The Black Maternal: Heterogeneity and Resistance in Literary Representations of Black Mothers in 20th Century African American and Afro-Caribbean Women's Fiction

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Comparative Literature.

Chapel Hill
2008

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ABSTRACT

(Under the Direction of Trudier Harris)

My project seeks to uncover the multiplicities of interpretation found in the peculiar simultaneity of oppressions that affect African American motherhood. I expand this notion to the Afro-Caribbean, interrogating the power of place and comparing how it influences mothers’ interactions with their children. To this end, my research responds to contemporary theoretical approaches to race, motherhood, and psychoanalysis, including the writings of Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Paule Marshall about black motherhood as a site of resistance. Simultaneously, it highlights successful acts of resistance black women create employing alternative ontologies that bypass patriarchal notions of inheritance and remain matrifocal in nature.

The first chapter, “A Failure To Resist: The Dangers of the Mother Who Loves Too Much,” centers on the black feminist theme of maternal resistance. The mothers in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973) are successful within the relative safety of their homes in both the humanization of their loved ones and the teaching of resistance to destructive hegemonic forces. My second chapter, “Maternal Abjection: Mothers Who Resist the Ideal,” places Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection within a racial context. I begin with an exploration of Patricia Hills Collins’ and Gloria Wade-Gayles’ insistence upon the complex nature of black mother-
daughter relationships. I use this dynamic to analyze the Caco women in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). The mothers in Tina McElroy Ansa’s *Ugly Ways* (1993) and Maryse Condé’s *Desirada* (1997) choose to abject their daughters to reclaim their own individuality, their own sense of self. The final chapter, “The Transcendent Black Maternal: The Power of Female Inheritance,” examines the transcendent Black Maternal as a system of knowledge that is based on a spiritual communication process between a young female novice and two dead female ancestors. This process leads the women to an alternative expression of being, which I term the communal “I,” that models itself upon the Holy trinity. The transcendent Black Maternal figures centrally in three texts: Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana* (1994), Simone Schwarz-Bart’s *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* (1972), and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* (1998).
DEDICATION

This work is for Gregory, Wanda, Cincia, and Kelsi.

Also, to all the Brooks and Dunn women who came before me—Clara Mae, Mama Corinne, Jesse Jewel, Mama Lisa, and Mama Myrt. I am the product of your sacrifice.
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INTRODUCTION
A HISTORY OF RESISTANCE

Carol Boyce Davies’ notion of the black woman as a “shifting signifier” informs my project which seeks to uncover the multiplicities of interpretation found in the peculiar simultaneity of oppressions that affect African American motherhood. I expand this notion to the Afro-Caribbean, interrogating the power of place and comparing how it influences mothers’ interactions with their children. To this end, my research responds to contemporary theoretical approaches to race, motherhood, and psychoanalysis, including the writings of Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Paule Marshall, and Hortense Spillers about black motherhood as a site of resistance to hegemonic American culture. Further, my project identifies the implosion of this resistance as a mother’s failure to reconcile the multiple tensions that dominate the physical and mental constitution of black mothers. Simultaneously, it highlights successful acts of resistance black women create using alternative ontologies that bypass patriarchal notions of inheritance and remain matrifocal in nature. Thus, my project stakes its claim at the fertile intersection of psychoanalytic theory and African Diasporic studies.

The first chapter, “A Failure To Resist: The Dangers of the Mother Who Loves Too Much,” centers on the black feminist theme of maternal resistance. Janice Hale insists that the task of the black family is to “prepare its children to live among white people without becoming white people” (80). Thus, the home becomes an important tool in resisting the harmful and negative images the hegemonic culture creates of black
people. This chapter explores maternal figures who succeed in creating a homeplace in accordance with the ideal bell hooks describes in transformative essay, *Homeplace: A Site of Resistance*. The mothers in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973) are successful within the relative safety of their homes in both the humanization of their loved ones and the teaching of resistance to destructive hegemonic forces. Conflict arises when their sons rebuke the lessons they have worked so hard to bequeath to them. Lucy Potts Pearson and Eva Peace find that their respective sons have failed to resist the seductive destruction of mainstream culture. Both John Pearson and Ralph “Plum” Peace are morally weakened characters; but, my analysis centers on the maternal figures’ differing reactions to their sons’ lack of strength. The resulting deaths in the novels stem from an overabundance of love on the part of the mothers. Their love blinds them to their sons’ sins until it is far too late.

My second chapter, “Maternal Abjection: Mothers Who Resist the Ideal,” places Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection within a racial context. I investigate Patricia Hills Collins’ and Gloria Wade-Gayles’ insistence upon the complex nature of black mother-daughter relationships. I begin with an exploration of Patricia Hills Collins’ insistence that black mothers often prioritize physical survival in their daughters at the cost of emotional destruction. This dynamic often results in a complex relationship fraught with misunderstandings, rebellion, and eventual acceptance. I use this dynamic to analyze the relationship between Martine and Sophie Caco in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). I then place Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection within the context of identity formation. It is normally assumed that a child must abject the mother and deny
her desires in order to create a separate, individual identity for themselves. I invert this relationship for I believe that in some cases, black mothers do not sacrifice themselves and their own individuality for the bettering of their daughters. I examine contemporary descriptions of symptoms associated with pregnancy, including fatigue, maternal diabetes, and disturbing dreams. These women lose their individuality during pregnancy; they become incubators for a foreign life form that inhabits their body. In “Approaching Abjection,” Kristeva insists that the corpse serves as the ultimate symbol of abjection, for it elucidates the border of death that a body fights against each day. I expand this notion to include the process of parturition, birth. I investigate the medical dangers associated with the birthing process and place them within the context of the margin of death. It is here that the mother chooses to abject her daughter in order to reclaim her own individuality, her own sense of self. I investigate the murky intricacies of these decidedly female relations in Tina McElroy Ansa’s *Ugly Ways* (1993) and Maryse Condé’s *Desirada* (1997). The mothers in these texts, Esther “Mudear” Lovejoy and Reynalda Titane, respectively, actively resist the restraints society places on ideal mothers. These black maternal figures complicate the complexities found within the abject in heretofore unexplored ways. They privilege their own individual development as self-actualized human beings by shattering the myth of the self-sacrificing black mother.

My third chapter, “The Transcendent Black Maternal: The Power of Female Inheritance,” examines the transcendent Black Maternal as a system of knowledge that is based on a spiritual communication process between a young female novice and two dead female ancestors. The communication most often occurs through simple
inanimate objects, such as a quilt or gramophone. This process leads the women to an alternative expression of being, which I term the communal “I.” It is an existence that models itself upon the Holy trinity, that is, three women in one body. The neophyte inherits not only the women’s knowledge, but also their entire being and consciousness. The transcendent Black Maternal reconsiders several texts about mothering from a taxonomic theoretical viewpoint. I contend that there is a black female inheritance that has a nucleus of a complex ontology and epistemology that posits a resistant alternative to the tradition of the Western male. The theory figures centrally in three texts: Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana* (1994), Simone Schwarz-Bart’s *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* (1972), and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* (1998). This investigation expands the exploration of the supernatural beyond the works of Toni Morrison, whose work has dominated much of the criticism that intersects African American Women’s literature, maternal theory and the fantastic. This chapter challenges conventional notions of the intersection of black motherhood and the supernatural, revealing the ideological threads that have lain below the surface of other examinations of mothers in African American and Afro-Caribbean literature.

The urgency of this project is illuminated in its presentation of the Black Maternal taxonomy, a creatively cohesive elucidation of themes that have existed in the margins of disparate critiques of African American, Afro-Caribbean, maternal, and psychoanalytic literatures. It is imperative to see how literary characters have reconciled the effects of slavery upon the black family dynamic. My interests focus on the most basic family unit, that of mother and child, which is socially becoming the most prominent black family dynamic. How have simultaneous oppressions coalesced with
societal maternal expectations to affect the psyche of these women? How do these mothers continue the black feminist tradition of resistance in their everyday interactions with their children? The black mother in African American literature is a powerful figure, but she has been thought of as monolithic. It is imperative that we recognize the heterogeneity that exists within literary portrayals of black mothering. We too often get lost in the myth of the self-sacrificing, martyred black mother or its opposite, the pathologically emasculating mammy.

As we move into the 21st century, it is necessary to further the black feminist project of creating nuanced analyses of these literary characters. My project recognizes and reflects this need for complexity within and beyond the borders of the United States. I continue the examination of the effects of the “simultaneity of oppressions” upon black women that black feminist theory highlights. This introduction examines the history of resistance to Western hegemonic ideals in black motherhood from its pre-slavery origins in West Africa to the horrors of American and Caribbean slavery. I also examine the foundation slavery provided for using the home as a place of resistance. Finally, my introduction examines mainstream maternal theory and how black feminists have resisted and re-imagined the simplistic binaries of the public and private sphere created by white feminists to adapt to the revolutionary place of the black mother.
The Importance of the African in Maternal Identity

The West African women who came to the shores of the Americas and the Caribbean were equipped with an ontology inherently subversive to slavery.¹ In the introduction to The Black Woman (1980), La Frances Rodgers-Rose argues that slavery could not completely erase their memory of African ontology and epistemology. The West African woman was a wife, worker and most importantly, a mother. As a wife, she was responsible for her husband’s meals. And as a worker, the African woman controlled certain industries within the economic marketplace. She was responsible for raising and maintaining her family’s food (16). These roles instilled the black woman with a marked identity, an ordered and superior place within her cosmology that specifically contested the lack of personhood or natal alienation Western slavery attempted to bestow upon these women.² This core of identity allowed these women to resist and the power to pass this resistance on to their families.

It is the role of mother that most aptly defined the ontology of the West African woman, for Rodgers-Rose argues that it was her most important function. The mother was the center of the universe in African mythology for “no other person has…the ability to give birth, to ensure the ever-increasing number of ancestors, to link the past with the present” (16). West African mores and traditions were based in fostering this vaunted place within their society. The mother was expected to give her “complete attention and love to the child”; she was often given a pass in her wifely duties, for she could not risk conceiving another child before “the first child [was] weaned” (17). West African

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¹ It is generally agreed that most blacks who were enslaved came from West Africa. See Rodgers-Rose, pp. 15.

² Orlando Patterson explores the concept of natal alienation in Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (1982). See Introduction, especially pp 7-10.
children were extremely close to their mothers. The needs and desires of the child superseded all other things. Motherhood remained the most important identifier for slave women. The strength this sense of identity proffered them would prove invaluable in their attempts to resist harmful Western ideals. This idea of a core of African identity is explored further in my treatment of the transcendent Black Maternal. It is an embrace of an alternative epistemology steeped in the African that allows for the identity creation that the novice experiences.

**Maternal Resistance in American Slavery**

Enslaved women who became mothers faced the harsh reality that they were actively perpetuating the very system that dominated every facet of their lives. Enslaved women were denied the joys of motherhood that revolved around raising happy and healthy children. There was little to no child spacing for those women who were fecund were expected to procreate each year. Their bodies became overused, they aged prematurely, and they suffered a high death rate (Rodgers-Rose 18). Slave mothers cared for their children as best they could. They collected their older children from plantation babysitters for their nightly meals. And they attempted to continue the West African custom of keeping their children tied to their backs with cloth in their early years (Moitt 88). Still, slavery severely altered the primary relationship between the black mother and child, but it was never strong enough to destroy it. Mother-child bonding occurred in the small spaces that remained their own (Rodgers-Rose 19). Yet the harsh reality of natal alienation, or the lack of legal claim on their child, pursued
them relentlessly. Despite this reality, many slave mothers had the courage to fight against the legitimized cruelties of slavery.

The slave family had many political uses and incarnations. Most historical theorists agree that slave family life provided a mental buffer to the cruelties of slavery. Home was established as a safe space that allowed for privacy and peace of mind outside of the slave master’s purview. Home also became an established site of resistance and subversion. It is in the home that slaves were taught how to pilfer small victories from the institution that objectified them. They developed alternative moralities that enabled this resistance. In the home, slaves taught each other the differences between “taking” and “stealing.” Taking allowed slaves to appropriate foodstuffs and various other necessities from their masters without moral consequence. The resistance of the phenomenon was twofold. First, taking went against the explicit orders of the slave master and his powerful proxies. Second, the very act of taking blatantly contested the objectification the institution of slavery forced upon blacks. Prioritization of one’s own needs and wishes over that of the master alluded to the existence of self-actualization, a subjectiveness slavery often attempted to outlaw. Household economies also allowed for a subversive economic self-sufficiency (Morrissey 98). Marietta Morrissey speaks of the potential sabotage this practice contained for slave economies: “They offered status, authority, and economic power to women and families and provided incentives for men and women to reduce their labor commitments to slave masters” (98). These actions proved subversive through their denial of economic gain to their masters by prioritizing their own self

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3 For more explicit examples of the stealing/taking dynamic, see the first chapter of Daryl C. Dance’s *From My People: An Anthology* (2002).
interests. The safe space of home also served as an important place for the
construction and implementation of slave conspiracies:

Women may have been especially important communicators, given their
more frequent presence in slave owners’ homes as domestics. And, as
principal socializers of slave children, they passed on knowledge about
communication lines and channels. We can verify slave rebellions and
acts of sabotage and assume with confidence that they were possible only
with the support of kin and informal slave networks. (98)

The creation of slave conspiracies and the active role slave women took in their
propulsion crossed national boundaries. The Caribbean became infamous for its
dangerous and frequent slave uprisings.4 The subversive tactics of these slave mothers
were also more visceral. The next section explores how many refused to perpetuate the
institution of slavery within their very wombs.

Maternal Resistance in Caribbean Slavery

A distinction must be made here between the institution of slavery in the United
States and in the Caribbean. American slavery reached a point of stabilization in
population, that is, enslaved persons reproduced themselves. The pronatal policies
were successful in America; there was increased appraisal for black female fertility.
Enslaved black women failed to be mothers, but were simply considered breeders
(Davis 7). The Caribbean slave population continuously failed to sustain itself.5 Most
countries of the Caribbean found it necessary to sustain a heavy dependence upon the
Atlantic slave trade. The unpredictability of this dependence called for the plantation

4 There were frequent uprisings throughout the Caribbean against English, French, and Spanish slave
owners. The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) remains the most successful slave rebellion. There were
less successful slave revolts on every Caribbean island. See Shepard, pp. 868-945.

5 Only Barbados sustained its slave population (Beckles 15).
owners of the Caribbean to be even more aggressive in pronatal policies that used propaganda and incentives to increase the birthrate on plantations.

French Caribbean plantation owners encouraged marriages through financial incentives because marriages increased fertility; some women received one dollar for each successful birth or if an infant reached a certain age (Beckles 16). Owners offered numerous other incentives to increase fertility. Pregnant and nursing women were exempted from certain tasks on most plantations (Moitt 94). “The Belly Woman Initiative” remains a classic example of the slave owners’ incentive policies. Fertile women were given a scarlet girdle with a silver medal in the center to wear on the outside of their clothing. The wearer of this girdle was entitled certain privileges and indulgences that increased with the more children they bore their master. The scarlet girdles became a badge of honor as these women were “the first served [for holidays]...and receiving a larger portion than the rest...the first fault which she might commit, should be forgiven on production of the girdle” (Beckles 16). Conversely, plantation owners and overseers severely punished those women who were suspected of abortion and whose children died during or soon after childbirth (Moitt 94). This incentive system was not in appearance in slavery in the United States.

Despite their efforts, fecundity remained extremely low among the slave women of the French Caribbean. Many historians theorize that the low fertility rate of the women was simply another facet of female resistance to the institution of slavery. There remain numerous accounts of abortion and infanticide. Many women refused to fall prey to the plantation owners’ devious pronatal policies. After admitting her distaste for marriage to any man, a young Guadeloupean enslaved woman continues, “I am
miserable enough as it is without having to bring children into this world to be more miserable” (Moitt 81). I suggest that these women made a concerted effort to control their fertility as a specifically feminine form of resistance. They operated within their own moral code, a product necessitated by slavery; this practice went explicitly against the reverence of the child propagated by West African custom. To have a child, to love a child, but to possess no legal or formal claim to him or her proved an impossibility for too many Caribbean women. They were aware of the inheritability of their legal status and refused to pass it on to their children. The reality of these women remained that male slaves could produce free children, but female slaves could not because of matriarchal law (Moitt 89). Therefore, the birth rate remained low.

Those enslaved women who became mothers found ways to resist within seemingly immovable restraints. Many French Caribbean mothers initiated legal proceedings to expand and protect their children’s rights under the auspices of *Code Noir*. The *Code Noir* was enacted in 1847 by the French government and prohibited the breakup of the slave family as long as the children were under the age of fourteen (Moitt 83). Many slave women were successful in convincing abolitionist sympathizers in rewriting and expanding this law throughout the 1830s and 1840s (Moitt 101). This culture of resistance perpetuated in slave households of the Americas and the Caribbean would continue in contemporary black homes, particularly within the realm of black mothering.

**Resisting the Monolithic Conclusions of Mainstream Maternal Theory**

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6 Though *Code Noir* was continuously adopted and expanded to protect the rights of slaves, very few slave owners followed the law’s dictates.
Enslaved women, both American and Caribbean, provided the template upon which black feminists base their contemporary theories of black motherhood. This was a necessity, for the false dichotomies suggested by mainstream feminists such as Adrienne Rich failed to encompass fully the simultaneity of oppressions that defined the black woman’s experience. Postmodern maternal theory was re-imagined with the publication of Adrienne Rich’s groundbreaking work, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). In it, Rich insists that there are two meanings of motherhood. The first is potential motherhood, which centers on the “relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and to children” (13). The second meaning she terms “institutional motherhood”: “which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (13). In this distinction, motherhood remains a patriarchal institution. Motherhood “is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women” (O’Reilly 2). This basis of the patriarchal has shifted feminist scholars’ attentions from a study of motherhood and to the act of mothering itself “[which] refers to women’s experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women” (O’Reilly 2). The reality of power in the role of mother was already established within the African American experience.\(^7\) Though Rich’s work is not full in its analysis, it does provide some useful conclusions that provide a basis from which black feminists adapt their maternal ideas.

The first maternal reality that Rich illuminates demonstrates feminist historians’ agreement that “motherhood is primarily not a natural or biological function; rather, it is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in

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\(^7\) Adrienne Rich speaks of her former ignorance of the African American experience and revisits her lapse in the tenth anniversary edition of *Of Woman Born.*
response to changing economic and societal factors” (O’Reilly 4-5). This cultural influence upon motherhood becomes evident in the shifting definitions of black motherhood that were created under the different auspices of Western institutions. The specific stereotypes idealized, from the emasculating mammy to the impossible standards of the black mother who sacrifices all, furthered the agenda of the large, Western institution rather than accurately describing the complex reality of black mothers. Another conclusion contemporary maternal theorists agree upon is the harmful features of patriarchal motherhood. It posits itself upon the interweaving and powerfully pathological assumptions that mothering is natural to women and that child-rearing is the sole responsibility of the biological mother (O’Reilly 5; Rich 1976). The dangerous nature of these misguided notions of patriarchal motherhood were powerfully disputed in the African American community. Black women employed the concepts of “othermothers” and communal child-raising as compelling alternatives to the lone burdens of motherhood. Multiple alternatives have always been necessary for black mothers, for they have the added responsibility of sustaining a battle against the patriarchal institutions of race and class. Collins believes black motherhood to be a “fundamentally contradictory institution. African American communities value motherhood, but Black mothers’ ability to cope with race, class, and gender oppression should not be confused with transcending these conditions” (Thought 133). Black mothers always have to mother within the context of slavery’s legacy. Many black mothers succeed in this difficult task by drawing upon the reserves of power black motherhood occupies within the African American community.
Resistance in Contemporary Black Motherhood

This necessity to use motherhood as a site of resistance is a coping mechanism for the fact that motherhood “occurs in specific historical contexts framed by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender” (Center 56). So much of mainstream feminist maternal theory has centered on the experiences of white middle class women whose socioeconomic status and privileged skin color affords their children every possible opportunity to live a fully-realized life. Collins argues against this centering, which conversely marginalizes the more common experience of mothering by women of color. It is in her groundbreaking article, “Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood” (1994), that Collins articulates the external forces, specifically those surrounding race, that affect motherhood for racial ethnic women. It is here that Collins contextualizes and outlines the practice of using the home as a site of resistance.

The article begins with a critique of white feminists’ pejorative assumption of a “normative” household for mothers. It is a household where the man works and the woman stays at home to nurture the family. This household “assumes that male domination in the political economy and the household is the driving force in family life and that understanding the struggle for individual autonomy in the face of such domination is central to understanding motherhood” (Center 57). Collins continues to critique a hegemonic cosmology that divides the world into a public and a private sphere where each is gendered, male and female respectively, within this dichotomy. This

\( ^8 \) Collins uses the terms “women of color” and “racial ethnic women” interchangeably throughout her article. I choose to follow her example. Also, Collins expands her study of racialized maternal theory to all women of color. I will focus my treatise of her article upon African American mothers and expand its conclusions to the realities of Afro-Caribbean women.
gendering proves problematic because capitalism shapes this dichotomy. Thus, the
domestic world is incorrectly assumed to be both a separate and an apolitical entity
(Center 58).

Collins argues that this dichotomy does not exist for women of color. Work and
family are inextricably linked for the black mother. She believes that black women
“worry the lines” between the dichotomies. To this end, Collins introduces two terms,
“motherwork” and “disjunctures,” that soften the harsh dichotomies mainstream feminist
critiques create. Motherwork is the reproductive labor that women perform; it
recognizes “that individual survival, empowerment, and identity require group survival,
empowerment, and identity” (Center 59). This is placed in stark contrast to the
emphasis on individual autonomy that mainstream maternal theory prides itself upon.
The second term, disjunctures, refers to the liminal places where motherwork occurs.
Disjunctures are “the places between human and nature, between private and public,
between oppression and liberation” (Center 59).

