction between the use of the terms "return migration" and "reverse migration" explaining that she

prefer[s] the term 'return migration' as opposed to 'reverse migration.' That's because 'reverse migration' makes it seem the people had made a mistake and are going backward. [She doesn't] believe any migration is ever a mistake or going backward. It's a universal human story no matter what our background. (qtd. in Dreyfuss)

The distinction between return migration and reverse migration is an important one; however, it is more nuanced than Wilkerson contends. The term "return migration" suggests the population migrating from the North, Midwest, and West to the South are *returning* to a place they once lived or in which family ties remain. Based on southern in-migration statistics, return migration is generally only applied to 42 percent of migrants, while the remaining 58 percent are categorized as non-return migrants. An expansion of the definition of return migration to factor in an inter-generational model of family migration—which accounts for familial connections across generations as the reason for the return and specifically the movement of children; for instance, those born in the North to migrants but raised in the South by those who stayed behind—changes the numbers to 69 percent of black migrants being return migrants and only 31 percent of black migrants being non-return migrants (Cromartie and Stack 307-309; Stack, "Black Migration" 199-200).

Like Wilkerson's work on the Great Migration, Stack's qualitative work on black return migration has shed light on the complexities of, and the decisions to, return for black migrants. Even with Stack's expanded definition, the parameters of the term return migration do not account for those who are non-return migrants. Thus, the term return migration could be better situated as a subcategory of reverse migration. We must point out that reverse migration does not necessarily mean a mistake or backwards movement on the part of the migrants, as Wilkerson contends earlier, but rather an indication of the reversal of the flow of migration ways used during the Great Migration.⁶ For non-return migrants, generally, their reasons for migrating to the South are not really about someone to whom, or someplace to which, to return. Some black non-return migrants move to the space of the South with small groups of northern friends after retiring, to enjoy the climate and lower cost of living, while other black non-return migrants in their 30s relocate to southern metropolises for job opportunities.⁷ Thus, for the purposes of my study, I prefer and will be using the phrase "return migration" because the texts I am dealing with present migrants returning to a space and a place with which they have some previous familial relationship or attachment, even if that connection is a generation or so removed.

Long and Hansen point out in their study that more white southerners than black southerners were involved in the return migration. The Great Migration saw the exodus of both black and white southerners from the South with a larger number of white southerners leaving than black southerners. A larger number of white return migrants, however, does not make the return migration of black southerners less significant.

⁶ For salient flows of black migration ways during the Great Migration and their reversal in the 1970s see Kevin McHugh's "Black Migration reversal in the United States."

⁷ See "Atlanta: New Mecca for Young Blacks" (1973).

Additionally, the violent and hostile history of the treatment of African Americans in the South makes the return to that space much more significant than the return of white southern migrants. Wilkerson offers population growth as a reason why the return migration will not compare to the Great Migration:

When the Great Migration began, there were 10 million African Americans in the U.S. You were looking at a million leaving per decade. By the end of it, half [of blacks] had been redistributed to the rest of the country. Currently there are 35 million to 40 million African Americans. Even the movement of a million people would not have the same impact now that it would have then. (qtd. in Dreyfuss)

Nevertheless, the number of black return migrants to the South has been steadily increasing over the past 40 years and has yet to slow. As a result, the full scale of the possible impact return migration will have is yet to be seen, even as African American writers, especially, continue to explore their personal and creative affinities to it.

Furthermore, African American affinities to the South, specifically following the Civil Rights Movement, resulted in an expansion of the meaning of the term southerner.⁸ James C. Cobb's *Away Down South* (2005) historicizes black and white southerners' attitudes towards the South by their identification with the term southerner. Interpreting survey data about feelings towards southerners between 1964 and 2001, Cobb concludes that only 55 percent of southern black respondents considered themselves southern in 1964, while 90 percent of southern whites did; by 1976, that number rose to just below 80 percent and "by 2001 the percentage of blacks in the South who identified themselves as southerners was actually higher than that for whites" (262-263). This resituating of a regional identity where black southerners are classifying themselves as southern,

⁸ Thadious Davis notes in *Southscapes* that identification in the South after Jim Crow initially produced an environment where "whites in the South became simply 'southerners' without racial designation, but blacks in the South became simply 'blacks' without a regional designation" (29).

essentially claiming the South, speaks to the importance of the region of the South and African American identity. Cobb develops this connection further by noting that “some African Americans who lived outside the South were clearly drawing on their southern roots [through southern drawls, dialects, dietary preferences, and the positive reappropriation of the term ‘bama’] to help them define their blackness” (282).

Sherita L. Johnson expands on the connection between African Americans and the South in her *Black Women in New South Literature and Culture* (2010). She argues that the South and Southernness cannot be defined without considering the role of black women in the region. Johnson uses fictional and historical figures from the postbellum South at the turn of the twentieth century—including Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, and female characters of Charles Chesnutt and George Washington Cable—to show how black women were significant “agents of cultural change” in the South despite being “often invisible in historical accounts of regional politics and culture, especially as *Southern* black women” (emphasis original 2). Much like Danielle McGuire’s recent study of the Civil Rights Movement *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance--A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (2010) which changes and illuminates the historical record and of black women’s substantial contributions to and our understandings of the Civil Rights Movement, Johnson’s study questions our understanding of the South and how “the way we think about the South changes of we recast black women, looking at the region as organized by and around black women” (Johnson 2).

African American's claiming their right to a southern regional identity motivated Thadious M. Davis's exploration of a more inclusive image of the Deep South appearing in "traditional literature of the South" (19) in her study *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, & Literature* (2011). She takes an autobiographical approach to black southern writing from Louisiana and Mississippi to interrogate attitudes about place and southern identity from black writers such as Richard Wright, Ernest Gaines, Alice Walker, and Natasha Trethewey. She considers the return migration to the Deep South through the movement of black writers between the South and other regions, and spatially setting their literature in the Deep South despite residing elsewhere. She argues that the return migration to the South, both culturally and regionally, "provides a major grounding for identity particularly when in the absence of a distinct racial binary it has become harder to formulate identity within the nexus of community" (35). The racial binary to which Davis refers here reflects the segregated South where communities were defined, in part, by geographical racial divisions.

Civil rights integration of the South changed the presence and idea of community in the South, which, in turn, contributes to the complication of identity formation that is connected to racial binaries. In other words, the instability of communities following the Civil Rights Movement—and the subsequent devaluation of community apparent in the consecutive arrival of Postmodernism⁹—forces a reconfiguration of identity in the absence of a cohesive, strong, and stable community. While in general it may be harder to

⁹ Kalenda C. Eaton argues in her study *Womanism, Literature, and the Transformation of the Black Community, 1965-1980* (2008) that "One method of categorizing the confused state of the Black Community connects its fractured organizational structure with the rise of a postmodern understanding of social constructs and rejection of traditional unified goals" which followed the Civil Rights Movement (4). Bernard Bell also notes that the sensibilities of postmodern writers "were shaped and misshaped by modern jazz, rock music, drugs, war in Vietnam, political assassinations, black power and women's rights movements, civil rights and antiwar demonstrations, [and] campus sit-ins and building take-overs" (283).

formulate an individualist identity within community, black writers of the post-Civil Rights era continue to explore the function of communities in individuals' self-definition. In addition to the search for a place to formulate identity, Davis notes the importance of a southern return like Gaines', which involved him building a home on the plantation where he was born and generations of his family resided before him. The fictionalization of return migrations in African American post-Civil Rights era novels brings together the connections between the space of the South, various configurations of community—including unknown, family, and home communities—and the formation of a whole self.

The South of Return Migration Narratives

Stack's analysis of the role of familial generations involved in experiences of the South, as mentioned earlier, can also be seen in some northern black writers' relationships to the South. In a 1998 interview, "Blacks, Modernism, and the American South: An Interview with Toni Morrison," Carolyn Denard notes that Morrison is not a southerner herself and as such her "sense of the South" and of African Americans' relationships with the South is largely influenced by her "parents' memories of the South" (1). Denard then asks Morrison, "What was your perception, the sense of the South that you gained from your parents?" Morrison cites her parents' relationships to the South as inspiration for her own characters' experiences with migration and the South. She explains that her parents

had diametrically opposed positions. My father was born in Georgia. My mother was born in Alabama. Both were from very small towns in those states. My father thought that the most racist state in the Union was Georgia and that it would never change. My mother had much fonder memories. She was very nostalgic about the South. But she never visited it—ever. While my father went back every year. Quarreling and fussing all the way, he went back to see his family—

aunts, uncles—there. So I grew up with a complicated notion of the South, neither sentimental nor wholly frightening. On the one hand, with no encouragement, my mother was nostalgic about the Alabama farm, yet she would talk in a language of fear about her family's escape from the South. On the other hand, my father recounted vividly the violence that he had seen first-hand from White southerners, but he regularly returned. (qtd. in Denard 1)

This complicated notion of and personal relationships to the South that Morrison discusses here are actually common in African American literature, especially that of the post-Civil Rights era which attempts to reconcile the space of the South. Some characters are inexplicably drawn to the South through an ambiguous nostalgia for it, while others return very purposefully to take action. No matter their attraction or intent, however, all of them must address their relationship with the space in order to reconcile their identities. Although Morrison's father verbally disavows the South and yet feels familially tied to it and her mother verbally holds onto it but physically rejects it, neither could move on without it.

While how to define a geographical South is important when using the term "the South," the definition of the other South of the literary imagination is of equal importance. This imagined space is the most difficult to define. The South of the African American literary imagination is a fluid space that exists beyond a geographical understanding of the South and within the creative space of the individual writer. For example, Morrison's *Sula* (1973) fits within the Southern Gothic tradition, despite its geographical setting of Ohio. Morrison evokes the imagined, fluid South in her depiction of the Bottom and its community. The imagined South can exist outside of the boundaries

of Jim Crow laws, which becomes much more prevalent in post-Civil Rights era.¹⁰ The imagined South also has a much larger presence in literary works; at times, it is embodied, personified as another character, ubiquitous.

Black writers' preoccupation with the imagined South reflects their interest in challenging the history and culture that reside there. Trudier Harris acknowledges the way in which the South has been portrayed as a healing space for black women, not black men. In *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line* (2009) Harris asserts that becoming a true African American writer "come[s] only after a confrontation with black history and American history as represented by and in the South. That history of repression, violence, and lack calls out to each generation of African American writers, and each generation responds in its own way" (16). Harris's study centers on the way the African American writer has been influenced by a fear of the South as a region. I agree with Harris's assertion that the fear of the South shaped African American literature of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. With the end of Jim Crow laws in the mid-1960s, however, African American writers of the mid-1970s through the twenty-first century address that trepidation and push beyond it in order to reclaim the South as a region.

In the African American literary imagination, the fear of the South has largely been replaced with an enduring desire to reclaim it by acknowledging and transcending its violent history. To Morrison, the impetus for this reclamation has to do with the

¹⁰ Brian Norman notes in *Neo-Segregation Narratives* (2010) that segregation narratives that were written during the period of Jim Crow were preoccupied with the very real and immediate need to remove Jim Crow laws, while those narratives written during the post-Civil Rights era that temporally revisit the Jim Crow era do so to revise the historical account surrounding that earlier time period. As Farrah Jasmine Griffin notes of *Song of Solomon* (1977) that "The South to which [Milkman] goes is not a place of racial horror and shame, it is a site of history and redemption for him—a place where he can begin to piece together the fragments an where he can grasp and sing that which Kabnis sought, the Song of the Son" (177). The threats of the Jim Crow South prevent Jean Toomer's Kabnis from successfully reinhabiting the South and reconnecting to his southern culture, while Morrison's Milkman is able to avoid those threats because his Jim Crow South is written after its end.

South's dual position and positioning as both "home" (viewing it as the "first stop" for African Americans in the United States), and its connection to the modern, a place where black culture for the most part refused assimilation and continued to innovate and create (qtd. in Denard 14). Morrison states,

But this is a whole new experience—and it is a modern experience. So that there is some modernity and some grasp on the future that the South holds more than any other place. Although I understand nostalgia about it being everybody's past, and the good old days, and ma and pa and grandpa and so on. But for me the actual thing that was going on was this wholly modern thing. (qtd. in Denard 15)

Morrison further explains,

I think the South is now, finally, getting close to the edge of the modern world because Black people are there. Once White people gave up the legal claim to the things they were doing—killing blacks, bullying them, and pushing White supremacy, ideologically and personally—they stopped to see what was in their best interest. Then and only then, did it become a modern part of the world. (qtd. in Denard 16)

Morrison offers an assessment of two sides of the South in its connection to the modern. First, she emphasizes the role of the South in African American culture as always holding modernity, identifying it as "the earliest 19-th century modernist existence" (qtd. in Denard 14). As such, she asserts that the South still holds an opportunity for an innovative and creative black culture. Second, Morrison distinguishes the end to Jim Crow laws as allowing the South to move into the modern world. The South's becoming a part of the modern world has also meant a rejection of its position as a static space. Likewise, Jeffery J. Folks and James A. Perkins assert in *Southern Writers at Century's End* (1997) that "The rapid Southern transformation to modernity has produced a greater sense of disorder and conflict than elsewhere. Southern culture, quite

simply, has moved further in a shorter period of time than have other regional cultures in America” (4). This is particularly important to the South of the African American literary imagination. Black writers have turned their attention to the South in its state of change to re-imagine and reinvent that space for African Americans. The literature largely re-imagines the possibilities for a successful relationship with the southern space, where previously the South had been represented as failing to support black characters.

African American migration narratives accompanying the historical Great Migration depict characters’ attempts at returning to the South after living in the North and/or abroad, but those efforts do not bring the desired outcomes of self-fulfillment and a sense of place and belonging. African American novels written prior to and during the early stages of the Great Migration took up the idea of the difficulties of African American return migration in works such as Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), and Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928), most notably through the characters of Chesnutt’s Dr. Miller, Johnson’s Ex-Colored Man, Toomer’s Kabins and Larsen’s Helga Crane. Farrah Jasmine Griffin assesses the treatment of the South in Johnson, Toomer, and Larsen’s early return migration novels in *Who Set You Flowin’?* (1995). She argues that for Johnson, Toomer and Larsen, a return to the South is not yet viable, nor necessarily desirable (146). Griffin even goes as far as to call Larsen’s South “a provincial, black living hell” (159). The ambiguous endings to Chesnutt, Toomer, and Larsen’s novels,¹¹ however, suggest that they have not given up on the South despite the

¹¹ *The Marrow of Tradition* ends with Dr. Miller being granted admission into Major Cateret’s home, to which he had previously been rejected because of his race, to save the white, young, dying Dodie. This raises the question of whether or not this will be a onetime event or if Dr. Miller’s status has actually changed in the eyes of white supremacist Major Cateret. Likewise, the ending of Larsen’s *Quicksand* holds

inability to get what they need from it, or that they wanted to embrace the south but just could not do so under the circumstances. This ambiguity with the South is similar to that which Morrison discusses in relation to her parents' conflicted relationships with the region.

Mid-century, rather than contemplating the possibilities of a return to the South, Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and *Native Son* (1940), James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953), and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) represented the need for many of their main characters, both male and female, to leave the South and not return. While there is a clear distancing from the physical South in these novels, the ambiguity that exists is regarding the North. Finally, written towards the end of the Civil Rights movement, Ernest Gaines's *Of Love and Dust* (1967) and the *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1970) portray black characters taking physical stands in the South, but their outcomes—mainly death at the hands of white southerners, though occasionally flight, as is the case for *Of Love and Dust*'s Pauline—raise the question of what is to be gained by fighting for the southern space.

It is important to point out that although African American literature of the Great Migration tends to represent the migration to the North as a dilemma if not a failure, that failure is really of the North not fully living up to the historical idealization of it as racial shelter in the African American consciousness. In the literature, migrants must deal with northern hostilities in addition to their difficulties as migrants in a new space. Such experiences challenge the idea of the North as the Promised Land for African Americans. Griffin's *Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative* and

the ambiguity of how she feels about the position she finds herself in, poor and continuously birthing children, once returning to the South.

Rodgers's *Canaan Bound: The African American Great Migration Novel* explore the complex experiences depicted in African American migration narratives of the Great Migration.

Griffin utilizes the term narrative to extend her analysis of literature to include visual art, films, and song lyrics. Griffin identifies a framework in African American migration narratives made up of four pivotal moments: an event that moves the action north, a detailed encounter with the urban space, the migrant's attempt to negotiate that space and/or its effects, and the possibilities and limits of a specific region. Griffin rejects the idea of a static migration narrative and notes that migration "narratives are as diverse as the people and the times that create them" (4). Her chapter addressing the possibilities and limitations of a specific region focuses on the representations of southbound return migrations in African American literature. After spending the bulk of her study treating African American migration narratives written during the Great Migration to the North, Griffin chooses Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) as the exemplar text for post-Civil Rights era narratives of return migration to the South.

Morrison's novel differs from the earlier texts treated by Griffin because Morrison's main character, Milkman, achieves success: he is guided to the South by his ancestor, he gains an understanding of his family's roots, and he returns to the North a whole person with a new sense of self and understanding of his people. Characters attempting to return to the South in African American literature prior to the Civil Rights Movement are unable to realize such success, as shown in the cases of Jean Toomer's

Kabnis and Nella Larsen's *Helga Crane*¹². I argue that the ability of characters in African American literature of the post-Civil Rights era to go to the South and successfully find in it needed cultural nourishment and belonging represents a distinctive shift in the treatment of the South in migration narratives. While, for instance, Morrison's *Milkman* returns to the South for a short trip before returning to his northern life, other writers' characters make the decision to leave the North indefinitely and take a much larger stake in the return to the South because it is not a just a space to find the ancestor and roots, but a place to seek out and establish their selves.¹³

In the epilogue to his study *Canaan Bound*, Rodgers notes that the 1970s showed a reversal in African American movement, which signaled the end of the Great Migration. He briefly assesses post-Ellison Great Migration novels, which he classifies as those written after the publication of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in 1952. He asserts that following the end of the Great Migration, novels connected to migrant culture fall into three categories: one, urban narratives made possible by the movement of the Great Migration but not involving migration; two, the "narratives of southern reconstruction," which optimistically dismantle the myth of the North as the promised land; and three, novels that revive the south-to-north migration while "positioning the South as African-American culture's locus of identity" (181-183). Rodgers argues that of these three categories, only the third falls into the migration novel form; however, Rodgers only

¹² Toomer's Kabnis in *Cane* (1923) is unable to reintegrate himself in his family's southern hometown despite having access to the necessary ancestor, and Larsen's *Helga Crane* in *Quicksand* (1928) is disgusted with the poverty in the rural South, childbearing, and religion, as she lies awaiting death.

¹³ Griffin cites Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* as her example of a successful return migration to the South partially due to Morrison's status as the leading contemporary black writer. *Song of Solomon*, while an appropriate example for Griffin's project, is a less typical representation of the return migration novel because it features a male protagonist who spends the majority of the narrative in the North and does not make a permanent return to the South. However, if the focus of analysis shifted from *Milkman*'s return to Pilate's return, there could be a discussion that places the text more in line with other return migration novels.

recognizes the migration novel form as one that involves a south-to-north migration. The second category Rodgers identifies includes numerous novels depicting a return migration from the North to the South, which is significant to the plot and the characters' experiences. It is these novels that need to be recognized as migration narratives and treated with attention to the distinct differences between the concerns of earlier Great Migration novels and the concerns of the return migration to the South.

Griffin and Rodgers both totalize their treatment of African American Great Migration narratives by broadly classifying them as migration narratives. Rodgers qualifies migration novels as necessarily moving from south-to-north, which eliminates those with north-to-south migrations from his tradition of African American migration novels. Griffin, on the other hand, acknowledges movement in either direction, but her framework focuses on a northbound experience that leaves the majority of return migration narratives of the post-Civil Rights era outside of her parameters. These limitations do not undercut the significance and contributions of their studies; instead, they reflect the above mentioned importance of the Great Migration and show the need for multilayered scholarship on African American literary representations of black movement in the United States after the Great Migration. My project builds upon Griffin and Rodgers's studies by picking up where their efforts conclude in order for me to consider the significance of the return migration to the South in contemporary African American novels.

It is important to distinguish the return migration narratives of the post-Civil Rights era from the northbound migration narratives of the Great Migration, which is the purpose of this study. The post-Civil Rights era return migration novels do not fit into the

same template as the northbound or return migration narratives of the previous era, nor are they generated from the same socio-political climate—that of the Jim Crow era. Griffin’s established scaffold appropriately reflects the northbound migration narratives of the Great Migration, but it begins to break down with the previously mentioned subset of post-Civil Rights era return migration narratives. The first three of Griffin’s pivotal moments are specific to a north-to-south migration where the migrant spends the majority of his/her time in the North. Since that is not the case for characters in return migration novels, it is only Griffin’s fourth pivotal moment—in which characters contemplate the possibilities and limits of a specific region—that holds as return migrants position their identities relative to their new understanding of the South.

Griffin recognizes the importance of the shift in the treatment of the South of the post-Civil Rights era. She notes that “The view of the South as a place of possibility [...] is indicative not only of a tendency to romanticize the South, but also of an attempt to reconsider its significance to black people, an attempt that in many ways would have proven futile prior to the Civil Rights Movement” (146). This thematic shift in African American literature runs concurrently with the literal, reverse migration trend of African Americans moving from the North to the South. In much the same way that the Great Migration occasioned northbound migration narratives, this reverse migration also inspired southbound migration narratives that draw attention to men and women’s migration destinations. These novels address the questions: Why return to the South and what does the South have to offer African Americans in the post-Civil Rights era? Griffin’s answer to these questions is the presence of the ancestor. While the ancestor is a critical figure in many migration narratives, it is not the only reason to return to the South

nor does it appear in all return migration novels. Although cultural heritage is an important aspect of the South in return migration novels, the narratives also pay specific attention to the individualized experience.

Rodgers claims that a key feature of the novels he classifies as narratives of southern recolonization is that they “recuperate a sweep of southern geographies where loyalty to the ideal of community is the critical underpinning of black life” in order to “challenge the conception that black and northern culture are becoming ever more synonymous” (182). Although African American literature about the South has been heavily criticized¹⁴ for romanticizing black folk culture, it has remained connected to the idea of community. Likewise, the North has been largely associated with individuality, as exemplified in Great Migration novels such as Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. It should be clarified, however, that African American return migration novels do not blindly celebrate the South nor do they necessarily condemn the North; instead, the return to the South engages with the possibilities of the New post-Civil Rights South when, as Rodgers argues throughout his study, finding a place in the North has proven “to be an elusive and at times impossible goal” (38). I argue that the South of the post-Civil Rights era has become a space where the individual can, at least, unite with the community, while maintaining the important aspects of the self realized in the North.

There has been the sense, following the Civil Rights Movement, however, that African American women writers such as Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Gayl Jones have generally romanticized the possibility of the South in the African American literary imagination. This glamorization has been done largely through the

¹⁴ For example, see Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987) and Madhu Dubey’s *Signs and Cities* (2003).

simplicity of the rural and the necessity of roots represented by the ancestor in order to “defragment the self” (Griffin 146). In order to understand the ways in which the South is being reclaimed by black writers, it is important to consider the role of displaced histories as an impetus for identifying the change that takes place in the South. The fragmentation of the black psyche is sometimes portrayed as the result of failed attempts to balance the North and the South, among other things. This is why it is important to approach the representations of the South through return migration novels where the characters, although living outside the space of the South, still choose to return to it. The choice to return to a space that has historically been experienced as volatile and dangerous for African Americans is significant in relation to the migration to the North where black migrants’ knowledge of their destination is largely idealized. That characters, after experiencing both the North and the South, desire or decide to return to the South would suggest that, despite its violent legacy, the South has something constructive, something positive, to offer African Americans.

My project looks at how black writers are writing about the South and to what ends. More specifically, I am interested in the impact the South has on African American writers’ literary imaginations from the perspective of identity and place. I grapple with the question: Why is a return to the South—a fluid and ambiguous space both geographically and metaphorically—necessary for the fullness of African American identity? This dissertation argues that the project of defining stable, whole black selves is one of the preoccupations of the focal African American return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era and, significantly, that the narratives situate that process towards self-definition within the South because the place-based identity that emerges as a part of

the return migration enables the attainment of a more whole self. I attempt to balance the significance of place in the novels with the relationships between the community and the individual. Although literary scholars have noted a shift in the treatment of the South in African American literature beginning in the mid-1970s, they have not thoroughly accounted for that shift beyond their general interest in the representation of the South as a space of healing enabled by the presence of the ancestor. There are various re-imaginings of the South in African American literature by both black men and women novelists, and these writers, particularly those discussed in this study, have largely, though not exclusively, focused on repositioning black female characters within the post-Civil Rights South.

Methodology

My theoretical and analytical framework is grounded in space and place theory, in approaches to the self, and in what literary historian Bernard Bell has developed through the sociological idea of “socialized ambivalence.” I draw especially upon Doreen Massey’s discussion of space and place and Hortense Spillers’s psychoanalytical discussion of the self, which, like Bell’s construct, is developed from the sociological concept of “double-consciousness.” Both scholars offer important and germane insight on the difference between the community and the individual relative to identity construction and the theory of home.

Bernard Bell charts the development of the African American novel in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987). He situates the overarching concerns in the African American novel around the concepts of W.E.B. Du Bois’s double-consciousness, Melville J. Herskovits’s socialized ambivalence, and Ralph Ellison’s double vision, all

suggesting a duality of identity. Bell maps the development of the African American novel with romances and realism in the early decades developing into social consciousness engaging race, class, and gender conflicts surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. During the Harlem Renaissance, he notes the expansion of the exploration of double-consciousness from the bourgeoisies to the lower classes. He suggests a temporary rejection of the concept of double-consciousness in the 1940s naturalism of Richard Wright, although Wright's contemporaries persisted in its exploration. As the novel continued to develop through the 1950s, Bell distinguishes "a movement away from naturalism and nonracial themes, and a movement toward the rediscovery and revitalization of myth, legend, and ritual as appropriate sign systems for expressing the double-consciousness, socialized ambivalence, and double vision of the modern black experience" (189), which continues into the 1980s. He concludes with a summation of his study, suggesting that "if there is an Afro-American canonical story, it is the quest, frequently with apocalyptic undertones, for freedom, literacy, and wholeness—personal and communal—grounded in social reality and ritualized in symbolic acts of Afro-American speech, music, and religion" (341-342). This exploration of personal and communal wholeness has continued in the return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era, which specifically recognize the role of place in the quest for wholeness.

Du Bois defines double-consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) as

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. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark

body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (12)

Bell pinpoints the importance of double-consciousness as “The historical quest of black Americans, their principal canonical story, in short, is for life, liberty, and wholeness—the full development and unity of self and the black community—as a biracial, bicultural people, as Americans of African descent” (12). Spillers also builds upon the relationship between the self and the black community in W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of African American double-consciousness. She addresses the external aspect of the psychological twoness in which the individual, as the representative of the race, sees one’s self through the eyes of white dominant culture, and the internal aspect of the self which develops internally in relation to black culture.

Spillers draws attention to the internal self, suggesting that it has been under-acknowledged in the minimal theorizing on race *and* psychoanalysis. Spillers notes that one of the negative aspects of the success of the Civil Rights Movement is the destruction of black communities. She sees this as one of the reasons it has become so important to address the internal side of the Du Boisian double. She refers to the internal piece of the fragmented black self in terms of the “one” who must engage in “interior intersubjectivity,” in self-reflection, with the goal of self-defining through speaking (395-401). Dickson Bruce explains the internal side of Du Bois’s double-consciousness as the pull of “a distinctive African consciousness” in an effort “to privilege the spiritual in relation to the materialistic, commercial world of white America” (301). Bruce’s description of the internal side of double-consciousness aligns with Bell’s use of socialized ambivalence which he defines as “the dancing attitudes of Americans of African ancestry between integration and separation, a shifting identification between the

values of the dominant white and subordinate black cultural systems as a result of institutionalized racism” (xvi). The pull of “a distinctive African consciousness” that Bruce identifies can be understood as an existential response to the socialized ambivalence experienced through the dominant American culture of materialism being externally imposed on individuals’ identities, amongst other expectations.

As noted earlier, the South, as the “first stop” (Morrison qtd. in Denard 14) in the United States, functions as the homeland for African Americans and as a key site for black culture which positions this internal, African consciousness within the space of the South. Bell asserts that

Afro-American culture, which has its historical roots in the deep South and the dynamics of sex, ethnicity, and class, means in this context the symbolic and material expression by black Americans of their relationship to nature, the black community, and the white community as they seek to adapt to the environment in order to first survive and then to thrive, both individually and collectively. (339-340)

The strained relationships between the black community and the individual¹⁵, much more apparent in post-Civil Rights era African American literature, work to further complicate the internal side of Du Bois’s double-consciousness. Additionally, the success of integration during the Civil Rights Movement, along with the institutionalized racism that remained, has increased tensions between the individual and the black community.

Du Bois notes a fragmentation between the black self imagined by the white dominant culture and the self within the black culture. I suggest, however, that the internal self, positioned within the black culture, is also determined and sometimes over determined externally by the expectations of the black community in which the individual

¹⁵ It has become a much more recurrent focus in the past forty years, but can also be seen in earlier texts such as Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1941) and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952).

lives, thus creating another point of split between the self constructed by the community and the self within the individual. The acknowledgement of each individual's multiple subjectivities¹⁶ that has developed alongside postmodernism makes this self-reflection even more necessary, but not in Du Bois's sense of a "self-conscious manhood [as] merg[ing] his double self into a better and truer self" (13). Instead of attempting to merge the double self, reflection is necessary to construct whole and stable selves from which African Americans can perform their various subjectivities and also negotiate those subjectivities shaped by both the black community and the dominant white culture. That is to say, I am not suggesting that there is a single identity to be had, but that there is the desire for a stable foundation of the self from which an individual's various identities/multiple subjectivities can develop.

In *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994), Massey critiques the trend of space and place theory that positions time as fluid and space and place as static.¹⁷ The romanticization of places—in the case of this study, the South of the American imaginary—contributes to the image of space and place as static, as trapped in time. She claims that understandings of identity are the reason space and place are conceptualized as such because "A 'sense of place', of rootedness, can provide – in this form and on this interpretation – stability and a source of unproblematical identity" (151). In other words, since human beings give meaning to spaces, the desire for a stable identity and the idea that a stable identity does not change results in a static view of place, to which identity is

¹⁶ Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) is commonly cited for her discussion of multiple subjectivities. Also, see Norma Alarcon's development of the concept within Chicana feminism.

¹⁷ For instance, Yi-Fu Tuan's foundational study *Space and Place* (1977) differentiates between space and place by identifying space as a movement and place as a pause. However, when he goes on to discuss the relationship between space and time, he defines space as historical and suggests that "When we look outward we look at the present or future; when we look inward (that is, introspect) we are likely to reminisce about the past" (126). In both cases, space is situated in a specific time.

connected. However, in much the same way that a singular static identity has been questioned with the idea of multiple subjectivities, Massey questions the treatment of space and place as static. When spaces are in flux, as the South is following the Civil Rights Movement, or when spaces are treated as fluid, identities associated with such spaces and places should be or are inevitably redefined. Allowing for the fluidity of space and place is what occurs, especially in the focal African American return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era, as writers seize the opportunity to remake both the space of the South—which results in new understandings of specific places—and the individuals who occupy it.

A fluid sense of space and place—which Massey terms a progressive sense of place—accounts for the dependent relationships between time and space and between time and place where understandings of space and place are constantly shifting for the individual and the community, in conscious and unconscious ways. E Relph makes a clear distinction between what he identifies as unselfconscious sense of place and selfconscious sense of place in his seminal work on place theory, *Place and Placelessness* (1976). He views the unselfconscious sense of place as the authentic sense of place which “is above all that of being inside and belonging to *your* place both as an individual and as a member of a community, and to know this without reflecting upon it” (emphasis original 65). Implied in Relph’s statement is the existence of an innate sense of belonging and sense of place that is accepted without question or knowledge. He claims that an authentic and unselfconscious sense of place “provides an importance source of identity for individuals, and through them for communities” (65-66). This valuing of authentic, unselfconscious sense of place, however, becomes complicated when

considering the historical migration of African Americans, beginning with the forced movement from Africa to America during slavery. Across African American literature, from Phillis Wheatley to Toni Morrison, the importance of a conscious sense of place has been a recurrent theme due to sociohistorical structures and strictures—first slavery, then Jim Crow segregation laws—that sought to dictate African Americans’ interactions with and access to certain places. Accordingly, African American migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era explicitly contemplate the spaces and places occupied by the characters, which Relph would identify as the less authentic selfconscious sense of place where “they [the places] become objects of understanding and reflection” (66). In African American migration novels, generally, but more specifically those engaging with the South, characters who have an unselfconscious sense of place or those that refuse to reflect upon place suffer in various ways because of it.

Although it is the individual that faces the formation or the reconciliation of his/her identity, this work does not occur alone, or, at the very least, not in isolation. African American return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era show the complex part the community plays in the process. Massey also engages with the role of community in her analysis of space and place. She acknowledges that the existence of a community can offer one unified definition of a place, but, as the works under study will demonstrate, place is experienced differently by every individual. Thus every place has both a community-defined identity and an individual self-determined identity. People, certainly, are not places, but a similar experience of identity can be seen in relation to focal characters’ identities. There are the community-defined identities ascribed onto them by their communities and the individual identities they work to define themselves.

The characters are part of various communities with different formations, but one community, typically the home community, holds more power over their identities than do the others. This community-defined identity can also disrupt or displace the individual identity, as the return migrants experience most vividly when they are outside of the South. The community-defined identity tends to be associated with the South and the individual identity with the North. The return to the South—to home, as it were—allows for these stressed aspects of one's identities to be more wholly unified.

Relph and Massey both stress the importance of home in relation to an individual's sense of place and self. Relph claims that "In authentic experience 'home', whether a house, a village, a region, or a nation, is a central point of existence and individual identity from which you look out on the rest of the world" (83). Despite its importance, Relph states, "The meaning of 'home' has been weakened not only through increased mobility and a splitting of the functions associated with it, but also by sentimentalism and commercialism" (83). In contemporary society, home has become associated with a house, but the various aspects of one's life that would include home are kept separate from one another. This separation between home life, work life, and social life, for instance, no longer makes home the central point of existence. As such, Relph asserts that the frequent "interchangeability of 'homes'—it has been estimated that in North America the rate of mobility is equivalent to each household moving once every three years—is both made possible by and reinforces the reduction in the significance of 'home'" (83). In this conceptualization, home does not hold historical significance nor does it seem to matter where it is geographically located. The decision, however, for

return migrants to go back to the South, to home, suggests that the idea of home is still significant and something quite different from the physical structure of a house.

An issue Massey raises relative to a return home, in *For Space* (2005), is that “Migrants imagine ‘home’, the place they used to be, *as it used to be*” (123). In most cases, this “used to be” translates to nostalgia surrounding the idea of home, which she views as detrimental. As Massey writes, “nostalgia constitutively plays with notions of space and time” so “that the imagination of going home [...] so frequently means going ‘back’ in both space and time. Back to the old familiar things, to the way things used to be” (124). Massey adds “that when nostalgia articulates space and time in such a way that it robs others of their histories (their stories), then indeed we need to rework nostalgia” (124). While Morrison, referenced above, distinguishes between nostalgia for the South and the modern South holding opportunities for the future, Massey recognizes nostalgia as robbing others of their stories, and that view is entirely appropriate when considering the type of nostalgia still existing for the South in American popular culture.¹⁸

In African American literature there is, however, a different type of nostalgia present in relation to the concept of region and home. Acknowledging place as fluid, rather than static, rejects the practice of nostalgia because “the truth is that you can never simply ‘go back’, to home or to anywhere else. When you get ‘there’ the place will have moved on just as you yourself will have changed” (Massey 125). It can be said, therefore, that in many ways the Civil Rights Movement was fighting against nostalgia for the South that sought to keep certain antebellum formal structures within the South. In

¹⁸ See the essay collection *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (2000) for a historical development of southern nostalgia, and Tara McPherson’s *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (2003) for an analysis of southern nostalgia in American popular culture.

African American return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era, there are moments of character nostalgia for the rural, black folk South; however, and more important, there are also significant periods in the novels when significant change is clearly recognized and viewed positively for both the individual and the community.

The concept of home is less geographically placed in African American literature and the quest for home is directly connected to the exploration of identity in relation to place. In *Burning Down the House: Home in African American Literature* (2005), Valerie Sweeny Prince claims that the failure of the North to deliver its promises during the Great Migration left the “Passion for home [running] like lifeblood through the African American psyche” (2). As Rogers suggests, “The basic drive of migration is the search for a livable home” (4). While Rogers’s idea of home was a literal place, much like Relphe and Massey’s descriptions, Prince discusses home as intangible, a “sense” (5) or “a universal ideal to which we aspire” (7). This does not, however, result in the abandonment of the concept, but instead fuels the desire to remake the shattered idea of a house into an actual home. Like Charles Scruggs in *Sweet Home: Invisible Cities in the Afro-American Novel* (1993), Sweeny cites the city as the desired “home” in African American literature. However, the only successful construction of home Sweeny encounters in her study is that of Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* in which a strong African American community must embody its opposite in order to continue fighting for unstable home. The multiple shortcomings of the city to deliver the desired home have returned African American literature to the rural South in search of a place with which to identify, in search of a physical and spiritual connection to home, not a house.

In all, the term “place-based identity” therefore signifies the tight connection between the physical space occupied and the construction of identity that reflects that place. The conceptualization of identities relative to place is an attribute of return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era. Migrants are depicted separating northern-urban and southern-rural identities. These identities become so rooted to place that the migrants have difficulty moving them. I argue that return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era disrupt the fixed identities by questioning their boundaries and the rigidity with which they are defined.

Chapter Outlines

Structurally and discursively, the chapters of this dissertation move from the re-representation of the Civil Rights Movement in the South—in which the South becomes a space of redefinition—to narrations of the eventual reconciliation, stability, and wholeness of the self. Thus, the chapters follow a thematic instead of a chronological progression in order to construct a larger view of the South present in contemporary African American return migration novels. All of the texts I am dealing with are written after 1975. This time frame enables me to address the change in the literary treatment of the South following the Civil Rights Movement and African American literature’s participation in reconstructing that image. Although not all return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era include physical returns, returns to the South occur in all of the studied texts, though it occasionally requires a redefining of what qualifies as the North. There are instances of metaphorical, psychological returns, as seen in Morrison’s *Jazz* (1992), or spiritual returns, exemplified in Tina McElroy Ansa’s *Baby of the Family* (1989). Like the physical returns, these symbolic journeys back are and can be just as

meaningful, powerful, and transformative for African American characters, male and female.

For most of the focal novels, the Civil Rights Movement appears on the periphery, either in moments where it is specifically mentioned as a past event or when a character has an encounter that invokes the Movement. Its consistent presence, however, shows an acknowledgement of the Movement's importance to the development of this sub-genre of migration novels. Chapter One focuses, accordingly, on the return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era that are temporally set during the Civil Rights Movement. These novels situate the foundation upon which those stories set after the Civil Rights Movement build. In many ways, the stakes are much higher for the characters who return to the South during the Civil Rights Movement than for those who return afterwards. The main texts for this chapter are Walker's *Meridian* and Andrews's *Baby's Sweets*. Andrews and Walker both depict the return of black female characters to the rural South and position the Civil Rights struggle around these characters' ability to regain control over their own bodies. In *Baby Sweet's*, the control in question is related to sexual exploitation of black women by white men in the South, while in *Meridian* it is a question of psychological control over the body that is sacrificed for the well-being of the black community. Treating these two novels together creates a multifaceted image of women who, after participating in formal Civil Rights activities, practice forms of resistance that are more suited to their individual needs and beliefs. Additionally, each novel speculates about a definable end to the Movement indicated by a symbolic change.

Following the Civil Rights Movement, African American literature begins to reconsider accepted attitudes about the North and the South. Thus, Chapter Two moves

from the more categorical juxtaposition of the urban North and the rural South in Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* to the confusion of a South that is both urban and rural in Jones's *Leaving Atlanta*. At the forefront of these two novels is the importance of place, as Marshall and Jones consider assumptions about the urban and the rural, and correspondingly about the North and the South. Both authors depict the difficulties their characters face with place-based identities that have been informed by misconceptions about the urban-North and the rural-South.

Chapters Three and Four look at the community's role and the individual's role in the process of self-definition within the space of the South. In chapter three, I explore the significance of community in Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* and Ansa's *Ugly Ways*. The loss of communities fostered by segregation in the post-Civil Rights era is a point of concern with critics of contemporary African American literature. Kenan and Ansa are amongst the black writers that have responded to that concern by developing fictional black communities that serve as the setting for all their texts: Tims Creek for Kenan, and Mulberry for Ansa. I examine repercussions of community-defined identities that do not leave room for individual self-definition. Both *A Visitation of Spirits* and *Ugly Ways* call for new configurations of home, of communities, that support rather than police their members.

