

THE CAUL THEME IN  
TINA McELROY ANSA's NOVELS

---

A Thesis presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
University of Missouri

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degrees  
Master of Arts

---

By  
ANJA GISELA M. BOETTCHER, M.A.

Dr. Christopher N. Okonkwo, Thesis Supervisor

DECEMBER 2011

© Copyright by Anja G.M. Boettcher, 2011

All Rights Reserved

The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

THE CAUL THEME IN TINA McELROY ANSA'S NOVELS

Presented by Anja G. M. Boettcher, M.A.

A candidate for the degree of Master of Arts  
And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

---

Professor Christopher N. Okonkwo

---

Professor Elaine Lawless

---

Professor Robert Baum

## DEDICATIONS

A great THANK YOU NOTE to my “OKI family” and friends

on this side of the Atlantic Ocean:

You have carried me through until the very end. You helped make something possible that seemed too far to reach at times. You supported me in every way, I could have imagined. THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

Ein GROßES DANKESCHÖN an meine Familie und meine Freunde

in Europa.

Ich weiß, dass es nicht immer einfach war mit mir in diesen Zeiten. Um so mehr gebührt Euch mein Dank für Euer Vertrauen, Euren Zuspruch und Unterstützung. Ihr habt mir geholfen, zwei Welten zusammen zu führen.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I greatly thank my thesis advisor, Professor Okonkwo, for his diligence and strong support in my process of composing, rethinking and eventually finalizing this thesis project. His questions, pointers and his motivation have tremendously nurtured the growth and progress of my thought and writing process over this long period of time.

I also thank the other members of my committee, Professor Lawless and Professor Baum, for their input, questions, and directions which this project needed. Furthermore, I thank Professor Prahlad for his input on the subject matter.

Finally, I thank Professor Ireton and Professor Williams for their initial support on this journey to this project.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
INTRODUCTION.....	1 - 10
CHAPTER 1 “Claiming the birthright’s ca(u)ll and response: <i>Baby of the Family</i> ”.....	11 - 27
CHAPTER 2 “Reca(u)lling the self: <i>The Hand I Fan With</i> ”.....	28 - 37
CHAPTER 3 ‘It takes a community to raise a child’: <i>You Know Better</i> ’.....	38 - 51
CHAPTER 4 Conclusion: “ <i>Ugly Ways</i> ”.....	52 - 65
Bibliography .....	66 - 72

## INTRODUCTION

African American women novelists have found in their culture's folklore a rich source of fictional material<sup>1</sup>. In their novels, the women authors explore different facets of their culture such as conjuring (Thomas 40), ghost beliefs, guidance and spiritual healing practices and other African American folk traditions in connection with the experience of women in society. In the late eighties, Georgia native Tina McElroy Ansa began her fictional explorations of similar aspects of African American culture. With *Baby of the Family* (1989), its sequel *The Hand I Fan With* (1996), and *You Know Better* (2002), she literally treats the folklore theme of the caul<sup>2</sup> and its impact on the characters' lives. Ansa plays out the special features of the caul<sup>3</sup> and its particular role in African American belief system. She creates a world in and around the fictional town of Mulberry, Georgia, for the caulbearers<sup>4</sup> Lena McPherson and LaShawndra Pines. Not only does Ansa integrate explanations and cultural rootedness of the caul belief in her works, she also uses it as literary device. Its stylistic purpose is to show how difficult changes in life can be and how faith in folkloristic traditions can direct characters in

---

<sup>1</sup> This reaches back to the beginning of the twentieth century, when Zora Neale Hurston had already reached into the culture's folklore as source for her literary material.

<sup>2</sup> The caul is an amniotic membrane covering the newborn's face or torso when being born. It appears then as if the child is being born with a helmet.

<sup>3</sup> *Song of Solomon*, a novel by Toni Morrison, also contains a protagonist (Macon "Milkman" Dead III) who was born with a caul.

<sup>4</sup> Caulbearers is the plural of caulbearer. It is my terminology for the novels' protagonists who are marked by the caul, and thus, have to bear the consequences/abilities the caul attributes to them.

claiming their birthrights and managing the challenges of everyday life. Ansa has personal experience in such matters.

Tina McElroy Ansa herself was born with the caul. She considers the belief in the caul and its powers credible. In her own life, as she told Shirley M. Jordan in an interview (Ansa in Jordan 4), she encounters ramifications of this birth phenomenon (Ansa in Jordan 3). Her childhood memories have taught her that the natural and the supernatural realm<sup>5</sup> form one interconnected entity. In an interview with Rebecca Carroll, Ansa stated that especially older African Americans attach “special gifts” (Ansa in Carroll 20) to the birth phenomenon of the caul. In cultures, such as the Welsh, Native American, African American, and Caribbean (Ansa in Carroll 20), the belief in the caul and the attribution of certain skills to it are still relevant<sup>6</sup>. Ansa states that “in the black community, the caul marks you as a special child” (Ansa in Carroll 20). A witness to this kind of occurrence is Mrs. Gibson who shared with Ansa that her daughter was born with a caul. In order to weaken the nightmares of “seeing all kinds of things” (Carroll 23), to which the caul enabled the child, the mother consulted a midwife who “did something for [the daughter].”<sup>7</sup> In three of her four novels discussed in this thesis project, Ansa explores the

---

<sup>5</sup> Some say that there is no differentiation between these two realms. Nevertheless, Ansa uses these words in her interviews and novels to mark the realms (see Ansa in Carroll 20; Ansa in Jordan 4).

<sup>6</sup> In European cultures, too, the caul is believed to enable its bearer to be fortunate, rescues him/her from drowning, equips the person with extraordinary wisdom, and contributes great honor to the person. Especially in *Folktales of Herefordshire* and Irish tales, we find accounts of these features. African Americans testify that caulbearers are capable of seeing ghosts and spirits, and in rare cases can communicate with them. These privileged individuals also have the ability to distinguish between witches and good spirits.

<sup>7</sup> In interviews, witnesses have given this kind of account throughout the twentieth century. Rosa Sallins, whose account is recorded in *Drums and Shadows*, worked as a midwife. She states that the power of the caul needs to be controlled or weakened; otherwise the “owner” would be haunted for the rest of the life (*Drums and Shadows* 128). She suggests a caul tea as reliable antidote. Some other testimonies even mention the possibility of a baby being born with a double caul. James Washington was born with a double caul (*Drums and Shadows* 39). He claims that this was a divine gift and enables him to “hab a deep



caul and its special role in African American belief system. In the same interview with Jordan, she asserts that living on one of the Georgia Sea Islands nurtured her interest and at the same time grounded her understanding of spiritual aspects of daily life – a topic that contemporary black women novelists pride and prove in their works.

Much has been written on contemporary black women novelists who explore elements of African American culture<sup>8</sup>. Yet to date, little work has been done on the overarching aesthetic value of Ansa's literary treatment of the caul theme in her novels. Ansa's critics have preferably discussed aspects of individual novels such as *Ugly Ways* (1993) or *Baby of the Family*. Tara T. Green, Nagueyalti Warren and Velma M. Guillory-Taylor, for instance, discuss the raptures of contemporary motherhood as it is displayed in Ansa's novel *Ugly Ways*. In his article, published in the *CLA Journal* on *Baby of the Family*<sup>9</sup>, Christopher Okonkwo<sup>10</sup> discusses Ansa's novel in regards to its

---

knowledge uh magic.” The magic he refers to can be either life-affirming or life-threatening. Another Sea Island inhabitant was Liza Basden, who was born with a caul, as well. Her account slightly differs from the others in terms of the effectiveness of her caul. She testifies that her ability to see spirits stopped after her children were born (*Drums and Shadows* 127).

<sup>8</sup> Critics who have worked on African and African American folklore in literature heavily rely on the following sources: Brogan, Kathleen. *Cultural Haunting* and *Moorings and Metaphors*. ,Levin, Amy K. *Africanism and Authenticity in African-American Women's Novel*, Awkward, Michael *Inspiring Influences*.

<sup>9</sup> There are several dissertations that discuss cultural and literary aspects of Ansa's novel *Baby*, for instance Okonkwo (2001), Hartsfield (1997), and Leedham (1995). On *Ugly Ways*, dissertations either discuss Mudear's shifting roles throughout her life, and praise the presentation of the mother wit in African American families, see, for instance, Brooks (2008), Powell (2002), and Thompson (1998)), or analyze the effects of the mother-daughter-relationship, see, for example, Whitney (2009), or Brooks (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Christopher N. Okonkwo deals with Ansa's *Baby* in parts in his dissertation (2001) and in his article “Of Caul and Response: *Baby of the Family*, Ansa's neglected Metafiction of the veil of Blackness” (2005). In the dissertation chapter, he asserts Ansa's motivation to create harmony between the natural and the supernatural world (62:2001). He further aims to show the importance of folk culture, using the caul in *Baby* as example. He stresses the role of faith in order to realize the caul powers. In his article “Of Caul and Response”, Okonkwo suggests a more political reading of *Baby* being in line with its precursors of Du Bois *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) and Arna Bontemps's *God Sends Sundays* (1931) considering a racial double-sightedness, which stirs imbalances and crises. As much as this thought could be traced through Ansa's novels, a proper discussion of this theme exceeds the capacities of this project. This thesis project spins off of parts of Okonkwo's argument in his article, yet it extends it by a close analysis of the caul

call-and-response-mode with Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folks* (1903) and Arna Bontemps's *God sends Sundays* (1931). He focuses on Ansa's treatment of the caul theme in light of a wider scope of socio-politically connoted power positioning of the African-American child in America. In this regard and extending other critics' works, Okonkwo's argument also addresses the veiling on a folkloristic level. Okonkwo approaches Ansa's novel from a broader angle than his peers. Caren J. Town examines *Baby* from a different angle. She draws out the protagonist Lena McPherson's progressing maturation into adolescence yet neglects to open the discussion of its folkloristic dimension and relevance. Nagueyalti Warren comparatively reads Ansa's *The Hand I Fan With* as an extension of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She depicts the strength and risks of an African American woman within a community setting in these two novels<sup>11</sup>.

In this thesis, I examine Ansa's cultural validation of the caul and its aesthetic application as literary device in her novels. I will discuss the caul theme as Ansa's tool to "snatch back" (Ansa in Carroll 22) African American folklore and shape her novels. In addition, although it does not treat the caul themes, I will explore how *Ugly Ways* (1993) is concerned with topics Ansa explores through the caul idea in the other three novels. I will contend Ansa's ability to create a reality consisting of the natural and the supernatural. In this sense, my discussion will emphasize the novels' themes over their dates of publication. My aim ultimately is a cohesive and close critique of Ansa's four novels.

---

theme in all of Ansa's novels and also approaches the role of the caulbearer and caulbearer-by-proxy from a more folkloric angle.

<sup>11</sup> The articles of the following authors mention Ansa's works, yet do not offer a discussion: Trudier Harris (1995), Neal A. Lester (2000), Patricia Yaeger (2005), Joyce Ann Joyce (2008).

As hinted earlier, African American folk beliefs shape the cosmological framework of Ansa's novels. African-American folk beliefs, for instance the comprehension of time (a notion important to the caul idea), have been molded by a confluence of African, European and Native-American cultures in the New World (Raboteau 4; Barthold 14). African folk beliefs were transplanted by enslaved Africans to the New World. For the slaves, folk beliefs "were a central and necessary part of existence" (Levine 63; Holloway xiv; Raboteau 4; Thomas 17-20). The slaves were familiar with the presence of ghosts (Levine 78) as "supernatural support" (Mulira in Holloway 37) given that their well-being "depended upon being able to [...] understand the visions that recurrently visited one, to commune with the spirits that filled the world; [...] the spirit ancestors who linked the living with the unseen world" (Levine 58). Thus, ancestral spirits, either evil or benign (Levine 79), function as mediators between the world of the living and the world of the dead (Barthold 10). They guide, protect, and commune with the living (Levine 79; Raboteau 12).

Accepting the co-existence of the natural and the supernatural world also defines the African traditional understanding of time as cyclic<sup>12</sup> (Barthold14), based sometimes on recurring events for the community. In comparison, the Western modern linear time drives on progress and change (Barthold 14). A modern black writer with interest in tradition, Ansa uses both approaches in plotting time in her novels.

This existence of dual temporal spheres also plays into the framework which the natural and the supernatural world build around the caulbearer and other characters in Ansa's works. Ansa transforms the caulbearer and the novel into a space in which the

---

<sup>12</sup> According to Barthold, the cyclic time consists of the material and the natural world which are connected in the human birth and human death (11). This cohesiveness ensures the cyclic continuity between the two worlds (11).

past, the present, and the future intermingle. Not only does the cauled individual bear the involuntary burden of an obligation from both spheres, but also his or her everyday life becomes more complicated as a result of the caul. In this light, I will argue that the interactions of the supernatural world with the caulbearer in the natural world will complicate the caulbearer's understanding of self, reality, and identity. Ansa uses the caul theme stylistically to create a space where African American folklore regains relevance and increasingly is able to influence and shape contemporary life.

The thesis has four chapters. In chapter one "Claiming the Birthright's Ca(u)ll and Response in *Baby of the Family*", I examine the bildungsroman<sup>13</sup> *Baby of the Family*.<sup>14</sup> In this novel, Lena's coming-of-age is complicated by the caul. Her clairvoyance separates her from her peers and family, and forces her to deal with her limitations, her fears, and the potential that lies within her. Ansa is able to recreate a communal experience, one that is culturally specific to Southern blacks by adding a folkloristic spin to this overall challenging maturation process. She uses the caul theme to represent rich southern African American culture. By connecting the caul's ethnically specific feature to the universal experience of coming-of-age, Ansa complicates Lena's maturation journey

---

<sup>13</sup> Geta LeSeur offers a definition of this term in the introduction to her publication *Ten Is The Age Of Darkness*.

<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, the *Baby's* critical voices of Thulani Davis ("Don't worry") and Caren J. Town (*The New Southern Girl*), discuss Lena's struggles with her coming of age without indicating the changes that occur to and around her in the presence of the caul. Both critics also do not reflect upon the African American epistemology of the novel. On the other hand, critics such as Lisa Abney, Alan Dundes and Valerie Lee address the folkloristic aspects of Ansa's novel but do not discuss the literary value of the caul theme. The dissertation projects of G.B. Montgomery, Haynes, and Okonkwo offer seminal interpretations of *Baby* by merging cultural and theoretical perspectives.

and at the same time makes her novel accessible to a more diverse audience. As a caulbearer, Lena calls/cauls<sup>15</sup> for help in dealing with her special birthright.