Collins’ main argument focuses on problematizing contemporary maternal
theory’s concentration of themes on the white middle class experience, which
incorrectly assumes the specific realities. The first assumption is the experience of
economic security for mothers and their children. The second assumption is that all
mothers see themselves as individuals fighting for power that centers on autonomy,
thereby ignoring the communal struggle for power that guides so many African
American mothers (Center 60). This faulty foundation causes mainstream feminists to
focus on themes that exclude far too many mothers and their children, such as:

9Cheryl A. Wall uses the phrase “worrying the line” in the introduction of her work, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition (2005). The term refers to how black women delegitimatize, displace, and rewrite the dominant story, to then inscribe their own (16).
the connections among mothering, aggression and death, the effects of maternal isolation on mother-child relationships within nuclear family households, maternal sexuality, relations among family members, all-powerful mothers as conduits for gender oppression, and the possibilities of an idealized motherhood free from patriarchy. (Center 60)

Collins is particularly specific in her criticizing of psychoanalytic theory for its continual failure to include the realities of race in critiques of power relations. I both further and answer this criticism in the second chapter of this project. I critique Julia Kristeva’s lack of imagination in her application of the theory of abjection as I also expand abjection into the reality of black mother-daughter relationships. I further strengthen my assessment of abjection by showing how black women complicate the already complex notions of psychoanalytic theory.

A major goal of black feminist theory has involved recognizing and articulating the power and importance of black mothers within the African American community. In her foundational book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1991), Patricia Hill Collins critically analyzes previous treatments of black motherhood. Collins critiques the controlling image of black motherhood she believes far too many black men have “fostered” (*Thought* 116). She acknowledges that the images of the black mother as an all-powerful “superwoman” who sustains a “life of sacrifice” often come from a place of love and respect (*Thought* 116). But good intentions fail to remove the pejorative nature of these controlling images. Collins’ project begins to articulate the awesome heterogeneity present in the manifestations of the black mother. I further this project by focusing on the heterogeneity present within the literary genre.

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10 Collins specifically addresses Nancy Chodorow’s theories in a footnote (57). Collins insists that Chodorow’s work “exemplifies how decontextualization of race and/or class can weaken what is otherwise strong feminist theorizing.”
Collins refers to black motherhood as a “dynamic” institution that allows black women to access the power of “self-definition and self-reliance” (Thought 118). One particular manifestation of this power is the creation of the home as a site of resistance. Black mothers are continuing the traditions of subversion established during slavery, where the home served as a vehicle for slave resistance (Morrissey 98). Contemporary black mothers continue the slave practice of creating the family home as a sanctuary from the harsh realities of the external world (Hale 82). It is in the home that the mother must mediate the basic conflict that is sustained between the African and the European “world view” (Hale 81). It is here that mothering becomes a source of great power for black women that affords them the opportunity to instill their children with the tools that will prepare them to deal with the devastating legacy of slavery and its remnants. It is a legacy that is rife with racism, classism, and sexism that has seeped into the institutions that govern the Western power structure or hegemony. It is here that black mothering re-imagines what mainstream feminists consider mothering. These women are purposeful in not making a distinction between motherhood and mothering. They recognize that mothering and motherhood are confluent; each serves its purpose within the dynamism that is black mothering. Power and the willingness to resist must be found and implemented wherever necessary, even in the patriarchal institution of motherhood.

Paule Marshall elucidates the power of maternal resistance in her short essay “From the Poets in the Kitchen” (1983). The women in the kitchen refuse to fall victim to the stereotypes of menial labor. Their defiant creativity with the English language

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11 bell hooks speaks in detail of this practice in her essay titled Homeplace: A Site of Resistance (1990). The first chapter explores this work in detail.
gives them the internal agency to influence their battle within the American hegemony, allowing them to construct the world around them. These women embody the success of home as a site of resistance, and use its power within their world [to populate their lives and their homes] with a complex dexterity within the deceptive simplicity of language: “They had taken the standard English…and transformed it into an idiom, an instrument that more adequately described them” (8). They both recognized and reveled in the power of the performance of language,

...changing around the syntax and imposing their own rhythm and accent so that the sentences were more pleasing to their ears. They added the few African sounds and words that had survived, such as the derisive suck-teeth sound...And to make it more vivid, more in keeping with their expressive quality, they brought to bear a raft of metaphors, parables, Biblical quotations, sayings and the like. (Marshall 8)

These women, both mothers and communal othermothers, have taken the performative mores of language, which they have inherited from their female ancestors, and use them as a source of strength against external forces. These women are hybridizing the language, picking what they see as useful from both the hegemonic dialectic and their own island slang, turning it into something that they own. They have formulated a patois which they own, edit, and to which they act as gatekeepers. They take what has been the most powerful tool of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy—language—and forge it into a formidable weapon to cope with the conditional onslaught of what Marshall terms the “triple invisibility” of being black, female, and immigrant. In her novel, Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959), a friend of the main character Selina’s mother, Silla, proclaims: “Be-Jees, in this white-man world you got to take yuh mouth and make a gun” (70). Marshall demonstrates their sustained and ever-evolving mastery of language through her rich memories, as these women of the kitchen begin to exert
some modicum of control over themselves and their lives. They are literally conjuring power through their words, mixing different syntax and dialectics to create a powerful potion of self-pride. Most importantly, their magic provides the necessary self-preservation to continue the demeaning jobs they must do to provide for their families: “Not only did it help them recover from the long wait on the corner that morning and the bargaining over their labor, it restored them to a sense of themselves and reaffirmed their self-worth” (6). The “language power” Marshall’s mother possesses aids in cementing that sense of self necessary to develop and nurture a healthy relationship with her as a child.

The linguistic dexterity of Marshall’s mother sets a precedent for the young Paule. Her mother demonstrates the willingness, ability and power of resistance to Paule. The kitchen table acts as a safe place where these women are humanized as subjects in an economy that continually objectifies them. This remains a powerful model for the essence of black maternal power and defiance. Marshall’s recollections come from what she saw sitting in the corner of her mother’s kitchen. By allowing her daughter to observe and eventually participate in this hybridization and performance of language, Marshall’s mother defines the parameters of a way to function within a system that is set against her. In the act of conjuring with her friends, she is sustaining the inheritance she received and passing it on to her daughter. Marshall’s memories, paired with the act of sharing them with her readers, embody the mixing of the present and the past that is a classic tenet of the resistance found in black mothers. She is sharing her inheritance with us, the story of how she received it and an accounting of its power within her own familial dynamic. The model her mother sets also contributes to
the formation of the inheritance of the power within the hegemonic discourse these women were creating: “I graduated from the corner of the kitchen to the neighborhood library” (Marshall 9). Marshall’s inheritance gives her internal strength and ignites her love for words, an affection that influences her decision to become a writer. Marshall and later, her readers, become the inheritors of this grand coping mechanism conjured through the power of words. Still, the women of the kitchen find power beyond the realm of the linguistic.

Marshall also highlights the power of the idea of place. It is not only the words and the performance thereof that prove powerful, but also the choice of space. For Marshall, the space of the kitchen acts as hallowed ground. Its vaunted nature multiplies the effects of the power invoked within. The women choose the kitchen as their meeting place for conjuring. Again, these women prove adept at taking something seemingly oppressive, and refashioning it as tools of power. They take an oppressive, exclusionary language and make it their own and they then choose to venture further. The women of Marshall’s essay turn the feminized prison of the kitchen in on itself and make it an interstitial place that allows time for creation. Not only does it serve as a place for the conjuration of self-pride, but most importantly, the kitchen takes its place as a location of self-healing: “[the women’s kitchen talk] served as therapy, the cheapest kind available to my mother and her friends” (Marshall 6). It was this dual interaction of words and space that allowed the women to “overcome the humiliations of the work-day” (Marshall 6). Word and place come together, each compounding the other’s magical power, so that the ordinariness of a kitchen full of women becomes something spectacularly extraordinary.
Still, even with the power the women find in their liberatory appropriation of the master’s oppressive language, Audre Lorde’s statement remains ever present: “[f]or the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (112). An alternative power structure must be created to circumvent the power of the Western hegemony. Lorde calls for this alternative, and the transcendent Black Maternal fulfills this lack. It presents an alternative epistemology and heterogeneous ontology that portrays a marked return to the African. Marshall’s mother uses the internal locus she creates in the power of the self she has formulated within the kitchen to empower her relationship with her children. Her “kitchen therapy” allows her to bequeath a method of direct resistance to the forces that enact her daily oppression and reclaim the “mother right” slavery has taken from her. The harmony Marshall’s mother finds in this therapy not only eases her interactions with the world outside of her home, but it cements the admiration her daughter feels for her mother. “Poets” is Marshall’s ode to her mother, suffused with love and the admiration for how her mother survived and even found room to flourish amidst such difficult circumstances.

It is through these sessions of conjuration in the kitchen that the women begin to define themselves and later become empowered in their very own right to be seen in a sexist, racist, classist, and xenophobic country. It is in their creation and use of the dualistic phrase “beautiful-ugly” that Marshall’s mother and her friends begin to define their own reality: “expressing what they believed to be a fundamental dualism in life: the idea that a thing is at the same time its opposite, and that these opposites, these contradictions make up the whole” (9). These women recognize and take advantage of the specific power of words to hold a complex number of meanings. Through the
power of discursive self-definition, Marshall’s women in the kitchen do more than “temporarily beat [the Master] at his own game” (Lorde 112). And they are also going far beyond the marginal victory of empowering themselves, for they have provided a grand inheritance, a recognition and respect for the power of words, for their female descendents. They are where true feminism lies, poor, foreign, uneducated women laughing and talking in their own kitchens, resting their feet after an entire day’s work of menial labor. All that is positive about black femininity is present in this well-defined sisterhood, for it is there at the kitchen table that they refuel their bodies, minds, and spirits at the designated place of consumption. These wives, sisters, friends, lovers, confidants, and most importantly, mothers realize they are unable to aid the others in their lives without first taking the time to center and empower themselves in the therapeutic sisterhood found in their kitchen therapy. It is in this participative act of forming the self through words that these women are able to participate fully in the “interactive continuity of relationship” all motherhood requires.

Paule Marshall provides a specific literary example of maternal resistance in black motherhood. bell hooks also speaks of the power of resistance in the black home. hooks coalesces the power of childhood memories Marshall uses, and pairs it with the sociological doctrines of Collins to articulate a specific taxonomy of the home as a site of resistance. hooks’ trope becomes useful in the next chapter’s evaluation of black maternal resistance. This project outlines the resistance in the multiple manifestations of black motherhood in 20th Century African American and Afro-Caribbean women’s fiction. The theme of resistance trails through the first chapter’s treatment of Zora Neale Hurston’s and Toni Morrison’s manifestations of homeplace.
Resistance again becomes evident in the second chapter’s evaluation of Maryse
Condè’s and Tina McElroy Ansa’s creation of maternal characters who refuse to
operate within outdated maternal ideals. These women shift the boundaries of black
motherhood by operating within Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. The trail of
resistance in black motherhood is finalized in the third chapter’s exploration of the
transcendent Black Maternal in the novels of Phyllis Alesia Perry, Erna Brodber, and
Simone Schwarz-Bart.
CHAPTER ONE
A FAILURE TO RESIST: THE DANGERS OF THE MOTHER WHO LOVES TOO MUCH

The creation of the home as a safe private space ruled by women is an established fact in maternal theory. Mainstream feminist theory bases its maternal cosmology on the dichotomy of the public sphere of business and politics that men rule versus the private sphere of the home that women rule. African American maternal theory disputes this clean separation of the public and private sphere, the masculine and the feminine. Patricia Hill Collins suggests that this dichotomy rarely exists in the homes of ethnic women. The homes of women of color have never existed in a vacuum, for they are always influenced by the realities of economics and politics. The treacherous effects of Western influence continually seep into the psychological and physical circumstances of black personhood. Thus, the black woman develops the home into a soothing space that anesthetizes the pains of being black in a world that is not. Further, the black home also acts as a place where resistance to the dangerous effects of the hegemonic forces of institutional racism is both initiated and sustained. The strength of this archetype coalesces in bell hooks’ powerful essay, “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance.”

12 See Adrienne Rich (1976), pp. 3

13 Collins’ use of the terms “ethnic women” and “women of color” includes black mothers. I focus my use of Collins on the experiences of African American and Afro-Caribbean mothers.
hooks speaks of the black home as serving two necessary functions. First, it stands as a place of respite, offering its inhabitants peace from the wearying onslaught of economic and psychological objectification. Here, in the bosom of homeplace, its occupants are given the freedom to be whole human beings. They are humanized as they grow from the objectification of Western institutions to subjective beings who can offer and debate varied opinions and ideas. Second, the black home operates as a space in which blacks are given and refine tools that aid in their resistance, tools necessary for survival and prosperity within the world at large. Finally, hooks emphasizes the importance of black women within this hallowed space.

Homeplace is constructed as a safe place for healing and affirmation (hooks 42).

hooks begins Homeplace with the memory of her grandmother. As a young girl, she remembers a distinct feeling of joy at the safe arrival at her grandmother’s house. It was a place of comfort and homecoming juxtaposed with the “terrifying whiteness” of the world she was forced to travel in to get to her grandmother’s doorstep (hooks 41). There is an acknowledged fear of the world outside the homeplace; it is a world that is incredibly unforgiving of blackness. This cruelty is seen in the inability of black men to get jobs to thereby acquire the means to adequately care for their families. It is an actuality aptly described in Ann Petry’s characterization of Jim Johnson, Lutie Johnson’s husband in The Street (1946). The shame associated with unemployment plagues Jim; it is a dangerous humiliation that eventually turns to anger and is expressed in domestic violence, infidelity, and eventual abandonment.14 Black women acknowledge the reality of this fearful outcome; yet, it does not rule existence in the homeplace. hooks speaks of her grandmother forming a homeplace for her children and grandchildren; black

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14 See Petry, pp. 168-182.
women also establish homeplaces for their men, both husbands and lovers. Martha Harrison, a former slave, remembers the realities of her sacrifice for her husband:

My husband never did like for me to work; he used to ask me how come I work when he was doing all he could to give me what I wanted. “Looks like you don’t ‘preciate what I’m trying to do for you.” But I’d say, “Yes, I do, honey, I just help you ’cause I don’t want you to break down. If you put a load on one horse it will pull him down, but two horses can pull jest as easy.” (Lerner 25)

Homeplace is more than the bricks and mortar of a home. It is an idea, transferable to and through the black women who actively created and nurtured its reality. Mrs. Harrison works very hard to ensure that she creates a space for her husband that allows him to feel human, to find a respite from the hegemony’s onslaught. She constructs a homeplace between the two of them where they can “affirm one another, and by so doing, heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination” (hooks 42). Her actions also afford a measure of protection against the dangerous indignities black men suffer under the harsh economic avenues allowed them. Martha’s homeplace becomes a mental buffer for her husband that gives her agency in an often powerless economic situation.

The domestic space has a history of being crucial for the political organizing of the black community. hooks declares “that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous...had a radical[ly] political dimension...homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist”(42). Susie King Taylor, a former slave, remembers the dangers of learning to read at the home of the free woman, Mrs. Woodhouse: “We went every day with our books wrapped in paper to prevent the police or white persons from seeing them. We went
in, one at a time, through the gate into the yard to the kitchen, which was the schoolroom” (Lerner 28).

The kitchen places their resistance within a gendered and racialized context. It also hearkens to the conjuring of power by Paule Marshall’s mother and friends in the memories of modeled resistance. hooks insists that homeplace is the domain of women: “…houses belong to women, were their special domain…as places where all that truly mattered in life took place” (hooks 41). Trudier Harris further racializes the kitchen within the reality of black women and their work as domestics. The kitchen remains the domain of black women even outside the black home. Harris declares the kitchen as “[t]he most comfortable realm” of the black woman’s existence in the white house; the kitchen “becomes the black town, the nigger room of the white house” (15). Mrs. Woodhouse’s kitchen is so successful as a place of resistance because it is so familiar as a place of power. Black women generate and continue this power. Mrs. Woodhouse teaches Susie Taylor how to read in the homeplace of her kitchen; it is a move initiated and supported by Taylor’s grandmother, who is adamant that her granddaughter attend school, even if it ignores the 1848 slave law that governed Georgia at that time: “I often wrote passes for my grandmother, for all colored persons, free or slave, were compelled to have a pass” (Lerner 29). Taylor acquires and sustains the model of resistance established by the black women who came before her. She becomes an active participant in the movement of black women resisting racial domination.

The ingenuity of homeplace as a site of resistance allowed “[m]asses of black women, many of whom were not formally educated…to play a vital role in black

15 See Introduction, pp. 21.
liberation struggle” (hooks 47). The realities of black women sustaining this community of resistance doubtlessly impacted their mothering. hooks remembers the important rituals and responsibilities black women performed in the home; for it was a place “where all that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls” (41). Of equal importance is the mother’s acts of teaching her child[ren] who they are and how to live and resist in a world that denies their subjectivity: “we learned dignity, integrity of being…we learned to have faith” (hooks 42). Black mothering must include fostering the humanization of black children in a society that treats them as chattel. A former slave remembers:

The one doctrine of my mother’s teaching which was branded upon my senses was that I should never let anyone abuse me. “I’ll kill you, gal, if you don’t stand up for yourself,” she would say. “Fight, and if you can’t fight, kick; if you can’t kick, then bite.” (Lerner 35).

But what of those who fail to resist the hegemonic onslaught? What factor does mothering play in this failed resistance? The maternal characters I examine in this chapter fail in their attempts to use the homeplace as a site of resistance, because they choose to actively ignore their sons’ respective hubris. Lucy Potts of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and Eva Peace of Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973) are maternal figures that participate in their respective son’s destruction because of a failure to resist. Instead of girding their sons for the fight ahead, they offer too much love and too much forgiveness for their respective son’s weaknesses. These mothers never achieve the necessary balance of love and discipline in rearing their sons. This investigation is not a condemnation of their actions, but an examination of the consequences of mothers ignoring obvious faults in their children.
*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is a bildungsroman of John Pearson, a young field worker who becomes a successful preacher and the eventual mayor of Eatonville, Florida. It is a story suffused in the Southern black culture and vernacular of the early twentieth century. John leaves the home of his mother and stepfather, Amy and Ned Crittendon, to work and to marry his true love, Lucy Potts. Lucy dies of a broken heart halfway through the novel as a consequence of John’s ever-present womanizing and his expanding pride. He goes on to marry two more women, Hattie Tyson and Sally Lovelace. Hattie is a rebel woman of the world; she drinks, cusses and uses conjuring, or hoodoo, to collapse John’s first marriage and sustain his interest in her. His last wife, Sally, is a virtuous church woman modeled after Lucy, who again fails to hold his interest. The novel ends with John’s death in a car accident when rushing home out of shame for his weakness for women. The mother-figures actively use homeplace to teach John Pearson resistance; he fails to resist not because of ignorance, but because of his own hubris. His downfall is explicitly a consequence of his own making. Still, Lucy’s purposeful ignorance of John’s weakness for women is a result of too much love.

hooks’ theory of homeplace as a site of resistance is an articulation of the social protest Zora Neale Hurston promoted over a half-century earlier. Cheryl Wall declares:

[Hurston] asserted that black people, while living in a racist society that denied their humanity, had created an alternative culture that validated their worth as human beings. Although that culture was in some respects sexist, black women...attained personal identity not by transcending the culture but by embracing it (Words 372).
Both John’s mother, Amy Crittendon, and his first wife, Lucy Potts, develop a homeplace for John that is steeped in the humanization of homeplace, and advocate John’s resistance to the hegemonic power structure run by whites.

Amy creates a homeplace for her children in the tiny sharecropper’s shack she shares with her husband. She works hard to create a safe space where her children can feel human, and she encourages her husband Ned to do the same: “we ain’t go tuh let de white folks love our chillun fuh us…Us chillun is ourn…us got tuh ‘gin tuh practise on treasurin’ our younguns. Ah loves dese heah already uh whole heap. Ah don’t want ‘em knocked and ‘buked” (Hurston 5). Still, the most important skill Amy attempts to instill in John is resistance. She protests Ned’s decision to bond John to a nearby white landowner, Captain Mimms, proclaiming: “You ain’t gwine put no chile uh mine under no Mimms” (Hurston 7). Amy is unable to prevent Ned from getting rid of John, but she does prove her resistant mettle within the patriarchal institution of marriage. She preemptively sends John to the plantation of her former slave master, Alf Pearson, so he will not be bound to Mimms. The major themes of homeplace, humanization, and resistance marry with the perfection of a mother’s love in this one act. Amy sends John to a place where she knows members of the white and black communities living on the plantation will protect him. Amy knows Mister Pearson will employ, and probably take a liking to, a boy that Hurston infers is most likely his son: “he’s quality white folks…Tell ‘him whose boy you is and maybe he mought put yuh tuh work” (Hurston 11). Amy is also confident that the leftover community of former slaves will embrace John, for many are his relatives and they remember her to be a good woman.

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16 Bonding promises John to Captain Mimms as a servant for a small fee paid to Ned. It is similar to slavery in that John is virtually sold to Mimms and receives no wages.
Amy does more than send John to Pearson’s place; she personally walks him a part of the way: “Ah’ll go piece de way wid yuh tuh de Creek, John” (Hurston 10). Further, Amy both sets a model of resistance and humanizes John by giving him a hard-earned dollar. She has saved the dollar amidst the smothering racist and sexist domination sustained by the sharecropping system and by her own close-minded husband. She gives the dollar to John, offering her love and what little financial security she can muster, in an effort to make him feel human.

