

1996

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DWELLING IN POSSIBILITY: AESTHETICIZING IDENTITY IN AFRICAN
AMERICAN WOMEN'S FICTION

by

WHITNEY GLOCKNER

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Senior Scholar's Program.

COLBY COLLEGE
1996

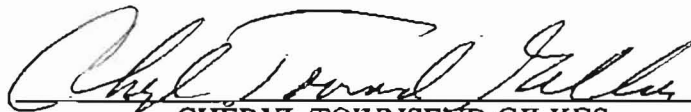
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I dedicate this Senior Scholar's Paper to my first mentor,
and the woman responsible for my love of the written word:
my big sister Jennie.
You are the most real superwoman I know.

A most heart felt grazié to Cedric Gael Bryant, Thank you for guiding me with elevated
grace and sensitivity. You are someone I will always look up to.

I give special thanks to my readers Charlie Bassett and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes for all
their help; I apologize for the abundant "in whiches."

Thank you to Gingee and Robee, for everything.

Tony and Morenike, you offered endless support despite great tracts
of land and water between us, thank you both.

Finally, I would like to thank the Independent Studies Committee for granting me the
opportunity to do a Senior Scholars Project.

Abstract

African American women writers define aesthetics through their negotiation of identity in the politicized loci of space, place and voice. In the balkanization of such issues of voice and space, we can see the ways that the emergent self is embodied and aestheticized in literature. To do so creates a more tactile and “art-full” representation of the self rather than a representation of identity as a mere abstract concept. To use written language to express the self is to carry processes of self-definition for black women into the realm of creative production. For women, especially black women, who are a politically and socially compromised element of society, the written word is a way of expressing the politically and the socially critical voice that is suppressed in other forums of expression. Using theories on “writing in difference” as a skeleton key, this project seeks to outline some of the ways that black women writers use aesthetic elements in their art to express the potential for self-examination, discovery, and emancipation.

Part I : Introduction and Theory

I dwell in Possibility—
A fairer House than Prose.
More numerous in Windows
Superior for doors.
— Emily Dickinson

I see a greater and greater commitment among black women writers to understand self, multiplied in terms of the community, the community multiplied in terms of the nation, and the nation multiplied in terms of the world. You have to understand what your place as an individual and the place of the person who is close to you. You have to understand the space between you before you can understand more complex or larger groups. Thus, the exploration of this space is a main focal point in our work.
— Alexis De Veaux

That I begin this excursion through African American women's literature with a citation from an Emily Dickinson poem may seem odd. However, I choose this poem because it focuses on location and potential in literature. What Dickinson has done in this poem is to aestheticize, or make specific artistic elements of her place and space¹ in the world as a

¹ The phrase *place and space* may appear to be a tautology; however, I make a distinction between the two. Place refers to a physical location with barriers, as in a house, a town or even a geographic region (that has distinct physical qualities). Space, I would argue, is a more abstract reference to confinement and/or freedom and the ways that people react to circumstances of space. Where, Dickinson is identifying a physical place in which she lives as a place that is positive and will allow her to explore, she is also identifying a more abstract space: the space to create. This distinction acknowledges that the spiritual and the physical reaction to place and space are intimately bound together, and yet distinct. To say that the physical place is merely a metaphor for the spiritual would be to deny the physical reality which shapes so much of the spiritual in women's literature.

positive space that offers creative possibilities through language. That Dickinson has identified a voice with which to express this place is implicit in the poem's existence. The metaphorizing of space, place, and voice makes aesthetic the politicized and personal ways that Dickinson negotiates these elements in her life and translates them into creative expression. She has placed her debate profoundly in the realm of art and the expression of her identity through that medium using the various tropes available to her as an artist. She uses elements such as metaphor and symbol that appeal to our sense of the aesthetic to broaden our understanding of the self and the potential of the personal and the political in her work. Furthermore, it is because Dickinson can express her identity through her art that it appeals to the reader and can be made accessible to her readership through language.

African American women writers also define aesthetics out of the ways that they negotiate identity in the politicized loci of space, place and voice. The claiming and exploration of voice through innovative language represents ultimate possibilities for the expression of female identity. In Dickinson's poem, "dwelling" reflects how the speaker is grounded in the interior spaces where she lives. With language she builds the place of her dwelling, a dwelling of possibility. That women have intimate relationship with the spaces that they dwell in and the ways they move through and negotiate space in their art represent the of possibility "interiority" as well as the possibility of mobility inside and out of these spaces.² The fact that Dickinson names her medium as poetry not prose

² In an interview with Robert Stepto titled "Intimate Things in Place," Toni Morrison puts words to the idea of "interiority" in her literature by saying: "I think it is just a woman's strong sense of being in a

is less important than her choice to locate the creative self in writing and to view writing as a way to express her world: her house.

In the balkanization of such issues of voice and space we can see the ways that the emergent self is embodied and aestheticized in literature. To do so creates a more tactile and “art-full” representation of the self rather than a representation of identity as a mere abstract concept. To use language to express the self is to carry processes of self-definition for black women into the realm of creative production. For women, especially black women, who continue to be politically and socially threatened members of society, the written word is a way of expressing the politically and the socially critical voice that is suppressed in other forums of expression.

As bell hooks puts it, “language is also a place of struggle” (1990, 145). Language, or the power to use voice to tell a story, is an act of confidence and recognition of the self in speech. Just as important as claiming voice and using it is the way that women use and create a language to express the self. As hooks notes, the writer must make a choice in the language that she uses and that choice is as important to locating herself in a discourse of literature as what it says: “The politics of location necessarily calls those of us who

room, a place, or in a house. Sometimes my relationship to things in a house would be a little different from say my father's or my sons'. . . . I do very intimate things “in place”: I am sort of rooted in it so that writing about being in a room looking out, or being in a world, looking out, or living in a small definite place, is probably very common among most women anyway” (11). Interiority, then, is that sense of place and space that is integral to the works of many women writers, especially African American women writers. “Place and space” does not necessarily only refer to rooms or houses or actual interior spaces; space can be the emotional space in which a character exists. As Marilyn Sanders Mobley notes, “Morrison discovers what Adrienne Rich refers to as a ‘whole new psychic geography to be explored,’ and what Morrison herself identifies as the ‘interior life of black people under those circumstances’” (359). The circumstances that Morrison refers to might be the circumstances of space and place that she mentions to Stepto. Interiority, I would suggest, is not a thematic motif or a singular element in African American fiction, but rather is a central concern the literature that is manifested through theme, metaphor, voice and the overall structure of the novels.

would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of re-vision” (145). In the realm of literature this process allows women who address issues of identity and social thought in their work to be considered participants in what hooks calls counter-hegemonic cultural practice.

To say that language is a “place of struggle” is to acknowledge the moment in literature in which women are able to step out of their “place” in society and use their language to further the struggle for identity and the self in both literature and society.

Where women locate themselves in the discourse of literature and *how* they move in the space in which they locate themselves in is both cultural and political re-vision:

Language is also a place of struggle. We are wedded in language, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle. Dare I speak to oppressed and oppressor in the same voice? Dare I speak to you in a language that will move beyond the boundaries of domination—a language that will not bind you, fence you in, or hold you? Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle. (hooks, 1990, 146)

The fact that this “place” of struggle for African American women in literature lies in the margins of other more historically oppressive traditions of literature emphasizes the need for black women writers to both identify the language with which they speak and the content of what they write as art that is revisionary; both as literature and as social and political commentary, fiction by black women must move toward defining the self for oneself in a language that lives for the writer.

De Veaux suggests that as a direct result of black women writers’ commitment to understanding the self in society through literature, community, and nation is an emphatic

assertion that self-definition is a necessary and healing process in overcoming the oppression that has kept them knocking at the doors of western tradition. Some theorists define a discourse of women's and African American literature and self-expression as different from that of men or people of other races in its conception, aims, and tropes. In doing so they are acknowledging the connection between the ways African American women define the self and the ways it is expressed in literature. They further acknowledge that to explore and love the self in literature is to create the potential for that expression and self-definition to take place in reality. The discourse that addresses the racialized and gendered differences in writing (a discussion often referred to as "writing in difference") allows interpretation not just of subject matter but also of method as it pertains to subject matter. Therefore, if there is a body of literature that is thematically about self-affirmation and self-definition, it utilizes the aesthetic possibilities of voice, space, movement, memory, and relationships not just for aesthetic pleasure but also to express aspects of identity.

When Dickinson, hooks, and De Veaux all use images of space and place in their poetry, prose, and analysis, they are acknowledging that in some way the issues of space and place are intimately tied to the ways in which they perceive the creative element in themselves. That several women writers use similar metaphors in their work is not coincidence; it is evidence that enough women feel strongly enough about interior spaces and the significance of their physical and political location in society that it becomes a characteristic of their literature. It also means that there is a direct connection between the aesthetic and the political that is grounded in women's conception of their position in

society as represented by certain cultural signifiers or experiences that identify a common female experience.

The discourse of theory and analysis that studies the relationship between the political, social, and aesthetic and gender in literature is powerful and important both in terms of literary accomplishment and social implication for African American women. In her essay "Trajectories of Self-Definition," Barbara Christian artfully and concisely expresses the possibility that African American women's literature can be a social force with which to shape identity:

For what African American women have been permitted to express, in fact to contemplate as part of the self, is gravely affected by other complex issues. The development of Afro-American women's fiction is, in many ways the mirror image of the intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism in this country. And while many of us grasp this in terms of economics of social status, we often forget the toll it takes in terms of self-expression and therefore self-empowerment. To be able to use the range of one's own voice, to attempt to express the totality of self, is a recurring struggle in the tradition of these writers from the nineteenth century to the present. (234).

The search for the self as presented in literature, then, is a means of accessing the sexual and racial conflicts of identity for African American writers as well as a means of asserting identity through the act of claiming voice and dominion. Patricia Hill Collins adds to Christian's concept of literature as a means of asserting and discovering the self by defining the African American woman's search for the self in American culture as a form of understanding and negotiating the differences between a culturally and personally constructed life: one as a Black woman and one as the "other" in society:

Why this theme of self-definition should preoccupy African American women is not surprising. Black women's lives are a series of negotiations

that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African American women with our objectification as the Other. (94)

To define an identity in fiction that allows for the separation of the self from society's projections of it allows the African American woman to truly identify themselves as an individuals separate from stereotype and strict social constructions of gender and racial identity. In trying to move away from a study of identity as stereotype in literature, the question presents itself of how black women, under the controlling forces of a racist and patriarchal hegemony, define themselves outside of stereotypical constructions of black womanhood as other than mammies, mothers, wives, sex objects, and matriarchs ³.

African American women have been constructed politically and culturally as "other" in American society since they first stepped on this soil. Their otherness can be constructed in terms of "white supremacy," which bell hooks notes is a term that enables liberal whites, feminists, and even blacks "to recognize not only that black people are socialized to embody the values and attitudes of white supremacy, but that we can exercise 'white-supremacist control' over other black people" (1989, 113). However, to recognize the all-pervasive power to exert supremacist control consciously or unconsciously over others is to be forced to recognize your own position in relation to the study of a literature that is not wholly your own.

³ There is a danger in feminist analysis and criticism of African American literature to view the search for the self as a quest to be "more than" mothers, wives, sex objects, or matriarchs. This seems to imply that the roles of mother and wife, or the sexual power of a woman are not important and valid ways for women to identify themselves. The use of "more than" implies a value judgment on certain roles. Therefore, I choose the phrase roles "other than" to emphasize that stereotypical and potentially imposed roles of women are not the only ways for women to identify themselves; however, to choose these roles or possibilities is a valid prerogative for any woman and does not imply acquiescence to any stereotype.

Toni Morrison's description of her own study of American literary culture also describes my own "positionality" in endeavoring to study African American literature:

My project rises from delight, not disappointment. It rises from what I know about the ways writers transform aspects of their social grounding into aspects of language, and the ways they tell other stories, fight secret wars, limn out all sorts of debates blanketed in their text. And rises from my certainty that writers always know, at some level, that they do this. (1992, 4)

Morrison makes this statement in an attempt to describe the ways that writers and readers not only examine but *become* characters in the books they write and read. I believe that what writers seek and find ways to define through literature, the possibilities for identity and interaction based on compassion. When they "limn out on. . . debates blanketed in their text," it becomes clear that in exploring both the apex and the nadir of human emotions, they are creating the possibility for constructions of the self in literature that go beyond the reach of their experience. Morrison says she is "interested in what makes possible this process of entering what one is estranged from" (4). Morrison is concerned with how to write about and understand things that are different from her or not a part of her personal construction. The ability to think the unthinkable allows Morrison to create the character of a father who rapes his own daughter, twice, and do it in such a way that the reader can understand how his is an act of love. An objective and close reader is bound to try to understand not just the ways in which a text speaks to the obvious aspects of her own character, but also what the text presents as different from or estranged from the reader. In recognizing both the familiar and the extraordinary, we are expanding our own definitions of womanhood and the self. Because I am a white woman

reader dealing with African American literature, I am attempting to understand aspects of a body of literature that is written by women who have lived a very different experience from my own in American culture. This enterprise inevitably involves a certain amount of “othering” on my part.

The word “other” or the verb “to other” in our society generally refers to alienating a person or a group of peoples, usually on the basis of sex, religion, race, or ethnicity. It is most often described in terms of a privileged group or person “othering” another person or group of people. Morrison maintains white literati believe that the American canon of literature has existed free of African American influence for over three hundred years. She presents a binary of literary “whiteness” as a dominating and oppressive force that seeks to negate and deny literary and cultural “blackness.” Literary whiteness in our culture seeks to deny the profound influences that black and white culture in America have had on each other; thus, in ignoring our literary blackness we are denying a force in American literature that has driven it from the beginning:

There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that , because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, [that] those views, genius and powers are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States. . . . The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination.
(5)

The reality of a black presence in literature and the fears inspired by it place literary whiteness and blackness in a dialogue in which African American literature lights the

margins of the other. Therefore, to ignore positionality in this particular debate or to assert my own whiteness on a text is an act of othering.