Furthermore, I read Lena as an allegory for African American folklore, which undergoes complication and transformation in modern day America. In making Lena the baby of the family, Ansa “centers” Lena and by extension the caul theme within the novel. In that way, Ansa offers up a consistent discussion of this topic between the traditional, folkloristic and the modern, scientific world view, which the grandmother and the mother represent (Okonkwo “Of Caul and Response” 154,155). The folk beliefs undergo several tests of credibility and effectiveness as the novel progresses. Buttressing the points above, I draw upon Lena’s experiences in the introductory scene of her birth, and upon her encounter with her baby ancestor, her friendship with Sarah and her friendship with the beautician Mamie. I also look at Lena’s encounter with the ghost of the former slave Rachel, and also her last conversation with her grandmother.

In chapter two “Reca[u]lling the Self in *The Hand I Fan With*”<sup>16</sup>, I discuss Lena’s life as a grown woman. The fictional African American community of Mulberry refers to the adult Lena McPherson as the hand everybody fans with.<sup>17</sup> Once more, Ansa presents a woman-focused novel that follows Lena’s spiritual and emotional life and also her continuing battle for a stable and mature identity.

---

<sup>15</sup> Okonkwo suggests this connection of caul/call in his article “Of Caul and Response: *Baby of the Family*, Ansa’s Neglected Metafiction of the Veil of Blackness”.

<sup>16</sup> The reviewers of *The Hand* Paula L. Woods and Elsie B. Washington mainly address the relationship between Herman and Lena, without offering an in-depth-discussion of the novel. Tarpley, as well as the reviewers aforementioned, points to the amalgamation of folklore and the relationship between Lena and Herman. N. Warren reads *The Hand* as successor to Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She examines Lena’s unfulfilled life despite the freedom and independence. To Warren, the caul is a “potent indication of liberation” (Warren “Echoing Zora” 364).

<sup>17</sup> This title refers to a black folk song. It means that the person or thing (the hand) is essential to the speaker’s life. The referee depends very much on the presence of that “hand”. According to Nagueyalti Warren, the hand signifies on the black woman’s role as object. She is useful and to be used (Warren 362).

Lena's continuing maturation reflects the interplay between the natural and the supernatural worlds. Lena's childhood experiences, as portrayed in *Baby*, still echo in her life three decades later, as *The Hand* reveals. In order to eventually reconcile with her spiritual gifts, Lena needs the influence of the supernatural in the form of a conjured man that also doubles as her lover, Herman<sup>18</sup>. In this chapter, I argue that only a representative from the supernatural world can assist Lena in finding a comforting balance in her private, public and emotional spheres of existence. Ansa links Lena's emotional health directly to her attitude to the spiritual world. Ansa also offers the detailed descriptions of Lena's material possessions to emphasize the limitation of the natural world. Ansa seems to suggest that it may be more beneficial to focus on spiritual peace and fulfillment than on material wealth. The caul functions as a door for Lena and the reader to slip in and out of the respective realms to participate in the other. It also becomes Ansa's clever way of weaving spiritual beliefs back into modern society.

Through the caul idea, Ansa also realizes new ways of weaving African American slavery experience within the framework of her novel. Through the Herman story, she allows insight into untold African American history of the nineteenth century. Ansa's novel, therefore, counts as an example of such fiction about which Rody comments: "black writers [...] find themselves bound to address one subject above all: slavery's lingering mark on the heart" (23-24). With his love and his time connection to the nineteenth century, Herman most certainly lingers on Lena's heart.

---

<sup>18</sup> Herman can also be read as a spirit-spouse. Its discussion exceeds the frame of this project and would need its own discussion. See O'Brien, Kathleen in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings, and Expressions*. "Mami Water in African Religion and Spirituality" (p198-222); Nwapa, Flora *Efuru* (1966); Okonkwo, Christopher N. *A Spirit of Dialogue: Incarnations of Ogbañje, the Born-to-Die, in African American Literature*; Jell-Bahlsen, Sabine *The Water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology*; Cole, Herbert M. *Mbari: Art and Life among the Owerri Igbo*; pp. 64-65.

Chapter three “Communal Support in Child Raising in *You Know Better*” explores Ansa’s fourth novel *You Know Better*<sup>19</sup>. Here again, Ansa explores the caul theme. She focuses on the development and influential forces in the life of nineteen-year-old LaShawndra Pines. I discuss the influence of the caul on LaShawndra’s coming-of-age. In *Baby* and *The Hand*, Ansa mainly focuses on Lena’s perspective and her experiences as a caulbearer in Mulberry, Georgia. In *You Know Better*, she emphasizes the circumstances and people that shape young LaShawndra’s life in the 1990s. In *You Know Better* as in *Baby* and *The Hand*, the caul enables the merging of the natural and the spiritual worlds. The axiom that ‘It takes a community to raise a child’ applies to LaShawndra’s life, as well. In her case, however, her mother Sandra does not take care of her parenting responsibilities to her daughter. Because LaShawndra’s mother fails to offer her loving guidance, the deceased Mulberry community elder and now ancestor Miss Eliza Jane takes on this role. The ancestral presence in the form of Miss Eliza Jane further indicates the connectedness between folklore and fiction and between the natural and the supernatural world in LaShawndra’s life. As Morrison asserts, “ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (343). While the caul theme enables Ansa to destabilize the plot and the secure surrounding for Lena in *Baby*, it creates a benevolent environment for LaShawndra to reconsider her life and ambitions.

---

<sup>19</sup> At the time of research for this project, no criticism to this novel was found.

In chapter four “Conclusion: *Ugly Ways*”, I offer a conclusive discussion of the caul theme in Ansa’s second novel *Ugly Ways*<sup>20</sup>. With the help of the ancestral figure’s active mothering and nurturing, LaShawndra reconsiders her life choices and morals. For her, there is hope to change the course of her life because of her crucial experiences and the concluding involvement of the maternal Pines figures. The three Lovejoy sisters, whom we meet in Ansa’s *Ugly Ways*, have lived much of their lives without the nurturing and mothering care of their mother Mudear (Esther) Lovejoy. This novel lacks a caulbearer, yet its concerns and plot implicitly indicate the presence of the caul theme. Perhaps most important, however, is that in *Ugly Ways* Ansa initiates her engagement with the cosmological coexistence and interdependence of the natural and the supernatural worlds.

Mudear Lovejoy ‘snatches back’ her influence on her daughters’ lives postmortem by interrupting the natural world through her input originating in the supernatural world. In a similar way, Ansa chooses to restore African American folk beliefs by visualizing and realizing the omnipresence of the supernatural. The multi-dimensional conversation, which takes place in *Ugly Ways*, depends on the reader’s engagement with the material. In this way, the reader technically becomes, what I call, caulbearer-by-proxy. In this way, Ansa’s employment of the caul theme comes full circle.

---

<sup>20</sup> Supporting voices of the proactive mother figure in *Ugly Ways* are numerous. The criticism on *Ugly Ways* has not yet enlightened about the novel’s cosmological concept. For instance, E. Shelley Reid offers a discussion of strong Black female characters in contemporary African American novels but fails to include Mudear Lovejoy. Tara Green argues that Mudear’s voice in *UW* becomes a powerful tool in the process of identifying the self and its growth as well as the expansion of Mudear’s journey toward freedom and self-definition. Barbara Bennett (Comic Visions, Female Voices) solely focuses on Mudear’s sarcastic tone as tool for her liberation. Further, she discusses Mudear’s maneuvers in order to prove that she develops from a stereotypical mother into a real woman who can be read as an example for contemporary life motherhood. V. Guillory-Taylor establishes the point that Mudear retreats to collect strength for her revolt against her husband. N. Warren draws upon Mudear’s resistance and rejection in order to enjoy freedom and economic liberation after the change.



## CHAPTER ONE

### CLAIMING THE BIRTHRIGHT'S CA(U)LL AND RESPONSE:<sup>21</sup>

#### *BABY OF THE FAMILY*

In this chapter, I analyze Lena's life as a caulbearer. I also suggest that Ansa uses events surrounding her life as moments to reclaim and affirm African American folk beliefs in today's society. *Baby of the Family* (1989) takes the reader episodically through Lena McPherson's maturation as a "mighty special child" (*Baby 1*) from her birth to age sixteen. In Lena's case, the struggles with growing-up are much more complicated because of her visionary powers. I will first take a close look at the scene that sets Lena's troubles in motion. Here, Nellie neglects to feed her the caul tea which Nurse Bloom prepares from Lena's birth caul. I next consider Lena's encounter with her dead baby aunt to suggest the rupture of Lena's comprehension of reality that surrounds her. I also consider Lena's friendship with Sarah for evidence of Lena's heightening ability to distinguish between ghosts and humans. Sarah becomes her first friend outside of her family. I contemplate Lena's conversation with the ghost Rachel on the Georgia beach. Through this meeting, Ansa links African American past, present and future. Then, at the beauty parlor, Mamie helps Lena uncover truth by searching for answers to her questions. The ultimate test of Lena's maturation is, however, the visit of her grandmother's ghost

---

<sup>21</sup> This chapter's title leans on the title of an article by Christopher Okonkwo "Of Caul and Response: *Baby Of The Family*, Ansa's Neglected Metafiction of the Veil of Blackness".

in the last chapter. In all these episodes, the caul implicitly sets the cultural framework of the novel.

Ansa introduces Lena as the newest member of the fictional African American community of Mulberry, Georgia (*Baby* 1-34). The changing weather on Lena's birth day indicates that she will not be an average child. The beginning chapters inform the reader right away about the caul and its meaning, which Nurse Bloom helps explain. In the hospital settings, we witness the collision of two perspectives on the caul power – the traditional and the modern perspective –which later complicates Lena's life (Okonkwo 156-158).

The medical staff ascribes supernatural power to Lena's birth caul. Nurse Bloom and Dr. Williams have the scientific knowledge and training in "midwifery"<sup>22</sup> and medical treatment. In addition, the former country Nurse Bloom has experience and knowledge in the traditional methods of midwifery and has "conducted this same ritual [caul ritual] time and time again" (*Baby* 19). These methods contain the proper handling of and respect for the baby's caul as well as knowledge of remedies and antidotes to limit its powers. Dr. Williams is a black medical doctor who has undergone institutional training and teaching at a medical school and represents the strictly scientific approach to midwifery. Despite that, he and Nurse Bloom recognize the extraordinary circumstances of Lena's caul because of their background and knowledge. In *Childbirth in the Ghetto: Folk Beliefs of Negro Women in a North Philadelphia hospital ward*, one of the informants discusses the caul as cause for seeing things (42; see also Herskovits 189). The scientific staff understands the limitations of science relative to birth phenomena such as the caul. As the narrator states, "[a]rriving with a veil over her face, the child

---

<sup>22</sup> Here, the medical doctor enables Lena to enter the natural world by leaving the spirit world.

brought with her a touch of a supernatural into a place that owed so much to the scientific. The doctor was reluctant to break the spell that had settled on them all there in the hot, antiseptic little room” (*Baby* 3).

The other view on the caul comes from Lena’s mother. A modern mother, Nellie discredits the caul’s spiritual and cultural implications. When Nellie sees her daughter’s caul, she makes a “gasp sound like one of fear” when “it was really an expression of wonder” (*Baby* 3). All of her experiences with childbirth exclusively stem from the births of her two older sons Raymond and Edward. Neither one was born with any anomaly. So, seeing her “precious, precious” (*Baby* 3) with the caul is incomprehensible to Nellie, a woman with modern and enlightened sensibilities (Okonkwo 147). Unable to appreciate her daughter’s fortune of being touched by God in her [...] womb (*Baby* 17), Nellie disapproves of Nurse Bloom’s attempt to enlighten her about the luck and visionary powers ascribed to her daughter’s birth gift. She discards the offered antidote, caul tea, as “old-fashioned potion shit” (*Baby* 33). Properly boiling the caul in water produces the caul tea which is supposed to protect the girl from uncontrolled visions. As Okonkwo posits, “Nellie cannot see that the caul tea is the needed response [to Lena’s clairvoyance] because it is ritualized, patient-, time-, and culturally specific” (160). Nellie’s action interrupts the caul tea ritual, thereby setting in motion difficult emotional, physical and spiritual complications later in Lena’s life. She leaves Lena with no natural protection from the supernatural world (Okonkwo 160). Nellie lets her rational, modern intellect reign and disrupts the cyclical nature and communication between the spiritual and material worlds embodied in her growing daughter Lena.

In the novel's episode "Picture" (*Baby* 35-41), we see another evidence of Ansa's cultural play on the caul. Lena's curiosity causes her contact with her dead baby aunt's spirit. Lena believes her grandmother Miss Lizzie's promise that "nothing will touch grandma's little puppy in this bed" (*Baby* 37). There, Lena is tempted to touch her dead baby aunt's picture hanging on the wall. Toddlers explore their surroundings by feeling and touching. In reaching out, Lena satisfies her curiosity. She cannot make out the origin of the voice that instructs her to successfully touch the picture. Ansa's choice of language leaves the reader unsure of the voice's origin. The spirit of the dead baby aunt physically connects with Lena by pulling her into the photograph. That way, the spirit world proves itself to be physically real (*Baby* 39). Although Lena almost falls from the headboard, she is still determined to reach for the picture and 'feel' it. The voice and the partly mutual wish to play together appear natural to Lena. She follows her instincts even when the baby's spirit tries to fully pull her into the photograph (*Baby* 37), causing Lena to almost suffocate (*Baby* 40).

The security that the family and especially the grandmother intend to provide for Lena is set off in the face of the supernatural. Miss Lizzie's promise fails Lena because, unlike Lena, the family does not have access to the supernatural. The physical pain Lena experiences (*Baby* 41) while desiring to talk about the baby spirit's action traumatizes her. Later she sees ghosts in the mirror and around the house, yet the painful memory of the convulsion after the encounter with the dead baby aunt keeps her from announcing the presence of the spirit world in their familial surrounding. In that physically and emotionally painful way, and lacking adequate familial understanding and comfort, Lena

learns that she has to protect herself from pain during spiritual encounters and ghostly activities (*Baby* 41).