Amy must create a homeplace despite the Western ideals her husband, Ned Crittendon, repeats and enforces. Amy desperately attempts to include Ned in the homeplace she has carved out for her family. But he steadily insists on sustaining the Western ideas of racial and male domination that have incurred so much misery in his life. Ned’s misery is palpable; he is a drunk who has just been swindled out of what little money he earns by the white landowner for whom he sharecrops. Still, he mocks Amy’s attempts to humanize her children by making each feel special in her motherlove: “[h]ow come dey’s diffunt? Wese all niggers tuhgether, ain’t us?” (Hurston 5). He deceitfully thwarts any effort by Amy to resist the institutions that have heavily contributed to his own unhappiness. He allows the white landowner Beasley to steal the family’s cotton, even after Amy had advised him against storing his cotton bales in Beasley’s barn. The only time Ned is proactive is in the perpetuation of the hegemony’s racial and sexual domination of his family. He attempts to suppress John’s freedom through surreptitious bonding, an action Amy sees as another form of slavery: “Dis heah bindin’ over ain’t nothing’ but uh ‘nother way uh puttin’ us folks back intuh slavery” (Hurston 7). He verbally counteracts many of Amy’s dictums on the
power of black solidarity and awareness with harmful pronouncements that highlight community separation. As Amy tries to impart black pride into the half-white John, Ned proclaims: "[y]aller niggers ain’t no good nohow…Dese white folks orta know and dey say dese half-white niggers got de worst part uh bofe de white and de black folks" (Hurston 9). Ned also physically enforces his supposed sexual domination, the only approved domination still available to black men, with frequent beatings of Amy.

Hurston allows the reader into the physical and emotional horror he inflicts upon his family. His use of a rawhide whip brings back the evil of slavery as Ned endeavors to enslave Amy into the patriarchy of marriage. Amy strives to have a voice within their marriage; she has never been shy with her opinion because she works just as hard as Ned in the fields. In the evenings she returns home to fulfill her domestic duties of cooking and cleaning as Ned smokes and drinks. But the crack of the whip across her back is powerful: "[t]he pain and anger killed the cry within her" (Hurston 8). Her voice is lost in the harsh reality of such potent domination.

These scenes of familial discord serve a twofold purpose. The first allows Hurston to critique the institution of marriage. Genevieve West believes Hurston subtly "reconfigures oppressor/oppressed relationships by demonstrating the ways in which women to some degree perpetuate their own oppression, sometimes choosing one sphere of oppression over another" (500). Ned remains the best choice of two evils. It is easier and more manageable to resist him than it is to resist her greatest oppressor, the white man, "but Hurston makes it clear Amy needs refuge from the man dominant ideology" (West 504). Still, the most important purpose of these familial scenes is to show the situation from whence John came. Amy and Ned set a standard that heavily
influences John’s expectations for marriage. John F. Kanthak insists that John and Lucy Pearson’s marriage becomes a dangerous replica of the “inherited interpretive systems” displayed in the dysfunction of the Crittendons’ marriage (114).

The most dangerous model John inherits from his stepfather is what Susan Edwards Meisenhelder refers to as “a kind of masculinity that is fundamentally childlike in its emotional dependency and irresponsibility” (43). Though Ned beats Amy in his awkward attempts to assert his domination over her, the greater part of his behavior in their marriage is remarkably childlike. He sulks when he does not win an argument and lashes out whenever his feelings are hurt. Still, the most childlike of behaviors Ned displays is his inability to critically assess the hegemonic drivel he accepts as doctrine: “Dese younguns ain’t uh bit better’n me. Let ’em come lak Ah did” (Hurston 4).

Kanthak explains that, “[w]hen one half of an adult couple chooses the role of a child, the other half is nominated for the role of parent. Amy Crittendon accepts this role and enables Ned’s childish behavior by acting like a mother to him” (115). Kanthak speaks of how Amy slips into the role of mother by scolding Ned and telling him what to do.

Lucy and John Pearson sustain a marital relationship that exists strongly within the mother/child dynamic. This primary aspect of their interpersonal relationship allows for my contention that Lucy mothers John in creating a homeplace infused with the instillation of soothing healing and resistance. Their relationship falters in her overabundant love, expressed in her purposeful ignorance of his sexual prowess with other women. Other critics have taken note of Lucy’s maternal instincts toward John, instincts that supersede those of a wife. Meisenhelder refers to John’s third wife, Sally, as a mother-figure who protects him in a manner quite similar to Lucy, implying that
Lucy was a mother-figure herself (42). Kanthak speaks of the Pearsons as having a dual marriage where the wife/husband and parent/child dynamics co-exist (117).

Lucy explicitly mothers John. Within their marriage, the Pearsons recognize the special nature of the bond between them. Lucy characterizes their bond as a long, unbreakable cord that exists between them: “look lak wese tied tuhgether by uh long cord string and youse at one end and Ahm at de other” (Hurston 96). This description can be applied to the marital binding that occurs within matrimony, but the most obvious interpretation of Lucy’s metaphor is the umbilical cord. John is bound to Lucy in the most visceral manner possible between mother and child. John Kanthak suggests that Lucy provides John with a backbone, something he sorely lacks: “[he has] had the dumb luck to marry a master puppeteer” (121). But Lucy provides so much more. She forces him to allow the construction of homeplace, a place he can be nourished and cultivate resistance. Granted, Lucy only accomplishes this goal by ordering him to get established and send for his family, once he arrives in Florida. She takes advantage of John’s childish nature and orders him to acquire a house for her and the children, once they get to Eatonville: “You go git us a house of our own” (Hurston 109).

Lucy recognizes and believes in the advantages of homeplace. She creates a place where John and the children exercise their subjectivity as human beings:

John, dis is uh fine place tuh bring up our chillun. Dey won’t be seein’ no other kind uh folks actin’ top-superior over ‘em and dat’ll give’em spunk tuh be bell cows theyselves, and you git somethin’ tuh do ‘sides takin’ orders offa other folks. Ah ‘bominates dat. (Hurston 109)

Lucy ties in her expectations for John with the other children. She hopes to support the humanization of her husband and her children by expanding homeplace beyond the walls of their small home. The all-black town of Eatonville provides the family
numerous opportunities for nourishing the black pride Lucy possesses. It is this black
pride that spurs Lucy to push John to resist the lowered expectations American society
has for blacks. She urges John to go into business for himself as a carpenter and
make enough money so they can buy their own house and property, for “[t]ain’t nothin’
lak being yo’ own boss” (Hurston 109). Lucy dotes on him, giving him motherly praise
for his accomplishments as he becomes a well-known preacher and begins to make
more money. She simultaneously tells him exactly what to do with his earnings: “We
goin’ tuh finish payin’ fuh dis place wid dis money…You makin’ good money now, John.
Ah always knowed you wuz goin’ tuh do good” (Hurston 112).

Unfortunately, John has inherited his stepfather Ned’s child-like demeanor and
lack of talent at critical assessment. He repeatedly counteracts Lucy’s attempts at
fostering subjectivity and resistance with verbal expressions that further hegemonic
plans for racial domination. Even as Lucy is suggesting that they take the initiative and
buy their own land to build a house, John protests: “Dat’s uh bigger job than Ah wants
tuh tackle, Lucy…Wese colored folks. Don’t be so much-knowin’” (Hurston 109). Not
only does he lack the gumption to resist, he remains constant in his childish ways.
When he gets into trouble with the deacons at his church for running around with other
women, he runs to Lucy like a lost child, questioning: “What mus’ Ah do?” (Hurston
121). He fails to handle the most basic situations in a mature way. The Pearsons’
dughter, Isis, contracts typhoid and lies on her death bed. John is unable to stand as
the strength of the family, supporting his wife and children. He chooses to run away to
Tampa with his favorite mistress: “Ah got tuh go ’way ’til it’s all over. Ah jus’ can’t stay”
(117). John possesses not one iota of resistance. His will is weak to the temptations
of the flesh and his mind is child-like in its failure to properly assess hegemonic
propaganda. His downfall, when it comes, is complete and wholly deserved.

Still, Lucy in her maternal weakness is guilty of loving her “son” John too much to
properly take him to task for his weaknesses. She continually refers to the boundless
nature of her love for him which grows the longer they are married and despite his many
wrongdoings: “Ah got mo’ tuh love yuh fuh now” (Hurston 111). It is only on her
deathbed that Lucy begins openly to point out John’s many flaws: “If you’d stay home
and look after yo’ wife and chillun, Ah wouldn’t have nothin’ tuh talk uhbout…keep ole
Hattie Tyson’s letters out dis house” (Hurston 128). But her explicitness comes far too
late. John has allowed the success to which Lucy has guided him to inflate his own
ego. His reaction to her chastening remains predictably childish; he blames her for her
illumination of his own faults: “Oh you always got uh mouf full uh opinions, but Ah don’t
need you no mo’ nor nothing you got tuh say, Ahm uh man grown. Don’t need no
guardzeen atall. So shet yo’ mouf wid me” (Hurston 128). This particular declaration
of John’s does two important things. First, it demonstrates John’s knowledge and
previous acceptance of the mother/son dynamic of their relationship. Secondly, it
reveals how little maturing John has actually undergone, despite the many efforts of
Lucy. He remains a scared and insecure child who must shout and brag about what he
supposedly can do instead of quietly and maturely doing it. He is still reliably
unpredictable in his subsequent actions. Like a teenager eager to prove his diminished
manhood he reacts with violence, slapping Lucy for speaking words of truth. It is only
then, as a victim of domestic violence and a defeated and ashamed mother that Lucy
allows herself to die, but not before giving her daughter Isis hard-earned advice that
lays her mistakes bare: “Don’t you love nobody better’n you do yo’self. Do, you’ll be
dying befo’ yo’ time is out…uh person kin be killed ‘thout being struck un blow” (Hurston
130). Lucy dies of a broken heart in Hurston’s characterization of the intersection of
homeplace, failed resistance, and an overabundance of mother love. The main
instigator of her frustration lives on to marry twice more and continues his search for
happiness in the arms of a string of women, until his death at the very end of the novel.
Lucy yields her agency to John.

The maternal character, Eva Peace, of Toni Morrison’s novel, Sula, refuses to
concede her personal agency to anyone, even her own child. The majority of criticism
of Sula centers on its namesake, but the Peace family’s matriarch, Eva, remains a
fascinating character more than thirty years after her creation. A surface perusal of
Eva characterizes her as the stereotypical strong black matriarch, but Roseann P. Bell
warns that this characterization demonstrates a dangerously simplistic assessment:
“[t]he only thing Eva has in common with the…hundreds of other heavy-set, Black
‘domineering’ mamas of traditional American literature, is that she is Black and she is
the head of her household” (24). Trudier Harris insists that Eva breaks the mold of
matriarchy because she possesses no “God-centered morality” (Folklore 71). This
freedom allows her to create her own sense of morality, therefore transcending
traditional societal mores. For Harris, Eva becomes a goddess in her own right,
placing herself above judgment even as she passes judgment on others (Folklore 72,
74). Eva is as incredibly complex in her words, beliefs, and actions as is her journey
within Morrison’s novel. Eva Peace is the first of the matriarchal line of Peace women
explored in the narrative that includes her daughter, Hannah and her granddaughter,
Sula. The beginning of the novel explores a young Eva’s struggles as a mother of three children, Hannah, Eva or “Pearl,” and Ralph, nicknamed “Plum.” Her husband, BoyBoy, abandons her, leaving the family with no money and little food. Mistaken characterizations of Eva as the all-sacrificing black mother stem from her subsequent actions. She goes to extraordinary lengths to ensure the survival of her young children; she uses the last bit of lard to save Plum’s infant life and is rumored to have sold her leg for ten thousand dollars to finance the costs of the boardinghouse she returns to town to build.

Eva becomes a complex pastiche of common binaries. Margaret Schramm likens her to the Biblical Eve, naming her a similar agent of life and death (168). She births three children; yet, she murders the very son whose infant life she worked so hard to save. Eva displays a similar dichotomy for love and hate. Her life’s purpose is sustained on an immaculate hatred of her husband, BoyBoy: “…it was hating him that kept her alive and happy” (Morrison 37). Still, her life is punctuated by astonishing acts of love. She sacrifices her leg for the economic stability of her family, she kills her beloved son to free him from the ravages of heroin addiction, and she jumps out of a second story window in a thwarted attempt to save her daughter’s, Hannah’s, life. Rita A. Bergenholtz believes that Morrison is purposeful in Eva’s contradictorily binary construction, because Sula should be read as “an extended satire on binary (reductive, clichéd) thinking” (89). Bergenholtz echoes Deborah E. McDowell’s suggestion that Sula “transgresses all deterministic structures of opposition…[as it] insistently blurs and confuses…binary oppositions. It glories in paradox and ambiguity” (Self 79-80). Eva affords the opportunity to expand beyond the confines of the restrictive
characterizations stereotypes offer: “[Eva] suggests a positive way of freeing our fettered minds from the oppressive tentacles of a past which...prevents us from progressing and projecting a new vision...[of] a more realistic human experience” (Bell 26-27). It is with this sense of freedom in mind, I contend, that Eva both fulfills and expands the defining characteristics of homeplace. Eva creates a homeplace for her own children, but also imposes the necessities of homeplace upon her wards and her boarders. Her son, Plum, fails to acquire the values of homeplace, adopting the dangerous practice of drug use. Eva kills Plum in a spectacular act of love, and as a final acceptance of her failed awareness of the effects of the indulgences of her baby boy.

Eva works hard to fashion a homeplace for her children. Other evaluations on the importance of homeplace make its construction appear effortless. Lucy orders John to get her a house and it is done almost immediately (Hurston 109). hooks’ childhood memories only recall that her grandmother’s house existed as a place of retreat and comfort (41). It is Morrison who demonstrates the pain and sacrifice necessary for the creation of the soothing and safe instruction homeplace provides through her characterization of Eva. Home fails to be a safe respite for Eva when her children are young; it becomes a place of desolation because her husband has abandoned her. Eva’s home becomes a demanding source of despair, need, and looming starvation: “[t]he children needed her; she needed money...she was confused and desperately hungry” (Morrison 32). There is no time to assess her feelings on being abandoned; she can only afford to think about possible sources of income for their next meal. The home becomes lonely and claustrophobic as Eva is boxed in by
her limited options: “She would lie in bed with the baby boy, the two girls wrapped in quilts on the floor, thinking…she would have to scrounge around and beg through winter” (Morrison 33).

Eva leaves the children with a neighbor, Mrs. Suggs, and disappears for eighteen months after an incident in which Plum almost dies. Schramm refers to this incident as a “hiatus in Eva’s mothering” (170), but I would contest this assessment of Eva’s actions. Eva remains a construction that moves beyond rote characterizations. Eva does not take a hiatus in mothering; she continues to mother her children, even in absentia. She mothers them by finding an alternative way to construct a homeplace, a safe space for them to be soothed by her love. There is an inordinate amount of self-awareness in this action; she realizes that she can no longer provide for her children in her current economic situation. She leaves them with Mrs. Suggs in order to become a better mother, an improved provider. It is during this time away from her children that she reportedly sells her leg for the economic security that later sustains her family. Eva returns as soon as is feasible. Her very first action is to reclaim her children and pay her debt to Mrs. Suggs with a ten-dollar bill. She then re-establishes her life from her newfound and stronger economic position: “she started building a house on Carpenter’s Road…which she rented out” (Morrison 35). It is only after spousal desertion and severe economic uncertainty resulting in an eighteen-month separation from her children that Eva is able to carve out a homeplace.

The trials Eva experiences give her the agency to create a magnificent and enormous homeplace where all she deems worthy are welcome:

Sula Peace lived in a house of many rooms that had been built over a period of five years to the specifications of its owner, who kept on adding
things: more stairways—there were three sets to the second floor—more
rooms, doors and stoops. There were rooms that had three doors, others
that opened out on the porch only and were inaccessible from any other
part of the house; others that you could get to only by going through
somebody’s bedroom. (Morrison 30)

The chaotic nature of Eva’s home expresses the contradictory nature of her
characterization. She is never simple nor clichéd and fails to fit within any proposed
binary. She remains as complex in her construction as that of her house. And her
employment of the ideal of homeplace remains just as intricate and expansive as her home.

Morrison says little about the specific mood of the homeplace Eva creates for her
own children; they “grow stealthily” under Eva’s “distant eye” (Morrison 41). Paula
Gallant Eckard believes that these circumstances come as a result of the largesse of
Eva’s maternal sacrifice. The acts of losing her leg to improve their economic situation
and leaving the children with Mrs. Suggs keep them alive. But they fail to “flourish,”
for they all possess an “emptiness at the core” (53). Eckard underestimates the power
and accomplishment gained in Eva’s children surviving. They flourish in the very act of
staying alive. I suggest that Eva believes enough homeplace ideals of safe space and
resistance were set for her children in her fight to establish homeplace. She is able to
expand the environs of homeplace to those who occupy and visit her bustling boarding-
house. Bell declares: “True, Eva is a woman without a man, but she is not without
men” (24). It is for these gentleman callers that she allows them the safe space to be
men and feel masculine: “[t]hey would read the newspaper aloud to her and make
observations on its content, and Eva would listen” (Morrison 42). They would play
checkers and admire her lovely calf. Eva would also show them that a woman could
also be subjective, setting an example of feminine resistance filled with “such an absence of bile, such a concentration of manlove, that they felt their convictions solidified by her disagreement” (Morrison 42). Eva sets this example of manlove for her daughter Hannah, who interpreted it in such a way that she “rippled with sex” and gave her love freely (Morrison 42). Eva also attempts to spread her exemplar of easy interaction with menfolk to the young brides who stay in her roominghouse. She urges them to learn how to create a safe space for their husbands, to begin to create a homeplace that allows them to feel like men: “She fussed interminably with the brides of the newly wed couples for not getting their men’s supper ready on time; about how to launder shirts, press them, etc., “Yo’ man be here direc’lin. Aint it ‘bout time you got busy?”” (Morrison 42).

Her penchant for creating a homeplace for men folk extended to the lives of little boys. She takes in three little boys she names Dewey. They all look remarkably different from each other—one was very dark-skinned, one was light-skinned with freckles and red hair, and the last was half-Mexican. Eva treats them all the same: “[w]hat you need to tell them apart for? They’s all deweys.” (Morrison 38). Eva’s pronouncement about the three deweys becomes the accepted law. From that point on, no one is able to tell them apart, despite their marked physical differences. It is within this Eva-appointed identity that the boys begin to come out of their cocoons: “…[they] accepted Eva’s view, becoming in fact as well as in name a dewey—joining with the other two to become a trinity with a plural name…inseparable” (Morrison 38). Some critique this treatment of the deweys pejoratively. Within Harris’ dynamic, this is one more example of Eva’s domination of men and her goddess-like powers to name
things into being and pass judgment upon others (Folklore 74). Susan Neal Mayberry lauds Eva’s innovation, but admonishes her technique because it “ultimately stunts their growth” (525). Eva’s formation of the deweys “consume[s] the individuality of these Lost Boys and prevent[s] their growing up” (Mayberry 525). Mayberry is correct in elucidating the constrictive effects which forming a single identity has upon the deweys. But I suggest that it is an inadvertent outcome of the profound love that Eva shows in taking these boys in and providing them the shelter that homeplace provides. Eva’s magnanimous love for her boys and menfolk allude to a formidable weakness evident in her dealings with her son, Plum.

The most glaring example of the limitations inspired by too much love and a failed resistance of homeplace is in Eva’s relationship with her baby boy, Plum. Eva demonstrates her specific favor for Plum early in his life. Morrison describes his upbringing as “float[ing] in a constant swaddle of love and affection” (45). Eva wants to bequeath all of her assets to Plum. Finally, it is Plum’s close brush with death while still an infant that convinces Eva that she must change her abandoned family’s economic circumstances. It is in this particular exchange that Eva first begins to blur the lines of the dichotomies of life and death. She is unable to create the safe space of home because of BoyBoy’s absence. It is the middle of winter, she and her children are starving, and Plum becomes deathly ill. His bowels refuse to move and he is making himself sick with his fitful crying. Eva does all that she can; she massages his stomach and gives him castor oil, but nothing works: “[h]e seemed in great pain and his shrieks were pitched high in outrage and suffering. At one point, maddened by his own crying, he gagged, choked and looked as though he was strangling to death”
Eva finally finds a solution in a frantic act of mother love:

She wrapped him in blankets, ran her finger around the crevices and sides of the lard can and stumbled to the outhouse with him. Deep in its darkness and freezing stench she squatted down, turned the baby over on her knees, exposed his buttocks and shoveled the last bit of food she had in the world (besides three beets) up his ass. Softening the insertion with the dab of lard, she probed with her middle finger to loosen his bowels. Her fingernail snagged what felt like a pebble; she pulled it out and others followed. Plum stopped crying as the black hard stools ricocheted onto the frozen ground. (Morrison 34)

Eva’s desperation in this scene eerily foreshadows her later actions when she murders Plum. She is resolved in her determination to end her beloved son’s pain. Morrison’s choice of words to describe Eva’s sense of purpose demonstrates the ambiguity in Eva’s resolve. Before she brings him to the outhouse, Eva decides to “end his misery once and for all” (34). These words illuminate the numerous possibilities of the lengths to which Eva will go to lessen her son’s misery, and they include the very prospect of Plum’s death. This first time, Eva’s determination to aid her son out of love results in his life, but it also heavily alludes to Eva’s future decision to kill him.