In studying the literature of black women, who continue to be othered by white men, white women, and black men, the only way to begin to understand the literature is to allow it to “other” me as a reader. This alienation means allowing the text to shape me rather than culling from the text examples that match my own cultural conception of myself. In doing this, the “other” has the potential not only to understand more completely what is at stake in a piece of literature but will also be more able to adapt her own way of thinking and understanding the world based on her understanding of that literature. As a white woman reading and analyzing books by African American authors, I must be aware and re-evaluate constantly my understanding of “Americanness” as it hinges on “femaleness” and “maleness,” and what Morrison calls literary blackness and whiteness. A reader like me will realize, as a result of allowing the literature to other her, that there is a changing and disparate relationship between literary whiteness and blackness. This relationship between literary blackness and whiteness has very tangible repercussions in modern and contemporary African American literature, especially in the works of women

In the period beginning in the Harlem Renaissance through about 1960 the dominant trend of African American women's literature, according to Barbara Christian:

... embodied the tension between the writers' apparent acceptance of an ideal woman derived from white upper-class society and the reality with this [that] their protagonists had to contend. And most of the literature of the period seemed to be written for an audience that excluded even the writers themselves. (237)

The self, she says, is a secondary concern in these novels and so, even in their attempts to present positive images of the black woman, the writing of the period "did not result in an in any improvement in her image, but rather in a decline in strong identity in literature" (237). Christian claims that female characters in the literature of this period are defeated by both social reality and a lack of self-knowledge, and so the possibility of holding them up as strong examples from which new literature could further emphasize identity as an issue for black women was thwarted by their lack of self-analysis. This insight leads Christian to the assertion that self-knowledge as a literary theme, " was critical if black women were to develop the inner resources they would need in order to cope with larger social forces" (237).

However, a precedent set by some of the literature of the period acknowledged the need for African American women to search for and understand the self as an individual in African American society. It is Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God that serves as what Alice Walker calls the "literary foremother" to many of the writers of the contemporary period of African American women's literature. Janie Crawford, the determined protagonist, is active in her search for the self. She makes a transition through three marriages that allows her to come to a fuller understanding of her self in relation to her culture. In her first marriage she is no more than a mule, but she then progresses through another in which she is placed on a pedestal but not allowed to speak and act for herself to one that, though not perfect, is based on mutual love and allows Janie to gain a complete sense of her identity as a woman and what it means to be an African American

woman in her society. It is also important to note that her search for identity takes her further into the South and further into a black community that represents a step in De Veaux's vision of the potentiality of understanding the self. This conscious and active search for the self surfaces as a primary literary influence when in 1970, several pivotal works by and about African American women are published.

Notably, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Toni Cade Bambara address issues of identity and self-knowledge in terms of what it means to be an African American woman in the contemporary period in their premier works. Toni Morrison published her first novel, The Bluest Eye, and Alice Walker published her debut novel The Third Life of Grange Copeland, both in 1970. Both of these novels and the anthology of poems, stories and essays edited by Toni Cade Bambara titled The Black Woman, challenged existing stereotypes of black culture and questioned the ways in which woman have traditionally been defined versus the ways in which they define themselves:

Rejecting the definitions imposed by experts ("all male") and resisting encouragement to locate themselves in the emergent definitions of women by white feminists, the [Black Woman anthology] heralded an effort by black women to define themselves. (Wall, 2)

What followed has been a concerted literary effort to write African American literature for and about African American women. Since the publication of these works great attention has been paid to the ways that African American women construct the self and identify that self in the various spaces and places in their lives. In her essay "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," Barbara Smith states that the analysis and treatment of identity, which was barely a concern in analysis preceding these works, must take the center stage

in order to try and undo some of the damage that has been done by inaccurate and limiting analysis of African American women's fiction (172). Taking Smith's cue, many writers make identity the leading theme in their works of fiction, identity clearly pervades these texts on both a thematic and textual level.⁴ The process of forming a working conception of the self for African American women is bound by the location of the self in personal, familial and societal spaces. These possibilities of the self, as many critics claim, are intimately bound up with the social and political power of women and their varying forms of artistic self expression.

In her book of interviews titled Black Women Writers at Work, Claudia Tate names the "quest" as one of the preponderant themes in contemporary African American literature. She defines this theme as "a character's personal search for meaning and identity and for self-sustaining dignity in a world of growing isolation, meaninglessness and moral decay" (xix). This theme is bounded by several issues particular to the reality of women's lives; these issues are carefully delineated in terms of space and voice in Tate's reading of African American women's literature. Tate's use of the metaphor of space recalls Dickinson's metaphor of dwelling within the house of possibility, an apt metaphor when reading a body of literature that is invested with images of interior spaces and how women inhabit them.

Tate sees a direct connection between the social and spatial immobility of African American women in society and the ways they are portrayed in literature. Clearly,

⁴ It is also possible that the social structure of America informs readings of African American women's novels as works concerned primarily with identity. Though this reading would change slightly the

African American women write with a social, political and historical consciousness; however, there is the danger of reduction in reading the literature in a framework bound by the condition of black women in society. Literature is fiction, which by nature is an act of imagination and careful composition. Though many powerful connections can be made between literature and sociology, I would suggest that in its fictive nature, literature is capable of symbolic and artful possibilities that are not necessarily present in reality. In understanding literature for its possibility rather than the level to which it reflects reality, the reader can gain a better understanding of how literature embodies issues of identity that go beyond current social possibility. This conclusion reinforces my reading of Dickinson's poem as listing the poetic and linguistic possibilities of fiction.

Cheryl Wall cautions the critic of African American literature against reading fiction in a purely sociological framework:" the verbal text has been treated as if it merely mirrored the social text. To read that way is inately reductive, but to read black writing as if it has no relation to political reality is to vitiate its power" (9). A balance must be struck, then, one that allows readings to be grounded in social context without allowing that social context to dictate a frame in which the literature must fit. This strategy of reading enables interpretation of the literature in terms of possibilities of the self and identity in women's literature and the artful ways in which these possibilities are expressed.

motivation for interpreting these novels as identity driven novels, the theme and structure of the novels suggest that this is a valid reading with ample textual support.

The possibilities of the self in African American women's literature are largely expressed not in prophetic statements about women's identity, but rather in the aesthetics or artistic elements in their writing. I see this particularly in the ways that they negotiate the issues of voice, space and mobility in their works. In order to understand more clearly the gendered ways these works address the issue of self, we must have a strong understanding of the theories of "writing in difference" and women's identity. These theories offer a skeleton key to understanding the mechanics of identity embedded in aesthetic elements.

"Writing in difference" is a heading under which lies several theories, both biological and cultural, that define the differences in the way that women and men create works of written art. In her poignant exploration of the fate of Shakespeare's hypothetical sister, Virginia Woolf was one of the first woman to define sexual difference in writing. This culturally centered view of the life options for a woman who wished to act and write in a man's world ends with the option of suicide, as Woolf chose to herself. Much has changed since Virginia Woolf stated that all a woman needs is five hundred pounds and a room of her own to write good fiction in her essay "A Room of One's Own."

As the white and black feminist movements have revealed, women have found endless difficulties in their efforts to write in what is undoubtedly a man-centered world. Economic struggles aside, theories have emerged that examine the differences in the creative experience for both men and women and point to some reasons why there is such a disparity, not only in the quantity of work published by men as opposed to women,

but also as to why writing by women is different in structure and content from that of men. With the emergence of the Black feminist movement, ideas of writing in difference, that encompass not only gender, but also race, class, and sexuality have emerged and given more contemporary theoretical substance to the ideas that Woolf so vividly laid out for us in her essay "Professions for Women."

Judith Kegan Gardiner argues in her essay "On Female Identity and Writing by Women" that one of the main differences between men and women, and therefore the main difference in the way they create art, lies in the different ways women and men form their primary gender identification. Though more based on psychology than biology, Gardiner uses the ideas of Nancy Chodorow on the formation of the female identity as the basis for her discussion that leads to her statement: "female identity is a process." This concept shows "that female experience is transformed into female consciousness, often in reaction to male paradigms for female experience" (190). This process is based on the primary differentiation of gender in men and women, and follows from the woman's close bond to her mother in physical and social status. By studying this paradigm of female and male gender identification, we can construct a theoretical framework to use when describing the ways in which women construct identity differently from men in their fiction.

In her essay "Gender, Relation and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective," Chodorow claims that after the early stage of infantile development when all infants see themselves as an extension of the mother or their primary care giver, the experiences of male and female children follow separate paths of development. Freudian psychology

calls it the mirror stage, when the infant makes the distinction that he/she is a separate and individual being from his or her mother. This differentiation usually takes place in relation to the mother and is brought about when the infant experiences disappointment and dissatisfaction at not having its every desire catered to. The infant's disappointment at the disparity between its desires and the fulfillment of those desires confirms for the infant that the mother is in fact a separate person who cannot and will not do everything the infant wishes. Because this differentiation usually takes place in reference to the mother (clearly a gendered being), Chodorow claims that gender differentiation takes place soon after. Gender differentiation establishes for male and female children their "core gender identity," which is defined as "cognitive sense of gendered self" (12) as different from or like their mother. Chodorow claims that gender differentiation is far more conflictual for a male child as he recognizes that not only is he separate from his mother, but that he is also different:

because of the primacy of the mother in early life and because of the absence of concrete, real, available, male figures of identification and love who are *as salient* [my emphasis] for him as female figures, learning what it is to be masculine comes to mean learning to be not-feminine, or not-womanly. (13)

The boy then begins to emulate figures of masculinity rather than the feminine form of his mother.

In opposition to this divisive establishment of identity, the female child learns to establish herself based on her similarity to her mother. "Females do not develop as 'not-males.' Female core gender identity and the sense of femininity are defined positively, as

that which is female, or like mother" (15). We can see this in literature most specifically in the ways women writers emphasize intimate relationships between women ⁵.

In contrast to men's formation of identity in literature, Chodorow argues that because of the difference in primary identity formation, men "come to deny the feminine identification within themselves and those feelings they experience as feminine" (13). They learn to assert their individuality and separateness from other beings and all that is feminine. Women, on the other hand, do not deny that which is feminine, but, in embracing femininity, must bow to the patriarchal structure that wields power in society. "Men have the means to institutionalize their unconscious defenses against repressed yet strongly experienced developmental conflicts" (15).

Gardiner lists the differences in primary gender identification as a possible reason that men have oppressed women in all things, including literary production, a reading that is supported by sociological and anthropological evidence that proves the economic, social, and political degradation of women in America and beyond. Though patriarchal power was in place long before women tried to enter the world of published writing, writing and the psychology of female creativity are powerful and pressing representations of patriarchal oppression. Men have certainly tried to suppress efforts by women to publish fiction as is evident in the very name George Eliot, the only name

⁵ Every book discussed in this paper has at least one woman to woman relationship that is central to the text: Janie and Phoebe in Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, Sula and Nel in Morrison's Sula, Pilate, Reba, Hagar, and Ruth in Morrison's Song of Solomon, Pecola and Claudia in Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved in Morrison's Beloved, all the character's in Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place, Celie and Nettie in Walker's The Color Purple, and Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo in Shange's novel of the same name. The possible exception is Sent for You Yesterday, which I discuss, but which is written by John Edgar Wideman.

under which Mary Ann Evans could only publish. However, difficulties are also inherent in the very structure of the creative process as it has existed for centuries. In her essay “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity,” Susan Gubar explores the close relationship between the woman and her work through the metaphor of ink and page.

Gubar lays out possible cultural barriers that have made writing for women a far more soul-wrenching and difficult task than is writing for men. She argues that because women have almost always been the subjects of art (writing, painting, and song) that it is more difficult for women to create art; because women have always been created and manipulated by artists, they must either break completely from the accepted norms or make themselves the subject of their own work. Women do not usually identify themselves as creators, but rather as the created: not as the writer, but as the text. Thus Gubar claims that “female sexuality is often identified with textuality” (75). Furthermore, Gubar claims that women are not the object or subject of art, but the actual art object, the created, the blank page:

This model of the pen-penis writing on the virgin page participates in a long tradition identifying the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation—a secondary object lacking autonomy. . . . Clearly this tradition excludes women from the creation of culture, even as it reifies her as an artifact within culture. (77)

This reification in turn creates anxieties for women who wish to or are compelled to create. Gubar calls this the “anxiety of authorship,” which was/is experienced by women who considered their attempts at writing “presumptuous, castrating or even monstrous” (77). For women who “experience their own bodies as the only available medium for

their art,” the experience of creating is “experienced as a painful wounding. . . for the woman artist who experiences herself as killed into art may also experience herself as bleeding into print” (78). Creating, therefore, is putting the self up for scrutiny as well as the surrender of that part of the self to anyone who chooses to read the work.

For women writers, Gubar associates creating to the bloodying of a page with their own blood. The painful act of self-expression is then “deformed by being channeled into self-destructive narcissism” (79) because the woman sees little difference between the text and herself or her life and her art, thus causing the woman to fear that in her writing she is giving away too much of herself, too much self-knowledge. The image of blood on the page evokes the ideas of artistic creativity to biological creativity. As Ann Sexton said, “I have ink, but no pen,” and therefore, her poems leak from her “like a miscarriage,” (85). Gubar makes the connection between inspiration as the terror of being “entered, deflowered, possessed, taken, had, broken, ravished— all words which illustrate the pain of the passive self whose boundaries are being violated” (87).

Literary creativity is then likened to the creation of new life, of children, and is then the written voice of past generations of women for whom creativity came through biological creation as well as the creation of stories and songs that were never written down. The close connection of body and mind to the text does not exclude the possibility of men experiencing their art on a personal or emotional level. The difference that both Gardiner and Gubar are trying to uncover lies in the idea that because of the place of the woman within the patriarchal structure and the ways in which women come to an

understanding of their own identity, the act of creation for women is like the sharing of a physical piece of oneself, like giving birth or letting blood.

We can see that women are bound together psychologically through gender identity formation, culturally through social constructs of patriarchy, artistically through the woman as subject and art object, and even biologically through the linking of creative production with biological production. Returning to the work of Gardiner, she argues that differences in the formation of core gender identity, men and women experience identity crises differently.

For a boy, the adolescent identity crisis tests the accreted components of his individual identity. At its conclusion, he accepts a place in his society roughly congruent with society's view of him. The girl, however, achieves her socially accepted roles through marriage and motherhood, social and biological events that can occur independently of a personal identity crisis and that do not require its resolution. (184)

So where female gender identifications are more stable in their earlier states because of their primary identification with the mother, girls' emergence from adolescence is marked by adherence to rigid social structures while boys are free to prove themselves as individuals.

The "process" that Gardiner speaks of relates to the continual process of female identification with events such as marriage and childbearing, which force the woman to constantly re-invent herself in relation to new people, events, or roles. Female identity, formed through adherence to social norms within the patriarchal structure, is more mutable and evolutionary because of the demands placed on women to adapt and exist in relation to other people, events, and situations. Gardiner applies this theory to

twentieth-century female literary creativity stating that though women communicate a consciousness of their identity through paradoxes of sameness and difference, "the formulation that female identity is a process stresses the fluid and flexible aspects of women's primary identities" (185). She states that women's characters and story lines are more fluid, that they tend to "dissolve and merge into one another" (185). This close relationship of characters and events in a work of fiction Gardiner identifies as emerging from the mother-daughter relationship and leads her to the idea that the "hero is her mother's daughter."