Through the caul idea Ansa creates two spheres described by their physical and audible features. Lena senses the presence of the supernatural by listening to a voice that instructs her to climb up on the bed. The actual connection with the supernatural world tactilely takes place (*Baby* 39). Its feel is new to Lena which causes her to “let out a little scream” (*Baby* 39). Yet it was not heard in the natural world. As she begins to share the incident with her family (Brogan 46), she experiences physical pain and learns about her separation from her family in this circumstance. Realizing that there are physical and spiritual encounters, to which only she has access, Lena finds herself emotionally secluded from the people around her. She is exposed to the evil deeds of the supernatural world because of Nellie’s refusal to feed her the caul tea. The story’s seamless transitions from the natural to the supernatural worlds and back are intended to show the close proximity of the two realms. The photograph shifts from two-dimensional to three-dimensional, creating a space where Lena is eventually left with her painful memory, as suggested above. By expanding this space, Ansa extends the realm in which Lena lives and learns. She allows parallel interactions between Lena and the natural world, on the one hand, and Lena and the supernatural world, on the other. This expansion of space and time connects the past and the present in order to influence the future.

These interactions of the different times are manifested in Lena’s life, as she further discovers the world around her. As Lena ventures out in the chapters “Houses” (*Baby* 62-75) and “Sarah” (*Baby* 76-101), she is again taken outside of her family’s protection. At age six, Lena takes a walk away from her family’s house toward the street

so far that “Lena turned around and saw that she could barely make out the green roof [...]” (*Baby* 74). There she meets and befriends another girl, Sarah. In their friendship, Lena gains courage to become more independent and acquires knowledge about her family life as well as Sarah’s.

Within the natural world, Lena learns a behavioral protocol towards strangers. Meeting Sarah causes Lena to leave her familial realm and reach out into the larger Mulberry community. Lena is bold enough to address Sarah at first despite her past experiences with her dead baby aunt. This greeting proves to Lena that her interest in her environment is greater than her fear of ghosts. Lena is familiar with ghosts and their uncontrollable interactions in her natural world. Wandering away from the family’s property leaves Lena without the least familial protection. When she sees Sarah, Lena decides on the appropriate demeanor and initiates greeting. She finds out for herself whether the girl is human or of the supernatural world: “Are you really a little girl?” (*Baby* 72). Lena’s assertive approach to Sarah boosts her confidence and her senses because she finds a new friend in Sarah. As the narrator relays, “[s]he was pleased to have someone other than family to play with [...]” (*Baby* 73).

Lena’s friendship with Sarah helps her find a reassuring consistency in the world. Sarah’s friendship offers her comfort in the face of “[Lena’s] world of apparitions and uncertainties” (*Baby* 98). In Sarah, Lena finds a friend and a playmate to discover the worlds of each other’s families and to exchange knowledge. Playing with Sarah is joyful and entertaining for Lena (*Baby* 73). Sarah becomes Lena’s confidante outside of her family, a companion with whom she shares trust, secrets and positive memories and eventually discovers sexual experiences between man and woman. Lena learns also to

trust her instincts. It should be noted, however, that the girls' friendship is reciprocal. To Sarah, Lena is a "sho' mo' [...] funny" (*Baby* 73). Sarah receives food, cleanliness and familial affection from the McPherson's family. It is ironic that, despite Lena's spiritual and emotional disconnection with her family, she becomes Sarah's example of a well-protected child, one cared for and willing to share love and wealth with her. In Lena's presence, Sarah finds peace and freedom to play as opposed to the fulfillment of duties in her family.

Lena learns about the pain of losing a friend when Sarah suddenly disappears. Her perspective of the world around is challenged again. Once more, she is left alone to deal with the sadness that burdens her heart. Nellie can comfort Lena's crying but it is beyond her power to restore Sarah's friendship (*Baby* 100, 101). The family's helplessness recalls Lena's encounter with the dead baby aunt. As much as Lena longs for consistency, she learns at an early age, especially through the encounter with the former slave Rachel, that the only constant thing in her life is change itself, and adapting to it is a life imperative.

The McPherson family spends its summer vacation on the Georgia beach. There, Lena meets Rachel's ghost (*Baby* 155-173) and during their conversation she hears about Rachel's life as a slave. Okonkwo points out correctly that Rachel's narrative received by Lena enables Ansa to "recover, sub-text, and archive [the former slave's] narrative" ("Of Caul and Response", 155). In this sense, Rachel's narrative orally transports historical events into the present. In "African-American speech communities, oral narratives have long been recognized as one of the major means by which important cultural traditions are kept alive" (Nichols 233)<sup>23</sup>. Nichols adds that African American oral narratives carry

---

<sup>23</sup> Patricia Nichols's article deals with features of storytelling throughout South Carolina, especially styles and themes of children's narratives of children of African and European heritage. Her article offers

“family histories, religious practices, and spiritual beliefs” (233). Communicating with spirits allows community members to access information and experiences from the past in order to mold the community’s future. As Ansa suggests in the chapter “Rachel,” only Lena as caulbearer can interact with the celestial and simultaneously find helpful advice for her individual quest for identity. Adults “serve as the grounding force in the child’s life, through whom or toward whom to channel his existence” (Brooks de Vita<sup>24</sup> 20). While Rachel functions as Lena’s instructor for spiritual lessons as well as her teacher for life lessons, Lena’s predicted caul powers are being confirmed (Okonkwo “Of Caul and Response” 158), and simultaneously, she serves as Rachel’s mediator or as Okonkwo phrases it “amanuensis” (“Of Caul and Response” 158) between herself and the natural world carrying and preserving Rachel’s story.

During their conversation on the beach, Rachel instructs seven-year-old Lena to claim her belonging anywhere in this world: Rachel commands her: “Don’t be afraid, Lena. Claim what is yours” (*Baby* 168). That must begin with Lena claiming her marker caul and her powers of vision. Here, Rachel takes the role of the ancestor. As Toni Morrison states, ancestors in African American fiction are “not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (Morrison 343). Through Rachel’s

---

feedback information in terms of knowledge about caul powers as well as tracing the roots from African to African American communities in terms of storytelling.

<sup>24</sup> In her article entitled “Abiku Babies: Spirit Children and Human Bonding in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!*, and Tina McElroy Ansa’s *Baby of the Family*”, Novella Brooks de Vita discusses the roles of spirit-children, abiku babies, in the above-mentioned novels, in terms of their healing impact on female characters. Especially in terms of love and self-affirmation, the spirit-children find their main application. In her discussion on Ansa’s chapter “Rachel” of *Baby*, she enlightens about the binary relationship of Lena and Rachel. She argues that both female characters depend on each other’s presence. Rachel who favors being alone becomes Lena’s motherly instructor. Lena, on the contrary, becomes Rachel’s audience to further her “ghost[ly] self-assertion” (Brooks de Vita, 23).



empowerment, Lena's confidence grows – she trusts her insight more when she seeks out a spot she had dreamed about (*Baby* 156); there, she finds Rachel sitting on the beach. This time Lena is not afraid. We are told “[...] she occasionally dreamed about places and things and events before they came to pass” (*Baby* 156, 157). Moreover, despite her fear and her inability to move in Rachel's presence, Lena dares to interact with the spirit although she is aware of possibly painful consequences. She even verbally contributes in the conversation with Rachel and inquires about the female ghost's life (*Baby* 159-168). Questions “seemed to pour out of her mouth [although it happens] without her permission” (*Baby* 164). Ansa describes Lena's contributions in the conversation as an offer to Rachel's celestial perspective of the world. For the first time, a spirit clarifies the purpose of Lena's life and foresight. Rachel informs her: “A child like you. You gonna see a heap more like me before you dead ...” (*Baby* 158). Here, the caul transcends temporal boundaries; it connects the past, Rachel's life, with the present, and with the seven-year-old Lena, by foretelling Lena's future. Then, Lena learns about her earthly purpose as a medium, a consort of the natural and the supernatural worlds. Rachel also stresses her dependency on Lena's willingness to listen to her story and identifies Lena's role as caulbearer; “Child, [...]. Do you know how long I been waiting for somebody like you [...], so I can share some of this?” (*Baby* 164).

With Rachel's narrative the caul becomes once more a device with historical and folkloristic imports. Ansa uses Lena's visionary power to facilitate new ways of narrating history (here an unheard slave narrative) and therefore recreating history's importance within a new context. For the seven-year-old Lena, the recovery of history (listening to Rachel's narrative) becomes more interesting and tangible right there on the beach. In

that way, Lena becomes a vessel (Brooks de Vita 20) to transport Rachel's story, and African American history and folk thought back to her classmates and the novel's audience.

Given that Lena can connect with the past and plant herself on the threshold between the natural and the supernatural, caul power becomes a convincing and credible cultural belief within the context of the dialog between Lena and Rachel. At the same time, Rachel writes herself back into history by telling her story. Brooks de Vita argues correctly that "the ghost of Rachel uses the little girl's audience as an opportunity to express her identity and validate her own existence, no longer alone, as she has been in death as well as in life" (23). In Rachel's case, Lena's presence allows Rachel's "spiritual autobiography [to transfer] back the right to self-authorship to her" (Okonkwo, "Of Caul and Response" 158). Rachel shares her trauma and pain with Lena, who relives the whole experience. "[T]he child serves as a vessel [...] of self-discovery for [the adult]" (Brooks de Vita 20). Lena occupies a place in history, as Ansa does with Rachel, whom she depicts as representing many others' unheard slave narratives. This experience connects Lena to her forebears. Rachel becomes personified history that connects Lena's schoolbook knowledge to the slave narrative Rachel shares with her. In this way, Ansa uses Lena's clairvoyance to project history from a supernatural perspective into the natural world of Lena and in extension into the one of the reader. Okonkwo argues that Lena's encounter with Rachel "[...] allows Ansa to finesse spectral visitation as well as 'unpublished' slave narratives as springboards to accomplish what Kathleen Brogan sees as authorial 'conjuring of ghosts to perform cultural work'" ("Of Caul and Response" 157).

Lena overcomes her fear of the supernatural in Rachel's presence and is capable of asking the question of belonging and identity.

Lena acknowledges the spirit's helpful contribution to her quest for identity. Prior to this meeting with Rachel, Lena's understanding has been forged by the conflict between her grandmother's understanding that African Americans do not belong on the beach (*Baby* 167) and her mother's opposing opinion (*Baby* 132). Rachel helps Lena find her own opinion on history, identity, and belonging by helping her consider the progress African Americans have achieved surviving slavery. Rachel encourages Lena to learn to belong anywhere she wants. And because Lena has access to the natural and the supernatural worlds, it is essential to the success of her quest for growth and identity that she learns to belong in both. Ansa suggests here that African Americans should feel similarly enlightened and empowered about themselves, their physical appearances, including even their identifying and sometimes derided hair texture (Okonkwo "Of Caul and Response" 155).

For over three years, Lena has had hair appointments at Delores Beauty Parlor with the new beautician Mamie (*Baby* 174-190). Through the conversations with Mamie, Lena's inquisitive mind awakens, and her passion for "know[ing] and understand[ing] her world" (*Baby* 183) grows. Like Sarah, Mamie eventually disappears out of Lena's life but she leaves Lena with the gift of curiosity. Inquisitiveness, which she learns with Mamie's help, becomes necessary during her ultimate conversation with Miss Lizzie's spirit. The ability to address her life questions turns out to be crucial in her quest for identity from her grandmother.

Meeting Mamie further confirms Lena's resolve to face strangers alone. She first makes this resolve when she earlier meets Sarah. At the beauty parlor, again, she has the opportunity to test her ability to differentiate between spirits and humans<sup>25</sup>. Lena looks for indications of Mamie's origin, when she first sees her. She first assumes that Mamie is human. She has learned, however, that evidence for her thoughts is necessary. Now at age nine, touching strangers' faces becomes inappropriate for Lena, although she is really intrigued by it (*Baby* 181). Mamie in return touches her, which proves to Lena she is real. In addition, Lena observes others in the parlor, who see Mamie, as well (*Baby* 181). She concludes that Mamie is a real human. The caul power here hints at Lena's newly acquired skill to converse, later, with her grandmother's spirit. Lena feels comfortable around Mamie and is therefore open to learn from her new mentor (Town 14).

While doing Lena's hair, Mamie offers Lena the gift of curiosity wrapped in a ritual of asking and answering questions. The beautician herself does not have interest in book-learning but in experiential knowledge. In Lena's case, that means facing her different worlds with open eyes and an alert mind. Communicating with Mamie comforts Lena and strengthens her conscience, so that she eventually "[begins to take] part in their ritual" (*Baby* 188). In the safe setting of the salon, Lena indirectly learns to accept herself more and to carefully employ her clairvoyance. At the beginning of this episode, Lena's success solely depends on Mamie's presence. With time, however, Lena gains confidence and practices her inquisitive mind even when Mamie is not around (*Baby* 188), for

---

<sup>25</sup> At the introduction of this chapter, the omniscient narrator describes the history of "new girls" at the parlor and provides much information about Mamie. This gives the impression that Lena has superior observation skills which can be linked to her visionary powers as caulbearer. Differentiating between Lena's and the narrator's perspective can become difficult when considering Lena's growth process in terms of observation and communication skills because the two appear to be relatively close. Town mentions this oddity, drawing upon the mirror image throughout the novel which deals with the issues of identity formation (Town 14). How well this mirror image holds up to make up for the lacking of a first person narrator would need to find a discussion in another project.

example at school. Raising Lena's awareness of her environment is important to the application of her powers. Finding answers to her questions eventually leads to finding herself (*Baby* 184). As gently as Mamie does Lena's hair, she teaches her to lose her fear of facing herself and experiencing the worlds around her. Discovering the unknown requires her activity despite its unsure outcome. In order to understand multiple aspects of her identity, she must reach out, she must reason and remember. These regular schooling-conversations at the salon with Mamie help shape Lena's maturation and personality. They nurture Lena emotionally and give her more knowledge about the supernatural, as well as her hometown Mulberry, Georgia.

While Lena discovers the benefits of satisfying her curiosity with Mamie's help, in the novel's closing chapter "Home" (*Baby* 259-265) Lena undertakes what one might call her ultimate adventure as adolescent. Lena's fears of her clairvoyance and her struggles growing up culminate in *Baby's* last chapter. Her sense of belonging and confidence is significantly challenged in her apparent loneliness after her grandmother's death. Miss Lizzie's spirit appears to Lena to provide her with missing information about Lena's life (Okonkwo "Of Caul and Response" 161) as well as to encourage her only granddaughter to fully embrace her birthright, personality, and identity.