Chapter Four culminates the trajectory of my project. It situates characters making permanent returns to the South in order to repair and meld their fractured selves. I focus on Naylor's *Mama Day* and Morrison's *Home* as their characters bring together community-defined identity and individual self-definition. In that mending, fusion, and self-(re)definition, place is important to the characters, independent of community.

Within the space of the South, the characters must make personal journeys through their pasts and experiences to define stable identities from which their future subjectivities can develop.

CHAPTER I. THE BLACK WOMAN'S BODY AND THE SOUTHERN CIVIL
RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN RAYMOND ANDREWS'S *BABY SWEET'S*
AND ALICE WALKER'S *MERIDIAN*

African American return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era do not all directly address the Civil Rights Movement in their narratives. However, the thematic shift in the depiction of the South in African American migration novels—from those of the Great Migration during the Jim Crow era to those of the return migration during the post-Civil Rights era—positions the Civil Rights Movement as a crucial moment in authorial reimagining of the South in African American literature. As such, the Civil Rights Movement appears both centrally and tangentially to the plots of return migration novels, whether the stories are set temporally during the Civil Rights Movement or after it. For example, texts such as Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Home* (2012), Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), and Tina McElroy Ansa's *Baby of the Family* (1989)¹⁹ are positioned during the Civil Rights Movement and their characters' experiences are directly related to the surrounding events. Others such as Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989)²⁰, Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta* (2002), and Alice Randall's *Rebel Yell* (2010) are located following the Civil Rights Movement with brief references that critique the progress of the Movement in relation to their characters' current conditions.

¹⁹ The return migration that occurs in Ansa's novel is not a physical return but a temporal return in which the main character's interaction with spirits moves her spatially through time and through alternate understandings of the South.

²⁰ As will be discussed in Chapter 2 with Jones's novels, the North of Kenan's novel is that of the urban space and his main character's return is to his smaller more rural hometown.

This chapter focuses on two return migration novels set during the Civil Rights Movement, Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) and Raymond Andrews's *Baby Sweet's* (1983). Revisiting an earlier time, these texts directly engage with the Movement. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, they judge the Movement's success in relation to its black female characters' reclamation of their bodies from the volatile Civil Rights South to which they return.

The return to earlier time periods in the return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era represents an attempt to revise our understandings of the events involved in the return to the South. In *Neo-Segregation Narratives* (2010) Brian Norman identifies a specific tradition in African American literature of the post-Civil Rights era in which narratives are temporally set during United States' segregation. He terms this literary tradition, neo-segregation narratives. He asserts that "While segregation narratives attempted to revise America's racial script, neo-segregation novels continue that effort in revising Jim Crow's history" (9). The revision Norman argues is occurring in these neo-segregation narratives is also present African American return migration narratives of the post-Civil Rights era that position their characters' returns in relation to the Civil Rights Movement, and in so doing engage with, complicate, or revise the history and events of the Movement. These African American return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era, which overlap with Norman's concept of neo-segregation narratives, feature characters returning to the South prior to²¹ and during the Civil Rights Movement in

²¹ Such as Andrews's *Appalachee Red* (1978) in which the main character, Red, returns to the South in the mid-1940s. Additionally, separate from the return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era and Norman's concept of neo-segregation narratives, neo-slave narratives also feature characters who return from the North, such as Morrison's Paul D from *Beloved* (1987), or characters who reach the northern edge of the South and return to the deep South, such as in Shirley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986). The temporal scope of my project does not allow for the discussion of neo-slave narratives, but it is important to note that those characters who return to the South in neo-slave narratives are driven by similar purposes:

order to fight for a place for themselves and for communities in which they have personal investment. As such, the Movement is positioned in direct connection with the migration of the mid-twentieth century. In her study *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010), Isabel Wilkerson argues correctly that the loss of black southerners, “through the sheer weight of [the Great Migration], helped push the country towards the civil rights revolutions of the 1960s” (9). African American return migration narratives of the post-Civil Rights era address the link between migration and the Civil Rights Movement by placing those who return from the North at the center of the Movement in the South. This return is not driven by a rejection of the North, but by a desire to fight for the space of the South.

The attention paid to the Civil Rights Movement in African American return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era is also integral to the work of revising the space of the South in the African American literature. As hinted in the introduction, African American literary imagination of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century largely equates the South with Jim Crow laws. As a result, Jim Crow with its myriad impacts on black life permeates African American narratives engaging with the South.²² The reclamation of the South by many black writers, however, involves a re-envisioning of the South beyond the prior parameters of Jim Crow. Post-Civil Rights era black writers add to that literary re-representation of the South by situating their narratives in earlier time periods—from the antebellum South through the Jim Crow South—to construct

the search for people, place, and home, or to fight against the system at work while asserting their subjectivities. For more on neo-slave narratives see Ashraf H. A. Rushdy’s *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Logic of a Literary Form* (1999), Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu’s *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (1999), and Arlene R. Keizer’s *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (2004).

²² From James Weldon Johnson’s novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) to Richard Wright’s autobiographical sketches “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” (1937) to Alice Childress’s play *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White* (1966).

narratives that exist alongside and thematize the history of southern violence and oppression without the immediate need to focus on those issues.

Critics have noted that the reimagining of the South in the post-Civil Rights era is a project led by black women writers, many of whom portray the region as a space of healing. Trudier Harris argues in *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line* (2009) that one of the main differences in the treatment of the South by black men and women writers is at the literal site of the body with the historical legacies of lynching and rape in the South. She claims that generally black men writers have more discomfort towards the South because the violence resulting in death could not be overcome, whereas “black women and black female characters, even after rape, move on with their lives”²³ (7). Harris contends that beyond just the ability for female characters to move on with their lives, the message conveyed is “Wherever one finds one’s self on southern soil, these women writers posit, the possibility exists for transcendence without permanent damage to the psyche” (15). I would add to this assertion that not only does the likelihood of transcendence exist on southern soil, but that the writers suggest that the space of the South is a necessary component in the reconstitution of the self, especially in African American novels of the post-Civil Rights era.

It is important to also note that twentieth-century black male writers have also focused on black female characters’ ability to inhabit the space of the South. For instance, Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923)—arguably the most canonical African American text depicting the South—is populated with black female characters that are relatively

²³ Harris notes that she is not opening up a conversation about who suffered more—black men or black women—but that there are important differences in the way each type of physical assault can be addressed by its victims and/or witnesses. Furthermore, it is the difference in the ways in which black male and female writers treat the violence in their writing that leads her to focus on this specific piece of southern history present in the literature.

stationary in the South, while black male characters move between the North and South, but are unable to successfully inhabit the South, as shown most clearly in Kabnis's failed return to the South in *Cane*'s final section. In *Masculinist Impulses* (2005), Nathaniel Grant claims Toomer portrays black women as the beauty of the South and black men as those who would ignorantly or willingly partake in that destruction. Additionally, he notes Toomer racializes specific spaces through the use of female characters: "A darker black womanhood can represent the rich dark earth of the country while a feminized whiteness stands for the shining city; the black man in *Cane* is generally suspended between these" (37). In both cases, the women are positioned as objects²⁴ with which the men struggle as they move within and between the spaces of the North and the South. The black female characters are thus equated with the physical space of the South and its black folk life and culture.

African American literature of the post-Civil Rights era by both black men and women writers attempts to revise earlier problematic portrayals of black female characters in the South as objects. The response by black writers in the return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era shifts from casting male protagonists in the Great Migration to the North to highlighting female protagonists in the return migration to the South. Black female characters are no longer represented as stationary objects of the South but rather mobile subjects that *choose* the South. As moving subjects, the black female characters conceive and enact change in southern communities while positioning themselves as individuals. Additionally, those returning to the South of the Civil Rights

²⁴ Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" (1983) also questions Toomer's depiction and understanding of black women in his writing. She suggests his treatment of black women presents them as spiritually oppressed to the point of emptiness. Walker challenges this representation in her essay and, as we will see, explores the issue in her novel *Meridian* (1976).

Movement confront the gendered revolutionary attitudes propagated by Black Nationalism through the tactics they use to bring about change in their communities. Madhu Dubey claims that “As a symbolic locus of the undesirable past, then, the black woman was excluded from the ‘new’ political agenda of black nationalistic discourse” (20). As we shall see, these black female characters respond to the revolutionary activities and organizations that fail to meet their needs by independently working for the cause they find most compelling in a manner that best fits their own beliefs and situations.

This chapter looks at the ways Alice Walker and Raymond Andrews illustratively return to the 1960s as they revise the history of Jim Crow at the site of black women’s literal bodies in their respective novels *Meridian* and *Baby Sweet’s*. Walker and Andrews couch the success of the Civil Rights Movement in the South as the black woman attaining control over her own body after returning to the South. Walker’s critique of the expectations placed on women by both their communities and Civil Rights organizations manifests as *Meridian*’s physical and mental sacrifice to fight civil rights injustices even after the Movement is supposedly over, while Andrews uses humor as he pushes the limit of objectification of black female characters while moving them towards subjectivity. His depiction of prostitution in *Baby Sweet’s*, and sexual assaults in his earlier novels, draws attention to the historical sexual violence and exploitation of black women in the South upon which he comments. I argue that Walker and Andrews both use the framework of the return migration to recognize black women’s significant roles within the Civil Rights Movement. The women play major parts, both formally, as a part of the Movement, and subversively, as independent contributors. Walker and Andrews are also concerned to

acknowledge a change in the South that allows their female characters to reclaim their bodies from the violence and exploitation in the region. The point here, then, is that the focal texts depict the return migration as an act, a decision, motivated by the returnee's desire to take a stand in the South for the benefit of both the community and the individual.

Andrews's narrator marks the end of Jim Crow on the 4th of July 1966 with his main character, Lea, bringing Jim Crow to an end by redefining the parameters of her sexual activity in order to gain a new form of control over her body through her sexuality. In other words, it is through Lea's rejection of prostitution and reclaiming of her body and her own sexual pleasure that signal a significant change in Andrews's South. Walker's main character, Meridian, is still fighting for Civil Rights into the 1970s. This fight manifests as mental and emotional control over her body that positions the reclamation of her body as a psychological act. These two characters return to the South in search of their individual identities and their identities *within* their communities. In addition to revising the South of the African American literary imagination, the novels under study represent it as a site that has more to offer these characters than does the North, specifically in terms of enabling them to define and actualize their selves on their own terms.

Even though Walker's *Meridian* was published before Andrews's *Baby Sweet's* I start with Andrews's novel for three reasons. One, the chronology of Andrews's narrative begins and ends before Walker's narrative, since Walker extends Meridian's Civil Rights Movement into the 1970s. Two, the chapter moves inwards discursively: its direction is from the interactions between the white and black community members in Andrews's

narrative to those among the black community members and the revolutionaries in Walker's narrative. And finally, the intersectionality of Lea and Meridian's experiences can be read together progressively. Lea's resistance comes through her manipulation of her sexuality for sexual revenge, while Meridian shuts down her sexuality, after it betrays her multiple times. She disconnects from her body to withstand her form of protest. Neither of these choices are viable for the women; instead, the culminating events of the novels are what actually allow the women to regain control over their bodies. Towards the end of *Baby Sweet's*, Lea sees her actions through a different light and reconsiders her own tactics regarding the use of her body, while Meridian also questions the physiological suffering she has willingly endured.

Before analyzing Lea's return from the North and her relationship to the end of Jim Crow, we should situate *Baby Sweet's* in relation to the Muskhogean County trilogy to which it belongs. Like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County and Tina McElroy Ansa's Mulberry County, Muskhogean County is a fictional county of Andrews's creation. It is located in Georgia near Atlanta and is the setting of his novels *Appalachee Red* (1978), *Rosiebelle Lee Wildcat Tennessee* (1981), and *Baby Sweet's*. The majority of the trilogy takes place from the early 1900s through 1966, though many of the characters' family histories recounted stretch back to the 1800s and the beginnings of Muskhogean County reaches back to the 1600s. *Appalachee Red* focuses on the fictional town of Appalachee and develops both the black and white communities that occupy that space, *Rosiebelle Lee Wildcat Tennessee* centers on the rural community of Plain View located outside Appalachee, and *Baby Sweet's* brings the storylines from the first two novels together, back in the town of Appalachee.

Baby Sweet's tells the story of Rosie Belle Lee's granddaughter Lea and of John Morgan Jr., the son of the town's white patriarch John Morgan Sr. Appalachee Red's girlfriend and owner of all of his property and possessions in Appalachee, Baby Sweet, partners with John Morgan Jr. to open a brothel after "Red's" café fails from a lack of customers due to the success of integration. Lea rides into town on the day of the brothel's, "Baby Sweet's," grand opening. As with the preceding novels, *Baby Sweet's* brings the sexual exploitation of women to the forefront of the narrative. At the end of the first novel, Red succeeds in killing Baby Sweet's white rapist, Sheriff "Boots" White, who represents the rise of the poor white class in the South following Reconstruction, but he fails to bring down John Morgan Sr., who represents the old moneyed South of the antebellum period. Andrews returns his final novel to Appalachee to once again challenge John Morgan Sr.'s reign over the southern town, this time through the character of Lea.

Andrews positions the trilogy's narrator as a storyteller from within these communities which both breaks the narrative's linearity and helps develop the complex relationships that exist between the community members, both black and white. Each time a new place or character, no matter how minor, is introduced, the plot's trajectory is paused for a rich, in depth history. This technique, along with Andrews's use of call-and-response, functions to construct a playfully ironic narrative that addresses both the violent history of the South and the deeply rooted black communities that inhabit the space. At the heart of Andrews's writing is humor. As Trudier Harris observes, "Andrews is in the writing game for the sheer fun of it [...] and he gets his fun by laughing *at* his characters and the circumstances in which they find themselves just as much as he laughs *with*

them” (emphasis original, *Scary* 197). Andrews voiced on multiple occasions his deep love of the South²⁵ and his desire to depict the strength of the people who occupy the space and the pleasure they experience in life. He does not, however, shy away from the difficult circumstances faced in the South; instead, he uses humor to create “voices and characters whose slightly altered notes of oppression provide us with fresh looks at much-worn southern territory” (Harris, *Scary* 196). In order to do so, Andrews narrator and fictional community construct stereotypes around the novel’s characters and pushes those stereotypes to the limits, while at the same time Andrews develops his characters outside of those imposed stereotypes as he shows their complexities and that they embody few if any of the qualities present in the community’s imagination of them.

In working with Andrews’s novels, critics have focused on his stories’ attention to issues of masculinity.²⁶ Some reviewers have even gone as far as subordinating women in his novels by adamantly stating Andrews’s trilogy is about men,²⁷ both black and white. It is accurate that Andrews’s trilogy is *also* about men because Andrews spends time developing and depicting whole communities of individuals; I contend, however, that women are actually his focus. Andrews even states in his preface to *Baby Sweet’s* that “This book is not about Baby Sweet. *Appalachee Red* is about Baby Sweet. This book is about Lea” (x). His main black female characters drive the majority of the narratives and it is their stories and experiences that dominate his novels. One of the experiences these black female characters share is what the narrator calls the “white-man-black-woman love affair, a then-prevalent Southern pastime” (*Appalachee* 7). This ironic “love affair”

²⁵ See Andrews’s introduction to *Appalachee Red* and his article “The Necessity of Blacks’ Writing Fiction About the South” (1993).

²⁶ Trudier Harris’s “This Disease Called Strength: The Masculine Manifestation in Raymond Andrews’s *Appalachee Red*” (2001) and *South of Tradition: Essays on African American Literature* (2002).

²⁷ Keith Byerman’s *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2005).

the narrator refers to is the rape of black women in the South by their white employers and other white men in positions of power, a practice dating back to slavery.²⁸ Danielle McGuire acknowledges this sexual violation of black women in the South as the impetus for the Civil Rights Movement in her study *At the Dark End of the Street* (2010). McGuire addresses the lack of justice black women received when reporting the crimes or even attempting to defend themselves. In Andrews's trilogy, this violation is rarely acknowledged as rape by those in power, the narrator, or the victims themselves.

The depiction of sexual assault across the trilogy positions the self-reclamation of the black woman's body at the end of the final novel, *Baby Sweet's*, as a pivotal symbolic turning point in the history of the South. In *Appalachee Red*, Andrews depicts the sexual coercion of Little Bit by her white employer John Morgan Sr. (7-10), which results in her pregnancy and the destruction of her marriage to Big Man Thompson; and, the main character, Baby Sweet, escapes the sexual advances of her white employer Mist' Ed at his plantation only to enter into brutal and ritualized rapes by the chief of police "Boots" White (81-85), followed by her sexual relationship with Red which does not begin with a clear act of consent (92). In *Rosiebelle Lee Wildcat Tennessee*, Andrews depicts Rosiebelle Lee's resistance to the advances of her white employer's oldest son as the impetus for the castration of her fiancé Willie Henry, followed by her untold sexual experiences that result in children she does not claim as her own and leaves scattered across the South as the shame of white men (237-239). Finally, in *Baby Sweet's*, Andrews depicts the rape of white trash Betty Jean by a middle-aged preacher as her

²⁸ See Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985), Crystal N. Feimster's *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (2011), and Danielle McGuire's *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (2010) for discussions of black women's rapes in the South from slavery through the Civil Rights Movement.

multi-racial baby, Lea, lies in the dirt beside her (258). Little Bit and Rosie Belle Lee are of the same generation, born prior to the 1900s, and both are working as maids when their assaults occur. Baby Sweet and Betty Jean are of the next generation, born in the 1920s, and they are separately headed to Atlanta in 1945, after leaving their rural homes, in the hopes of finding opportunities in the city when they encounter their assaulters. Baby Sweet never makes it to the city, and Betty Jean is outcast once she arrives for having a multi-racial daughter. Lea is the final generation, born in 1944, and college educated in the North. Unlike the other women, she is not sexually assaulted. Upon returning to the South, Lea does make it her mission, however, to respond to the sexual exploitation of women by men, specifically those in positions of significant power.

A college education in the North is one of the main reasons Andrews's characters leave the South. The result of the northern college education is that they return—four years later, without spending any additional time in the North—as leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. The character Blue, who returns from college to join the freedom riders in *Appalachee Red*, is briefly referenced multiple times in *Baby Sweet's* as leading sit-ins for southern integration, which, as I suggested earlier, positions a formal Civil Rights Movement as the backdrop to Lea's activities. Initially Lea has no interest in being physically active in the Movement. As an outcast in her southern community, Lea is an introvert who spends all her time locked in her room reading. When she moves from Atlanta, Georgia, to attend the University of Michigan with the desire that living in the North will free her of her outcast status, her plan is to write the "Great American Novel." This plan changes, ironically, when she quickly finds her status in the North the same as in the South. She reflects that "even up in the North, where they *understand* the colored

problem, I was still a little colored girl with cracker skin and nigger hair” (emphasis original 149). Lea and Blue find themselves more confined in the North than in the South because the North attempts to mask its racism which makes it more difficult for the two of them to confront. This limits both characters’ ability to address their situations there. As a result, Lea and Blue feel disenchanting with their northern colleges when the idealized North turns up short. This disempowerment causes them to look back nostalgically to the South and stake their claims there as opposed to in the North. Both respond to their frustrations with the North by becoming involved in the Civil Rights Movement activities in the South.

Lea’s experience in the North transforms her; she leaves her books behind for physical involvement in the Movement. Lea recalls, ““I got caught up and became—some thought overly—active in the Civil Rights Movement. Back to the South, baby. Under a full head of kinky hair I spent all of my summer vacations, and frustrations, marching through dear ol’ Dixie justifying my coloredness by *living* the Great American Novel”” (emphasis original 149). Lea’s drive to justify her “coloredness” comes from her being continuously outcast, a marginalization she no longer hides from. Yet, as the narrative infers, the only productive place to respond to her frustration is back in the South. She also positions the Movement as the material of the Great American Novel, which she no longer has time to write because she is participating in it. This commitment to the formal Civil Rights Movement involving Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) marches, however, does not last for Lea. Blue continues the “overly active” status in the Movement, but Lea abandons it as she internalizes her mother’s experience in relation to men. Betty Jean’s early and sudden death shifts Lea’s focus from her own experience of

race to her mother's experience with gender. Much like her dissatisfaction with the North for its shortcomings, Lea realizes to her dismay that the potential success of the Movement will not address her mother's treatment by men. The formal organization of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Nationalism accompanying it do not provide a space for Lea to address women's exploitation in conjunction with racial discrimination.²⁹ The realities of her mother's sexual exploitation lead Lea to develop her own civil rights tactics to meet the needs of her situation. The strategies do not take the form of protest, as her earlier participation in marches did and as does Blue's continued affiliation.

Lea transitions from taking formal action with the organized Civil Rights Movement to her own form of subversion independent of any organization but reliant on her perceived sexual power. Avenging her mother is the goal behind her final return to the South upon her graduation from college. She decides to go after all the men her mother worked for and then all men generally to disempower and embarrass them sexually. Lea removes her body as another number in the national Civil Rights Movement and reassigns it to the local level to exact change, one man at a time. The sexual violence across the trilogy culminates in Lea's ability to assert her sexual agency through the sacrifice and, then, the reclamation of her body. This eventually results in the destruction of the white patriarchal figure of Appalachee, John Morgan Sr. These female characters' recurring incidents of sexual violence come to an end on July 4th 1966, when

²⁹ For historical overviews of black women's relationships to the Civil Rights Movement and Black Nationalism see Wahneema Lubiano's "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing Ourselves and Others" (1997), *Sisters in the struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (2001) and *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (2006). This issue has also been addressed in reference to other novels by black women writers see Madhu Dubey's *Black Women and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (1994).

Lea appears in Muskhogean County to work as a prostitute at Baby Sweet's, the new brothel in town. Andrews signals a turning point to centuries of the casual treatment of sexual violence against black women in the South when John Morgan Sr. dies on top of Lea in bed.

Scholars have a tendency to focus on the significance of this ending for John Morgan Sr.'s relationship to the South, rather than its implications for Lea.³⁰ One of the few exceptions to such a view, Harris notes that "As Appalachee Red's spiritual sister by her mixture of black and white blood, Lea inadvertently becomes the avenger that Red could never become with John Sr." (*Scary* 204). In the first novel, Red attempts unsuccessfully to seek revenge against his biological father, John Morgan Sr., by running off with and impregnating John Morgan Sr.'s daughter. Red's use of the white female body for indirect revenge against John Morgan Sr. fails because Red overestimates the value of the white female body to John Morgan Sr. John Morgan Sr. responds by keeping his daughter and grandchild hidden from the rest of the community and, furthermore, remains unaffected upon learning that Red is also his biological son, thus making the relationship incestuous. Lea, however, has direct access to John Morgan Sr. through his desire for her "black" body. At this point in the narrative, her reasons for being with John Morgan Sr. are not based in revenge and his defeat is unintentional. That Andrews presents her success in this moment, however, implies the success of the Civil Rights Movement—specifically Lea's ability to undermine John Morgan Sr.'s claim to black women's bodies—and represents the changing South within the framework of the novel.

³⁰ For example, see Jeffrey Folks's "'Trouble' in Muskhogean County: The Social History of a Southern Community in the Fiction of Raymond Andrews" (1998).

Lea's ability to signal a change in the social structure of the South largely depends on her status in the novel as an outsider. Like Walker's *Meridian* or Morrison's *Sula*, this position gives her power over the community, which, denied full knowledge of her being, can only construct its own lore about Lea based on speculation and its own needs. Positioning her as an outsider, the narrator relies on her physical appearance and an awareness of how the community will receive her to present her body as hypersexualized. The community locates Lea's power in her body and her sexuality because she enters its space as the third prostitute at Baby Sweet's. The community's need to turn the white prostitute they call "Motorcycle Momma" into a legend is reflected in the story surrounding her arrival that passes through the town. According to the narrator, the gossip in the black male community is that

despite her long straight blond hair and light skin, [she] right off announced her color as colored and proclaimed black as "beautiful" by stating flat out to the white man John Morgan, Junior, that her body was "for colored only," and if she wasn't allowed to serve her own race with it there in Baby Sweet's, then she would just get her hat and motor right on out of Appalachee...the *whole* damn whorehouse *knew* that this here Motorcycle Momma said exactly what she meant and, Lord, meant exactly what she said. (emphasis original 116)

Baby Sweet's is initially segregated, sort of. It originally is structured such that only white men are allowed access to the black female bodies inside. This early setup reflects the scheme of the Jim Crow South with its history of white men raping black women and leaving both the women and the black men in their lives powerless to attain any form of justice.³¹ This community, therefore, develops its lore and legends on the individual's ability to resist or exert power over the white oppressors, as is the case with

³¹ Such is the case for Sarah and Silas in Richard Wright's "Long Black Song" in *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and for Little Bit and Big Man in Andrews's *Appalachee Red*.

their earlier legendary community members, Little Bit, Appalachee Red, and Rosie Belle Lee. In the male community's imagination, the pseudo integration of Baby Sweet's is only possible by this outsider's ability to confront the white man, acknowledge her love of black men with the black-as-beautiful reference, and claim her body as "for colored only." Lea's decision to provide the community's black men with that which they have previously been denied places her firmly in the community's gratitude and memory. For the black men in the novel, Lea's transgressive presence at Baby Sweet's implies a public acknowledgement of the beginnings of racial and gendered equality based on equal access to black women's bodies. Yet, Andrews later shows that the community's beliefs and assumptions about Lea's presence are misinformed because her mission is not about men having equal access to women's bodies, but for women to have control over their own bodies.

Here Lea's power is imagined by the black community of on lookers, who are also largely male. The imagined confrontation between Lea and John Morgan Jr. does not occur. It is significant that Lea's decision to proclaim her body "for colored only" comes down to a last-minute realization that the ensuing integration of the Civil Rights Movement—led in the state by Blue—would shut down the business if Baby Sweet and John Morgan Jr. do not figure out a way to serve the black population. Lea, overhearing the conversation, responds "'I'll serve the *black* bread'" (emphasis original 115). At this point her actual motives are still hidden from readers, and the few lines she speaks present her as having no interest at all in what happens at Baby Sweet's, or in issues connected to the Civil Rights Movement. It must be pointed out that even with the pseudo-integration of Baby Sweet's, the black patrons are still prevented from entering

through the front door and using the parlor or bar. The black patrons, instead, enter Lea's room through a back staircase and exterior door. For the community, however, their access to her body and to a building they were excluded from minutes earlier is equated with a shift in power they attribute to the woman they desire. For Andrews's narrative, however, the actual shift in power comes when Lea makes her decision to quit her life of prostitution.

The community's construction of Lea that places her power in her body and sexuality is not entirely wrong, as readers learn when Andrews makes Lea's story known. Two-thirds of the way through the novel the narrator is almost entirely silenced—with the exception of one paragraph in which the narrator notifies readers that the story of *Appalachee Red* is being told at that same moment across town—as Lea takes forty pages to convey her personal narrative to her new boss, the sympathetic Baby Sweet. Lea has the most agency of all of Andrews's characters because she is afforded the space to account for her own story; in the earlier novels, the equally puzzling *Appalachee Red* is given only two pages for his narrative and *Rosiebelle Lee* is allotted fifteen pages for hers. It is here that readers get the story of Betty Jean's rape after she is ostracized from her family for having a black baby. As Lea's mother, Betty Jean is subsequently outcast from the white community in Atlanta after Lea's hair changes its consistency not too long after she begins school, visually marking her as black. After Lea becomes racially marked, Betty Jean finds herself in similar employment situations as female characters from the earlier novels, *Little Bit* and *Rosiebelle Lee*; she can only get hired if she gives her employers the rights to her body.

In response to the treatment of her mother, which she views as causing her mother's early death, Lea decides to first seek out these men and attain sexual revenge on them, and then decides even to go after all men in general, though she frequently seeks white men in positions of power. It is from Lea's self-narration that readers come to know her and understand not only the impetus for her work as a prostitute, but that contrary to the community's impressions of her, her mission is really one that is less connected to the Civil Rights Movement and Black Nationalism, and more concerned with seeking justice for the sexual exploitation of women,³² not about serving black men. It is not her ability to work as a prostitute, however, that signals a change in the South; it is her self-sexual exploitation that helps her discover what she is really fighting for and how to achieve it by reclaiming her body.

Through her personal narrative, Lea reveals her own awareness of the power her body, when understood and correctly utilized, now has or can have over men. Lea recalls, "it didn't take me long to discover in tracking down Momma's killers that God, despite being a man and perhaps unsuspected by Him at the time, from the deal dealt woman the single most powerful weapon the world has ever known—the pussy, or the promise of it. And, honey, I used *both*" (emphasis original 170). Her revenge on her mother's past employers involves not just her awareness of the power of her body, but her intent and ability to use those powers. Lea's initial actions do not take the form of prostitution because they do not include any exchange beyond personal satisfaction; the switch to financial transaction happens only after she has avenged her mother's death. Her

³² This theme is also explored in other texts by black writers. For example, Gayl Jones's *Eva's Man* (1987) recounts the experiences of its titular character from her jail cell as she recalls the various sexual assaults experienced by herself and other women in her life, which culminates in her killing and biting off a man's penis.

retaliation against her mother's past employers also does not necessarily involve any sexual contact. Lea's goal is public sexual embarrassment that works to emasculate the men. She is able to use men's desire and the "promise of pussy" to destroy the men's families, businesses, and sanity as she walks away without giving them what they actually want. It is her ability to elude any sexual situation she finds herself in that begins to separate Lea from her female predecessors whose opportunities were more limited.³³ For the black women across the trilogy, it is Lea's sexual agency, her subversive control of who has access to her body that symbolizes a shift in the historical systems of the South.

Unbeknownst to Lea, her attitude towards her body and the use of her sexuality is similar to her grandmother's, Rosibelle Lee, with the one main difference being Rosibelle Lee's lack of sexual agency. Where Lea successfully combats a pimp to maintain her autonomy, Rosibelle Lee's repeated resistance to her employer's oldest son—which finally escalates to her pulling a knife on him to protect her self—results in the castration of her fiancé Willie Henry. While Lea can decide who she has sex with and why, Rosibelle Lee realizes she lacks such ownership of her own body. In response to that realization, Rosibelle Lee travels across the South no longer resisting sexual advances of white men with power. Like Lea, nonetheless, she finds her own revenge in leaving illegitimate children on the doorsteps of their fathers' wives. Rosibelle Lee's response to her sexual exploitation is also public shaming of the men. Although she does not have Lea's agency, Andrews presents her exoticized physical appearance as giving her more power over her situation than she would have otherwise.

³³ For reflections on women's power in the field of sex work see the collection *Whores and Other Feminists* (1997).

Both Lea and Rosiebelle Lee are exoticized and fetishized by the black and white communities of Muskhogean County. Rosiebelle Lee's arrival in Appalachee is initially racially ambiguous, as is her appearance hours later at Plain View. This uncertainty instantly gives Rosiebelle Lee power over those around her. Both the black community of Appalachee and the black community of Plain View question her racial background. The black men Rosiebelle Lee encounters in Appalachee are mesmerized by her because "Though her skin was a smooth acorn-brown, she was definitely not like any colored woman the old eyes squinting out from the shade of Blackshear's porch had ever hit on before that hot Georgia summer afternoon back in 1906" (*Rosiebelle* 3). The "acorn-brown" of her skin suggests to her watchers that she is a "colored woman," but her physical features and the manner she holds herself are unknown to the old men of Appalachee. Rosiebelle Lee represents something new and unknown for the Appalachee residents. Following Rosiebelle Lee's departure from Appalachee, her co-workers at Plain View see her as a "strange, non-nigger-looking new servant" (9). Like the old men of Appalachee, the black women working at the Plain View mansion also question her look as "strange" and cannot personally relate to her physical appearance. Rosiebelle Lee's long straight hair and olive skin tone combined with her air of importance imbue her with almost immediate power over the mansion workers of Plain View.

It is ironic that the same questionable features that place Rosiebelle Lee as an oddity and outsider in the black communities are what provide her power over its white residents as well. Even when there are not any employment openings in Plain View,

True to her words she had gotten herself hired immediately to a "house" job by none other than the lady of *the* house herself, Missis Bea, well known for her fetish for pretty and exotic things. Missis Bea felt her plantation house would be

greatly ornamented by the addition to her domestic staff of this unusually pretty—but a mite mystic looking—barefoot negress with the long straight black-as-coal shiny hair hanging down her back. (emphasis original 8-9)

It is Rosieabelle Lee's visual appearance that inspires Missis Bea to create a job for her.

Missis Bea's "fetish for pretty and exotic things" is generally met with items from abroad that she brings in to decorate her home. Extending this "fetish" to the "unusually pretty" and "mystic looking" Rosieabelle Lee suggests Missis Bea's desire to classify Rosieabelle Lee as an "exotic" foreigner that it is socially acceptable to be captivated by, instead of a light skinned black woman that Missis Bea is socially not suppose to envy. This depiction of Rosieabelle Lee as "exotic" foreigner allows her to charm Missis Bea and take over Missis Bea's responsibilities as lady of the house, giving Rosieabelle Lee power over all of the workers at Plain View. She eventually extends this power to Missis Bea's son, Mister Mac whom she chooses to provide for her and to have her own children with.

The oppression Lea experiences in the South as a child and adolescent differs from that of the other women in the trilogy because it is not an experience of sexual assault; instead, as the narrator suggests, hers is one of racial exclusion of a white body marked with blond kinky hair. A key component to Lea's sexual power over the men she encounters is her ability to physically present her body as either black or white. Upon her arrival in Appalachee, she wears a wig of long straight blond hair, which initially causes confusion as to why a white woman is entering Baby Sweet's. After the announcement that she is black, her whiteness functions as a sexual fetish for the black men who line up around the alley for their turn with her. Her whiteness is too much for her customers as each leaves shamefaced and silent. Readers eventually learn that some, if not all, of them prematurely ejaculate into a wash cloth as she ritualistically cleanses each one when they

enter her room. The black men's fetishization of her white body leaves them unable to access it once they are alone with her.

Alternately, the sexual fetishization of the white man for the black female body that consumes much of the novel, with artist John Morgan Jr.'s obsession with black women's nipples, reappears in the final pages when John Morgan Sr., the most respected man in town, sees wigless Lea's blond afro and desires only her. Just as the wig of long straight blond hair is important to her black customers, her natural hair is important to John Morgan Sr. Lea realizes that "more to her surprise, and secret delight, he appeared more fascinated by her kinks than her cunt, running his hand through...and through...and through...her hair. This, she felt, was what *really* got him ready" (emphasis original *Baby* 211). John Morgan Sr. forces Lea to question her knowledge about the power of her body and sexuality. His obsession with her hair is a secret delight to her because, as a child, the southern community's inability to reconcile her skin tone with her hair equaled her rejection. In this final scene, Lea discovers the power racial constructions have over human behavior.

At the end of her personal narrative, Lea frees herself from her commitment to sexual revenge and hatred towards men. She reveals that while taking a break she visited, her grandmother, Rosie Belle Lee's grave for the first time and promised her that she would never prostitute herself again. She finishes her story with a thank you and an apology to Baby Sweet "'Please, let me say I didn't walk in here begging for pity or advice...just an ear...an *understanding* woman's ear. That's all. And you've graciously provided it. Thanks a heap [...] I'm sincerely sorry and beg your forgiveness. But right now my heart ain't into whoring" (emphasis original 181). Lea tells her story in order to

be heard and understood by another woman. To readers, it allows her to show the way in which she understands her own sexual agency to be functioning, rather than leaving it constructed by the community as it is earlier. This self-narration prepares her to let go of her past, with her goal changing from the destruction of men to the reconstruction of her self by finding her father's family. Lea is ready to move from outsider to insider. She realizes that such a move begins with further self-actualization involving constructing a personal narrative on her own needs, separate from her dead mother's.

It is telling that before leaving, however, Lea goes back on her promise to her grandmother by taking one last customer, John Morgan Sr., as a tribute to her mother. This is the scene in which Lea's reclamation of her body and sexuality destroys the white patriarch of the southern town. While having sex with John Morgan Sr., she thinks about the reasons for her decision, justifying her actions to herself:

I lied about needing the money [...] but felt I was doing a favor to John Junior, who was the *only* person who helped Momma when her own daddy kicked her out, all because of me, and she had *nobody* else in the world to turn to. That's why I didn't *really* whore anymore. And for John Junior's daddy I even went *all* out, tried to enjoy it myself for a change. (emphasis original 209)

No longer driven by revenge, Lea's sexual agency becomes even more powerful. Her rationalization of her decision to have sex with John Morgan Sr. after she has quit the life of prostitution reinforces her sexual agency. Her claim that she "didn't *really* whore anymore" signifies that she does not have sex with John Morgan Sr. because he wants her body and can pay for it, but because she wants him to have access to it for her own personal reasons. She is able to identify this sexual interaction with John Morgan Sr. as anything she wants because she is in control of it. Lea's sexual power in this final scene

comes from her choice to go “all out” and try “to enjoy it [herself] for a change.” In consenting to this act and in seeking and deriving pleasure from it, Lea subordinates and thus implicitly removes John Morgan Sr.’s sexual power that, in the past, is based on force and money. He thinks he is just paying a prostitute here, but Lea’s motives take that monetary authority from him.

Initially in this scene, Andrews suggests John Morgan Sr.’s lack of direct access to Lea, due to her retirement and her ability to reject him if she chooses, marks the beginning of the end of his power. Perhaps more important, it finally and allegorically highlights a space for change within the southern social structure. As with her other clients, Lea is in control of the situation; her reasons for having sex with John Morgan Sr., however, have nothing to do with him and his power, but everything to do with her own emotional healing. It is this change in attitude that is significant when John Morgan Sr. dies atop her.

John Morgan Sr.’s death must necessarily accompany Lea’s emotional healing. He symbolizes the lingering attitudes of the Old South and the New South of Jim Crow; he has actively participated in sexual assaults on black female characters and has passively been involved in maintaining the problematic southern social structures by not only refusing to acknowledge any problems but also through his indifference towards his cardinal role in creating the problems. It is John Morgan Sr. refusal to acknowledge his culpability that, by believing himself indestructible, leaves him susceptible to Lea’s power. Lea’s healing and the future of the community are dependent on the death of the Old South and New Jim Crow South. John Morgan Sr.’s death symbolically frees the town of its remaining oppressor.

John Morgan Sr.'s death seals Lea's status as the ultimate legend of Appalachee and the most important character in Andrews's trilogy. Lea's knowledge and tactical displays of sexual agency represent the possibilities for black women to regain control over their bodies in the South if the Civil Rights Movement is successful. This sexual agency's destruction of John Morgan Sr. helps finally bring down the oppressive southern hierarchy and open the New post-Civil Rights South. Andrews's setting this event on the fourth of July ironically draws attention to celebrations of Independence Day. Finally, on this Independence Day of 1966, Lea's subversive revolutionary actions give the black community a deserved stake in the national holiday.

Andrews's trilogy is particularly important to our fullest understanding of the change in African American literature of the post-Civil Rights era that re-imagines a South specifically connected to black female characters and largely addressed by black women writers. It suggests a significant change in the way black women's bodies and sexual agency exist in the New post-Civil Rights South. Andrews is one of the few contemporary black men writers who position the South as a space with the potential for healing. Although Lea does not reconcile her identity by the end of the novel, it is clear that she has set the steps in motion and that recovery is her new project. She now has the knowledge and experience to define her identity more complexly.

While *Baby Sweet's* depicts Lea instigating a turning point for the Civil Rights Movement in the town of Appalachee through her destruction of the old southern white man, *Meridian* contrastively removes sexual exchange from Meridian's life early on with her rejection of her sexual urges that betray her with pregnancy on more than one occasion. Early on in the novel Meridian redeems her body from men by not forging

physical relationships with other men. Like Andrews's Lea, in reclamation of her body at the end of the novel, she takes her life back from the black community she dedicated it to through her civil rights work. While Walker, unlike Andrews, does not mark a specific end to the Civil Rights Movement, *Meridian* consciously discovers that moment for herself by witnessing a change in the community to which she had sacrificed her body. This community is not specific to one town, like the Appalachian community that claims Lea, but representative of multiple rural black communities. *Meridian* questions the idea of the Civil Rights Movement as both a success and a movement situated nationally and temporally; the novel suggests, instead, that it is an ongoing event that occurs depending on the changing psyche of the individual and his/her local community.

Meridian's thematic concern with black women's position in black communities is reflected in the corpus of Walker's texts. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) considers the presence of domestic violence within black communities and homes, and briefly touches on the Civil Rights Movement. Likewise, the canonical *The Color Purple* (1982) looks at sexual violence within black communities and families. Although her work has been criticized for its negative portrayal of black male characters, her overarching concern is to represent an alternate experience of black female characters, outside of black-white racial binaries and outside of a masculine Black Nationalist agenda. Thus, the experience she depicts with her titular character Meridian is one of the Civil Rights Movement relative to the black woman's experience within the black community, both at the national level of the Movement and at the local level through individual communities' actions.