This formation implies that the author is emotionally linked with her characters as a mother is to a daughter or that the act of writing is somehow a maternal act of creation for women. Furthermore, Gardiner places the woman reader in the same position as the author, the position of mother to the hero when she states that "the maternal metaphor of female authorship clarifies the woman writer's distinctive engagement with her characters and indicates an analogous relationship between woman reader and character" (179). By making this relationship clear between the reader and the work, Gardiner is implying that not only do women create differently from men, but that they also read differently from men.

This theory is closely linked to Gubar's statements on female creation as a letting of the womb's blood, but it is perhaps more positive in that it implies not a blood-letting, or a miscarriage as Sexton said, but a creation of life and the potential for a new voice to live in her creation: her writing. Gubar's essay is strong in its discussion of the incredible emotional outpouring involved in writing by women as well as their helplessness in trying

to create in a world that is so dominated by men. However, Gardiner's ideas perhaps focus on the notion of female creativity as empowerment even as they are mediated by the pain and difficulty of production in a patriarchal framework.

Both Gubar and Gardiner focus on the idea of literature as a form of self-definition that is essential to African American women's fiction. Self-definition or the search for the self is not only a key element to creating fiction; that is, it allows the author to find herself, but it is also a key textual element to African American fiction. Gardiner says that "the woman writer uses her text, particularly one centering on a female hero, as part of a continuing process of her own self definition and her empathic identification with her own character" (187). If self-definition is promoted through the act of creation, and through the content of that creation, Gardiner also cites a potential for awareness-building to occur for anyone who reads that text, man or woman. And in that potential is expressed a multitude of possibilities of African American women to define themselves positively in their society.

This Senior Scholar Project, then, attempts to integrate the theories of writing in difference with various theories of African American women's literature, and to explore the ways these ideas are embraced and/or rejected in the literature. I choose to approach this issue from the perspective of aesthetics in literature because it allows the reader to identify the ways in which African American women's literature makes art out of concerns regarding identity and the self. Unlike social science and autobiography, fiction opens and amplifies possibilities that are not always apparent in reality. The second chapter will be a two-fold discussion of voice in African American women's literature.

The first portion will focus on the claiming of authorial voice as well as the claiming of voice as a tool to aid in self-definition within the text. The second portion will address specifically the diction and images that the voice speaks and how they can be identified as both gendered and racialized speech and metaphor. The third chapter of this essay will focus on the issue of mobility. If women have intimate relationships with the spaces and places in their lives, and if their powers of mobility are at stake in their works, then this too is an indication of the boundaries of the self being brought into question. Issues of movement and stasis as well as transgression, violation, and protection of space all address the issue of identity through aesthetic in fiction. Finally, I will explore the structure and method of the novels and how they too reflect a sense of femininity in the literature as well as possibilities for the reader to enter and identify with the text actively. This last element is essential to a literature that seeks to achieve both response and revision, be it from the margins of literature or the center of its own tradition.

Part II: Voice and Language

Uh huh, listen. Really listen
this time: the only voice is
your own.

— Gloria Naylor

Any discussion of language in African American women's literature must focus on both the voice and the language of the text. These are two very elements that which work together to establish meaning and identity in a text. The voice is the ability or act of speaking, be it through literature, song or speech; language refers to what that voice says and how it establishes meaning in a text. African American women use voice and language in their literature to demarcate the possibilities of a voice that is both distinctly feminine and African American. In doing this, they establish the possibility of using that voice and language as a means of forging identity.

To take voice and make language is a risk for any writer, but especially for the African American woman, who has historically suffered both sexual and racial oppression. When bell hooks says, “dare I speak to the oppressed and oppressor in the same voice? Dare I speak to you in a language that will move beyond the boundaries of dominion?” (1990, 146), she is arguing that black women’s writing should be accessible to both black and white readers as well as including issues of political and social revision through writing. A large risk for black women writers lies in any writer's desire for “response-ability” (1992, 5). Response-ability is a term that Morrison uses to describe

the need to produce a literature written in a language that can be responded to both in the contemporary period and in generations to come by a wide variety of readers. There is a lot at stake for the African American woman writer that can be expressed in the words of Wallace Stevens as "the poem of the mind in act of finding what will suffice".⁶ The poet must find the words to express both her contemporary situation as well as the lasting possibilities inherent in that literature no matter what her targeted readership or her political standpoint. This recalls Dickinson's assertion that to "dwell in possibility" means making writing express the possibilities of life through language.

Gwendolyn Brooks advises young poets that "the language must be fresh" (1); the language must be poetic, new, and it must address the contemporary situation in order to achieve response-ability. Morrison summarizes the words of these three masters of language in saying: "how stunning the achievement of those who have searched for and mined a shareable language for the words to say it" (1992, xiii).

For African American women writers, finding the words to express their situation involves battling and wading through issues of tradition, oppression, and cultural hegemony in order to claim a voice and to create a language that embodies the "poem of the mind in the act of finding what will suffice." This means exploring the use of language as a tool to claiming and understanding identity and the self. Morrison writes in her novel

Sula:

Had she paints, clay or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged her restlessness and preoccupation with whim

⁶ Line 1 of Wallace Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry."

for an activity that provided all she yearned for. And like many artists with no form, she became dangerous. (105)

Morrison is describing almost a precursor to the blood-on-the-page model. The artist, in this case, Sula, is at a loss for a voice or other tool to express her identity, and so she is dangerous. However, as Morrison also intimates, her rebellion against society was dangerous to both Sula and to the people she ,et. Sula herself is an explication of the necessity of finding the voice with which to speak. Stifled by the conventions of her sex, Sula finds power in rebelling against society. Though Morrison portrays Sula with great affection, she is, nevertheless, a product of a society that demanded conformity and smothered Sula's intense individuality.

It is important, then, to give attention to the less-explored ways in which African American women fictionalize voice and language through their works. Most discussions of language and metaphor in African American women's fiction focus on the use of traditional myth and folklore in the works and their intertextual relationship to the various mythical traditions from which they draw. Jaqueline de Weever states that African American women write in a tradition of Attic (Greek), Hebraic (biblical), and African myth and lore that permeates and lends richness to their works. This claim is certainly true; however, from another angle she is naming a kind of intertextuality that attempts to situate African American writers in a tradition of literature that is not wholly theirs. These issues of tradition and signification identify one of the central concerns of criticism and analysis of African American fiction in the twentieth century: to locate themselves at the center of a tradition of African American *women* writers

We must acknowledge that African American women writers should not be excluded from other traditions in favor of their own; rather, their works deserve consideration as contributors to all traditions of western and African literature that they contribute to as well as acknowledgment that their work differs from these traditions in ways that make it necessary to classify them in a tradition of their own. In this way, black fiction is not ghettoized but is considered important both for the ways it is different from other traditions as well as the ways it is similar to various parts of the western canon. In this discussion of black women's literature, I note characteristics of the genre that set it apart from these other traditions in an effort to heighten sometimes overlooked beauty in their feminine language and theme. In fact, all strains of literature come together to form a synthesis in African American literature, but to heighten certain elements of the texts is to acknowledge that they are interesting for the ways in which they make aesthetics out of identity.

To study where myth and folklore of other traditions enter a work is essential to understanding the signifyin(g) and revision that takes place in almost all African American women's novels. To deny these aspects of the literature would deny the power of African American and women's literature to revise these traditions that have held sway over them. And it is by reading and interpreting African American women's literature in terms of all the other traditions with which it overlaps and "talks to" that critics are able to determine, through difference, that which is characteristically African American and that which is signified on from other traditions.

Gloria Naylor's novels, for example, are richly endowed with a mixture of elements from many mythic traditions of literature. Her second novel, Linden Hills, draws on classical themes of hell to create a novel based loosely on Dante's L'Inferno. Streets are laid out in circular patterns leading to the bottom of Linden Hills where the devilish figure of Luther Nedeed presides over and corrupts the dreams of families who seek to gain notoriety in the community. Naylor revises the mythic construction of hell to fit modern black bourgeois families who nearly fall over themselves to gain a higher status on the hill. She shows that in doing so, they must sacrifice their morals and their integrity to complete their move "down" the hill.

Likewise, in Mama Day, Naylor loosely adapts Shakespeare's Tempest and transforms it into a heart-rending tale of love, magic, and jealousy. The part of Prospero is taken by an art-full and dynamic mixture of sorcerer, grandmother, matriarch, and conjure woman. The scene is set on an almost fantastical island that is neither in Georgia nor South Carolina and hence does not fall under the jurisdiction of either state's laws. The story she weaves around these characters brims with folk and mythic references from several traditions, but at the same time placing itself as a work for and about African American women and their relationships with the women and men they love.

Even though black women writers read, understand and consciously or unconsciously signify on the works and myths that came from the Attic, Hebraic, and African traditions, to use this as a means of placing these writers firmly in a tradition that is only partly their own denies the importance of the works. In her book Moorings and Metaphors, Karla C. Holloway states:

The discussion of this literature within a canon that barely acknowledged its existence and would distract the critical audience away from its complexity (and towards a so-called more 'universal' model) has been a process of both affirmation and denial. (23)

Despite the fact that African American texts are read and appreciated as participants in several different traditions, most critics fail to acknowledge the importance of African American texts as the central texts of their own tradition, resulting in a kind of theoretical and canonical invisibility. It is critical to recognize the specific struggle of black women in print. In a patriarchal and racist American society, African American women write under the dual oppression of racism and sexism.⁷ According to Mae Gwendolyn Henderson:

Since [the printing of All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us are Brave] it has perhaps become almost commonplace for literary critics, male and female, black and white to note that black women have been discounted or unaccounted for in the 'traditions' of black, women's and American literature as well as in the contemporary literary-critical dialogue. (Wall, 16)

Furthermore, Henderson states that this discounting produces gendered and racialized readings of African American women's novels as marginalized and marginal literature which aids in the relegation of African American women's literature to positions on the fringes of larger more established traditions:

That is, by privileging one category of analysis at the expense of another, both of these methods risk setting . . . "strategies of containment" which restrict or repress different or alternative readings. . . . Such approaches can result in exclusion at worst and, at best, a reading of part of the text as the whole—a strategy that threatens to replicate (if not valorize) the reification against which black women struggle in life and literature. (17)

⁷ In her essay "Multiple Jeopardy. Multiple Consciousness," Deborah King defines the term "multiple jeopardy" to represent the racial, sexual, and economic oppression that black women face in American society.

It is critical to recognize and identify the ways in which African American women's literature not just revises other literary traditions but is unique as it conjoins aspects of the feminine and African American in creative expression. An important aspect of a tradition that has been marked by forced silence, is voice; an author must claim the voice with which she writes. In her essay "Talking Back," bell hooks says:

moving from silence to speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals and makes new life and growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back" that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of outward movement from object to subject, the liberated voice. (9)

This serves almost as a manifesto of the healing and growing possibilities of African American literature. The idea that voice can be used as a vehicle of power to express the self resonates throughout African American women's fiction in the attention paid to claiming voice and making language new.

Return for a moment to "the poem of the mind in the act of finding what will suffice"; in order for women to find a language that is able to express what they seek to convey in their writing, a group known as the "Editorial Collective of Questions Feministes" states that women must "claim for themselves 'another' language, that, in its new form, would be closer to woman's lived experience" (Eagleton, 233). By including aspects of their domestic and social experiences in their writing, black women are boldly asserting this experience, as Woolf puts it, as the "proper stuff of fiction." But before they can do so, they must assert their voice as both powerful and artistic, and as hooks claims in her essay, this is very hard for black women who have endured centuries of

oppression, restriction, and silencing. I would return to Christian's statement in her essay "Trajectories of Self-definition," where she synthesizes the struggle for voice and the need for that voice in order to express the self and forge a tradition of literature:

But in order to really understand the remarkable achievement of a Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, or a Paule Marshall or the budding creativity of a Gloria Naylor or an Alexis DeVeaux, one must appreciate the tradition form which they have come and the conflict of images with which their foremothers have had to contend. For what Afro-American women have been permitted to express, in fact to contemplate, as part of the self, is gravely affected by other complex issues. The development of Afro-American women's fiction is, in many ways, a mirror image of the intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism in this country. and while many of us may grasp this fact in terms of economics or social status, we often forget the toll it takes in terms of self-expression and therefore self-empowerment. To be able to use the range of one's voice, to attempt to express the totality of the self, is a recurring struggle in the tradition of these writers from the nineteenth century to the present. (234)

Because it is the first step in the formation of literature, the claiming of a voice with which to speak and the development of that voice into a unique and powerful one, black women writers make central their examination of the effects of silence and voice in their work.

Zora Neale Hurston, whom many contemporary writers claim as their modern literary foremother, carries on the self-conscious assertion of voice that we find in slave narratives by making voice the central concern of her most well-known novel Their Eyes Were Watching God. By boldly situating Janie as the teller of her own story, Hurston signifies on previous autobiographical pieces and establishes the use of a woman's language to tell a woman's own story. A dual goal is achieved by locating Phoebe as the receptor of this tale. Hurston reinforces the importance of women's intimate and close

relationships while at the same time emphasizing that the stories of women's lives are important both to tell and to pass on.

Alice Walker signifies on and revises Hurston's narrative ingenuity in her novel The Color Purple not only establishes Celie and Nettie as the tellers of their own tales, but also by nearly eradicating the anonymous third-person narrator from the text. By communicating plot through letters throughout the novel, she emphasizes the self-conscious voice as well as the tenacity of women to communicate intimately with each other. The fact that Nettie and Celie are reunited creates a triumph of language and communication in the novel, a triumph that represents a possibility not always realized in reality.

Just as the stories of Celie and Nettie blend together in The Color Purple, Gloria Naylor draws together the stories of several women in her two novels The Women of Brewster Place and Bailey's Cafe. Both novels are structured as a series of vignettes of the interconnected lives of several women who either live at Brewster Place or frequent Bailey's Cafe. Commingling so many voices and so many aspects of black women's experience not only broadens the possible constructions of women's identity in literature, but it also establishes a strong community of women who live and tell their stories through one another. However, in all of these cases, the stories of women are told only to women; hence, it is women who are able to gain and use their voices despite the external forces of patriarchy and white supremacy.

When the possibility of voice is radically denied a character, the almost literal negation of that character ensues. Toni Morrison creates a powerful tale of silence,

madness, and oppression in her first novel The Bluest Eye. Morrison uses the character of a Pecola Breedlove to express the effects of silence on the most helpless member of society: a young black girl. Morrison calls on the classical myths of Persephone and Philomena to create a cycle of rape, silence, and madness that pervades the novel⁸. In her comment on this topic, "Lady No Longer Sings the Blues," Madonne Miner outlines a number of binaries at work between men and women in the novel:

In depicting the effects of rape on one young woman, Morrison sets into motion a series of associations that take their cue from gender. Men, potential rapists, assume presence, language and reason as their particular province. women, potential victims, fall prey to absence, silence and madness. An understanding of the powerful dynamics behind this allotment of presence/ absence, language/ silence, reason/ madness along sexual lines contributes to an understanding of the painful truths contained in Philomena's story, in Pecola's story . . . (181)

The paradigm of the voiced versus the silent reaches its violent zenith in the scene in which Cholly rapes Pecola: "and the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made—a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon" (128). The rapid suck of air, a voiceless reaction to her father, almost confirms the completion of a gradual silencing that has rendered Pecola nearly incapable of communication.