Plum fails to recognize and appreciate the impact of the sacrifices Eva makes to ensure a homeplace. Harris insists her actions reflect those of an egotistical and “vengeful goddess…destroying a creature who has failed to worship in an appropriate manner at her altar” (Folklore 74). One cannot ignore the potent presence of ego in her immolation of Plum, but the evaluation of Eva’s act must also include the great love she feels for Plum. Plum remains her beloved baby boy. Toni Morrison herself explains that Eva adores Plum and really wants the best for him (Bakeman 60). But her love is too much, so powerful that she destroys her object of affection.
In the moments leading up to the fire, Eva rocks her son like the little child he used to be and the heroin has now reverted him to: “[s]he sat down and gathered Plum into her arms….Eva held him closer and began to rock. Back and forth she rocked him” (Morrison 46). She remembers her great love for her son as she holds him so close, and how it has grown over the years: “Eva let her memory spin, loop and fall. Plum in the tub that time as she leaned over him. He reached up and dripped water into her bosom and laughed. She was angry, but not too, and laughed with him” (Morrison 47). She has indulged his mistakes all his life, has forgiven him for so much. But Eva’s adoration takes a dangerous turn as she realizes the depth of Plum’s failure to resist. Plum does not inherit the resistant spirit that allows Eva to sell her leg. He falls prey to heroin, one of the many seductions that subverts the resistance homeplace advocates.

Morrison again demonstrates Eva’s determination in her love for her child. Eva’s resolve is evident in the description of Eva’s painful and measured descent down the stairs to her son’s room: “[s]lowly she manipulated herself down the long flights of stairs, two crutches under her left arm, the right hand grasping the banister…On each landing she stopped for breath” (Morrison 46). She is again determined to end her son’s misery, just as when he was a crying infant. The circumstances under which she is willing to do so remain just as ambiguous to Eva as they do to the reader. Eva acknowledges and recognizes the possibility of murder, but she needs to see the depth and reality of his addiction. It takes her a while to accept what she must do. She rocks him and remembers. She silently cries as she holds him close: “[l]ater she laid him down and looked at him a long time” (Morrison 47). It is only when Eva attempts
to drink from the strawberry soda bottle in Plum’s room that she finally finds the impetus to begin her plan of action: “[s]he put it to her lips and discovered it was blood-tainted water and threw it to the floor” (47). Eva is now ready to kill her son, to accept that her love for him is so great; she would rather see him dead than enslaved by the ravages of heroin: “She rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick about six inches long, lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay” (Morrison 47).

The mothers in this chapter attempt to teach their sons the valuable mores of homeplace. Homeplace allows them humanity and instills them with tools of resistance and subversion that will aid them in an external world that seeks to destroy them. Still, both John Pearson and Plum Peace fail to resist the distorted mores of the world around them. Plum sinks into the oblivion of dope and John attempts to fulfill his description as a “walking orgasm” and blatantly disregards Lucy’s wise advice. Daryl Dance attributes this failed resistance to a misplaced hatred of black mothers (Eve 127). Are John and Plum latently resentful of their mothers’ strength and see them as accomplices to the white world? These wayward sons must recognize and appreciate the realities of black mothering and the value of homeplace (Eve 130). I explore this necessity for black children to see the black mother as an individual, as an entire person, in the next chapter, which focuses on the complexities of black mother-daughter relationships.
CHAPTER TWO
MATERNAL ABJECTION: MOTHERS WHO RESIST THE IDEAL

Black mother-daughter relationships have proven to be an intricately complex system of buffers and intermediaries that allow for the balance of severity and leniency necessary to train daughters into successful and independent black women. The goal of black mothers in terms of their daughters is incredibly complex. These mothers must juggle racial realities with the added rigors of the sometimes contradictory gender and sexual expectations for black women. The difficulty of this high wire act black mothers must complete contributes to the sometimes contentious relationship between black mothers and daughters.

Patricia Hill Collins speaks of the necessary complexity of this relationship in *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins insists that black mothers must “ensure their daughter’s physical survival [by]…teach[ing] them to fit into systems of oppression” (123). These women contribute to their own enslavement to the very system that seeks to destroy them. Black daughters are taught to be self-reliant, to question little, and develop skills that will aid in uplifting the African American community (Collins 123). The valorization of these specific characteristics as strengths leave black mothers in a quandary of their own creation, for these women ensure their daughters’ physical survival at the “high cost of their emotional destruction” (123). The mothers in the literature examined in this chapter attempt to follow this mode of thought with varying degrees of success. Each daughter in Tina McElroy Ansa’s *Ugly Ways* (1993),
Maryse Condé’s *Desirada* (1997), and Edwidge Danticat’s *Breathe, Eyes, Memory* (1994) must counteract the emotional destruction their own mothers have initiated and sustained. Though each book heavily emphasizes the daughters’ journey out of the emotional ruins they occupy, my treatment of Ansa’s and Condè’s novels will focus upon a textual reading of the maternal characters within Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. These women invert maternal abjection by privileging the creation of the self above the maternal expectations of their families and the community. I analyze Danticat’s novels within the context of Patricia Hill Collins’ explication of black mother-daughter relationships.

According to Collins, “emotional strength is essential, but not at the cost of physical survival,” for those daughters who actively and openly confronted the oppressive systems of Western culture often found their lives threatened and, at times, taken away (123-4). Again, the inherent contradiction of black motherhood is highlighted: “Black daughters must learn how to survive in interlocking structures of race, class, and gender oppression while rejecting and transcending those same structures” (124). The instruction of the dual ability both to reject and transcend these power structures requires an admirable dexterity on the part of black mothers. “Black mothers are often described as strong disciplinarians and overly protective; yet these same women manage to raise daughters who are self-reliant and assertive” (125). As we shall see in Danticat, it is those specific methods of strong discipline and over-protection that so often contribute to the currents of contention that characterize black mother-daughter relationships. Black daughters are isolated within protective walls built by their mothers and allowed few freedoms and many responsibilities leading to
copious amounts of tension between the women involved in a power struggle fueled by teenage rebellion (126). Collins suggests that this protection and instillation of self-reliance is necessary because black women are so often “denied male protection,” a luxury too easily assumed by white women (Collins 126).

Gloria Wade-Gayles supported and influenced many of the characterizations of black motherhood Collins delineates. Wade-Gayles’ article, “The Truths of Our Mothers’ Lives: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Black Women’s Fiction,” proves most useful because she places these characteristics within the context of literary representation, rather than Collins’ sociological realm. Wade-Gayles acknowledges the complexity of the mother-daughter relationships portrayed in the literature:

> We want to see mothers embracing their daughters—loving them openly and unashamedly. We want to see mothers and daughters sharing laughter and baring their souls to each other in moments of intimacy. And yet, we want the truths of our mothers’ lives, even if those truths are sometimes “cruel enough to stop the blood.” (12)

The literary truths of black motherhood reveal a harshness rarely seen in mainstream literatures: “mothers in black women’s fiction are strong and devoted…but...are rarely affectionate” (10). Wade-Gayles insists that affection is not a necessary marker of maternal love, specifically within the black experience: “the exigencies of racism and poverty in white America are sometimes so devastating that the mothers have neither time nor patience for affection” (10). Literary black daughters must often reconcile themselves to this dearth of affection and begin to appreciate the complexity of love and sacrifice that epitomizes their relationship with their mother for “affection does not equal bonding” (10). Wade-Gayles believes that reconciliation means the daughters must acknowledge that part of themselves that is inseparable from their mothers and achieve
a certain peace within that context, for “there is an understanding on the daughter’s part…even when she wishes for more affection, that her mother is giving [her] all” (10). Black mother-daughter relationships operate within a dynamic different from the mainstream because of the harsh realities of black womanhood. These literary mothers have never “…stood as fragile figurines on pedestals white feminists seek to dismantle…they have a decidedly different approach to rearing their daughters” (12). These mothers must raise daughters strong enough to survive in a society that actively seeks to destroy the minds and bodies of black women. Within the context of these external pressures, literary black mothers must also function as mothers despite their personal faults and imperfections as women, for “[they] bring to the role of mothering their individual strengths and weaknesses as persons, and what they feel about themselves as persons influences their performance as mothers” (11).

Though women are biologically equipped to become mothers, not all women possess the temperament necessary for family life. French theorist Julia Kristeva acknowledges this reality by suggesting that “a woman does not have to be a mother in order to have a motherly relationship to the world…there are women who have children and stick to a military lack of sensitivity…physiological and mental motherhoods are different things” (Midttun 172). The black community has acknowledged this reality and created familial and social makeshift measures to tackle this problem. The most obvious exemplary of this reality is the presence of the othermother. Some othemothers overtake the role of mother in totality; grandmothers, aunts, and extended family members raise unwanted children from birth until adulthood. Others fulfill this role within a child’s life for only a specific period of time, until the bloodmother reaches
the necessary financial stability and emotional maturity her role requires. Most othermothers act as buffers to diffuse the contention that mars black mother-daughter relationships. “Othermothers…defuse the emotional intensity of relationships between bloodmothers and their daughters” (128). These women were aunts, grandmothers, teachers, esteemed females in the community who could afford the luxury of talking to angry young daughters because they did not have the responsibility of providing for them (Weems 27, qtd in Collins 128).

The reality of the othermother furthers Wade-Gayles’ persistent view that we see mothers as real women with flaws. Othermothers allow the community to acknowledge these weaknesses and permit other women to shoulder the sometimes heavy burden of motherhood. Wade-Gayles insists that the literary representations of black mothers must be judged with a modicum of restraint: “we must see them first as persons with dreams and needs no less important than ours and then as mothers who sacrificed their dreams in order to put our hands on the pulse of freedom and self hood” [emphasis added] (12). But what of those mothers who prioritize their dreams over those of their daughters? How does one begin to characterize the literary representations of those mothers who refuse to sacrifice their dreams? The maternal characters I examine in this chapter embody many of the aforementioned complex characteristics of black motherhood, including a marked lack of affection and the prioritizing of physical survival over emotional strength. But their motives are far more complex than the tales of self-sacrifice upon which Collins and Wade-Gayles choose to focus. The drives of these mothers remain a complex web of struggles that emphasize their own individual achievements and the living of their truth over the reality of anyone else’s existence.
Collins’ and Wade-Gayles’ tendency to centralize their theories on the communal identity of African Americans lends itself to critic Janice Hale’s insistence that it is “always necessary to define the black woman in terms of African social reality” (80). But these mothers are trapped in a past that is not wholly African. They are highly influenced by the Western ideal of individuality over the African insistence upon community. African society believed that the child’s needs surpassed all and that mother was the most important role a woman could occupy.¹⁷

I draw from Collins’ sociological and Wade-Gayles’ literary conclusions in my textual analysis of the mother-daughter dynamic of Martine and Sophie Caco in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory.* The novel focuses on the journey of Sophie Caco from a young girl to an adult as she moves from Haiti to America. She leaves the comfort of being raised by her Tante (Aunt) Atie and Grandma Ifé for the loneliness of life with her mother in the harshness of New York City. It is another coming of age story as Sophie eventually marries against her mother’s wishes and becomes a mother herself. She remains plagued by the difficulties in her relationship with her mother, demonstrated in her severe sexual anxiety and bulimia. Sophie finally reconciles with the depth of Martine’s sacrifice with her graphic suicide. She returns home to Haiti with her mother’s body and begins the long journey of reconciling with her family’s past lest it does not destroy her daughter’s, Bridgette’s, future. Danticat’s novel demonstrates the delineated progression of how black mothers and daughters grow and change in their interactions. Martine Caco sacrifices the comforts of her home village and motherhood when she emigrates to America to provide financial

¹⁷ See Introduction, pp. 11.
stability for her family. Her mother’s sister, Tante Atie, raises the young Sophie. She embodies the familiar black maternal role of the othermother: “the Aunt is celebrated as a real mother, a woman of origin, even though she is not the biological mother but rather a substitute one” (Jurney 7). Martine finally receives a visa for the preteen Sophie, and she joins her mother’s simplistic life in New York City. Martine works very hard to provide her daughter a better life; she works two full time shifts as a nursemaid to the elderly and the indigent. She is diligent in providing a safe space for her daughter to grow; when school is not in session, Sophie accompanies Martine to both jobs, much to the chagrin of her supervisors. Still, tensions exist in their relationship from the very beginning and develop throughout the novel.

Danticat forces the reader to see Martine as a woman with a past, a woman with flaws. In foregrounding Martine’s trauma we see her as a complex individual in which motherhood acts as one of many facets. Sophie is the result of Martine’s rape by a government soldier, a tonton macoute, in a Haitian canefield. This reality permeates their existence as mother and daughter. Sophie does not look like her mother, because “[a] child out of wedlock always looks like its father” (Danticat 61). Sophie is a walking reminder of her mother’s most traumatic experience. This truth is reiterated each evening as nightmares plague the peace Martine should find in the solace of sleep. Donette Francis argues: “[a]s witness to her mother’s nightmares, Sophie not only gains an understanding of the magnitude of her mother’s suffering, but she becomes a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event” (Francis 83). It is Sophie who has to physically shake her mother out of her screaming night reverie, and she is rewarded with Martine’s grateful proclamation, “Jesus Marie Joseph…Sophie, you’ve
saved my life” (Danticat 81). Danticat alludes that no one has been there to awaken her in the past. Martine has shouldered this great burden alone; it is only with the appearance of Sophie that she gains some solace.

It is Martine’s attempts to protect her own daughter from all things related to sex that increases the already established tension in her relationship and initiates Sophie’s rebellion. Martine isolates Sophie within the predictable walls of school and prayer. The use of education and church to prevent the moral and physical corruption of black daughters remains an active tool in the arsenal of black mothers in the battle to give their daughters a better life (Collins 126). Martine furthers the usual methods of black mothers with the added practice of “testing” Sophie once she turns eighteen and becomes interested in boys. She becomes obsessed with Sophie’s chastity as she initiates the weekly ritual of inserting her finger inside her daughter to test for her virginity. It is a suppressive sexual practice passed down the generations of Caco women. Jennifer Rossi explicates testing’s many contradictions: “…it can neither prevent consensual sex from occurring, nor protect the daughter from rape…it does not bring marriage…Additionally, when the mother conducts purity testing, she herself is violating her daughter’s purity, by committing sexual abuse” (Rossi 208). This intimate practice increases the tension and widens the emotional chasm between mother and daughter. Sophie loathes this practice and in one ultimate, pyrrhic moment of victory, takes a pestle and violently takes her own innocence. Her body is the “only entit[y] over which [she] can exercise power. Hence, [her only] form of protest or resistance…[is] enacted on [her] own bod[y]…This act of resistance signifies an incomplete victory for Sophie since it later haunts her” (Francis 87).
Repeated testing coupled with sustained participation in her mother’s nightly traumas result in Sophie’s emotional destruction. She finds herself unable to have a healthy sexual relationship with her husband Joseph. The sexual trauma Martine inflicts as well as that which Sophie inflicts upon herself leaves her feeling undesirable; and she forces herself to have sex to prevent abandonment: “I am his wife. There are certain things I need to do to keep him” (Danticat 210). Sophie also becomes bulimic: “I ate every scrap of dinner leftovers, then went to the bathroom, locked the door, and purged all the food in my body” (Danticat 200). The reality of Sophie’s bulimia reiterates Francis’ insistence that acts of protest and resistance are enacted upon her body, for it is the only entity over which she can exercise power. Sophie attends weekly sexual trauma group meetings and has individual sessions with a personal therapist: “I felt broken at the end of the meeting, but a little closer to being free” (Danticat 203).

Therapy aids in Sophie’s healing, but she must reconcile with her mother, acknowledging and appreciating the sacrifice and love Martine has given her daughter: “I knew my hurt and hers were links in a long chain and if she hurt me, it was because she was hurt, too” (Danticat 203). In turn, Sophie begins to recognize her mother’s strength in dealing with her trauma: “Twenty-five years of being raped every night. Could you live with that?” (Danticat 219). Her mother’s suicide coupled with her determination not to continue the cycle of sexual violence that has plagued her family coalesce into a heretofore unseen level of consideration of her mother’s journey. Sophie does not want her own daughter, Bridgette, to suffer the psychological and emotional misery that has plagued her family. The novel culminates with Sophie
running through the Haitian cane field after her mother’s funeral, “I…began to beat a cane stalk. I pounded it until it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking at my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground. My palm was bleeding” (Danticat 219). She attacks the land and the specific area responsible for her mother’s traumatic existence: “Sophie does not simply act or react. Instead this scene in the canefields suggests a confrontation with cultural history and social practices…the violence is enacted on the canefields rather than on her own physical body” (Francis 80). Sophie has begun the painful journey that will free her and young Bridgette from the harmfully violent practices perpetuated through generations of Caco women. Sophie wants to secure her own identity outside of the roles of mother and daughter. She appreciates her mother’s sacrifice; yet wants to prevent such extremes in her own role as a mother. Martine is a mother who sacrifices all for her daughter, even to her own detriment. Not all mothers employ this type of sacrifice in their relationships with their daughters.

It is within the frame of Wade-Gayles’ insistence that we must examine literary representations of black mothers as whole women that I present my reading of maternal abjection within black women’s fiction. It is first necessary to explicate fully Kristeva’s notion of the abject as it will apply to my project to place it within a racially gendered literary context. My reading is centered on Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection; it is a central topic in her theoretical work *Powers of Horror*. Kristeva begins her essay “Approaching Abjection” by defining abjection as “an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it [the abject] literally beside himself” (1). She goes on to define the abject as one who occupies the space
between subject and object (1-2). Those who are considered the abject often occupy
the margins of society—the poor, minorities, prostitutes. The state of abjection centers
on those abjects that are expelled from society. But there exists a gray area that
surrounds the abject; the abject remains both heavily desired and deeply reviled.
Kristeva continues to describe the tangential feelings that accompany abjection:

[Abjection is] one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a
threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected
beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It
[abjection] lies there, quite close but it cannot be assimilated. It
beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not
let itself be seduced...desire turns aside; sickened, it
rejects...simultaneously...that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn
toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned (1; ellipses mine).

Abjection is an important element of Kristeva’s theory of identity formation. It is often
described within the context of mother-child relationships. Kristevan theory contends
that a child must abject itself from its mother, eschew her, put her aside, as an important
step within identity formation. This act of abjection never fully expels a mother’s heavy
influence in her child’s life. But the act of abjecting the mother allows the space
needed for the child to become its own individual.

My reading of Kristeva’s theory of abjection inverts this illuminating contingent of
the abject. It is my contention that the maternal characters examine in this chapter
abject their very own daughters. They eschew them as babies in order to prioritize
their own identity formation. Thus the daughter becomes that which has been
abjected, the abject. Still, black mother-daughter relationships do not easily fit into the
roles of abject and deject. Using the lexicon of Cheryl Wall, black women worry the
lines between these constructions and force new literary paradigms for analysis.
Operating within the context of abjection explicates a multifaceted relational system that
allows for the extremes experienced in the aforementioned complexities that formulate literary representations of black mother-daughter relationships. Kristevan theory allocates a safe space that allows for the mothers to be seen as individuals, but also relates the importance of the tangled, fluctuating emotions that accompany the emotional abjection of a daughter from a mother’s heart.

The word abject is used many different ways within Kristeva’s theory and through subsequent discussions and adaptations of it. Subsequently, I adopt Kristeva’s different practices of the word abject in my analysis of *Desirada* and *Ugly Ways*. Abject is used as both a verb and a noun. One is able to abject someone or something; to physically and emotionally distance itself from that which is horrific and unwanted. The abject is that which has been rejected. It is a “jettisoned object” that is “radically excluded” and proceeds to ceaselessly “challeng[e] its master” from “its place of banishment…where meaning collapses” (2). The abject is most often associated with something that is improper or unclean, but its most interesting characteristic is its innate ability to unsettle its master or deject in a manner extremely different from “the uncanny.” It fluctuates in its ability to attract and repel the deject.

Kristeva’s descriptions of abjection in relation to food and death prove the most illuminating in her intent for the theory. Kristeva believes food loathing to be the most elemental form of abjection. She describes abjection in the form of her visceral reaction to the filmy skin old milk develops: “I experience a gagging sensation…spasms in the stomach…[it] provokes tears and bile, increase[s] heartbeat, sight-clouding dizziness…nausea” (3). Still her reaction to this, which she denies so violently, reaches beyond the physical. There exist deep currents of emotional and psychological
abjection in her reactions. Her refusal to take the milk inside her being “separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. ‘I’ want none of that element, sign of their desire… ‘I’ do not assimilate it, ‘I’ expel it” (3). A rejection of the desires of the mother and father prove essential in the identity formation that is key to abjection:

I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself… “I” am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which “I” become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit [emphasis in the original]. (Kristeva 3)

Hence individual identity is formed through the process of abjection that includes a rejection of the parents; an expelling of those unwanted parts of the self within an experience acknowledges the border of death. The visceral nature of her reaction to the abject parallels the visceral response of the mothers who abject their daughters.

The presence of death is essential in the process of abjection: “…without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (3). The sense of marginality created by the human confrontation with sickness, bodily fluids and excrement only signify the border of death: “…such wastes drop so that I might live” (3). Kristeva highlights the necessity for one to confront death openly through a corpse for “there, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border” (3).

Kristeva insists that confrontation with death, ultimately through a corpse, is the most necessary element of abjection: “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life…It is something rejected from which one does not part” (4). I disagree. It is ultimately through the experience of parturition, not the corpse, that the border of death must be confronted. The corpse
cannot remain the most fundamental way to confront the border of death within abjection. This adaptation is necessary to expand the universalism present within Kristeva’s theory of abjection. It is clear she wishes for this universality to stand, for she ends the essay by portraying its dexterity within the works of writers from Dostoevsky to Proust. Abjection must be made relevant to the literary representation of all, most specifically, black women. And investigating how literary representations of black women complicate the theory of abjection serves to strengthen the analysis of both.