Meridian is structured through a series of vignettes from the third person accounts around one of the three main characters: Meridian Hill, Truman Held, and Lynne Rabinowitz. The narrative is predominantly set during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the 1950s and the 1960s; however, readers are introduced to Meridian and Truman in the early 1970s as they debate the successes and failures of the Movement, along with its definitive conclusion. As the two reflect on Meridian's present situation and events of their pasts, Walker revises the history of the Civil Rights Movement to consider the role and sacrifices of black women in the South. The novel concludes with Meridian's self-reclamation after realization that there are fulfilling roles within her community she can occupy on her own terms without destructive self-sacrifice.

The discrepancy between the formal Civil Rights Movement at the nation level and the remnants of the informal movement at the local level is an issue Meridian and her former revolutionary friend Truman discuss directly. *Meridian* opens with a scene of Meridian standing in front of a town's tank in protest of the segregated viewing of a mummified white woman being marketed as a traveling marvel. Truman, who comes into town that same day looking for Meridian, witnesses the event and responds with the observation, "But the Civil Rights Movement changed all that!" (5). From the novel's outset Walker begins the project of revisiting and revising the history and purported accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement by questioning what the Movement actually achieved and whether or not it is actually over. Truman's response to the incident of segregation he encounters upon entering Chicokema, Georgia immediately positions him as an outsider to the town and, by extension, towns like it. He understands neither the continuing incidents of small town segregation in the South nor Meridian's

reasons for staying in such places. For Truman the Civil Rights Movement is past and deemed successful enough. This view is responsible for his confusion when watching scenes from it replay before his very eyes.

Truman is also confused at the outset of the novel due to his inability to conceptualize the Civil Rights Movement separate from its formal organization.

Meridian's localized work, after the end of the national Movement, leaves Truman unable to understand what Meridian might achieve. Truman, like Andrews, tries to periodize the Movement. As he later reveals, his designated end to the Civil Rights Movement does not come from success but from resignation: "'Meridian,' Truman said. 'Don't you realize no one is thinking about these things any more? Revolution was the theme of the sixties: [...] The leaders were killed, the restless young were bought off with anti-poverty jobs, and the clothing styles of the poor were copied by seventh avenue'" (192-193). Truman's relegation of revolution to a theme and, then later, to a fad questions the underlying beliefs of the movement that allow Truman to deduce its defeat to the loss of leaders, the appeasement of a generation, and the commodification of ideals at the national level. Meridian's rejection of material possessions and her lack of concern over her physical condition help position her outside those Truman identifies as being bought off or distracted from the cause.

This unwavering dedication to a cause Truman claims is dead and to questions that no one cares about any longer reflects Meridian's concern for the well being of the black community as a whole, and, more specifically, rural black communities less visible at the national level. Meridian does not condemn Truman for giving up on the Movement.

She challenges his assertions that it was a passing fad, but does not try to change his mind. The narrator reflects on Meridian's stance that

In the end people did what they had to do to survive. The acquiesced, they rebelled, they sold out, they shot it out, or they simply drifted with the current of the time, whatever it was. And they didn't endanger life and limb agonizing over what they would lose, which was what separated them from Meridian. (193)

Meridian is not just interested in surviving. She has done so in the past during her time as a wife with a child. She seeks out suffering in her dedication to the ideals of passive resistance connected to the Movement. She also struggles to answer difficult moral questions which she internalizes to the extent that her body physically decays. This decay is presented with extreme weight loss, hair loss, acne, yellowing of her eyes, and blackouts caused by her entire body shutting down directly following her protests.

Meridian is willing to die for the success of the revolution, which is her problem. When she is brought back to her home after her standoff with the tank, she is unconscious and in a state of paralysis. Her physical state after years of giving herself entirely over to the fight for civil rights continues to worsen every year. After not seeing her for a year, "Her face alarmed [Truman]. It was wasted and rough, the skin a sallow, unhealthy brown, with pimples across her forehead and on her chin. Her eyes were glassy and yellow and did not seem to focus at once. Her breath, like her clothes, was sour" (11). Though her blackouts and paralysis now only coincide with her protests, her body's decay is continuous. The community to which she remains an outsider sees her suffering and attempts to care for her from a distance.

The black community of Chicokema provides Meridian with generous amount of food and supplies so she can return her health, but she continues to deprive her body.

Meridian explains that the items provided for her by the town are an acknowledgement of her work on their behalf. She tells Truman, “They *appreciate* it when someone volunteers to suffer” (emphasis original 13). An earlier conversation between Truman and a member of the community, however, contradicts this assertion. While Truman stands there marveling at Meridian’s display of bravery and power, one of the town’s people tells him, ““as far as I’m concerned, this stuff she do don’t make no sense”” (8). This man’s inability to comprehend Meridian’s action has to do with his not placing value in the segregated viewing of the spectacle which she is protesting. He does not understand why she sacrifices herself for a supposedly ridiculous cause. On the most basic level, he does not value Meridian’s non-violent, passive resistance form of protest. As Meridian later discovers, the community does not desire that she willingly suffer. Reflecting that tension between the collective and the individual, their values and tactics are different from the passive resistance she is dedicated to from her early civil rights work. Meridian’s tension with communities is what causes her many movements throughout the novel, each time searching for individual fulfillment.

Meridian’s migrations to the North and to the South are tied to her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. The majority of the novel takes place in the South with Meridian migrating from a small rural town in Georgia to Atlanta. This first migration is motivated by her early work registering voters for the Civil Rights organization in her home town. It is during this initial involvement that Meridian is convinced she can have more out of life than just motherhood and a failed marriage. She moves to Atlanta for a college education and to take part in the protests happening in the urban environment. Similar to Andrews’s Blue and Lea, Meridian’s college education changes her outlook on

the world. Her disenchantment, however, is not with the North per se but with her college's conservatism. Meridian has an idealized view of education, especially after losing her access to her high school education at the time of her pregnancy. She and many of her activist classmates, like Anne Marion, struggle with the college's position on the Civil Rights Movement. The official policy is zero tolerance for students and faculty who participate in Civil Rights Movement activities even though the college administrators will look the other way. As a very active member in the Civil Rights Movement and a former wife and mother, Meridian is out of place at her college because "The emphasis at Saxon was on form, and the preferred 'form' was that of the finishing school girl whose goal, wherever she would later find herself in the world, was to be accepted as an equal because she knew and practiced all the proper social rules" (91). The college's accommodationist practices are in conflict with Meridian's dedication to helping those who need it, evidenced in her failed attempts to help Wild Child. Meridian attempts to mother the independent, homeless, pregnant Wild Child by bringing her to the university to clothe, feed, and shelter her. Meridian encounters resistance there and Wild Child is struck by a car and killed while attempting to reclaim her autonomy. After Wild Child's death, Meridian fails to attain a burial at the college campus because of its conservative position and desire to distance itself from everything Wild Child represents.

Meridian also finds herself directly in conflict with the black nationalistic agenda as she struggles with her tightrope roles as revolutionary and black woman. Karen Stein asserts, *Meridian* emphasizes "that the Movement failed to acknowledge women's selfhood and thus perpetuated the counterrevolutionary values of a destructive society" (Stein 129). Additionally, since "black national discourses tended to gender its racial

subjects as masculine” (Ahokas 482), women directly involved in the movement were gendered as masculine and deemed undesirable by their male counterparts (Danielson 323). These oppositional concerns lead Meridian to struggle with her own identity as she attempts to be a black revolutionary woman. Meridian rejects her mother’s model of traditional motherhood which she has already fallen into because Mrs. Hill’s experience of “motherhood is inherently oppressive” (Butler-Evans 120). Yet, as she demonstrates through her interactions with Wild Child, Meridian cannot let go of her desire to mother.

Meridian recognizes her disdain for her son when she is trapped in her home with him alone all day. Despite this contempt, her unconventional decision to leave her son to pursue her new found passion with the Civil Rights Movement is not one she takes lightly. Her attempt to reject the same oppressive form of motherhood her own mother experiences shows Meridian taking a stand for her position as a black woman because “motherhood, in Meridian’s world, reflects the abnegation of personal freedom for the roles defined by men, race, class, and for the responsibilities mandated by poverty and by children” (Nadel 62). Moreover, Meridian’s desire to participate in the revolution forces her to give up her son as she learns “that the demands of the political world require she relinquish her maternal role” (Nadel 61). She is unable, however, to entirely discard her role as mother when it is mandated by the Movement. It is not necessarily that Meridian could not be a mother to her son, but that she needs to do so on her own terms, which did not support staying home with him all day, every day. Likewise, indeed paradoxically, her struggle within the Movement is that it has no room for the self-sacrificing mother.

Meridian's illness and continued physical deterioration comes with her inability to let go of her role as mother. Before turning into physical decay, her illness begins as mental distress caused by abandoning her role as mother:

she knew she had broken something, for she began hearing a voice when she studied for exams, and when she walked about the academic halls, and when she looked from her third-floor dormitory window. A voice that cursed her existence—an existence that could not live up to the standard of mother hood that had gone before. (88)

This mental anguish Meridian experiences while still in school reflects her connection to her culture and community. Though she decides to give up her son in order to live her own life, much like Rose in Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*, she is still controlled by the social expectations and changes that equate her actions with poor or failed mothering. Her susceptibility to these social views she tortures herself with lead her to her deteriorated state, where "It did not surprise Meridian that her hair came out as she combed it, any more than it surprised her that her vision sometimes blurred. She was too driven to notice; and it seemed essential to her then that whatever happened to her she should be prepared to accept it" (94). Meridian's passive acceptance of her weakening physical state mirrors the ideal of passive resistance to an extreme, but also shows her ability for self-sacrifice as a mother.

Many scholars have suggested that Meridian's physiological symptoms, both her blackouts and decaying body, result from her inability to accept her position as a failed mother³⁴. Her physical symptoms, however, are actually the manifestation of her inability to reject motherhood. During Meridian's first paralysis while she is still at school in

³⁴ See Alan Nadel's "Reading the Body: Alice Walker's Meridian and the Archeology of Self," Karen F. Stein's "Meridian: Alice Walker's Critique of Revolution," and Madhu Dubey's *Black Women Novelist and the Nationalist Aesthetic*.

Atlanta, she is cared for by Miss Winters, a woman from her home town. Miss Winters understands what it means to leave home and go against what is expected of her. In her delirium, Meridian dreams she is a baby and her mother is holding her over the edge of a ship but refusing to drop her. She says, ““Mama, I *love* you. Let me go,”” to which Miss Winter responds, ““I forgive you”” (123). Meridian views herself as an undeserved weight on her overburdened mother, who herself bears the pressures of traditional marriage and motherhood. Even when Meridian gives her mother permission to jettison her in order to save her self, she refuses to do so. Meridian needs the forgiveness Miss Winters gives, not for her own rejection of motherhood, but for her self-punishing failure to let go of it despite being physically freed of her children. Meridian dares to do what her own mother desired but could not: evading the physical confines of motherhood. After escaping, however, Meridian realizes she cannot abdicate her role as mother. Thus, she transfers her self-sacrificing responsibility as a mother to the black community. Her body’s continuous desire to mother is what she seeks forgiveness for.

Meridian is a mother and her mind will not let her reject that piece of her identity. Meridian’s attempt to meet the expectations of the revolutionary community to which she belongs causes her physiological response to her situation. The rigid line drawn between revolutionary and black woman makes her efforts at being a black revolutionary woman destructive. She attempts to sacrifice pieces of her identity that she is unable to let go of. Michael Cook argues that despite her rejection of motherhood by giving up a child and aborting a child, she “makes the cause of all children, all weak and suffering people, her own” (152). Her rejection of traditional motherhood ironically leads her to acceptance of

an alternate form of motherhood: she trades mothering a single child for the symbolic mothering of various black communities throughout the South.

Meridian clearly gives up a great deal more for the revolution than other members. Like Andrews's Blue, Meridian remains officially involved in civil rights activities, from voter registration to publicly protesting segregation practices. Even after the formal movement ends, she continues with the practices she has learned. Meridian is genuinely invested in struggling with the difficult issues such as the "would you kill for the revolution?" question that causes her to flee the North and return to the South. Meridian's inability to answer that question affirmatively separates her from her revolutionary friends in the North. Ironically, her compatriots that so easily claim they would kill for the revolution are amongst those that, like Truman, walk away from it. In the ten years since Meridian left the North, one of the most forceful of her rebellious friends, "Anne-Marion, she knew, had become a well-known poet whose poems were about her two children, and the quality of the light that fell across a lake she owned" (205). This echoes Nikki Giovanni's Black Arts Movement poem "For Sandra," in which the issue is not that the poem's figure becomes a poet, but that she/he must write a different type of poetry that addresses issues relevant to the revolution. Anne-Marion, however, does not write for or about the revolution she claimed she would kill for which makes her poetry inconsequential to the Movement.

Walker suggests that Meridian's inability to answer this question that easily is tied to her standing as figurative mother to the novel's southern black communities. Meridian knows her attachment to the rural South and its people separates her from the Movements' other insurgents that do not understand the power of

the sight of young girls singing in a country choir, their hair shining with brushings and grease, their voices the voices of angels. When she was transformed in church it was always by the purity of the singers' souls, which she could actually *hear*, the purity that lifted their songs like a flight of doves above her music-drunken head. If they committed murder—and to her even revolutionary murder was murder—*what would the music be like?* (emphasis original 14-15)

Meridian identifies with much larger black communities beyond her revolutionary group. She values not just the rural communities' churches but also the farmlands of her childhood her urban revolutionary friends have no knowledge of. These friends have seen rural black communities during their civil rights work but, unlike Meridian, have not lived in them. She views her potential actions, and those of her companions, that would involve murder as corrupting the purity she sees embodied by rural black communities.

Meridian's view of rural black communities as pure, innocent, and in need of protection from persecution is her motherly response to these communities. Unable to proclaim that she would kill for the revolution, Meridian decides to ““go back to the people, live among them, like Civil Rights workers used to do”” (18). For Meridian, the people and the things she is fighting for are rooted in the South, not in the North. She intentionally seeks out the small towns because that is where she senses they need her more at the moment. By the end of the novel, it is revealed that Meridian is more committed to the revolution than those who claimed they would kill for it. Her return to the South is not a return to her home community. Instead, Meridian survives by

moving from one small town to another, finding jobs—some better or worse than others—to support herself; remaining close to the people—to see them, to be with them, to understand them and herself, the people who now fed her and tolerated her and also, in a fashion, cared about her. (18-19)

The numerous small rural towns in the South are spread across Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana.

Meridian's presence and work in the small rural communities are integral to, or can be better read as her, quest for her identity. As Deborah McDowell rightly notes,

the continued progress of her search for identity requires that she go backward in order to move forward, and backward is the South [...] Walker sees the South, despite its history of racism and oppression, as regenerative, for it is the South that is the cradle of the black man's experience in the New World, and the South that has continued to shape his experience in this country. (174)

Deeply connected to the South, Meridian is unable to successfully find a place and permanence in the North with her militant companions. This rootedness also keeps her fighting for what the members of the black southern communities believe. Much like Andrews's Lea, Meridian becomes most powerful when she positions herself as outsider in relation to the communities in which she lives. Meridian finds her strength in protecting the communities, as in when she defiantly stands in front of a tank. However, instead of externalizing her experiences and feelings as Lea does, Meridian internalizes them with an adverse physiological impact on her body. Her ability to self-define occurs, however, when she chooses to attend church services and finds herself at a large Baptist church. Although she goes there with the intent to remain an outsider, she discovers to her surprise a community no longer in need of a messianic mother to care for it. Pulled into the community by this healing epiphany, Meridian is finally able to answer the difficult questions of community, liberation, and self.

Although critics agree that Meridian's healing is enacted by the church scene towards the end of the novel, they give varied reasons for the resolution. Some reviewers

argued that the church service allows her to envision for herself a future that can accommodate her nonviolent approach,³⁵ others argue that it helps her realize the real question is not whether or not she can kill, but whether she can live through it all.³⁶ Scholars have also argued that it is her rediscovery of black cultural heritage in the church that allows her to rediscover her identity.³⁷ All of these are adequate reasons that accurately reflect her experience in the church and afterwards. The connection among all of these discoveries Meridian makes during her time in the church, however, is that she has finally found the revolutionary community she had been looking for since she left her hometown for Atlanta over a decade earlier.

It is significant that it is the same group Meridian initially views as needing her self-sacrificing protection that illustrates the success of the Civil Rights Movement when it absorbs the Movement into the church and persistently maintains the Movement's relevance to their lives. It is equally noteworthy that Meridian misses the moment this change occurs because she has remained an outsider to all of these communities. She has been living off of the angelic image of the young girls singing the same songs in the choir. To Meridian's shock, the static image of the church from her childhood has changed with its members' needs. Upon looking up to admire the stain glass, Meridian finds a "broad-shouldered black man...wearing a brilliant blue suit" in place of Jesus's image (203). Meridian enters the church after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., whose image is possibly the one in the stained glass. Meridian has spent the majority of the novel functioning as a martyr for the Movement, but she realizes that she does not

³⁵ See Roberta M. Hendrickson's "Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker, *Meridian* and the Civil Rights Movement"

³⁶ See Susan Danielson's "Alice Walker's *Meridian*, feminism, and the Movement."

³⁷ See Deborah McDowell's "The Self in Bloom: Walker's *Meridian*" and Seongho Yoon's "Gendering the Movement: Black Womanhood, SNCC, and Post-Civil Rights Anxieties in Alice Walker's *Meridian*."

need to fill that role³⁸. Plenty of people had already lost their lives, like the young man whose funeral was taking place at the church. This new impression of Jesus is the first of the many changes Meridian notices. Meridian enters the church for a reminder of what she is protecting, but experiences confusion and questions instead:

And what was Meridian, who had always thought of the black church as mainly a reactionary power, to make of this? What was anyone? She was puzzled that the music had changed. Puzzled that everyone in the congregation had anticipated the play. Puzzled that young people in church nowadays did not fall asleep. Perhaps it was, after all, the only place left for black people to congregate, where the problems of life were not discussed fraudulently and the approach to the future was considered communally, and moral questions were taken seriously. (203)

Meridian pieces together, within the church, the puzzle that the living revolution of a community does not need her protection. Her shock in this moment is due to her finding the kind of revolutionary community she always wanted to belong to since she left her own rural hometown. The difference between the church congregation and her old revolutionary group is not merely the solemnness with which the congregation takes the issues but that the decisions are being made locally *as* a community, rather than *for* the community. The transformations in the institutionalized church and on the respective members of the church congregation signal a significant change in the future outlook for the black rural southern community. The seriousness with which the moral questions are taken—such as the subject of seditious murdering that Meridian is unable to answer for her revolutionary friends—finally gives Meridian the room to responsibly answer that query for herself. Meridian realizes during this moment in the church that actually she is

³⁸ See Paul Tewkesbury's "Keeping the Dream Alive: *Meridian* as Alice Walker's Homage to Martin Luther King and the Beloved Community" (2011) for an analysis of Meridian as a Christ-figure.

not alone in her continuing struggle for civil rights. These southern communities, unlike her northern revolutionary friends, have not given up on the Movement.

We should point out that the Movement within the rural black community is strategically much different than that in which Meridian was trained. Meridian recognizes the different approach being taken by the church as she listens to the unexpected message of the sermons: “‘Understand this,’ they were saying, ‘the church’ [...] ‘the music, the form of worship that has always sustained us, the kind of ritual you share with us, these are the ways to transformation that we know. We want to take this with us as far as we can’” (204). Like Meridian’s own form of resistance that puts her outside the formal Movement, the new sermons she hears in the church discuss bringing about change on the community’s own terms. The sermons ask the community to participate in the revolution using their own cultural knowledge and tactics, not by using those dictated by outsiders. This is a response to the desires of the Civil Rights Movement workers who sought transformations from the community members that they did not know. Meridian finally recognizes the importance that these overhauls are culturally and spatially tied. Walker suggests that Meridian’s return to the South is the correct course of action, even though at the time it is in response to her feeling lost and out of place amongst her revolutionary friends.

The seemingly innocent and vulnerable communities of the South she sought to protect show her that they are willing and able to care for themselves. As she listens to the congregations’ side of the service, “She was suddenly aware that the sound of the ‘ah-mens’ was different. Not muttered in resignation, not shouted in despair. No one bounced in his seat. No one even perspired. Just the ‘ah-mens’ rose clearly, unsentimentally, and

with the firm tone of ‘We are fed up’” (200). There is now a calm, somber tone to the church services that Meridian has not experienced before. The congregation is very much engaged in the events happening around them. And, very significantly, Meridian sees that Truman is wrong; the communities have not been appeased as Truman claims others have. Meridian senses she has successfully fulfilled her self-arrogated role as protective mother to the communities and it is time for her to step aside and watch them take action themselves.

Attending the church service, Meridian sees those around her as still keeping alive the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement. As mentioned earlier, she is not standing alone for the rights of her people. She also ultimately knows and accepts her limits and that she could kill for her cause. Moving beyond the constraints of the formal Civil Rights Movement affords Meridian a new outlook on life. During her experience in the church, “there was in Meridian’s chest a breaking as if a tight string binding her lungs had given way, allowing her to breathe freely. For she understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own” (204). She does acknowledge that though there are things worth killing for, she may not after all be the right person to do it. In taking back her body and life, Meridian finds a communal civil rights struggle in which she can more appropriately define her role as supporter and not extremist. To her the power of the local community movement lies in the ability for all involved to choose their own strategies based on their own situations, and to ensure, more importantly, that the range of tactics will be supported by the community.

Meridian's physical recovery is therefore based on her finding a black community that shares her concerns and has the institutional and ideological space for individual differences. Walker suggests that the success of the Civil Rights Movement is visible in the actions developing within communities at the local level. Meridian's body, as mother, is reclaimed through the community's capacity to define its own actions and protect itself without Meridian's sacrificial intervention. Meridian finally transitions from her role as protective mother to supportive mother, a role she desired but could not realize from her own mother. Meridian has taken her mother's sacrificial form of mothering and moved beyond it to discover her own identity and approach, one in which she can support the community's goals and actions without compromising her self.

As Andrews and Walker illustrate in the forgoing discussion, the Civil Rights Movement in the South as a theme in African American literature of the post-Civil Rights era has enabled authors to address the importance of both place and the individual, as well as questions of local and localized change in southern social structures. Although both authors position specific moments as turning points in relation to the goals of the Civil Rights Movement, neither acknowledges a conclusive end to the struggles the Movement addresses. Instead, both novelists suggest that the return to the South and the desire to participate in the remaking of the space of the South cannot overlook the need for an awareness of remaining social issues in the region. At the end of *Baby Sweet's* the brothel is tellingly and potentially still operational and exploiting the black women's bodies inside, and in *Meridian* the church community Meridian is now a part of is left to respond to the new injustices facing its congregation. The culmination of the Civil Rights

Movement in these texts positions the South as habitable for black women—and, possibly for black men pending Truman's revelation begun at the end of *Meridian*. As the narratives clearly indicate, there is a lot more work to be done in order to fully reclaim and transform the space. That is the unfinished project for the return migrants and their communities.

Andrews and Walker intertwine the reclamation and transformation of the black individual's self with the reclamation and transformation of the South. The return from the North to the South, both physically for the characters and imaginatively for the writers, requires reconciliation with the spaces of the North and the South. While characters conciliate attitudes and experiences associated with each space, the writers too must balance those spatial complexities and meanings, as Andrews and Walker have done in *Baby Sweet's* and *Meridian*. In the next chapter and in the return migration novels *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Leaving Atlanta*, Paule Marshall and Tayari Jones respectively attempt to reconcile the North and the South.

CHAPTER II. URBAN NORTHS AND RURAL SOUTHS IN PAULE MARSHALL'S
PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW AND TAYARI JONES'S *LEAVING ATLANTA*

Following the Civil Rights Movement the South becomes a space that can be reconfigured in African American literature, enabling black writers to complicate notions of the urban North and the rural South. Many black writers, such as Tayari Jones and Paule Marshall, challenge the geographic boundaries of the North and the South as they reclaim the space of the South and rethink its importance for African Americans. This shift has been accounted for in several ways: some scholars impute it to the South being a place, a space, in which African Americans have already invested so much and now return to reclaim;³⁹ others attribute the thematic shifts to the rise of postmodernism in African American literature that coincided with the end of the Civil Rights Movement;⁴⁰ and still others see the South as the sight of the modern⁴¹ which makes it important for African Americans' future advancements. The idea of the South as a place of possibility in discussions of modern developments and the future, and as evidenced in black return migration to that space, has been difficult for some scholars to fully rationalize.⁴² However, the treatment of the urban and the rural in black return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era reflects black characters' complicated relationships with both the

³⁹ See Farah Jasmin Griffin's *"Who Set You Flowin'?" The African American Migration Narrative* (1995).

⁴⁰ See Madhu Dubey's *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Post-Modernism* (2003).

⁴¹ See Toni Morrison's interview with Carolyn Denard "Blacks, Modernism, and the American South: An Interview with Toni Morrison." and Jürgen Grandt's *Shaping Words to Fit the Soul: The Southern Ritual Grounds of Afro-Modernism* (2009).

⁴² This is evidenced by sociologists' initial responses to reports of a black return migration to the South, as cited in the introduction.

North and the South in a way that questions lingering beliefs and assumptions about both spaces.

These complex relationships with the North and the South have drawn scholars' attention to black writers' ambiguity towards place. This ambivalence speaks to those expected attitudes towards specific space mentioned in the introduction. In the American socio-cultural imagination "the North" generally connotes "the urban" and "the South" has been equated with "the rural." This stereotypically further develops into ideas associated with those terms: the urban as progressive and metropolitan, and the rural as backwards and rustic⁴³. Toni Morrison acknowledges the ambivalence her migrant characters feel about the urban North and the rural South, based on watching her own parents' struggles with the North and the South. In a 1998 interview, "Blacks, Modernism, and the American South," Morrison admits, "You give up a lot, you know, to take advantage or benefits of urban or working life elsewhere: The problem is trying to balance those two environments" (qtd. in Denard 3). The desire and attempt to complicate, if not balance, these two environments has been a feature of African American literature across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and before. The ambiguity relative to the North and the South—between the urban and the rural—can be read as an attempt to deal with the complexities of spaces that are culturally supposed to be desired or rejected. The urban North has symbolized freedom and opportunity while causing fractured identity and feelings of physical and spiritual isolation; likewise, the rural South has corresponded with violence and danger while providing a nurturing home

⁴³ For the historical development, from the Puritans through WWII, of attitudes about the urban and its relationship to the rural in the United States see Sidney H. Bremer's *Urban Intersections: Meetings of Life and Literature in United States Cities* (1992). Also see the collection *Literature & the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature* (1981).

and community.⁴⁴ These conflations are problematic for African American place based identities, especially as characters attempt to access the sustentative features of each space and as these spaces encounter one another.

This urban North-rural South dichotomy can be seen in both northbound and southbound African American migration narratives in the form of the absence of the southern city and the focus on the northern city in the stories. Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert Butler position African American literature in opposition to classical American literature based on its treatment of the urban and the rural. In their collection of essays *The City in African American Literature* (1995), they persuasively advance the thesis that “the main tradition of African American literature has been persistently pro-urban in vision” (9). They attribute this pro-urban vision, which they date as far back as Fredrick Douglass, to the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow that constructs dangerous images of rural areas and the South. Hakutani and Butler acknowledge, however, that scholarship has centered less on the city in African American literature, and more on the rural and black folk life, despite the overwhelming presence of the city in the literature. To Hazel Carby, the fascination with the rural can be traced to the recovery of Zora Neale Hurston “which represents the rural folk as bearers of Afro-American history and preservers of Afro-American culture” (175). Carby’s study *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987) looks at the texts of other Harlem Renaissance women writers that she claims open up a space for “the fictional

⁴⁴ James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and James Baldwin’s *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953) represent the urban North as the safe space for their main characters with an understanding of the loss of family and culture in the rural South. Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) show the destructiveness of that supposedly safe urban North. Raymond Andrews’s *Muskogean County Trilogy* (1978-1983) represents the violent but nurturing rural South with his characters choosing it over the urban North with its thinly veiled racism.

urban confrontation of race, class, and sexuality” (175) that follows them. Like Hakutani and Butler, she argues that texts by black women writers that prioritize the black urban working class are being marginalized in scholarship by those focusing on the black rural experience.

The absence or de-emphasis of the southern city in northbound migration narratives removes a crucial piece of migration routes from the fictional narratives. The southern city historically functioned as a short-term or long-term transition space in the migration from the rural South to the North, West, and Midwest (Wilkerson 261-262). The northern city serves a specific purpose in both the northbound Great Migration narratives and the southbound return migration narratives. The northern city is used to juxtapose the North and the South by representing the urban in contrast to the rural, as in James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) or James Baldwin’s *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953). In the northbound great migration narratives the northern city is imagined in various ways at different points in time, from a space of possibility, as in the first half of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) or Morrison’s *Jazz*, to a space of hostility, as in the second half of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Southbound return migration novels respond to these versions of the northern city to show the North is not necessarily the answer, not that it fails, but that it is unable to provide necessary physical and spiritual connections and nourishments. Whereas northbound migration narratives frequently end with characters remaining in the North despite its various limitations, southbound return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era, particularly those under study, depict the characters choosing to make a home

in the South. Despite the importance of the city in northbound great migration narratives, the southern city only exists on the periphery of most northbound migration narratives.⁴⁵

Contemporary African American return migration novels feature both the urban North and the rural South, though the most prominent space is understandably the rural South because that is the focal point of the return migrations. The privileging of the rural South in black southern experience in return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era de-emphasizes the southern city largely due to those essentializing conflation of the North with the urban and the South with the rural. Thus, the southern city is frequently absent in return migration narratives in which it more commonly serves as a spatial marker for locating the smaller towns and rural areas surrounding them. For example, in the texts discussed in the previous chapter, Atlanta juxtaposes Andrews's fictional county of Muskhogean without functioning as a significant setting for the rest of the narrative; in *Meridian*, on the other hand, Atlanta is the city that houses the university Meridian attends for a significant portion of the novel, but Meridian is also pulled away from the city by the university's desire to distance itself from the social activism occurring outside its gates. In both cases, the return migration is to the rural towns.

This chapter addresses the ways in which contemporary African American literature challenges the conflation of the South with the rural and the North with the urban in the American socio-cultural imagination. I focus on Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta* (2002). I will examine their characters' place-based identity struggles as the characters attempt to reconcile their relationship with the urban North and the rural South. Marshall and Jones are among the

⁴⁵ For instance, Washington D.C. is briefly mentioned in Ellison's *Invisible Man* during the main character's train trip to New York, and Atlanta is referred to as the site of Helga Crane's fiancé's parents' home while she is working at the southern school, yet neither character spends time in these cities.

post-Civil Rights era black writers who interrogate the role of the urban North and the rural South in relation to place-based identities through their characters' endeavors to align the urban and the rural. I start with Marshall. Her highly symbolic text directly engages with the urban North-rural South dichotomy but, as I content, ultimately refuses to privilege one space over the other. Both Marshall and Jones depict, among other things, the way attempts to repress and remove the South from the characters' cultural and spiritual knowledge results in fractured identity, personal vulnerability, and stressed familial relationships. Withholding historical and cultural knowledge of the South is damaging to both the older individuals with the knowledge as well as the younger generations deprived of it. Marshall is unique in that she elevates both spaces as viable homes. She shows that in order to make the North the fulfilling place it is supposed to be, one must maintain open and diligent connections to the South. Jones's treatment of the North and South is also quite distinct because she interrogates assumptions about both the urban and rural within the space of the South. Jones complicates the geographical boundaries of the North and the South by picturing Atlanta as a liminal space that is simultaneously North and South. Marshall and Jones's texts exemplify feelings of ambivalence towards the North and the South, towards the urban and the rural, and towards community and individual place-based identities.

Praisesong for the Widow recounts the life of Avey Johnson who experiences a constant pull between the North and the South. Avey is a second generation migrant to the North; Avey's North is New York: Harlem, Brooklyn, and the North White Plains suburb. The narrative begins with a middle-aged, retired, widowed, and over packed Avey vacationing on the cruise ship, the Bianca Pride, in the Caribbean. It is here that her

past resurfaces in her dreams with her Great-Aunt Cuney beckoning for her return. Her dreams force her to confront elements of her self that she has spent decades rejecting. She abandons the rest of the cruise and her northern middle-class friends at the Grenada port with the intent of flying back to New York, but instead finds herself reassessing the decisions in her life with the help of local Lebert Joseph. She rediscovers her past and cultural history by experiencing her connection to the African diaspora through the annual cultural pilgrimage of local out-islanders from Grenada to Carriacou Island.

Many reviewers have focused on *Praisesong*'s celebration of the diaspora in the rural and the healing ritual on Carriacou Island;⁴⁶ however, the South is not entirely affirmed, nor is the North entirely condemned. This scholarship on *Praisesong* uses the term south to delineate the physical direction of Avey's movement from New York to the Caribbean-as-south and in reference to the United States South. As Marshall states, "when I say African American, I'm talking about blacks from Brazil to Brooklyn" (*Conversations* 79). She expands the meaning of the term African American to include all of the African diaspora in North and South America. Throughout her novels, her focus consistently returns to the African diaspora. She seeks to illuminate the similarities that exist rather than the differences. Scholars' globalizing treatment of the South in the novel diminishes the significance of the United States' South. Differentiating between the South of the United States and the global South of the Caribbean, however, does not negate the importance of the events that occur on Carriacou Island. Instead, Marshall's

⁴⁶ See, for instance, Barbara Christian's "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*", Silvia Pilar Castro-Borrego's *The Search for Wholeness and Diasporic Literacy in Contemporary African American Literature*, Barbara Frey Waxman's "The Widow's Journey to Self and Roots: Aging and Society in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*", and Carol Boyce Davies's "Black Women's Journey into Self: A Womanist Reading of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*."

simple representations of the United States' North and South, paralleled in her portrayal of Grenada and Carriacou Island, complexly interrogate the individual's choices and actions that disrupt the spaces.

Avey's decision in the end to split her time between the North and the South, instead of selecting one over the other, shows the prospects of embracing and intersecting both spaces. Marshall does not recoil from urban reality; rather she depicts its possibilities for African Americans as a place of financial security and opportunities and its short comings when those who inhabit it get caught up in the quest for materialism and, as a result, lose knowledge of their selves. This alienation could happen in both urban and rural environments because it is associated with the character's actions. The urban heightens the chances of that disconnection from self, however, in that it creates more distractions that lead to physical and spiritual distancing from cultural pasts.

By reinforcing these spatial tropes while rejecting their totalizing nature, Marshall unsettles the view that stereotypes the urban North as a destructive space to be escaped and the rural South as a healing space to which to return. Marshall shows the ways in which the rural, as place and sensibility, can be constructed and exist within the urban North and, conversely, how the urban North and the rural South can be complementary in the maintenance of the self. As Marshall demonstrates, the spaces functioning together depend, however, on each person's ability and willingness to negotiate between the two spaces. The decision from Avey's past that looms over her the entire novel is her rejection of her southern place-based identity and subsequent distancing of the South. Although Avey is born and raised in the North, she develops a southern place-based identity through connections to her father's relatives. Avey's father maintains ties with

his southern family after moving to the North, which results in Avey spending the summers of her childhood in Tatem, South Carolina with her Great-Great Aunt Cuney. It is in the South that Avey is ingrained with Aunt Cuney's spirituality and rituals, which involve repeated physical pilgrimages to the site of Ibo Landing and the passing of cultural knowledge about the rebellious Igbo slaves of Ibo Landing with the myth of the flying Africans. Despite Avey's inability to fully believe or understand the importance of Aunt Cuney's teachings, she forms a connection with the rural South and Ibo Landing that, subsequently, supports her life in the urban North.

Avey's childhood influences remain critical in stabilizing her psyche and reestablishing her sense of self and kinship, even as a young married woman. Avey's affinity for the rural South throughout her childhood couches the rural as necessary mental, emotional, cultural, and physical stimulations, even though Avey is unable to recognize the types of nourishment it offers her. She and her husband, Jay, actively and symbolically incorporate aspects of the rural in the urban space of their apartment, as the narrator says:

Back then the young woman whose headstrong ways and high feelings Avey Johnson had long put behind her, whom she found an embarrassment to even think of now with her 1940s upsweeps and pompadours and vampish high-heeled shoes, used to kick off her shoes the moment she came in from work, shed her stockings and start the dusting and picking up in her bare feet [...] Freed of the high-heels her body always felt restored to its proper axis. And the hardwood floor which Jay had rescued from layers of oxblood-colored paint when they first moved in and stained earth brown, the floor reverberating with 'Cottontail' and 'Lester Leaps In' would be like a rich nurturing ground from which she had sprung and to which she could always turn for sustenance. (11-12)

In this memory of their apartment on Halsey Street we discern the emblematic grafting of elements of the rural onto the urban space through the wood floors and earth brown stain. Similar to Avey freeing herself of high-heeled shoes, Jay's rescuing of the wood from layers of paint is a figural stripping away of the artificial trappings of urban life. Additionally, his staining the floor "earth brown" represents his attempt to ground their fifth floor walkup to the earth. After coming in off the paved city streets and also shedding her artificial trappings, Avey's reconnection to the earth and black culture through the music allows her to recover spiritually and physically from her state job as a clerk. Avey's embarrassment with this recollection initially appears to be about her hair and "vampish high-heeled shoes," but it is actually in relation to her desire to be connected to the earth. Here Avey acknowledges that it is her "bare feet" on the "earth brown," "hardwood floor" that rejuvenate her self every evening. The point is not just that Jay recreates nature inside their home for Avey and that Avey removes the artificial barriers between it and her body; it is also that this connection to the earth provides her with the sustenance she needs. This tropologic idealization of the rural helps reinforce the idea that healing and nurturance mostly occur in the rural space, not the urban space. And more important, it counters the reductive presumption that the rural, no matter how artificially constructed, cannot exist in the urban North. Marshall wants us to not forget, however, that the presence of the rural in the urban North, and vice versa, must be consciously and continuously sought out or it and its effects will be lost.

Thirty-five years pass between the Avey that sought sustenance from a hardwood floor and the Avey with a six piece luggage set aboard the cruise ship. Over the decades Avey has ignored and rejected her southern place-based identity, with no more trips to

Tatem and Ibo Landing, and a rather revealing silencing of Duke Ellington and Count Basie Kansas City Seven's music. For Avey and Jay, who shaves off his mustache, the rejection of black culture becomes synonymous with a better life, since the better life they are after is the American Dream of white, middle-class suburbia. Jay's success as an accountant secures them their piece of the American Dream with their home in the North White Plains suburb. Their northern place-based identities are defined by obtaining financial security and material possessions in order to perform the appropriate class status to separate them from the black urban poor who haunt Avey during her time in the apartment on Halsey St.

Once Jay and Avey achieve their desired financial security, they have become too far removed from their cultural investments and stronghold that they are unable to recover their southern place-based identities. Their lengthy and complete commitment to this inauthentic performance does not leave room for their former selves. Avey's loss of self is so deeply rooted in her subconscious that even in her dreams she becomes crippled by her desire to perform her class and material position in life that she is unable to follow Aunt Cuney to Ibo Landing:

Did she really expect her to go walking over to the Landing dressed as she was? [...] That obstacle course of scrub, rock and rough grass leading down from the cotton field would make quick work of her stockings, and the open-toed patent leather pumps she was wearing for the first time would never survive that mud flat which had once been a rice field. Glancing down, she saw they were already filmed with dust just from her standing there. Her amusement began to give way to irritation. (40-41)

Like her earlier recollection, Avey's understanding of self is depicted through her connection to and disconnection from the material and the natural. Where previously she

kicked off her shoes to feel her axis restored through her bare feet's contact with Jay's symbolic construction of the rural in their apartment, here, in her dream, she refuses to follow Aunt Cuney out into the rural in order to protect her stockings and "open-toed patent leather pumps." Her understanding of these items' utility is correct—the urban items would not survive the rural trek to Ibo Landing—but her inability to remove them, as she once did, or to follow Aunt Cuney, rather than scoff at the idea, shows her failure to understand what that space had once offered her. Her further irritation at the film of dust on her shoes and stockings is indicative of her rejection of the rural encountering the urban. She is particularly exasperated with this urban-rural encounter because at this point she does not know how to reconcile the two spaces and everything they encompass despite her understanding that both have significantly contributed to her life.