⁸ Paraphrased from Madonne Miner's "Lady No Longer Sings the Blues" (181-182): The story of Philomena chronicles the story of the maiden sister of Procne, wife of Tereus. Tereus travels to Philomena's home to escort her to see her sister in Thrace. On the way to Thrace, Tereus rapes Philomena, and when she cries out for help and threatens to tell what he has done, he tears out her tongue. Deprived of a voice, Philomena weaves her story in a quilt which she sends to her sister. When Procne reads the quilt she seeks revenge by killing Tereus' son and feeding the remains to him. Philomena, is then transformed into a nightingale, damned forever to chirp the name of her rapist: tereu. In another tale of madness and rape, Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, calls out the name of her father Zeus as Pluto, the god of the underworld, rapes her. Demeter reacts to the rape by denying the world fruit and flowers for the winter months.

The final step of her silencing falls, ironically, on her mother's head. After her father rapes her, Pecola tries to tell Polly what has happened. Polly, not wanting to hear the truth, denies Pecola the right to voice her violation and get retribution for it. By the end of the novel, and after Cholly has raped Pecola again, she is irreparably driven mad by the violation of her body, the destruction of her family life, and the denial of her right to speak her grievances. Pecola's madness and her crisis of identity are caused not so much by the rape, but by the silence that it has forced Pecola into. The need to speak the rape to a sympathetic ear is denied her, and unable to face it on her own, Pecola goes mad. Once mad she carries on conversations with the only person with whom she can still communicate, herself:

"How come you don't talk to anybody?"

"I talk to you."

"Besides me."

"I don't like anybody besides you. . . ."

"You don't talk to anybody, you don't go to school. And nobody talks to you." (153)

As in the myths Philomena and Persephone, Pecola is tongue-less in her inability to speak her affliction and imprisoned in her own hell. This devastating example of a violation perpetrated against a helpless member of society is drastically exacerbated by silence as Morrison shows us that it is not just the physical abuse but the silence that cause Pecola's crisis of identity.

In Bailey's Cafe, Esther is also denied the power to speak her own story. Esther is forced into marriage at twelve, and her husband makes her to come into the basement where he forces her to do unspeakable things to him in the dark. Esther's story is

punctuated with the phrase, "*we won't speak about this Esther*" (95). Esther learns from the hag-root working woman to be silent: "I work with her. She teaches me. An angry, silent old women" (97). Esther is not driven mad to the same degree as was Pecola; in fact, she physically escapes from the house and seeks refuge in Eve's house. There, she lives in the darkened basement, unable to reclaim a life different from the one she was leading before. Men bring her white roses, which she likes because she can see them in the dark. Esther maintains her silence with these men, even as she allows them to do unspeakable things in the dark, because she knows no other way of life.

At one point she mentions her confusion that she did not become pregnant by what she did in the basement, on her knees. She realizes when she listens to *The Shadow* on the radio that what she does in the basement will bring her no babies: "it becomes my friend because it finally gives me the words I have been seeking. What we do in the cellar is to make evil. I still come when he calls. But now I know his touch will not bring babies" (98).

Like the basement for Esther, Morrison represents the gravity of Pecola's circumstances in terms of infertility and hell. The opening line of the narrative signifies on the myth of Persephone saying, "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the winter of 1941" (5). Just as Demeter submerged the earth in winter when her daughter was carried away to the underworld, making the land infertile, the land yields no flowers the year that Pecola is raped by her father, bringing forth a child who does not live. Morrison makes the connection too that Pecola was unable to bloom and flower in her

childhood. Like Esther, she descends into a mental reclusion where there is no love, only madness.

However devastating, The Bluest Eye is not just about silencing, confinement, and madness. Morrison, as in almost all of her works, maintains an element of hope and survival. In the Bluest Eye that hope rests on Claudia. Claudia narrates a portion of the story herself, chronicling her interactions with and perceptions of Pecola. In doing so, she offers a voice of triumph to take the edge off of the tragic silence of Pecola:

Ultimately, I read Pecola's story as a tragic version of the myth; this twentieth-century black woman remains behind blue eyes, an inarticulate, arm-fluttering bird. But I cannot read The Bluest Eye as tragedy; Claudia, our sometime narrator, *speaks*, as does Morrison, our full-time novelist. Thus, although the novel documents the sacrifice of one black woman, it attests to the survival of two others—a survival akin to that of Philomena or Persephone—filled with hardship, but also with hope. (Miner, 189)

By making Claudia many of the things that Pecola is not, Morrison is telling us that in the same community, young girls can be brought up with more love and can learn to use their voices and love themselves. The fact that Claudia speaks, and that she has survived whatever has happened to tell the tale, signifies on Hurston's assertion that the stories of women's, as well as girls', lives are worth hearing and that the passing on of the story, however tragic and poignant, is essential to other women struggling for freedom and voices of their own.

The role of Phoebe in Their Eyes Were Watching God is also recalled in the assertion that this story is one that will be passed on through Claudia's telling of it. This theme of passing on stories is one that we see prominently in Morrison's fifth novel Beloved. Morrison asserts in the final line of the novel, that the stories of Sethe and Paul

D were not stories to be passed on. The paradox is, of course, that their stories will be passed on by the novel's very existence. Morrison implies that stories such as Pecola's and Sethe's are not stories to be sensationalized; but rather they are stories that must be heard, understood, and then forgotten in all but the effort not to allow them to occur again. Both Sethe and Pecola were forced into identities that they did not want and would never have chosen for themselves. Sethe, however, is able to come to terms with her slave identity and all its ramifications on her free-woman identity in time to forge a more self-defined and constructive identity by the end of the novel. She and Paul D continue to try and make a future together. However, Pecola's hope lies only in Claudia. Both Sethe and Pecola's only hope lies in what can be learned from her story; these are the teaching stories of women who had no teacher, women who struggled for their voices on their own.

In novels by African American women the claiming of voice through teaching or speaking is enriched by other forms of communication that are identified as feminine. In her novel Song of Solomon, Morrison offers us one of the most positive example of the power of the voice. The element of tragedy that exists in The Bluest Eye and Beloved are not as apparent in this, her third novel. Pilate chooses to use her voice to heal and help other characters in the novel in a more precautionary way than in the other two novels; she is able to affect positive change with her words and by the example of her full, though unconventional life.

As a kind of oracular figure, Pilate represents a voice, which, mingled with memory and experience, recalls the storytellers of African American folklore. Pilate is many things: a conjure woman, a mother, a grandmother, a single woman, a maker of

moonshine, and a guide to Milkman. Joseph Skerrett names Janie of Their Eyes Were Watching God as the literary character who is the inspiration for Pilate.

As a figure of a woman who has gained social and moral experience in the world which her community finds it difficult to absorb, Pilate's prototype or predecessor is Janie. . . . Janie's telling of her life story to her friend Phoebe changes Phoebe's life. But Pilate is a larger figure than Janie. She is more than a woman who has found her voice and a satisfactory experience in tragic love. She has been an individual lover, but that is not seen as the great experience of her life. . . . the range of aspects of the culture of which she is master suggests that Morrison most certainly not to limit her to supporting roles. (198)

Skerrett also suggests that Pilate can change lives and teach people more because of the unusually alienating circumstances caused by her lack of a navel. "People fear Pilate as they fear Janie, because her personal power goes beyond the conventions of her gender. Her navel-less belly is the symbol of her alienation, an alienation which is the ultimate cause of her radical individuality," (198). Pilate has been forced to live her life on her own, by her own rules and her own wits; thus, she can tell more about being the "other" because there are no social circles in which she is or has been accepted.

Pilate is the strange provider of needed services like moonshine, spells, and potions, and for Milkman, knowledge. "her alien's compassion for troubled people ripened her and—the consequence of the knowledge she had made up or acquired—kept her just barely within the boundaries of the socialized world of black people" (149).

In Gayl Jones' Corregidora the act of claiming the voice takes the form of blues music. Ursa Corregidora expresses her sorrow and her history by singing the blues. Ursa comes from a matriarchal line which, commodified and exploited by the slave owner, Corregidora, gives testimony to their lives by "making generations" or children who will

carry the story and pass it on until one of them can tell it at Judgment Day. When Ursa's womb is removed after her husband brutally pushes her down a flight of stairs, she has to express herself through something other than bodily reproduction.

Though she has the powers of reproduction, Morrison's Pilate in Song of Solomon is also identified with song as well as unnatural sexuality (she has no navel). It is the song that Pilate sings throughout the novel that acts as a skeleton key to Milkman's discovery of his own past and identity. Just as Ursa sings her sorrow in her music, so Pilate sings her personal history, her identity, in her song.

The fact that Ursa finds her voice through singing signifies that she can use her voice to say what her womb would have said. Jones then contributes to what Patricia Hill Collins call an "overarching theme of finding a voice to express a self-defined black women's standpoint," (94). Ursa (whose name means *bear*) has no choice but to redefine herself, but is most important, as Amy Gottfried points out in her essay "Anger Silence, Speech and Song in Gayl Jones' Corregidora" that Ursa finds her voice through a tradition of music that has always been available to women, one that relies on a ritualized dialogue that draws attention through repetition to language and what is being said. Like signification and revision, Ursa uses repetition and revision to both emphasize what she is saying and how it changes as she does. In the novel's final dialogue between Ursa and Mutt, repetition and revision cap the entire novel:

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

"I don't want a kind of man that'll hurt me neither." (185)

Gottfried emphasizes that this form of communication both emphasizes Ursa's voice as well as her blues artfulness:

Jones' use of repetition and rhyme is deliberate; in focusing on the *sounds* of these dialogues she focuses upon Ursa's verbal nature. ritualized dialogue reminds us that Ursa's art form is the blues song and that the novel is also "about a woman artist who sings the blues." Painting a "portrait of the artist as a young woman," Jones both acknowledges and moves beyond Ursa's role as "hysteric" and black female victim, thus moving beyond a cultural and literary stereotype. (568)

Ursa's transformation from a woman whose prescribed mode of expression is through reproduction to a woman who uses her voice to speak and give her testimony orally legitimizes both the art of blues singing and women's use of it as a form of self-expression and voice.

This signifies into the real life stories of singers like Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith by legitimizing their forms of expression as important forms of female expression outside the political and literary world. Furthermore, Holiday and Smith shaped on the folk and blues tradition, made it popular, and therefore, extended the matrix of female expression from the domestic realm into the public sphere.

Alice Walker states in her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," women found outlets for their creative spirituality through weaving stories, singing, cooking perfect meals, planting and nurturing flowers and plants, and only sometimes through what white American society would have considered conventional forms of expression, sculpting, painting, composing, and writing books.

In a conversation with Morrison, Naylor discusses the importance of setting precedents in black women's literature in order to create the space for other writers to use their voices. By including various narrative styles and forms of expression in their works, they are finding new ways of telling their stories that are broadening the field of expression and self-identification:

Morrison: But now I feel that, thank God, some things are done now. I used to think that it was like a plateau; now there are these valleys, if you will, full of people who are entering this terrain, and they're doing extraordinary things with novels and short stories about black women, and that's not going to stop; that's not ever going to stop.

Naylor: Because oneself spoke up for oneself.

Morrison: That's the point, It wasn't anybody else's job. I'm sitting around wondering why A, B, or C isn't telling my story. That's ridiculous, you know. This is our work and I know that it is ours because I have done it and you know it is because you've done it. And you will do it again and again. I don't know. It's a marvelous beginning. It's a real renaissance. You know, we have spoken of renaissances before, but this one is ours, not someone else's.

Naylor's Mama Day represents not just a "speakerly text"⁹ as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines it in his seminal theoretical discourse on African American fiction, The Signifying Monkey. In Naylor's text narrative authority rests with every person involved in the story. The book has no one narrator; in fact, one of the primary characters in the story is communicating with his wife from beyond the grave. This narrative variety reinforces the various ways that people define and tell their own stories and identify the audiences to whom they speak. In the community of Willow Springs, Naylor places superior importance on speaking voices and listening ears:

⁹ As Gates defines it, the "speakerly text" is one that is concerned with representing "speaking black voices in writing" (1988, xxv). A speakerly text is one that allows the black voice to carry narrative authority and verbal power in the text.

Think about it: Ain't nobody really talking to you. We're sitting here in Willow Springs, and you're God knows where. It's August 1999— ain't but a slim chance it's the same season where you are. Uh huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own. (10)

Naylor makes sure this statement is a prophetic one by creating a multi-voiced narrative in which even the dead tell their own story. The story they tell is more about the power of love and the meaning of peace than anything else, but Naylor, by allowing the voices to speak with their own authority, creates a text that not only speaks to other African American texts, it speaks to itself. She has discovered a new way of balancing “the tension between the oral and the written modes of narration that is represented as finding a voice in writing” (Gates, 21).

Like Ursa's singing, Pilate also exhibits a radically different way of speaking that is both instructive and inspirational to all the other characters in the book. She has total knowledge of herself and her history and can therefore claim her voice as a tool to use to help other people achieve the same sense of themselves and their history:

Pilate functions as a priestess or *shaman*; she is a figure of power and mystery. . . . Pilate is the frightening source of uncomfortable questions and liberating truths. . . . Pilate becomes a kind of oracular figure, a spiritual teacher whose lessons are deeply important but not always accessible. (Skerrett, 199)

Pilate's power lies in her voice, in the passing on of knowledge that she attained in her journeys and experiences in the world. Pilate not only uses her voice, but speaks with a voice that is distinctly feminine. She is instructive and nurturing in her language, a quality emphasized by Morrison's use of feminine metaphor to describe her. Feminine metaphor is characterized most markedly by a sense of “interiority.”

Interiority, again, is what Morrison defines as a woman's close and intimate relationship with the spaces she lives in as well as her sense of being enclosed in spaces. In Song of Solomon, and in other novels, this sense of space and place is evidenced in metaphors of interior spaces and feminine activities, in the ways we understand the personal and interpersonal significance of the events, and in the ways that we can see the theories of identity and writing in difference at work in the voices of female characters in literature.