The process of abjection begins with pregnancy. It is a reaction to the foreign other within the body. A parasite has taken over. Symptoms of pregnancy include extreme fatigue, early lactation, bleeding gums, nosebleeds, vivid dreams and disturbing thoughts (WebMD). During pregnancy a woman’s body is no longer her own. Symptoms of pregnancy are meant to slow a woman down and prepare her for the coming difficulties associated with motherhood (WebMD). Individuality becomes moot, for the woman is now an incubator for a foreign life form.

Parturition is when these women experience their most violent reaction within the birthing process. It is here that these women occupy the border of death as they simultaneously bring life into the world. Parturition has the potential to be the most physically dangerous time of a woman’s life. One third of a pregnant woman’s blood is diverted to her uterus, which severely increases the probability of death from uterine hemorrhaging. The health dangers facing a pregnant woman are numerous; preeclampsia, or maternal high blood pressure, and maternal diabetes remain prominent even in these advanced times. And the period between the birth of her child
and the appearance of the afterbirth remains one of the most physically vulnerable times in a new mother’s life. Birth is not a beautiful, loving process for the women I examine in this chapter. It is a time for the expelling, the abjecting of this foreign object, one’s child. As Kristeva illuminates with the spitting of the milk, these women expel themselves, their daughter that is a part of them. They reject the milk of the familial and community’s maternal expectations. Yet through this process, they also recognize and solidify that which is unique: the Self, and choose that path over the patterns of self-sacrifice that plague womanhood. My exploration of these texts centers on analyzing how these women form their identity through the abjection of their daughters. These women both fulfill and problematize Kristeva’s theory in their struggle for identity within the simultaneous struggles of gender, race, class, and ultimately, maternal expectations.

This process of abjection is repeated in the Titane maternal line of Maryse Condé’s novel, Desirada. Desirada centers on Marie-Noëlle Titane’s journey to discover herself and her father’s identity by investigating her mother’s history. Marie-Noëlle is born and raised by family friend, Ranélise, in Guadeloupe until the age of ten. Ranélise takes in the suicidal Reynalda far into her pregnancy and accepts her daughter as her own once Reynalda abandons Marie-Noëlle for Paris. At the age of ten, Marie-Noëlle is sent to Paris to live with her mother, Reynalda, and her new family. The novel charts Marie-Noëlle’s own self-discovery in her attempts to determine her father’s identity and grow closer to her emotionally distant mother. She awkwardly attempts to find a place in Reynalda’s new family consisting of her husband, Ludovic, and son, Garvey; Marie-Noëlle fails, contracts tuberculosis and finds a loving home in a
sanitarium for young girls. Instead of returning to her mother’s emotionally vacuous home, Marie-Noëlle chooses to marry a musician, Stanley, and move to America. It is upon the death of Ranélise that Marie-Noëlle returns to Guadeloupe and confronts her grandmother, Nina Titane, to discover the truth of her origins. The narrative is centered on Marie-Noëlle’s youthful endeavors to define herself by delving into the mystery of her family. It is only far into adulthood that Marie-Noëlle recognizes that she must define herself on her terms and end her childish goal to replace her mother with disappointing surrogates.

Marie-Noëlle never discovers her father’s identity, and her investigation of her mother’s life sustains Reynalda Titane’s role as an ever-evolving mystery. Marie-Noëlle is only allowed to view glimpses of her mother’s past, usually from interviewing people who are not her mother. Reynalda Titane tells her story towards the beginning of the novel, but doubt arises to overshadow her truth as Marie-Noëlle continues to research Reynalda’s life. The most potent critique of Reynalda’s story comes from her own mother, Antoinine or Nina Titane.

Maternal abjection has haunted the Titane women throughout their maternal line. Each act of abjection has devastating consequences that affect the subsequent generation. These consequences are evident in the emotional chasm that exists in mother-daughter relationships within the maternal line. It is Marie-Noëlle who breaks the cycle, but only by choosing not to procreate. Nina creates the mold for maternal abjection with the birth of her daughter Reynalda, a child conceived in rape and incest. Reynalda was small, dark and ugly, much like the cousin, Gabin, who raped and impregnated Nina. After referring to her newborn daughter as a rat, Nina proclaims:
"You cannot give orders to your heart. What is the use of lying? I have never loved that child, the only one to ever come out of my belly" (Condé 172). It is here that abjection surpasses the simple emotional destruction Patricia Hill Collins describes. The emotional destruction of black daughters, harmful as it may be, remains a symptom of the encompassing love black mothers have for their female child. Within abjection, there is no love. There is only rejection of the emotional requirements of motherhood. Nina spits out the milk, vomits up the softer feelings that mothers supposedly incur with the birth of her daughter. Abjection contains no love, but neither does it possess hate: “I’ve never loved Reynalda, but I’ve never raised a hand to her either. Never given her a slap or the strap. I sent her to school…I gave her what I could to eat…her clothes were always clean and nicely ironed to go to mass on Sundays” (173). Hating would necessitate emotion, something that Nina is unable to give to her daughter. Reynalda is the abject, that which is expelled and exists as a reminder of what ripped out of Nina so that she may live.

Nina discovers herself after the birth of Reynalda. The bishop of Guadeloupe offers her a position as a housemaid in La Pointe. She experiences true love with members of the Coppini family. Nina develops a complicated love of and respect for the sickly lady of the household, Madame Arcania, “[f]or strange as it may seem…I can say she was the only person in the house who loved me…She loved me, whom nobody loved, not even my own child” (Condé 178). And she enters into a lovingly carnal relationship with Madame Arcania’s virile husband Gian Carlo: “On first sight. I became his slave like the women in the Great Houses a long time ago. People said I was his creature. They were right. If he’d ordered me to descend into hell for him I
would have certainly gone” (Condé 174). The complexities of these loves underscore the complicated nature of Nina’s relationship with Reynalda. Kristeva insists that “abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar” (5). Nina has love to offer, and often gives it away freely. Yet, she actively chooses not to do so with her very own child.

Nina occupies the role of deject within this particular process of abjection:

the one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places [herself], separates [herself], situates [herself], and therefore strays instead of getting her bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing” (Kristeva 8).

Nina remains this marginal character in her life and in the life of all who occupy the Coppini household. She is a mother who never truly engages in the role and later is revealed as a grandmother who never knew of her grandchild’s existence. As a housemaid she is never a member of the Coppini family, but variously occupies the role of mistress, mother [of the Coppini clan], caretaker, and nursemaid. She remains a stray, never laying claim to nor successfully occupying one role. The deject “never stops demarcating her universe whose fluid confines…constantly question her solidity and impel[s] her to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a stray” (Kristeva 8). The space Nina constantly creates lies within the aforementioned marginalities that are present in the Coppini household. She relentlessly looks after the needs of the man and woman of the house. She manages the household with more love and care than she has ever given her own. But even within this home space she has taken as her own, she recognizes the fragility of her role: “…can you love a servant? Who, ass up, scrubs and scour[s] the floors. Who does the shopping, the cooking, and the washing up” (Condé 174). Nina defines

18 In this quote I replace all male references (e.g. himself, his) with female references.
herself primarily as a maid, eschewing the role of mother. Nina places her child in the role of abject in order to solidify her individuality. But in her attempts to become an individual she becomes lost in the identity of the Coppini family. The happiest time in her life comes after the death of Madame Arcania: “I slept in Gian Carlo’s room on the second floor…Ah! It was as if love had another feel to it in that bed…I had been bewitched, and from slave and servant I had been turned in to the mistress” (Condé 180). She describes her happiness in terms that actively take her outside of herself, her individuality, her “Ninaness”: “[I was] free to take my pleasure. I was no longer Nina…I was a horse without bridle or halter galloping for sheer joy” (Condé 180).

As Nina’s abject, Reynalda serves as a reminder of what Nina has survived and what she has failed to become. Nina has extricated herself from the border of death that looms during the birthing process. She attempted to define herself as an individual, outside of the role of mother. She abjects her own daughter in order to fight against communal maternal expectations. But her abject continues to haunt her very being; Reynalda is a “burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate” (Kristeva 6). Reynalda’s ambiguity acts as a ceaseless memento of her own precarious marginality. Reynalda becomes Nina’s albatross, a constant reminder of how close Nina was to death. Reynalda remains incredibly powerful because she is Nina’s own creation. She is a creature Nina hosted within her body for nine months and continued to support throughout childhood and adolescence. Reynalda remains a living reminder of her rapist, her varied vulnerabilities as a woman and failed attempts to define herself within her own right.
Reynalda goes further in her monstrous relationship with Nina, becoming a constant reminder of what Nina is not. She actively participates in destroying what tiny part of the universe Nina has carved out as her own. Reynalda develops a primal hatred of her mother’s affair with Gian Carlo:

Evening after evening I could hear Gian Carlo climb into Maman’s bed and manhandle the mattress springs...I never heard Maman and that was more hideous still...this silence turned her into an inert object, maid for all things...I hated him. I hated Maman. I don’t know which one I hated more. I dreamed of killing them...They had to suffer, they were monsters.

Reynalda does not physically kill her mother, but she does participate in the killing of her spirit. Reynalda leaves the Coppini home pregnant, or “with a belly” and leaves the beginnings of the Coppini family’s destruction behind. Reynalda and Fiorella Coppini, the beautiful daughter of the Coppinis, begin to spread their truth about the Coppini household. It is Fiorella who begins the rumors of an inappropriate relationship between Gian Carlo and Nina. It is also Fiorella who alludes to Nina’s alleged participation in Gian Carlo’s alleged sexual corruption of Reynalda, at the supposed behest of Reynalda. Ambiguity permeates the state of abjection and the suppositions and denials of specific relations among these players subsist at every level: “…vague, shadowy rumors circulated about her [Nina]. Folk in La Pointe were frightened of her and considered her Gian Carlo’s creature” (Condé 144). The only sexual relationship that is acknowledged is the one that takes place between Gian Carlo and Nina. All other allegations remain simply that, allegations, which are shrouded in the silent rage of Reynalda Titane.

Reynalda Titane remains a fascinating character because she occupies both possible roles in maternal abjection. She is abjected by her mother Nina and likewise,
she makes the choice to abject her own daughter, Marie-Noëlle. Even though almost every chapter contains pieces of Reynalda’s story, past, present, and future, she remains the character most shrouded in mystery. Apart from nine pages in the first third of the novel, Reynalda’s story is always told through the filter of another character. Still, the largest and most surreptitious filter remains her daughter’s eyes and ears, through which the reader continuously receives others’ interpretations of what they have seen and heard of Reynalda. Reynalda remains an ambiguous character, typical of abjection whose own truth is often vigorously denied by the people in her life.

The silencing of Reynalda remains an important theme in this text. Marie-Noëlle complicates abjection because this novel is her story, not Reynalda’s. Granted, Reynalda silences herself. She never reveals the identity of Marie-Noëlle’s father. But her daughter and her mother, Nina, also actively silence Reynalda. Reynalda is silenced through Marie-Noëlle’s bias. She remains unable to see her mother within her context, to understand her humanity and reconcile herself with her mother’s efforts to mother her. She pointedly ignores one of the first candid sentences her mother reveals: “I’ve suffered more than anybody else in my life. I don’t know how many times I wished I were dead” (51). Marie-Noëlle remains guilty of an error so many daughters commit when telling their mothers’ story—emotional bias and a radical lack of context. Nina, too, is biased by emotion that is full of the context of abjection. Now occupying a cabin that lies in the margins of the island of Desirade, she proclaims Reynalda the liar she knows her to be. Maryse Condé acknowledges the complex difficulty Reynalda presents as a character: “...she had a very difficult and painful past...she is a character who should be pitied rather than condemned...[i]t’s difficult to defend her. She’s not a
very positive character” (McCormick 525). The persistence of Reynalda’s silence increases her ambiguity and contributes to her mystery.

Reynalda’s passionate hatred of her mother causes her failure to imbue care into her relationship with her own daughter, Marie-Noëlle, which at best can be described as strained. Just as her mother Nina, Reynalda occupies the marginal borders of death and life pregnancy highlights. The book begins with the discovery of Reynalda’s body in the water after a failed suicide attempt at drowning. She tried to drown herself, knowing she is with child. It appears that Reynalda chooses the path of abjection early on. She is unable to cope with possession of her body by someone other than herself. Because of this, she remains listless in her role as a potential mother. But it is necessary to note the possibility that this path was chosen for her by her own mother, Nina, so many years ago. It is Nina who created this model for motherhood and it is Reynalda who is unable to stop this maternal cycle that is vicious in its antipathy.

Reynalda abandons Marie-Noëlle soon after her birth, choosing to pursue a better life for herself in Paris. It would first appear that Reynalda is simply following the mold of Martine Caco who leaves her daughter with an othermother until she becomes more financially stable and sends for her beloved daughter when she is able. Here, Condé revises motherlove. Reynalda sends for her daughter to “fulfill her duties” as she proclaims in a professionally gracious letter. It is not until the final pages of the book that Condé reveals that Reynalda has sent for Marie-Noëlle only at the persistent prodding of her husband Ludovic. Reynalda’s abandonment of Marie-Noëlle in Guadeloupe is only the beginning of the long process of abjection in their relationship.
Abjection in their mother-daughter dynamic becomes particularly evident when juxtaposed with Marie-Noëlle’s loving relationship with her Guadeloupean caregiver, Ranélise. Ranélise embodies the self-sacrificing black mother typified in so many other characterizations of black mothers: “Marie-Noëlle was the only reason Ranélise’s heart throbbed” (Condé 10). Once Marie-Noëlle enters her life, she undergoes a transformation of untold proportions: “From one day to the next, her [Ranélise’s] reckless behavior changed” (10). She is no longer free with her sexual love, dropping all but one of many lovers who occupied her bed. She aims to set an example for her adopted daughter, spending her time in the church saying rosary rather than taking in lovers. The first ten years of Marie-Noëlle’s life are spent wrapped in the cocoon of Ranélise’s love:

Marie-Noëlle’s childhood was an enchantment…Never a slap, never a blow, never the mark of a belt on her buttocks…Not even a word spoken louder than the next. Rather cascades of affection, with pet names and showers of kisses on the nape of her neck. (Condé 10-11)

It is the denial of this warm reality in the tropical heat of Guadeloupe that makes her journey to Reynalda’s cold world even more wrenching.

Reynalda leaves for Paris soon after Marie-Noëlle’s birth. This choice is a physical continuation of the abjection that began in her earlier suicide attempt. The emotional abjection cements itself when Marie-Noëlle arrives in Paris. An uncomfortably distant Reynalda greets her: “Her face betrayed nothing, as if she were wearing a mask…She looked at Marie-Noëlle furtively, almost fearfully, forced a smile then quickly turned her eyes away without leaning over to kiss her” (25). Marie-Noëlle’s entrance into the role of abject in her mother’s life remains a tangible result of her removal from the loving care of her othermother, Ranélise. She faces the harsh
reality that she can never occupy the role of beloved lost daughter and family member: “Marie-Noëlle understood immediately that her presence inconvenienced her [Reynalda] more than anything else” (30). Reynalda has created a family in Paris composed of her husband, Ludovic and young son, Garvey. Marie-Noëlle has been replaced in her mother’s affections, for Reynalda treats her husband and son with similar indifference. And it is this indifference in their relationship of abjection that Marie-Noëlle finds most cruel: “Reynalda was not like one of those monsters whose revolting crimes you read about in the tabloids. She was worse…Neither brutal nor quick tempered, she was generous with pocket money and did not skimp on clothes and school supplies” (30).

Reynalda remains individualistic, even within the midst of family life. She is emotionally isolated from Ludovic and fails to attempt a relationship with her other child, Garvey: “As a woman [she] did not concern herself with things that are a woman’s lot around the house” (29). Reynalda contrasts herself against Nina, finding no bliss in the domesticity her mother so cherished. She actively perpetuates the role of deject established by her mother, Nina, by carving out a place of her own where she is separated in her dis-ease with others. She remains at the margins, on her own in all she does, even in her creation of space: “In a cubbyhole she used as an office she would type for hours on her typewriter…On other days…she drew her bedroom door over her like a tombstone” (Condé 30). Even when Reynalda is physically amongst her family, she remains aloof: “…[she would] sit at the dinner table without touching her plate and stare in sulky silence at the television…absorbed in an obsession she shared with nobody. She had no conversation…In a word she did not seem to be

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19 I acknowledge that Reynalda’s relationship with Ludovic and Garvey is just as complex, but I choose to focus my analysis on the motherline of Nina, Reynalda and Marie-Noëlle.
interested in anything” (30). Her space as a deject goes beyond her personal office or her bedroom; it has expanded beyond the realm of the physical. It occupies a space in her own mind which no one else can enter and sustains her separation from everyone else.

While it is Marie-Noëlle who embodies the role of abject in Reynalda’s life, it is Marie-Noëlle who remains haunted by Reynalda. Though Reynalda abjects her daughter, Marie-Noëlle fails as an abject because she relates to her mother as an abject more than the deject she makes herself to be. Marie-Noëlle complicates the inversion of abjection delineated earlier. It is Marie-Noëlle who is abjected, but this mother-daughter relationship’s reality is that it is Reynalda who actually embodies the role of abject. Condé illustrates how black women worry the lines of psychoanalytic theory. The mystery of Reynalda haunts Marie-Noëlle throughout the novel. It is Reynalda’s lack of history that forces Marie-Noëlle into a marginalized existence. This reality begins with her tenth birthday as Reynalda sends word of Marie-Noëlle’s new role in her life, outside of the marvelous cocoon of Ranélise’s love. Marie-Noëlle develops a dangerous fever that night that eventually leads to convulsions and a deep coma. She survives, but with Reynalda’s pronounced re-entrance into her life, she is transformed mentally and physically: “…the chubby mysterious little girl…was gone. In her place was a great gawk of a girl, nothing but skin and bone with a glazed look…she seemed to be looking through [people] to pursue some personal obsession” (Condé 17).

Reynalda becomes that personal obsession, one she is unable to explore until much later in life. After living with Reynalda and her family, Marie-Noëlle develops tuberculosis and lives in a sanitarium in Vance for two years. She then marries a
musician who does not love her and follows him to America. She continues a search for her own identity in America through various affairs, surrogate mother figures, and occupations.

The abjective relationship between the black mother and daughter is one fraught with intertwining motives and the worrying of the lines between roles with the process of abjection. Reynalda’s story, or lack thereof, haunts her daughter for she believes she is unable to discover her true self without paternal identity. Reynalda’s lack of motherly love leads her to this search and Marie-Noëlle’s realization of the complexity of their relationship reveals that this is a journey she is destined to make alone. This realization occurs when Marie-Noëlle asks to leave Paris to live in Africa with her best friend, Awa and her mother, Natasha. Reynalda finally acknowledges Marie-Noëlle by looking at her:

Straight in the eyes. And Marie-Noëlle knew what this look meant. It meant possession. She understood that Reynalda who had ejected her, abandoned her for ten years, for reasons known to her alone, that had little to do with love, no longer had any intention of letting her go. She herself, whatever she did, whatever others did, would never be free of her. She would spend her life imagining the unimaginable tenderness when they had been joined together in the same flesh, and would spend her life regretting it and trying to relive it. But it would be a lost cause. She would never achieve her end and would be destined to wander alone in her desert [emphasis added]. (Condé 45)

Her predictions prove true. Reynalda’s failure to impart tender emotion haunts Marie-Noëlle throughout her life. This is only one way in which Reynalda haunts her daughter as abject. The abject both draws and repels its deject. Marie-Noëlle cannot stop herself from pushing Reynalda to share her story and returning to the islands of Guadeloupe to discover her mother’s truth.
Likewise, Reynalda also repels Marie-Noëlle. She runs away to America and begins to develop a semblance of a life there. It is never a truly full life because the specter of Reynalda is ever-present. Marie-Noëlle occupies the marginal borders between life and death in a loveless marriage and a series of failed affairs and maternal figures. She physically runs from Reynalda, but arrives in a profession similar to that of her mother, that of academic. And like Reynalda, Marie-Noëlle expands the separate space the deject creates for herself. Marie-Noëlle’s place is mentally and physically manifested in her quest to discover her true identity through the lives of her mother and unknown father. Maryse Condé’s novel focuses on the mystery and silences of Reynalda; in contrast, the mother in Tina McElroy Ansa’s novel allows for the mother’s active participation in her characterization.

Esther “Mudear” Lovejoy remains a character who will never be silenced. Even in death she is determined that her voice will be heard. Tina McElroy Ansa’s *Ugly Ways* centers on three daughters processing the life and death of their mother, Mudear. Betty, Emily and Annie Ruth comprise the Lovejoy sisters, and they find it necessary to reconcile their mother’s sometimes corrosive influence upon their psyches. The narrative allows the reader to reminisce on the life of Esther Lovejoy and pays little attention to the lines of life and death. Everyone participates in the recreation of Mudear’s life—her daughters, her husband, Ernest Lovejoy, and even Mudear herself who vigorously contributes from beyond the grave. Mudear reacts to their words and actions throughout the novel, she is not silenced, and her voice gives her the necessary context few mothers are allowed in literary explorations of maternal characters. The
novel focuses on the strength of sisterhood and the power of reconciliation within problematic mother-daughter relationships.