Making room for both the North and the South in her life as a child was feasible for Avey. As a child, she spent her time in Tatem traipsing around the countryside, learning about alternative medicine, and visiting Ibo Landing. These trips eventually shorten in duration as she grows up and gets married, but she and her husband, Jay, make it a point early in their marriage to go to South Carolina every year in order to reconnect with their cultural heritage. The Igbo are not necessarily Avey's family's specific roots, but they are claimed as such by Aunt Cuney when she leaves the Protestant church. This is an important aspect of the Ibo Landing as a piece of black cultural heritage, that it is available to those who want to claim it. Aunt Cuney's inability to keep her feet on the ground and her temporary banishment from the church results in a rejection of the southern community of which she is a member and allows her to develop her own spiritual practice. She shares this practice with her great-niece, but the connection with

Ibo Landing is an individual experience that Avey struggles to understand herself. The story Aunt Cuney tells Avey every time they visit Ibo Landing is the passing of both cultural and familial knowledge. The context of the story places Avey's great-great-great grandmother, and namesake, as witness to the event. While working as a slave, her grandmother witnesses a large group of Igbo brought to shore from a slave ship. She watches as they envision their future in the United States, and then turn around and walk/fly across the Atlantic back to Africa. In addition to her grandmother as witness, the familial knowledge accompanying this tale is that her grandmother "just picked herself up and took off after 'em. In her mind. Her body she always usta say might be in Tatum but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos..." (39).

This fragmentation of mind and body provides the grandmother with spiritual protection, through the removal of her mind, from her experience during slavery. Barbara Christian identifies a "recurrent motif throughout the novel, that the body might be in one place and the mind in another, is characterized not as fragmentation but as a source of wisdom, stemming from a history of the forced displacement of blacks in the West" (75). The separation of mind and body as indicative of wisdom is valid for the experience of Avey's great-great-great grandmother and later Aunt Cuney, but it does not hold through the generations. Upon Avey's telling of the history of Ibo Landing during Jay's first trip to Tatem, Jay responds, "'I'm with your aunt Cuney and the old woman you were named for. I believe it, Avey. Every word'" (115). Avey spends years questioning the story and unable to understand its significance, but Jay immediately connects with the cultural history of the South. Even though Jay is from the Midwest, Kansas, he recognizes his own connection to the South and the legend of the brave Igbo who chose to walk back to

Africa rather than be enslaved. Much like his reverence for the blues and jazz, and for African American poetry which he recites, Jay sees Ibo Landing as a rich piece of his culture that revitalizes his spirit and that is kept from them in the North. Through his connection with Ibo Landing, Jay develops his southern place-based identity with a piece of his cultural heritage which is dependent on physical connection to a specific place. Jay understands the Igbo in a different way than Avey, but this appreciation ultimately does not help him survive the demands of their life in the North.

The body-mind split that functions as a source of wisdom for Avey's great-great-great grandmother results in the destruction of Jay and of his and Avey's marriage. Avey does not understand the importance of her connection to the rural and after discovering she is pregnant with her third child Marion, she severs her link to the rural and the South with her consuming quest for the American Dream. Avey's American Dream is a suburban house in the right neighborhood, slightly outside the city, which requires Jay to establish a new career that would allow them to achieve the necessary financial means for her desire. In a scene similar to Aunt Cuney's rejection from the church, Avey falsely accuses Jay of cheating. This act results in a transformation that is the opposite of Aunt Cuney's. Unable to argue with her any longer, Jay gives in and gives up his self:

While she had stood in the arms of the tearful man who had stepped forward, Jay might have slipped quietly out of the room, down five flights of stairs and up Halsey Street out of their lives, leaving Jerome Johnson to do what he perhaps felt he had neither the strength nor the heart for...
(136)

This scene reflects the grandmother's statement that her body was in Tatem, but "her mind was long gone with the Ibo" (39). For Jay, he leaves his body in New York to complete the necessary tasks to gain material success, while his mind takes his culture

and leaves him. This rupture does not save Jay as it does Aunt Cuney or Avey's great-great-great grandmother; instead, it marks an end of his relationship with Avey and an end of their ties to their history. Their southern identities are consequently muted in their lives and their northern identities are prioritized. Avey and Jay's bodies are in one place and their minds in another. Marshall suggests that they both close off a section of themselves because they are unable to maintain the various dimensions of their place-based identities while building a different life.

Avey and Jay achieve financial success and enjoy considerable material comfort; this, however, results in the destruction of her and Jay's selves when they forfeit their racially and culturally protective rituals. Their alienation from the South and from African American culture and history make them strangers to each other. Avey recalls, "On occasion, glancing up at him, she would surprise what almost looked like the vague, pale outline of another face superimposed on his, as in a double exposure" (131). Avey's doctor interprets this strange phenomenon of her inability to recognize her own reflection in the mirror as "a sure sign [...] of money in the bank" (49). The doctor's suggestion is as equally disturbing to Avey as the superimposed faces she sees on herself and her husband. It is not until after Jay's death when Avey goes to the Caribbean that she is able to rediscover her self. Although this rediscovery and her spiritual healing are too late to help Jay, she is still driven by her desire to understand why they trade one another and their cultural identity for monetary success.

Avey's realization of the importance of her return to the South and her return to her heritage is tied to the Carriacou Excursion. This section of the narrative has attracted the most critical attention because Marshall deftly shows Avey rediscovering and re-

embracing her alienated self and her African roots. Her inner struggles become solidified and externalized by her encounter with Grenada local, Lebert Joseph, who picks up what Aunt Cuney's spirit started on cruise ship by inviting Avey to attend the annual return to his home island. Critics have read Lebert as the Papa Legba figure⁴⁷ who meets Avey at a time of conflict and confusion in her life. As the god of the crossroads and a trickster figure, Lebert tricks Avey into partaking in the Carriacou Excursion while functioning as her spiritual guide and ancestral figure. It is Avey's decision to attend the Carriacou Excursion—which involves her own experience with a reverse Middle Passage on the boat ride from the mainland to the islands, a ritual cleansing in the forms of purging the middle-class excesses from her system and of a bath and redressing, her witnessing the cultural heritage of the out-islanders from their performance of African dances, and her own eventual participation in the dancing—that revitalizes her body and mind, preparing her for the work ahead once she returns to the United States. The dancing has been particularly interesting to scholars⁴⁸ who have noted that the moment Avey participates in the dancing ritual on Carriacou Island is the moment her mind and body reunite as she experiences embodied knowledge. This intricate process of her guided recuperation of self ends with renaming as she recovers her ancestral name Avatara and assumes the role of ancestor for herself.

The Carriacou Excursion functions as a form of rebirth for Avey as she participates in the excursion to the out-islanders' home and sees how they reconnect with

⁴⁷ See, for example, Mawuena Logan "Spirit and Body: African Spirituality in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*" for an extended discussion of the parallels between Lebert Joseph and Papa Legba.

⁴⁸ See Barbara Frey Waxman's "Dancing Out of Form, Dancing into Self: Genre and Metaphor in Marshall, Shange, and Walker", Paulette Brown-Hinds's "In the Spirit: Dance as Healing Ritual in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*", and Courtney Thorsson's *Women's Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Novels*.

their African roots through this annual return. Although Avey rejects Aunt Cuney in her dreams because she, Avey, has taken that journey to Ibo Landing countless times and remains unable to fully understand its place in her life, Joseph Lebert's bringing her to Carriacou positions her as an outsider with less at stake watching others reconnect with their heritage than if she had to do so herself. Although he guides her to the island, once she is there he turns her over to his daughter Rosalie Parvay who privately conducts the bathing ritual (216-220). Rosalie and her maid Milda accompany Avey to the island's cultural celebration, which does not distinguish between the women's class statuses. What Avey does not realize until she is on Carriacou Island witnessing the annual rituals is that the out-islanders' experiences are similar to hers and Jay's.

The out-islanders are able to do what she and Jay cannot. They have reconciled the ontologic and epistemologic aspects of the urban and the rural in their lives while keeping intact the necessary aspects of each space. The Grenada coast is described as lined with hotels to support its tourist industry, while Avey describes Carriacou Island, as she leaves it aboard a plane, as having a landscape in which buildings are sparse and barely visible. Comparably Carriacou Island translates as the rural and Grenada as the urban for the out-islanders, just as Ibo Landing in South Carolina functions as the rural and Harlem, Brooklyn, and White Plains as the urban for Avey. As Silvia Pilar Castro-Borrego claims in "*Praisesong for the Widow* as Narrative Restoration: Reading Black Women's Search for Spiritual Wholeness" (2011), "cultural knowledge must be retrieved and negotiated between the demands of material well-being and the pursue [sic] of spiritual wholeness" (194). Avey's participation is important, but the key aspect of her involvement in the Carriacou Excursion is the model of bringing together two disparate

lives in order to achieve a necessary balance between cultural roots and financial security. The out-islanders offer Avey a model for reconciling the urban and the rural in her own life.

The model for reconciling the urban and the rural observed by Avey reflects and revises her own experiences of the urban and the rural. Like Avey and Jay, the Carriacou islanders are hardworking people who migrate to Grenada for the opportunity to better their material conditions. Avey's cab driver tells her the out-islanders are different from the other Grenadians because they are

Serious people. Hardworking. They come to live here and before you know it they're doing better than those like myself that's born in the place. Is a fact. In no time they're pulling down a good job, building themselves a house—nothing big and outlandish: they don't go in for a lot of show; buying themselves a car—again is always a sensible car; you never see them over doing things; starting up a business. They have a business mind, you know, same as white people. And they look out for one another just like white people. (78)

Out-islanders' goals are similar to Avey and Jay's, who want to make a better life for themselves and to keep their family out of the poverty lurking below their apartment on Halsey Street⁴⁹. The cab driver both attributes and condemns the success of the out-islanders to what he sees as them behaving like white people. The cab driver also tells Avey that he refused to attend the Carriacou Excursion when he was dating an out-islander. He views their desire to return to a rural island as nonsensical. What the cab driver misses in that refusal and in his dismissing the out-islanders behavior as "like white people" is that their annual returns foster a tight-knit community encouraging them

⁴⁹ Barbara Christian notes that the activities on the street below Jay and Avey's apartment serve as an ever present reminder that those who are just getting by can at any point be turned out onto the street (78).

to look out for one another⁵⁰. This community is not exclusive nor excluding, as shown in the invitations that they extend to outsiders, such as the cab driver and Avey. The out-islanders' success, much like Avey and Jay's, is based on their hard work and financial restraint. A key difference between them and the out-islanders, however, is that the out-islanders are conquering their version of the urban space as a self-affirming community, and they maintain connections to the rural space that holds their culture. Avey's partaking in the Carriacou ritual allows her to see the advantages of keeping both spaces active in her life.

The out-islanders, additionally, go beyond functioning in the two separate spaces; they bring them into contact with each other, thus exposing and questioning the rigid and false boundaries that Avey earlier imposes between the urban and the rural. Avey's cabdriver critiques the importance the out-islanders place upon the excursion: "And the nice *nice* way they dress! The way they stepping! I tell you, you would think they was taking a boat—a decent boat—to go to America or England or someplace that's someplace instead of just to a little two-by-four island up the way" (emphasis original 76). This contrasts with Avey's refusal to accompany Aunt Cuney to Ibo Landing in her dream when wearing her nice clothes. Like Avey, the cab driver, himself a local Grenadian, has a specific opinion about sartorial protocols—what should or should not be worn in rural spaces and what is a worthy destination for a trip. The out-islanders are not worried about the toll the rough elements of the excursion will take on their meticulously designed and sewn clothing. To them, the nice clothes speak to the importance they

⁵⁰ The cab driver's observation also echo's the sentiments of Maxine Lavon Montgomery's argument in "A Pilgrimage to the Origins: The Apocalypse as Structure and Theme in Toni Morrison's *Sula*" where she discusses the problem with black communities' attempts to imitate a Western culture that excludes them. She argues that black communities must reject linearity and develop "a sense of self not bound to linearity" (128).

bestow on the place, not on what others deem appropriate for the rural landscape. The return to Carriacou is their most important annual event of group revivalism, and as such, their clothes reflect their respect for this spiritual excursion. The out-islanders' comfort with "cross-dressing" so to speak, by wearing their urban dress to the rural island implies their ability to easily move across urban and rural boundaries without confusing the spaces.

After seeing a model for inhabiting and moving back and forth between the urban and the rural spaces, Avey also witnesses a model for what to do with her knowledge of Ibo Landing in South Carolina. In reading this island scene, reviewers⁵¹ have generally suggested that Avey finds her roots or connection to Africa here, but that is not entirely the case. If this were the site of roots for Avey, then this would be the site for her return, but it is not. Tatem is the site of Avey's own annual return and also the spiritual roots claimed for her. By watching the celebration on Carriacou, she begins to understand the possible revitalization her participation in the historical recovery of Ibo Landing would provide to her community:

It was the essence of something rather than the thing itself she was witnessing. Those present—the old ones—understood this. All that was left were a few names of what they called nations which they could no longer even pronounce properly, the fragments of a dozen or so songs, the shadowy forms of long-ago dances and rum kegs for drums. The bare bones. The burnt-out ends. And they clung to them with a tenacity she suddenly loved in them and longed for in herself. Thoughts—new thoughts—vague and half-formed slowly beginning to fill the emptiness. (240)

⁵¹ See, for example, Barbara Christian's "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*", Silvia Pilar Castro-Borrego's *The Search for Wholeness and Diasporic Literacy in Contemporary African American Literature*, Carol Boyce Davies's "Black Women's Journey into Self: A Womanist Reading of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," and Guy Wilentz's "Towards a Spiritual Middle Passage Back: Paule Marshall's Diasporic Vision in *Praisesong for the Widow*."

The distinction between the essence of the thing and the thing itself is particularly important for Avey's experience. The piecing together of what remains within the community's cultural memory, no matter how sparse, is enough for the necessary spiritual renewal. In other words, it is the dedication to and practice of the ritual that nurtures the individuals' identities, more than the correctness of the practice. Coming from her northern life of material excess, the fragments and bare bones required for the excursion's dance rituals to occur show Avey the bounty available in the essence, much like she experiences the emptiness in her material excess.

Just as she sought financial security in the North and performs it by dressing and behaving in a manner acceptable for her middle-class status, she is able to mimic the behaviors of the out-islanders of Carriacou in order to learn how to reconcile the two spaces and all they encompass. It is this knowledge she returns to the United States with. She does not need to take the pieces of their African heritage because she already has that of Ibo Landing which was established by her great-great-great-grandmother and facilitated by her Aunt Cuney. The out-islanders' excursion teaches her how to embrace the heritage of Ibo Landing which links to their rituals and cultural connections. She decides to reestablish her annual trips to Tatem, South Carolina and work to create a community return, like the out-islanders have, bringing others from the urban North to reconnect with their culture in the rural South.

Avey's prospects of successful reintegration of the self depends ultimately upon her ability to establish a complex African diasporic and American identity that embraces both the urban North and the rural South, as well as the Caribbean. This results in her splitting her time between the North and the South. The North is her home, the place she

lives in and loves. The South is her racial and spiritual history, the place she needs. The South provides knowledge that she seeks to pass onto children in order to balance the material distractions of their lives that could cause a loss of self. Avey's desire to mentor black children in the South reflects Meridian's desire to mother rural black communities in the South. The difference between the two women, however, is that Meridian relinquishes her role as community mother, as protector, when she reclaims her self, while Avey steps into the position of community mother as cultural educator upon balancing her identities. Avey also does not plan to deprive herself, as Meridian does, when she steps into her maternal role. She does see the need, however, to reduce her material possessions. On her flight from Grenada to the United States, Avey plans her future which involves selling her house in North White Plains and renovating the home Great-Aunt Cuney left her in Tatem. Selling her house in the North follows the material cleansing that begins on the boat ride to Carriacou; since it is a much larger home than she needs, she makes plans to downsize and remove excess materials from her life.

As mentioned before, it is important to distinguish between the South of the United States and the directional south that positions the Caribbean south of Avey's New York. Avey's third trip to the Caribbean occurs in 1977 at which point she had not been to the South since 1951. Avey has not entered the post-Civil Rights South and has not considered the new possibilities it might hold for her. The opportunity for redefinition of the South that writers of African American literature of the post-Civil Rights era explore is not something that Avey is able to recognize. In addition to giving her a model to maintain her own identity, her time on Carriacou Island allows her to realize what is already available to her. Prior to leaving for this cruise, her youngest daughter Marion

asks ““Why go on some meaningless cruise with a bunch of white folks anyway, I keep asking you? What’s that supposed to be about?”” (13). Like Avey’s Grenadian cab driver, Marion has opinions about appropriate travel destinations. For Marion, however, the places she begs her mother to visit are Brazil and Ghana where she could learn some racial and cultural history. After leaving Carricaou Island, Avey knows Marion would understand her plans to create a space in Tatem where the black cultural heritage of Ibo Landing can serve the same purpose as the trips to Brazil and Ghana. Marion, much like Lorraine Hansberry’s Beneatha Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), represents the project of some black nationalists to reconnect to Africa. Although Marshall does not feel confined by the borders of the United States, she offers a way to reinvest in the United States South by reclaiming the black cultural heritage that exists there. Thus she suggests that spiritual, symbolic return to the South as the vessel of cultural heritage could carry significant connections to Africa.

Avey must reestablish her connections with the South, and in doing so extend her knowledge of Tatem and the Igbo to other black children, especially her grandchildren. She realizes her purpose in doing so is to take up the role Aunt Cuney used to perform, imagining that “each summer she would ask that her two grandsons be sent to spend time with her in Tatem, especially the youngest one, who had known the value of a dime-store xylophone. If forced to, she would be as tyrannical in demanding that they be sent as her great-aunt had been with her” (256). Avey’s special attention to her youngest grandson is due to his ability to see value in things others do not, like a dime store xylophone. He sees the importance of something that does not have a significant monetary value, but that he could use to express himself musically. This transfers to the possibility of him

understanding the value of Ibo Landing more than his siblings or other cousins. She imagines extending the cultural knowledge beyond her own family by running a summer camp where black children from the North can spend their summers. Her work as a mentor or guide to these children is a step in connecting both community and individual place-based identities in the South.

Marshall suggests that the history and rural black culture of the South could provide a connection to ancestral roots needed to nurture the soul left hollow by mainstream American materialism of the urban North. To Marshall, human connection and an understanding of one's self are healthier alternatives to consumerism. Marshall does not, however, entirely reject the urban North. That both spaces are important in Avey's life reflects what she needs from the South and her ability to continue to function in both spaces without sacrificing her identity.

The boundaries of both spaces have continued to become exceedingly blurred in contemporary African American literature with the rural spreading North and the urban spreading South. Unlike Marshall's *Praisesong*, Jones's *Leaving Atlanta* does not treat the South as a necessarily healing space for her characters. She, instead, counters idealized representations of the South by juxtaposing the urban South and the rural South, in order to interrogate ideas of the South in the American socio-cultural imagination. Her characters' experiences of the urban and the rural disrupt the customary conflation of the urban with the North and the rural with the South. Jones engages with the fluidity of the South as an imagined space. Like Marshall, she addresses the problems associated with the urban North-rural South divide by depicting characters that struggle to understand their identities within the urban South. This struggle is due to the characters'

conceptualizing the urban and the South as incongruous spaces. The representative urban South in Jones's novel is Atlanta, Georgia. The use of Atlanta is partially determined by Jones's interest in writing a fictionalized account of the historical Atlanta child murders that took place between 1979 and 1981. Jones's use of Atlanta as the setting for all of her novels, similarly to Andrews's use of Muskhogean County in his stories, suggests that Atlanta has something specific to offer when challenging idealizations of the South⁵².

Geographically, Georgia is positioned as the deep South⁵³ or lower South⁵⁴ in studies that differentiate between the physical regions of the South. However, W.E.B. Du Bois recognizes the unique positioning of Atlanta in his essay "On the Wings of Atlanta." He refers to it as "South of the North, yet North of the South" (76). Although here Du Bois refers to educational institutions and warns Atlanta not to become distracted by capitalist industries, his assessment of Atlanta as a liminal space remains in contemporary African American literature. Initially, it is Atlanta's developing urban status and advancement that position it as an in-between space, neither North nor South. In his book length essay, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), about the trial surrounding the Atlanta Child Murders, James Baldwin takes issue with the common saying "*I'm from Atlanta. I'm not from Georgia*" (2). He states that "Atlanta's high visibility and commercial importance do not mean that Atlanta is not in the state of Georgia" (3). He goes on to suggest that the black administration⁵⁵ overseeing the trial of Wayne

⁵² During a conversation with scholar Jürgen Grandt, we discussed the way each of Jones's novels contradicts a specific stereotype connected to the South. *Leaving Atlanta* rejects the idea of the South as rural, and *Silver Sparrow* (2011) rejects the idea of the South supporting the traditional nuclear family.

⁵³ Stewart Tolnay and E.M. Beck places Georgia in the same category as Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, and South Carolina in their survey of violence in the region.

⁵⁴ Ira Berlin includes three additional states, places Georgia in the same category as Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas.

⁵⁵ Eric Gary Anderson notes that "Mayor Maynard Jackson, Police Chief George Napper, Commissioner of Public Safety Lee Brown, and many other Atlanta public officials at the time of the murders were black"

Williams, most specifically Judge Clarence Cooper, allowed the media to close the child murder case by linking Williams to all of the murders because Atlanta is in the South and “could not be accused of administering ‘Southern’ justice” (4). However, Baldwin also suggests that those who believed Wayne Williams’s guilty verdict did so in order to remove the possibility that southern racial violence had occurred there.

Through its development and appeal, Atlanta gained the title “Black Mecca” to replace the North deemed the failed “Promised Land.” The 2002 documentary *America Beyond the Color Line* addresses the concept of Atlanta as the Black Mecca, noting its appeal to young black professionals and the rise of high-end, self-segregated black suburbs. In a 2006 interview with John Quinn, following the release of her second novel, Jones articulates her specific interests in Atlanta and its regional positioning in the United States. She explains, “[Atlanta] intrigues me—I am very interested in exploring the concept of a new south, an urban south” (163). In his survey of the narratives of the Atlanta Child Murders, Eric Gary Anderson notes that

the city of Atlanta plays two important roles: it is both a socially exceptional (progressive, seemingly successful, somewhat racially integrated) southern city and an ecologically troubled and otherwise minimally progressive place where the gleaming white buildings of urban renewal contrast with the dead bodies of black children and fear stoked by urban serial homicide. (196)

Jones’s treatment of Atlanta and her characters’ assumptions about the urban and the rural in *Leaving Atlanta* warn against placing too much faith in the city as a Mecca when in fact it is located in the South, which brings together urban difficulties and southern threats.

(199) and views their actions, which some saw as pandering to the FBI investigators, frequently distanced them from the black community. Baldwin is equally critical, but focuses his criticisms more harshly on the circumstances surrounding the actual trial.

A polyvocal novel, *Leaving Atlanta* is structured in three parts, “Magic Words,” “The Direction Opposite of Home,” and “Sweet Pea.” The story is divided among and unfolds through the narrative perspectives of three fifth graders Tasha Baxter, Rodney Green, and Octavia Fuller as they attempt to understand the events unfolding around them, specifically those related to the Atlanta Child Murders, and deal with the general struggles of elementary school children. Tasha attempts to manage her repeated rejection from the “in-crowd” at school and her parents’ recent separation, which ends as the fear from the murders brings her father back home. Rodney spends his time as a loner at school and dreading returning to his home where his fear of his father leads him to convince himself that the children are being murdered by their fathers. Octavia is a good student who is somewhat of an outcast at school and relates her experience of growing up in a single parent household. Trudier Harris judges Jones’s use of child narrators a success because they show “that horror can take up only so much space in an eleven-year-old mind. Everyday things with which children are concerned can be life stoppers as much as murderers can be” (*Scary* 161).

Readers are presented with overheard adult conversations that the children do not know how to process, along with their own thoughts about their experiences growing up in Atlanta. Mr. Baxter, the first narrator Tasha’s father, blames general ignorance about the history of the space the children live in as the reasons for the disappearances. Mr. Baxter states, ““That’s the problem. We been hushed up too long. These children don’t know nothing about lynching. They don’t know nothing about white folks burning niggers alive. That’s why we had to go out today—This whole thing is because black kids don’t have sense enough to be scared of a strange white man”” (Jones 77). Although, the

silence surrounding the South's history of violence, specifically lynching, is correctly seen here as contributing to the disappearance of the black children, I posit that the reason for this silence depends largely on that prevailing if not deceptive construction of urban Atlanta as not South. Since the urban is equated with the North and the rural conjures the South, one can assume that the children, especially the black children, living in urban Atlanta may not be warned of the dangers of the South because the children are not considered to be in the South.

It is therefore the liminality of urban Atlanta that causes Jones's characters' spatial dilemma, as they grapple with their understanding of not just the place they live but also their identities relative to that place. This struggle appears differently for the narrators' parents and the narrators themselves for several reasons. The child narrators have lived in Atlanta for most or all of their lives, while their parents are all migrants to the city. Tasha's parents Mr. and Mrs. Baxter are from Alabama and Oklahoma; Rodney's parents Mr. and Mrs. Green are from Louisiana and Chicago; and Octavia's parents are from rural Georgia, though only her mother is with her in Atlanta. For the most part, these migrations appear inconsequential to the development of the plot because they are mentioned tangentially. However, the characters' perceptions of the North and the South, coupled with their experiences in other places, inform their lived responses to Atlanta and the events of the plot. These interspatial connections are significant because they dictate the knowledge and experience of the main characters and the formation of their place-based identities.

Another important generational difference between the parents' and the children's experiences is that the children are just learning how to fit in with their peers and they

are, therefore, consciously trying to construct and problematize their identities. The children attempt to situate their identities in Atlanta by bringing and grafting family knowledge of other places into their Atlanta experience; this knowledge transfer ranges from Oklahoma jump rope rhymes to the children's sense of the best or worst candy that can only be found in the South. Octavia, a.k.a. Sweet Pea, spends the most time questioning and reflecting on Atlanta's uniqueness as a city. This is likely due to the point of view from which each character's section is narrated. The novel moves inward, from the most narrative distance with Tasha's third-person point of view to Rodney's disconcerting second-person consciousness and finally ending with Octavia's intimate first-person reflection. This progression also reflects the narrators' class-based positions to the city. Tasha and Rodney live in middle-class suburbs further away from Oglethorpe Elementary School and downtown Atlanta—a distance that requires they take a bus or get rides from their parents. Octavia, on the other hand, lives across the street from the projects and is within walking distance from their school. For Tasha and Rodney, the school is where the tragedy of the child murders hits the closest to them because the victims are their classmates. Octavia has a more intimate experience since she lives in the same neighborhood as the victims.

Octavia's class status locates part of her conceptualization of Atlanta in material terms through her perception of her position in the structured routing of hand-me-down clothes. Each year a box of clothes arrives in Atlanta for Octavia from her older cousin, Nikky, in Chicago, and each year Octavia's clothes are boxed and shipped to her younger cousin, Kay-Kay, in Macon. The only items in the box Octavia acknowledges are the fancy dresses that end up hanging in her closet unworn for two years before they are

finally passed onto Kay-Kay. Octavia's mother suggests that these velvet dresses with lace and satin are worn by Nikky in the pageants her mother enters her in, but Octavia connects the dresses to daily life in Chicago. She thinks, "all [the dresses] have big ribbons around the waist that tie in the back. That must be the style in Chicago. The Windy City. I can see all those girls walking through the streets with their satin sashes flapping behind them. That's where I want to go the next time I get to go someplace" (179). Since she associate Nikky with the clothes and the clothes with Chicago, she transfers her imagined idealization of Chicago to Nikky as she muses on the kind of life Nikky must live in the North. She even goes as far as to view the day she receives the box of clothing every year as a surprise holiday she calls "Nikky Day" (180). She initially understands Chicago as different from Atlanta because she has no place to wear the fancy dresses she receives. Octavia wishes she were Nikky or that Atlanta was Chicago, but it is not until the current moment of her narrative that she is able to develop a clearer understanding of Atlanta.

The last time Octavia receives a box of clothes from Nikky, she reflects on where Atlanta sits geographically. Octavia recognizes her/Atlanta's positioning in-between Nikky/Chicago and Kay-Kay/Macon. This causes her to question Atlanta in a new way. Rather than focus on its spatial difference, she begins to align it with Chicago. While her mother is boxing the dresses Octavia never got to wear, Octavia sees herself in both Nikky and Kay-Kay: "All of a sudden I started laughing. It was like when somebody tell you a joke and you don't get it till half a day later. Kay-Kay probably think I get to wear these dresses all the time. What if she call it 'Sweet Pea Day'?" (183) Though it is unclear if Octavia knows that Nikky may not get to wear these dresses all the time either,

she does realize that she is playing the same role in Kay-Kay's imagination that Nikky plays in hers. Following this discernment, Octavia continues repositioning Atlanta by trying to understand it in similar terms as she understands Chicago: "Chicago is the windy city, but what is Atlanta? I asked Miss Grier one time and she say, 'Atlanta is the city too busy to hate.' Mama say it's the 'Chocolate City.' Kay-Kay probably think everybody up here smile all the time and eat Hershey Kisses wearing velvet dresses" (183-184). Given that she takes her cues about Chicago from the adults in her life and from her fancy dresses, Octavia assumes Kay-Kay, too, is being relayed a message about Atlanta like the kind she herself receives. From their young perspectives, the children take literally the figurative city mottos voiced by adults. As an Atlanta citizen, however, Octavia knows that these adult precepts do not accurately reflect her experience in the city. From Octavia's point of view the humor in the situation is the misrepresentation of her city's identity and her own reality. Although Octavia recognizes the possibility for Atlanta to be like Chicago/the North or like Macon/the South, she fixates on her desire for Atlanta to be Chicago because she longs to imagine herself around her idealization of the North. Jones appears to propose that constructing her identity around a false ideal of Atlanta is potentially harmful to that identity, as we will see with Tasha's father, when he experiences the "real" Atlanta.

Octavia's nuanced musings about Atlanta's identity mirror her understanding of the relationship between identity and place, as she shows through her conflation of Nikky and Kay-Kay with Chicago and Macon, respectively. At a more personal level, her interest in the city's identity relative to her own identity is influenced by her lower-class circumstances. Even though Rodney is uninterested in friends, he does not want other

students to associate him with the free or reduced-lunch kids. This causes him to disassociate himself from Octavia on more than one occasion. His curiosity about her intelligence and strength, however, makes him watch her constantly. During one such moment, the material confirmation of her lower-class status makes him uneasy: “From where you are standing, you see the small piece of cardboard covering a hole in the bottom of her shoe. You turn away, embarrassed to glimpse something as intimate as poverty” (96). Rodney’s description of poverty as intimate suggests his middle-class discomfort at knowing he has more than his classmate. Even though other free-lunch kids can acknowledge living near one another and thus “knowing” one another, class functions as a distinct barrier in these children’s relationships. It does not, however, protect Rodney from falling victim to the Atlanta child murderer.

Jones acknowledges class and gender as the points of tension within her all black community in Atlanta, and that tension influences her novels’ themes. In another interview she addresses her own perception of class as a child in Atlanta: “Before the murders, I thought being middle-class meant that you didn’t get free lunch. But after the murders, I knew what a privilege it was. It meant whether or not you got to live” (qtd. in Grandt, “(Un-)Telling” 73). While the fictional Rodney figures a way around the protection his class affords him, Baldwin notes that one of the mothers of the young victims cited “the economic status of the victims” (54) as the reason for the social indifference towards the murders. Baldwin argues that the disappearance and murders of black children, who were by and large poor, brought class tensions to the surface within the black community⁵⁶.

⁵⁶ Class tensions, however, were not the only anxieties invoked by the disappearances and murders. Race and gender were also of concern with the majority of the victims being male and the distrust of many in the

The first child abducted within the narrative of the novel, but chronologically the tenth to be kidnapped is Jashante. At the time of his seizure, he is selling car air fresheners in an attempt to help his mother financially. His activities during his abduction and his living in the same neighborhood as Octavia highlight the significance of class in the children's experiences in Atlanta, whether or not they fully understand its structure. Octavia makes a clear distinction between living *across* from the projects, as opposed to *in* them, when she receives a ride home from one of her teachers. In this moment, she sees her neighborhood as dingy and unkempt, but through her teacher's eyes. She has explanations for every imperfection that does not reflect poorly on those who live in the neighborhood, but she keeps most of them to herself. Her resistance to being identified as poor intensifies her desire for a city in which she could wear Nikky's nice dresses instead of jeans that are not long enough to cover her socks or a corduroy jacket she has worn all the fuzz off. Like Avey's performance of class and place through her clothing, Octavia sees urban Chicago offering her the opportunity to change her class status. Unlike Avey, however, Octavia rejects her desire for the beautiful dresses and better class status if achieving it means losing her mother, which happens at the end of the novel as she is sent away from Atlanta wearing one of Nikki's fancy dresses.

The deceptive, subconscious substitution of Atlanta for Chicago because of its urban-ness also defines the parents' understanding of where they choose to live and raise their families. The difference for the parents, however, is that they have more firmly established their identities in connection to urban Atlanta; consequently, it takes longer for them to begin to question Atlanta and the space they, the parents, are actually

black community when the murder was identified as a black man. For a historical overview of violence experienced by black youths see Wilma King's *African American Childhoods: Historical Perspectives from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2005).

occupying. Octavia's mother once had planned to go to Chicago on invitation by relatives, but her unplanned pregnancy kept her in Georgia. Losing her dream of going to the North, she subordinates Chicago as a spatial reference which limits her understanding of Atlanta relative to her hometown of Macon. In doing so, Octavia's mother replaces Chicago with Atlanta as the urban North, nullifying in her mind the possibility of Atlanta being the South.

The phone exchanges Octavia overhears between her mother and grandmother can therefore be seen as arguments over whether Atlanta or Macon is the better place to live. In their conversations, those two locales are depicted as the only two viable options; presumably Octavia's grandmother wants them to move back to Macon. In connection to the murders taking place in Atlanta, Octavia overhears her mother on the phone saying "Mama, you act like no black boy ever got killed in Macon, Georgia. At least here it is a crime" (Jones 146). Octavia does not pay much attention to this conversation because it is just like all the others. In the Atlanta-Macon debates, Atlanta is portrayed as more progressive than Macon. Octavia's mother has been defending her choice to live in Atlanta for so long that her responses have become mechanical; she even refuses to consider her mother's concerns. After more child disappearances, however, she decides that Atlanta is not a safe place for her daughter and sends Octavia further north to live with her father in Charleston, South Carolina.

It is through Octavia's narrative that Jones shows the imaginary constructions of Atlanta as the North, but then in Tasha's story that notion is undercut. While Octavia's mother consciously replaces the North with Atlanta, this is not the case for Tasha's father who migrates to Atlanta from Alabama. Mr. Baxter believes he has escaped the South

with this move. That Atlanta is in fact still the South or *in* the South comes as a shock to Mr. Baxter. His sudden realization that his urban/suburban experience is actually situated within the South disrupts and complicates his understanding of his Atlanta place-based identity. Mr. Baxter leaves his black middle-class neighborhood in Southside Atlanta to help search for one of the missing children. His experience of the white suburbs north of the city returns him to a different knowledge of the southern space. He reflects,

“Out there where we went, is like where I grew up. It’s a trip. Twenty-five miles outside of Atlanta and *bam*, back in Alabama.” He made a sound that was something like a laugh. “White folks looking at you half mean, half scared. The ones who came out to help us look were decent; I’ll admit that. But most of them didn’t lift a finger. Just stayed in their houses.” (78)

Mr. Baxter’s description of his encounter just outside of Atlanta’s urban space reflects his lived, racial understanding of the South and his placement of Atlanta in the North. He associates the South with a specific geographical space and with a set of attitudes and behaviors based on experience, not region. Here Mr. Baxter metaphorically returns to the South that is both spatial and temporal. The white suburbs of Atlanta, which he equates with the Jim Crow South of his childhood, seem more rural than the suburbs closer to the city. The memories of the Jim Crow South evoked in Mr. Baxter by this experience are those of not only Emmet Till but also the young girls in the Birmingham, Alabama bombing, the history of which he now wants to share with his two daughters. It is important to note that his experience outside of the city does not cause him to associate Georgia with the South; instead, it prompts him to see and feel Alabama. This, to him, signals he is in the South. Later, this sobering experience leaves him on his knees, with his head in his wife’s lap, as he struggles to reconcile the fact that Atlanta is *still* in the

South or that the South *still* exists in Atlanta. It is both the metaphorical return he experiences in his mind and the epiphany that Atlanta is not in the North that disrupt his normative understanding of his self.

Mr. Baxter registers, ironically, that he is not in his presumed safe space and that he is actually unaware of his own location. His disassociation of Atlanta from the South is first confused when he discovers Atlanta's situatedness within the South. And then he is further bewildered when the searchers find the body of another missing black child, not near the white suburbs outside Atlanta he has acknowledged as the South, but close to his own neighborhood:

“That’s the thing,” Daddy said. “It was right around here. I didn’t realize it at first. Word got around that they found a body, a skeleton really, around a lake.”

“Around here?” Mama said. Her hand stopped its soothing circles.

“I saw a policeman. A brother. He said they found her at Niskey Lake. I said ‘Where the hell’s that?’ and he told me. I said, ‘Man that’s not far from where I stay. I never heard of no lake off of Cascade Road.’ He said, ‘Somebody did.’”
(80)

When Mr. Baxter learns that a body is discovered around a lake, it does not immediately occur to him that it is in his own neighborhood. His understanding of his neighborhood as urban excludes the presence of the lake. He has hitherto imagined Atlanta as an endless urban space devoid of rural markers, such as a lake, connecting it to the South. At each moment of his participation in the search for the missing children, Mr. Baxter perceives more deeply that he does not know where Atlanta is or how his identity fits in relation to this newly mysterious place. Just as he noted earlier that the children’s lack of knowledge about the South was the cause of the disappearances and murders, he admits that his own lack of geographic and spatial knowledge about Atlanta makes him

vulnerable as well. In its undefined liminality, Atlanta becomes a space where issues of race, class, place, and identity intersect in very real life and death situations. Residency in Atlanta does not guarantee safety, and the inaccurate place-based identities constructed in relation to the city can result in fragmentation. In Mr. Baxter's case this fissure allows him to reassess his situation and also makes for new self-definition as he decides to tell his daughters about the South's violent history.

In between Tasha's narrative of Mr. Baxter realizing that urban Atlanta is the South and Octavia's narrative of Atlanta constructed as the North is Rodney's narrative in which the intersection of the North and the South creates a violent space. Jones's superior use of second-person narration, which turns Rodney into the narrative's subject, referred to as "you," forms a barrier distancing Rodney from readers while also bringing readers closer to the way he experiences the events as readers are told how to think and feel at different moments⁵⁷. Rodney has a clearer conception of Atlanta than Octavia and Mr. Baxter because he is not concerned with it or how it defines him as an individual. He views Atlanta as a large varied space in which downtown Atlanta is urban, holding the dangers of his potential abduction and murder as a black male child during this string of

⁵⁷ Jones states that her "idea for the second-person point of view in *Leaving Atlanta* is the idea of a guardian angel almost speaking to Rodney. Almost how his adult self would have explained the world to his younger self" (Grandt "(Un-)Telling" 74). Grandt, on the other hand, argues, "the disembodied narrative voice addresses the protagonist directly in the second-person singular [... and] the narrative voice does not so much record mimetically Rodney's actions and thoughts as dictate them" (*Shaping Words* 111). Harris, offering another perspective, claims "the effect is one of distancing [... and] Paradoxically and simultaneously, the second-person narration also locks readers into Rodney's situation [...] Rodney is in a situation comparable almost to watching a movie of his life, with him being dragged along as the reluctant participant" (*Scary* 161). Harris's reading of the use of second-person narration is the closest to my own. The use of the uncommon second-person narration feels strange to readers because we are not expecting it, but its use in this situation brings readers directly into the position of victim as we are directed through Rodney's section right along with him.

serial killings. On the other hand, his home, despite its middle-class suburban location, represents the violent South as he experiences it through his father's physical abuse of him intermingled with stories about picking cotton. His experiences at home and with his family—from his mother doing everything for him, including homework assignments, to his father's unattainable expectations—not only prevent Rodney from establishing his own identity, but also kindles his desires to return to the time before he was a even a thought.

Jones depicts Rodney as being unable to convey his thoughts or be heard, and always stumbling over his words. His second-person narrative attempts to explain his decisions, but repeatedly exposes his inability to discern social cues, both in situations with his peers and with adults. Throughout his narrative, Rodney frequents a convenience store Lewis's Market near his school. On several different occasions Rodney witnesses community place-based identities at work. He initially reaps the benefits of this identity bestowed upon him: "Mrs. Lewis has known your father since the two of them were barefoot children in Plain Dealing, Louisiana, so she is convinced that your honesty is guaranteed by superior genetic material reinforced by corporeal punishment" (102-103). Unlike the other children, Rodney does not have to leave his backpack at the front of the store. Mrs. Lewis relies on her connection to Rodney through their community place-based identity that allows her to know Rodney via his father. Mrs. Lewis's identification of Rodney as a trustworthy child and ally in the urban space is proved wrong as Rodney, ironically, confides to readers that he steals candy from her two to three times a week.

While Rodney differs from this woman from his father's childhood, he does desire acceptance from his father. In another instance where he is at the convenience

store with his father, Rodney has a more direct encounter with Mrs. Lewis and his father's southern identity:

Father once came into the store and chuckled at the sight of this odd-looking confection.