In Sula, for example, we are introduced to the inner-geography of the mad Shadrack through a description of his home. When Sula happens on the shack she is struck by the orderliness of the inside of the shack, especially when compared to the disorderliness of Shadrack in both appearance and action. It is because of the description of Shadrack's inner-orderliness that both the reader and Sula come to understand that inside, Shadrack is really a calm and collected individual: "the neatness, the order startled her, but more surprising was the restfulness" (61). The parallel between the restfulness of the hut and the restfulness of Shadrack, himself, is confirmed for us when Sula notices the way he lays his hand on the door frame:

When she called up enough courage to look back at him, she saw his hand resting on the door frame. His fingers, barely touching the wood, were arranged in a graceful arc. Relieved and encouraged (no one with hands like that, no one with fingers that curved around wood so tenderly could kill her), she walked past him out of the door, feeling his gaze turning, turning with her. (62)

This particular metaphor is feminine because it hinges on a woman's understanding of home and interior spaces to describe for how they are a reflection of the inner workings of

Shadrack. That Morrison uses this metaphor of the inside of Shadrack's house to describe the paradox between Shadrack's wild outside and calm inside is especially important because it employs a code of language or a means of understanding that appeals to a woman's sense of interiority.

As Morrison tells Stepto, she attempts to "put [things] in conventional terms for a woman" (14). One of the most tangible forms of language that represents a kind of "interiority" in her literature is partly evidenced in literal descriptions and uses of interior spaces, especially homes, where many women do the majority of their living. As Morrison suggests to Stepto, "it is just a woman's strong sense of being in a room, a place or in a house" (11). Morrison submits that this familiarity can account for the detail in which she describes the homes, neighborhoods, and towns in which her characters live. We come to know characters, often through their homes and their home lives.

Likewise, in Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place, the apartments at Brewster Place come to signify more than a fictional place where fictional characters live. Though Brewster Place is no more than a fictional place, every reader realizes the tenement and the walls that enclose it represent a world of dead ends, disheveled dreams, and peeling paint promises. As Mattie reflects on her life and all the events that led her to Brewster place, the reader realizes that Brewster Place is a metaphor for the end of the line, socially, economically, and emotionally for many of the women who live there.

Naylor's vignette "Luciella Louise Turner" attempts to "put it in conventional terms for a woman" by using metaphors pertaining to domestic responsibilities. Ciel, whose husband has lost his job and does not want the child that Ciel is bearing him,

listens to him complain while she goes through the customary procedure of cleaning the rice for supper:

The second change of water was slightly clearer, but the starch-speckled bubbles were still there, and this time there was no way to pretend deafness to their message. She had stood at that sink countless times before, washing rice, and she know the water was never going to be totally clear. (94)

Clearly, the message of the rice is that Ciel's life will never be clear of the hardship and strife that have marked it to this point. The tragic irony of the story is that Ciel aborts the baby in her womb, only to lose her toddler daughter when the child electrocutes herself trying to chase a cockroach into a light socket. That Naylor uses food to construct the metaphor that defines our understanding of Ciel's life, is similar to Morrison's description of Shadrack's house as a metaphor for his interior geography. Both Naylor and Morrison use rituals and places that are familiar to women to describe these women's ways of knowing.

Returning to Song of Solomon, Pilate, like Sula, is an example of a strongly identified individual who has defined herself and her world as she desires. Furthermore, it is impossible to separate Pilate's actions and speech from the metaphors which surround Morrison's descriptions of her; action, speech, and metaphor go together to present a complete picture of a woman whose identity is formed out of strength and individuality as well as love. The reader is privy to the private workings of Pilate's world through what we discern as readers in the descriptions of her house and the objects that belong there. Both the description of Pilate and the descriptions of Pilate's house reflect the eclectic mix of chaos and order that defines Pilate's life and actions. We can see a

similarity in the metaphor that represents both Pilate's intimate relationship with her surroundings and the fact that her surroundings provide the reader with information that develops Pilate's character through association with the intimate objects in her life as well as the acts she performs.

For Milkman, Pilate's house (as well as Pilate's company) are forbidden to him by his father; both present a picture of Pilate as a threat to Macon's authority and as enticing to Milkman. Macon tells Milkman that Pilate can teach him nothing about this world. Though they are family, Milkman is taught to look down on Pilate for her "unconventional " practices. When Milkman first enters her home, it is also the readers introduction to Pilate, and we as readers carry with us the apprehensions and excitement that Milkman does. When Milkman is able to discover her house for himself and the woman Pilate for himself, then he is able to see and benefit from the many other things she has to teach him:

Nor was she dirty; unkempt, yes, but not dirty. The whites of her fingernails were like ivory. And unless he knew absolutely nothing, this woman was definitely not drunk. Of course she was anything but pretty, yet he knew he could have watched her all day: the fingers pulling thread veins from the orange sections, the berry-black lips that made her look as though she wore make-up, the erring. . . . (38)

Pilate is a walking paradox to Milkman: she is clean but unkempt, unattractive but entrancing, and connected to the earth through images of her body that coincide to food and her powers of root working. He is entranced watching her interact intimately with the food she is eating. Her house emphasizes these same characteristics endowing the

interior space with the same life spirit as Pilate, and makes a direct connection between Pilate and the space she lives in:

. . . they followed her into a large sunny room that looks both barren and cluttered. A moss green sack hung from the ceiling. Candles were stuck into bottles everywhere; newspaper articles and magazine pictures were nailed to the walls. But other than a rocking chair, two straight backed chairs, a large table, a sink and a stove, there was no furniture. Pervading everything was the odor of pine and fermenting fruit. (39)

Like Pilate herself, her home is cluttered, but not dirty. with a moss colored sack hanging down from the ceiling like her earring hanging from her head, and the entire house associated with the smell of fruits and pine, just as Pilate is associated with fruits.

We should recall Skerrett's assertion that Pilate's central importance is to fulfill the role of storyteller, teacher, and helper. Pilate begins an education for Milkman which encompasses helping Milkman to discover his history and his identity and teaching both Milkman and Guitar to use their voices. Pilate, the teacher, is in full possession of her voice, her identity, and her own way of living. Therefore, as Skerrett says:

Pilate's interactions with Milkman—and with others—are informed by processes of narration that have little to do with the patterns of self-protections and self-justification we have seen in Macon and Ruth. When Milkman and Guitar visit her in her wine house, she immediately strikes toward them the pose that is central to her self-concept—that of teacher, preceptor, exemplar. (195)

So when Milkman greets Pilate with "Hi," she reacts by saying, "You all must be the dumbest unhung Negroes on earth. . . . You say 'Hi' to pigs and sheep when you want 'em to move. When you tell a human being 'Hi,' he ought to get up and knock you down" (37). Her emphatic ways of speaking is both a shock and a joy to Milkman. He is drawn to her and wants to know her as a person as a direct result of her intriguing and

open way of speaking as well as the willingness of Pilate to share her knowledge with him. Pilate then begins a relationship of teacher and pupil that will last for the next twenty years. And rightly so, she begins with an egg.

Pilate who is connected to berries, pine trees, and fruits is again connected to food when she teaches Milkman and Guitar how to boil a perfect egg. The eroticized images of food connect Pilate with the earth and the powers of creation. She has intimate knowledge of the food as one would have intimate knowledge of a lover; she knows how to boil a perfect egg, and she knows how to use that to teach Milkman about new beginnings. She gives both the boys a new beginning with that egg, but more than give them the beginning, Pilate teaches both boys *how* to make that beginning for themselves at the same time that Pilate gives Milkman his first objective account of his own history. Pilate does not care what the boys think of her, and so her storytelling is prescriptive, an action of love and guidance, not an act of selfishness or ego action. And in using food as a tool, she is rooted in the domestic and in the knowledge that she has gained through the intimate workings of her life.

Milkman's mother, Ruth, on the other hand, tells her story to Milkman, not because she believes that it will do him any good, but because she believes that she needs to justify her actions to him so that he will love her. Her plea, "What harm did I do you on my knees?" (126) (referring to Milkman's accusations that she nursed him until he was a grown boy), is really a plea for love. She is looking for the love and human touch that her husband, Macon, denies her, but she is unable to find any forms of fulfilling erotic love.

In an interesting moment, Milkman looks out the window to watch Ruth working in the garden. He sees his mother completely engulfed by the flowers in her garden, which I read as her desire that remains unfulfilled despite all her efforts to find love from her father, Macon, and Milkman. Ruth is literally consumed by the flowers in her garden and is lost among the overwhelming growth of her desires. This engulfment coincides with the image of the watermark on the dining room table; for years a bowl of flowers sat on the dining room table. The mark left where that bowl of flowers sat for so many years represents the absence of erotic beauty in Ruth's life. The flowers, fittingly, cease to be placed on the table after her father dies and Macon catches her in an act of necrophilia. Also fitting, however, Pilate uses her knowledge of roots to make a potion that will compel Macon to sleep with Ruth. This conjunction produces Milkman, the reminder and object of Ruth's erotic desire. She is ashamed, however, when her latent erotic desires are again revealed by the man who catches her nursing Milkman when he is well past the acceptable age for nursing. After this, Ruth receives no erotic pleasure in the living world and seeks pleasure in visiting her father's grave site in the middle of the night. The flower bed scene, then, represents her all consuming desire to be loved, to be touched, until Milkman becomes too old to give her erotic pleasure anymore.

Clearly, note that not only does Pilate use her knowledge to help Ruth, but also hers is a characteristically feminine form of knowledge. Barbara Smith asserts that the inclusion of these feminine practices and ways of knowing are integrated into the literature of African American women to emphasize their importance to the cultural identity of African American women:

That [African American women writers] incorporate the traditional black female activities of root working, herbal medicine, conjure and midwifery into the fabric of their stories is not mere coincidence, nor is their use of specifically black female language to express their own characters' thoughts accidental. (174)

The choice to include these elements, then, represents a conscious effort in black women's fiction to create continuity of culture and collective identity through the literary tropes of metaphor and folklore.

Ruth goes to Pilate before Milkman is born in order to ask her to help Ruth regain the love of her husband through bearing a child. In need of help again, Ruth returns to Pilate to ask her to influence Hagar to keep her from killing Milkman. Then, as she did in Ruth's first visit, Pilate offers Ruth a peach. Pilate offers the fruit as a reminder of their first visit, and without saying word, she situates them in a conversation that never ended through the characteristically feminine act of providing and preparing food. Pilate reminds Ruth that Milkman had to fight for his life before he was even born, and that nobody can take it from him unless he wants to give it up. As Skerrett puts it, "Pilate's storytelling is an art of love and nurture, closely associated with food—an egg, a peach—and structures to meet the needs of others, not self" (198).

Pilate is a character immersed in all the aspects of voice, action, and metaphor that are most feminine in literature, and she represents the possibility for instructive and nurturing communication between men and women as well as among women. This strong example of connection between men and women is carried on in Morrison's fifth novel, Beloved.

In Beloved Paul D enters Sethe's house, number 124, and immediately usurps the order present there. Paul D's act is not constructed as negative, however, because before his arrival, Sethe, Denver, and the ghost lived, trapped, in the womb of their house. The house itself is endowed with human qualities: "124 was spiteful, full of a baby's venom" (1). When Paul D enters the house, it absolutely rebels against a male presence in its female space. By giving the house these feminine qualities, Morrison is telling us the house as both a feminine symbol and an eroticized extension of the woman with which women form relationships. The house is not just a home, but a living place, inhabited by the ghost of Sethe's murdered child, who later comes to life in the character Beloved.

These metaphors are particularly important to a feminine reading of novels like these because they represent a woman's understanding of the places/spaces and objects on her life. Reminding the reader of Morrison's places and spaces, and moving away from descriptions of metaphors of homes and food, we can move into a discussion of places and spaces in terms of mobility and confinement.

Part III: Mobility and Stasis

The fiction of African American women reflects a gendered construction of motion. Both in society and in literature, women tend to be physically static; their mobility is limited by their obligation to maintain a home and raise children as well as by their lack of financial freedom. The restriction of movement explains the large amount of attention given to the description of interior spaces as well as the spatial metaphors that pervade African American women's fiction. However, by examining mobility as a literary construct, we can see the ways that writers defy and stretch gender boundaries, thus endowing with or depriving characters of power based on their ability to move in and out of certain spaces. The discussion of mobility and stasis in fiction can be broadened to include issues like transgression of boundaries, violation of spaces, and the motion of memory, which all play a significant role in black women's and men's writing.

Zora Neale Hurston creates a complex dichotomy between mobility and stasis in her novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God. By contrasting the amount of power that Janie has when she is in stasis (in her marriages with Logan and Jodie) and when she is in motion (in her marriage to Tea Cake), Hurston establishes the power of motion as a means of discovering the self as Janie goes out on a hero quest in search of her identity. Through her three marriages and their three major settings, Janie follows her husbands in

their adventures into the South. In each marriage she gains more autonomy and a greater knowledge of herself and her ability to live her own life and love other people. Although Janie does return to Eatonville with a greater understanding of herself and her place in the world, she requires a male counterpart for every segment of her search for that self. However, as Joseph Skerrett suggests in his analysis of Janie as the inspiration for the character Pilate in Song of Solomon, Janie is restricted to supporting roles as she can only achieve self-knowledge through marriage. Hurston limits Janie's self-development and active assertion of the self in the novel by allowing her motion to take place only as a predicate to a husband. In fact, Janie has no children; this is not to say that she should be defined by her reproductive capabilities, but rather that Janie is only able to achieve such radical motion because she doesn't have any children. When Janie does return to Eatonville, she does so in a dramatic act of claiming stasis.

She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life was in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see. (184)

The reader understands this stasis to be a triumphant and satisfied return, and so we do not consider the choice to remain static a tragic or castrating act. However, Hurston does not allow Janie to assume motion without the help of a man, a construct that is abandoned in several other characters.

Janie's search, in fact, follows the classical hero cycle in literature that chronicles the separation, initiation, and return of the heroine within her community. This cyclical pattern in the novel not only helps to raise Janie to the status of heroine but also emphasizes that the act of self-discovery, for women, is a heroic act. Toni Morrison calls

physical quests of this sort part of the “Ulysses theme.” In his interview with her “Intimate Things in Place,” Robert Stepto suggests to Morrison that men are more often in motion in literature, while women are usually stationary. More attention is paid to the intimate and domestic aspects of their lives. Stepto notes that in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man and James Weldon Johnson’s Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man the are protagonists, in almost constant motion, remain unnamed throughout the works. Morrison’s reply notes both the gendered aspect of motion as well as the possibility of power in claiming mobility:

I think that is one of the major differences between black men’s work—the major black characters—and black women’s work is precisely that. The big scene is the traveling Ulysses scene, for black men. They are moving. . . . It is the Ulysses theme, the leaving home. . . . Go find out what that is, you know! And in the process of finding they are also making themselves. (25-26)

A kind of self-discovery takes place when characters are in motion; they undergo a process of identification of the self that is catalyzed not just by the motion that they claim, but also by the experiences they have while they are in motion. Characters can define themselves in relation to other people and events and thus develop their identity based on process-like comparison and common experience.