In the midst of her struggles as a powerful, special child<sup>26</sup>, Lena needs Miss Lizzie's supernatural comfort. She awaits her grandmother's spirit a day after Miss Lizzie's funeral. Having become a living-dead, Miss Lizzie explains to Lena that "it's been some kind of job to get to you. [...] But them other spirits – the scary evil ones – was too strong" (*Baby* 261). According to Mbiti, the living-dead are "the closest link that

---

<sup>26</sup> Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) also depicts a powerful child in a familial and supernatural context.

men have with the spirit world” (Mbiti 82). He further describes the living-dead as “guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities” (Mbiti 82). Miss Lizzie always has been Lena’s familial confidante; her important role in Lena’s life remains after her death: “[Lena] was so happy to have her grandmother again. Dead or alive” (*Baby* 260). Because her natural family cannot comprehend her anxieties about growing-up, Lena needs her grandmother’s return from the supernatural world to regain her confidence and emotional strength: “All Lena wanted was to feel the spirit of her beloved grandmother envelop her [...]” (*Baby* 260).

Miss Lizzie returns to the natural world with the task of providing Lena<sup>27</sup> with the missing information about her caul rituals which her mother disobeyed and disrupted. Having experienced the supernatural, Miss Lizzie admits the familial failure of keeping the caul rituals for Lena’s sake (*Baby* 260). Okonkwo argues that “Ansa implies that Miss Lizzie ought to have been more alert, discerning, and questioning of the possible causes of Lena’s situation” (Okonkwo “Of Caul and Response” 161). Given that her mother burned the caul and discarded the tea, there is no physical evidence left of her birthright. Nevertheless, Lena’s experiences in the past sixteen years have left her with enough evidence that she is gifted. On the one hand, Miss Lizzie’s return allows her to admit the family’s failure to inform Lena about the disobeyed caul rituals. On the other hand, however, it is outweighed by the comfort and proof of Lena’s abilities which are mutually necessary for Lena to continue her search of identity. Ansa rewards Lena at the end of *Baby* with the positive confirmation of her gifting by sending her grandmother. Lena solely is responsible for claiming her life, her gift, and her caul. Miss Lizzie rejects an answer to Lena’s question about the meaning of her veil, yet she encourages her to

---

<sup>27</sup> In this way, Ansa closes the existing narrative gaps about the caul rituals for the readers.

seek its meaning herself (*Baby* 263). Lena is advised to accept her birthright as caulbearer as part of her individual identity. Despite being baby of the family, she herself has to take ownership of her life including her visionary powers<sup>28</sup>. Gaining confidence in Miss Lizzie's presence, Lena also dares to speak her mind about what she sees on her 'craziness', which leaves her partly insecure. The conversations with Mamie, who taught Lena to pose questions, help her in this circumstance to actually verbalize her fear of being crazy (*Baby* 262). As Mbiti notes, "Even if the living-dead may not do miracles [...] to remedy the need, men experience a sense of psychological relief when they pour their [...] troubles before their seniors who have a foot in both worlds" (82). Cursing from the celestial, Miss Lizzie admits her limitations and sends Lena on her journey to claim her birthright. Instead of fearing these "crazy" abilities, Lena must embrace and develop them to integrate them into the community's life. Like other teenagers, Lena, as emotionally spent as she is by the end of the novel (Okonkwo, "Of Caul and Response" 162), has to come to terms with her puberty and insecurity, alongside her clairvoyance. Town sums it up very well, "Lena has to accept who she is, for better or worse; the visions and voices are going to be as much a part of her adolescence as emotions and acne" (Town 16). This makes her as normal as every other teenager, which is exactly what she desires.

The last image of Lena looking into the mirror leaves room for hope that her maturation journey will be successful (*Baby* 265). Seeking answers about herself by acknowledging herself in the mirror indicates a positive beginning. When she tries to look into her soul through her eyes to recognize herself, her vision becomes blurry, "she

---

<sup>28</sup> Considering Nurse Bloom as the personified source of African American folk beliefs could also be a fruitful discussion, yet it exceeds the capacities of this project.

stared so long into her eyes that her pupils began to dilate” (*Baby* 265). Her future is as unclear to her as the things she sees inside of her. However, after the conversation with her grandmother, Lena seems willing and emboldened.

Considering that Lena is the only daughter out of three children in the family, one might ask about the role of the male figures – her father Jonah, her brothers Raymond and Edward, and the male house servant Frank Peterson – in Lena’s upbringing. Owning a bar and grill in downtown Mulberry, the Place, does not offer much family time for the McPhersons. Lena’s father Jonah is not responsible for rearing Lena. At home, her grandmother and mother care for her, and when she visits the Place, the waitresses watch her and teach her life lessons. Even at the Place, Lena perceives her mother of being “the boss” (*Baby* 117-118) instead of her father. Her brothers Raymond and Edward become Lena’s bodyguards when she meets the world. In terms of learning life lessons from them, the brothers do not play an important role in Lena’s life. Because of her caul powers she appears to be more intelligent for her age, and exceeds them. Frank Peterson, as male housekeeper, becomes Lena’s friend and confidante, as well as her entertainer. In this regard, Frank becomes the male ancestor of the natural world, who teaches Lena of world history (*Baby* 197) or communal living.

The caul allows Ansa to unify the past, the present and the future. Enabled by the caul, Lena senses the presence of a spirit because of a strong scent of moonflowers: “Scents seemed to be so strong whenever ghosts appeared” (*Baby* 262). The visit of her grandmother’s ghost reaffirms Lena’s gift and position in the universe, but it also allows Lena finally to voice long-nagging questions.



Ansa has used Lena's experience as an allegory to appeal to African Americans to claim their folk beliefs, identities, and heritage. Like Lena, individuals themselves in Mulberry's black community should look into the mirror and recognize their opportunities. *Baby of the Family* offers glimpses of Lena's development into a young and complex African American girl. To fully develop her complex identity, she has to face both worlds. The fact that it takes a conjured man to finally forge Lena's identity is the topic of the following chapter on Ansa's *The Hand I Fan With*.

## CHAPTER TWO

### RECA(U)LLING THE SELF: *THE HAND I FAN WITH*

In *The Hand* (1998), we encounter a confident, successful and wealthy Lena, in her mid-forties, as the community's pillar or the hand everybody fans with (see p.9, footnote 14) in fictional Mulberry. Because of her clairvoyance, Lena McPherson has become the town's source for happiness, and yet she herself is left unfulfilled and lonely. In this chapter, I contend that only a mediator of the supernatural world can assist Lena in finding comfort and strength, in her belonging in the natural and the supernatural realms. The conjured spirit-man Herman participates in Lena's life and assists her in reclaiming herself resulting in newly-found emotional and spiritual health. The caul theme allows Ansa such tight weaving of the supernatural and the natural realms enacted in Lena's relationship to Herman.

Lena needs individual attention from a man who breaks her routines. At the peak of Lena's solitude, the spirit-man Herman (read: Her Man) enters her life upon her request during a conjuring ceremony with her best friend Sister. Up to this point, Lena is a workaholic who has become everybody's anchor. In an interview with Nagueyalti Warren, Ansa shares the origin of this phrase, mainly found in the Southern states and spoken by women ("Echoing Zora" 362). According to Ansa, it "signifies the black woman as an object, [...], to be useful and be used" (Warren "Echoing Zora" 362). Lena tends to everybody's needs either through quick blessings in passing or dedicating time

and money to the Mulberrians. In addition, she has become family and teacher to the town's homeless children over the years. All these good deeds, however, have not brought Lena a fulfilling life with love.

It should be noted that Lena's overwhelming charity originates from her compelling caul powers. As the narrator observes, "Considering the kind of attention she had gotten all her life, [Lena] figured she owed people..." (*The Hand* 206). Because much has been given to Lena, she pours herself and money into her commitment to others (*The Hand* 89). Her gifted abilities "frightened her more [...] to even think about discovering more about herself" (*The Hand* 121). Her misconception of gaining recognition sets up her need to receive assistance. She has to learn to center herself without depending on others' recognition and love. Nagueyalti Warren argues that *The Hand* gives an example of how independence and freedom can be unfulfilling for a woman searching for female identity and self-actualization ("Echoing Zora" 362). This is especially complicated for a woman in Lena's cultural position. Lena's financial independence and freedom which is, according to Warren, important to Ansa in order "to attain a modicum of freedom" ("Echoing Zora" 365) is exactly what traps Lena in a dissatisfying life.

Moreover, Lena's spiritual/caul powers have not lessened over the years despite her biological aging and maturation. In order to keep her abilities in control, she uses work as therapy or simply ignores the visions (*The Hand* 47). Lena is not at peace in her natural life and with her spiritual gifts (*The Hand* 146). Lena's encounter with the one-hundred-year-old spirit Herman sets the course for the rest of their relationship and the novel as well. At their first personal meeting, Herman interrupts Lena's routine and

exposes her to his transformation (*The Hand* 155). Witnessing Herman's coming into corporate being leaves Lena so impressed that she forgets about her fear of spirits. Revealing that it was Lena who through a ceremony caused his (re)creation, his emergence, Herman affirms Lena's caul-aided power to actively and positively connect to the supernatural world. She "believed she had invited Herman in, and she was beginning to feel it was the best decision she had ever made" (*The Hand* 164). Herman was born one hundred years ago to free African-American parents who were Florida farmers. A mule killed him at the age of thirty-nine. Listening to his story of his life, Lena completely disregards his spiritness. Unafraid of Herman's supernatural's presence, "Lena was learning more about life, death and herself in one conversation with Herman than she had learned in her whole life of struggling and bumping around trying to find things out" (*The Hand* 165). She chooses Herman to be her man, partially because he selflessly expects nothing of her (*The Hand* 177).

Ansa structures the Herman-Lena encounter such that his love spurs Lena's crucial redefinition of priorities. Patience, fun and love define their budding relationship. Ansa extensively describes their lovemaking, their work in the garden and their meals, among other things. Unlike the critics Tarpley and Farrington who understandably consider them to be "tedious" (Tarpley 7), I argue instead that the descriptions of minute details in and around Lena and her property, such as of flower arrangements or her feelings while lovemaking, are necessary and justifiable in order to show the reader how powerful yet gentle Herman's influence is on Lena. The mental and emotional shift in Lena's life from solely worrying about others to appreciating alone-time and finding Herman's company nurturing happens slowly but thoroughly. Such massive change in

Lena's life needs time and deserves her full attention, as well as the reader's. In addition, using the natural environment around Lena's house turns out to be a valuable teaching tool for Herman, Lena's "instructor and coach" (Warren "Echoing Zora" 375). The natural environment does not expect anything of Lena, in contrast to the Mulberrians who besiege her with requests.

Herman teaches her to take time and discover her property alongside discovering herself. Without any demands in return, Herman offers Lena the necessary peace and restfulness in order to emotionally and mentally open up and shift her focus from work to a more relaxed and appreciative life style. Further, detailed descriptions prove how active and creative the couple, originating of two worlds, becomes in shaping their relationship. As Washington points out in another instance, "a man doesn't need a hundred women, but simply needs to choose one woman and find one hundred ways to love her" (Washington 8). Taking time to arrange flowers or cook homemade meals is activity to which Lena has previously not dedicated her time. Given that the town's people daily provide her "CARE package meals" (*The Hand* 179) Lena also spends her time on the community in return. Through Herman's intercession, she now learns to value domestic activities and integrate them into her life. Lena intentionally cooks and works the garden because of and through Herman's love. Besides, her property's name is called "You Belong" (*The Hand* 61). She belongs in her garden and her kitchen to work in it. These rituals, which Ansa initiated in *Baby*, have also been part of Lena's childhood memories of her mother Nellie and grandmother Lizzie working in the kitchen (see *Baby*, i.e.112). Her encounter with Rachel during a family vacation to the beach also echoes in her

property's name. Rachel taught her in *Baby* that she and all African Americans belong anywhere they desire.

Because Lena's successful withdrawal from her community is badly received, Herman functions as the counterpoint to the community for Lena's attention and time. Having the best intentions for Lena and observing her civic commitment from the distance of about 100 years, Herman objectively evaluates her dilemma: "'You [Lena] were tryin' t' take care a' the world. And you were miserable. Yo' yoke, baby, was hard'" (*The Hand* 353). Lena learns that she has to look out for herself because nobody else will do it because "[i]t's just like [her] Mama said, 'They start out wanting your friendship, just wanting to talk, and they end up wanting your heart, soul and liver, chopped up fine and spoon-fed to 'em'" (*The Hand* 395). Her "craziness,"<sup>29</sup> which is connected to her caul powers, in the end is her only way to save herself from completely being worn out by her commitment to others. Okonkwo draws out this realization, that Mizz Lizzie tries to teach Lena at her return in *Baby* (Okonkwo "Of Caul and Response" 162). Enabled by the caul, she can hear and sense the people discredit her changed behavior. It takes Herman's affirmative words to show her that she needs to claim herself and time, even if it means to care less about the world. Imbibing this lesson, Lena even neglects her businesses. The town's people predict Lena's financial bankruptcy. But Lena, satisfied with the new disaffected and begrudged prospect of having time to herself, "had just about turned everything loose to devote her time to having fun with Herman, but her businesses didn't go to hell in a handbasket as everyone had predicted.

---

<sup>29</sup> Okonkwo refers to this "craziness" as Lena's incurable injury as well as a description of the black female's position on the battlefield between racism, sexism, and power positioning ("Of Caul and Response" 158).

Even Lena could see clearly that God and the universe were taking care of things” (*The Hand* 379).

Ansa raises the important question of the individual’s responsibility to self and community. Tied to this is the community’s egotistic claim of Lena’s caul abilities. Lena’s further mothering and nurturing of the Mulberrians enabled the people’s tendency to claim her. Okonkwo points to Lena’s function at the beginning of *The Hand*. Her “cauling/calling [is] to serve ultimately as an altruistic community healer and stronghold” (“Of Caul and Response” 162). Town links Lena’s “take-charge model” in the community to the image of her mother as “boss” of the Place in *Baby* (Town “A Whole World” 100). In this way, Lena carries the responsibilities, and does exactly what she has learned from her mother. However, in order to develop her caul abilities as much as finding her own center, she has to be removed from her involvement in the community, and later on, from her physical involvement with Herman. N. Warren asserts correctly, that community is a necessary construct in [the] novel[], yet “[Lena must] move [...] beyond the boundaries of home to embark on the mythic journey of growth and exploration” (Warren “Echoing Zora” 365). In the end, it resides with Lena to find a comfortable place for her as caulbearer within the community.