"Virginia," he exclaimed, tell me this ain't what I think it is."

Mrs. Lewis laughed from behind the counter. "Claude L, don't tell me you got so old you don't know a peanut patty when you see one."

Father laughed so deeply that he became unrecognizable. "I haven't seen one of these here since Hector was a pup!"

Mrs. Lewis said, "Go on and get one. Take one home to Beverly, too."

"Naw," Father said. "She from Chicago. She don't know nothing about this here." (103)

Through this exchange the import of this specific peanut patty is shown relative to a community place-based identity. That Mr. Green declines to take one for his wife because she is from Chicago suggests that this candy does not have merely generational or black cultural significance. The peanut patty transports and links Mrs. Lewis and Rodney's father to a specific southern place—their growing up in Louisiana together.

Following the conversation between Mrs. Lewis and Rodney's father, Rodney is told to pick out a candy for himself. Rodney knows this to be a test but does not understand its implication. He does not grasp the importance of this decision in relation to the significance of place, but he does know that it will affect his father's opinion of Rodney's identity. Rodney mentally removes the candies he actually wants because he fears his father will view them, and thus him, as "dainty" or "too soft" and chooses the one "that features a drawing of a grape dressed for combat" (104). Knowing that his father is testing him, he chooses the Alexander the Grape candy, illustrating his belief that his father wants him to make a masculine choice. This logic fails, however, because

the only correct choice is the peanut patty. Rodney's failure to choose the southern peanut patty indicates his inability to process the exchange between his father and Mrs. Lewis and to share their southern identity.

Recalling Marshall's depiction of Avey, Rodney cannot return home to his middle-class suburban neighborhood under the crushing weight of his family's attempt to perform the "Dick and Jane myth of American nuclear families" (Harris, *Scary* 161). Unlike Avey, Rodney is unable to conform to his role in the white middle-class American family and, instead, lives in terror of his dominating father. After leaving school without his little sister, he debates whether or not he should return to take her home. He reflects, "Nothing you know is in the direction you're heading. Home is the other way" (Jones 139). Despite this assessment, Rodney does know what is in the direction he is heading. He is seeking an end to his misery and believes it is in the direction of urban downtown Atlanta. He continues,

At Martin Luther King Drive, you dart across four lanes of traffic against the blinking warning of the cross signal. Car horns scream, but the drivers accelerate when you find yourself alive and disappointed on the north side of the road. Carillon bells sing from the college campus nearby and you walk toward downtown. Home is the other way. (140)

His disappointment at not getting hit while crossing the busy street makes his mission much more apparent: he ominously longs for death, which responds when Rodney encounters the Atlanta child murderer and willingly gets in the man's car.

This scene assumes a much greater consequence in Jones's setting it at Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, which runs from east to west, dividing the southern side of Atlanta from downtown Atlanta. This decision re-invokes Alice Walker's questions about the end

of the Civil Rights Movement and its success. While Dr. King acknowledges forms of injustice in the North⁵⁸, his focus was predominantly on the condition of the South. In the context of Atlanta, King served as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) headquartered in Atlanta. The SCLC helped build coalitions between the North and the South, working towards freedom in the United States. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive in *Leaving Atlanta*, however, does not represent freedom, or protection for the urban black child, or a union between the North and the South. Jürgen Grandt reads this as a scene of tragic irony, taking it back to the antebellum South, where the movement across Martin Luther King Jr. Drive “harks back to the perilous journey of the runaway slave; only now, the freedom to be found north of ‘the direction opposite of home,’ even in the New Souths, is the liberty that comes with death” (113). Rodney as the runaway child knows the dangers of his decision to head into the city rather than home to his suburb.

For Rodney home represents a mentally and emotionally destructive South embodied by his father’s deep connection to his rural Louisiana upbringing. Rodney’s reflection on his inability to respond to his father, both due to not knowing how to respond to his father’s southern nostalgia and his father’s silencing his attempts to speak, present his father as the “Southland [...] bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue” (King, “Letter”). Mr. Green expects Rodney to have innate knowledge on a particular brand of southernness without teaching him about it. This results in Rodney’s inability to negotiate his own life within the confines of a silent South. Although Rodney’s mother is from Chicago, she does not bring a balance to his

⁵⁸ Such as the northern black populations living urban ghettos and having nothing worth voting for in the North, that he mentions in his “I Have a Dream” speech.

father's southernness. When she questions his treatment of their son, he responds with definitive answers that go unchallenged. Instead of serving as an ally to her son, she remains emotionally distanced from him and more interested in performing her class status.

In many ways, Rodney's existence has perpetually been at the oppressed and oppressive intersection of the North and the South as symbolized through his parents. This experience does not result in death for him, but it does make him suicidal, leading him into the city. When he comes to the intersection at Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, he does not heed the "blinking warning of the cross signal." The warning from this cross signal suggests that the Martin Luther King Jr. Drive does not unite the urban downtown of Atlanta with the south side of the city; instead, it marks a divide between the two. Rather than waiting for the signal to change, Rodney chooses to go against traffic, placing himself in harm's way. His completed passage from the south side of the street to its north side symbolizes his successful and active escape from his father. Rodney presumes the urban downtown that couches his freedom in death as the grounds of the Atlanta child murderer towards whom he flees. Invoking Martin Luther King Jr. again, Rodney seeks justice through non-confrontational actions, coded in his entering "the car as an act of passive resistance against his violent, domineering father" (Grandt, *Shaping* 113) or "passive suicide" (Harris, *Scary* 161). Rodney's inability to construct or his lack of desire for an identity shows the difficulties of being suspended between two dueling spaces. More so than any of the other characters in the novel, Rodney represents the junction of the North and the South and is helpless to situate his self in either or both.

By inserting a reflection about Atlanta's identity within the historical event of the Atlanta Child Murders, Jones plants a very real stake in the perception of place. Her characters' understanding of place does not only function mentally and emotionally to nurture them, but their lives are dependent upon it. Jones's treatment of the urban South in *Leaving Atlanta* further complicates the idea of the South and helps to develop the South as a multifaceted space. In *Leaving Atlanta* the incongruous urban South dislocates the urban experience and reinscribes fears of the South. This fear develops due to a lack of awareness on the part of her characters and due to the idealization of the city as the North. Jones challenges ideas about the South, but more important she challenges beliefs that are associated with that space. Her representation of the southern city suggests there is a danger in accepting imagined spaces, both rural and urban, as real. Jones constructs the possibilities for the urban South—specifically Atlanta, a place she is very interested in exploring—in her realistic treatment of space. She suggests that if the urban South as the new South is to be a productive place for African Americans, the identities constructed within it must accurately reflect it.

These interrogations of the urban North-rural South dichotomy in African American literature of the post-Civil Rights era address the potential jeopardy to place-based identities when obviously complex places are reduced to certain generalized stereotypes. While Marshall dramatizes how both the urban North and the rural South can function together, Jones illustrates that the urban does exist in the South and that neither the urban, as North or South, nor the South, as urban or rural, can be romanticized because this glamorization comes at the expense of its occupants. Additionally, both

authors present class divisions within the novels' black communities as inimical to the wellbeing of the community. Marshall sees the reaffirmation of black cultural connections as a way to bridge class divisions, while Jones does not offer a solution, but does attempt to undermine class privilege by including the middle-classed Rodney as one of the victims in the Atlanta Child Murders. Jones shows that class divisions affect children's understandings of their selves in similar ways they influence adults, as Marshall depicts in *Praisesong*. Ultimately, both writers demonstrate the role conceptions of place have on identity formation.

The place-based identities that Avey learns how to reconcile *and* those Mr. Baxter and Octavia have disrupted are also split between community definition and individual or self-definition. Community-defined identity is most commonly associated with the stereotype marking community as southern, while the individual identity is connected with the North and its northern individualism. The community-defined identity can be at odds with the individual identity, or prevent the self from being independently and wholly defined. The following chapter considers Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* and Tina McElroy Ansa's *Ugly Ways* relative to the role of community-defined identity, which migrants reencounter upon returning to the South, plays in the reintegration of the self.

CHAPTER III. COMMUNITY-DEFINED IDENTITY AND THE SOUTH IN
RANDALL KENAN'S *A VISITATION OF SPIRITS* AND TINA MCELROY ANSA'S
UGLY WAYS

In her essay "Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction" (1985), Barbara Christian charts the development of the black woman's search for self, from the nineteenth century through the 1980s. She marks the 1950s as a significant turning point in novels by black women writers. Christian references Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953) as the work that sets the tone for future novels that explore the process of self-definition. Christian notes that following the Civil Rights Movement the major shift in the novels by black women writers is their general representation of the black community as "a major threat" (240) to the process of black women's self-definition. Since Christian's survey of the literature, both black men and women writers have continued to explore the possibilities of the black community that was disrupted by the integration of the Civil Rights Movement. The community is portrayed as an obstacle to not only black women's full self-definition, but also to black men's self-definition. Although sometimes an obstruction, the idea of community must be interrogated and incorporated into the individual's identity for that identity to be made whole and properly spatially situated.

Farah Jasmine Griffin deduces that the importance of the spatial South is tied up with the role of the ancestor, which makes the South "the place where community and history are valued over Northern individualism" (9). Within the framework of return

migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era, the return to the South incorporates communities into the process of individual self-definition. The characters must negotiate between the community's power over their identity *and* their own desires for selfhood. Rejection of northern individualism is not necessary, but what seems imperative is the balance between community-defined and individual identities.

Hortense Spillers discusses the implications of the end of the twentieth century on both the African American individual and the African American community. Although she claims that it is finally time for scholars to explore the interior side of WEB Du Bois's idea of racial double-consciousness, she is also concerned with the loss of community for African Americans. Spillers asserts "that the postmodern economy, both in real and symbolic terms, has been devastating for both the concept and practice of 'community'" (383). She goes on to identify the loss of community for African Americans as a result of systemic changes of the post-Civil Rights era and as "something quite private and unofficial" that has led to the dissipation of "certain social capabilities" (383). Spillers acknowledges that she feels a personal loss of community, one that is both familiar and somewhat nostalgic.

The problem with the desire for the familiar and nostalgic experience seems to be its potential to disrupt or hinder the development of the concept and practice of community. Alice Walker states that "What the black Southern writer inherits as a natural right is a sense of community. Something simple but surprisingly hard, especially these days, to come by" (*In Search* 17). Walker acknowledges that a sense of community has become sparse. Like Spillers, Walker's conception of community is specific to time and place, seen as static. She suggests that while community may not necessarily be found

any longer, a sense of it lingers in the South and is only available to southerners. In her analysis of novels primarily by contemporary ethnic American women writers—including Toni Morrison—Magali Cornier Michael notes that these writers theorize that community is always in a state of redefinition “as members enter and leave and as the interests of individual members change. As such, communities have the potential to be inclusive and to create spaces for difference—although they can also function to ensure sameness through exclusionary practices” (12). These contemporary depictions of community reject the idea that it is static. They instead construe it as a potentially positive or negative force depending on the community’s desire to make space, or not, for its individual members.

It is a difficult task to let go of the impression that community is static, as Spillers suggests. This is because the new form of community, with ongoing and multiple entries and exits by its members, old, new, and varied, becomes challenging to identify. Spillers proposes that “An apparently homogeneous social form with strictly determined borderlines, within and without, is no longer located in the same place, or, perhaps more accurately, no longer configured in the same way, if by that we mean zones of safety in the familiar” (384). In other words, it is not that the community no longer exists or exists elsewhere, but that the community has been reconstituted, and thus serves a different function. The difficulty in identifying these alternate constructions of community has resulted in little scholarship on community in contemporary African American literature.

In a study that attempts to understand recent representations of community in contemporary African American literature, Philip Page argues that novels by John Edgar Wideman, Toni Cade Bambara, Charles Johnson, Gloria Naylor, and Ernest Gaines

“document the spiritual and psychic disintegration that accompanies the loss of community and cultural heritage as well as the redemptive possibilities of reaffirming such ties” (*Reclaiming* 5). Page interrogates the ways these novelists address contemporary issues of community and how their novels open up spaces to reclaim the concept of African American community and even larger conceptions of American community. He notes, however, that none of his focal novelists offers a solution for recovering the community. He even shows how some writers, such as Gaines, depict the failure of community after it is given the space to come back together. Page further argues that the model of the empowered community in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, for instance, also fails because it exists in the liminal space of a mythical Island, outside of reality.

An additional feature Page discusses in relation to contemporary African American literature in its engagement with the idea of community is authorial use of polyvocality to forefront the importance of community through the presentation of multiple narrative perspectives. Interestingly, as a logical factor of the migrants returning to communities in the South, that trope of plural narrators is also common in African American return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era. It is present in seven of the eight novels discussed in this dissertation. Just as having a space for multiple narrators strengthens the idea of manyness, and by extension, it can also drive the community members to stand out as sovereign individuals and voices separate in community, even in smaller, rural places.

The return migration novel of the post-Civil Rights era normally depicts characters’ returns to smaller, more rural communities as a contrast to their experiences

in large urban cities. Sometimes the returnees arrive as outsiders to communities they previously have no experience with, as in the cases of Walker's *Meridian* and Andrews's *Lea*. At other times, the return is to a place where the characters can build their own communities, as with Andrews's *Rosiebelle Lee* and Paule Marshall's *Avey*. Being an outsider to a community or being the center of it can pose its own challenges. The most difficult return presented in return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era, however, is the return to a home community. This chapter will look at the effect home communities have on the identities and experiences of characters in Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) and Tina McElroy Ansa's *Ugly Ways* (1993).

I will be looking at the subconscious internalization or the adamant rejection of identities ascribed to characters by their small, rural, and all-black southern communities that purport to know the characters based on their membership in the community. The sense of fragmentation experienced by return migration characters appears to result from a split between a community-defined identity, which is bestowed upon them by their mere location within or familial descent from a specific group, and an individual identity, which is self-defined. The community-defined identity can force out or hinder the fullest development of the non-conformist individual identity. For some migrants, loss of the home community upon departing the South leaves the characters, unable to conceptualize their individual identity, holding onto their community-defined identity, while for others the distance allows them to explore their individual identities, although self-definition is still restricted.

I examine the family as the home community in Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*. Kenan's characters face different issues with their familial community based on age,

gender, and sexuality. Looking comparatively at Jimmy Greene, the return migrant, and Horace Cross and Ruth Davis-Cross, who have never left, however, will show the different concessions to his identity the return migrant makes versus those made by the characters that never leave. In Ansa's *Ugly Ways*, I go outside of the family to the black citizens of Mulberry, read here as the home community. The Mulberry community is less visible in *Ugly Ways* than Ansa's other novels because the characters in *Ugly Ways* are focused on a death in the family, but the community's presence in the periphery dictates the actions and feelings of the main characters. As with the first text, I look comparatively at the three Lovejoy sisters' inability to escape their community-defined identities. For all of these characters, the reconciliation of their community-defined identities and their individual identities must occur in the space of the South and the authors suggest that that reconciliation is critical to the characters' survival.

Kenan's novel *A Visitation of Spirits* is a complex polyvocal narrative that experiments with multiple narrative forms. The story moves between the events of two specific days April 29-30, 1984 and December 8, 1985 with third-person narration. The 1984 sections are told from Horace's point-of-view, while the 1985 sections shift between the viewpoints of Jimmy, Ruth, and Zeke Cross. These accounts are separated by "confession" sections from the first-person accounts of Jimmy and Horace. Within these first- and third-person sections are short drama scenes and ethnographic sketches⁵⁹ of the black community of Tims Creek in fictional York County, North Carolina. These

⁵⁹ The ethnographic sketches in *A Visitation of Spirits* are less frequent than those in Kenan's short story "Let the Dead Bury the Dead" which also experiments with form as it compiles documents produced by Jimmy Greene to create a more thorough image of York County. In *A Visitation of Spirits*, the two main sketches "Advent"—the account of a community's hog killing—and "Requiem for tobacco"—the account of a community helping harvest tobacco—reinforce the gendered roles within the community, while depicting the community coming together to help its members.

various forms help Kenan create an image of York County's black and white communities as reluctant to let go of the past. The white community celebrates the history of the white Crosses and plantation life through the production of a local play, while the black Crosses cling to tradition that brought them out of slavery and led to their current success as leaders of their community. The black Cross family is the spiritual and moral leaders of the community; the older members of the family serve as deacons and deaconesses on the board overseeing the church their great-grandfather established after emancipation. The novel focuses on the events leading to and surrounding the suicide of sixteen-year-old Horace who is unable to live up to his community-defined identity despite his attempts to reject his homosexual identity.

Alongside Horace's struggle, Jimmy shows how he explores his homosexual desires while attending college and living in Durham, NC and also the way he is able to suppress those desires upon returning to Tims Creek. Unlike Horace, Jimmy does not allow his homosexual desires or activities to become a part of his individual identity because, like Horace, he believes he cannot escape the identity he is assigned by his family. Comparatively, Horace and Jimmy have similar backgrounds: both are raised by grandparents after their own parents are deemed unacceptable parents; both are "chosen" as future heads of the community, Jimmy as religious leader and Horace as secular leader; they are both gay⁶⁰ black men in a religious, southern family that does not allow them to express their sexuality; and, finally, although there is nearly a twenty year age difference between them, they are of the same generation in their family.

⁶⁰ While critics generally agree about Jimmy's homosexuality, it is important to note that Jimmy and the narrator only allude to homosexual practices and he does not identify himself as gay at any point, not even during his confession sections.

The main identity struggle present in *A Visitation* is whether or not the rural community can acknowledge homosexuality as a piece of one's identity. Critics read *A Visitation* as reworking James Baldwin's treatment of gay characters and the spaces they live. Robert McRuer, for instance, argues that it is a revision of *Go Tell it on the Mountain* with Horace's death showing "that the gay individual cannot and does not survive such attempts at accommodation with the church" (82). Sharon Holland proposes that Kenan signifies upon *Giovanni's Room* in order to "rewrite the space of blackness to include the presence of a black gay male" (111). To Shelia Smith McKoy, *A Visitation* is in direct conversation with *Another Country*. McKoy adds that "Kenan reconciles what had been previously irreconcilable in black southern literature: that it is possible to define black gay manhood" (33). These critics generally agree that the novel imagines a space in the South where homosexuality does not remain positioned in opposition to blackness and manhood (Holland 113-114, Littler 44, McKoy 17, Wester 1047). Horace's suicide at the end of the novel, however, complicates the success of Kenan's project.

In addition, the reviewers differ on the outcome of Horace's suicide. McRuer, Holland, and McKoy posit that Horace's death has the potential to change the community. Maisha Wester cites an interview in which "Kenan proclaims that Horace has to die in order for the community to change: 'They have to understand the devastation they're wreaking on certain people and tragedy most effectively disturbs and moves people'" (1050). However, as Trudier Harris points out, Horace's funeral is not depicted within the text (*Scary* 132) and readers do not see a community aware of its actions in relation to Horace's demise. Harris and Lucy Littler question the view that Horace's suicide actually changes the community when that community does not even

discuss his death nor its causes. For Harris and Littler, Horace's death is a tragedy lacking purpose. I agree with Harris and Littler; there is no textual evidence that suggests Horace's suicide has a clear impact on the Tims Creek community. Furthermore, I would argue that there are several moments in the text that suggest Horace and his homosexual identity could have had a place in the Tims Creek community, which desires change itself. It is his familial community, led by Zeke and Jonnie Mae Cross-Greene, that destroys Horace by rejecting his attempts at self-definition. The purpose of Horace's death, then, speaks to the need for a re-understanding of community and a questioning how community ideals are actually being used by the smaller familial community. The impact Horace's death has is on readers more so than it is on the fictional Tims Creek community.

Placing this community in the post-Civil Rights era rural South challenges the community to leave behind its antiquated practices and to openly create a space for those individuals, like Horace, who question the community's restrictive belief system. McRuer cites a 1991 interview in which Henry Louis Gates Jr. discusses gay characters. Gates states, "I want Randall Kenan to, as it were, take Horace to the big city in his next novel" (qtd. in Rowell 454). While McRuer sees this as a "predictable" (69) response since the move to the big city is an exhausted trope in gay and lesbian literature, Gates's response comes from the desire to see Horace succeed, with his life intact. The problem with taking Horace to the city is that placing him "in an urban area where, presumably, a 'black gay identity' is more developed and secure effaces, if not jeopardizes, the possibility of transforming the community in which Horace is already located and—more important—undermines Kenan's critique of the 'regime of sameness'" (70). Kenan aims,

then, to keep Horace in and return Jimmy to the rural space in order to confront the attitudes of the static community. The two characters need to be in a space where they can affect necessary and noticeable change.

Additionally, the big city would allow Horace to disappear among its large population, rather than visibly emerge which is the advantage the small Tims Creek community offers. Holland argues that rather than subtly addressing identity that is both black and gay, “Kenan places Horace’s struggles in a changing South, at the table of not only a black family but also one with a church going legacy to fulfill [...] challenging notions of blackness and bringing the imaginative project back ‘home.’” (114). In other words, the problem facing Horace is not that he is in the South or in a rural environment—because that space is in a state of change—but that he is oppressed by the fundamentalist black church⁶¹ and his familial community. Like other African American migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era, *A Visitation* uses the changing state of the South to re-imagine a space for self-definition. Kenan’s characters, however, are still attempting to make sense of the South as a changing region and struggle to define their individual selves while being held to their community-defined identities.

In order to maintain the Cross family’s reign over Tims Creek, Jonnie Mae seeks to preserve the rural community her grandfather Ezra Cross developed following the Civil War. In doing so, Jonnie Mae refuses to let another generation pass without producing a reverend to fulfill Ezra’s dreams for the church. Jonnie Mae’s father Thomas Cross, along with her brothers Zeke and Jethro, and her son and nephews all fail to become reverends but instead become farmers, alcoholics, or leave the South entirely.

⁶¹ See Marlon Riggs’s documentary *Black Is and Black Ain’t* (1994) and Charles Nero’s “Towards a Black Gay Aesthetic” (1997).

Jonnie Mae takes charge of her daughter's children in the hopes that they would do what those before her were unable to do. Jimmy remembers his calling to the church was not a calling, but a result of his siblings failure to fulfill the role:

By the time I was fourteen, Isador had gone off to school. Franklin had proven to be a serious student, a hard worker in the fields, and an excellent athlete, respectful and dutiful. But in the end, just like his uncles, he loved women more than he loved the Lord. So I became the pious one, the holy one. (174)

Like the majority of the last two Cross generations, Isador, Franklin, and Jimmy all do well in school and Jonnie Mae sees to it that they receive college educations. The weight of familial expectations shifts from Franklin, if it was even there to begin with, onto Jimmy. Jimmy does not love women more than he loves the lord but he internalizes the limited identity placed upon him by his family more than his brother does. His affirmation of this community-defined identity prevents him from realizing his own subjectivity.

Jimmy's encounter with his identities comes once he leaves Tims Creek for college. Jimmy confesses, "when I stepped through the gates of those hallowed halls at North Carolina Central, I became acquainted with the intoxicating rush of freedom. I was far from the roving eyes of the deacon and deaconesses. I was in my own hands" (174). He is able to experiment with his individuality outside of Tims Creek, free from the constraining gaze of his family. His account of negotiating between his individual identity and community-defined identity is not presented as a struggle. Instead, Jimmy is able to compartmentalize these identities into the spaces in which he can preform them. He notes that during his undergraduate days in Durham, "[he] was sure [he] was the antichrist come, and was perfectly happy to be so. [He] slept with anything that was

willing” (174). Although Jimmy does not claim a homosexual identity, it is repeatedly suggested through his sexual struggles with his wife Anne, from his impotence during their first sexual encounter to his resignation after finding out she is having an affair. Most explicitly, he admits to exploratory homosexual desire and activities when counseling Horace. He tells him, “we’ve all done a little...you know...experimenting. It’s a part of growing up” (113). Jimmy’s experimenting ends when he completes his degree and begins seminary school; however, he does not give up men for women, but turns to celibacy.

Although his separate identities are not presented as an obstacle, he does admit to duplicity. He acknowledges dishonesty in performing his community-defined identity when in Tims Creek and experimenting with his individual identity in Durham.

Reflecting on his time in college, Jimmy concedes,

my only regret being that my aunts and my grandmother never seemed to suspect that I was a hypocrite, a liar. For when I came home I still read the Scriptures in church and taught Bible school, only to return to school and recruit the first co-ed who gave me a willing glance. I realize that this was the true sin. (174)

He regards his hypocrisy as his “true sin,” but fails to desist from it. His candor, resolve, and ability to voice his hypocrisy hold the key to enacting public change in the Tims Creek community. Kenan suggests that Jimmy’s failure to effect that change and the unlikelihood of it happening in the future result from his unwillingness to outwardly define his self. He leaves his difference in Durham and instead accepts the identity determined by his family.

Jimmy’s failure is most visible during the scenes where he receives opportunities to actually move the Tims Creek community out of its ideologic stasis, but instead he

responds passively. When Horace seeks counsel from Jimmy, as his cousin and reverend, Horace is left confused and alone by Jimmy's inability to define his own subjectivity. Jimmy's struggles with homosexuality show up in his conversation with Horace, but this conversation quickly deteriorates as Jimmy goes from affirming "You're perfectly normal" to "Horace, you'll cha—Change? Well, there's nothing to change. You're normal" to "You'll change" (113-114). This sequence of utterances confirms for Horace that his feelings are in fact abnormal and must be changed, not accepted. The advice Jimmy finally offers Horace comes from his own experience. He says, "Ask God to give you strength and in no time [...] You'll be fine believe me" (114). This approach may have been feasible for Jimmy because he was able to work through his desires outside of the intrusive space of the community. It is even suggested that his experiences with other men were limited to the physical. Horace, on the other hand, has been in love with at least one young man, Gideon, whom he ultimately rejects out of fear. Jimmy's rejection of self-definition can be read as the only way in which he is able to repress his homosexuality, while Horace's desire for self-definition forces him to confront his homosexuality and leaves him unable to reject it.

Jimmy reflects on how he might have handled differently his conversation on homosexuality with Horace but he only knows how to fill the role created for him. Jimmy confesses to readers, "I keep dreaming about him, about that morning. Keep thinking there was something I could have done. Said. If not that morning then before, long before...but that's just me being a romantic" (36). This initial expression of regret over Horace's situation and suicide turns self-centered when Jimmy considers himself a romantic. That he sees the possibility of preventing Horace's suicide as unrealistic

suggests that he still does not understand why Horace kills himself. Jimmy appears more interested in freeing himself of responsibility than in taking action so the community does not drive another youth to suicide.

Jimmy's righteous confessions contradict his actual behavior. His reflections on his feelings about events and his interactions with community members show good intentions, but his conduct and reactions reveal him as the moral watchdog his family desires him to be. Prior to recounting his conversation with Horace, he defends his passivity during a meeting with a sick community member:

How could I communicate that I was not, did not want to be the holy and pious dictator of a pastor they had been used to for all their lives [...] There was no way to say: I have not come here to judge you. To say: I want to introduce a new way of approaching Christian faith, a way of caring for people. I don't want to be a watchdog of sin, an inquisitor who binds his people with rules and regulations and thou shalt and thou shalt not. But looking at those eyes so full of past hurt and past rejection and past accusation, I could only smile and let be what was. (110)

Even after Horace's death, Jimmy still finds it hard to convey his acceptance of community members as individuals. As the wife of the community's bootlegger drinks a beer in front of him, he mentally rationalizes his compliance to himself by repeating, "there was no way to say." Rather than there being no way to articulate his beliefs, it is just that Jimmy is incapable of voicing the necessary change for his congregation. Jimmy chooses the most self-serving and expedient response that does not require him to break from his family's position in the community nor stand out as different in Tims Creek. It seems Jonnie Mae chooses Jimmy because he lacks leadership qualities. Jimmy accepts that he is who people say he is and he even helps to maintain the status quo.

During Jonnie Mae's funeral, Jimmy demonstrates his continued enforcement of his family's morals when he rejects his estranged mother Rose. Only his uncle Lester shows her compassion when he lightly places his hand on her shoulder. Jimmy wonders about this encounter during one of his confessions:

How much I could have learned from her. She had raised her fist to her home, to her God, to her people, and chased after her heart...and lived. What had she seen? The scars were evident to me. I saw them in her hands, in her neck, in her face. How had it changed her? For she could never return home. What did she come to understand of love and sex and lust and freedom, of violence and betrayal, of evil and hypocrisy, and all the naked pain I am sure she endured? Does knowing those things make living easier?
(122)

Jimmy considers these questions. He does not see himself doing what she did, however, nor is he able to forgive her for doing these things in order to ask her any of these questions. He once again demonstrates his own hypocrisy. He paradoxically is unable to forgive her for the features he admires about her. Among the many questions he formulates about her life experience, he states that "she could never return home," yet he fails to ask *why* she cannot return. Rose had attempted to return home several times, but she was unable to live under the control of Jonnie Mae. Rose fails to suppress her individual identity and Jonnie Mae's inability to create a space for difference and self-definition positions Rose as an outsider, an oddity in her family. Rose cannot return home because the community fails to adapt and create a space for her within itself. Jimmy's inaction, maintained even after Jonnie Mae's death, fails to reshape the Tims Creek community into a place that would accept Rose.

In addition to overlooking the most important question about his mother's experience, Jimmy also asks the wrong questions about his own reasons for not leaving

the South. His brother and sister “had both been singing the same old song to [Jimmy]. Leave North Carolina. Get out. As if it were on fire. As if, like Sodom or Gomorrah, the Almighty would at any moment rain down fire to punish the wicked for all the evil done on Southern soil” (34-35). He accepts that his siblings have left the South, but he does not understand their concern over his staying in the South. Isador and Franklin have equated the Tims Creek community with the rest of the state and the rest of the South. Jimmy responds to their concerns with “one simple question: ‘If we all “get out,” who will stay?’” (35). This question once again misses the point; Jimmy should ask, instead, why they should stay, or what can be achieved by staying. Jimmy implies here that he returns to Tims Creek simply to help populate it. This is where critics⁶² have generally given Jimmy too much credit. He cannot change the community until he is willing to confront his identities and define his self.

While Jimmy “was perfectly happy” to behave as the antichrist (174), Horace cannot accept his behaviors that are in opposition to his church and religion. Of course, Jimmy’s actions occur in the city, outside of the Tims Creek community. Unlike Jimmy, Horace does not need to leave Tims Creek to encounter freedom, but his family prevents him from embracing that liberty. His most successful attempt to thrive in Tims Creek is through his friendship with four white boys—Nolan, Ian, Jay, and Ted—who have lived outside of the South. His friendship with them lasts three months: “he remembered the months of September through November as a rare reprieve from anxiety. He had found his group” (236). The reprieve granted by his inclusion in this group is distraction from

⁶² See, for instance, Shelia Smith McKoy’s, “Rescuing the Black Homosexual Lambs: Randall Kenan and the Reconstruction of Southern Gay Masculinity” (2001) and Robert McRuer’s *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities* (1997).

his struggle with homosexuality and self-acceptance. He is drawn to this group of boys because, like himself, they “did not fit into the archaic, close-knit, rural ways of York County. They were from elsewhere” (236). While Horace is not really from elsewhere, he identifies with the boys to the extent that he imagines himself to also be from outside of Tims Creek. Three of them had parents who were returning to North Carolina: Nolan’s mother is a doctor migrating back from San Francisco; Ted’s father is a lawyer moving back from New York; and Ian’s father is returning home after retiring from the military. Horace’s family does not approve of this group, however, because they believe integration should be kept within school limits (63-64). As a result, Horace is forced to abandon his group of friends.

Horace’s demise comes at the hands of his family during a Thanksgiving dinner. This Thanksgiving scene has been of particular interest to critics because it is the only point where the family alludes to Horace’s possible homosexuality. It is also the moment in which his attempt at publicly expressing his identity is rejected. The Thanksgiving before his suicide, Horace arrives late to dinner with a pierced ear, for which his Great-Aunt Jonnie Mae and her three daughters, Rebecca, Rachel, and Ruthester chastise him. Ironically, the piercing does not represent homosexuality or whiteness to Horace. For him, it connected him to the “singular, infectious freedom” he saw in the boys as he “identified with their sense of entitlement, believing the world owed him what it owed them. Believing wholeheartedly he would receive it in the end” (237). With their friendship, the boys bring Horace hope in a world outside of Tims Creek. His family, however, views the boys as embodying homosexuality. What transpires at this dinner is recounted three different times: first in the third-person narrative from his grandfather’s

perspective, then in the form of a play in one of Jimmy's confession sections, and finally from Horace's third-person narrative section.

The second rendition appears to be the most objective, as it recounts the dialogue that occurs amongst the family members. The setup of this scene involves Zeke and Jonnie Mae occupying the head chairs of the dining room table with Reverend Barden, Jimmy, and Lester sitting between them while Rebecca, Rachel, and Ruthester bring dishes to the table from the kitchen, and their husbands' voices are heard coming from the kitchen. This arrangement of characters in the family's domestic space reflects the power structure of the Cross family. Those who are not biological descendants of the Crosses remain outside the familial community; an exception is made for the reverend who was chosen by the Cross family to uphold their grandfather's ideals in the church he established. Additionally, the patriarchal structure that is adamantly upheld by the Cross family is reflected in the table being occupied by the men of the family, regardless of their generation, while the women serve the meal. The traditional gender roles are disrupted by Jonnie Mae, the only woman sitting at the table, and ironically the one who seeks to rigidly maintain the traditional roles. Jonnie Mae is represented as an equal to her brother Zeke and of higher standing than her brother Jethro based on the portion of her family's land she owns. However, in fulfilling the role of the family's patriarch, she is presented as superior to Zeke. She creates her daughters in her own image, tells Zeke how he should raise his grandson, Horace, and keeps her son, Lester, silenced.

To the family, Horace's pierced ear aligns him directly against blackness and heterosexuality, positioning him with whiteness and homosexuality. Jonnie Mae resents this and accuses Horace of acting "Like some little girl. Like one of them perverts" (184).

Littler claims that Jonnie Mae's response to Horace's earring reflects "the Cross family's civil rights struggle because to be gay is to fall on the side of whiteness, and whiteness is what the Crosses have been fighting against all their lives" (44). While Jonnie Mae ignores other religiously admonished acts, like Zeke's adultery, she rigidly attacks sexual behavior that deviates from tradition and traditional gender roles. For instance, Zeke maintains his position in the family despite the possibility that he has children with several women, while Jonnie Mae's daughter Rose is outcast from the family after having multiple babies with different men outside of marriage.

It is important to note that everyone in the immediate Cross family does not share Jonnie Mae's opinion of Horace. During this heated family discussion, the only sentences Horace and Jimmy are able to complete are directed to Zeke, while Zeke is the only man able to finish his sentences within the larger conversation. Lester makes four attempts to defend Horace: "Well, I kind of like it, my—"; "Well, if you asked me—"; "It reminds me of—"; "Well, I think..." (183-188). Lester is cut off midsentence by each one of his sisters and then finally silenced by his mother. This scene points to the reason Jonnie Mae passes over her son to groom her grandson for the position of Reverend. Lester's open-mindedness and willingness to accept Horace's decisions threaten the static environment Jonnie Mae seeks to keep in place. It also raises questions about Lester's own sexuality, since only he, Jimmy, and Horace do not think there is anything wrong with the piercing. Jonnie Mae's silencing of Lester keeps her from having to exile him from the family as she does with other family members whose actions are too sexually radical.

When Horace later reflects on this exchange, he views it as rejection from his entire family. He does not remember Jimmy or Lester's attempts to defend him, and more importantly, he has no idea what his great-aunt was actually upset about:

He suspected his family might object to his action. But he had no idea they would pronounce treason and declare war. From top to bottom, uniformly, they condemned him [...] Horace has no alternative but to retreat into a world of guilt and confusion, not understanding the reasons for his exile. (238-239)

The reason for his confusion is that his friendship with the four white boys alleviates his anxiety from engaging in sexual activities, which suggest he has not been sexually active since his summer in the theater company. He thoroughly internalizes the way his family defines him and the way they would define him if he continues his homosexual behaviors. It is this disorientation that leads him to his end. While he puts together the ritual for his transformation, "In his mind he could see his Cousin Ann smiling her cinnamon smile and hear her say in small, raspy voice: But don't you know it yet, Horace? You the Chosen Nigger" (13). Unlike Jimmy, Horace cannot accept his designation as the chosen one in his family. Despite his attempts to the contrary, he cannot give up his subjectivity to fulfill Jonnie Mae's plans for him.

As previously noted, readers are not presented with a remorseful or devastated community, but Zeke's love for his grandson does have him questioning his interactions with Horace. Zeke recalls that "Horace would sometimes ask me about Papa and I couldn't fit on nothing to say about him, except he was a big, strong, hardworking, Christian man, who walked in the way of righteousness" (53). This idealized description of Thomas Cross as the upstanding Christian works to further banish Horace from his family as this heteronormalized image reminds Horace where Christianity places his

conduct. Zeke then imagines a different way of doing things with Horace that might have prevented his suicide. He thinks, “But now I reckon I’d tell him about them eyes of his and the way he moved and the way I wanted to be just like him...then” (53). Zeke idealizes his father, but fails to acknowledge how Thomas does not meet the requirements enforced by Jonnie Mae and himself. The eyes he would now describe for Horace reflect a very different side of the Cross family. As Zeke remembers it, Thomas’s eyes

were like a wild animal’s. Seemed like he could pull more stuff out through his eyes than most folk do. He didn’t look at you, he looked inside you, saw everything, and it was casual for him. But you came away with the feeling that you had no secrets from this man, cause he done looked into the very place where you locked your stinkiest secrets, and the bad thing was, you never knew if he approved of what he saw, despised it, loved it...you just never knew with that man. Never. And he could scare me to death. You’d be doing something—chopping wood, mending a fence, slopping hogs—and turn around and he’d be there sitting and peering right into your mind, reading your thoughts, like the devil or something...Once or twice I remember I let out a holler, he scared me so. But he was like that. Quiet as an Indian. Didn’t talk much, always sneaking...well, really, there wont no sneak to it, it’s just that he moved so quick and fast; you turn, he’d be there; you blink, he’d be gone. (53)

Zeke’s actual memory of his father differs greatly from the image he relates to Horace. Rather than remembering his father as the “Christian man, who walked in the way of righteousness” (53), Zeke compares him to a wild animal and the devil. These devil like qualities are accepted fondly by Zeke who even remembers imitating his father’s behaviors. A very different type of Cross patriarch is depicted in this memory. We are forced to wonder how Zeke and Jonnie Mae developed their strict enforcement of tradition and religion from a man who is seemingly disinterested in controlling the behavior of others. Unlike his children, Thomas does not outwardly police other people’s

actions. Zeke is sure of his father's ability to see the truth in everyone, but he ultimately views his father's lack of judgment as his unsettling flaw.

Much like Jimmy's "what if" moment, Zeke wonders how he might have changed Horace's outcome by saying something different. Sharing this information about his own father with Horace could have shown Horace that there was room for alternative, powerful identities in Tims Creek. Zeke would have also had to allow Horace the space for his own self-definition by releasing him from the burden of imagined identity his family imposed upon him. As shown in Jimmy's scene with the bootlegger's wife, there are community members, such as Thomas, who also reject the rigid guidelines for the Tims Creek community. In addition to Jimmy's interactions with this elderly woman and Zeke's memories of his father, Jimmy is also shown attempting to understand the abnormal behaviors of his great-aunt Ruth who, though absent from the Thanksgiving scene, represents a more accepting community already present in Tims Creek.

While Horace and Jimmy, as the main characters, have received the most scholarly⁶³ attention, their great-aunt Ruth is particularly interesting because of her position outside of the family. Ruth's intimacy with the family through her marriage to Zeke and Jonnie Mae's brother and her status as outsider to that family allow her the distinctive viewpoint, a double-sight of sorts, to see through the eyes of the Cross family and those of the larger Tims Creek community. Through these two viewpoints, she develops a perspective that directly conflicts with that of Zeke and Jonnie Mae. The exchanges that occur between Zeke and Ruth throughout the December 8th chapters reveal a strained relationship that results from Ruth's failure to accept the identity assigned her by the Cross family.

⁶³ All of the aforementioned scholars focus almost exclusively on Horace and Jimmy.

The familial expectation placed upon Ruth was that she manage her husband who, to Zeke and Jonnie Mae, does not live up to the Cross standard. His siblings sit back and slowly collect his land as he continuously mismanages it. Jethro's main vice is alcohol, which Ruth cannot keep him from and which she and her eight children suffer from as they do without food. In an argument between Ruth and Zeke the question of her husband Jethro's drinking problem is raised. Zeke tells Ruth, "I know that before you he never touched a drop of liquor. He was a good man till he laid eyes on you" (197). Zeke's accusation is grounded in his belief that Ruth's disposition drove Jethro to alcoholism or something more.