Motion is a significant element to the lives of many characters in Morrison’s works, an element that crosses gender lines and social roles so as to create a dichotomy of motion and stasis that challenges gender roles by its insistence not to conform to a simple formula of men in motion and women in stasis. Milkman, for example, conducts what is

ultimately a myth-like quest for his history and his identity.¹⁰ Leaving his home town, Milkman travels through the towns where his ancestors lived. He slowly pieces together the story of his family history and is able to claim a new identity based on his understanding of his ancestors and his immediate family. However, where Ulysses eventually returns to his home and his wife, Milkman makes the last step of his journey (the return to his community) in the form of flight. Though there is tremendous ambiguity as to whether or not Milkman flies away (as his fabled ancestor Jake is to have done) or whether he falls to his death, the act of surrendering to the wind can be seen as an act of ultimate mobility and power in the self. Milkman does not return to the place he began his journey, as most heroes do; rather, he takes wing and, in full knowledge of his personal history and community, he returns (at least metaphorically) to the community from which he came: Africa.

Likewise, Sula adopts the male prerogative of motion and goes on her own quest. She leaves Medallion after the marriage of her best friend, Nel, and does not return for ten years. The interesting comparison between Milkman and Sula lies in Morrison's telling of their respective stories. In Song of Solomon the reader follows Milkman's journey from beginning to end, going everywhere with Milkman, seeing what he sees. The discourse of the self is laid out for us as the relationship between Milkman and the

¹⁰ Milkman's search is a search for continuity with the past and present. His is a journey of memory and discovery that ultimately leads him to a full understanding of his world and the powers within that world to know the self and to understand his own collective memory. One can mark the classical myth cycle in Song of Solomon which both endows the novel with a classical richness that signifies and revises Homer's

various people and situations he encounters. In Sula, we see Sula leave Medallion, and we watch her return; however, we are not privileged with the details of her quest. The discourse of the self in Sula takes place between Sula and Nel and is based on continuity and discontinuity in their relationship. We are not led to believe that Sula has made any of the same discoveries that Milkman has made, nor is her return a triumphant act that she relates to the community. She remains on the outside of the community, feared and chastised both for leaving and returning to Medallion, as well as for committing various sins in the eyes of the community.

The fact that Sula has left Medallion and returned endows her with the power of motion; however, it serves as just one more quality that sets her apart from the rest of the women in her community. The significant events of her quest are related tersely to the reader and to Nel and with little interest on Sula's part: *Sula went to college*. Furthermore, her quest does not bring her into unity with the rest of her community as Milkman's search ultimately does; rather, Sula is even more tangential to her community when she returns.

The exclusion of almost any information about the ten years that Sula was gone can be read as a lack of character and plot development within the novel, thus an undermining of the boldness of Sula's travels. Actually, the lack of detail regarding her time away from Medallion serves not necessarily to trivialize or undermine Sula's motion, but to place more emphasis on what she does in her stasis. I believe that Morrison chose not

Odyssey. Morrison not only draws on Greek myth, but she also changes it and adds complexity to it by translating it into a black man's search for his Ithaca.

to include this information because the novel was meant to chronicle the relationship of two seemingly opposite characters and their connection with their community. It is more important that Sula did something unconventional, something that sets her off from the community, than exactly what she did. Like Eva, Sula is a woman endowed with the power to leave and re-enter Medallion. And her movement is nothing less than a dramatic assertion of identity. Sula claims motion for herself, motion that is not aided by any other character or prescribed by any teacher or helper; her movement is her own. Furthermore, the plague of sparrows that accompanies Sula's return emphasizes not only the anomaly of her motion, but also its catastrophic¹¹ power. Sula is powerful and even dangerous in her ability to come and go, to pick up and drop men, to break up marriages and to define the boundaries of her own life.

Motion, then, in the case of both Milkman and Sula, is a means of self-discovery and empowerment. In the case of Milkman this motion means discovering his past, in effect, creating a past for himself where none existed. For Sula this means claiming the power to move outside of the constructs of her gender claiming the male prerogative of motion, education, and sexual power. Physical motion and the right to claim it are both empowering and identity-forming actions for Sula and exemplify the way that black women writers can appropriate and revise a classical theme in order to make aesthetic an act of self-discovery.

¹¹ I take catastrophic here to mean the final event in a dramatic action, and Sula has made a very dramatic action by leaving and returning to Medallion.

In Beloved, we are also presented with an act of self-discovery which encompasses both male and female searches for identity through both memory and physical journey. Memory is itself in motion in this novel, and the tension between memory and motion and stasis redefines and re-figures issues of mobility in the powerful struggle for wholeness and self-discovery. When Sethe and Paul D's lives collide, they are forced to reverse the course of their motion and address issues of memory, which they have been avoiding since they last saw each other. Sethe says the future is "a matter of keeping the past at bay" (42). Such, for Sethe, means closing the door to the past as well to as any elements of the outside world that could force her to remember that past. Paul D keeps the past at bay by running from it. Memory and the vocalization of that memory become essential to the reformation of identity that occurs for Sethe and Paul D in Beloved. In her essay "A Different Remembering: Memory, History and Meaning in Beloved," Marilyn Sanders Mobley claims that Morrison uses memory as a "metaphorical sign of the interior life [of a character] to explore and represent dimensions" (357), of a character's experiences that have been overlooked and depersonalized through institutionalized oppression. Through their own voices Morrison's characters in Beloved relate their memories, and in the relation of their memories, they explore and re-form their identities in relation to one another, their shared memories, and new situation together.

However, Sethe and Paul D's memories are fragmented, and the act of remembering becomes a process both for the characters and the readers. This process is based on the assertion that the past exists in the memory in a very concrete and real way.

Memories serve as remnants of the past that literally move throughout number 124, first in the form of the ghost and then in the incarnation of Beloved. The ghost of Beloved inhabits the house that Sethe and Denver live in. The ghost, like Sethe and Denver, is trapped in the house she haunts as well as in Sethe's memory. When Paul D *walks into* their lives, then the use of stasis as a protective tool from the past backfires as their memories literally take form and Beloved *walks into* their lives. When memory becomes an active part of these characters' lives, they too are forced to abandon their forms of avoidance and face the past.

Throughout the novel, Morrison uses the word "rememory" to describe the very painful process of recollection that Sethe and Paul D undergo. Philip Page, in "Circularity in Toni Morrison's Beloved," defines rememory as the process by which characters relive and remember events in their past: "for her [Sethe] memory is both an actual repetition of real events and the repetition of a memory, a rememory, a circling back in one's mind to what was previously there both in reality and in its recall" (37). This reinforces the idea of memory as a process of reconciling the past with the present and emphasizes that characters must not only remember but also face their pasts if they hope to be able to live with the memories of that past. Rememory involves not just the remembering of events, but the re-evaluation of those memories at every turn. When the characters must move through the past and in taking motion to travel through their memories, they can begin to reconcile the past with the present.

When Paul D enters the novel, he does so in motion. Since his escape from the forced stasis of the chain gang, he has led the life of a traveling man, coming and going as

he pleases with no fixed trajectory. In fact, he arrives at Sethe's door by accident, not knowing why or how he has arrived at the point he is at, but rather arriving as if by coincidence. His movement, to that point, has been a motion of avoidance; he seems to travel to keep his memory behind him. Morrison uses the metaphor of a rusted tin box to describe the way that Paul D keeps his memory locked in an impenetrable place inside himself. Therefore, where his physical motion is active, his emotions can only be liberated through memory.

Paul D's motion is problematic because unlike Milkman, for whom motion was an act of memory and reclamation, motion has been an act of avoidance. This defies the previous model of motion as a positive action of self-discovery, defining the self based on adventure. However, if we say that he is, in fact, searching for some sort of identity, it is an attempt to forge a new identity that is completely free of and different from the man that he was when he was a slave. Motion, then, does not signify power and active assertion of the self, but rather movement away from self-examination of the past as a search for the self. He is looking for a way to define himself in terms of experiences and people who have no connection to his past.

In contrast, Sethe has been in a physical stasis that is equally as detrimental to her quest for self-definition and knowledge. Sequestered in her home, she has not traveled outside its safe walls, nor has she been asked to confront the memory of her experiences at Sweet Home, her travel north, or the chilling memory of sacrificing her children for freedom. Stasis represents a resignation from life, an attempt to remain safe in the womb of her home. She literally keeps the past outside the doors and chooses not to confront it.

Both characters live immersed in their individual memories while trying to deny that they are haunted by their pasts; they avoid the act of self-exploration and remembrance.

The “future,” for Sethe, “is a matter of keeping the past at bay” (42). Thus, in order to live in the present, she must actively repress the past in her memory. Stepping into her life, Paul D acts as a catalyst, swelling the reaction between motion, stasis, and memory as the very house around them rebels against his presence. When Paul D drives the ghost of Beloved from the house and into a physical being, memory takes life; it is no longer a static element in the lives of these characters. What ensues is a deconstruction and reconstruction of both shared and individual memory.

By divulging to each other the details of their individual experiences at Sweet home, Paul reaches into his tin box and Sethe reaches beyond the boundaries of her home to pull in Paul’s knowledge and share her own. Because neither one had a complete picture of what had happened at Sweet Home and after, neither one was able to realize the extent of the damage done to them by School Teacher and his nephews. With the process of remembering and gaining fresh knowledge, both Paul D and Sethe are forced to face the cruel reality of their pasts and it almost destroys them. Never before did Sethe know what had happened to Halle after she left Sweet Home. Nor did Paul D know that in order to save her children from School Teacher, Sethe tried to kill her children rather than have them handed over into slavery.

When all the memories rise to the surface, memory becomes dangerous and threatens to destroy Sethe, Paul D, and Denver. The emergence of Beloved as Sethe’s child returned from the dead further represents Sethe’s retreat into the past in her own

effort to reconcile her actions to the love that she has for Beloved. Sethe slips further inside her home, dedicating her whole self to winning forgiveness from Beloved. She rejoices in Beloved's arrival when she realizes that she is her lost daughter: "she was excited to giddiness by the things she no longer had to remember" (183). Paul D likewise slips back into the detrimental motion that brought him to 124. He moves, by degrees out of the house and away from Sethe and the knowledge of their pasts.

When Paul D takes moves again, this time running from his memory and from Sethe, who is being eaten alive by her desire to reconcile herself with the ghost incarnate. When Stamp Paid comes to call on Sethe and finds that his knock goes unanswered, he looks in and sees Sethe and Beloved and knows that "the indecipherable language clamoring around the house was the mumbling of the black and angry dead" (198), and he believes: "Almost. Mixed in with the voices surrounding the house, recognizable but indecipherable, were the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts unspoken" (199). Sethe, Denver, and Beloved do not leave the house, but feed off of the sadness. When Stamp Paid looks in the window of the house, he sees what amounts to the total destruction of Sethe. She is literally being winnowed away to nothing by the past in her active assertion to give her life over to Beloved in order to make up for taking her infant life.

Near the close of the novel, the balance between motion through memory and physical motion is finally achieved. Paul D returns to the house, retracing the slow steps he took to leave it, and Beloved is forced back into the grave as Sethe and Paul D reconcile their relationship. His return, and Sethe's acceptance of the present constitutes a real act

of faith. Paul D says to Sethe, “me and you, we got more yesterdays then anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (273). The reader believes at the end of the novel that Sethe, Paul D, and Denver will be able to move into a future that embodies more potential than their past.

Issues of motion and stasis take on totally different meaning when examined not in terms of heroic quests or memory journeys, but in terms of trespassing or transgression of personal space. Morrison makes space and place a central issue in The Bluest Eye. Personal space is tragically reduced for Pecola by the motion of others against her. In the previous chapter I discussed the ways that self-definition is limited through silence, and, akin to silence, that Pecola is forced into stasis by the trespassing of her personal space. Both in the events leading up to as well as Cholly’s rape of Pecola, she also experiences a contraction of space that results in her ultimate retreat within herself. Pecola’s silence and insanity are direct emotional and psychological reactions to the very physical transgressions committed against her. In the many physical ways in which Pecola is violated by men in the novel and shrinks away from the rest of her society, so her conception of herself undergoes violent contraction until she is so introverted and tortured that she can no longer exist in her home or society. Madonne Miner says, “Male realms expand as those of the female suffer an almost fatal contraction” (179). This assertion is true in the case of the violent loss of emotional space for Pecola; however, Miner’s statement should not be taken to mean that male realms are not transgressed and forced into contraction. In fact, black male realms suffer just as devastating a contraction under white male domination.

In what is chronologically one of the first events of the novel, the young Cholly Breedlove is making love to a young woman named Darlene in an open field at night. Armed white men come upon them and seeing two black people making love, they shine a lantern on them and force them to continue for their entertainment. Mobility is limited in the most physical sense in that Cholly and Darlene are being held at gun-point, but the lantern light shone on them also reduces the space in which their love-making takes place from an open field to the concentrated and mocking gaze of the racist men:

There was no place for Cholly's eyes to go. They slid about furtively looking for shelter, while his body remained paralyzed. . . . Darlene had her head averted, her eyes staring out of the lamplight into the surrounding darkness and looking almost unconcerned as though they had no place in the drama taking place around them. . . . Darlene put her hands over her face as Cholly began to simulate what he had done before. He could do not more than make-believe. The flashlight made a moon on his behind. (148)

Darlene too is fixed by the beam of light, but she is also confined under the weight of Cholly. Her physical reaction of averting her eyes and then placing her hands over them limits her vision, or the spatial extent of her vision, to within herself. Cholly's remembrance of the event shows the emotional and psychological damage surrounding the act precisely because of the powerful confinement they were forced to undergo:

he could only think of the flashlight, the muscadines, and Darlene's hands. And when he was not thinking of them, the vacancy in his head was like the space left by a newly pulled tooth still conscious of the rottenness that had once filled it. (150)

By confining the space in which their lovemaking could take place, the white men changed both the privacy and the purpose of the act into a spectacle for them to watch.

Morrison's concentration on space in this quotation shows that Cholly has internalized

the event in terms of spatial loss. This transgression of space is important because it is the loss of mobility through the concentration of light on Cholly and Darlene that endows the act with negative meaning under a white male gaze.

Throughout the novel a similar series of transgressions against Pecola causes her to retreat into her mind, the only place where no one else can enter. Pecola's retreat in reaction to the transgressions visited against her is represented spatially in terms of the constrictions that she tries to place on her vision, as well as her desire for blue eyes.

Pecola believes that if she can have blue eyes she will no longer be ugly, no longer be black, no longer be poor, no longer be a part of a fractured family, and no longer be the child of uncaring parents. She believes that to be white, to have blue eyes, to be Shirley Temple, would change her bad situation to good:

If those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes."