Mudear's place within abjection is complex because she, like so many other black mothers, aggressively complicates Kristeva's theory. She makes a distinct choice to abject all social roles expected of women. She actively refuses the desires of her family and her community at large, eschewing the role of wife, friend, community member, and most importantly, mother. She individuates herself as Mudear, a woman confident and self-aware who cares very little what others, especially her family, think of her. Her grand act of individuation does not occur during a literal parturition, like the experiences of Nina and Reynalda. Nor is it spurred by the suffocating stages of pregnancy. Mudear's individuation occurs during a metaphorical rebirth of her own self, when she makes the final decision to eschew society's maternal restrictions. Mudear's abjection comes about as a result of her oppressive marriage to Ernest "Poppa" Lovejoy. He despises her individuality; he is ill at ease with her open displays of sexuality and inquisitiveness as a newlywed. He demonstrates his dis-ease by oppressing her in their relationship; he routinely kicks her and the children out of the house for days on end. His domineering nature arrives to the point where "he...no longer order[ed] her and her life around with sharp rough words, he was making her do what he wanted with just a gesture" (Ansa 128). He only has to glance at his hands and Esther runs for the manicure kit. Ernest taps an empty space on his plate where the mashed potatoes used to be and Esther would run to grab the pot and replenish his food. He "feels intimidated by her capabilities, and his abuse is clearly a means to control her and to relieve his feelings of inadequacy" (Green 47). But even in her
subservience, Mudear remains subversive; she continuously refers to him as “Mr. Bastard” and burns his favorite okra every day without fail. Mudear simply allows her anger to grow and bides her time until her strength is needed for her family to continue.

The change comes about as a result of Ernest’s pride. He overextends himself financially, loaning two hundred and fifty dollars to unreliable relatives. Mudear must step in to provide the money necessary to supply the proper medical care to their youngest daughter, thereby highlighting Ernest’s inability to care properly for his family: “it was a mistake he could never forgive himself for” (Ansa 172). It is in this moment that a symbolic parturition occurs. She gives birth to herself as the woman she wants to be, freeing herself from the role of wife and mother. From this moment on, life in the Lovejoy household changes drastically. Ernest returns home to find that none of the usual household chores have been completed, dinner is not cooked, and the children have not been fed. When Ernest comments on her lapsed household duties, Mudear announces: “I done et [ate], and when I done et, my whole family done et” (Ansa 206). It is with this proclamation that Betty realizes that “Mudear [had] abandon[ed] all of them in favor of her own wishes…She just, bit by bit, let go of what she didn’t feel like doing. And the girls picked it up” (Ansa 207). Ernest and Esther’s marriage becomes defined by what Annie Ruth refers to as an “internecine bloodletting” (Ansa 228).

Mudear’s abjection has a severe effect upon all three of her daughters. Each daughter must cope with the emotional abandonment of her mother. Betty steps into the now vacant role of motherly caretaker, feeding her younger sisters, marveling at the decision her mother has made to remove herself from all familial and social obligations.
It is also Betty who feels the most responsibility to sustain some sort of normality for her sisters; it is her job to keep the memory of what Mudear used to be alive. She relives the tales of motherly love that the other girls no longer remember: “Many of her [Annie Ruth’s] childhood memories were really born and nurtured in Betty’s stories to the girls rather than in actual experience” (Ansa 135). Additionally, Betty becomes Mudear’s face to the outside world, paying bills, organizing household duties all at the age of twelve. Most embarrassing for Betty is her new role as the conduit to Mudear’s now abandoned friends: “[she hated] the telephone calls and visits—curious, hurt, confused, frantic, insistent, indignant—from Mudear’s former friends inquiring about her sudden disappearance” (Ansa 211). The uncertainty of her home situation makes the preteen Betty a nervous wreck as she spends her schooldays worrying about dinner and the need to take care of pressing bills. Her schoolwork as well as her psyche suffers: “[s]he loved reading and studying, but now she knew she had other things to learn,” and she fails to ever catch up with her schoolmates (Ansa 209).

The immediate effects of Mudear’s change are most pronounced in Betty’s life because she is the oldest. Still, the other two girls, Emily and Annie Ruth, respectively are also severely affected by the change in their family dynamic: “[t]he girls had to shift the focus, the line in which they were growing, when Mudear changed…They just knew that this change left things so different, so strange that it was frightening” (Ansa 212). The youngest Lovejoy daughters increase their participation in household chores, aiding their sister in her new role. They sustained their status as good students and began to look toward Betty in her new role as preteen caretaker. The immediate effects upon Annie Ruth are not very clear, because she was so young when the change occurred.
But the middle sister remains a different story: “Emily, especially, was unhinged by the sudden and unexplained shift,” and her emotional fragility follows her into adulthood (211).

Such early emotional trauma continues its destruction throughout their adult lives. The sisters are survivors in the quietly powerful familial war that accompanied Mudear’s change:

At night, the three of them would sit on the floor between their beds...They would huddle there on the floor like survivors of a village raid who suddenly found they had to deal with a new unknown leader. Knowing in their little stomachs that things were different, strange, altered, never ever to return to their original state. Like raid survivors surveying the burning rubble that was once their homes, their meeting places, their gardens, and knowing that even rebuilt, they would not ever be the same. Not familiar, not safe, not comfortable, not ever again. (211)

The adult sisters remain survivors under the peculiar rule of Mudear in the Lovejoy household. Each daughter appears successful; Betty is a prosperous hairdresser with two popular shops in the family’s hometown of Mulberry, Georgia. Emily is a content bureaucrat in Atlanta while Annie Ruth remains a popular news anchor in Los Angeles. The sisters continue to demonstrate the closeness they shared as children, participating in conference calls at least twice a week, speaking to each other every day as they provide the emotional and psychological support needed for their daily lives. The effects of their home life is seen in their relationships, or lack thereof, with those who are not in their immediate family. The women have no noted friendships with women outside of their tight sisterhood. And their relationships with men prove disastrous. Each woman was indoctrinated with Mudear’s sincere belief that “A man don’t give a damn about you” (Ansa 42). And with those words, the women share one failed marriage and relationship after another. It is Emily who notes that neither sister
possesses the simple joy for life that attracts and keeps good men, a trait she notices in a gay co-worker. Betty and Annie Ruth ridicule her fairytale beliefs, revealing the entrenched mistrust of men they all possess: “…it’s close to suicide to strike up a conversation with some strange man on the street…[black men] don’t want a pleasant exchange, they just want to say something mean and degrading to a black woman” (Ansa 227).

This dearth of solid relationships in their lives, both platonic and sexual, continues its psychic and emotional effect upon the three women. Betty lives alone and sustains her role as the caretaker of her beauty shop and her aging parents. She appears to concern herself with the emotional and psychological health of her sisters, nursing Emily through early morning breakdowns over the phone, while ignoring her own emotional needs. Emily attempts to coalesce some semblance of life amongst her myriad psychological problems. She is a diagnosed obsessive compulsive living with the guilt of two failed marriages and one emotionally ravaging abortion. Her weekly therapy sessions and visits to the beauty parlor remain the highlight of her life. Annie Ruth has had at least one nervous breakdown and is diligently working on her next as she has begun hallucinatory sightings of cats everywhere she goes. She arrives for Mudear’s funeral pregnant with a child whose father’s identity includes a myriad of possibilities. These women occupy the margins of a full life. They are emotional and psychological corpses within the context of abjection. Their psyches have expelled all that Mudear believes to be wasteful and unnecessary.

Again we see black women complicating Kristeva’s theory of abjection. The mother and daughters adapt the roles of deject and abject to their reality. It is Mudear
who has abjected her daughters during her change. Yet, Mudear haunts the daughters as the abject. She has expelled them as they incur a lifelong attempt to expel her from their lives. Mudear haunts them; she is far from haunted by their presence. In fact, after the change from submissive wife and mother into her own individual, she makes it clear that the girls are negligible in her affairs. The girls believe that Mudear will eviscerate them after she catches them denigrating her name, in her house, near her precious garden. When she ignores their cruelty and comments upon the health of her collard greens, Betty realizes: “I don’t think Mudear care about whether we talk about her or not” (Ansa 188).

Mudear’s controlling and emotionally distant presence in the girls’ lives begins soon after the change. She becomes her daughters’ abject, both drawing and repelling them in her horror even as they try to expel her blistering influence from their lives. Mudear actively indoctrinated her young daughters into her way of doing things: “[s]ince Mudear seemed to love controlling things, she did enjoy overseeing the duties, the responsibilities, the running of the household, even if she had no intention of actually participating in the work” (Ansa 210). Indoctrination moved beyond the realm of the house. Mudear kept her foundation of power over her daughters consolidated by effectively removing the influence of other adults in her daughters’ lives. Dinner became a rapid fire session of questions and information exchange centering on the community and the people from which Mudear had stepped away:

…Mudear [would go] after anyone outside who tried to show an active, positive interest in one of the girls. If a teacher…tried to encourage their love of literature…Mudear talked about them so badly, going into their family history and failed romances and business endeavors that the girls eventually shied away from the teachers just to shield them from Mudear. (Ansa 165)
Mudear proved to be a fount of information because it was her daughters that fed it to her. They became her community spies, relaying gossip and current events: “[t]hey would come home offering up their news, perceptions, observations like royal honey for the queen bee. It was what was expected of them” (57). Because of this, they became horrified with these dinner sessions, barely eating during her criticisms as they “realized too late that they had probably provided some of the ammunition for Mudear’s attacks. Then they…felt stupid and on edge as if they had pointed out the best place to chop off their own legs” (165). Even their father’s influence proved a dangerous threat to Mudear’s power. She worked to separate them from Ernest, and they become her girls. It is upon Mudear’s death that Ernest realizes “[t]hat there was so little he could claim in his own children” (53).

Mudear’s reign of control as their abject continues into adulthood. As their mother she proves both compelling and exasperatingly off-putting. They are beholden to her spell as they pay all of her credit card bills from the home shopping network, buy her expensive gifts, and hire a worker to perform the daily cooking and cleaning. Even as they scramble to cater to her every want and need, she hardly pays them any mind. This is evidenced by her marked disinterest in their adult lives: “she either drifted off to her own thoughts while they talked or she cut them off dead” (203). She would become easily distracted by something in her garden and hang up in the middle of a telephone conversation. Though they despise her, she occupies every waking minute of their time. All of their sisterly conference calls center on her thoughts and actions, past and present. They are haunted by Mudear’s sayings and opinions, most especially by her list of declarations/rules involving Lovejoy women, “[from] Lovejoy
women keep dirty noses [to] Lovejoy women don’t wear no cheap clothes” (Ansa 222). It is because of this reign of terror that the daughters ultimately decide to make a vow to never become a mother, and certainly not a Mudear, the term of endearment used for all the mothers in their family: “Let’s just never have any children...Then we know we won’t be like Mudear” (142).

Though it is the daughters who are haunted by Mudear as the abject, Mudear also takes on characteristics of the deject in that she develops a space that she situates and separates herself from the encroaching world, her garden. Mudear’s garden is a magnanimous part of her characterization. Green believes her garden to be a place where she practices her displaced nature for nurturing, qualities she is unable to expend upon her own offspring, for it represents “true freedom for Mudear and allows her daughters to see her as a mother” (Green 50). Most importantly, the garden acts as a physical and psychological separation of Mudear and her world from the outside community. It is a physical barrier and mental reminder that the girls must cross each day to enter the outside world. Betty understands this and notes: “Even when she [Mudear] let us visit around here or go to a basement party, we were still set off...they could see from our house, we were strange and different” (Ansa 217). Mudear as deject ensured that her family would forever exist within the margins of Mulberry’s community, set apart and never truly embraced by the outside world.

Eschewing the societal role of motherhood is deliberate for Mudear. It is the most important relationship examined in the novel because the novel is told from the point of view of her daughters. She can be characterized as a cruel, emotionally distant mother who rejects all softer emotions usually associated with the self-sacrificing

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20 The novel includes a long list of Mudear’s sayings including Lovejoy women. See pp. 221-222.
black mother: “[they] never did come crying to me with some silly little stuff they knew I didn’t have no interest in. I could never stand a whole lot a’ childish crying and whining” (106). The daughters characterized Mudear’s mothering as advice without the tit, “…just the basic, the real deal, the bottom line without the hand-holding, without the sympathy…She just gave you what you needed, you know, that little piece of wisdom without any of the flavoring to make it taste better” (Ansa 235). The daughters lament that lack of tit, that seasoning that they never got; instead had always had to subsist on only what they could offer each other. It is near the end of the novel, days after Mudear’s death that they begin to feel comfortable enough to debate if she ever truly loved them. Mudear would always qualify her declarations of love: “I love you, daughter, but I hate your ways. You got ugly ways sometimes” (251). It is the careful nurturing that Mudear so freely gave to her garden, that her daughters thirsted for in their daily lives as children and later, as adults.

Still, Mudear must be put into her own context. She embodies the emotional destruction that so many black mothers have visited upon their daughters. But she raises strong, capable women who are economically independent. Granted, her daughters are nowhere near whole, emotionally or psychologically. But Mudear actively chose to privilege the physical and economic survival of her daughters:

I never was one for lying…so I’d tell them right out what their best attributes were and what failings they didn’t even need to waste their time on trying to improve. I didn’t coddle’em and cuddle’em to death the way some mothers do. I pushed’em out there to find out what they was best in. That’s how you learn things by getting on out there and living. They found their strengths by the best way anybody could: by living them. (Ansa 37)
And she succeeded in her primary goals. She buttressed them with the walls of her garden and isolated them from the ills of the community. She also provided a wonderful example of both the privileges and cost of the freedom she embodied: “I tried to show them how freeing it is to discover that [no one cares] and really live your life by that…know it ain’t got nothing to do with you…And when it don’t hurt no more, then you free” (Ansa 107). Mudear occupies a freedom Ernest admits that “…[he] gonna have to die to be that free myself” (Ansa 52). In fact, Mudear does not recognize their broken nature; she did not set out for their emotional destruction. Mudear believed she was teaching them to be free: “[I]…[t]aught them how to carry themselves. How to keep that part of themselves that was just for themselves to themselves so nobody could take it and walk on it. Tried my best to make them free. As free as I could teach them to be and still be free myself” (Ansa 34). Mudear remains an example of successful mothering; she has ensured the ultimate goal of black mothers, that their daughters become more successful than they: “providing a better chance for their children was a dominant theme among black women” (Collins 125).

Elizabeth Badinter argues in her work, *The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct* (1980), that current societal expectations of mother love remain a fairly modern invention. Before 1760 most European mothers were indifferent to the mental, psychological, and most interestingly, physical well-being of their children. Privileged children were sent off to rural wet nurses until they were of a suitable age while the children of the underclass filled the orphanages and the street corners as peddlers. It is Badinter’s contention that the West has mistakenly substituted the concept of motherly love for the maternal instinct. In her investigation of the history of
European motherhood, specifically that of France, Badinter illuminates that “[m]aternal love is a human feeling. And, like any feeling, it is uncertain, fragile, and imperfect. Contrary to many assumptions, it is not a deeply rooted given in women’s natures” (xxiii). This is a decidedly Western ideal that clashes directly with the African ideal of the child as the center of the mothers’ and the ancestors’ universe. Further exploration of these abjective mothers must question if they are unknowingly reverting to an outdated European practice. Are these mothers an incidental result of the European influence upon the West African ideal acquired through the horrors of slavery? The next chapter coalesces many of this chapter’s themes, particularly the sometimes physically and mentally harsh nature of black motherhood, in its presentation of an alternative epistemology and ontology rooted in the African.
CHAPTER THREE

THE TRANSCENDENT BLACK MATERNAL: THE POWER OF FEMALE INHERITANCE

The idea of resistance continues with an exploration of the transcendent Black Maternal. It posits a struggle centered on a return to the African that offers a subversive alternative epistemology to the narrow confines of Western ideals. The inspiration for the transcendent Black Maternal stems from the ideas Audre Lorde conveys in her foundational collection of interviews and essays entitled *Sister Outsider* (1984). While that work does not speak directly of the Black Maternal, that concept can be expanded from Lorde’s amorphous idea of what she terms the “Black Mother.” In fact, the ideal of the “Black Mother” threads itself within several of Lorde’s works. Lorde first attempts to define the black mother in her essay “Poetry is not a Luxury”: “The Black mother [is] within each of us—the poet—that whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom” (Lorde 38). Lorde defines the black mother in direct contrast to the rationality of the white father, whose ultimate ideal is “I think, therefore I am.” Lorde continues to explore this idea in an interview with Adrienne Rich that is also included in *Sister Outsider*. Rich presses Lorde to explore this concept further in the interview. Lorde discloses:

When I talk about the Black mother in each of us, the poet, I don’t mean the Black mother in each of us who are called poets…the Black mother who is the poet exists in every one of us…I personally believe that the
Black mother exists more in women; yet she is the name for a humanity that men are not without...Unless we learn the lessons of the Black mother in each of us, whether we are Black or not ... But I'm not saying that women don't think or analyze. Or that white does not feel. I'm saying that we must never close our eyes to the terror, to the chaos which is Black which is creative which is female which is dark which is rejected which is messy which is ... sinister, smelly, erotic, confused, upsetting. (100-101)

The quotation includes almost all of Lorde’s mentions of the Black Mother. They make clear the scattered nature of her thought processes on this subject, her elusive attempts to clarify. The dis-ease Lorde associates with the Black Mother parallels the sometimes dark ways the transcendent Black Maternal manifests itself in the novels explored in this chapter. The main characters of Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* (1998) and Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana* (1994), Lizzie and Ella, respectively, experience pain, confusion, physical and psychological scarring as a result of their contact with the transcendent Black Maternal. Past interpretations of the authors’ works have only focused on these negative aspects of these communings with the spirits. Lisa A. Long misreads the actions of Lizzie’s ancestors, Grace and Ayo, characterizing them as “postcolonial subjects” who are “situated within traditional rape scripts” (6). Long insists that “Ayo and Grace become historical panderers, procuring their ancestors’ bodies and modes for the voracious appetite of the racist historical forces that consume their own lives” (6). I contextualize these women to portray these interactions as far from pejorative in nature. The transcendent Black Maternal re-imagines these exchanges and allows for the complex consequences that accompany communications with the dead.

The transcendent Black Maternal is a communication process that occurs between a young female novice and at least two foremothers endowed with
supernatural powers. The communication can occur directly or through a conduit, which is often an inanimate object. The process exposes the novice to an as-yet unacknowledged epistemology and ontology.\textsuperscript{21} These ancestors share more than their knowledge of the past and the key to a higher understanding of the self. They literally share themselves. A recurring goal of the communication process is the entrance into the communal “I.” The female novice’s self-discovery and self-acceptance centers itself on the joining of that self with the spiritual personage of her ancestors. A trinity is formed, where the women become distinctive, yet the same. They become contained within the body and psyche of the novice. This process, though at times difficult, always demonstrates its fruitfulness in the achievement of the final goals of the ancestors. These outcomes are far different from Long’s assessment of the female ancestors as “anguished, angry, and demanding ancestors—[who] threaten to obliterate modern protagonists” (3). The transcendent Black Maternal does not ignore the trauma, blood and pain that accompanies communing with the past, but it also gladly accepts the rewarding process of self-discovery and acceptance. Most interesting is the reality that this communication process operates wholly outside the realm of the rational.

Rationality is not the only approach to knowledge.\textsuperscript{22} There are other ways of knowing, other powers to be gained that occur outside the province of the rational world. There exists a marked linguistic lack, for the opposite of the rational is the irrational. There is a distinct inability for that word [irrational] to begin to encompass the complexity

\textsuperscript{21} These epistemologies are unacknowledged by the patriarchal hegemony of which Lorde speaks. There is often acceptance and knowledge of these different epistemologies and ontologies in marginalized communities and cultures.

\textsuperscript{22} Audre Lorde explores the pitfalls of relying on the rational in \textit{Sister Outsider}. See pp. 100.
of alternatives to rationality without entering the realm of the insane and the delusional. The female ancestors use the communication process of the transcendent Black Maternal to expose their novices to an epistemology that encompasses that which is not rational. This process is subversive, for it attempts to lessen the imbalances put into place by the Western patriarchal hegemony, most specifically, the institutions of racial and gender domination.

Audre Lorde insists that “we cannot fight old power in old power terms only. The only way we can do it is by creating another whole structure that touches every aspect of our existence, at the same time as we are resisting” (101). The alternate epistemology encompassed within the communication processes of the transcendent Black Maternal provides the tools with which to fight the old power paradigms. This epistemology, coupled with the alternate ontology of the trinity-like nature of the communal “I,” fulfill Lorde’s prescription of a grand power structure of resistance. What are the conduits for the transcendent Black Maternal? Are there limits to how much the novice gives of her self to the creation of the communal “I”? How important a factor is place? Finally, what are the ultimate goals in initiating the transcendent Black Maternal and achieving the communal “I”? This exploration of the transcendent Black Maternal will center on three texts, Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata*, Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*, and Simone Schwarz-Bart’s *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* (1972).

The central character in each novel inherits the experience of the transcendent Black Maternal. This communication process, coupled with the subsequent entrance into the alternate ontology of the communal “I,” are the inheritance of these chosen black women. Their inheritance is decidedly different from traditional, patriarchal
notions of inheritance. Patrimony is defined as an inheritance from one’s father. So where does this leave the inheritance bequeathed by those ancestors who are not male? There is no feminized equivalent of patrimony. Its literal opposite, matrimony, denotes the state of being married. Thus there is a linguistic deficit, as there is no existing word or phrase within the language to encompass the notion of female inheritance. But the lack of a proper term certainly does not preclude its existence as a concept. The transcendent Black Maternal allows for an inheritance that is specifically black and female. The process creates a space for a racially engendered inheritance that supplements the lack found in the patriarchy of language. The female ancestors move beyond the act of leaving material objects to their descendants. They bequeath their knowledge, their power, and their entire selves as they commune with their chosen descendant.

Each female character goes through some type of change or metamorphosis in her respective novel. The novels highlight the main characters’ rite of passage into self-creation through the mutuality of the communal “I.” The term rite of passage is used because their experiences include specific trials that aid in guiding them as they each become one with their female ancestors. Each woman ends the novel with a clear notion of who she is, but it is only after experiencing significant physical and psychological trauma bathed in blood, self-doubt, and pain. Lizzie, the central character in Stigmata, begins to experience her first communication at the age of fourteen, just as she is on the cusp of womanhood.