Ultimately Ruth fails to save Jethro from himself and her familial identity positions her as a disagreeable woman who drove her husband to drinking. Ruth responds, "Well, you'll see yourself one day, Ezekiel Cross. See what you and your family, your evil family have wrought. And it wont just on Jethro. It's on Lester. It's on this boy here. It was on your grandboy. You all is something else" (197). Ruth's list does not include Jimmy's mother Rose who, as discussed earlier, is exiled from the family for her having children outside of wedlock, nor does it include Horace's womanizing father Sammy, who likewise is ostracized from the family for his actions. Wester suggests that the Crosses have a history of repressed homosexuality in their family⁶⁴. That Ruth aligns Jethro and Lester with Jimmy and Horace whose commonality is neither alcoholism nor ostracism suggests that she understands what the Crosses actually seek to repress.

⁶⁴ Other critics have considered the reasons other Crosses are exiled from the family and leave the community, but they do not go as far as Wester in suggesting that those other than Jimmy and Horace might also be struggling with homosexuality. While other the other characters' sexuality is not discussed or presented with the same detail as Horace and Jimmy's, it is certainly plausible that the same type of silence exists towards other members of the Cross family for similar reasons.

Although Ruth does not name homosexuality nor term the “evil” “wrought” by the Crosses as homophobia, she refuses to remain quiet about the silence that exists around the men’s experiences and behaviors. Trudier Harris notes that “it is not quite clear that [Ruth] understands the true nature of Horace’s demise” (*Scary* 124) since she does not name it. Yet, a conversation Ruth remembers between her husband and herself suggests that Ruth knows alcohol is not Jethro’s actual problem. After finding Jethro on the front porch crying, Ruth prods him until he finally attempts to explain his tears:

—I didn’t want you to live in such a bad way. I don’t
deserve you. You...you don’t deserve me. I ain’t worthy of
you, Ruth. And I don’t know what to do about it. I just
don’t. I try to do better. I sure do...but I fall. I’m weak.
And look at you. Look at you.
—You...we’ll just have to keep trying hard. That’s all.
Just keep on. Just keep on and don’t quit—
—You a good woman, but you don’t understand, do you?
You don’t understand. (135)

Jethro’s protest at the end of their conversation suggests that he thinks Ruth is reassuring him about his alcohol problem, when he is really talking about something else. He is adamant that she does not understand that he is not talking about his alcoholism, but perhaps the reason for it. As she remembers this conversation, however, Ruth follows it with the thoughts, “Oh, but I did. I did” (135). Ruth tries to help Jethro survive his family, but she is blamed for his self-destruction instead.

Externally, Ruth acts like a disagreeable woman when she is with the Cross family. Her actions, during her visit to their cousin Asa in the hospital, confirm every opinion Zeke has about her. It is during this trip that Jimmy realizes Ruth does not actually meet the identity assigned to her. On the way home from the hospital, instead of delivering the behaviors Jimmy expects of her, Ruth shows a different side to her self.

After vehemently stating, “‘I ain’t no Cross, damn it. I’m a Davis. That’s what I was born, you old fool’” (198), Ruth visibly rejects her Cross identity and, presumably, performs a Davis one which involves her interaction with a changing future, via her interest in technology through the *Pac-man* arcade game, and her relationship with the young white girl playing the game. For the Crosses, both actions go against the ideals they have spent their generations upholding: racial segregation for their wellbeing and devotion to a traditional way of life.

Jimmy does not understand that Jonnie Mae and Zeke’s model is not the only belief system functioning in their older generation. When Ruth sees the young girl playing the arcade game, “Jimmy was sure she was about to be vexed and demand the child quit keeping that fuss, but her face was placid, and her voice did not seem in any way annoyed. If anything, she was curious” (203). Ruth’s interest in the *Pac-man* game, a machine she has not seen before, offers Jimmy a glimpse into how the community might act towards the future. Rather than allow for this realization, he can only respond with confusion: “Jimmy could not figure the unusual look on his great-aunt’s face. He took note of the girl, who kept turning around and smiling at Ruth, and Ruth smiling back, and he kept wondering what he was missing” (204). Ruth’s cordial behavior to the white woman at the mechanic’s shop and her encouragement towards the young white girl surprises Jimmy; he views her as like the other Crosses. Ruth does not keep her distance from these white people as Jimmy expects of her. Ruth defies his knowledge of her even further when “The girl clutched Ruth’s other hand and Ruth rose to her crooked position, and in her crooked fashion made her way, much to Jimmy’s dumbfounded disbelief, to the video game” (204). Jimmy’s ignorance and misunderstanding of his own 93-year-old

aunt raise the question of how well he knows his community or even his family. This scene suggests that changing the Tims Creek community's, or even his family's, beliefs might not be as hard as Jimmy imagines if he recognizes the voices and actions of all those who, like himself, have been silenced.

Ruth's behaviors, which appear inexplicable to Jimmy, draw attention to Kenan's complex representation of community in *A Visitation*. For much of the novel, the perspectives presented as belonging to the community are actually the beliefs of the Cross family, specifically Jonnie Mae and Zeke Cross. Kenan suggests that the destructive force keeping the community in its static state is the Cross family's power over the community members as the family tries to over determine individual self-definition. Such small changes as the decreased number of hogkillings, opening the novel, or group tobacco harvests, closing the novel, suggests, however, that change is occurring definitively outside the family's control. The Tims Creek community that exists beyond the Cross family is actually ready for and awaiting a more organized change. Horace's death is, therefore, not necessary to change the community's behavior and it seems ineffectual at altering the Cross's behaviors. Here the family functions as the pernicious force while the community could have offered acceptance.

The opposite model, in which the community is harmful and the family is protective is presented in Ansa's second novel, following her debut *Baby of the Family* (1989), *Ugly Ways*. The novel focuses polyvocally on the struggles of the three Lovejoy daughters as they come together to bury their mother. The sisters all have conflicted relationships with their mother because, to them, she fails to fulfill the role of nurturing mother that they desire their entire lives. The oldest daughter, Betty, has remained in their

hometown of Mulberry, Georgia, while her younger sisters Emily and Annie Ruth reside in Atlanta and Los Angeles. Like characters in other migration novels, Emily and Annie Ruth struggle mentally and emotionally as they attempt to live in these urban environments that represent the North. The novel's over arching theme is the mental and emotional stability of the Lovejoy family. While all three sisters have versions of psychological breakdowns, Betty's is the mildest because she remains in the small southern hometown and has neither the time nor space to fall apart. As in Kenan's novel, the family dynamic and the familial expectations play a large role in these women's vexed understanding of their identities. The Lovejoy sisters' tight bond in the face of their mother's alleged insanity and the community's judgment of her, however, make their familial space as supportive as it is devastating. It is Mulberry community's judgment projected onto and reflected in the sisters with which they attempt to cope. It is ironic that the sisters do not all together recognize the community's role in their struggles with their identities, but instead place the blame solely on their mother. Mulberry community's gossip sets behavioral expectations for the women even when they are still young children, and it is those suppositions that alter the way the sisters perceive their selves as adults.

It is unfortunate that published scholarship has not given *Ugly Ways* the extent of attention it deserves. Only a few critical responses have been written about *Ugly Ways*. Several of the critical reviews either focus on the domestic violence occurring between the parents, Ernest and Esther "Mudear" Lovejoy, and/or blame Mudear for the situations in which her daughters find themselves. A reviewer more forgiving of Mudear, Tara Green argues, "Mudear has both embraced motherhood by teaching her daughters what

she feels they need to know to be independent women and denied it by withholding emotional nurturing from them” (50). Green does not view Mudear’s withholding of emotional nurturing as a failure in her role as mother because “she feels that showing her love for them may be detrimental to their success as independent women” (50). The villainization of Mudear by the Lovejoy daughters, the Mulberry community, and other scholars results from gendered expectations that Mudear refuses to participate in any longer. Barbara Bennett, for example, suggests that if the roles were reversed and Ernest was the one to withdraw emotionally and physically, “most readers would be more accepting [...] What is so shocking is that the one rejecting home and family is the mother” (193). Mudear views her rejection of subordination as a wife and selflessness as a mother to be a tough-love model that will teach her daughters to be their own women in a white, male dominated and still racist society⁶⁵. Her daughters’ individual successes as independent career women prove that they have benefited from her lesson, but their desires for marriage and general acceptance from their communities show that they do not understand the reasons behind it.

As the oldest child, Betty is the only Lovejoy daughter to remember Mudear as the pristine, submissive homemaker and Ernest as the verbally and physically abusive provider. Betty divides her life into two parts: before Mudear’s change and after Mudear’s change. She also reconstructs for her younger sisters memories of the first part that they were too young to remember. Mudear’s change makes the Lovejoy family, for decades, the center of town gossip. Initially the gossip is targeted at Mudear, “Nearly

⁶⁵ The theme of tough-love and tough-mothering is present at various levels in many African American novels that portray parent-child relationships. It is visible, for instance, with Nanny in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Eva in Morrison’s *Sula* (1973), Sethe in Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), and with Nellie in Ansa’s *Baby of the Family*.

everyone over the age of forty in Mulberry claimed they knew the date that they said Mudear lost her mind” (10). Mudear never explains to her daughters the circumstances surrounding her change, so they assume she went crazy, as the Mulberry community claims. Through Mudear’s reflections, it becomes clear that Mudear neither goes crazy nor has a psychological breakdown, as her daughters do. She presents herself as making a conscious decision to take back her life for her own purposes rather than surrender it for others’ benefit. In contrast to Walker’s Meridian who rejects her role as a traditional mother to sacrifice herself for the welfare of the black community during the Civil Rights Movement or Avey who willingly assumes the role of black youth mentor, Mudear rejects her station as wife and mother to reclaim her self from all external demands. Her daughters view this action negatively. They see themselves as part of what Mudear rejects, as Emily tells her psychiatrist, “Mudear made selfishness into a religion” (Ansa 115).

The Mulberry community is first introduced in *Baby of the Family* and developed further in Ansa’s third novel *The Hand I Fan With* (1996). *The Hand* reflects a similar motherly relationship between its protagonist Lena McPherson, and the Mulberry community as Walker depicts in *Meridian*. Lena does not, however, have a distinctive moment where she realizes her community does not need her to mother its members. Instead, in her early forties, Lena begins to put her happiness first and essentially abandons the Mulberry community. As a result, the community is forced to learn how to care for and depend upon itself, and it begins casting judgment on Lena’s eccentricities once the community can no longer take advantage of her kindness. Lena is initially

protected from the vehement gossip the Lovejoy sisters face, but she forfeits this when, like Mudear, she distances herself from the community.

As mentioned earlier, Ansa shares the narration of *Ugly Ways* among the perspectives of the five Lovejoy's. The third-person omniscient consciousness narrates each chapter from the point of view of Betty, Emily, Annie Ruth, or Ernest. Every few chapters, however, readers receive intrusive posthumous, first-person narration from Mudear as she reflects on, responds to, and relativizes the conversations her family has just had about her. Green claims it is important that "We learn about Mudear from Mudear" because "She makes it clear that they do not know her; they only have a perception of her" (46). Drawn into the story's postmodern ambiguities, readers can have sympathy towards the sisters for feeling unloved or abandoned by Mudear, but at the same time be confused by an equally proud and critical mother as she mediates on her involvement in the important moments of her daughters' lives. Additionally, Mudear's first-person, interruptive narration amongst the third-person narration of her family is significant in that it reflects her very clear and stable sense of self that allows her to directly express herself to readers without the filter of third-person narration⁶⁶. Although Mudear is annoyed at times that her daughters do not understand her motives, she watches them work through an understanding of her actions without their realizing it.

⁶⁶ In his recent study *Dead Women Talking: Figures of Injustice in American Literature* (2013), Brian Norman claims, "Dead women tend to talk in American literature when their experiences of death can also address an issue of injustice that their communities might prematurely consign to the past" (1). Although her does not address Ansa's *Ugly Ways*, Mudear would fall somewhere in between his treatment of William Faulkner's Addie Bundren and Randall Kenan's dead channeled through young Clarence in "Clarence and the Dead." She desires autonomy, yet she remains immersed in her daughters' secrets and gossip. Additionally, Ansa's use of the supernatural with Mudear watching her daughters after her death parallels Marshall's Aunt Cuney attempting to communicate in Avey's dreams. Their spirits bridge the lived knowledge and experience of the past and present.

Mudear views her approach to childrearing as productively constructing the space for her daughters to establish their individual identities free from the constraints she faced herself. In her first chapter Mudear explains,

Taught them how to carry themselves. How to keep that part of themselves to themselves so that nobody could take it and walk on it. Tried my best to make them free. As free as I could teach them to be and still be free myself.

How many times did I tell Emily, my middle girl, to pull up that chin, tie up that chin. Look to the stars, I would tell them look to the stars. Don't let the whole town see you walking with your heads down, like you got something to be ashamed of.

Lord knows this damn little-assed town did try to make them think that. That they had something to be ashamed of. Me mostly. Umph. It's funny really. The one thing in life that they could always look to with pride, a mother who set an example of being her own woman, was the one thing that everyone wanted them to be ashamed of. (34)

Mudear's education to her daughters is about self-definition. Mudear wants her daughters to be their own women. She focuses on her daughters' individualities, completely discarding their community-defined identities. She believes that through her own example the community's criticisms of her do not influence her daughters, but she is incorrect. Despite her efforts to raise her daughters to be independent women—which they are—the stigmatizing identities ascribed to the women by the larger Mulberry community disrupt their abilities to value Mudear's message.

The main difficulty the community and her daughters have with Mudear's change is her failure to articulate it to anyone. She does not view her actions as a rejection of motherhood, but rather as an effort to actively redefine her mothering so it is compatible with her new vision of herself and life. Mudear initially has an idealized view of marriage as a partnership. When this ideal is destroyed, she patiently waits for the right moment to escape. That opportunity comes when Ernest is unable to pay all the bills one winter after

loaning Mudear's northern relatives a substantial sum of money, against her advice, and unexpected medical bills for their three sick children. Mudear steps in with money she has saved and turns the gas and electricity back on. In this moment, when Ernest realizes his error and she steps in to provide financially for the family, Mudear gains the upper hand and decides to no longer perform the expected roles of homemaker, wife, or mother. Mudear recounts "*I decided to stay in body. But to leave in spirit and let my spirit free. So that's what I did. And never did regret it, either*" (106). This decision mirrors that of Jay Johnson and Avey's great-great grandmother in Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* when the two make a similar choice to stay in body but leave in mind. Mudear's execution of this resolution, however, takes a very different form, beginning with her refusal to allow her body to continue performing required tasks.

What the community deems crazy is actually Mudear claiming her freedom by rejecting socially prescribed gender roles. Mudear's change is difficult for the community to accept because her refusal to leave her home results also in and means her planned refusal to participate in the community. Betty reflects that the new house her father builds to meet Mudear's expectations separates them from the community: "Mudear grew a buffer around this house. The plants and the trees and flowers set [them] off from this whole neighborhood" (217). While Mudear cultivates her plant barrier nightly and enjoys the seclusion, the community, like her daughters, works to understand further this self-interested distancing, thus encouraging the gossip about her. Page argues that contemporary black writers create intersubjective webs that are reflective of "the belief in West African cultures that individual fulfillment only occurs through harmony with the community and the cosmos" (26). As such Mudear's rejection of the community can be

read as having cosmic implications. Although it disrupts the sense of harmony for the community and her daughters, it does not prevent her individual fulfillment. Mudear, like Ansa's Lena and Morrison's Sula, follows the Hurston model of black women rejecting self-sacrificing roles in order to nurture their process of self-definition. Unlike Lena, Sula, and Janie, however, Mudear is not childless when she makes her decision to reclaim her life from her oppressive marriage, which results in individual fulfillment that is at greater odds with the Mulberry community. Page adds that "The individual could not thrive, indeed, could not exist, in isolation from the infinitely interwoven relationships with other members of the community and with the community as a whole" (26). Mudear shows this is not necessarily the case. She does not participate in any local communities, but her love of television, especially catalogues and home shopping networks, connects her to a different kind of community.

While it is not the same type of community Page references, her daily FedEx and UPS deliveries make it an interactive community from which she receives physical items. Ernest recalls Mudear's awareness of this connection with others: "She had said many times how those two conveniences had been tailor-made for a person like her. Like there were other Mudears scattered all over the country, as if she weren't one of a kind" (162). This reflection reveals that after thirty years Ernest does not believe Mudear's actions are normal, in the sense that there are other people who have chosen to live life in a similar manner. This alternative community, however, also remains physically distanced from Mudear, as does the Mulberry community. Even though she is living a self-indulgent life, she does not join the community of frivolous shoppers who buy items just to buy them. Ernest notes that "she didn't waste no money on those little china dogs and doodads that

they sold on TV. She went for the good stuff. Equipment and stuff for her garden, light bulbs that were guaranteed to burn for a hundred years, and a speed video rewinder” (101). All of these purchases project the life that she has designed for herself in which she sleeps all day, gets up at night to watch TV and movies, and to garden outside. Her distant community of at-home shoppers supports her freedom through their anonymity that allows them to require nothing from her.

While Mudear receives all she believes she needs to be whole, the community takes out its uncertainties and frustrations with her actions on the family members they have easier access to. This eventually develops into gossip about the entire family since all the members have to change to support Mudear’s new lifestyle: “Some said the whole family had ‘walking insanity’ like other folks had ‘walking pneumonia.’ They still went about their daily routines, but as far as people in Mulberry were concerned all the Lovejoys were walking-, talking-, working-, shopping-crazy” (11). Unlike the Bottom community’s accommodation of Shadrack and Sula’s aberrances, the Mulberry community is unable to make room for Mudear’s new vision of self. They make Mudear, and by extension her whole family, the continued subject of gossip and speculation. The label “crazy” becomes the false community-defined identity undeservedly ascribed to difference, in this case to the Lovejoy sisters Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth. This endless gossip positions the community as a complicating if not hindering force in the Lovejoy daughters’ formation of their identities. The sisters scrutinize any of Mudear’s actions that, to them, result in making them different from everyone else. Each moment the sisters confirm any such action, the more deeply the community-defined identity indents their psyches.

Mudear believes she has offered her daughters a model for effectively dealing with community rumors. Her daughters find it difficult, however, to understand her indifference to the gossip: “the thing that amazed Betty was when she discovered that Mudear had somehow heard all these rumors, probably from her friend Carrie, and that none of them disturbed the self-contained woman. She even laughed at some of the rumors. Since the change, Mudear didn’t give a damn what people thought of her” (61). The bigger issue is that the sisters cannot learn from this model as Mudear hopes they would, much like Kenan’s Jonnie Mae, Mudear attempts to define her daughters’ identities for them, not realizing they are different individuals. They remain susceptible to community gossip relative to their own identities and to Mudear’s state of mind. Their treatment of Mudear reflects the community’s treatment of them. Rather than insisting that the community stop abusing them, they want Mudear to stop being different and indifferent. Even as an adult, “It made Betty mad that Mudear’s actions had left her and her sisters so vulnerable, so defenseless, open and raw to the town’s gossip. Always had” (11).

The main shortcoming with Mudear’s childrearing, in her daughters’ opinion, is that she was not nurturing. Green argues that Mudear’s garden allows her to “displace her nurturing instincts by cultivating her fruits and vegetables” (50). This suggestion that Mudear still desires to nurture appears on more than one occasion in the actions she takes to protect her children from the community when she feels clear damage might be done to them. She shields Annie Ruth and Betty from the home community around the time of their emotional breakdowns and she also empowers Emily to claim her happiness in her Atlanta work community, although none of these actions are done delicately or

affectionately. She steps in when she thinks the situations will do damage to their status as independent women.

Following the news of Annie Ruth's public breakdown in Washington D.C. and time at a recovery facility, Mudear takes action to protect her youngest daughter. Without leaving her home, "Mudear went right to work. Over the phone she told Carrie, the one woman she still talked with in town and who still talked with her, 'Cut, my baby done gone and had a heart attack. Working in that fast-paced northern city, all that stress and overtime and all that. You know, Carrie, all my girls are working women'" (13). It is paradoxical that Mudear's one remaining connection to the Mulberry community is also the community's best gossip. A calculating woman, Mudear strategically places the information with Carrie because she knows it will spread quickly in the community, just like "The word of Annie Ruth's breakdown spread quickly in Mulberry" (13). Mudear does not care if the community calls her "crazy" because she knows she is sane. However, when Annie Ruth actually has a mental breakdown, Mudear improvises: she changes the story to a heart attack so Annie Ruth is not viewed as vulnerable with a "weak sounding" (14) mental health issue. Since Mudear spends so much time making her daughters tough so that they will not be mistreated or taken advantage of, she cannot concede to Annie Ruth's breakdown. She asks, "'What she got to break down about?'" (14). At the most basic level, Mudear sees Annie Ruth as a successful independent woman without a man there to drag her down or give her something to break down about. For Annie Ruth, however, this breakdown confirms her community-defined identity as crazy.

It is not explicitly stated why Annie Ruth has a breakdown while living in Washington D.C., but not long after checking out of the rehabilitation center, she takes a new job in Los Angeles. She eventually has a breakdown in Los Angeles as well. Only this time we are offered more reflections on the breakdown, which point to her inability to cope with city life. The narrator first identifies the features specific to Hollywood, “the shallowness, the hunger for fame and stardom that left Annie Ruth so empty in L.A.” (144). This emptiness, presented as being specific to Hollywood, is not Annie Ruth’s main problem with the city. The larger issues that Annie Ruth struggles with even more are both material and particular to all big cities:

The rows of convertible Jaguars and Mercedes with their cellular phones parked next to a homeless family’s raggedy Ford. The danger from random violence in the street that everyone tried to pretend they didn’t understand. Having to go all the way across town to see more than three black people laughing and talking together. (145)

Notwithstanding the class differences in Mulberry, Annie Ruth’s southern home community, Ansa depicts it across all her novels as a community that takes care of all of its members. Its gossip maybe difficult for the Lovejoy sisters to endure, but the Mulberry community does not ignore its problems as is the case in Los Angeles.

The sisters’ own childhood experiences of their father kicking them all out of the house on numerous occasions before Mudear’s change has a lasting impact on them. In finding shelter with others, however, the rough moments also show them that there is always someone to take in, to embrace, the less fortunate. Homelessness is insinuated as a particularly urban problem, one that Emily shows to be highly disturbing within the parameters of Mulberry. After happening upon a cardboard shelter by the river in Mulberry, Emily, at “the thought of a homeless person in the tiny town of Mulberry [...,

leaves] her lined leather gloves there with a twenty-dollar bill tucked inside” (68). The only conclusion Emily can draw to explain the phenomenon is that it is not occupied by a member of Mulberry’s community, but that it is her ex-husband seeking shelter from Atlanta as he treats the mental stress of his time in Vietnam with a drug addiction. On her drive home, “All the way back to Atlanta, [Emily] had kept saying to herself, A homeless person in Mulberry. A homeless person in Mulberry” (68). It is both her concern for her ex-husband and her inability to accept urban problems in her tiny hometown that cause Emily’s state of disbelief. This cardboard shelter does not remain at the river and its occupant is never confirmed, but it is an extremely uncommon occurrence in their hometown.

The stress of the urban environment is too much for Annie Ruth to deal with partly because she is alone, without female friendship, and partially because her distress over race and class divisions in the city is not taken seriously. Since the community deems her to be crazy, it does not come across as a legitimate response when “She had had to stop going to parties in the Hollywood Hills because looking down on the smog-choked city below and all the unfortunates who could not afford to breath unpolluted air made her so melancholy that she would have to find a quite spot on a deck and weep” (145). Annie Ruth is unable to take her experience of melancholy and weeping over class divisions seriously because, to the community, she is overreacting. Her individual identity is the only of the sisters’ not to be referenced, which suggests that she has been unable to survive and transcend the community’s image of her.

Despite her unhappiness in urban cities, Annie Ruth will not return to Mulberry. Annie Ruth’s refusal to move back to the South is acknowledged as an attempt to “put

some space between herself and Mudear” (218). Of all the sisters, she puts the most space between herself and Mudear, which leaves her desiring the South. After proclaiming,

“God, I miss the South.” Annie Ruth rubbed her hand over the Velvety moss growing on the outside of a huge strawberry pot and smelled her palm. She sounded as if she might cry as she touched the tongue of a frog set among a bed of frilly ferns with the toe of her boot and came back to the swing and sat down. (218)

Annie Ruth’s acknowledgement of her longing for the South occurs in Mudear’s garden. Although the displacing garden has previously been a point of jealousy with the sisters because it receives all of Mudear’s attention, this garden represents a very specific type of rural which Annie Ruth associates with the South. Annie Ruth does not, however, miss the Mulberry community, at least not on a personal level. She harbors nostalgia for a specific ideal of the South, which her Malibu beach house cannot provide. This scene also invokes Alice Walker’s essay “In Search of our Mother’s Gardens” where the garden connects Annie Ruth to her mother’s creative expression. Unlike the mothers discussed by Walker, however, Mudear has the time and resources to direct her creativity in any number of directions. Annie Ruth’s experience in her mother’s garden is a bittersweet one as she both desires and resents the space that held her mother’s attention and nurturance.

Like Annie Ruth, Emily consciously stays away from Mudear, seeing her as the destructive force, not the community. Emily does not move as far away as Annie Ruth, but she is also unable to accept the city of Atlanta as her home. She makes minimum of one trip to Mulberry every week to get her hair done at her sister’s shop, though normally more than that, but “she never even considered moving back to her hometown. Not as long as Mudear was living there, and it was hard to think of Mulberry without Mudear.

And it was impossible for her to think of Mudear not living. She was grateful for the protection the hundred and fifty or so miles to Atlanta gave her” (72). She sees the distance as offering her protection, however, Emily works against it by visiting Mudear every week. Her isolation in Atlanta, along with the rate at which gossip about her travels back to Mulberry, makes her decision not to move back less clear than Annie Ruth’s.

Emily also desires to return to Mulberry for the communality it offers. Even though this community has not been particularly supportive of Emily, she has an attachment to her place within or near it:

Although she felt the town hadn’t been kind to her, with its gossip and harsh judgments, Emily still loved Mulberry like an old friend. Other than her sisters, she felt her hometown was all she had. The only thing that anchored her to the world was her identity in Mulberry, even if it was as “the craziest Lovejoy sister.” (69)

Emily desires a clear connection to the world because she constantly lingers on the edge of suicide. Additionally, the only identity she is able to recognize is her community image of her as “the craziest Lovejoy sister.” Even though she willingly accepts that identity, she would rather be included on “party lists and invitations” (70) which would actually make her feel like a part of the Mulberry community. Either way, she forgives the community and accepts the identity that maintains a place for her to belong.

Emily is more conflicted about Mudear’s failure as a mother than are her sisters. She remains confused about some of Mudear’s ambiguous actions that would qualify her as a caring mother. In a moment of defending Mudear, she recounts to her sisters a specific exchange between herself and Mudear. When Emily shows up in her parents’ drive at 4:00 am, Mudear is awake and outside gardening as usual. As she sits in her car crying about ongoing sexual harassment at work, Mudear approaches. Emily reflects,

“She was looking at me like I was one of her flowers that wasn’t doing too well and she was wondering whether she should cut back on water, fertilize me, or snip my head off” (233). Emily’s comparison of herself to one of Mudear’s flowers places Mudear momentarily in the role of nurturer, but Emily also notices Mudear fight the urge to be that nurturing mother: “She reached out to me for a minute, just a minute, I thought she was actually gonna wipe my tears away. But she didn’t. She reached up in my hair and picked something out” (234). Ultimately Mudear solves Emily’s problem through a series of practical questions to determine how much Emily wants the job. Mudear tells her “‘don’t you let nobody steal your joy’” (234). This simple advice serves as permission for Emily to confront her harasser and claim her position at the office.

Emily also has a very public breakdown, but hers is not as compact as Annie Ruth’s. Emily’s most crucial moment for her community-defined identity is connected to her insomnia and a series of incidents that, to Mulberry, prove her insanity. Following Annie Ruth’s mental collapse and her own abortion and divorce, Emily

drove around her neighborhood in Southwest Atlanta at various hours of the day and night, looking for all the world like a wolf clutching the steering wheel of her red Datsun, her eyes darting dangerously here and there, always in search of something. Atlanta was not so far away. The stories got back to Mulberry. (13)

Throughout the novel, Emily is presented as being the most comfortable behind the wheel of a car. It is where she fits and she finds purpose by driving her sisters where they need to go. This scene that gets reported back to the Mulberry community reflects Emily’s search for the things, such as happiness and belonging, she feels missing from her life. Her actions behind the wheel of her car also resemble her search for her self. This search

takes many forms such as weekly meetings with her psychologist and with a psychic, and continued effort toward self-discovery.

Prior to receiving Mudear's permission to claim and insist on her joy, Emily cannot fight the sexual harassment at the office because she has been sexually involved with almost everyone in the office. The identity she is given by her work community reflects her promiscuity, but she is not willing to have sex with just anyone. In Emily's opinion, "white men have gotten all the black pussy they gon' ever get in this country" (233). This is a small piece of her individual identity, but she is unable to assert it beyond avoiding her boss' advances. Mudear's continuous lesson to her daughters is to not let anyone define them or dictate their actions. However, Mudear is not there every time Emily is stereotyped, offering Emily authorization to reject misnaming. Emily is described as

the family chameleon, changing with what was expected of her. She tried so hard to be whatever she was asked of her that she routinely lost track of what she felt was the real Emily. Betty felt this was why her sister acted so crazy sometimes, it was what people expected of her. And her older sister had to routinely tell her, "Okay, Em-Em, come on now, come on back now." (223-224)

Although it implies a lack of connection on Emily's part, her attribute as chameleon suggests fluidity to her identity. This ability to be anything, however, dislodges her true self or the "real" Emily. She does not actually know who the real Emily is because she is also submerged in negative community expectations and the portrait of her as crazy. Betty recognizes that Emily is living up to her this communal typecasting of her as is Annie Ruth.

Considering that Betty never leaves Mulberry, she remains immersed in the community and its gossip about the Lovejoy family. Betty's profession also gives her prime access to all of the town's gossip. She is able to a priori see the gossip forming when community members witness her and Emily picking up a disheveled Annie Ruth from the airport. After Annie Ruth has an anxiety attack on the plane, "Betty could already see the tongues wagging. She had always made her living working in beauty shops—the hotbeds of gossip—and she knew from experience that Mulberry had not stopped discussing and dissecting the Lovejoy family since the day Mudear changed" (10). Since the events are already beyond Betty's control, she collects her sister and the luggage as discretely as possible and gets them to the car, beyond the community's reach. Despite her attempts to keep them out of the public eye, their lives are never so private that the inquisitive and meddling community will not find its way in.

As a child, Betty develops a distaste for gossip when she overhears a conversation about her family at the grocery store. The women speculate that "Esther probably getting her ass whipped in that house, too. That man only allow the girls to leave for school and errands. Yeah, Esther a captive in that house" (61). This gossip blurs Betty's experiences from before and after Mudear's change, which is the most frustrating aspect of the situation for Betty. The two women position Esther and her daughters as the victims to Ernest's tyranny. There was a time when Ernest was that type of man. After Mudear's change, it is Mudear the family views as the tyrant. Mudear is not physically but verbally abusive: her words and inaction succeed in tearing her husband down and upsetting her daughters. The lesson Betty consciously learns from this encounter is to never talk about anyone in public "without looking over her shoulder first to make sure

somebody's relative or friend wasn't listening nearby" (61). Ansa suggests that she should have learned that the gossip moving through the community about her mother was not true. As such, she should know enough to view and ignore the gossip that began including her and her sisters.

Betty's nervous breakdown is much more subtle than her sisters', but living in the community keeps her from having a more visible breakdown. Her anxiety manifests as a nervous itching that she is able to keep discrete. When she finally lets herself go, Mudear is there and tells her to "Save the crazy shit for your own time, now get up off that floor and go on to that cosmetology seminar, like you got some sense" (14). Once again an apathetic Mudear rejects the role of nurturer and offers, instead, practical advice to keep Betty's career moving forward. Mudear's command brings Betty out of her momentary breakdown and the town does not get to partake in it as gossip. Mudear's interjection prevents Betty from proving her self crazy to the community as do the other sisters. This is more important for Betty than for her sisters, because she is the most obsessed with the community's opinion of her.

Leading up to the final scene from the sisters' third-person perspective, Betty and Emily remain controlled by Mulberry's insinuations about them as Annie Ruth desires to heal some of her childhood pain by confronting her mother's corpse. Upon making her intentions known that she is heading down to the funeral parlor to talk to Mudear's corpse, the three sisters have a heated argument:

"For God's sake, Annie Ruth, don't be going out of this house shaming us in the street," Betty said, catching her sister by the arm in the kitchen and pulling her back into the hall.

Annie Ruth snatched her arm away.

“Betty, you the smartest one of us. Don’t you get it? We ain’t never done nothing to shame us in this town. Hell, we ought to be proud we still alive and just *slightly* crazy.”
(emphasis original 257)

Unlike her sisters’, Annie Ruth’s desire for the South is less about community connection and acceptance and more about the physical and cultural space it provides. While Betty and Emily are driven by what Annie Ruth’s actions will mean for their positions to the community, Annie Ruth shocks them with the revelation that they have “never done nothing to shame” themselves and that they should be proud of their slight craziness. Betty and Emily believe this statement to be true, at least the first half, but they remain unwilling to perform their perceived craziness for the community’s enjoyment.

After following Annie Ruth to the funeral parlor, which had a service in progress in one of the other chapels, the three sisters enact what is perhaps the novel’s most tragicomic moment. According to the narrator, “Betty and Emily burst in the chapel door like henchmen. But they stopped to turn and close the door behind them so no one could see and hear what was going on” (264). Their attempt to hide Annie Ruth’s confrontation of Mudear from the community fails. The three women are heard and then discovered by the others at the funeral parlor in a tangled mess with their mother’s corpse on the floor of the empty chapel. In their attempt to conceal the situation, they end up making it more visible as they first fight with one another before turning on Mudear. Betty and Emily resist Annie Ruth’s plan to confront Mudear for their suffering in life, but all three women eventually join in this attempt to address their unresolved feelings. Mudear recognizes these events as only one part of the process of self-definition. She responds, again posthumously, “*Humph, those girls don’t know me at all. Or themselves! Now they think they free women ’cause they think they got me told. Humph, getting mad is just the*

first step” (276). For the Lovejoy sisters, getting mad and finally voicing their frustrations clear the space for them to come to terms with their community-defined identities and begin their self-definition.

The appearance of more community members than expected at Mudear’s funeral reinforces the Lovejoys’ position as the center of town gossip. Mudear exhibits her self-involved mindset when she assumes the crowd of “*ninety-five, a hundred people*” (274) at her funeral have come out to “*see a show. Bet they thought it was gonna be an open casket*” (275). Based on the events of the previous day, however, the show the Mulberry community has come to see is round two of the Lovejoy sisters acting crazy, but the sisters are surprisingly composed and dignified. Mudear observes, “*Ain’t got to say one time to any of ’em to pull up their chins and look to the stars today. Lots of women woulda been to ashamed after the way they behaved yesterday in this funeral home to show their faces around here*” (275). The Lovejoy sisters seem to have learned Mudear’s lessons for surviving the community at last and no longer need her reminders. Their appearance at Mudear’s funeral with their heads held high reaffirms Annie Ruth’s proclamation, “*We ain’t never done nothing to shame us in this town*” (257).

In *Taking After Mudear* (2007), Ansa’s sequel to *Ugly Ways*, Annie Ruth and Emily make their returns to Mulberry permanent. As Mudear claims “*getting mad is just the first step.*” The Lovejoy sisters take the next step towards their freedom by accepting their place in their home community and create a space for their own self-determination. As the sisters allow themselves to accept pieces of life they had once denied themselves, they move towards their whole selves. Annie Ruth finds her personal identity in motherhood. Betty no longer fears the community’s judgment as she makes public her

relationship with Cinque, who is twenty-three years younger than she, and also considers the possibilities of their future together. Emily is finally able to articulate her feelings and opinions, and no longer functions as the chameleon to meet others' expectations of her. The Lovejoy sisters are finally able to forge their lives, having moved beyond the judgment of the Mulberry community and their own fears perpetuated by the town's gossip.

As the foregoing discussion illustrates, the conflicted representations of community in African American return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era address the role that those close to the migrants play in their attempts to reintegrate their identities. Both Kenan and Ansa suggest that traditional configurations of the southern community can challenge the wellbeing of the migrants. The depiction of the return migrants' relationship to their home communities in *A Visitation of Spirits* and *Ugly Ways* suggests the migrants are more able to accept the community interferences than those who do not leave. This tolerance is necessary before the migrants, such as Annie Ruth, can merge their community-defined and individual identities.

Assent to the southern community-defined identity is not necessarily an agreement with the parameters of that identity. Instead, it is an acknowledgement of the limits and expectations imposed by the community as the characters define their individual identities and work to reconcile the two into a stable whole self. The next chapter looks at the importance of balancing the community-defined identity with the individual identity in *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor and *Home* by Toni Morrison.

CHAPTER IV. INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY FROM THE SOUTH IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *MAMA DAY* AND TONI MORRISON'S *HOME*

As discussed in the previous chapter, questions of where community can be found, what community looks like, and how community can be reconfigured are a preoccupation of African American return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era. From Meridian's recognition of the transformation of the church community and Avey's vision of annually creating a summer community of northerners in the South to Horace and Ruth's struggles with their places in their familial communities, the characters' balancing of their community-defined and individual identities depends largely upon their understanding and acceptance of the communities to which they belong, but without allowing those communities to destroy their distinctive selves. The representation of the individual's identity distinct from that of his/her community and then the balancing of the individual and the community is the focus of this chapter.

In their 1985 conversation Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison discuss the gendered differences between men and women's individual identities. Despite American individualism being portrayed in literature as a masculine tradition—exemplified in Benjamin Franklin's autobiography and Frederick Douglass's slave narratives—Naylor and Morrison discuss men's struggles to communicate individual identities. Morrison observes, "They have an idea of how to be male and they talk about it a lot. I'm not sure that they talk to each other about the other thing, personal identity" (192-193). She clarifies that this difference is not innate, but that men "are trained out of it so early in

life” (193). Naylor agrees with Morrison, she goes on to describe her favorite female characters as ones who are selfish, but in a way that is not destructive to others. And by “selfish,” Naylor means the Hurston model of self-definition. Morrison discusses this self-definition as self-discovery that “when you see it, it does stay with you even though you may surrender to whatever your culture’s version of you is supposed to be” (194). What Morrison identifies here is the presence if not the coexistence of both the self-defined identity and the community-defined identity.

This chapter looks at Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988) and Toni Morrison’s *Home* (2012). I discuss the importance of community in *Mama Day* and *Home* relative to the ideas about community in the previous chapter, but with a recognition that making distinctions between the community-defined self and the individual self often draws attention away from the communities to the individuals. Additionally, a physical and mental distance exists between the focal characters in this chapter and their southern communities. Both novels have male and female characters that struggle with their identities and must confront their fragmentation in the space of the South. I will focus primarily on one character from each novel, Naylor’s Cocoa Day and Morrison’s Frank Money. I will, however, bring the other characters into the discussion for purposes of comparison: George Andrews, to supplement Cocoa’s experience in *Mama Day*, and Ycidra Money, to augment Frank’s experience in *Home*. Cocoa and Frank, like the characters discussed in earlier chapters, are not overtly radical or working at a socio-political level. Naylor and Morrison, respectively, portray Cocoa and Frank as working through their own pasts and their connections with the space of the South in order to reintegrate and cohere their identities at the individual level.

As Barbara Christian observes, both Morrison and Naylor are “intrigued by the effect of place on character” (“Gloria Naylor’s Geography” 99). In the two novels under study, Naylor and Morrison’s attention to the impact of place on their characters emerges through both novelists’ placement of their characters in the urban North and the rural South. Cocoa and Frank are rendered as having fragmented identities that they are unable to recover in the space of the North. For Cocoa the South to which she returns is connected to a rich familial history and direct ancestral roots, while Frank’s South is the hometown his parents adopt when he is a child. Frank does not return to his birth place in Texas from which his family was displaced when he was a child, nor is his hometown in Georgia a place with extensive familial roots. While it takes a return to the South for Cocoa and Frank to address their fragmented selves, the difference in the representation of what the South has to offer each of them shows possibilities for multiple configurations of the South. Naylor and Morrison’s depictions of strong communities existing in the North challenge stereotypes of the North lacking communities only provided by the South. The clear presence of community in both the North and the South shifts the focus from the healing power of community to the place required for the reconciliation of the self to occur. In Naylor and Morrison’s texts, the communities situated in the North cannot help the individuals recover their identities; such recovery must take place in the South.