Herman’s departure after a year causes Lena emotional breakdown. However, while Lena adapts to his absence, she successfully learns to rely on the acquired knowledge of using her special caul abilities to do good to herself and others. She also learns to appreciate the infinite possibilities the supernatural offers. It has been Herman’s purpose to teach her to trust her caul powers. His aim was to support Lena and help her along her quest for identity, but not to completely save her (*The Hand* 310). She has

already discovered the part of her identity belonging to the natural world, on the one hand; for example: through living with her family as presented in *Baby*, through offering herself to the community and enjoying the friendship with Sister, Frank Peterson and James Peterson, her male housekeeper. On the other hand, Herman helps her explore and affirm the part of her identity that is tied to the supernatural. In that sense, Lena learns to gradually liberate herself from her exhausting “take-charge modes” (Town in “A Whole World” 100). By ridding her closet of designer clothes and returning to pragmatic outfits, disregarding the growth of her body hair, Lena even sets herself free of beauty dogma. To Lena, the experience of proving her abilities to herself becomes life-sustaining. Her rediscovery of her spiritual gifts, even in the midst of enormous material opulence, becomes essential to her in order to live a more fulfilled life. Her gifts attributed to her through her caul, according to N. Warren, “symbol[ize] a potent indication of liberation” (“Echoing Zora” 364). It is this freedom that Herman successfully teaches her through his presence, tender love, care and eventually his physical absence.

Ansa’s employment of the caul theme allows her tight juxtaposition of supernatural and natural, enacted in Herman’s and Lena’s relationship. In the novel, Herman appears in various shapes. He becomes a three-way shape-shifter in terms of shape, time, and space. Herman appears to Lena in the forms of breezes (*The Hand* 9), in nature (*The Hand* 152) or as vapor (*The Hand* 167) as well as a real male figure (*The Hand* 160). By shifting his shapes when he is around Lena, Herman becomes testing ground for Lena’s sensory powers as well as her clairvoyance. Early on, Lena can only sense that “something’s up” (*The Hand* 30). Her senses receive the signs of the supernatural at first “the breeze, [...] the musky odor. She felt more than she saw“ (*The*



*Hand* 47). Yet she cannot locate voices and possible shapes. The slap that knocks Lena out leaves no physical mark on her, as the doctors confirm (*The Hand* 50-53). Herman and the attacking spirit Anna Belle took part in this incident. Functioning as and at intersection between the natural and the supernatural world, Lena could feel but not recognize the attacker. Herman later comments on Lena's lack of ability: " 'I'm surprised you didn't hear [Anna Belle]' " (*The Hand* 308). A few things become clear in this incident. We observe Lena's increasing abilities to handle her caul powers. Later in the novel, Lena is said to have become stronger since Herman's arrival and to have "drawn closer to the serene spirit of the world itself" (*The Hand* 319, 325). Herman's presence unlocks doors in Lena's soul which helps her self-introspective. Herman's questioning of Lena's behavioral convictions and commitment becomes the driving force in her lifestyle changes. The ultimate test for Lena relative to her caul abilities is, however, the colt's birth during a raging storm (*The Hand* 442-456). Not only is Lena's birth said to have influenced the weather in *Baby*, but also her emotional constitution appears to influence it again in *The Hand*. When she rages over Herman's departure, nature responds with a huge storm. As the narrator relays, "She called on all her powers of faith and belief and love and gratitude and did the work before her" (*The Hand* 447). We also see Lena believing and knowing that she has a place that she belongs as do spirits. In addition through the caul theme, Ansa offers an expanded version of history and reality. For example, Herman tells Lena about his childhood and his family who were first generation free African Americans. His experiences in freedom amplify the former slave Rachel's story of hope for freedom in *Baby* (155-173). Centuries of African American history are interconnected and come together in the form of Lena's listening and living out the

results of Rachel's slave narrative as well as Herman's intermediate step of African American history. Lena's life is directly linked to Rachel via Herman's personal and historical experiences which she recalls. In this way, reality becomes multi-dimensional, reaching into the far past, the near past, the present and into the future. Lena's maturation and self-assurance in employing her caul powers signal therefore an affirmation and a continuation of folk belief in conjure (Washington 8) and the presence and ongoing interaction between the natural and the supernatural worlds.

As a figure of supernatural, Herman is essential to Lena's fullest development and her quest for identity. He offers her companionship and becomes temporarily her emotional home. With his help, she reviews and modifies her self-image and her challenging involvement in the Mulberry community. Furthermore, he acts as her supernatural guide by teaching her how best to appreciate and handle her spiritual gifts. His intervention results in Lena's self-acceptance in her improved understanding of her specialness and of herself as caulbearer and woman. Herman's intercession reaffirms the great relevance of Lena's encounter with her grandmother's spirit at the end of *Baby*. Lizzie's states the request for Lena (*Baby* 263), and is realized in Herman. In return, Herman needs Lena to re-enter the natural world for physical, natural experiences such as love-making, enjoying home-cooked food, and physical work in the garden. Grandmother's spirit initiated Lena's quest in *Baby*, and Herman's presence and influence shape it in *The Hand*. Through *Baby* and *The Hand*, Ansa recovers African American folk beliefs and successfully validates the caul theme and its aesthetic potential in contemporary literature. Ansa presents the interactions between the natural and the supernatural world as inspiring, comforting, encouraging, and culturally crucial. As N.

Warren writes “Ansa seizes the paradox of life and death to create a woman of unusual power, one who communicates with the dead and enhances the lives of the living. Thus, Lena represents infinite possibilities” (“Echoing Zora” 367). Ansa continues her interest in the caul idea and in the importance of community in her fourth novel *You Know Better*.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ‘IT TAKES A COMMUNITY TO RAISE A CHILD’:

#### *YOU KNOW BETTER*

Ansa’s fourth novel *You Know Better* (*YKB*<sup>30</sup>) (2002) deals altogether with generational conflicts. The polyvocal story focuses not only on the members of the Pines family who need supernatural interferences to approach and resolve their mutual differences, but also on LaShawndra Pine’s dual identity formation. Ansa plots the Pines family’s relations through the perspectives of three characters: LaShawndra’s grandmother Lily, LaShawndra’s mother Sandra, and LaShawndra’s perspective. Ansa portrays the almost-nineteen-year old LaShawndra Pines as a symbol of the 1990s adolescents’ generation, who turn to music videos and peers rather than their families or spirituality for guidance. This young generation needs more of the community’s assistance and protection to attain a sense of responsibility and spirituality on their paths to adulthood.

In this chapter I argue that, as a result of her environment, LaShawndra needs communal involvement in her life in order to find a positive self-identity. LaShawndra’s personal growth depends on her family’s adequate reconsideration of their roles in her life. Furthermore, I claim that Ansa uses the caul theme to create a framework of time

---

<sup>30</sup> The abbreviation *YKB* stands for the novel’s title *You Know Better*. It will be used for the remainder of this chapter. It is noteworthy to draw attention to the lack of scholarship that deals with this novel. In the preparatory research for this project, it was only possible to draw upon Ansa’s interview comments about *YKB* and a few book review articles. This chapter shall extend the scholarship on *YKB*.

and space in which Lily, Sandra and LaShawndra's conversations and thought processes take place. By exploiting the caul theme, Ansa lubricates the frictions between instructional and spiritual discrepancies to which LaShawndra is subjected. Ansa's exploration of the caul theme in *YKB* is, however, more subtle than in *Baby* or *The Hand*.

In plotting LaShawndra's development, Ansa considers her grandmother's and her mother's perspectives on her, as well. The narrator retrospectively enlightens us on the familial issues of and around LaShawndra Pines' life through the Pines women's intersecting three narratives. Lily's narrative is entitled "Faith" (*YKB* 1-102), Sandra's is "Hope" (*YKB* 103-194) and LaShawndra's is captioned "Love" (*YKB* 195-320).

It is important to touch on the novel's 1990s<sup>31</sup> socio-cultural backdrop. Ansa places LaShawndra in the context of rap music, increasing adolescent violence and a shift in identity among many blacks. Another backdrop is the annual college gathering called "Freaknik"<sup>32</sup> in Atlanta between 1982 and 2000. Freaknik was considered "annual rite of spring" (Meyers 95) and the best party with street parties and cruising for black college students on Spring Break (JBHE Foundation<sup>33</sup> 18) in the 1990s. The fundamental motivation behind Freaknik was to organize "modest social gatherings for a small number of students from Black Morehouse and Spellman Colleges" (Meyers 95). It

---

<sup>31</sup> According to Manis, racial cultural wars began to rage in the 1980s and 1990s. "Colorblind" America was pitted against the "multicultural" America (Manis 277). The former's intention was to produce loyal Americans who feared the "disuniting" of the US. Race and class differences were not addressed as essentially different. For the latter, the American nation resembled a "democracy of nationalities" (277). Multiculturalists praised the coexistence of different cultures and enforced their practices.

<sup>32</sup> In the nineties, there were similar parties of that nature in Berlin, Germany. It was called "Love Parade" and the music style was rave and techno. It was considered the best street party every year. Party, drugs, sex and electronic music drew millions of people to Berlin every year.

<sup>33</sup> In the article "Comparing the Party Habits of Black and White College Students on Spring Break" published by the JBHE Foundation in 2000, trends of a 1998 survey indicate that more students at Freaknik had been sober than white students in Florida at a similar event. The survey also shows that black college students seemed to be more prepared for safe sex than students in Florida (JBHE Foundation 18).

attracted hundreds of thousands of African American college students from across the US before it was unofficially ended in 2000.

LaShawndra is a child of this era in American and African American history. Before her grandmother and her mother are able to positively influence her maturation,<sup>34</sup> however, they have to face their own sufferings and their roles in relation to her. Because routines of everyday life allow them little space and time to deal with their individual problems, the spiritual world intervenes and assists them in the form of three living-dead who help the Pines' women with their relationship and also accompany them through their narratives. To invoke Mbiti: "[even] if the living-dead may not do miracles or extraordinary things to remedy the need, men experience a sense of psychological relief when they pour out their hearts' troubles before their seniors who have a foot in both worlds" (82). The living-dead counsel Lily, Sandra, and finally LaShawndra. The first chapter "Faith" (*YKB* 1-102) follows Lily Paine Pines' search for her granddaughter in the middle of the night. Despite her willingness to take care of her granddaughter, Lily must learn to have faith in LaShawndra's ability to realize a change in her life. She is a source of wisdom for LaShawndra in the natural world, yet she fails to pass on her knowledge about the supernatural world and spirituality to her.

Fearing for LaShawndra's life, the family elder<sup>35</sup> Lily takes on gradually the role of LaShawndra's teacher or "other-mother". Lily fears for LaShawndra's life after witnessing the teenager's struggle with the everyday life, the generational neediness, and

---

<sup>34</sup> According to Mbiti, the community into which a child is born "must protect the child, feed it, bring it up, educate it and in many ways incorporate it into the wider community" (Mbiti 107). In this sense, the proverb "the community raises the child" rings true for the fictional context of LaShawndra as well as its validity in African/Africana understanding.

<sup>35</sup> In comparison to the rest of the family, elders have the longest *Sasa*. Therefore they have more access into the spiritual realm than younger members of the family (Mbiti 69).

her mother's lack of proper parental instruction (YKB 90). She instructs LaShawndra to manage rudimentary things in life by teaching her about propriety and cleanliness, and little tricks about the everyday life (YKB 256). She also looks after the teenage LaShawndra and supplies her with clothing, a home and advice. In doing this, she fulfills those roles of the ancestor that Morrison discusses in "Rootedness" (Morrison 342). As an ancestor, Lily teaches creativity, productiveness, diligence and resourceful thinking (Allen 24). Respecting her elder, LaShawndra, more or less successfully, continues to practice these daily routines in her life at the girls' house on Painted Bunting Road where she lives with her best friend Crystal. LaShawndra tries to live out Lily's values. Lily's instruction positively increases LaShawndra's, and in the greater sense, her generation's knowledge about daily rituals.

Through Lily, Ansa affirms the [African American] extended family relationship<sup>36</sup>, which becomes even more important when the young generation is in danger of losing their lives' perspectives. In her role as family elder, however, Lily, a middle-aged woman, fails LaShawndra in terms of passing on spiritual beliefs. Ansa celebrates Lily's spirituality and provides detailed descriptions of her prayer routines and Lily's readiness to call upon the supernatural. We learn, for example, that Lily listens to "[her] first mind [that] told [her she] would truly need heavenly help to conquer the day" (YKB 19). She is a spiritually active elder in the Pines family. According to Hannah, elders in African American families stress the importance of religious belief. They become "transmitters of religious instructions [...]" and "are the ones most concerned about exposing the children to religious training" (*The Black Family* 42-43). The living-

---

<sup>36</sup> Darlene Hannah describes the extended family within the African American community as "multigenerational composition" which mostly consists of "three generational household" (Hannah in *The Black Family Past, Present, & Future* 37-38).

dead Miss Moses' conversation with Lily helps Lily rediscover her faith and release it into LaShawndra's life. She does that when she "gave [LaShawndra] to the angels" (YKB 102). It appears reasonable, then, that Lily is the only one who knows about caul powers to which LaShawndra is connected through her birth caul (YKB 51). She also seems to comprehend that LaShawndra's "spirit [...] gets her in trouble so much" (YKB 21), and therefore needs restriction. As grandmother in the natural world, her help for LaShawndra is, however, limited to it. As a caulbearer, LaShawndra needs additional supernatural guidance to restrain her spirit and benefit from it. Yet Lily does not share any information about spirituality and about her spiritual abilities with her granddaughter. She even downplays her negligence to explore the extraordinary gift which LaShawndra's birth contributes to the girl.

Through Lily's narrative, Ansa leaves open whether or not LaShawndra survived her mother's attempt to terminate the pregnancy by throwing herself down the stairs because of LaShawndra's caul powers. In this sense, her failure to explain the special status of being a caulbearer to LaShawndra weighs heavier on her and her role as positive force in LaShawndra's life. Although Lily describes LaShawndra as lively (YKB 23), "lucky" (YKB 24), "cute" (YKB 37), and "a quick little study" (YKB 202), she does not attribute these traits to the caul. Despite Lily's recognition and appreciation of the supernatural in her life, she does not communicate its necessity in her granddaughter's own quest for a positive identity. When LaShawndra tells her family about the encounter with Miss Eliza Jane – a former Mulberrian with took life and love very easy – Lily only laughs and does not offer LaShawndra any information about the special circumstance of talking to Miss Eliza Jane as living-dead. Lily fails LaShawndra in the same way that



Miss Lizzie fails Lena in *Baby*, although Ansa redeems the McPhersons' elder, Miss Lizzie, as the transmitter of folk traditions (Hannah 42-43) by letting her spirit revisit Lena and provide her with necessary information for her quest of identity.

In an interview with Smith Henderson, Ansa states that today's youth "[knows] too much – of the wrong things" (Ansa in Smith Henderson 66). In *Baby*, Ansa makes the point that spirituality is and should be an essential facet of (African American) experience. LaShawndra and by extension the 1990s young generation are depicted as being uninformed about folk beliefs and wisdom. This is problematic for Ansa, who has noted: "Not having a child out of my own body has made it easier for me to write about a lot of issues. But it has made me no less responsible for what I have seen in society" (Ansa in Smith Henderson 68).