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23 Mae G. Henderson originally presented the idea of a linguistic lack surrounding patrimony in a lecture in her Fall 2005 seminar titled “Black Feminist Theory.”
*Stigmata* centers on twenty-two years in the life of main character Elizabeth “Lizzie” DuBose. The book’s structure is split into two distinct, yet interwoven storylines. The first storyline begins in June 1994 and charts Lizzie’s journey from the mental institution back into the life and the family she left behind. The second storyline begins in April 1974 and chronicles Lizzie’s communications with her long-dead grandmother Grace and great-great-grandmother Bessie “Ayo” Ward. Grace’s parents, John and Sarah DuBose, eventually commit Lizzie to a mental institution for fourteen years, as a result of the significant mental and physical changes she undergoes from those communications. These communications often manifest as something akin to possession. The storylines alternate throughout the novel, revealing the nuances of Lizzie’s experiences with the transcendent Black Maternal and her entrance into the communal “I” with Grace and Ayo.

Stefanie Sievers highlights the subversive structure of the novel as a critique of hegemonic culture with the dichotomies upon which it chooses to focus: “linearity versus circularity, insanity versus normalcy, the need to turn toward the past versus the desire to leave it behind” (134). The novel continuously contradicts hegemonic ontologies and epistemologies. This tendency is best seen in the exploration of Lizzie’s entrance into the communal “I.” Lizzie discovers herself even as she discovers the selves of her grandmother Grace and great-great-grandmother Ayo. This occurs through the communication process of the transcendent Black Maternal. Communication with her foremothers begins through the conduits of inanimate objects and eventually manifests itself specifically to Lizzie as a psychic menarche and subsequent menstruation.

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24 Sievers mentions this phenomenon but fails to fully expound on its overall significance. See pp. 136.
Lizzie’s ancestors, great-great-grandmother Bessie “Ayo” Ward and grandmother Grace Lancaster, communicate with her using a variety of methods. They begin her initiation into the process of the transcendent Black Maternal through inanimate objects, when she receives her grandmother Grace’s trunk soon after her beloved great-aunt’s funeral. The trunk contains an object from each of Lizzie’s foremothers. There is a quilt from Grace that focuses on the life of Ayo, and Lizzie’s great-grandmother Joy’s diary, which acts as a transcription of Ayo’s memories of Africa and her journey to America. Each woman bequeaths an object that is centered on the life of Ayo. She is an ancestor who is unable to write, but this inability does not prevent her from initiating the rite of passage she requires her chosen descendants to experience. She makes her presence known through the adulthood rites Lizzie must undergo. It is necessary to note the absence of Lizzie’s mother Sarah within the line of participatory history. She has no connection with this trunk. She is unaware of the importance of Ayo within the maternal line, for she was lost the day her mother, Grace, made the difficult decision to abandon her family. Sarah grew up without a mother, with little direct contact with the powerful ancestral force of Ayo. The recovery of Sarah’s place within the matriarchal line is, ultimately, the main focus of this novel.

The ancestors are adamant in reclaiming Sarah, and because of this insistence, they are ruthless in the revelation of their power to Lizzie. Lizzie is the key to bringing her mother, Sarah, into the matriarchal fold. This is why Grace ensures her trunk is left to her granddaughter, Lizzie: “[Grace’s] letter says quite clearly that Mama wanted it to go to a granddaughter. I guess Eva thought Lizzie should be the granddaughter.

25 The matriarchal line is as follows: Ayo [Bessie] begat Joy, who begat Grace, who begat Sarah who begat Lizzie.
and that now was the time” (Perry 22). Grace is purposeful in her insistence that Sarah be bypassed, for her inheritance, though delayed, proves to be quite fruitful. Lizzie’s father notices this slight and comments: “That trunk should be your property, shouldn’t it, Sarah?” (Perry 22). But Sarah has yet to be properly prepared for her inheritance. She is closed to any ideas that suggest the depth of history and character that lies within the trunk’s contents: “What kind of quilt is that anyway? Just some pictures stuck to a background. No rhyme or reason. She [Grace] wrote about it like it was supposed to mean something” (22-3). Grace’s abandonment of Sarah at such a young age has left her emotionally and psychologically barren for any of the fantastical occurrences that lie ahead in the journey to self-definition. This is why she denies herself access to the trunk even as Lizzie offers a peek at the power within: “Why don’t you take it, Mother?...It’s really yours, don’t you think?” (23) Again, Sarah denies herself entrée into the world of her foremothers, denies the possibility of all that they can offer her. “No, it’s not mine,” she declares as she returns the quilt and papers to the trunk (Perry 23). She goes even further in her denial of the possibilities of matriarchal power in her life by insisting: “Besides, ...My mother’s been gone for a long time. What good is some old quilt to me?” (24). Clearly, Sarah is not ignorant of the fact that the trunk and its contents are special. Lizzie herself notices the specific tenor her voice holds as she makes these declarations of certainty: “Something lingers on the other side of her words. Sadness, maybe. Something that tugs at my heart and won’t let go” (24). Self-denial permeates Sarah’s actions. Lizzie notices that her mother “smiles at me, but there is no light in her eyes.... she doesn’t seem to want [the trunk]...Despite her obvious curiosity” (23). Sarah exerts iron-willed control over any attempts to
acknowledge and accept the pain her mother’s abandonment has caused. And it is her forced ignorance that causes Grace and Ayo to assert their power within Lizzie’s life.

Lizzie proves the ideal subject for communication with her female ancestors. She is young, open-minded, and even begins to look like Grace as she matures. When her mother, Sarah, claims not to understand the pictures stitched onto Grace’s quilt, Lizzie counters in her head: “Of course the pictures mean something. I follow two figures walking down the road with baskets on their heads…It’s a story” (23). Still, Lizzie does so much more than easily discern the story on the quilt; she reacts viscerally to her own easy understanding of the pictures: “My skin tingles just below the surface. My arms ache and I massage one and then the other gently” (23). Lizzie, unlike her mother, is wholly open to the possibilities of power through inheritance. Sarah comments upon Lizzie’s openness to things that are outside the realm of what is usually considered normal: “Looks like it [the trunk] ended up with the right person, though…Just mysterious enough and quirky enough for Lizzie” (Perry 23). Her father reiterates Lizzie’s affinity for the strange: “This all fits you, Lizzie. Strange letters, quilts and old dusty bits of the past. I think your Grandma Grace must have had some kind of premonition about you” (23). Lizzie’s initiation into the world of her female ancestors begins that night. She finds herself in Africa as Ayo’s [her great-great-grandmother’s] mother hands her a basket of cloth and declares in a strange language, “We have a long way. We must start” (Perry 24).

Lizzie’s journey begins with her inheritance of the trunk, but it is the objects that lie within that sustain her passage into the power of the maternal. Lizzie’s female
ancestors slowly induct Lizzie into their world; the ancestors begin with what is comforting and familiar, then they revamp these simple objects to portray the abject horrors of slavery. Initially, “[t]he quilt engulfs the twin bed, and I have folded it in half. I am safe underneath the story of my life; the brown woman is safe underneath my palm….It is hot, but I pull the quilt up to my chin” (Perry 24). The quilt is a dynamic conduit to the exploration of lives before her own. Even though it is her first night under the quilt, Lizzie is already active in expanding the notion of self. Lizzie begins to associate the pictures on the quilt with her life, not simply that of Ayo. This, coupled with the “dream” of Ayo’s life in Africa, show her easy acceptance of the communal contributions to the construction of “I.”

She foreshadows the [later] thoroughly developed idea that Ayo, Grace, and Lizzie are one. The quilt and the diary that accompanies it claim a duty that is two-fold. Not only are they conduits of painful memories and experiences; they also offer the comfort and support that Lizzie will need to progress to the other side of this encounter. Still, the conduits are a double-edged sword, offering the pain of her foremothers (exposing her to the hard-earned knowledge and experience of her ancestors) and showing her that she is not alone.

The quilt aids in the portrayal of Grace’s world and her struggle to accept her own experienced life of Ayo. In addition, her great-grandmother Joy’s diary offers Lizzie a direct entrée into the life of her mother Ayo, through her own words. Though Lizzie speaks of reading Joy’s diary as a teenager, we are never privy to her actively reading. Perry uses the diary entries as a literary conceit to bookend her transitions from the older Lizzie to the younger Lizzie. These conduits are important for they ease

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26 I use the term “dream” loosely because Lizzie experiences life as Ayo while she is sleeping. In *Stigmata*, Perry portrays the experience as a supposed dream. Lizzie wakes up with dust on her feet from the dream’s dirt road (Perry 25).
Lizzie into her foremothers’ experiences. Her Aunt Eva insists: “The diary, see, is just
the key, baby. The diary. The quilt. Just the keys to unlock the door to what you call
the past” (118). The conduits also prepare Lizzie for the difficult memories that will
eventually accompany her first-hand experiences into Ayo’s and Grace’s lives. As the
young Lizzie storyline progresses, the foremothers remove the protective veils of the
diary and quilt and begin to contact her in a more direct manner. In fact, Lizzie
eventually comes to a point where the conduits are less important, and she can
experience their lives without them. Her second experience occurs three years later, at
the age of seventeen, as she glances at the trunk and begins to enter another’s
consciousness. This heightened state occurs while she is simply sitting on the quilt.
“My eyes fall on the trunk…I don’t feel at all grounded. It is as if I’m floating a little”
(38). Mutuality is ever-present between Lizzie and her powerful conduits to her
maternal ancestors. They need and want her and likewise, she craves their knowledge
and power: “When I first opened it [the trunk] three years ago and read the diary and the
stories Ayo told her daughter Joy, I had felt an incredible yearning to be in that room
with them, to look into Ayo’s face and see…I don’t know. To see Africa. I wanted to
be Joy, sitting next to my mother, pencil in hand, and I wanted to be Ayo, sitting next to
my child, my future” (Perry 38). Even more profound is Lizzie’s reaction to the
aftermath of her trance experience, where she speaks to her cousin as one of her
foremothers; her mother and cousin find her on the carpet floor “tangled in the quilt, but
it feels good to be in that cloth womb, because I am cold. I wonder what day it is.
Saturday?” (39). She has made the connection between the conduits and her
experiences, but she seeks the comfort and knowledge that they offer. Lizzie uses the
term womb when referring to the comfort of the quilt. Perry makes it clear that Lizzie has been in gestation these past three years, preparing for the pain and shock of the delivery that is to occur. Perry’s metaphorical use of the term womb successfully portrays the matrifocality that is necessary for the reclamation of self. Though womb is a suitable metaphor for the comfort the quilt provides, the metaphor of puberty, or Lizzie’s journey as a rite of passage into adulthood, is most relevant. But Lizzie’s journey ends not simply in the physical maturity that accompanies aging. She psychically acquires an emotional and psychological maturity that contributes to an astounding self-awareness. Her “I” becomes “we.” The communal identity she acquires, through the trials Grace and Ayo put her through, formulates and reinforces her sense of self.

It is because of the complexities of Lizzie’s physical, emotional, and psychological change that she undergoes a second, psychic puberty. The women focus on Lizzie in her youth because of the advantages her youth provides. She receives the trunk at fourteen, when she has yet to fully develop a sense of herself, who she is as an individual. Because of her age, she is more vulnerable and open to the concept of accepting these women as a part of her own person. The process is not clean—it is messy, bloody, and painful—for it is an initiation rite. But their focus on her while she is so young allows for her eventual acceptance of the realities of the communal “I” as a woman.

Slavery destroyed many of the specific African rituals that accompany the entrance to puberty. But that does not mean they cease to exist. The blood of menstruation remains the mark of a young girl’s entrance into womanhood for most
cultures. It signifies the beginning of her journey to define herself as a woman, not just physically, but also emotionally and psychologically. Menstruation is often accompanied by many symptoms: breast swelling and tenderness, sleep changes, lack of energy and pain, such as headaches, migraines, aching joints or muscles, cramps, and lower back pain. Common emotional symptoms include sadness, anger, irritability, anxiety and mood swings. Many women also notice that they feel less alert and less able to concentrate. And common behavioral symptoms include withdrawal from family and friends.

Lizzie experiences many of these “symptoms” of premenstrual syndrome leading up to and accompanying her secondary or psychic menstruation induced by her female ancestors. Lizzie’s baptism in blood is one of the most significant manifestations of a psychic menarche, or first period. They are the rigors necessary for Lizzie to journey to the state of the communal “I.” In fact, her heightened emotional state is often accompanied by the ancestor’s intrusions into her present life. This first occurs as she and her cousin Ruth discuss sex, and the possibility of Ruth consummating her relationship with a boyfriend. Here, Lizzie goes into the aforementioned “trance” and begins to speak as one of her female ancestors: “Is that any way to talk to me? What kind of tone is that, Joy?” (Perry 38). It is unclear which specific ancestor she has become, but Lizzie’s entire psyche embodies this woman. She is sympathetic to all that her foremother feels: “Anger, warm and immediate, surges through my veins” (38).

The emotion Lizzie experiences with her foremothers is not always so specific. The night she almost drowns in the creek outside her Aunt Eva’s house, her emotions are blurred, physically manifested as sadness and dizziness in response to Ayo’s
harrowing experiences in the Middle Passage: “I smell—taste—sweat and blood and months of misery. The scent knocks me dizzy for a moment and I stumble forward…A gurgling sob reaches me. Mine” (85). Lizzie’s psychological and emotional experiences begin to manifest themselves even more forcefully. The symptoms begin to mark themselves on her body. As a result of Ayo’s shackles, she begins to feel pain in the corresponding places. She begs her cousin Ruth to let her go because “‘It hurts.’…I slump, suddenly so tired, staring at the red round marks on my wrists” (88). The red marks are an indicator of the ever-increasing continuation of pain the ancestors visit upon her. She first feels pain coupled with the experiences of three years earlier when she called Ruth “Joy.” Lizzie accepts aspirin from her father: “I swallow them silently, then rub my fingers over my wrists: the skin feels raw” (43) These abrasions are her menstrual cramps. Her young skin is tender, much as the breasts of a young woman with the onset of menses.

Still, in her most traumatic experience with her female ancestors, Lizzie would do far more than smell the blood of others. It is as Grace leads Lizzie through the trauma of Ayo’s experiences throughout the Middle Passage and her life as a slave that all three symptoms associated with menstruation come together in a horrific initiation of blood. Lizzie’s emotions that night are raw as she senses that something big will occur: “[s]ometimes I’m doing some ordinary little thing, and I get that tightness in my chest and throat as if I’m holding back a flood of tears and Ayo is there in my memory, crying and lonely, trying to tell me of some long-ago hurt. I spend entire days on the verge of tears…I put the napkin up to my face…I am crying” (Perry 142). Her family is especially worried that night, for “They’ve been watching my melancholia grow as the
days pass” (142). Lizzie retreats to her room to commune with Grace, who initiates Lizzie’s most distressing visit of the spirits by giving her entrée into her own experience of pain with Ayo,

Yeah…that Ayo…She’s all pain, my grandmother. What I have of her is all pain…Your time here just like it was for me that night…I was in bed, unable to sleep and in pain, trying not to scream out. And the pain just got worse and worse and then I was…on the ship. Couldn’t get off. Water everywhere. Lord I wanted to jump…they drug me off and everywhere that iron chain touched me, blood ran like a river, down my arms and ankles…(Perry 145; italics in original)

In a direct response to Grace’s journey with Ayo, Lizzie experiences her own initiation in blood:

Blood drowns everything. Blood and water and brown bodies falling down and never landing. I watch red drops seep through my skin, onto the quilt, onto the carpet, but I have no astonishment left…all the aches and mysterious stabs of pain now have their corresponding wounds. Raggedy, ugly, familiar skin openings and welted patterns. I put my right hand to the opposite wrist and try to put the skin back together, twisting my body so as not to stain anything further. A futile move. There is an already-drying pool of blood on the quilt, right across, soaking into, Ayo’s face. Round red patches careened across the carpet like drunken stepping stones. Have I been up? (Perry 145-6)

Lizzie has not been up. It is not simply her blood on that quilt. The quilt also contains the blood of Grace: both women bleed because of Ayo’s experiences, which are etched into the quilt. For Lizzie, this is simply an initiation, the beginning of her journey with her female ancestors. This one night is a culmination of what has been hinted at for the past three years: her journey into the communal “I” has begun. This psychic menarche is necessary for her journey into the realization that “[b]lood binds three lives” (61).

Time is also relevant here. Why does it take so very long for Lizzie’s initiation to begin and carry itself out? She receives the trunk at the age of fourteen and a significant
experience occurs at the age of seventeen accompanied with pain. But it is not until the age of twenty that she is fully initiated into her psychic menstruation. Puberty is a gradual process, beginning anywhere from ages 8 to 16. Lizzie’s induction into the world of her foremothers reflects this gradual process. Mysticism and magic are important when measuring time. Time is not linear for the ancestors of the transcendent Black Maternal. These foremothers have the power to shift and fold time, slowing down its processes and speeding it up at will. This power is clearly seen in Lizzie’s jumps between and throughout the folds of time. It is her Aunt Eva who initiates a frightened young Lizzie into the fickle nature of time. “The past—that’s what you call it—is a circle. If you walk long enough, you catch up with yourself” (117). It is these words that aid an adult Lizzie in explaining her unique situation to her mother: “Life is non-linear” (93). The power the female ancestors of the Black Maternal possess over time allows for the repossession of Sarah into the motherline through her daughter Lizzie. The first words Lizzie reads from her great-grandmother’s diary declare:

*We are forever. Here at the bottom of heaven we live in the circle. We back and gone and back again. I am Ayo. Joy. I choose to remember. This is for those whose bones lie in the heart of mother ocean for those who tomorrows I never know who groaned and died in the damp dark beside me. You rite this daughter for me and for them.* (17; italics in original)

Lizzie is part of this circle. This is the past she experiences. Her inheritance allows her to cull from the vast pool of memory usually available only to ancestors. But, Ayo
has made it available to her line, for she chooses to remember and gather the knowledge her daughters shall inherit.\textsuperscript{27}

Ayo is deliberate in the act of remembering. Granted, Lizzie experiences a heavy connection with Grace, chiefly because of her role in the campaign for the reclamation of her daughter, Sarah. It is Grace she embodies through most of her journeys where she experiences life as an ancestor. Lizzie notices this difference; “Grace always speaks loudly, her memories hissing insistently inside my head. And behind her are the dream-like tangles of Ayo’s life. More distant but also more painful” (Perry 87-8). Still, it is Ayo who orchestrates this entire process. Grace tells Lizzie, “You’re never alone. Ayo has seen to it” (187). She willingly offers access to the power of self-knowledge and personal history she has acquired to those female descendants she has deemed worthy. Access to this vast pool of power and memory comes at a price. Her chosen inheritors must experience the pain and trauma necessary to sustain these memories and their power. She demands knowledge of and participation in the grand pool of memory she has provided. This is why both Grace and Lizzie experience the blood and the excruciating pain of Ayo’s memories.

The adult Lizzie acknowledges and accepts her place within the continuum: “And Bessie [Ayo] became Grace, and Grace became me. Me, Lizzie” (47). The adult Lizzie has also accepted the pain of her transition and acknowledges its purpose: “I wouldn’t change anything. I feel like I had to go through it all to be safe…from fear. There’s not much that frightens me anymore” (154). Earlier in the novel she speaks of

\textsuperscript{27} Again, the knowledge of the horrors of the past and the pain that accompanies it parallels the path of Premenstrual Syndrome, for its symptoms are also hereditary: “The one direct cause that is known to affect some women is genetic, many women with PMS have a close family member with a history of the syndrome” (WebMD).
the purpose of her journey, that it “Cured me of the certainty that I was lost” (47). With age and acceptance of her place amongst these women comes control. The young Lizzie was unable to process the women interfering in her life. They came at will. As an adult, she has found control. “I am free, I remember. These things can’t hurt me anymore. The story on those diary pages belongs to me, but they don’t own me. My memories live somewhere spacious now” (46). Concurrently, the foremothers no longer find it necessary to burden Lizzie with sudden entrances into her psyche, for they are one together. Her control has come as a result of her now easy acceptance of their place and power in her mind and body. It took a lot for Lizzie to acquire this sense of control over her memories. Apart from her psychic menarche, Lizzie continues to bleed and spends fourteen years in a mental hospital for her troubles.

Lizzie has come fully into her own because she must bring her mother into the fold. This is the ultimate goal of the female ancestors, most particularly Grace. Grace has made it her goal to reclaim the daughter she abandoned so long ago in an effort to save her family from her own struggle into the communal “I.” It is in the story of Lizzie’s mother, Sarah, that the true genius of Perry’s debut novel is revealed. The loss of her mother as a young girl has left Sarah adrift. She is ill-defined as a person because she denies any connection to her female ancestors and refuses to acknowledge any power they may possess. There arises the question of who is truly being initiated here, Sarah or Lizzie. Sarah’s initiation is just as profound, but it manifests itself differently, for it remains within the psychological realm. Her journey is one of continued physical and psychological abandonment. Her mother leaves her as a child, and even more hurtful, she loses her only child to a mental institution for fourteen years. It is the young
Lizzie’s father who takes charge of finding an answer to her strange behavior. Her father, John, gives Lizzie aspirin for the headaches, he finds and contacts her first therapist, and he is even the one who calls the ambulance that fateful night of Lizzie’s full initiation of blood. Throughout this process, her mother is a worried, nervous observer, occasionally asking, “Are you sure you’re all right? You’re not having bad dreams still?”(135).