Mama Day tells the story of the Day family, as the youngest generation, represented by Cocoa, along with the eldest matriarch come to fully understand the power of their family history. The novel opens with an account of a young man returning from college to conduct an ethnographic study of his home, but he is unable to make sense of

the island's complex history because he does not know the right questions to ask or how to listen. Cocoa is raised by her grandmother Abigail Day and her great-aunt Mama Day on the fictional and autonomous Island of Willow Springs, which exists off the coast of the United States at the border between South Carolina and Georgia. The story picks up with the already grown Cocoa living in Manhattan, New York, which is followed by a series of events which return her home to Willow Springs with her new husband George Andrews. Cocoa's return to the island ultimately results in her ability to finally ask the right questions and to hear the spirits residing on the island, but it comes at the expense of George's life when he is unable to go along with the rich cultural folk history that dictates the daily functions on the island.

Critical attention to *Mama Day* has predominantly focused on the characters of Miranda "Mama Day" and George. Interest in these two characters is due to the larger intertextual narratives that surround them. Mama Day/Miranda, gifted with supernatural powers, is read as Naylor's response to William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, while George is seen as Naylor's Christ figure whose position as the messiah is elaborated in her subsequent novel, *Bailey's Café* (1992)⁶⁷. It is important to point out, however, that while Mama Day, George, and Cocoa have equal shares in the narrative, questions and opinions about Cocoa's identity permeates the text from all narrative perspectives. The moments in the novel in which Mama Day and George develop as characters independently from Cocoa are necessary to explain later reactions to Cocoa's situation.

⁶⁷ For example, see R. Mark Hall's "Serving the Second Sun: The Men in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*" and Shirley A. Stave's "Re-Writing Sacred Texts: Gloria Naylor's Revisionary Theology" in the collection *Gloria Naylor: Strategy and Technique, Magic and Myth* (2001), and Maxine Lavon Montgomery's *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor: Houses and Spaces of Resistance* (2010).

The main plot line explores Cocoa's fracturing of her identity and the steps necessary to recover it.

The narrative structure Naylor employs in *Mama Day* exemplifies the complex set of interrelationships involved in the recognition and assertion of a whole self. As mentioned earlier, the narrative is split between Mama Day/Willow Springs, George, and Cocoa. Naylor's use of multiple narrators shows the ways personal histories do not exist in isolation and the ways the same event is perceived differently by those involved. The third-person narrative from the point of view of Mama Day and Willow Springs provides balance to the first-person accounts exchanged between George and Cocoa. By stylizing the narrative as a dialogue between Cocoa and George, in which their different interpretations of events and their understandings of each other are revealed, Naylor shows the external and internal work involved in claiming one's self.

At the end of *Mama Day*, it is revealed that Cocoa is sitting on the cliff overlooking The Sound, having a conversation with George's spirit. Cocoa does not need to speak as she communicates with George, but, as is evident by the formation of the narrative from one of these conversations, readers can hear her. As Cocoa comes to terms with the loss of George, she realizes the fluidity of her being:

I still don't have a photograph of you. It's better this way, because you change as I change. And each time I go back over what happened, there's some new development, some forgotten corner that puts you in a slightly different light. I guess one of the reasons I've been here so much is that I felt if we kept retracing our steps, we'd find out what brought us to this slope near The Sound. But when I see you again our versions will be different still. (310-311)

Mama Day's refusal to provide Cocoa with a picture of George and Cocoa's acceptance of it give her the space to have new understandings of both George and herself. The

presence of George's spirit in Willow Springs gives Cocoa another reason to return to her home. As she grows and changes she allows George to grow and change with her.

Though she is engaged in a continuous search to understand why she had to lose him to recover her identity, she realizes that they would never settle on one answer because they would never be the same people they were at the time it happened. As they continue changing, the versions of their experiences alter as well. It is through this signal ability to remain rooted and still change and develop that Cocoa successfully recovers her fractured self.

Much like Raymond Andrews and Tina McElroy Ansa, in the previous chapters, Naylor moves her characters between her novels, and as a result she creates a larger textual universe, a broader framework from which to understand the significance of the characters' actions. A reference to Mama Day appears in Naylor's earlier novel, *Linden Hills* (1985), where she is referred to as Willa Prescott-Needed's backwards Great-Aunt. This connection resurfaces towards the beginning of *Mama Day* with Mama Day referencing her experience of the North from when she visits Hope and Willa (38). This intertextuality between *Linden Hills* and *Mama Day* appears relatively subtle, but both times Willa is referenced in *Mama Day*, first in Cocoa first-person narration and then by the third-person narrator, it is directly connected to Cocoa's experience. As first cousins, Willa and Cocoa are the most recent generation of the Day family, but Willa's death leaves Cocoa as the last descendent of the Day lineage.

Mark Simpson-Vos rightly argues that *Mama Day* continues the project *Linden Hills* begins, this time showing how Cocoa is able to complete her journey to self-discovery, where Willa was unable to succeed and instead dies. While Simpson-Vos'

interpretation of Willa's outcome as a failure of self-discovery may not be entirely correct, Naylor's positioning of her in *Mama Day* next to Cocoa does invoke the outcome of Willa's lost identity in marriage as a possibility for Cocoa. Cocoa's success is significantly dependent on a connection to the South, which is missing from Willa's life. *Mama Day* reflects that there was "no reason for little Willa to carry on like she did, setting herself off from the family and breaking her mother's heart [...]. Just before Hope passed, she'd sent them little Willa's wedding picture. Miranda remembers the face on Willa's husband—like a bottomless pit—and shudders" (Naylor 39). Willa's downfall is her disappearance into the "bottomless pit" of her husband Luther Nedeed and his world, which results in her cutting herself off from everything else, her family included. She gives up her life and her identity, and by the time she realizes it, it is too far removed for her to get it back on her own. She does, however, realize her loss of self while imprisoned by her husband in their basement. This imprisonment enables Willa to rediscover her self and understand the differences between her individual identity and her community-defined identity through her discovery of the stories of the other Nedeed women who suffer similar fates⁶⁸.

Willa's process of self-discovery is unaided due to her confinement, but the journals remaining from the previous Nedeed women, in the forms of photo albums and cookbooks, guide her through her own discovery with their experiences serving as models. In many ways Willa succeeds in her journey to self-definition, but the northern

⁶⁸ As new generations of Luther Nedeed's are born, new generations of women are married to them and all suffer similar fates as they lose themselves to their husbands' control and lose their sons in the process. During Willa's time held captive in her basement she discovers the suffering of Luwana Packerville Nedeed through journal entries scribbled in a bible, followed by Evelyn Creton Nedeed's recipes which include lists of ingredients attempting to control or kill her Luther through his food, followed by Priscilla McGuire Nedeed's family photos that showed her being shadowed out of her life by her son.

suburb does not offer her the space to heal after she escapes from her basement prison. While Mama Day is suspicious of the fire in Linden Hills that kills Willa, she does not know the circumstances behind it nor Willa's part in it. Mama Day reflects that "Little Willa didn't deserve that kind of end; she was a good enough child if not a whit of courage" (39). Readers of *Linden Hills*, however, know that Willa does have the courage to fight back against her husband. It is the courage to survive alone she is unable to muster. With these references to *Linden Hills* in *Mama Day*, Cocoa and Willa are immediately setup as foils. Cocoa is described as a strong willed fighter in contrast to Willa's meeker demeanor. This story is referenced, however, because there remains the possibility that Cocoa will live out a similar fate.

The differentiation of Cocoa's experience and fate from Willa's appears early in the novel as well. Cocoa makes it a specific point to return south to Willow Springs every summer. Her connection to her family is important to her. She notes that "Mama Day and grandma could forgive [her] for leaving Willow Springs, but not for staying away" (19). Where Willa's severing of family ties contributes to her destruction, Cocoa's commitment to keeping her connection open signals the possibility of her success. Mama Day accepts Cocoa's decision to live in New York, but she remains skeptical of the North based on her earlier experience in Chicago while visiting Hope and Willa. Mama Day finally settles on indifference towards the North after continuously scrutinizing the audience members of Phil Donahue's show on television. She decides that despite "them mind-altering drugs" that are "just messing up them young people in Chicago" (67), "Chicago—and by guilt of association New York—[is] no worse or better than other places Baby Girl could have chosen to live in" (38). Cocoa's dedicated connection to the

South offers her a defense against the dangers of the city. In fact, Mama Day's view of the northern city as static is similar to the stereotypical view of the South as stagnate. Mama Day declines to visit Cocoa in New York because "Those big cities ain't changed in the years since she'd visited her folks up there" (38). The years that Mama Day refers to here are actually decades. Her limited experiences in the North inhibit her perceptions of its cities.

Likewise, George's experiences in the South, dictated by football playoffs, are limited to its cities: New Orleans, Tampa, Miami. He, however, idealizes the South as rural. He tells Cocoa, "None of those cities seemed like the *real* South. Nothing like the place where you came from" (emphasis mine 129). For George the real South is a version of Willow Springs. Cocoa contributes to George's stereotype of the South as rural in an attempt to downplay her life in Willow Springs. She says, "I painted the picture of a small rural community and my life with Grandma and Mama Day, so it seemed like any other small southern town and they two old ladies" (126). She portrays Willow Springs as an average southern town in order to edit out the elements George would not be able to understand, or believe. She does not mention Mama Day's ability as a natural healer and the power of folk beliefs on the island. George's idealized image of the South is exemplified upon his arrival in Willow Springs. He reflects, "you had not prepared me for paradise" (175).

Mama Day and George's stereotypical views that portray all the North as one city and the real South as rural are challenged throughout the novel. As Doreen Alvarez Saar suggests, "If Mama Day exemplifies the spirit of the island of Willow Springs, George exemplifies the spirit of the island of Manhattan" (74). Yet, functioning as the

representative spirits of each place, George and Mama Day show the ways the northern island and the southern island are, after all, not all that different. Cocoa's experience navigating both places and in between the two, however, suggests the importance of the islands' locations. George understands his "city [as] a network of small towns, some even smaller than here in Willow Springs" (61) and he describes the small town elements by the specific behaviors of the people in the area, for example, the reason a Jamaican florist keeps a certain colored flower. These pieces of personal knowledge come together to create various small towns within the larger city. George views the knowledge of individuals in these small towns as the membership into the communities. Similarly, near the end of novel, Mama Day returns to Cocoa's New York home after exploring the city with specific knowledge of various individuals she meets there. She gains personal information from individuals she encounters on the street and in small shops hidden between large buildings. This experience changes her opinion of the urban North because she is able to feel the presence of community.

Although it takes her longer than Mama Day, Cocoa is also able to find communities in the city. Their ability to construct a sense of community in New York shows that Cocoa's struggle with her identity in the North is not due to the absence of community. Like many others of her generation, Cocoa leaves Willow Springs when she turns eighteen in order to attend college. Her initial migration is from Willow Springs to Atlanta, where she spends two years before moving to the North. She remains an outsider in New York for years until she meets George. Under his tutelage, she is finally able to look past generalizations and negative stereotypes about New York and see the actual place, people, and communities that comprise it. Her annual returns to Willow Springs

function somewhat similarly to the out-islanders' annual pilgrimages to Carriacou Island in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. However, Cocoa's ability to move between and perform her northern identity and southern identity without allowing them to cross prevents her from establishing a stable, whole self.

Kathryn Paterson argues Cocoa's problem with New York is that she is unwilling to sacrifice a piece of her identity to attain the freedom she wants and that New York offers. Cocoa acknowledges the way in which she made her New York existence entirely separate from her home and the person she is in Willow Springs. Sacrificing a piece of her identity, however, is not a viable solution, as suggested by Paterson. Instead, Cocoa must accept her entire identity, both northern and southern, and allow them to operate outside of their designated spaces. This would enable her to recognize her whole self and nurture her individual identity. Then, she would be able to change "as much as [she] want[s] without the night mare of waking up a total stranger" (Naylor 50). The freedom New York offers her is only possible once she reconciles the different parts of her identity.

Despite Cocoa's efforts to keep her two identities separate, George believes her southern identity, though overlaid, comes through. George is interested in knowing the "real" Cocoa. As he reflects upon their first meeting, he notes that he was looking for Cocoa's identity that had been displaced by the individual sitting in front of him:

All I wanted was for you to be yourself. And I wondered if it was too late, if seven years in New York had been just enough for you to lose that, like you were trying to lose your southern accent [...] That's why I wanted you to call me George. There isn't a southerner alive who could bring that name in under two syllables. And for those brief seconds it allowed me to imagine you as you must have

been: softer, slower—open [...] But it was a fact that when you said my name, you became yourself. (33)

During her seven years in New York Cocoa has not lost her self, she has supplanted it. Even though George has never met her before, he still realizes that the woman in front of him is performing an identity that is disconnected from who she really is. He attempts to reconstruct who she once was, as in a palimpsest, based on his knowledge of her having the remnants of a southern accent. At this moment, he creates an illusion of who Cocoa is in his own mind, playing off his stereotypes of the South, which make the southern Cocoa “softer, slower—open.” Based on this understanding of Cocoa, George situates Cocoa’s identity in the accent that emerges when she says certain words, like his name. While Cocoa’s accent may reveal some background information about her life, her displacement of her identity is much more than her attempt to hide her accent. Her creation of two separate selves, her Willow Springs identity and an entirely separate New York identity, becomes entangled with George and New York. Even though George claims to desire access to her southern sense of self, he continues to call her Ophelia not Cocoa, thus accessing her northern identity instead of her southern one.

It is not until George finally journeys to Willow Springs with Cocoa, after four years of marriage, that Cocoa is forced to confront the division of her identity. Cocoa recognizes her New York self as a small piece of a larger whole that exists for her only in Willow Springs: “Regardless of how well you thought you knew me, it was only one part of me. The rest of me—the whole of me—was here. And I wondered how you would take the transformation, beginning with something as basic as my name” (176). She acknowledges that she spent the last eleven years in New York with only a part of her self present. Since Cocoa has always been Ophelia to George, his presence forces her

New York identity to confront her Willow Springs identity. Entrance into Cocoa's world will involve George witnessing a transformation in Ophelia and experiencing a Cocoa he does not yet know.

What Cocoa identifies as basic, her name, might be basic in George's eyes, but for Cocoa her multiple names allow her to support and reject different identities. In her childhood, Cocoa receives three different names, one from her mother, one from her grandmother, and one from her great-aunt. Her proper name, Ophelia, was given to her at birth by her mother. Ophelia was her great-grandmother's name, who had thrown herself off the cliff into The Sound after being unable to find peace following the accidental well drowning of her oldest daughter, Peace. In relation to their family history, the passing on of Ophelia as her name creates a new opportunity for an Ophelia to find peace; a previous attempt, where Abigail named her first daughter Peace failed to restore peace when she died within days of birth. The naming of Ophelia after her great-grandmother connects her to the past through her family's legacy and places the weight of certain expectations for her to fulfill. Ophelia, however, is not a name that any of the community members of Willow Springs knows her by. Instead, Ophelia is the name she uses in New York and that she attaches to her New York self.

The most important of Cocoa's names, and the one she rejects, is her crib name. Mama Day states that the name Baby Girl was the "name that helped to hold her here" (267) to the world of the living. The importance of her crib name developed out of the difficulty Day women had surviving. The crib name her grandmother gives her is The Baby Girl:

No—this was one girl they would *not* let get away. But that little ball of pale fire, spitting up practically every ounce of

goat's milk she could finally take, pulling Mother's china knickknacks off the curio before she could barely crawl, running before she could walk—she was *the* baby girl. They dropped the “the” when they were sure she was gonna stay. (emphasis original 39)

At the time of Cocoa's birth, Mama Day, Abigail, and Cocoa's mother, Grace, who they are losing as she slowly goes out of her mind with anger at being abandoned by Cocoa's father, are the only Days left in Willow Springs. While Hope, Willa's mother, stays in touch, she does not return to Willow Springs, and Willa is raised in Chicago without the influence of the island and its familial connections. Physically Hope and Willa have gotten away and it is clear to Mama Day that they are close to losing Grace, so Cocoa is the only hope for the survival of the Days. Naming her The Baby Girl, in a sense, represents a new start for the women in the Day family, ensuring that she will be the one female to not just survive, but to reconcile the past and present. As a child, Cocoa does not understand the significance of the name Baby Girl, what that name represents for her future, or what that name means for the recognition of her self.

At age five she consciously rejects the name Baby Girl by refusing to answer it because she associates being called Baby with being a baby or treated like a baby. By refusing her crib name, Cocoa loses the wholeness of her identity that will take her decades to recover. She is finally given her pet name, Cocoa, by Mama Day. While Cocoa rejects Baby Girl and the identity that she believes accompanies it, “[Mama Day] and Abigail kept calling her exactly what she was between themselves, and where it counted most of all—in their minds” (40). For Mama Day and Abigail the power of the name was in its existence and their own knowledge of its cultural power and metaphysical significance. The fact that the name remains spoken in private between the

two of them and that Ophelia/Cocoa exists in her entirety within their minds as Baby Girl is enough to preserve the possibilities of Cocoa's future. Mama Day knows that one day Cocoa will return to the name and all it represents: "She'll answer to Baby Girl again when she's a mama in her own right—there'll be no need to explain to the silly thing what she's been knowing all along" (40). Her "knowing all along" is that Baby Girl represents her whole self; it is this knowledge that has been lost to her and that she has to restore in her own time.

Cocoa's reconciliation of her identity to Baby Girl does not begin until she returns to Willow Springs with George. When Cocoa encounters Willow Springs with George, she experiences an encounter between her identities when Ophelia and Cocoa finally occupy the same space: "It was Cocoa's bedroom we were going to share, and I watched Ophelia's husband carefully unpacking his clothes [...] I felt as if we were going to have an illicit affair" (176-177). Cocoa's separation of selves is so defined that she is unable to recognize herself as Ophelia and Cocoa at the same time. George's presence in Cocoa's bedroom is both unnatural since Cocoa and George are strangers, and natural because when Cocoa is with George she is Ophelia. In order to negotiate the illicit affair she sees unfolding before her, Ophelia claims Cocoa's room as her and George's space—a New York within Willow Springs that no one else has access to. This shifting of space allows Cocoa to temporarily maintain her separate selves, but other experiences in Willow Springs make it more difficult to distinguish between the two identities.

Cocoa's worry about George's experiencing southern Cocoa as an entirely different woman than northern Ophelia distracts her from the real issue: she has two disparate selves, unable to function as one. Willow Springs as a place with "living

mirrors” shows Cocoa stuck as a child, while Ophelia is a grown woman. She does not understand why she is unable to be an adult in Willow Springs: “No, my temper was nothing new to you but, try as I might, I became a child again in this house. You respected Ophelia’s anger just as she respected yours. How would you react seeing that Cocoa’s anger, whether coddled or dismissed, was never taken seriously here?” (177). Cocoa becomes a child again in her grandmother’s home because she does not let the child version of Cocoa grow into the adult version of Ophelia. This separation also takes a toll on Ophelia. Since Ophelia is kept separate from Cocoa, she has no childhood and no past. As a child, Cocoa saw the name Baby Girl as trapping her into a baby-like status. But her rejection of that name and the whole self it represents leaves her with a lived experience as Cocoa in Willow Springs, which even as a thirty-two-year-old woman finds her still in a child-like status. Cocoa’s task becomes connecting Ophelia and Cocoa, so that Ophelia has a past, a strong sense of self and belonging, and Cocoa has a future.

Cocoa’s knowledge of her separate selves and the limitations they create for her is present from the beginning of her relationship with George. It is not until she marries him that she realizes the dangers of not having her whole self. Cocoa’s standards for her and George’s relationship are much higher than those of Mama Day and Abigail, but she realizes it is her own limitations that are going to be the problem:

And I wanted us to work so badly that I would be tempted to try and squeeze myself up into whatever shape you had calculated would fit into your plans. How long could I do it? The answer scared the hell out of me: I could have done it forever. [...] ‘She has all I have,’ you told my grandmother on our honeymoon. But I was determined that *we* were going to have a life that would work. (emphasis original 146)

Cocoa is aware of the sacrifices she might have to make for marriage, but she envisions a limit to what she would be willing to give. Mama Day interprets George's statement, "She has all I have," as "sharing. If he got a nickel, she's got a part in it. He got a dream, he's gonna take her along. If he got a life, Abigail, he's saying that life can open itself up for her. You can't ask no more than that from a man" (136). What Mama Day views as a statement about partnership, Cocoa interprets as his life having an already determined space for her to fit into. She does not simply want George to share his life with her. She wants the two of them to create and share their life together. She becomes aware, however, that she cannot ask this of George until she understands who she is apart from him, so she can participate in their creation of a life together.

In order for Cocoa to merge her separate identities, she needs the same love and belief from George that she gives to him. Although George is presented as loving Cocoa as much as she loves him and makes compromises for her to do the things she wants to do, Naylor suggests that George's love is not enough to heal Cocoa. George is unable to understand the Cocoa of Willow Springs, since she is an entirely different person from the Ophelia of New York. It is George's ability to understand and believe in Cocoa's past and the community she is from that will allow Cocoa to reconcile her two selves. In Willow Springs one of the strongest male presences, Dr. Buzzard, publically displays his beliefs in hoodoo, but he is presented as a fool because he does not actually have the power to perform any of the practices he believes in. Hoodoo is shown as a part of the power of women; even though Mama Day publically rejects the idea, when Cocoa falls ill to it, Mama Day retaliates by practicing some herself. But, it is not the retaliation that would save Cocoa. The biggest challenge for them to overcome in order to save Cocoa's

life is to undo the separation of selves that Cocoa had spent the past eleven years solidifying. Despite the fact that the hoodoo practiced on the island is exclusively female, the ability to fight it rests with George and

for a brief moment Miranda allows herself to wish that it wasn't so, that she'd never left to go beyond the bridge and still belonged only to them. She had fought for her life when she was theirs and she could fight for it again, give up her own life if need be. But what ain't so, just ain't so. Baby Girl done tied up her mind and her flesh with George, and above all, Ruby knew it. (265)

Ophelia does not belong to them and is separate from Cocoa and Willow Springs. Mama Day's wish that Cocoa had never gone beyond the bridge is based on the weakening of her healing power in Cocoa's life. The idea of Cocoa "belonging" to Mama Day and Abigail is not with her as a possession, but with them as place in which she fits, the home in which she would always belong. At the same time, Cocoa also created a home and place in which another piece of her fit with George, and belonged to him as well. It is the New York piece of her, the Ophelia, which Ruby attacks, removing the power of restoration solely from Mama Day to include George. Ruby's practicing of hoodoo on Cocoa represents the importance of Cocoa's reconciliation of her two identities in order to survive. Her whole self, embodied through Baby Girl could survive Ruby's attack, her fragmented identities will kill her.

Mama Day acknowledges that there are two possible ways to save Cocoa; both are dependent on the choices George makes. Cocoa's struggle to unite her two identities is dependent on George's ability to enter into her world with the piece of her identity she had developed in his world. Prior to Cocoa's relationship with George, Mama Day could have accessed Ophelia's identity, but after seeing them together she "realizes there's a

whole world in there that she ain't got nothing to do with" (232). George has the strength and ability to fight Cocoa's battle with her, but he has to be willing to believe in the female community of Willow Springs. The most productive way to heal Cocoa is for George to unite with Mama Day in order to unite Cocoa and Ophelia:

He believes in himself—deep within himself—'cause he ain't never had a choice. And he keeps it protected down in his center, but she needs that belief buried in George. Of his own accord he has to *hand* it over to her. She needs his hand in hers—his very hand—so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before. A single moment was all she asked, even a fingertip to touch hers here at the other place. So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over. (emphasis original 285)

What Mama Day needs from George is for him to join the Willow Springs community and root his identity outside of himself. The connecting of Cocoa's past, through Mama Day, and Ophelia's present, through George, allows her to "walk over" into her future, the future of Baby Girl. Mama Day and George coming together would represent the blending of Cocoa's communities and the ability for Cocoa to merge her selves. It depends on George's ability to believe in her family and community of Willow Springs, which represents his believing in Cocoa, and as a result providing the support she needs from him to incorporate Ophelia into Cocoa. George lacks a community-defined identity since he has never been a part of a community. This makes Mama Day's request of him more than he can handle. Despite his best efforts and love for Ophelia/Cocoa, however, George is unable to be a part of bridging that space for her. He chooses to save Cocoa his own way, in which he rejects the knowledge of her female community.

These community connections that are so strong for Cocoa do not exist for George who grew up an orphan in a state orphanage. George lacks a community, family,

and a home to connect to, and his understanding of his self has been much more independently constructed. Mama Day acknowledges that George has successfully created his home space as “his own place within him” (285). Unlike Cocoa, George has kept his identity grounded within him, independent from both place and any outside community connections. Since he does not have a home space rooted outside of his body, George is unable to understand the separation of selves and complexities of Cocoa’s subjectivity that depend on the South. When they first begin spending time together and George shows her the New York he knows, he has a similar revelation about Cocoa’s self that he had in his office when he first met her: “And it had been loads of fun, watching you change. You were becoming different, you were going back to the way you were” (100). George is witnessing a change in Cocoa that occurs as she sees and appreciates New York through the eyes of a New Yorker. Cocoa is finding her place in New York. However, George once again assumes she is just being herself again, “going back” to who she was before, instead of moving forward and creating someone new.

Cocoa fully creates a new identity through her relationship with George, which she situates within him and within his knowing of New York. It is this identity that George comes to know in its entirety. He does not realize she is residing in a small piece of herself. George’s assumed knowledge about Cocoa turns into a power and ownership of her: “the face I could read so well now. The lean body that held no more secrets bent over the railing. I liked that knowing which could only deepen as we went on together. A comfortable form of possessiveness. Only I owned the codes to a certain turn of her head, a slight narrowing of her eyes, the varying textures of her silences” (159). In claiming knowledge of her, he emphasizes all of the things he does not and cannot know about her

from his current position within his world. He presents his knowledge as a physical knowledge of her body, head, and eyes, and attaches textures to her silences. The Cocoa that George does not know is in the secrets remaining in those silences. The Cocoa he does not know cannot be owned and possessed. George's inability to understand the importance of place prevents him from understanding that there are others, such as Mama Day and Abigail, who hold that same ability to read Cocoa's mannerisms and expressions. For George to truly begin to understand Cocoa, he must enter into her world with an open mind about what he will find there. To do this, he must put his trust in others.

George has already shown that he is able to remove his status as outsider to the Willow Springs community during his morning at the barber shop. In this male space of Willow Springs, he is able to connect to the male community, as he learns things about the men that Cocoa does not know. However, even his knowledge of the men stops short of understanding their spiritual practices and beliefs, which largely structure their community. Alvarez Saar argues that the problem with George is his role in separating Cocoa from her Willow Springs heritage and female community. George's problem is not just that he distances her from this other community, but that he is unable to understand how to become a part of it. Mama Day offers George a way into the female space of the Willow Springs community by him trusting her knowledge and working with her to bridge the space for Cocoa to reunite her selves. Ultimately, it is the female space in which George is afraid to place his belief.

George's inability to trust and place his faith in the power of Cocoa's female community causes him to choose, his death, the second way to save Cocoa. Instead of

working with Mama Day from within the female community to create “the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over” (285), reconciling the worlds and identities of Ophelia and Cocoa, George releases Ophelia with his death, leaving Cocoa and Ophelia behind to form a new whole self. Cocoa no longer needs to reconcile two identities, however, she lets her New York version of Ophelia go with George. Cocoa reflects on her loss: “I thought my world had come to an end. And I wasn’t really wrong—one of my worlds had. But being so young, I didn’t understand that every hour we keep living is building material for a new world, of some sort” (302). After recovering, she makes a permanent return to the South because she is unable to face New York without the person who made it a home for her. Her return is not to Willow Springs, however, but to Charleston. Cocoa’s self-discovery and self-definition that occur during her physical recovery, following George’s death, also change the spiritual hold on the island of Willow Springs. She further breaks down the barrier between the world of the living and the world of the spirits, both signals her embodiment of a stronger power than Mama Day and allows her to have the conversation with George that constitutes the novel.

Naylor presents the possibility for the South to be a place of recovery for both black men and women, but certain criteria must be met. George’s downfall can be attributed to his value of northern individualism and inability to place his trust in others, which prevent him from discovering a community-defined identity with which to merge his very strong individual identity. His fate, however, is not the only possibility; he could have accessed his own past and allowed himself to recoup and reconcile his lost identity. While Naylor suggests that the recovery of a whole self in the South functions the same

way for black men and women, Morrison complicates the notion by considering the gendered ways characters recover community-defined identity versus individual identity.

Morrison's *Home* recounts the story of siblings, a brother and sister, who leave and return to the small, rural town of Lotus, Georgia. Both have been neglected and mistreated due to difficult circumstances faced by their parents, and both suffer the consequences of fragmented identities. Positioning their healing side-by-side, Morrison highlights the gendered experience of community by showing Cee's recovery occurring in a close knit circle of women, while Frank's healing occurs outside the space of the community. Like Cocoa, George, and Mama Day, Frank is able to find communities in the North and he relies on them to get him back to the South. They assist him in his return migration, but once he is back in Lotus he remains outside of his home community. Unlike George's experience in Willow Springs, Frank is not invited into the female community to become a part of his sister's healing. While both Frank and Cee have community-defined identities—Cee's is fairly destructive to her wellbeing—neither of them are able to construct individual identities until they are able to recognize themselves as separate from one another.

A 1998 special issue of *Studies in the Literary Imagination* focused on the role of the South Toni Morrison's works. In one of the volume's articles "The Politics of Space: Southernness and Manhood in the Fictions of Toni Morrison," Herman Beavers argues that for Morrison's male characters

the South is a duality, oscillating between a place of origin and a curse [...] in light of their experiences in the North, the South can also serve as the one place these men can recall where they are not rendered faceless and anonymous. As an experience, as a place, as a way of being, the South

never leaves them, creating and corrupting the integrity of their lives. (61)

Beavers focuses on Morrison's male characters—such as Cholly Breedlove, Macon Dead, Sr., Son Green, Guitar Banes, and Joe Trace—who are unable to recognize and appropriately respond to the duality of the South which ultimately leads to their destruction. In contrast to those unable to productively respond, there are characters—such as Milkman Dead, Paul D, and, most recently, Frank Money—that are able to confront their pasts or their family's pasts in the South and achieve new understandings of their own subjectivities.

Briefly comparing Milkman's migration to the South from *Song of Solomon* (1977) to Frank's migration to the South will show the alternative stakes possible in Morrison's treatment of the return migration as she offers two very different experiences and goals for her characters within the South. Milkman and Frank are roughly of the same generation and their narratives occur less than a decade apart, Frank's in the 1950s and Milkman's in the 1950s and 1960s. In relation to the stable construction of the self the two have opposite gaps their identities: Milkman is so wrapped up in himself that he remains disengaged from any community and Frank understands his position connected to the communities around him while being unable to function separate from them. Milkman is unable to become a part of communities in the North, including his familial community. He defines himself separate from everyone else and sees himself as superior to others⁶⁹ through his father's successful financial positioning in the northern community as owner of many rental properties. As such, his sister Lena despises him and he is responsible for the destruction of his cousin Hagar. Frank, on the other hand, defines

⁶⁹ See Philip Page's *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels* for a discussion of Milkman's fragmentation and reintegration into community.

himself in relation to others from his community, specifically Mike and Stuff. When he loses Mike and Stuff in the war, his lack of individual identity prevents him from returning to his home community in the South. Frank also defines himself connected to his sister and his loyalty to her is what finally draws him back to the South.

For the two characters, the reintegration of the self and self-assertion lies in the return to the South. The entire second half of *Song of Solomon* depicts Milkman's breakdown and process towards recovery, which is achieved at the end. Milkman's temporary return to the South⁷⁰ of his ancestors Shalimar, Virginia, allows him to discover his self in relation to community: "The healing of Milkman's own brokenness—not only as an individual but as a representative of an entire Black generation—requires Milkman's restoration to the community of his ancestors, and that requires, literally, the discovery of their names" (Lee 111). Frank's healing, on the other hand, requires self-definition, separate from his community and sister, which the rest of this chapter will look at in depth. Through the varied experiences of Milkman and Frank, Morrison suggests the South holds both ancestors—to balance the individual identity that lacks community enhancement—and the room for solitude—to balance the community-defined identity that is missing individual self-definition. While the southern return is only a temporary trek for Milkman, it appears to hold more finality for Frank.

Frank's decision to leave his hometown of Lotus, Georgia is not driven by the desire to attend college in the North; instead, his departure is enabled by his joining the Army. In an attempt to convince his sister of his decision, "He tried to tell her the army was the only solution. Lotus was suffocating, killing him and his two best friends. They all agreed" (35). He does not join the army to be a soldier, but as a way to get out of his

⁷⁰ See Griffin's analysis of Milkman's return in her migration study *Who Set you Flowin'?*

small, rural town. Throughout his childhood, Frank is unsatisfied with his life in Lotus. He longs to live in a place with more action and more to offer him. He acknowledges, *“My family was content or maybe just hopeless living that way. I understand. Having been run out of one town, any other that offered safety and the peace of sleeping through the night and not waking up with a rifle in your face was more than enough. But it was less than enough for me”* (84). Lotus represents safety for his family who were once chased out of their hometown in Texas. Frank does not know if it is peace or fear that keeps them within the space of Lotus’s all black community, but neither reason is sufficient enough to keep him there. Likewise, Cee finds her way out of town by marrying a young man from the city. After they move to Atlanta and he abandons her, she refuses to return. Neither sibling is able to recognize any value in their Lotus community.

The sanctuary the Lotus community offers their parents’ generation does not extend to the younger generation; instead, the community-defined identities obstruct their individual identities. For Frank, his community-defined identity is as one-third of a trio including Mike and Stuff. Frank’s decision to leave Lotus to join the army is not made on his own, but with his two best friends. They leave Lotus together, enlist together, and serve together in the Korean War. Frank, however, is the only one to survive the war. He returns to the United States missing both his community-defined identity through Mike and Stuff, and his individual identity. Frank does not know how to return to his home community without the two men he spent his life joined to:

he didn’t want to go home without his ‘homeboys.’ He was far too alive to stand before Mike’s folks or Stuff’s. His easy breath and unscathed self would be an insult to them. And whatever lie he cooked up about how bravely they

died, he could not blame their resentment. Besides, he hated Lotus. Its unforgiving population, its isolation, and especially its indifference to the future were only tolerable only if his buddies were there with him. (17)

Frank's inability to return to Lotus is partially a result of his experiencing survivor's guilt. He assumes that he will be judged and rejected by Mike and Stuff's parents. His previous experience in Lotus also causes him to view the community as generally unsupportive. Frank also connects the identity of Lotus with Mike and Stuff. His return would force him to define the place and his self separate from the two of them. This is something Frank is unprepared to do after the war and while he is still committed to maintaining his Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

After he comes back from the war and decides he cannot return to the South, Frank spends his time wandering around Seattle and mentally reliving the deaths of his two friends. This results in PTSD episodes that are entirely out of his control. He later admits that "he had covered his guilt and shame [about his own actions in the war] with big-time mourning for his dead buddies. Day and night he had held on to that suffering because it let him off the hook, kept the Korean child hidden" (135). His only temporary reprieve from his reliving the war memories comes when he meets Lily. The two meet after Frank regains his composure following a four-day PTSD episode. The narrator recounts their first meeting, "She smiled when she spoke. He did not return the smile, but his eyes had such a quiet, faraway look—like people who made their living staring at ocean waves—she relented" (74). Frank attempts to take shelter in this woman, but his inability to acknowledge his actions in the war keep Lily at a distance. Lily's narrative repeatedly recounts this same image of Frank with his faraway look directed for hours at

the wall. Frank's loss of community-defined identity and inability to deal with his own actions that might reflect his individual identity keep him trapped within himself.

His "big-time mourning" for Mike and Stuff keep his state of mind fixed on his experience in Korea. As their relationship wears on, Lily's frustration with Frank's PTSD slowly grows because she has plans and dreams about her future. Although Frank gets work and brings his money home to Lily, "When she questioned him about the future, what he wanted to do, he said, 'stay alive'" (76). His inability to plan for the future and his nudging of his mind to relive those scenes of his best friends' deaths in Korea cause Lily to feel relief when he leaves to save his sister. When Frank receives the brief letter, "'Come fast. She be dead if you tarry'" (8), he is brought back into the role of his sister's protector. His desire for the future shifts from staying alive to keeping his sister alive: "Maybe his life had been preserved for Cee, which was only fair since she had been his original caring-for, a selflessness without gain or emotional profit" (34-35). Frank's relationship with his sister is presented as a pure, untarnished bond that once again gives him a purpose in life. His journey back to the South to save Cee requires Frank to let go of the loss of Mike and Stuff and attempt to understand his self separate from them.

Like Naylor, Morrison employs multiple narrative perspectives in the telling of *Home*. The narrative moves back and forth between a third-person omniscient consciousness that narrates most of the story, and the protagonist Frank's first-person voice. The third-person omniscient narrator focuses on a different character each chapter, presenting the story from third-person perspectives of Frank, Cee, Lily, and Lenore. Each is given his/her own chapter and then, at the end, Frank has two more chapters and he and Cee share two chapters. While the third-person accounts from the various perspectives

serve to verify and reinforce the other versions given, Frank's first-person narration, like Cocoa's at the end of *Mama Day*, calls into question the truth of the narrative being told. However, rather than providing theoretical musings on knowledge and the questionable nature of memory as Cocoa provides, Frank's first-person narration deliberately questions Morrison herself, as the author, and contradicts the narrative provided by the third-person omniscient narrator. This device of the novel draws attention to the individual characters' subjectivities, and also raises questions of third-person omniscient narrators' reliability when it comes to character interiority. More specifically this technique works within the novel to allow Frank to reclaim his subjectivity by speaking his own experience.

In the same conversation between Morrison and Naylor referenced earlier, the two writers discuss the phenomenon of their characters speaking to them as a medium for their stories. Morrison reflects, "I have to have very overt conversations with these people. Before I could sort of let it disguise itself as the artist's monologue with herself but there's no time for that foolishness now. Now I have to call them by their names and ask them to reappear and tell me something or leave me alone even" (209). She goes on to evaluate the process, noting that "Some people are embarrassed about it; they both fear and distrust it also; they don't solidify and recreate the means by which one enters into that place where those people are. I think the more black women write, the more easily one will be able to talk about those things" (210). The artist's monologue is actually what is missing from *Home*. Morrison recreates, instead, the world in which her characters use her as a conduit for their experiences. We are presented with Frank's voice and explanations of events in his life and, then, those experiences are translated into a third-

person account. Frank's direct address to Morrison, as writer, occurs in seven of his eight sections. In many ways, Morrison provides a larger commentary on the writing process by embracing her very real experiences with the character Frank⁷¹. She overtly portrays for readers and other writers the authorial situation, she earlier suggests, writers are uncomfortable acknowledging.

Frank's dictation to Morrison appears to be from a vantage point where he can see what is being written because he does not simply tell his story, but inquires into the aspects of his story that make it on the page. He begins by providing her with helpful notes, before progressing to challenges, and then revising the previous information conveyed to readers. The first time Frank addresses Morrison/the author is in his first section before the third-person narration begins. He steps in early to prevent the misrepresentation of his story, specifically addressing a childhood memory that could be interpreted as dictating all his future actions. Frank tells Morrison, "*Since you're set on telling my story, whatever you think and whatever you write down, know this: I really forgot about the burial*" (5). He begins by drawing attention to the fact that he does not have narrative control over the telling of his story. It also appears that he has previously made some attempt to stop Morrison from writing it, but is now resigned to the fact that he cannot stop its telling. Morrison has the ability to think or write anything regardless of what Frank thinks she should. His clarification of this specific point about the witnessing of a traumatic burial as a child suggests he does not want his entire experience defined by a moment he claims he has long forgotten. His remembering of this forgotten moment is

⁷¹ This interview takes place while Morrison is in the process of writing *Beloved*. She addresses a different kind of responsibility involved when invoking characters inspired by the dead. Likewise, in the notanda section of M. NourbeSe Philips's *Zong!* (2008), Philips exposes a similar experience as she pieces together her journal entries and explains her position as medium for Setaey Adamu Boateng, the ancestor speaking through her.

important to the reintegration of his self at the end of his story, though it is not the only incident to fissure it.

While Morrison does Frank the courtesy of including his first-person accounts and responses to the way his story is told, her third-person narrator constructs a narrative that has points of opposition with Frank's accounts. Initially these contradictions are at the level of interpretation. In Frank's third section, he has a somewhat heated response to the narrator's description of the motivations behind his actions:

You are dead wrong if you think I was just scouting for a home with a bowl of sex in it. I wasn't. Something about her floored me, made me want to be good enough for her. Is that too hard for you to understand? Earlier you wrote about how sure I was that the beat-up man on the train to Chicago would turn around when they got home and whip the wife who tried to help him. Not true. I didn't think any such thing. What I thought was that he was proud of her but didn't want to show how proud he was to the other men on the train. I don't think you know much about love. Or me. (69)

Frank rebuts incorrect representations of two separate incidents involving relationships between men and women in the narrative. The responses the narrator offers Frank depict him as callous, but he provides more complex explanations to these incidents. These events also describe intimate moments between men and women with limited understandings of how they are perceived by and between men. In response to the assault of the black man on the train and his wife's attempt to help him, Frank rejects the notion that the only option for a black man in that situation is to beat his wife and that "She would have to pay for that broken nose. Over and over again" (26). Frank suggests that the man's public irritation with his wife is necessary to keep his masculinity intact in front of other men, but it does not necessarily translate to private violence when the two

are out of view of other men. He claims this anonymous black man's public reaction represents the man's performance of his community-defined identity, but underneath that role is an individual reaction based on his personal relationship with his wife. Readers do not know what happens when the couple gets home because both accounts are presented as Frank's thoughts. Their importance, then, is that it gives insight into Frank and his actions, an insight normally only experienced by Morrison as the author. Furthermore, readers see the differences between the account the character delivers and how the author develops and interprets it through the writing process.