Ansa dedicates the second part of the novel "Hope" (*YKB* 103-194) to LaShawndra's mother Sandra. A successful realtor, this single mother has an early appointment with Nurse Bloom during which a painful and life-changing conversation about motherhood arises. LaShawndra's father LaShawn's regression from her life mars Sandra as single-parent. LaShawn leaves Sandra pregnant, out of wedlock, at age nineteen. LaShawn's absence in Sandra's life nurtures her hateful attitude toward him (*YKB* 112, 123) and toward men in general. Sandra stigmatizes LaShawndra as constant reminder of LaShawn's absence and failure. As a professional single mother, she becomes sole caretaker and provider for her daughter with some assistance from her parents<sup>37</sup>.

---

<sup>37</sup>In 1999, H. Elaine Rodney and Robert Mupier published the article "Behavioral Differences between African American Male Adolescents with Biological Fathers and Those without Biological Fathers in the

Sandra's anger at LaShawn disables her mother's love for LaShawndra. Sandra turns LaShawndra into a scapegoat for her negative experiences since her daughter's birth. She deliberately suggests that LaShawndra is a mistake (*YKB* 112, 123), an unwanted child that reminds her of LaShawn's disappearance and their past mistake (*YKB* 134). She is hurt, hopeless, defensive, and frustrated. She has contradictory expectations for LaShawndra, for instance about her dreams (*YKB* 134). Ansa critiques this parental misbehavior, yet, and more significant, she sees redemption in communal guidance and history as suggested in Nurse Bloom's reappearance in the story.

In order to interrupt Sandra's negative relationship with her daughter, Ansa involves the spiritual community to help Sandra reconsider her parental responsibilities. Ansa draws upon Nurse Bloom's attributes as wise former midwife and situates her as Sandra's counterpart during the conversation. Through poignant questions and personal narrative, Nurse Bloom successfully gets Sandra to reluctantly admit to and unravel her shame.

Nurse Bloom inquisitively confronts Sandra in her role as a mother. In contrast to her mother, Sandra is not able to meet her life challenges. She instead justifies her behavior with the motto: "[s]incerity is everything, and if you can fake that, you got it made" (*YKB* 113). Nurse Bloom is, contrastively, depicted as the well-experienced, "timeless" (*YKB* 105) country nurse, who does not like small talk and inefficiency. In her life-time, Nurse Bloom helped birth many black babies in Mulberry. She presently directs

---

Home". Their research considers the difference in homes with absent fathers in comparison with homes with present fathers among male adolescents. The value of extended families in African American life is underscored by the help Sandra receives from her parents (Rodney, Mupier 45-46). Staley notes that in the 1990s, the majority of single-parent households were headed by females (57). Andrew Hacker confirms that "[...] the ratio of black women-headed households remains discernibly [high]" (101). This tendency of children growing up in broken families increased in the late 1980s and 1990s to about 74 per cent (Rodney, Mupier 52).

the conversation toward the issues Sandra has with motherhood. Nurse Bloom's request for information about LaShawndra's birth (*YKB* 121) forces Sandra to deal with it. Nurse Bloom openly challenges Sandra to reevaluate her shame and her attitude toward her daughter and expects a response. "[...] what do you think is going to become of our children if we continue to be ashamed [...]" (*YKB*151). Nurse Bloom's return as living-dead to instruct Sandra allows the spirit world to interact with the natural realm. She adds ancestral timelessness to the novel's message. Nurse Bloom's question becomes contextualized within the reader's contemporary reality. Not just Sandra alone has to take responsibility for LaShawndra's moral decline but every adult also has to reconsider responsibility for the young generation. Ansa appeals to adults in the community to look at today's world and how it is, instead of expecting it to see how it used to be (Ansa in Smith Henderson 66).

Furthermore, Nurse Bloom helps Sandra identify the gaps in her mothering. "Did you tell LaShawndra [...] all [of] your history?" (*YKB* 139), Nurse Bloom inquires. Instead of providing a precise answer, Sandra becomes defensive and blames their lack of communication for LaShawndra's inability to listen. Human relationships with the living-dead manifest themselves as "real, active and powerful" (Mbiti 81). The women's conversation reflects these features. During their talk, Sandra is actively challenged to reconsider the voids in her relationship with LaShawndra, especially her lack of affection for LaShawndra (*YKB* 123, 179). When Sandra attempts to withhold information, Nurse Bloom imposes on, and reveals Sandra's thoughts through mind-reading (*YKB* 127). In this way, Nurse Bloom metaphorically helps to birth Sandra's critical view about her maternal responsibilities in LaShawndra's life. In addition, Sandra confesses her most

personal feelings of loneliness, her shame of being LaShawndra's mother and her jealousy not only to Nurse Bloom but more effectively to herself.

Nurse Bloom's ancestral confrontation of Sandra marks the turning point in Sandra's attitude. Sharing her personal story for the first time, Nurse Bloom teaches Sandra about emotional attachment and the great responsibilities of motherhood. Sandra's long-term attempt to separate herself from her daughter is negated because of Nurse Bloom's story. "You can throw her out of your life, but [...] you won't be able to throw her out of your heart" (*YKB* 179), Nurse Bloom concludes. Staley asserts that "it is essential for the single Black mother [and any single mother] to accept and love her [child] just because they exist – unconditionally" (Staley 63). While in *Baby Ansa* depicts Nurse Bloom as an educated efficient woman without any impairment, in *YKB*, however, Nurse Bloom appears more approachable during the revelation of her personal story of terminating her pregnancy. Nurse Bloom gives her hope that she can overcome her issues step by step in order to save the relationship to her daughter. We are told that ultimately "Nurse Bloom had gotten [her] thinking" (*YKB* 189).

Nurse Bloom encourages Sandra's motherly involvement in LaShawndra's life. LaShawndra and the mother-daughter relationship can only improve when Sandra accepts that, first, her life is imperfect, and second, LaShawndra is part of her life and thus she deserves motherly affection and attention. Sandra has to be willing, however, to overcome her frustration with LaShawn. "Children don't take after strangers" (*YKB* 159) is Nurse Bloom's advice. In order to save her daughter and, in return, herself, Sandra must surround LaShawndra with love and support. These attributes will help LaShawndra

better position herself within the community. Unlike Lily, Sandra does not fail LaShawndra since she begins to bless her with wisdom and good taste as instructed.

Sandra's "flicker of hope" (YKB 194) for change in LaShawndra's life affirms the centrality of maternal/parental involvement in children's lives. In this sense, Ansa positively encourages mothers and parents in general to take interest in and invest themselves in their children's lives. As Rodney and Mupier note, "[The] quality of family relationships, including factors such as adequate nurturing, love, and support rather than the composition of the family, influences the level of a child's self-esteem and self-concept" (47). In addition, McBride Muny et al. confirms that a greater parental involvement in the lives of the children, especially in areas such as school life or friendships, results in greater self-reliance, less psychological stress and less problem behavior for the children (143-144). Focusing on LaShawndra's personal growth becomes more important than profiling her mother and her grandmother, as the first two discussions might reveal. This might be the reason LaShawndra's chapter is entitled Love. This love is as two-fold as her identity in the natural world and her identity as caulbearer in the supernatural world. She must come to terms with both for successful self-identity. LaShawndra's quest for a more positive identity can only succeed with much guidance from her family and Mulberry's black community.

It is in the third episode entitled "Love" (YKB 195-322) that the reader actually encounters LaShawndra for the first time. LaShawndra entertains a distorted self-image fueled by her family's negative input and her peers' problematic choice of guiding

sources<sup>38</sup>. From her family, LaShawndra receives controversial feedback. Her grandmother lavishes her with love and supports her “little lifestyle” (*YKB* 274). Ironically, however, as mentioned earlier, she calls LaShawndra bad names and does not share information about her birth caul. Ansa implies that the caul does not only complicate the birth of a baby because they have to fight for every breath (*YKB* 187-188), but it also makes the life of a caulbearer more difficult. Lily knows about caul powers but does not inform her granddaughter about it. The withheld information consequently leaves a gap of knowledge in LaShawndra’s life. In *Baby*, Ansa provides information when Miss Lizzie returns as living-dead and shares her knowledge with Lena. LaShawndra’s mother chooses not to be involved in her daughter’s life, and when she is, she uses LaShawndra as a scapegoat. Lily’s attempt to comfort LaShawndra’s pain, caused by Sandra’s harmful comments, is only partly fruitful. Over time, LaShawndra has developed a negative image of her mother, even to the point that she is not even sure what role Sandra plays in her life (*YKB* 220).

In addition, LaShawndra’s television consumption fuels the negative image she has even of herself. Through the widely distributed 1990s music videos (Chung 2007, Bryant 2008), LaShawndra draws her knowledge about the music business which she desires to join as dancer and preferably as writer since she has talent using words. LaShawndra adopts behaviors and self-images as portrayed in the music videos for herself. Thus, she reduces her skills, which are valuable to others, to doing people’s

---

<sup>38</sup> Sheng Kuan Chung contends that the young generation who grows up with electronic media, uses it as “primary source [of] aesthetic experience and knowledge acquisition” (Chung 34). Media has major influence on the youth’s emotions, lifestyle, and vocabulary (Chung 34).

make-up and her sexuality<sup>39</sup>. In this way, she provides for herself things her mother or grandmother is unwilling to support. Music videos and TV shows are also her source of sometimes lewd youth language. Another negative influence on LaShawndra is her circle of acquaintances either who do not value her (*YKB* 224) or she does not consider them as friends. Moreover, LaShawndra also has a history of drug abuse, irregular school attendance, and other problems (*YKB* 210).

The caulbearer turns to music videos which become substitutions for the guidance offered by parents. The issue with music videos lies in the character of these media. Sheng Kuan Chung points to the strong influence “on the identity formation [...] and knowledge construction” of LaShawndra’s generation “which are manifested in the ways teens dress, express themselves, behave, and interact with each other” (Chung 33). In addition, Chung draws out that the content of many hip-hop music videos “perpetuate[s] gender stereotypes and discrimination and attempt to normalize unequal social behavior under the label of art” (Chung 33). Lacking critical instruction from adults for example about the consummation of music videos, hip-hop culture takes on the role as educational tool (Chung 34). In addition, LaShawndra is influenced by the negative portrayals of African American women in those music videos (Chung 34). Chung highlights that “hip-hop culture has continued to construct and maintain its identity/authenticity through the glorification of ghetto living conditions as violence, drug abuse, poverty, and prostitution” (35). As an art form, however, hip-hop has “the ability to empower youth and its integration of everyday activities into an aesthetic form that is meaningful and

---

<sup>39</sup> Chung warns that “young girls adopt a highly sexualized cultural capital to gain popularity in their own peer group” (34). He extends that “hip-hop music video sets the standard for what is considered attractive” (34). In terms of misogyny, music videos portray women as “objects of transient sexual gratification” (Chung 35).

relevant to youth culture” (Chung 35). “Authenticity is a key element in hip-hop’s identity and increased popularity – being true to oneself and keeping it real” (Chung 35). Yet the issue lies in the “explicit use of misogynic rhetoric and sexist imagery” (Chung 36) which the adolescence views unfiltered. “In a society where women have long been perpetuated as sexual symbols, the youth generation may not consider the sexism in hip-hop culture disturbing” (Chung 37). To find a medium that counteracts the powerful hip-hop culture and offers different perspectives on self and surrounding is relevant to educate today’s teenagers.

As explicitly as Ansa describes the caul rituals of caul tea and preserving the caul for Lena in *Baby*, she does not offer much information about this folk belief in *YKB*. Despite Nurse Bloom’s inquiries about abnormalities during LaShawndra’s birth (*YKB* 122) and Lily’s marginal comments about her knowledge of LaShawndra’s birth (*YKB* 52-53), Ansa’s descriptions of LaShawndra’s caul powers remain tied to the natural world. Lily acknowledges that ever since LaShawndra was born, “she has caused a stir, and she’s been doing this ever since” (*YKB* 25). In *Baby*, Ansa draws the connection of Lena’s visions of the supernatural world to her caul powers. In LaShawndra’s case, the reader must make this connection oneself, if at all.

Ansa’s inclusion of an epilogue narrated by LaShawndra indicates that processes of identity formation demand time and self-discipline for full execution. LaShawndra continues her quest of a positive identity. Her will, her family’s support, which has been shaped by the conversations with Miss Moses and Nurse Bloom, and her one encounter with Miss Eliza Jane are persuasive enough for her to change negative aspects of her life.



LaShawndra is lucky enough to always have somebody around who covers for her. She is also fortunate that the supernatural world chooses to help her by initiating her long journey to self. Ansa points out that the community around a child is responsible for putting much effort in positively counseling the child from youth into adolescence and adulthood. This is essential for rescuing children and teenagers from overwhelming and detrimental forces in their lives.

Most significant, Ansa implies that children, especially African American children, will be incomplete if they are not grounded in African American spirituality. Nevertheless, she is hopeful that children, who deal with difficulties, can change if they are willing to try.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

### *UGLY WAYS*

If juxtaposed against the positive message of reconciliation among the Pines women, as discussed in the third chapter, *Ugly Ways* (1993) promotes a rather dissatisfactory settlement of the generational conflict between another group of Ansa's female characters. In this concluding chapter, I argue that, Ansa does not directly engage with the caul theme as she does in *Baby*, *The Hand*, and *YKB*, however, the reader technically becomes, what I call, the caulbearer-by-proxy with the function of negotiating the seemingly impenetrable double conflict between the deceased Mudear Lovejoy and her three daughters, Bettie, Emily and Annie Ruth, who like Lena, attempt to find their personal identities. Ansa does not explicitly equip one of the fictional women in *UW* with the caul, the reader is put in this place. Through the act of reading/hearing the narratives/voices of the daughters in the natural world, and Mudear's narrative/voice in the supernatural, the reader accesses both worlds. The more Mudear's daughters try to separate themselves from the overwhelming influence of their deceased mother Esther (Mudear) Lovejoy from the supernatural, the more they give credit and credibility to her manipulating authority in their lives. This unsolved conflict between the Lovejoy women, particularly Mudear's postmortem/spiritual influence, inaugurates Ansa's authorial interest in the functional coexistence of the natural and supernatural realms. I argue therefore that through *Ugly Ways* and the Lovejoy women's mother-daughter tension,

Ansa does not only anticipate the mother-daughter dynamic in *Baby* but also implicitly validates the belief in the caul theme that she explores in her statement stories. Thus, although published after the caul-theme novel *Baby*, and before the caul-theme novels *The Hand*, and *YKB, Ugly Ways* becomes a perfect conclusion to this thesis. It brings my argument full circle.