Pretty Eyes, Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes. Run, Jip, run. Jip runs, Alice runs. Alice has blue eyes. Jerry has blue eyes. . . . Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. . . . Thrown, in this way into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people. (46-7)

The use of the lines from the reading primer lines emphasizes Pecola's desire for what she understands to be the freedom, beauty, and privilege of white children. The desire to regulate her vision is key to understanding Pecola's self hatred and shame as she believes that her eyes (as well as her ugliness and blackness) are the keys to her unhappiness. As

a result, all the manifestations of her self-hatred, all the desires to pull away from her own identity and the events in her world it, are related to her desire to limit her vision or be outside the vision of others. Her desires for self-annihilation have their origin in her existence in her own home, which she tries to limit in reaction to her parents fighting. Because she cannot be comfortable in the space she is in, Pecola tries to collapse her existence by shutting her eyes and wishing herself out of physical space. She believes that if she can cease to exist, if she can only cease to see: "Try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear. So what was the point? They were everything. Everything was there, in them" (39).

Pecola's desire to cease to exist is compounded and takes on a more spatial quality in the series of events leading up to her rape. In terms of mobility, her personal space is so violently altered with every transgression against her that she is left standing on an island of sorts by the end of the novel. A piece at a time, her ability to move, her home, and her body are violated

At the beginning of the novel, Pecola is invited to come into Junior's house on the promise of seeing his kitten. Instead, Junior throws the kitten in her face causing her to suck in her breath in fear. Though hers is a natural reaction in this case, the sucking of breath is repeated in the rape scene with Cholly, where it is an unnatural reaction. These two instances then signify on each other and can be considered parallel events in their effect on Pecola. This first case causes Pecola to want to flee Junior's house, but he traps her in the room with him taunting, "you can't get out, you are my prisoner" (90).

Though the reader understands that this is an instance of juvenile cruelty, it causes the space around Pecola and her ability to move freely in that space to collapse violently.

Shortly, Junior's mother returns home, and finding her cat half dead, she lays the blame on Pecola. She expels Pecola from her house, driving her from the space that she was just trapped in. The lack of control over her space and the weight of the blame that is laid on her reinforces Pecola's self-hatred, and confusion fosters further her desire to be out of the vision of other people. Pecola is attempting to control the space that she exists in when the text tells us, "she could not hold [her head] low enough to avoid seeing the snowflakes falling and dying on the pavement" (76). There is a kind of masochism to Pecola's actions, and one that is central to her belief that she has brought disaster on herself through her ugliness. It is not entirely clear whether or not Pecola is trying to limit her vision in order to limit her ability to see other people or in an effort not to be seen in her ugliness and thereby invite evil to herself. The two, however, are not mutually exclusive, but it is clear that Pecola believes that she lives in an ugly world because she, herself, is ugly. Hers is not a self-hatred that directly seeks punishment from other people, but a slight fatalism in Pecola's belief that if she could change her identity, in particular her race, she could change her world. Pecola's rape is the ultimate transgression of personal space and control over the actions of which she is a part. Rape in and of itself is a violent form of trespassing, but this rape takes place in the home and is committed by her father, causing even more devastation for the victim.¹²

¹² Because the text humanizes rather than demonizes Cholly through the act of rape, it is important to note that he rapes Pecola in an attempt to reclaim his one positive sexual experience. Reminded of the first

Miner defines rape in The Bluest Eye as man's desire to confirm his presence, an act that much be asserted by denying that space and presence to another, in this case Pecola. Her reaction to the rape, the voiceless suck of air that she makes, represents a contraction in space, a loss of mobility as well as a loss of voice. Moreover, the rape occurs at home, a fact which "increases its raw horror. Morrison denies us the cover of a metaphor and confronts us directly with a father's violation of his daughter" (179). The damage done to Pecola destroys all the borders of her life. The rape is constructed as the elimination of voice, vision, and identity for Pecola. The elimination of her ability to move and exist in her home is represented by her paralysis after the rape. Her father pushes her to the floor, smothers her with his weight, and then leaves her, unable to move on the floor. Furthermore, the tools which she uses to define her world, her personal identity and her identity as a member of a family, are eliminated by those who she should be turning to:

... just as the mythemic act (man raping woman) robs the woman of identity, so too the mythemic interact, dependent upon familial roles for personal verification ("mother of," "sister of," "wife of") the female must fear a loss of identity as the family loses its boundaries—or, more accurately, as the male transgresses these boundaries. (Miner, 178)

In addition to the violation of personal identity that occurs for Pecola, there is a violation of her familial role that is enforced by the isolation established when Polly refuses to let Pecola tell her what has happened and the dissolution of the family when Cholly leaves; her space to live in (her home) is violated, her role (daughter) taken from her, and her

time that he saw Polly as Pecola stands at the kitchen sink, Cholly tries and fails to return to that moment and make a tender gesture toward Pecola.

personal space and mobility destroyed by the rape, Pecola completes a retreat into herself.

This retreat, behind the blue eyes given to her by Soaphead, represents not only the realization of her wish in the only way in which it could happen, but also represents a full retreat from reality into a world where shame, self-negation, and self-hatred do not exist. But even her successful retreat is the admission of total failure; the whole world of this child failed her in every way except to allow her madness:

The damage was total. She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind. (204)

In her insanity, the reader can infer a motion that is granted to Pecola. Though she is completely capsulated in her own mind, her world finally has all the motion she desired, motion that is only possible from behind blue eyes. But the reader knows, as does Claudia, that this motion and satisfaction, like the drum that Pecola hears, is only the sound and movement of a wounded bird, one that cannot fly.

In The Bluest Eye, mobility and the ability is a male prerogative that is delineated by the social hierarchy of white over black and male over female. The ability to move is denied to women and in the case of Pecola is violently transgressed. We see real despair in her retreat into herself and her helplessness to control her space in the world and her ability to determine who can enter that space. Though mobility is always a gendered power, it is not consistently a power granted to men and denied to woman. In Sula, for

example, we are presented with a woman who, though feared and even loathed by her community, challenges the male prerogative of mobility and power over her world by claiming motion as her province. Just as Pilate claims and exercises her voice, so Sula assumes certain male traits and explores them for herself. In this way, gender is modified by the issues of space and mobility and the consequences of male and female movement.

Sula is the only woman to leave her home town alone, and as only the men of her time do, receives an education, travels, and then returns to take her place in her community. Sula leaves Medallion during the celebration of Jude and Nel's wedding; this gesture can be read as her rejection of normal roles for women in favor of power and mobility. The catastrophic power of her movement is represented by the plague of birds that mark her return to Medallion, and she is said to act like a man in more respects than simply her motion throughout the novel. She picks up and drops men in the same routine way men do women. She sleeps with many men, and she sleeps with white men. She breaks up the stable construct of marriage when she and Jude are caught together, and she abandons her family by putting her grandmother in a nursing home. In doing all of these things, she ignores gender roles and threatens the patriarchal system. However, her freedom is detrimental to her relationship with her community. Because she does not assume the prescribed roles for women as wife and mother when she returns from college, she is ostracized from the community. Again, the main focus of this novel is not on Sula's motion, but on her relationship with Nel and the contrast between two seemingly opposite women compounded by their community's views of them.

However, the circumstances surrounding her untimely death cement the community's reaction to her. No one thing is represented as Sula's "undoing"; however, the fact that she did not return to assume the expected role of a woman in society, because she did not settle down, is significant in her demise. She does not listen to the so-called biological clock and allow her desire for children to root her in one place devoted to one man. Furthermore, her attempts to take a singular lover are unsuccessful. Sula, having made Ajax her lover and having fallen in love with him, drives him into motion. He punishes her for having prepared for his return and for asking the question, "where you been?" But this is not an event that causes her death any more than her action in taking Jude as a lover and dissolving his marriage to Nel. The important fact is that Sula dies alone; and she dies alone because her community has rejected her way of life. They have said that she will be feared and shunned for assuming the roles reserved only for males in society. Though Sula is a radical revision of the static role of the female in fiction, refusing even to abide by the insignificant mobility allowed to women, she finds her demise in daring the patriarchal structure.

These limits of mobility and stasis, and hence the exploration of the power implicit in them, constitute some of the major gender differences in John Edgar Wideman's Sent for You Yesterday. The text constructs the antinomic relationship of power and authority in male movement and female movement in the form of "scare games" or the games that characters play to test and challenge the boundaries of their world. Scare games are by their nature male challenges of motion and power

Carl and Brother assert their courage and trickery to test the limits of their command over their own movements. The object of the game is to remain still in the face of an oncoming train, and then to be the last one to move, and quickly, out of its way. The image of the train, a loaded image of movement and power, does not offer the promise of movement to these boys, but rather their ability to face danger and acquire some of the train's power in doing so. The winner has a sense of having conquered motion, and as Brother shows, there is motion in winning: "the train finishes swooshing past and you can see Brother again, not dead like he ought to be, but wagging his bald head and signifying with his whole self in the middle of the right of way" (18). However, for Lucy, the woman in this three-way relationship, scare games are played much differently. Sula defies and rejects the patriarchal construction of womanhood in order to make motion, but Lucy finds a way to move within the structure and maintain her gender roles while testing her power within the society she lives in; this strategy allows Lucy to avoid being ostracized by the community for testing her powers to move and make others move around her. Her adolescent scare games are played out on men through her flirtation, as opposed to Carl and Brother's games with physical motion and trains. She identifies a kind of motion between social and sexual roles of woman that allows her to find the boundaries, the outer limits of what is and is not acceptable behavior for her sex. She plays with Carl and other men in an effort to test herself against their manhood, "Carl knows it's just a seashell sliver, and she's trying to scare him. Like she does when she creeps up and hollers boo. Testing his manhood" (105). She is trying, by defining her

scare games in terms of one who has played the male scare games, to test her womanhood against Carl's manhood.

Later in life, the stakes of the games are raised, and Lucy finds herself in need of male assistance to rescue her when she pushes the boundaries too far. In the Bucket O'Blood, she plays her scare game based on flirtation and uses her femininity to make men bow to her. However, when she is accused of being a tease, she faces the real danger at the hands of her accuser. Ironically, a man rescues her and saves her from her own game. This brings the game to its crisis; Lucy must decide whether to continue to push the boundaries and face the danger that comes from playing the game, or she must find a way to live inside the boundaries that patriarchy defines as hers. She opts for life within the boundaries, but it is a socially enforced stasis, not a stasis of choice. Lucy is able to control her house and movement within it as she controls Carl and when he may make love to her. Nonetheless her potential for real movement is thwarted by the social restrictions of her gender; she may control only that which she is offered control over by men.

Neither Brother nor Lucy leaves Homewood during the course of the book. They conduct tests, challenging movement within the constructs of Homewood, trying to defy their stasis. However, the three of them, Carl included, explore yet another kind of motion through shooting heroin. Carl says, "who ever said that you supposed to just stand still and suffer. No. You take the freedom train running through your veins"(153). For the three of them, heroin is a way to travel, to move on the "freedom train" without leaving Homewood.

Carl describes the desire for movement and the gratification in the high as a kind of escape from space and its strictures,” I ain’t gon lie now like I’m supposed to and say it tore me up to be a junkie. Nope. Cause it was better than being nothing. World was a hurting trick and being high was being out of the world” (153). There is mobility and power in the high, but just as movement was dangerous for Paul D, drugs keep Lucy, Carl, and Brother running from reality and self-knowledge. As Carl explains, “I looked in Lucy’s eyes and saw junk. Lucy looked back in mine, and she musta seen the same thing. Junk. Like I said Hello, meet my monkey. And her monkey nodded at mine” (153). Under the control of the drugs, their mobility is nothing more than a mask, an angry attempt to take motion, and one that threatens to take their lives.

Albert Wilkes, who is described as one of the giants of Homewood, from a generation when men were larger than life, is a sharp contrast to his closest friend, John French. Wilkes is wooed by motion and power, while French *opts* for stasis, for the family and home life. French who is called “a family man” is revered as a hero by Carl, Brother, and Lucy for his decision to settle down and maintain the role of father and husband faithfully. The joy in fathering children is for him as satisfying as testing the boundaries like Wilkes, who says:

French, you a family man. How come you a family man? You like it out here just like I do. Acting a fool. Running wild. Come and go like you please. How come you a family man? . . .
Cause I got a family, fool.
Now wait a minute. That’s too easy, ain’t it? I mean you trying to say all I need is a family and Albert Wilkes be a family man too? That’s too easy, French
Ain’t nothing if it ain’t easy (64)

It is John French who is made a hero for his actions; it is Albert Wilkes who is gunned down for his disregard of the rules that separate white from black. John French thinks to himself, "if he bold enough to. . . march out when ever he's good and ready like he's been fucking rich white ladies and strutting down rich white folks' streets all his life, then more power to him. And shame on him" (64-5). Though there is no indication that Albert Wilkes is condemned by his own people for his actions, we certainly see a connection between the scare games that Albert Wilkes plays and those that John French plays. French gives up the scare games in order to raise a family; he has pushed them far enough and decides in favor of the moments of pleasure in fatherhood, like catching his toddler daughter trying to walk in his brogans. He gives up motions and freedom to go wherever at a moment's notice in favor of stasis that allows him more security. In this case, as in that of Paul D, the act of claiming stasis can be seen as an conscious act to address issues of the self. Both Paul D and John French ultimately choose stasis as a positive means of electing their role in the lives of the people around them, and they choose not to keep running from it through constant motion. Compare these two to Milkman, for whom stasis is an act of avoidance of the self, and for whom motion is a means to form his identity through self-knowledge. Despite the fact that no one set of rules can be applied here, motion is always a positive act; the difficulty lies in discerning what kind of motion, physical or mental, a character is involved in and which is more effective in defining for that character a clearer sense of his or her identity in society.

Albert Wilkes, on the other hand, continues to play and raise the stakes until they become too high. He not only challenges the train and claims motion as his own, but he

also transgresses class and racial boundaries by sleeping with a rich white woman, a scare game that eventually brought punishment down on him. It is not so easy, however, to say that Albert Wilkes was murdered because he pushed the boundaries too far and because he claimed motion as his prerogative beyond the boundaries of his class or race. Motion is the male prerogative; even John French maintains the possibility of motion in his staid lifestyle. Interestingly, Albert Wilkes also chooses stasis in the end. When the police come looking for him, they find him sitting at his piano, knowing full well that his life is in danger. Perhaps he stays because he sees more power in stasis, when movement is a man's natural prerogative. Unlike Lucy, who cannot jump on the train and leave as Albert Wilkes did seven years before, power lies in the ability to refuse motion as well as take it.

Given all these kinds of motion, stasis, choice, scare games, and restrictions, the book ends on a whole other kind of motion: dancing. Much of Sent for You Yesterday is devoted to Doot and the reclaiming of his memory through the stories told by Carl and Lucy. At the end of the novel, when Doot has reclaimed motion in time and memory, he gains the ability to connect with his past and understand it. So he dances, and like Milkman flying away, his is a dynamic act that represents all that he has learned about himself and his past throughout the novel. First he stands, takes a few awkward, baby steps, and then with the encouragement of Lucy and Carl, he dances: "Everybody joining in now. All the voices. I'm reaching for them and letting them go. Lucy waves. I'm on my own feet. Learning to stand, to walk, learning to dance" (208). And in dancing, Doot

has learned to claim his own kind of motion and to claim the space in time and his emotional frame to move in.