Ultimately, in this section, Frank questions Morrison's understanding of how love functions and her knowledge of him as a character. Despite Frank's PTSD panics, blackouts, and violent outbursts, he never behaves violently towards his girlfriend, Lily. Frank acknowledges his perceived power over women he has intimate relationships with. He claims to know how to break the softness inside of them, but he chooses not to do so. Lily is Frank's attempt to find his place in the United States outside of the South after returning from Korea. The first time he meets her he reflects, "*I felt like I'd come home. Finally*" (68). He tries to construct his home within her, seeking protection from the world. His past experiences in the South and in Korea, however, prevent him from finding relief with her. Although Lily can offer Frank shelter, she cannot heal him. He acknowledges his commitment to a life with her, saying, "*I was wide open for her. If it wasn't for that letter, I'd still be hanging from her apron strings. She had no competition in my mind except for the horses, a man's foot, and Ycidra trembling under my arm*" (69). His love for Lily is only surpassed by his love for his sister. The traumatic burial that involved the horses, the man's foot, and a terrified Cee reemerges for Frank during

his time as a soldier in Korea, when his identity falls apart (3-5, 97-100). This memory calls him back to the South because he must reconcile it to resolve the trauma of his action in the Korean War. He tells Morrison, “*Don’t paint me as some enthusiastic hero. I had to go but I dreaded it*” (81). He has to return because he is his sister’s protector. He is driven by love and responsibility for a sister he spent much of his childhood raising. He does not feel he is being heroic, but doing what any man should do.

Cee’s situation allows him to confront his fractured identity. After he is in the position to take action and save his sister from her death, he changes an account from his time in Korea. He has been haunted throughout the novel by the image of a little girl whose death he witnesses while in Korea. This event is relayed to readers three different times. The first and second accounts are relatively the same. Frank describes his watching the child, who is scavenging for food near a trash heap, when the soldier “*blows her away*” (95). The third-person narrator then relays Frank watching the young girl “before the guard blew her head off” (100). The third version of the story comes once again from Frank’s section after he returns to the South and Cee is healthy again. He explains that his earlier version was not correct: “*I have to say something to you right now. I have to tell the whole truth. I lied to you and I lied to me. I hid it from you because I hid it from me [...] You can keep on writing, but I think you ought to know what’s true*” (133-134). He is finally able to admit his role as a soldier in Korea. He reveals that he is not just a spectator of his friends’ deaths and violence done by other soldiers, but that he killed a young Korean girl who was scavenging for food. These narrative discrepancies show the work of the author to take the character’s story and adapt it in the way that he/she sees fit. In this instance, Morrison does not retell this piece of the story a second time in the third-

person narrative; she leaves the new revelation out of the story she is writing. This admission does, however, have an impact on the character. Frank finally faces the event that he kept trying to cover with his memory of Mike and Stuff's deaths which come after he encounters the Korean girl. It is through this confession that he is able to complete his healing. This admission does not come until he is back in his hometown watching his sister come to terms with her inability to ever have children.

The South becomes the site where he can therapeutically acknowledge his own experiences and actions to himself, both those that occurred in and outside of the South. The call to home for Frank comes from a stranger, Sarah, who writes him a letter about his sister simply stating, ““Come fast. She be dead if you tarry”” (8). Frank articulates his displeasure for his small, rural Georgia town claiming that only his love for his sister could make him return.

Frank's movement around the country after enlisting is dictated by the United States government. He moves from Lotus to Kentucky to San Diego, then to Korea, and back to Seattle, Washington. His return migration, by way of Portland, Oregon and Chicago, Illinois, is the first move he makes without Mike and Stuff. In both of these cities he is reminded of the dangers in the North. Reverend and Mrs. Locke who help Frank in Seattle after he escapes from a mental hospital warn him, “you come from Georgia, and you been in a desegregated army and maybe you think up North is way different from down South. Don't believe it and don't count on it. Custom is just as real as law and can be just as dangerous” (19). Frank experiences instances of segregation and police harassment as he travels back to Georgia, but these instances are kept relatively minor in the narrative. The reverend's warning about the North and the South offering

similar difficulties ironically reinforces the fact that Frank is not being protected from the South through remaining in the North.

It is significant that, like Avey who feels more and more whole the nearer she is to her roots, the closer Frank gets to the South, aided by stationed guides, the better he is able to deal with the symptoms of his PTSD. Frank finds extended community across the United States that helps him get back to the South. In a Chicago diner, he finds one such guide in the form of the connection he makes to the community he did not have on the west coast:

Booker's was not only a good and cheap place to eat, but its company—diners, counter help, waitresses, and a loud argumentative cook—was welcoming and high-spirited. Laborers and the idle, mothers and street women, all ate and drank with the ease of family in their own kitchens. It was that quick, down-home friendliness that led Frank to talk freely to the man on the stool next to his who volunteered his name. (27-28)

This down-home friendliness reflects a carryover by the number of migrants from the South living in Chicago. The connection to community he finds here links Frank to the South, and his camaraderie with the man on the stool next to him prevents him from having another one of his episodes.

After leaving Chicago on a train bound for Atlanta, Frank's condition improves even more. Frank still relives his war memories, but he "suddenly realized that those memories, powerful as they were, did not crush him anymore or throw him into paralyzing despair. He could recall every detail, every sorrow, without needing alcohol to steady him" (100). Just moving into the space of the South enables Frank to gain back power over his psyche. Morrison represents the South as a space that can bear Frank's sorrow without it destroying him. He begins to let go, not only of Mike and Stuff's

deaths, but of his community-defined identity tying his existence to theirs. His individual identity, however, is still entangled with his sister.

While his love for his sister is what brings him back to the South and energizes his recovery from his war experience, it also speaks to his individual emptiness. Frank describes both he and his sister as not entirely existent. He tells Morrison, “*When you write this down, know this: she was a shadow for most of my life, a presence marking its own absence, or maybe mine. Who am I without her*” (103). He cannot see himself independently of Cee. Her existence signifies the identity each of them is missing. After being faced with reconfiguring his community-defined identity through the deaths of his friends, Frank cannot bear the prospect of recovering his individual identity from another place of loss. He says, “*No more people I didn’t save. Not more watching people close to me die. No more*” (103). His attempts to save Mike and Stuff fail. In the war, he covers their wounds and collects their body parts in hopes of keeping them alive, but he is not equipped to save them. He could only helplessly watch. This experience recalls the forgotten and emasculating scene from his childhood. He can only watch the black body being thrown into a grave with no ceremony. His action in that moment is to protect his sister, by covering her eyes and holding her. He believes he saves his sister by keeping her hidden, but he is powerless to do anything for the man being buried.

Even though Frank had been Cee’s caretaker prior to their witnessing the burial as young children, it is in this moment that he defines himself as her protector and makes her dependent upon him. The novel insinuates that Cee’s dependence on Frank to safeguard her from the world is detrimental to her survival, as it leaves her unable to insulate herself emotionally or physically. After recovering Cee’s frail body from her

employer Dr. Beau's home in Atlanta, Frank takes her back to their hometown. He is then excluded from her healing process as Mrs. Ethel and the other community women take over. The narrator recounts,

he was blocked from visiting the sickroom by every woman in the neighborhood. If it weren't for the girl Jackie he would have known nothing at all. From her he learned that they believed his maleness would worsen her condition. She told him the women took turns nursing Cee and each had a different recipe for her cure. What they all agreed upon was his absence from her bedside. (119)

Although each woman has her own opinion about how to approach Cee's physical healing, they all believe they must keep Frank away. Frank's exclusion on the basis of his maleness references his physical and emotional maleness. Physically, the women work to heal the damage Dr. Beau's experiments do to her physical femaleness, reproductive organs. Frank's physical maleness as the opposite sex disrupts the female space the women create to heal her reproductive organs. On the other side, Frank's emotional maleness will obstruct both Cee's physical and emotional recovery because Cee knows Frank as her defender, the one who would kill for her (104). Allowing Frank to be by her side would potentially keep Cee emotionally weak, hence impeding her from healing properly. The actions of the community's women is reminiscent of the healing of Morrison's Sethe in *Beloved* when she needs protection from the malicious manifestation of Beloved and the ritual healing that occurs for Marshall's Avey in *Praisesong for the Widow* when she is physically cleansed in preparation for her emotional repair.

The Lotus community, both men and women, are not particularly concerned with Frank's wholeness, but seeing Cee nearly dead due to her inability to define and respect herself as an individual, independent of her brother, brings the community's women to

action. While the community had been indifferent to or harsh on Cee previously, when she displays clear need and violation by a man, the women protect and reeducate her to be able to guard her mind and body in the future. Following Cee's physical improvement, Mrs. Ethel turns her attention to Cee's emotional rehabilitation of her self. This requires Mrs. Ethel to undo years of verbal and physical abuse inflicted upon Cee by her step-grandmother who "Branded [her] early as an unlovable, barely tolerated 'gutter child' [...] she had agreed with the label and believed herself worthless" (128-129). This community-defined, but false, identity established by her step-grandmother is the only one Cee has until Mrs. Ethel helps her take her self back. Mrs. Ethel asks Cee to search herself until she locates an individual personhood not dictated by others:

"Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. Seed your own land. You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world." (126)

Although Frank is not mentioned in this lecture because he does not intentionally hurt Cee as the others do, he is alluded to as the one Cee always expects to save her. Mrs. Ethel emphasizes the need for Cee to reclaim her own life and to learn to care for her self. Throughout the remainder of the novel, Cee works to keep her newly found or rather regained individuality separate from Frank.

In contrast to the communal aspect of Cee's healing, Frank is left to rediscover his own distinctiveness. Like Cee, his self has been intertwined with her since their childhood in his role as protector. He reflects, "*She was the first-person I ever took responsibility for. Down deep inside her lived my secret picture of myself—a strong good me tied to the*

memory of those horses and the burial of a stranger” (104). Cee’s final rejection of the fallacious community-defined identity promoted by her step-grandmother along with her own self-discovery forces Frank to reconcile his own self. When the black women’s community of Lotus usher Cee back into the world after months of rehabilitation, “They delivered unto [Frank] a Cee who would never again need his hand over her eyes or his arms to stop her murmuring bones” (128). Cee’s independence disrupts the picture of himself he had secretly stored in her. This heroic vision he holds of himself, which he wanted to display in Cee’s healing, is, however, contested and indeed shattered by his actions in Korea.

Frank recognizes Cee’s vision of a young girl, which she imagines is the baby she would never have, as the young girl he kills in Korea. Frank creates his own healing ritual, but does not perform it alone. He and Cee return to the site of the brutal burial they witness as children after Frank learns the story behind the death. The man recklessly tossed in the ground was a father who sacrificed his life so the white spectators would let his son live—though this surrender took the gruesome form of forcing his son to kill him. Throughout his life, Frank has either been in or envisioned himself in the position of watcher. As a child, he watches the burial. As a soldier, he watches Mike and Stuff’s deaths, and he lies to himself about the Korean girl in order to be the watcher instead of the killer. While Frank cannot return to Korea to bury the young girl he kills there, he can return to the site of this man’s murder and take action to undo the disrespect paid to the man’s life through a proper burial ritual.

Frank and Cee walk the five miles in silence to the place where they once hid in the grass while a man’s body was carelessly covered with dirt. Frank does not explain his

actions to Cee, but she quickly understands what they are there to do as Frank begins exhuming the bones. Frank uses Cee's first and newly finished quilt to hold the man's bones: "Carefully, carefully, Frank placed the bones on Cee's quilt, doing his best to arrange them the way they once were in life. The quilt became a shroud of lilac, crimson, yellow, and dark navy blue. Together they folded the fabric and knotted its ends. Frank handed Cee the shovel and carried the gentleman in his arms" (143). Although Cee is initially embarrassed that her novice, flawed quilt would be use for anyone, she does not protest. In fact, the use of her quilt, which is crafted during her time spent healing, is entirely appropriate. The quilt she pours her pain into and develops her strength from becomes peace for both her and the bones shrouded by it. The careful re-composition of the man's bones and ritualized carrying of him as a gentleman signifies Frank's successful exhumation of and coming to terms with the past.

In the culmination of Frank's burial ritual, he devises a different type of burial plot that will complete his restoration of this corpse's personhood. Beneath "the sweet bay tree—split down the middle, beheaded, undead—spreading its arms, one to the right, one to the left," Frank digs "a four- or five-foot hole some thirty-six inches wide" (144) to place the body in. He marks the grave with the words "Here stands a man" (145). Rather than horizontally and literally laying the man to rest, Frank digs a hole that will allow the man to rest standing as a man for the rest of eternity. Through this act, Frank both re-establishes the brave father's personhood and claims his own. Frank is no longer the young boy hiding in the grass protecting his fragile sister. He now stands as a man beside his strong sister, confronting and reclaiming his past.

The last chapter of the novel is returned to Frank's first-person account. In his final reflection, Frank reflects on his choice to bury the man at the base of a decapitated tree that is split down the middle. He recuperates his self:

*I stood there a long while, staring at that tree.
It looked so strong
So beautiful.
Hurt right down the middle
But alive and well.
Cee touched my shoulder
Lightly.
Frank?
Yes?
Come on, brother. Let's go home. (147)*

His admiration of the tree represents his self-acceptance. The tree symbolizes Frank's perception of his self. Despite the tattered appearance of the tree, it remains undead. The longer he looks at the tree the more he comes to realize that the tree is not simply surviving, but it is strong, beautiful, and alive and well. He also acknowledges it as "hurt" instead of "split" as the narrator conveys. This distinction suggests that it is a wound that has the ability to heal and recover, rather than a separation that may not be repaired. The harrowing experiences of Frank's life have made him determined to stand as a man and perhaps to watch over the grave of the unknown father to ensure he is also able to stand like a man. Although he orchestrates this entire healing outside of the community, the actions he takes on behalf of his self are also taken on behalf of his community.

Morrison departs from the distinct ancestor figure in *Home* requiring the South to function independently from extended family histories. She suggests, instead, that the exploration of the effects the immediate southern past has on her characters can also allow what is required to reintegrate the self. While Cee's healing follows a traditional community model, Frank is able to create his own healing practice, one that allows him

to recover outside of a community and is not tied to publicly performing a predetermined masculinity. In contrast to Milkman's initiation into the southern community through his participation in a hunting party with other men, Frank keeps his distance from the community of men in Lotus, like his grandfather whose only interest in his granddaughter's recovery is to find out what happened to his car.

The African American return migration novel of the post-Civil Rights era seeks to create a space where characters can realize their individual identities and incorporate them with their community-defined identities. This ultimately must occur in the space of the South because, like the characters, the South is portrayed as being in a state of redefinition. It is dependent, however, on the migrants' ability to recognize the space as fluid, instead of static, in order for them to achieve a whole self. Morrison presents this as a exhuming and burying of the past, in Frank's case, or a claiming of one's own future, as in Cee's case. Naylor, on the other hand, suggests that it is necessary to carry the past into the future to maintain the whole self.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the African American return migration novel of the post-Civil Rights era is about a reconciliation with the southern experience. Re-invoking the South of the Civil Rights Movement allows for the bringing together of the successes of the Movement and the limits met by it. The interrogation of the urban North and the rural South rejects the notion of place as static and allows for the redefinition of the South as both urban and rural. The reassessment of community in relation to the individual and the how it functions in the South creates the space for the individual to acquire what is needed from the community without allowing it to maintain its damaging power. Additionally, the loss of the idealized traditional community in African American culture is responded to in these novels by the characters' ability to accept the limits of community and move forward by reconstructing what they need from it.

As the return migration of African American's to the South continues so does the literary representations of it. The increase in African American's claiming a southern regional identity that captured the attention of James C. Cobb and Thadious Davis continues to inspire black writers' imaginations. Most recently, Natalie Baszile's debut novel *Queen Sugar* (2014) recounts the return migration of mother Charley and her young daughter Micha from Los Angeles to a sugar cane plantation in Louisiana that she inherits from her father, playfully named Ernest. Baszile depicts the encounter with the South as an unknown space and as culturally foreign to their west coast experience. She fits into the new generation of black women writers, alongside Tayari Jones. Much like

Jones's novels, *Queen Sugar* seeks out a modern South; however, instead of situating it within the city as Jones does, Baszile considers what the modern rural South looks like and how it is experienced by newly arrived black southerners.

As analyses of current and future migration numbers continue, it will be important to understand where the migrants are leaving and where they are going in order to continue understanding the role of the South in these population shifts. The more difficult question to answer from statistical data is why they are migrating. Current data documenting a population shift in Washington D.C. that has displaced the black population from its position as the dominant population in the city, raises the question: where has that population gone? In U.S. census data, Washington D.C. occupies the region of the South. So, have these migrants moved within the region, from one southern city to another or to more rural locales?

Studies have begun immersing that consider African American literature in relation to the political climate of "the age of Obama." For example, Robert Stepto's *A Home Elsewhere: Reading African American Classics in the Age of Obama* (2010) and Stephanie Li's *Signifying Without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama* (2011) both question how issues surrounding race are being reconfigured. While Stepto comparatively looks all the way back to Fredrick Douglass to examine black manhood in the age of Obama, Li addresses how contemporary writers from Toni Morrison to Jhumpa Lahiri are developing new ways to treat race in their texts without an open discussion of it. These questions of change should continue to be asked of the South.

Over the past two years, the Stand Your Ground gun law in Florida has drawn considerable national media attention, first with the killing of Trayvon Martin and, then the less highly publicized, killing of Jordan Davis. While Stand Your Ground law exist in dozen of states, including those in the North and the West, the South maintains its position in American popular imagination as the site of racism and unjust laws. The repeated use of Stand Your Ground being used as a legal defense for the killing of young black men by middle-aged white men, reestablishes lynching of a different form in the 21st century. Additionally, the Florida law's failure to protect Marissa Alexander, as a black woman who stood her ground while being attacked at her home, further illuminates the prejudicial upholding of the law in the southern state. Zora Neale Hurston's romanticized southern home state of Florida does not appear as frequently in contemporary African American literature, but these current injustices could spur historical fiction in the vein of Jones's *Leaving Atlanta* to explore African American's relationship to the state, especially since it is a state that is a popular retirement destination for black return migrants.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adelman, Robert M., Chris Morett, and Stewart E Tolnay. "Homeward Bound: The Return Migration of Southern-Born Black Women, 1940 to 1990." *Sociological Spectrum* 20 (2000): 433-463. *Taylor & Francis Online*. Web. 9 Sept. 2012.
- Ahokas, Pirjo. "Hybridized Black Female Identity in Alice Walker's *Meridian*." *America Today* (1999): 481-488. Print.
- America Beyond the Color Line*. Dir. Mary Crisp and Daniel Percival. Nar. Henry Louis Gates Jr. Wall to Wall Television, 2002. Film.
- Anderson, Eric Gary. "Black Atlanta: An Ecosocial Approach to Narratives of the Atlanta Child Murders." *PMLA* 122.1 (2007): 194-209. *Jstor*. Web. 31 March 2013.
- Andrews, Raymond. *Appalachee Red*. 1978. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1987. Print.
- . *Baby Sweet's*. 1983. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988. Print.
- . *Rosiebelle Lee Wildcat Tennessee*. 1980. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988. Print.
- . *The Last Radio Baby: A Memoir*. Atlanta: Peach Tree Publishers LTD., 1990. Print.
- . "The Necessity of Blacks' Writing Fiction About the South" *African American Review* 27.2 (1993): 297-299. *MLA Bibliography*. Web. 15 September 2012.
- Ansa, Tina McElroy. *Baby of the Family*. 1989. San Diego: Hartcourt Brace & Co, 1991. Print.
- . *Taking After Mudear*. St. Simons Islands: Down South Press: 2007. Print.
- . *The Hand I Fan With*. 1996. New York: Anchor Books, 1998. Print.
- . *Ugly Ways*. 1993. San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1995. Print.
- Anzaldua, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987. Print.
- "Atlanta: New Mecca for Young Blacks." *Ebony* 28.11 (September 1973): 62-68. *MasterFILEPremier—Publication*. Web. 12 November 2012.
- Ayres, B. Drummond, Jr. "Blacks Return to South In a Reverse Migration." *New York Times* 18 June 1974: 1+. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009)*. Web. 12 November 2012.

- Baker, Houston. *I Don't Hate the South: Reflections on Faulkner, Family and the South*. New York: Oxford U P, 2007. Print.
- . *Turning South Again: Re-thinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T*. Durham: Duke U P, 2001. Print.
- Baldwin, James. *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. 1953. New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2000.
- . *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985. Print.
- Baszile, Natalie. *Queen Sugar*. New York: Viking, 2014. Print.
- Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann. *Black Women Writers and the African American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999. Print.
- Beavers, Herman. "The Politics of Space: Southernness and Manhood in the Fictions of Toni Morrison." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 31.2 (1998): 61-77. Print.
- Bell, Bernard. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts U P, 1987. Print.
- Bennett, Barbara. "Making Peace with the (M)other." *The World is Our Home: Society and Culture in Contemporary Southern Writing*. Ed. Jeffery J. Folks and Nancy Summers Folks. Lexington: The U P of Kentucky, 2000. Print.
- Berlin, Ira. *Slaves Without Masters*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1974. Print.
- . *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations*. New York: Viking, 2010. Print.
- Berry, Chad. *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2000. Print.
- Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South*. Ed. Alferdteen Harrison. Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 1991. Print.
- Black, Timuel D. Jr. *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration*. Evanston: Northwestern U P, 2003. Print.
- . *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's Second Wave of Black Migration*. Evanston: Northwestern U P, 2007. Print.
- Black Is...Black Ain't*. Dir. Marlon Riggs. California News Reel, 1994. Film.
- Boehm, Lisa Krissoff. *Making a Way out of No Way: African American Women and the Second Great Migration*. Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 2009. Print.

- Bremer, Sidney H. *Urban Intersections: Meetings of Life and Literature in United States Cities*. Urbana: U of Chicago P, 1992. Print.
- Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Maud Martha*. 1953. Chicago: Third World Press, 1992. Print.
- Brown-Hinds. Paulette. "In the Spirit: Dance as Healing Ritual in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Religion & Literature* 27.1 (1995): 107-117. *Jstor*. Web. 19 Feb. 2013.
- Bruce, Dickson D. "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness." *American Literature* 64.2 (1992): 299-309. Print.
- Butler-Evans. Elliot. "History and Geneology in Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*." *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993: 105-125. Print.
- Byerman, Keith. *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005.
- Carby, Hazel. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford U P, 1987. Print.
- Castro-Borrego, Silvia Pilar. "*Praisesong for the Widow* as Narrative Restoration: Reading Black Women's Search for Spiritual Wholeness." *The Search for Wholeness and Diasporic Literacy in Contemporary African American Literature*. Ed. Silvia Pilar Castro-Borrego. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. Print.
- Chesnutt, Charles W. *The Marrow of Tradition*. 1901. Mineola: Dover Publications Inc, 2003. Print.
- Childress, Alice. *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*. 1966. New York: French, 1973. Print.
- Christian, Barbara T. "Being the Subject and Object: Reading African-American Women's Novels." *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000*. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2007: 120-127. Print.
- . "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Callaloo* 18.1 (1983): 74-84. *Jstor*. Web. 1 April 2013.
- . "Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction." *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*. Ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1985: 233-248. Print.
- Cobb, James C. *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*. New York: Oxford U P, 2005. Print.

- Conversations with Gloria Naylor*. Ed. Maxine Lavon Montgomery. Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 2004. Print.
- Conversations with Paule Marshall*. Ed. James C. Hall and Heather Hathaway. Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 2010. Print.
- Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Ed. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie. Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 1994. Print.
- Cook, Michael. "Walker: The Centering Self." *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993: 140-154. Print.
- Cromartie, John B., and Carol B. Stack. "Reinterpretation of Black Return and Nonreturn Migration to the South, 1975-1980." *Geographical Review* 79.3 (1989): 297-310. *Jstor*. Web. 12 Nov. 2012.
- Danielson, Susan. "Alice Walker's *Meridian*, feminism, and the 'Movement'." *Women's Studies* 16 (1989): 317-330. Print.
- Davies, Carole Boyce. "Black Women's Journey into Self: A Womanist Reading of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Matatu* 1.1 (1987): 19-34. Print.
- Davis, Thadious. *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, & Literature*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2011. Print.
- Denard, Carolyn. "Blacks, Modernism, and the American South: An Interview with Toni Morrison." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 31.2 (1998): 1-21. Print.
- Du Bois, WEB. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. Rockville, MD: Arc Manor, 2008. Print.
- Dubey, Madhu. *Black Women Novelist and the Nationalist Aesthetic*. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1994. Print.
- . *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2003. Print.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 1952. New York: Vintage International, 1995. Print.
- Falk, William W, Larry L Hunt, and Matthew O Hunt. "'Call to Home?'" Race, Region, and Migration to the U.S. South, 1970-2000." *Sociological Forum* 27.1 (2012): 117-141. Web. 12 November 2012.
- . "Return Migrations of African-Americans to the South: Reclaiming a Land of Promise, Going Home, or Both?" *Rural Sociology* 69.4 (2004): 490-509. Web. 12 November 2012.

- . "Who is Headed South?: U.S. Migration Trends in Black and White, 1970-2000." *Social Forces* 87.1 (2008): 95-119. Web. 12 November 2012.
- Feimster, Crystal N. *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching*. Harvard University Press, 2011. Print.
- Fligstein, Neil. *Going North: Migration of Blacks and Whites from the South, 1900-1950*. New York: Academic Press, 1981. Print.
- Fowler, Virginia C. *Gloria Naylor: In Search of Sanctuary*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996. Print.
- Gaines, Ernest. *Of Love and Dust*. New York: First Vintage Contemporaries, 1994. Print.
- . *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. 1971. New York: Bantam Books, 1972. Print.
- Gloria Naylor: Strategy and Technique, Magic and Myth*. Ed. Shirley A. Stave. Newark: U of Delaware, 2001. Print.
- Gottlieb, Peter. *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987. Print.
- Grandt, Jürgen. *Shaping Words to Fit the Soul: The Southern Ritual Grounds of Afro-Modernism*. Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2009. Print.
- . "(Un-)Telling Truth: An Interview with Tayari Jones." *The Langston Hughes Review* 19 (Spring 2005): 71-81. *Proquest Direct Complete*. Web. 7 Feb. 2014.
- Grant, Nathan. *Masculinist Impulses: Toomer, Hurston, Black Writing, and Modernity*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2004. Print.
- Grant, Colin. *Negro With A Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey*. New York: Oxford U P, 2008. Print.
- Green, Tara T. "Mother Dear: The Motivations of Tina McElroy Ansa's *Mudear*." *The Griot* 21.1 (2002): 46-52. Print.
- Gregory, James N. *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*. Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 2005. Print.
- Griffin, Farah Jasmine. *"Who Set You Flowin;?": The African-American Migration Narrative*. New York: Oxford U P, 1995. Print.
- Grossman, James R. *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. Print.

- Hakutani and Butler Ed. *The City in African American Literature*. London and Toronto: Associated U P, 1995. Print.
- Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun and The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*. 1959 & 1965. New York: Vintage Books, 1987. Print.
- Harris, Trudier, *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line: African American Writers and the South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U P, 2009. Print.
- . *Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan*. Athens: The U of Georgia P, 1996. Print. Mercer University Lamar Memorial Lectures 39.
- . *South of Tradition: Essays on African American Literature*. Athens: The U of Georgia P, 2002. Print.
- . "This Disease Called Strength: The Masculine Manifestation in Raymond Andrews's *Appalachee Red*." *Contemporary Black Men's Fiction and Drama*. Ed. Keith Clark. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2001.
- Hendrickson, Roberta M. "Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker, *Meridian* and the Civil Rights Movement." *MELUS* 24.3 (1999):111-128. Print.
- Henri, Florette. *Black Migration: Movement North, 1900-1920*. Gardern City: Anchor P/Doubleday, 1975. Print.
- Hoefler, Anthony Dyer. *Apocalypse South: Judgment, Cataclysm, and Resistance in the Regional Imaginary*. Columbus: The Ohio State U P, 2012. Print.
- Holland, Sharon Patricia. *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke U P, 2000. Print.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 1937. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006. Print.
- Johnson, Daniel M., and Rex R. Campbell. *Black Migration in America: A Social Demographic History*. Durham: Duke U P, 1981. Print.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. 1912. Lexington: Filiquarian Publishing LCC, 2007. Print.
- Johnson, Thomas A. "Black Migration to South is Urged: Alabamian Says Plan Would Widen Negro Political Hold." *New York Times* 5 September 1971: 37. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009)*. Web. 12 November 2012.
- Jones, Gayl. *Eva's Man*. 1987. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004. Print.

- Jones, Tayari. *Leaving Atlanta*. New York: Warner Books, 2002. Print.
- . *Silver Sparrow*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2011. Print.
- . *The Untelling*. New York: Warner Books, 2005. Print.
- Keizer, Arlene R. *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery*. Ithaca: Cornell U P, 2004. Print.
- Kenan, Randall. *A Visitation of Spirits*. 1989. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2000. Print.
- . *Let the Dead Bury the Dead*. 1991. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1992. Print.
- King, Martin Luther Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." 1963.
- . "I Have a Dream." 1963.
- King, Wilma. *African American Childhoods: Historical Perspectives from Slavery to Civil Rights*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.
- Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy*. Ed. Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Larsen, Nella. *The Complete Collection of Nella Larsen*. New York: Anchor Books, 1992. Print.
- Lee, Catherine Carr. "The South in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*: Initiation, Healing, and Home." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 31.2 (1998): 109-123.
- Lemann, Nicholas. *The Promised Land: The Great Migration and How It Changed America*. New York: Knopf, 1991. Print.
- Lenke-Santangelo, Gretchen. *Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community*. Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1996. Print.
- Li, Stephanie. *Signifying Without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama*. New Jersey: Rutgers U P, 2011. Print.
- Literature & the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*. Ed. Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts. New Jersey: Rutgers U P, 1981. Print.
- Littler, Lucy R. "The Implications of 'Chosenness': Unsettling the Exodus Narrative as a Model for Black Liberation in Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*." *The Southern Literary Journal* 44.1 (2011): 37-55. Project Muse. Web. 22 Nov. 2013.
- Logan, Mawuena. "Spirit and Body: African Spirituality in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Xavier Review* 27.1 (2007): 11-20. Print.

- Long, Larry H., and Kristen A. Hansen. "Selectivity of Black Return Migration to the South." *Rural Sociology* 42 (1977): 317-31. *Jstor*. Web. 23 Aug. 2012.
- . "Trends in Recent Return Migration to the South." *Demography* 12 (1975): 601-614. *Jstor*. Web. 23 August 2012.
- Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*. Durham: Duke U P, 2004. Print.
- Lubiano, Wahneema. "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing Ourselves and Others." *The House that Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*. Ed. Wahneema Lubiano. New York: Pantheon Books, 1997. Print.
- Marks, Carole. *Farwell—We're Gone and Gone: The Great Black Migration*. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1989. Print.
- Marshall, Paule. *Praisesong for the Widow*. New York: Plume, 1983. Print.
- Martin, Louis. "Claim blacks going back 'Home'." *Chicago Defender* 22 June 1974: 3. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975)*. Web. 12 November 2012.
- Massey, Doreen. *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994. Print.
- McDowell, Deborah E. "The Self in Bloom: Walker's Meridian." *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993: 168-178. Print.
- McGuire, Danielle. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance-- A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York: Knopf, 2010. Print.
- McHugh, Kevin. "Black Migration reversal in the United States." *Geographical Review* 77.2 (1987): 171-182. *Jstor*. Web. 23 Aug 2012.
- McKoy, Shelia Smith. "Rescuing the Black Homosexual Lambs: Randall Kenan and the Reconstruction of Southern Gay Masculinity." *Contemporary Black Men's Fiction and Drama*. Ed. Keith Clark. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2001: 15-36. Print.
- McPherson, Tara. *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*. Durham: Duke U P, 2003. Print.
- McRuer, Robert. *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities*. New York: New York U P, 1997. Print.
- Michael, Magali Cornier. *New Visions of Community in Contemporary American Fiction*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2006. Print.

- Minchin, Timothy J. and John A. Salmond. *After the Dream: Black and White Southerners Since 1965*. Lexington: The U P of Kentucky, 2011. Print.
- Montgomery, Maxine Lavon. "A Pilgrimage to the Origins: The Apocalypse as Structure and Theme in Toni Morrison's *Sula*." *Black American Literature Forum* 23.1 (1989): 127-137. *Jstor*. Web. 15 March 2014.
- . *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor: Houses and Spaces of Resistance*. Knoxville: The U of Tennessee P, 2010. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987. New York: Random House Vintage International, 2004. Print.
- . *Home*. London: Vintage, 2012. Print.
- . *Jazz*. 1991. New York: Random House Vintage International, 2004. Print.
- . *Song of Solomon*. New York: Plume, 1977. Print.
- . *What Moves at the Margins*. Jackson: The U P of Mississippi, 2008. Print.
- Nadel, Alan. "Reading the Body: Alice Walker's *Meridian* and the Archeology of Self." *Modern Fiction Studies* 34.1 (1988): 55-68. *Project Muse*. Web. 1 Sept. 2013.
- Naylor, Gloria. *Bailey's Café*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992. Print
- . *Linden Hills*. 1985. New York: Penguin Books, 1986. Print.
- . *Mama Day*. 1988. New York: Random House Vintage Contemporaries, 1993. Print.
- Nero, Charles. "Towards a Black Gay Aesthetic." *Call & Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*. Ed. Patricia Liggins Hill. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. Print.
- Norman, Brian. *Dead Women Talking: Figures of Injustice in American Literature*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins U P, 2013.
- . *Neo-Segregation Narratives: Jim Crow in Post-Civil Rights American Literature*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2010. Print.
- Page, Philip. *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*. Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 1995. Print.
- . *Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction*. Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 1999. Print.
- Painter, Nell Irvin. *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1976. Print.

- Paterson, Kathryn M. "Gloria Naylor's North/South Dichotomy and the Reversal of the Middle Passage: Juxtaposed Migrations within *Mama Day*." *Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History*. Ed. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory. Columbus: Ohio State U P, 2006: 76-95.
- Philip, M. NourbeSe. *Zong!* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan U P, 2008. Print.
- Prince, Valerie Sweeney. *Burnin' Down the House: Home in African American Literature*. New York: Columbia U P, 2005. Print.
- Quinn, John. "A Conversation with Tayari Jones." *Voices: A Literary Review* 12.2 (2012): 161-164. Print.
- Redkey, Edwin S. *Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890-1910*. New Haven: Yale U P, 1969. Print.
- Reinholt, Robert. "85% of Rise in Population Found in South and West." *New York Times* 12 December 1975: 85+. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009)*. Web. 12 November 2012.
- Rodgers, Lawrence R. *Canaan Bound: the African-American Great Migration Novel*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1997. Print.
- Rosenthal, Jack. "South Made Greatest Gains in Census." *New York Times* 19 October 1970: 1+. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009)*. Web. 12 November 2012.
- Rowell, Charles. "An Interview With Henry Louis Gates Jr." *Callaloo* 14.2 (1991): 444-463. *Jstor*. Web. 2 March 2014.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford U P, 1999. Print.
- Rutkoff, Peter M. and William B. Scott. *Fly Away: The Great African American Cultural Migrations*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins U P, 2010. Print.
- Ryan, Tim A. *Calls and Responses: The American Novel of Slavery since Gone With the Wind*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U P, 2008. Print.
- Saar, Doreen Alvarez. "'Any city is the people, ain't it?' New York and Willow Springs in Naylor's *Mama Day*." *BMA: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review* 4.2 (Spring 1999): 66-80. Print.
- Schwalm, Leslie A. *Emancipation Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2009. Print.
- Scruggs, Charles. *Sweet Home: Invisible Cities in the Afro-American Novel*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins U P, 1993. Print.

- Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*. Ed. Bettie Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin. New York: New York U P, 2001. Print.
- Southern Writers at Century's End*. Ed. Jeffery J. Folks and James A. Perkins. Lexington: the U P of Kentucky, 1997. Print.
- Spillers, Hortense J. "'All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife was Your Mother': Psychoanalysis and Race." 1997. *Black, White, and in Color*. 2003. Print.
- Stack, Carol. "Black Migration: An Expected Journey." *Social Science* 72 (1987): 198-201. Print.
- . *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South*. New York: BasicBooks, 1996. Print.
- Stein, Karen F. "Meridian: Alice Walker's Critique of Revolution." *Black American Literature Forum* 20.1/2 (1986): 129-141. *Jstor*. Web. 1 Sept. 2013.
- Stepto, Robert. *A Home Elsewhere: Reading African American Classics in the Age of Obama*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 2010. Print. The W.E.B. Dubois Lectures.
- Tewkesbury, Paul. "Keeping the Dream Alive: *Meridian* as Alice Walker's Homage to Martin Luther King and the Beloved Community." *Religion and the Arts* 15.5 (2011): 603-627. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 23 Aug. 2013.
- Tharp, Julie. "The Maternal Aesthetic of *Mama Day*." *Gloria Naylor: Strategy and Technique, Magic and Myth*. Ed. Shirley A Stave. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2001: 118-131.
- The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*. Ed. Peniel E. Joseph. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Thorsson, Courtney. *Women's Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Novels*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2013. Print.
- Tolnay, Stewart E. and E.M. Beck. *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1995. Print.
- . "Educational Selection in the Migration of Southern Blacks, 1880-1990." *Social Forces* 77.2 (1998): 487-514. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 13 November 2012.
- . "The African American 'Great Migration' and Beyond." *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003): 209-232. *Jstor*. Web. 23 August 2012.

Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. 1923. Ed. Rudolph P Byrd and Henry Louis Gates Jr. New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 2011. Print.

United States. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration. United States. Census Bureau Geography Division. "Census Regions and Divisions of the United States." *U.S. Census Bureau Geography*. www.census.gov. 26 April 2013. Web. 28 April 2013.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1983. Print.

---. *Meridian*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976. Print.

---. *The Color Purple*. 1982. New York: Harvest Book, 2003. Print.

---. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. 1970. New York: Harvest Book, 2003. Print.

Warren, Nagueyalti. "Resistant Mother's in Alice Walker's *Meridian* and Tina McElroy Ansa's *Ugly Ways*." *Southern Mothers: Facts and Fictions*. Ed. Nagueyalti Warren and Sally Wolff. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U P, 1999. Print.

Waxman, Barbara Frey. "Dancing Out of Form, Dancing into Self: Genre and Metaphor in Marshall, Shange, and Walker." *Melus* 19.3 (1994): 91-106. Print.

Wester, Maisha. "Haunting and Haunted Queerness: Randall Kenan's Re-inscription of Difference in *A Visitation of Spirits*." *Callaloo* 30.4 (2007): 1035-1053. *Project Muse*. Web. 22 November 2013.

Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity. Ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage. Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 2000. Print.

White, Deborah Gray. *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. 1985. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999. Print.

Whores and Other Feminists. Ed. Jill Nagle. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Wilentz, Guy. "Towards a Spiritual Middle Passage Back: Paule Marshall's Diasporic Vision in Praisesong for the Widow." *Obsidian II* 5.3 (1990): 1-21. Print.

Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House, 2010. Print.

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. 1940. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005. Print.

---. *Uncle Tom's Children*. 1940. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008. Print.

Yoon, Seongho. "Gendering the Movement: Black Womanhood, SNCC, and Post-Civil Rights Anxieties in Alice Walker's *Meridian*." *Feminist Studies in English Literature* 14.2 (2006): 179-207. Print.

VITA

Shelli Homer was born in 1985 and raised with her older brother in the small, southern San Diego beach town of Imperial Beach, California. She excelled in mathematics during high school and entered Chico State with the intent of declaring math as her major. However, she quickly became intrigued with the non-linear and interpretive challenge of the humanities. While in undergrad, she put her Italian minor to work when she spent the summer of 2006 as an American nanny for an Italian family in Forte di Marmi, Tuscany. She graduated from Chico State in 2007 with a bachelor's degree in English and American Studies and in 2009 with a master's degree in English. She entered the University of Missouri in the fall of 2009 with an amazing cohort that saw one another through another phase of academia.