In the first part of this chapter, I discuss the daughters' challenging attempts to claim their individual identities. Ansa portrays Betty, the oldest daughter, as the mother-in-proxy after Mudear's "change" during which she rid herself of the traditional mothering and nurturing responsibilities for her family. Betty is immediately put in charge of continuing the family routines and raising her sisters. Like Lena in the *The Hand*, she has little to no time left to tend to her own needs. Assuming a mature woman's role, Betty keeps her sisters balanced and the family life intact even in their mid-thirties and forties, the time of the novel's plot. Helping her sisters get a college education and create a life of their own, she continues to make sacrifices – time, monetary and otherwise. Calm, mature, objective and pragmatic, she becomes her sisters' shelter, comfort and moral arbiters for her sisters. Emily calls on her during a heated discussion with her littlest sister Annie Ruth. "Betty, say something! Say you agree with me. Say you haven't lost your mind or forgotten how it is to be Mudear's child or how it feel to be the crazy woman's child. Say something that make some sense. If *you* don't make sense, then what we gon' do "(*UW* 253). Instead of Mudear's harsh and minimalist ruling, Betty runs the family household with love and care.

In addition, Betty takes on the role of her parents' keeper. Staying back in her hometown Mulberry, she frequently visits her parents' house to look after the household.

In fact, her father recognizes Betty's car by its sound from her numerous weekly visits (UW 246). Her dedication even shows at Mudear's deathbed. "[Betty] knew she could do something for [the dead Mudear], make her look like her own self with some makeup and the hot curls. It was her duty" (UW 242).

Betty also narrates the family's history. Her recollections of their life with Mudear take up most of the plot because she is the only one of the three sisters who had experienced their mother before the change. Like Herman Melville's narrator Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, Betty "took her responsibility seriously" (UW 27) of telling her sisters about life with the mother Mudear. The second daughter Emily, in contrast, deals with great psychological issues which Mudear's absence has caused over the years. Despite a solid government job and her siblings' love, Emily still searches for herself, her independence. She is described as "unstable" and mentally weak. She, "whose eyes dangerously dart [...] here and there, always in search of something" (UW 13), is a state archivist in Atlanta and regularly sees a psychiatrist. Her low self-esteem and self-consciousness have left her in the margin of social life. As she introspects one time, "But me, I ain't never had nothing...nothing but my sisters. Lord if it hadn't been for them what would I have done? [...] She would have jumped off the Spring Street bridge, [...] no matter whether the riverbed was bone dry or flush with running muddy water" (UW 73). Emily strongly depends on her sisters' friendship and love, their financial and moral support. Her recollections of the early Mudear are minimal, thus she does not have any memory of emotional support from her mother.

The traits of her victimization due to Mudear's change easily surface in her daily routines. The town's people feel that she has gone crazy after her mother's dramatic

“change”. “Emily never went so far as to live up to her mother’s epithet of a “raving, ranting maniac” (*UW* 12). Emily’s helplessness and inability to conduct a regular life take her to the edge of committing suicide for escape. Her expectations on life are similar to those of Mudear’s. We are told that “Emily felt the same way Mudear did about never knowing what’s going to happen in your life or what you’ll do in any situation” (*UW* 197). Emily longs for a life in the emotional abyss between normality and pain. Her regular therapy hours, during which she recollects her childhood memories, do not offer an acceptable solution to her. Emily daily quarrels with the memories of her mother’s rearing. Her masochistic view of herself regularly takes her back to her childhood. She “had no intention of ‘coming back’. She liked it out there on the edge of the ravine, the chasm between sanity and insanity. Even as she signed the checks for her regular appointments with her psychiatrist, she knew that she would allow herself to be helped to normalcy only so much” (*UW* 224).

To Emily, being a mother amounts to becoming another Mudear. Because of her own experiences of growing up with a mother who is physically present yet disengaged in her daughters’ lives, Emily completely rejects any thought about motherhood. To her, a mother’s responsibility stops with breastfeeding. She does not connect motherly love and compassion with motherhood. Seemingly, because of these perspectives and false assumptions, she decides to abort her one and only baby.

The youngest daughter, Annie Ruth, chooses to move away from Mulberry. She decides on a life in the media world on the east coast. After her nervous breakdown as an anchorwoman in Washington, D.C., she moves to the west coast. In Los Angeles, she continues her work on television. Since then, she leads a well-to-do life with expensive

clothes and the world's riches. Yet, despite the great distance to her hometown and to Mudear, she is aware of her mother's authoritarian influence: "Shit, I feel like her hanging around me all the time all the way out in that godforsaken L.A.'" (*UW* 253). Not only is Mudear's spirit at work in Annie Ruth's life, Annie Ruth also has to deal with engrained habits that linger from her mother's rearing. According to the narrator, "For years, Annie Ruth [...] had to fight the impulse to throw [...] panties in the bathroom sink each night after [she] took them off" (*UW* 210). In her anxiety, Annie Ruth sees imaginary cats as a relic from a childhood experience. Dale-Green proposes that cats symbolize either spirituality or omen of death (72) as well as traitor (112) or trickster-like (114) features. In regards to Mudear's reigning of her daughters' lives in life and in death, she proves to embody all of these aspects. Since Annie Ruth was not raised by her mother, she, nevertheless, experiences all facets of her mother in form of these cat visions. In that sense, Annie Ruth receives the same treatment as Betty and Emily.

Raised mainly by her older sisters, Annie Ruth depends on their approval for her life. Any disapproval from them causes her anxiety attacks. She "felt trapped by her sister's reaction to the news of her pregnancy and was finding it harder and harder to breathe. She took a few more deep breaths to try to control the quaking feeling in the pit of her stomach" (*UW* 43). Her sisters' disapproving reactions on knowing about her pregnancy turn into a trial situation for Annie Ruth's independence. Despite an oath between the sisters against motherhood, Annie Ruth decides to keep the child. To her, the child means finally becoming her own person because her pregnancy is independent of Mudear's doing (*UW* 32). It is important to notice that Betty, the other sister, can only claim her two beauty shops, Lovejoy 1 and 2, as her own successes. Because Emily has

her difficult psychological situation, the baby becomes even more important for Annie Ruth.

In spite of this liberating experience, however, Annie Ruth daily needs Betty's guidance, especially in difficult situations such as Mudear's death. In that sense, her position as the youngest and baby of the family remains until the novel's end. The lives of the three women and their habits bear witness to Mudear's incredible influence, despite her emotional absence. However, the women's struggle with self actualization continues under the shadow of Mudear's hovering ubiquitous spirit, and dictation. "The girls had to shift the focus," the narrator says, "the line in which they were growing, when Mudear changed, became as she called it 'a woman in her own shoes'" (*UW* 212).

It should be noted, nonetheless, that Mudear's death ironically leaves positive, cathartic effects on the women. Bennett argues correctly that Mudear's "brand of feminism" (Bennett in Perry and Weak, 443) turned out to be successful and effective for her daughters because "in the end, her three daughters are better women because they have been forced to stand alone and be strong" (443). Each of the daughters has made a promising career and established social and economic security to a certain extent. These successes are, however, debatable in that the women are more emotionally unbalanced and have yet to deal with the painful burden of their mother's actions for over forty years. In addition, on the one hand, the novel does not clarify that the women's lives have indeed fundamentally changed after their mother's funeral. The reader only witnesses the intention of changing and "work[ing] on happy and peaceful and appreciative and joyful" (*UW* 270). On the other hand, nevertheless, Ansa does not offer much space for a kind of Mudear-related communication which could cause healing to the remaining members of

the family. Nagueyalti Warren calls the sisters' problem a neurosis, and argues that "Each is a career woman and each is immensely unhappy" ("Resistant Mothers" 199). Warren adds that the daughters' inability to enjoy their prosperities stems from their mother's unwillingness to lovingly tend to them during their childhood years. She defines it as the 'daughters' greatest pains' ("Resistant Mothers" 200). Concurring with Weak and Perry, Warren nevertheless claims that Ansa presents a paradoxical situation, "namely that daughters often misunderstand and misinterpret the essential lessons of their mothers" (200).

Although the penultimate chapter of the novel indicates the beginning of a possible restoration of the daughters' emotional health, the ultimate ending of the story undermines any hope for realized improvement of the sisters' strengths. This is evident in the cathartic last gathering of the Lovejoy women at Parkinson's funeral parlor. The struggle for their personal identities and lives continues past Mudear's funeral. The more the sisters aim at living their own lives, the more they have to fight for separation from their mother's lifelong influence.

The reader as caulbearer-by-proxy is essential for finding a solution to this family conflict. The separation between the natural and the supernatural world embodies the struggles between the mother and the daughters. Ansa validates the two worlds on account of the caulbearer's existence and through Mudear's influential voice from the afterlife. Ansa visualizes the caul related supernatural theme through the novel's overall structure. The novel itself is divided in chapters which contain retrospective narratives of the Lovejoy family members before Mudear's "change", enveloped in the narrated preparation of Mudear's funeral. The story is framed around the nearly twenty-four hours



before Mudear's funeral in the same fictional Mulberry, Georgia. Through the chapters' alternating organization, Ansa intertwines the natural and the supernatural within close contextual proximity. Mudear's responses and comments to the narrated events of the Lovejoy sisters are printed in italics and are set apart through different chapters. The italicized chapters establish Mudear's verbal intervention. On one hand, her comments on preceding chapters either verify the statements or offer further explanation. On the other hand, they can also be contradicting or disapproving. Ansa gives the deceased Mudear space to act and interact in the natural world (of the book) and with the reader with whom Mudear shares her insight. The reader becomes Mudear's audience. Ansa installs the reader as caulbearer, a gateway between the two worlds. So, instead of equipping one of the novel's characters with the caul's clairvoyance, she hands the caul privilege or burden of these visionary powers to the reader. In that way, the triangular interactions between the reader as caulbearer, the natural world represented by the Lovejoy sisters and the Mulberry community, and the deceased Mudear take place through and because of the reader. In the space of nine chapters, as against the more than 20 chapters devoted to Lovejoy sisters' stories, Mudear speaks in monologues and tells her perspectives on truth thereby giving the reader a fuller picture of things. In a literal and metaphorical sense, the supernatural through Mudear as living-dead becomes necessary. The reader as caulbearer, nevertheless, gives tangible and visible attributes to this realm.

The final scene of *UW* (*UW* 260-273) is an attempt at a perception of closure and a redirection of focus after wailing over Mudear's body. It signals a change for the sisters compared to their former lives. This ritual prepares them to move on and away from Mudear's influence. But Ansa denies this gorge between the natural and the supernatural

world. For this reason, the living-dead Mudear and her daughters remain connected. First, Mudear gets to speak in the concluding chapter of the novel. Second, she sends the message of having the will to continue to interfere with her daughters' lives, especially in Annie Ruth's soon-to-be motherhood, which Ansa realizes in her most current novel *Taking After Mudear* (2007). Her daughters do not long for the contact, yet she wants to keep her past and authority in her daughters' present lives. This constellation shows that the ancestors are always present, but their influence is limited. The question of resolution remains. Should there be no healing for the daughters? They remain broken and incomplete in their quest for peace of mind and independent identities.

The daughters' searches for identities apart from their mother's influence turn into lifelong struggles against engrained habits and the mother's influence which reaches beyond the grave. Ansa's novel signals the impossible separation from childhood influences, such as Mudear and her "change". De Weever negates the mother's claiming of her daughters (16). She offers a new viewing as the "battle [between the mother and daughters develop] that, while it prods the daughter[s] along the road to authenticity and self-definition, lays bare the bitterness of the mother's strength" (16). The women's struggle against the influence of the mother gradually moves toward its climax when the deceased mother intrudes her daughter's, Annie Ruth, life again in shape of a cat/ghost, as presented in Ansa's latest novel *Taking after Mudear* (2007). Taking up the caul theme again, Ansa unites the three daughters for the birth of Annie Ruth's baby in Mulberry again. With a dead Mudear, Annie Ruth becomes this tabula rasa, onto which at least one of the Lovejoy daughters can inscribe a new identity and ideas of motherhood. Unfortunately, Ansa does not fully allow this creation. In her latest novel, Ansa identifies

two caulbearers, Mudear and the newborn baby MaeJean, who fill in the narrative gaps in the natural and the supernatural world. At the same time, she elaborates on the cat symbolism, which becomes Mudear's choice of return. Once again, Betty, Emily, Annie Ruth, and their father have to fight against Mudear's overpowering presence in their lives. But this time, they stand up united against a driven Mudear who wants to have a hand in raising the newest member of the family. Ansa's latest novel is driven by four narrative voices, which demand much tolerance from the reader in terms of accepting overly dynamic encounters of the natural and the supernatural. Ansa's sequel to *UW* closes many of the narrative gaps left in *UW*, however, the narrative plot appears to be overwhelming and in times confusing. One is tempted to describe Ansa's latest take on the caul theme as exhausted.

To sum up, in this thesis I have discussed Ansa's novels *Baby of the Family*, *The Hand I Fan With*, *You Know Better*, and *Ugly Ways* in terms of Ansa's employment of the caul theme as literary device and tool to restore African American folk beliefs.

In chapter 1 on *Baby*, I discussed how the presence of the caul complicates Lena's life, this universally valid yet personal transformation from child to young adult. Lena's mother Nellie disrupts the cyclical nature and balanced communication of the spiritual and the material worlds embodied in her daughter. As Geta LeSeur states "[contemporary] Black writers have [...] turned their attention inward, seeking to identify the traditions of their race by defining people individually, thus capturing a collective experience that is unique in terms of its circumstances of history and geography" (2). The scientific skepticism embodied in Nellie disrupts rituals and constantly discredits folk beliefs. When science fails, folk beliefs rise in importance. In that way, Lena's coming of

age equals a process of refinement and reestablishment of the crucial position that folk beliefs should allegorically maintain in a modern world. This constant struggle between these opposing world views, to which Lena's life bears witness, directs her character and by extension folk beliefs, which undergo refinement and reevaluation in the everyday life of southern African Americans.

In chapter 2 on *The Hand*, I argued that only a member of the supernatural world can heal and teach Lena as a woman in her forties to find peace and strength in her double-layered identity. Given that both novels, *Baby* and *The Hand*, depict Lena's struggle in life to find her true identity and claim her birthright, it is beneficial to read *The Hand* as an extension of Lena's quest for identity having begun in *Baby*. In her quest, Lena calls to the spiritual world by means of conjure for a/her man.