Part IV: Structural Interiority and Closure

The emphasis on the culture of women as a means of self-understanding and growth is not only treated thematically in this new fiction, but it is also organic to the writers' forms.

— Barbara Christian

In various accounts of writing and difference, critics have defined tangible strategies or tropes to give readers possible footholds into the ideas of sexual difference and interiority. Judith Kegan Gardiner suggests that “imagery of confinement and unsentimental descriptions of child care” (178) are noted as evidence of the “female consciousness” in writing. However, she points out that this theory is reductive as such a strict definition of the term forces the reader or critic to pull and push texts to fit a predetermined set of standards that would designate a work as “feminine” or having a sense of interiority.

Interiority, as it has been defined in this paper, is the sense of place and space, or outer and inner-geography, that is an integral element in women's fiction. I have outlined interiority in terms of intimate language and feminine metaphor as well as mobility, stasis, and the ability of a body to define its own motion in literature. Interiority is also evident in those moments in literary texts in which a more intimate identification between the reader and the text is possible.

Imagine that the text has a structure, a house with many rooms, and that the ways in which the writer is able to draw the reader into this house is integral to the understanding of how women make aesthetic their identity in a text. In terms of issues of mobility, which I used to frame the preceding discussion of power and identity in African American women's literature, that these writers create another kind of mobility through structure of their novels. Interiority of this kind is mobility because it allows the reader to enter and explore the text through the moments, or spaces, that the writer creates by using various narrative strategies. Writers also make their texts experiential by drawing the reader in and making him or her a central element in the text. By making the text an experiential and feminine text, these novelists are not just making aesthetic out of their experience, they are making an experience out of aesthetics.

Some writers achieve a sense of interiority in their works using distinct narrative strategies. Alice Walker's The Color Purple is called feminine in structure because of its epistolary construction. Because of the historical barriers against women writing "high literature," much of the writing by women that is available to us comes in forms other than prose or poetry. Walker capitalizes on this limitation in her novel and in doing so signifies on the stories of women that have been preserved in letters. Her novel is about women finding their own voices through writing when they were not able to speak to one another. Walker promotes the sense of the feminine voice by constructing her novel

around letters which also brings our attention to the wealth of writing by women that does not fall in the genres of fiction, poetry, drama, or essays.¹³

Ntoazake Shange's Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo is another example of feminine construction of a work that displays a sense of interiority. Shange attempts to bring the same sense of historically feminine modes of creativity into her novel through her characters. Each woman character in the novel is a celebration of talent that, like Walker's novel, does not define creative expression as prose narrative. Sassafrass consists of letters, recipes, and journal entries as well as narrative so that the reader is given a particularly detailed understanding of the texts of these women's lives. Not only do we understand the lives of the characters, but we understand them in terms of what it means to them to be women and the forms that their communication takes. Shange incorporates her characters' inner thoughts in the journal writings, their domestic and home lives in recipes like "Breakfast with Hilda Effania and her Girls on Christmas Morning," their belief in spirits and goddesses and the supernatural in such things as Indigo's "Numbers for Prosperity and Furthered Independence of the Race," "Marvelous Menstruating Moments," or her spell to use "If your Beloved Has Eyes for Another." Also important to note is that while the works of writers like Walker and Shange draw on traditionally feminine forms of expression, they are also reinforcing these modes of expression as valid and important forms of art. They are using signification to hearken back to the lost art of

¹³ It is not my intent here to say that only women write novels using structural elements such as letters; rather, that women use these forms to represent a characteristically feminine construct of literature.

domestic women and by including it in contemporary fiction, they are insisting that it too be considered as art in the contemporary period.

However, it is not only through the use of these feminine constructs that a writer can endow a work with a sense of the feminine or a sense of interiority. Toni Morrison never uses recipes, letters, or spells; however, her novels have no less a sense of the feminine or of the interior lives of her characters than writers like Walker or Shange. Instead, Morrison employs other narrative strategies to make the reader work and experience the literature from the inside thus giving the reader a sense of the interior lives of both men and women in the novel. In Morrison's novels her interpreters can actually move about the text as he or she wishes, filling in for herself that which the author has left out and making herself a part of the text.

The fact that Morrison does write intimately about women allows readers to get the same sense of interiority and femininity that is in novels of Alice Walker and Ntozake Shange. Arguably, Morrison does more than show the reader the intimate and feminine in her work; she allows the reader to experience it first hand. In an interview with Gloria Tate, Morrison describes one of her most integral narrative strategies

My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and that I think is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just about telling the story; it's about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking. Then we come together to make this book, to feel the experience. (Tate 125)

Morrison calls on readers to invest themselves in the text not just through the writing of art-full prose, but by insisting that the novel cannot take place without the personal

involvement of the reader. In her novel Beloved, as well as several other novels by African American writers, this is accomplished partly through the use of “circularity.”

Circularity is the narrative strategy of “circling” back within a story. It is an integral part of African American literature and stems from the use of circularity in the oral tradition of African American folklore. As Philip Page says in his essay “Circularity in Toni Morrison’s Beloved,” “stories are usually told to an audience formed in a circle around the storyteller, or the role of storyteller alternates from person to person around a ‘story circle’” (35). This circular motion of storytelling is carried over into modern African American fiction in structures such as that of Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, in which the original storyteller Janie passes the story to her friend Phoebe to tell to others. This emphasizes the element of orality in the story, but the circularity of the tale is evident in the circular motion of the plot. In the beginning of the novel Janie is returning to Eatonville after her journey to Florida; she then tells Phoebe her life story from beginning to present, ending with her return to Eatonville. Because the end of the story is first in the book, and the beginning is also in the end, the entire novel travels in a circular motion. Janie has not made a linear journey either; she has traveled in a circle and in her return tells the story of her travels.

Circularity can also be used to describe the relationship between a narrative that is written in fragmented pieces and the story that that narrative tells. In Beloved the characters’ do not sit down, as Janie does, and tell their stories from beginning to end; rather the reader must jump back and forth from present to past to present again as events take place in the present as well as in characters’ living memory. It is almost as if

one took the circular motion of Their Eyes and turned in into a spiral. Circularity can describe the way in which a novel reflects the circular and cyclical motion of a characters' memory and storytelling:

Just as she cannot say directly what she did or why, so the narration does not tell the story directly. Just as she says a little, then digresses, then circles back, so does the narration. . . . The principal narrative strategy of the novel is to drop an unexplained fact on the reader, veer away into other matters, then cycle back with more information about the initial fact, then veer away again, cycle again and so on. (Page, 35)

As Philip Page suggests, "the narrator knows the whole story, but since the characters have trouble confronting the past, the narration must be presented in bits and pieces" (35). The narrator does not try to usurp the authority of the characters and hold them to a linear framework; rather he/she allows them to tell their stories as they come to them. More important than the narrator's sensitivity to the characters and how they would tell their stories, Morrison creates a space for her readers to experience the narrative and feel the same sense of fragmentation that her characters do.

In Beloved this strategy is particularly apparent as Sethe and Paul D struggle with their pasts. Because the narrator does not simply tell the story to the reader in a linear fashion reflecting the order of the events that have already passed, the reader is able to experience the processes of rememory that the characters must go through in order to reconcile themselves with the past. This process within the literature is very much like the processes of female identity that Gardiner laid out in reference to writing in difference. Because the characters are constantly reshaping themselves in relation to every different event and memory that they experience, their stories must be told as a process (in this

case a circular process of rememory). Likewise, Gardiner argues that a woman is defined, not by any singular event such as an identity crisis (as she suggests the male does), but by her relationship to the changing things in her world. It follows, if the story is told this way, that the reader gathers a more intimate sense of the life of this character and the experiences that have shaped it.

Morrison also utilizes point of view to create spaces where the reader has to work and can therefore enter the text actively. Just as she created a sense of fragmentation for the reader in how she told us their stories, she creates another kind of space by what the narrator and the characters tell us. In Beloved, Morrison alternates constantly between the third-person narrator and the voices of several characters as they all tell their version of the past and the events surrounding Beloved's return. Just as the voices, distinct and individual, intertwine to create the story, so they are continuous with one another, each one needed to create a story that is ultimately about collective memory. This can be applied to the ways in which Chodorow maintains that women form their identity in terms of continuity with their mothers and events in their lives. So the use of multiple points of view can emphasize this continuity between people and events that defines them as distinctly feminine.

Morrison not only creates a continuity and community among the characters, but she also allows the reader to enter the text through multiple points of view. In The Bluest Eye, Morrison says that she had hoped to write her descriptions of Pauline entirely in the first person; however, "it didn't work because she, herself, didn't know a lot about things" (Bakerman, 37). Morrison settled on a combination of first and third person to

allow for more unity of character for Pauline and more information for the reader.

However, a disparity exists between the information that the narrator gives the reader and the information that Pauline gives us. Whereas the narrator gives us insightful analysis of Pauline, Pauline offers us pure emotion and experience as she understands them. The reader is meant to understand, from this disparity, that there are certain things we ought to know about Pauline that she cannot tell us. We can then deduce that she doesn't tell the reader the same details of her character that the narrator does is because she doesn't understand them herself. Then, that unspoken fact (that Pauline doesn't understand certain things about her own life) is as important to an understanding of her as any of the facts or emotions related to us by the narrator or Pauline, herself. The reader is meant to fill in the gap of understanding between the character and the narrator, to determine that Pauline does not have the powers of self-examination necessary to tell us what we need to know about her. By filling in the spaces with the required knowledge, the reader enters the text as a discerning and active member of the events.

Morrison also leaves another kind of blank or space for the reader, one that is akin to her use of circularity in that it causes the reader to experience the text emotionally: "I think I know how to [write provocatively] by simply relying an awful lot on what I believe the reader already knows. I wanted Sula to be missed by the reader. That's why she dies early" (15). The reader may think that the construction of the novel is flawed by having the supposed heroine die two thirds of the way into the novel, but Morrison's method in this that is so subtle that the reader barely notices what the author has done. She manipulates the relationship between Sula and the reader because she wants, among

other things, the reader to realize that Sula is not so evil as the community made her out to be. As Morrison has often said of Sula, she was hated by many of the women in the community, but she did good things for them and their relationships with their families, and so, when she died, a void exists there:

I wanted [the readers] to miss her presence in that book as that town missed her presence. I also wanted them to dislike her a lot, and to be fascinated, perhaps, but also to feel that thing that the town might feel—that this is something askew. And I wanted for [the reader] to realize at some point—and I don't know if anybody ever realizes it—that she never does anything as bad as her grandmother or mother did. (16)

The reader feels this void and also realizes when the Bottom falls apart, that though she challenged the roles for women and threatened the patriarchal construction of Medallion, Sula held an important place in that society. And so, by manipulating the reader's emotions toward Sula, by making the reader mourn her death in the text, the reader comes to realize that Sula is a character of complexity and nuance. In this way Morrison is showing that the values attributed to Nel and Sula by the society were based on narrow perceptions of their respective worth to the welfare of the town. Nel is deified for playing the part of the good wife and mother, when in fact it is the evil that people perceive (and even invent) in Sula that keeps them on the straight and narrow

Morrison chooses not to make this point directly in the novel, but rather allows the reader to understand this in the way in which she brings the novel to a close.

Narrative closure works in this novel to seal the fate of Nel, so that when Nel speaks at the end of the novel we experience the physical confinement of her life and of her grief over Sula:

“All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude,” And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up in her throat. “We was girls together,” she said as though explaining something. “O Lord, Sula,” she cried, “girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.” (174).

Not only does the reader experience the depression of loss felt by Nel when she realizes that it is too late for her to reclaim Sula, Jude, and her life in Medallion (as this understanding takes place after most of the town has committed mass suicide), but she realizes that she did not take action into her own hands to change her life. The reader leaves Nel at the end of the novel with a sense that the only movement open to her is her own grief: “It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (174). The impressive and definite closure of the novel acts to seal up for the reader any sense that there is a chance for a new and different life for Nel.

Likewise in The Bluest Eye the reader experiences a destructively tight closure. There is no doubt that Pecola—insane, voiceless and limited to motion only within her own troubled head—will never recover her childhood and have a second chance to live it over. Tragedy is in the end of this novel, a tragedy which keeps Pecola walking down the street flapping her arms like a silent bird, a bird which can never take flight. Morrison has, in one sense, left an element of hope in the novel; we are told this story by Claudia, who has survived her memory and told the story that others can understand why the earth does not nurture certain seeds.

Morrison uses more ambiguous forms of closure in Beloved and Song of Solomon to represent the possibilities of freedom and future present in the texts. In Song of

Solomon, Milkman literally takes flight. The reader does not know if he actually flies, or if he falls. This ambiguity has sometimes been criticized as a lack of sufficient closure in the novel, but we must try to picture a diver who has just jumped off the highest platform, caught in the moment right before he reaches the apex of his leap. He has not ceased to move up, has not begun the fall into the water; rather, he is perched on the very second where the audience does not know if his motion might carry him down or continue to carry him up. It is in this moment of motion in which Morrison ends the novel and allows the motion created by it to remain unconfined and therefore limitless in possibility.

Beloved too ends on the cusp of revelation. At the end of the novel we see several kinds of motion. As I showed earlier, memory and motion come together to form a complex and variable structure of identity; however, none of the characters have come to stasis when the novel reaches closure. In fact, Sethe, Paul D and Denver are all in motion, poised on a moment of "infinite possibility." We do not know if Sethe and Paul D will make it; nevertheless, they have arrived at a point of beginnings. They do not end with the book but may continue to love and grow in ways that the reader can only imagine. Denver too takes motion in the closure of the novel. As the novel reaches closure, she has begun her journey away from the house, out of stasis, and into movement of her own. She began with baby steps, and we experience a sense that hers will be a sometimes painful journey; however, it will be a journey of possibility. Like Denver, Doot has learned from the lives of others, how to claim motion and make his own baby steps. He stands, tests his feet, and then begins to dance, to make motion and embrace possibility. And Carl says to him, "Go Doot, Go go go go go,"(208) And in this salubrious

correspondence with all the people who moved and danced through Homewood, Doot has discovered himself and his potential for motion.

It is these sorts of transformations that embody the most dramatic possibilities for self-knowledge and identity formation in the literature of African American women. Writers achieve a thematic strength through the use of tropes that advance theme on the linguistic and structural strata of these works. To dwell in possibility, then, is to be able to recognize the potential of these works to inspire positive, active growth in women and men of all colors.

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