Lena plays multiple roles within the community of Mulberry. She is a businesswoman; she is also family and educator for the town's homeless kids. Because of the fortune and blessing of her birth caul, Lena is friend and role model to many in and around her hometown. However, she is emotionally and spiritually drained empty from all the responsibilities the community puts on her. The supernatural response is the ancestral figure of one-hundred-year-old African American Herman who ultimately functions as guide, mentor, friend, and lover for Lena. As the caul-enabled, physical intersection between the natural and the supernatural worlds, Lena can only be fully actualized and satisfied if she literally lives in both realities: the natural and the supernatural. The community's claiming of Lena pulls her too far into the natural world and detaches her from the supernatural ties which are life-sustaining to Lena. Herman, who appears as a ghost upon Lena's plea, becomes the community's counterpoint for

Lena's attention. In Herman (literally "her man"), Ansa creates a direct counterweight to the Mulberry community's pressures on Lena's life. In setting up this constellation, Ansa rejects the community's egotistic claim of Lena.

Furthermore, Ansa employs the one-hundred-years old Herman, born to free African Americans, to successfully amplify Rachel's message in *Baby* that African Americans can be anywhere they want to be and belong anywhere on this earth. In this continuation of African American history, Ansa strengthens the connection of the past via the present to the future.

In chapter 3 on *YKB*, I argued for LaShawndra's need of spiritual strength as initiator of her quest for identity. Ansa states in an interview with Sharon Smith Henderson that the children's generation, which LaShawndra represents, somehow end(ed) up knowing too much of the wrong things and not enough about the right things (Ansa in Henderson 66). She adds that "we [today's society] are in trouble [... because] most children don't feel loved; they feel they are an intrusion, that they are throw-aways" (66). Geta LeSeur points out that "contemporary Black writers have turned [...] their attention inward, seeking to identify the traditions of their race by defining people individually, thus capturing a collective experience that is unique in terms of its circumstances of history and geography" (LeSeur 2). Although LeSeur does not specifically address *You Know Better* in her chapters, the argument for the black bildungsroman applies to it nonetheless.

The love of an ancestral woman to whose encounter the caul enables LaShawndra triggers her to decide on life-changing and challenging modifications. This gives evidence to the caul theme's versatile application in African American literature, adds to

the reintegration of the supernatural and the natural as well as the “interesting aspects of the [time and space] continuum” (Morrison, 343). The concluding reunification of the Pines women essentially lets hope arise for black families in the future.

In the final discussion of *Ugly Ways*, I argued for Ansa’s installment of a caulbearer-by-proxy in order to negotiate the presence of the supernatural and the natural. In the preceding chapters, the caulbearers Lena and LaShawndra function as intersections between the two worlds. Despite the lack of an actual caulbearer in *Ugly Ways*, Ansa presents a different feature of the caul theme and an extension of its representation in *Ugly Ways*. Although, none of *Ugly Ways* characters is born with an actual caul, the caul theme, nevertheless, is implicitly still present. On the one hand, Ansa visually and structurally makes the reader aware of these intersections. The Mudear-chapters as representation of the supernatural world are printed in italics and interrupt the novel’s structural outline as well as the protagonists’ individual narratives as representation of the natural world. On the other hand, the protagonists’ lives bear witness to the deceased’s constant presence to which their considerate behaviors are evidence.

Nevertheless, Ansa’s presentation of the supernatural interactions with the natural world as suggested in this novel has not found any critical consideration. In her earlier mentioned essay “Rootedness”, Morrison contends the “blend[ing of] those two worlds together at the same time [is] enhancing” (342). However, now, the novel’s visual structures and context take on the function of indicating the caul theme and the intersection of the two worlds. Especially, the youngest Lovejoy sister, Annie Ruth, is most aware of a supernatural dimension in her life which reveals itself to her through visions of cats. Her maturation progress is measured by these cat appearances. She is not

able, however, to ultimately break with her mother's influence from the postmortem sphere.

As discussed in this thesis, Ansa's novels bear witness to various functions the caul theme fulfills in terms of plot dynamics and characters' identity formations. She makes the co-existence of the natural and the supernatural appear plausible, and is able to creatively open up the folk beliefs of the caul and the living-dead to African Americans as well as a wider readership. It lies within each individual's reach to find out the changing opportunities as one claims his/her identity. It is yet to be seen, in which ways, Ansa chooses to make even more aware of folk beliefs in the next phase of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adjaye, Joseph K. ed. *Time in the Black Experience*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994. Print.
- Ansa, Tina McElroy. *Baby of the Family*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1989. Print.
- Ansa, Tina McElroy. *Ugly Ways*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993. Print.
- Ansa, Tina McElroy. *The Hand I Fan With*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1996. Print.
- Ansa, Tina McElroy. *You Know Better*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers Perennial, 2002. Print.
- Ansa, Tina McElroy. *Taking after Mudear*. St. Simons Island: DownSouthPress, 2007. Print.
- Baird, Keith E. and Mary A. Twining. Eds. *Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia*. Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1991. Print.
- Barthold, Bonnie J. *Black Time. Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981. Print.
- Benes, Peter. ed. *Wonders of the Invisible World: 1600-1900*. Boston: Boston UP, 1995. Print.
- Bennett, Barbara. *Comic Visions, Female Voices: Contemporary Women Novelists and Southern Humor*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, c1998. Print.
- Brogan, Kathleen. *Cultural Haunting*. Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 1998. Print.
- Brown, Elsa Barkley and Thomas C. Holt, eds. *Major Problems in African-American History Volume II – From Freedom to “Freedom Now,” 1865-1990s*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000. Print.
- Butler, Octavia E. *Kindred*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1979. Print.
- Carroll, Rebecca. *I know What The Red Clay Looks Like*. New York: Carol Southern Books, 1994. Print.
- Cole, Herbert M. *Mbari, Art and Life among the Owerri Igbo*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, c1982. Print.



- Coleman, James W. *Faithful Vision*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006. Print.
- Courlander, Harold. *A Treasure of Afro- American Folklore*. New York: Marlowe & Company. 1996. Print.
- Dale-Green, Patricia. *The Archetypal Cat*. Dallas, Texas: Spring Publications, Inc., 1963. Print.
- Demetrakopoulos, Stephanie A. and Karla F. Holloway. *New Dimensions of Spirituality*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987. Print.
- De Vita, Novella Brooks. "Abiku Babies: Spirit Children and Human Bonding in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*, and Tina McElroy Ansa's *Baby of the Family*". *Griot*.24,1. (2005) 18-24. Print.
- Disheroon-Green, Suzanne and Lisa Abney,eds. *Songs of the Reconstructing South*. Westport:Greenwood Press, 2002. Print.
- Dorson, Richard M. ed. *Negro Folktales in Michigan*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1956. Print.
- Dundes, Alan ed. *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro- American Folklore*. New Jersey: Prentice- Hall, 1976. Print.
- Eastman, Roger, eds.*The Ways of Religion* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.
- Evans,Mari, ed. *Black Women Writers (1950-1980) A Critical Evaluation*. New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1984. Print.
- Folks, Jeffrey and Nancy Summers Folks eds. *The World is our Home – Society and Culture in Contemporary Southern Writing*. Lexington: The UP of Kentucky, 2000. Print.
- Foster, Genevieve W. and David J. Hufford. *The World Was Flooded with Light*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985. Print.
- Frankel, Barbara. *Childbirth in the Ghetto: Folk Beliefs of Negro Women in a North Philadelphia Hospital Ward*. San Franscisco: R & E Research Associates, Inc., 1977. Print.
- Friedel, Tania. *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism in Twentieth-Century African American Writing*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.

- Fulop, Timothy E. and Albert J. Raboteau, eds. *African- American Religion*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Furstenberg, Frank F. "The Sociology of Adolescence and Youth in the 1990s: A Critical Commentary." *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 62, 4. (November 2000). 896-910. Print.
- Gayle Jr., Addison. ed. *The Black Aesthetic*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1972. Print.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1993. Print.
- Golden, Marita.ed. *Wild Women Don't Wear No Blues*. New York: Doubleday, 1993. Print.
- Groover, Kristina K. ed. *Things of the Spirit*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004. Print.
- Groover, Kristina K. *The Wilderness within*. Fayetteville: The Univ. of Arkansas Press,1999. Print.
- Heiss, Jerold. "Effects of African American Family Structure on School Attitudes and Performance". *Social Problems*. 43,3. (Aug. 1996). 246-267. Print.
- Herskovits, Melville. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969. Print.
- Holloway, Joseph E, ed. *Africanisms in American Culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990. Print.
- Hufford, David J. *The Terror That Comes In The Night*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. Print.
- Hull, Mary. *Struggle and Love 1972-1997*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1997. Print.
- Jacobs, Claude F. and Andrew J. Kaslow. *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991. Print.
- Jackson, Kennell. *America is Me: 170 Fresh Questions and Answers on Black American History*. New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1996. Print.
- Jell-Bahlsen, Sabine. *The Water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology: Ogbuide of Oguta Lake*. Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, c2008. Print.
- Jones- Jackson, Patricia. *When Roots Die*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1987. Print.

- Jordan, Shirley M. *Broken Silences*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993. Print.
- Joyner, Charles. *Down by the Riverside*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984. Print.
- June, Lee N. ed. *The Black Family Past, Present, & Future*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991. Print.
- Kraft, Marion. *The African Continuum and Contemporary African American Women Writers*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 1995. Print.
- Kövecses, Zoltan. *Metaphor in Culture Universality and Variation*. Cambridge: UP, 2005. Print.
- Leach, Maria.ed. *Funk & Wagnalls The Standard Dictionary of Folklore Mythology and Legend*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1949. Vol 1. A-1. Print.
- Leather, Ella Mary. *The Folk- Lore of Herefordshire*. Yorkshire, England: S.R. Publishers Limited, 1970. Print.
- Leseur, Geta. *Ten Is The Age Of Darkness*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press. 1995. Print.
- Levin, Amy K. *Africanism and Authenticity in African- American Women's Novels*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003. Print.
- Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, (30<sup>th</sup> edition). Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977/2007. Print.
- Mbiti, John S. *Introduction to African Religion* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Oxford: Heinemann Publishers, 1990. Print.
- McBride Muny, Velma, et.al. "African American Single Mothers and Children in Context: A Review of Studies on Risk and Resilience". *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*. (2001) 4,2. 133-158. Print.
- McElya, Micki. *Clinging to Mammy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. Print.
- McGill, Lisa D. "Thinking back through the mother: the poetics of place and the mother/ daughter dyad in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*". *Black Scholar*. (Summer 2000) 30,2. 34-40. Print.
- Meyer, Kuno. *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*. Vol 12. 1918. Print.

- Moberg, David O. *Aging and Spirituality*. New York: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2001. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1987. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Knopf, 1977. Print.
- Nichols, Patricia C. "Storytelling in Carolina". *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*. Vol. 20, No.3: (September 1989). pp. 232-245. *Wiley Online Library*. Web. 1 December 2007.
- Nwapa, Flora. *Efuru*. London: Heinemann. 1966. Print.
- O'Brien Wicker, Kathleen. "African Religion and Spirituality". in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings, and Expressions*. ed. Jacob K. Olupona. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000. 198-222. Print.
- Ochs, Carol. *Women and Spirituality*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997. Print.
- Olupona, Jacob K. ed. *African Spirituality- Forms, Meanings and Expressions*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000. Print.
- Okonkwo, Christopher N. "Of Caul and Response: *Baby of the Family*, Ansa's neglected Metafiction of the veil of blackness". *CLA Journal* (49:2), Dec 2005. 144-167. Print.
- Okonkwo, Christopher N. *A Spirit of Dialogue: Incarnations of Ogbañje, the Born-to-Die, in African American Literature*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, c2008. Print.
- Okpewho, Isidore and Carole Boyce Davies and Ali A. Mazrui. eds. *The African Diaspora*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2001. Print.
- Parham, Marisa. *Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- Parsons, Elsie Clews. *Folk- Lore of the Sea Islands, South Carolina*. Cambridge, Mass: American Folk- Lore Society, 1923. Print.
- Parsons, Susan Frank.ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. Print.
- Perry, Carolyn, and Marie Louise Weaks, eds. *The History of Southern Women's Literature*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, c2002. Print.

- Pollitzer, William S. *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1999. Print.
- Puckett, Newbell Niles. *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969. Print.
- Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion – The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978. Print.
- Reid, E. Shelley. “Beyond Morrison and Walker: Looking good and looking forward in contemporary black women’s stories”. *African American Review*. 34.2. (2000). 313-329. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 7 January 2008.
- Savannah Unit Georgia Writers’ Project Work Projects Administration. *Drums and Shadows*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940. Print.
- Schrager, Cynthia D. “Both Sides of the Veil: Race, Science, and Mysticism in W.E.B. Du Bois”. *American Quarterly*. 48.4 (1996) 551-586. Print.
- Simpson, George Eaton. *Black Religions in the New World*. New York: Columbia UP, 1978. Print.
- Stuckey, Sterling. *Slave Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. Print.
- Thomas, H. Nigel. *From Folklore to Fiction A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988. Print.
- Town, Caren J. “A Whole World of Possibilities Spinning Around Her: Female Adolescence in the Contemporary Southern Fiction of Josephine Humphreys, Jill McCorkle, and Tina Ansa.” *Southern Quarterly*. 42.2. (Winter 2004) 89-109. *Literature Online*. Web. 1 December 2007.
- Town, Caren. *The New Southern Girl*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2004. Print.
- Wade- Gayles, Gloria. ed. *My Soul is my witness African- American Women’s Spirituality*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search Of Her Mother’s Garden*. New York: A Harvest/ HBJ Book, 1984. Print.
- Warren, Nagueyalti. “Echoing Zora: Ansa’s other Hand in *The Hand I fan with*”. *CLA Journal*. 46.3. (2003) 362-382. Print.
- Warren, Nagueyalti and Sally Wolff, eds. *Southern Mothers*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999. Print.

- Washington, Elsie B. "Conjuring Made Easy: Ansa's Heroine Summons a Mystical Love." *QBR*. February 1997. Print.
- Weever, Jacqueline de. *Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991. Print.
- Woods, Paula L. "Tina McElroy Ansa's Spirited, Southern Style." *Emerge*. Vol.8 October. (1996). P.75. Print.
- Vint, Sherryl. "'Only by Experience': Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo- Slave Narratives." *Science-fiction Studies*. 34.2. (2007) 241-262. *JSTOR Arts & Sciences V Collection*. Web. 4 December 2007.