Sarah, too, is initiated in blood that very same night the quilt takes Lizzie’s blood offering, but it is not her blood that covers her: “She puts her arm around me to lift me…She takes her hands away from my back and stares at the blood on her hands” (146). She is baptized by the physical connection of the blood of her child. Her initiation is psychologically the more damaging, for she experiences a mother’s deepest fear and pain: the potentially permanent loss of a child. The night of Lizzie’s most explicit visitation of spirits proves to be the last night Sarah sees her daughter outside the prison of a mental institution for fourteen years. Throughout these years, Sarah again assumes the role of the helpless, worried, observer. Again, Lizzie’s father takes the active role, coming to visit Lizzie at the hospital while her mother stays away: “Your mother can’t stand to come right now” (Perry 176). Even when the adult Lizzie returns home, Sarah is filled with self-doubt and uncertainty in her role and success as a mother: “I just hope I haven’t failed you…I wonder about the woman you could have been, if all this hadn’t happened, and maybe, I think, I didn’t do something. My mother wasn’t there to teach me, so maybe I didn’t know how to do it right” (Perry 153). But, Grace has laid her plans for Sarah in her communing with Lizzie. Grace has made it her duty to help her child, Sarah, find the power and knowledge she possesses within.
Lizzie/Grace finishes her mother/daughter’s initiation into the Black Maternal. They aid in Sarah’s process of self-definition by discovering and understanding her own mother’s story, for “Every woman needs her mother” (153).

And Grace assures that Sarah will have that lost access to her mother’s story and the story of those that came before her through her granddaughter’s entrance into the communal “I.” The serious nature of the work to be performed fails to make Lizzie/Grace’s task any less daunting; Sarah denies everything that centers around her mother, especially the quilt: “Sarah had cried. And she had looked at this thing [the quilt] and cursed her own mother and put it as far away from her as possible” (46). But Lizzie/Grace is committed to conquering any of her mother/daughter’s fears. Lizzie’s communication within the transcendent Black Maternal has made her fearless and most importantly, she remains stubborn. Her Aunt Eva notes that “when something needs doing, you don’t let it go. Never have. That’s why you’re here now. Because you left something unfinished. But I know you. You won’t feel right until you take care of it” (49). Her stubbornness is useful for her mother’s eventual acceptance of Lizzie, Grace, and the reality of the communal “I” of Lizzie/Grace. Lizzie/Grace hopes to facilitate their reunion by making a quilt that focuses on the life of Grace and the struggles she dealt with alone and away from her family. Sarah begins their project as an unwilling participant, sighing that she agrees to help Lizzie with the quilt: “But after this, no more fantasizing about her. Your obsession with this is just as scary now as it was then. She left. She died. That’s it” (Perry 70). But, eventually Sarah becomes heavily involved in the quilting, continuing to work on it even when Lizzie is gone. The quilt centering on Grace’s life acts as a conduit in time for Sarah, just as the quilt about
Ayo was a conduit for Lizzie. Grace’s quilt and the act of making it performs an interesting tripliate, as Lizzie reveals her plans to her cousin Ruth: “I decided that the best way, the gentlest way, to reopen the subject of my past was to make this quilt. Kind of a story quilt. About Grace” (222). The act of quilting brings Sarah closer to Lizzie/Grace as they spend large amounts of time together. It is Lizzie who teaches her mother how to quilt, a quaint role-reversal of tradition. The quilt also reveals the tragedy of Grace’s story to Sarah. Grace’s truth is revealed to Sarah and allows for empathy and understanding to come into a formerly hostile situation between mother and daughter: “I didn’t realize until then...what a sad story it was” (225). The most important revelation the quilt facilitates to Sarah is the special connection between Lizzie, Grace and Ayo, that they are one and the same. The denouement of this revelation is quick and sometimes ugly. Sarah first gives voice to it: “[I was] Thinking that those pictures on here [the quilt] look just like my mother’s handiwork, you know. And then, I guess my mind started working overtime” (226). Yet, Sarah again denies the obvious. “No! You’re [Lizzie] not my mother! Or—oh, God—my grandmother! That’s insane.... I can’t go through this again!” (Perry 228). She not only denies Lizzie/Grace/Ayo with her words, but also with her actions, for Perry describes her movements away from Lizzie’s attempted embrace as “pulling away and standing up” as she yell’s her denial (228). Lizzie/Grace/Ayo refuses to accept defeat, reiterating their reality—Sarah’s place in the maternal line of power. Sarah finally accepts the power of the Black Maternal, the reality of the communal “I,” when her daughter/mother/great-grandmother reveals the truth of the day Grace left her family:

She says nothing when I finish, just sits there with the tears on her cheeks. Without wiping them away, she picks up the needle I had put
down and finishes the stitching. The circle is complete and my daughter sits across from me with the gap finally closed. (230)

The story of Ayo’s descendants begins and ends with cloth and quilting. It is the stitching together of the disparate pieces that finally closes the circle. The symbolism of the quilt in the final scenes highlights the pain of Sarah’s initiation as being specifically psychological and emotional. Lizzie/Grace/Ayo find Sarah having laid out Grace’s quilt and holding a vibrant cloth: “From behind her, I see the red cloth is looped over her arms, like a sash, like a gushing wound that cradles close to her chest” (225).

This final scene is Sarah’s own initiation. The “wound” of the sash acts as Sarah’s psychological equivalent of the physical blood Lizzie offers to Ayo’s quilt. It is here that Sarah comes into her own power of self-definition. She, too, finds herself and makes peace with her role in the Black Maternal. Sarah accepts her role as Ayo’s great-granddaughter, Lizzie’s mother, and most importantly, Grace’s daughter. These women have developed their own syntax, the transcendent Black Maternal, a specialized system of communication that goes beyond words. It includes blood, power, knowledge and the ability to move through time.

Ella Townsend of Erna Brodber’s Louisiana also begins her communication with the Black Maternal through an inanimate object. Brodber’s novel centers on young Ella’s journey from the rational to the non-rational, from singularity to multiplicity. The narrative begins with Ella working as a folklorist, recording the stories of peoples in Southwestern Louisiana. She begins with the life of Miss Anna, a respected pillar of the community who speaks of her life with her best friend, Louise. Miss Anna dies soon after their sessions begin, but this fails to prevent her, and later Louise’s, revelations of their lives to Ella. This voyage blurs the lines between life and death, as
Ella becomes a supernatural figure embodied by her participation in the communal “I.”

Brodber provides distinct patterns that explore the thin lines that exist between life, death, and reincarnation. Ella’s first fantastic interaction with the transcendent Black Maternal occurs through a gramophone. Ella has traveled to Southwestern Louisiana to record the folklore stories of Miss Anna or “Mammy” as she is referred to throughout the book. She spends some time with Mammy shortly before she dies, but the transmission of her stories continues from beyond the grave. As C. Cooper makes clear:

Brodber uses the technology of tape-recording in this novel as a metaphor for complex processes of cross-cultural, transcendent communication. In a brilliantly anagrammatic trope the physics of sound reproduction becomes the psychic medium through which the spirits of the dead communicate with the living, and the academic is challenged to really listen to her informant. (4)

The gramophone continues to play back the stories of Mammy Ella knows she never recorded: “When I listened I heard Mammy’s voice in more places than I had known her to speak…what I could no how explain was what was on the reel” (43). *Louisiana* parallels Perry in that the spiritual world and communication with its occupants permeate the text. But Brodber expands the interior psychical explorations that plague Lizzie and her immediate family. Ella Townsend, her lead character, develops the notion of the transcendent Black Maternal, moving it from the internal exploration of self to its possibilities for communal strength and renewal. Mammy, and later her best friend, Lowly, initiate Ella into the transcendent Black Maternal through a deliberate process of power, knowledge and self discovery, or simply put, into the communal “I.”

As in Perry’s *Stigmata*, a trinity forms: Ella, Mammy, and Lowly. These older female ancestors initiate Ella into the communal “I,” but not without significant
consequences for all involved. At the beginning of the novel, the reader finds Lowly already dead, and a tired and aged Mammy soon joins her best friend after an initial meeting with Ella. Unlike Lizzie, Ella is a woman full grown when her initiation begins. She is in the beginning stages of defining herself as a folklorist, far from the medical expectations her West Indian immigrant parents held for her. And, similar to Lizzie, she is somewhat open to the existence of other epistemologies, proclaiming: “there are different yet logical systems of knowledge” (46). Her transition into the communal “I” is completed with very little violence, and lacks the blood initiation that necessitates Lizzie’s complete changeover. Blood is not necessary for Ella because she is a character that represents the expansion of the transcendent Black Maternal beyond the immediate family. Mammy and Lowly are best friends and young Ella is an outsider to their world, but her outsider status does not prevent her usefulness. The women’s lack of blood relation to each other is quite fortuitous, for it reveals the universality of the transcendent Black Maternal and eventual entrance into the communal “I” among all black women. The deceptively tenuous nature of their relationships exemplifies the efforts of ancestors of the transcendent Black Maternal to recruit any special novice, blood relation or not, in their efforts to provide their communities with forgotten, alternative epistemes. June Roberts expands upon Toni Morrison’s act of distinguishing between truth and knowledge by insisting that Brodber “uses ancestral counterfactual authority to claim a supervening order of knowledge for the discursive alterity of spirit practice.” (84)\(^28\)

\(^{28}\)Toni Morrison states, “Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot” (Zinsser 113)
The lack of violence seen in her initiation does not preclude the lack of madness or difficulty involved. In the beginning, Ella finds herself doubting her own sanity with the gramophone communications: “the reel was full, not of silences but of words, not of…Mammy reeling out her life story …but of a conversation between two women, one of them Mammy, with interjections from me in words I didn’t know” (44). Her greatest fears are revealed to be twofold, losing her grasp on her sanity and on her connection to her then fiancé Reuben:

I knew things Reuben did not know. I knew that I had heard voices; that my mind had been spoken aloud while the recording machine was on; I knew that I had heard myself say things in my head that I couldn’t know…This time round I would be falling by myself. I wasn’t sure that I could manage that…the connection between the content of the reel and my own unrevealed experiences was frightening” (44-45)

Her fears prove unfounded, for she receives her future husband’s unwavering support and understanding of the fantastic occurrences that she undergoes throughout the novel. After revealing her fears to Reuben with trepidation, he replies simply, “It all makes sense,” and allows the situation to stay as is. Herein lies a major difference between Ella and Lizzie’s experience. The people closest to her, her husband and later her mentor, Madam Marie, are immediately and wholly accepting of her situation. Lizzie, on the other hand, finds roadblocks at almost every turn. Aside from the acceptance of her Aunt Eva and the somewhat half-hearted support of her closest cousin, Ruth, Lizzie finds disbelief, distrust, and disavowal of the journey she has begun and travels to the very end. Why are a certain set of men and women open to the epistemology of the fantastic, yet others disavow the possibility of its existence? It becomes a question of place, which becomes in turn an important conceit in all three of these novels.
With the support system of her husband, Reuben, duly in place, Ella begins to discover and accept the existence of and within the communal “I.” Unlike Lizzie, Ella is fully aware of the largesse of the situation that has chosen her: “By the next morning, November 11th 1936 I was no longer just me. I was theirs. The venerable sisters had married themselves to me—given birth to me, —they would say. I could feel the change”(32). Again, Ella’s experience juxtaposes that of Lizzie. While Lizzie goes through a psychic menarche and ensuing puberty, Ella is birthed through the womb of these women. In keeping with the language of inheritance, the lack of patrimony’s feminine parallel, these experiences are decidedly female in nature—the transference of knowledge, power, and being embodied in Hortense Spillers’ idea of “matrifocality.”

Though she has gained knowledge, power, and an uncanny self-awareness with her entrance into the communal “I,” Ella initially doubts whether this change is good for her and her own sense of individuality, for “my other self entered their space as early as that [the first day of meeting with the then living Mammy]—involuntarily” (Brodber 33). Because of this initial fear of her newfound situation, Ella works hard to define herself against both Mammy and Lowly, but ultimately fails. Her minor attempts at resistance imbue her with the realization that she must fully embrace them as herself. This parallels the experiences of Lizzie, who defines herself through Grace and Ayo, so much so that she veritably becomes Grace, and the women become indistinguishable to those around them. Ella attempts to define herself so thoroughly from these women that she becomes an entirely different entity, Louisiana. Louisiana accepts her place within the trinity of women, but is also as accepting of, and adamant in defining, who she is as an individual. Ella chooses Louisiana as a realization of her allegiance to
these women and the necessity that she accept their place within her life, for Louisiana is the joining of Lowly and Mammy’s given names, Louise y Anna, respectively. It is Ella’s wholehearted participation in the “we” that aids in her discovery of the “I.” With her transition from Ella into Louisiana, she redefines not just herself, but what constitutes the communal “I.”

Ella begins the process of self-definition amongst the communal “I” by initiating a move to New Orleans, and finds herself an acolyte of Madame Marie, a character patterned after the renowned Voodoo priestess Marie Leveau. She reacquaints herself with the West Indian customs her parents had left in Jamaica. She clings to those things that define her individuality by providing a safe space for the homesick West Indian sailors who visit Madam Marie’s parlor in New Orleans. Ella becomes a conjure woman, a seer and a confidant for these lonely men, giving them the opportunity to exchange the stories and songs that define their culture. These actions steep her in her own West Indian nature. She is enveloped by those things that make Ella who she is.

Still, the Black Maternal is never far from Ella’s psyche. She accepts the women’s place and power in her life, but also insists on carving out niches of time and space for Ella. Mammy and Lowly remain influential. It is because of her questions about them that she seeks out Madam Marie. She comes under the tutelage of an expert of an unfamiliar epistemology in order to fully understand her newfound ontology as a member of the communal “I.” The marriage of these two parts of her self forms the entity of Louisiana. Louisiana accepts all that is Ella the individual, child of Jamaican immigrants: “I am Louisiana. After ten or so years with this clientele I know the songs
and where we each learnt them...The songs are equally ours now. We just sing” (129).

Louisiana is just as accepting of Ella, who participates in a trinity of power and communication with Mammy and Lowly. This growth and transformation into Louisiana amplifies all that is Ella by accepting each part of her: “As a matter of fact since I named myself Louisiana the sisters have not conducted conversation with me via the machine. I like to feel that there is some promotion in that for me. They have been making contact with me via the pendant I designed...much better” (131).

In comparison to the continuous violence and psychic trauma that accompanied Lizzie’s visitation of spirits, Ella’s experience seems almost anticlimactic:

I was drained, but tall. I had entered. I had listened, been with them and hadn’t collapsed. I was positively preening. I had eaten that little bit of cake, squeezed through, drunk just the right amount of that liquid, grown to their size, stabilized myself and was hobnobbing on equal terms! I had arrived. Passed through my rite of passage with flying colors. I had broken through that membrane and was in, ready and willing to be and see something else. Transform, change, focus, Transform, change. I was a woman among women. (52)

Ella comes to terms in one week with what it takes Lizzie almost fourteen years in mental institutions to accomplish. The resulting mandate is quite similar, an insistence by female ancestors to come to terms with the past, and to enter a state of the communal “I,” a marriage of spirits. The question remains, why is Lizzie’s rite of passage so traumatic in its violence and bloodshed?

The answer can be found in the severity of the price to be paid for entrance into the communal “I.” The experience moves beyond the paralleling of Lizzie and Ella’s experiences to puberty and birth respectively. Ella’s ease of transition lays bare the exploration of so much more, the most important being that Lizzie’s contact with the Black Maternal leaves her more or less intact. At the end of the novel, she has healed
her mother and is on the road to healing herself. The rest of her life is open to her and only her; she has completed the mandates of her female ancestors.

Ella’s experience with the Black Maternal demands her life as penance. She dies from the psychic toll the communal “I” has taken upon her, physically, emotionally, and psychologically. As Louisiana continues to grow in power, the women begin to communicate through her, no longer using an inanimate object. Her husband, Reuben, describes it as such:

After the pendant and before this last onset of illness, the conversation between Louisiana and her otherworld people was a private affair between them: they spoke in her head; she wrote what they said. I heard nothing and knew nothing excepting for that which she shared with me. Now conversation still takes place in her head but it is expressed through her speaking organs. I put it this way to underline the fact that it is not Louisiana’s voice that I, the scribe, hear. She is neither reporting speech nor translating. The voices I hear, are as with the recording machine, those of other people. (143)

She has become a conduit, a human version of their previous inanimate objects. But the women must change her to make this so. Her body begins to deteriorate, for these women must communicate through her, and to her. As their will to communicate becomes stronger, so do their demands that she become inanimate, a proper conduit for their story. Her transformation begins with physical exhaustion and increasingly frequent spells of dizziness. Reuben is forced to hire a maid to take care of household chores, an insult to the extremely self-sufficient Louisiana. But the maid is help she must accept, for her body is failing her. Then the falling begins—first she breaks her leg, then her hip. She is placed on bedrest and ultimately falls into unconsciousness. It is only then that the women fully reveal their story to Louisiana.
The resulting epistemological inheritance of the communal “I” thus “enters intellectual history as a potential discourse of power, mediated by an alternative vision that counters the imperialist project” (Roberts 84). Each action these women visit upon Ella/Louisiana is steeped in resistance. Communication with and through Ella/Louisiana is a continuation of Mammy’s previous work in improving the political and social consciousness of her community: “Mammy was a Garvey organiser and psychic…a black nationalist” (148). Mammy and Lowly’s descriptions of their lives and activities portray a two-fold use of the transcendent Black Maternal. The transmission of their stories of life in Chicago and Louisiana fulfills Toni Morrison’s call for the portrayal of the “interior life” of long-forgotten ancestors (Morrison 110). Most importantly, their marriage to Ella/Louisiana’s psyche provides “the ongoing communication of hidden truth from the folk to the folk…and create the conditions for the counter-narratives that presuppose discursive alterity” (Roberts 84). It is not accidental that these subversive acts occur within the body of Ella, for Denise deCaires Narain insists: “The body has become increasingly important as the site of a series of contested inscriptions and readings. In the context of feminist criticism woman’s body has been perceived as one of the most dramatic—and contradictory—sites of the struggle against patriarchy” (98). Mammy and Lowly are literally writing their story in and through the body of Ella/Louisiana. But they also insist on the expansion of their story to the community at large, enlisting the services of both Louisiana and Reuben.

Ella’s transformation into Louisiana embodies more than an individual progression. The community around her changes as she does, as do their interactions with her. While in Mammy’s hometown of Southwestern Louisiana, Reuben and most
especially, Ella isolate themselves from the community at large: “...I hadn’t taken the people around me very seriously. After all, it was Mammy on whom I was to focus” (47). But Ella becomes ensconced in the New Orleans community; she comes under the tutelage of Madame Marie, who supports her eventual metamorphosis into Louisiana. She counsels, and eventually inherits the care of, the community of West Indian men from Madam Marie. She becomes a fixture within the community, a progression no doubt steered by Mammy and Lowly with their entrance into the communal “I.” Ella’s story cannot be contained; it is imperative that it be shared to transmit the truths of Mammy and Lowly to the larger community. This is why Reuben acts as scribe, why Brodber chooses to frame the story as a long-lost potential publication of a small women’s press: “Brodber seems to invite parallels to be drawn between Ella as spirit medium and black woman writer, and the text as conduit and cultural medium” (Narain 114). Again, these characters are portraying the expansion of the communal “I” beyond the personal and into the shaping of the epistemological consciousness of the community.

So much of Ella’s story is about preparation. Her first meeting with the living Mammy prepares her for the entrance into the communal “I.” This newfound entrance into the trinity leads her to Madam Marie and New Orleans, laying the groundwork for her transformation into Louisiana. Becoming Louisiana prepared her to become a full conduit for the story of Mammy and Lowly. In turn, the release of their story prepares Louisiana for her own crossing-over. Ella only incurs a physical death. She becomes transcendent, joining Mammy and Lowly on the other side, becomes one with the Black Maternal: “Pain. Bone breaking pain, shooting from my bones, silver bullets dead set
on freedom, liberated, fill my room with lightning bugs and I become Christmas, starlights, fireworks, holidays, no flesh...What a relief then to be making my way over the rainbow’s mist” (161). These are not the words of a woman dying of agony, pain, and regret for the burden which the transcendent Black Maternal has placed upon her. She is excited and exhilarated at the prospect of finally becoming a part of the story these women have placed within her grasp. Her pain comes at the end, but it is fleeting, and for Ella, well worth the wait.

The transcendent Black Maternal continues a tradition in Black Women’s literature that conflates mothers and memory: “[b]y assigning mother (or maternal ancestor) the role of a ‘medium’ through which an alternative narrative emerges as a direct confrontation with history, ‘woman’ (as mother) is aligned with memory as an alternative to history” (Hochberg 2). Toni Morrison insists that “ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (343). The actions of the female ancestors in Stigmata and Louisiana force a qualification of her statement, or at least a broader understanding of the context of their actions. These ancestors’ ultimate aim, the attainment of the communal “I,” is benevolent in its goals, but not always in execution. Lizzie’s experience of blood and pain and Ella’s untimely death focus more on the instructive and protective nature of their wisdom. It is in the literature of the Caribbean that we find the most perfect example of Morrison’s insightful deliniation of the ancestor’s place within the black literary imagination. Conversely, it is in Simone Schwarz-Bart’s Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle that we see the most harmonious entrance into the communal “I.” Karen Smyley Wallace
believes the differences of the Lougandor women are found within the distinct Caribbean identity that influences their matrifocality: “Although reference is made to the independent black female, it does not mirror Western feminist principles. More accurately, it reflects the survival of the black female in harmony with the historical dynamics of Caribbean culture” (434).²⁹ It is the power of place that allows these women to possess easily the harmonious ontology within an alternative episteme that Lizzie and Ella work so diligently to achieve, for “[the] linkage between woman, magic, and sorcery is characteristically seen in black francophone literatures of the Caribbean and Africa” (Wallace 433).

The protracted effect of the power of place makes the Lougandor women’s experiences within the transcendent Black Maternal privileged. The narrative focuses on the journey of Télumée Lougandor from young woman to old age. Her mother, Victory, leaves Télumée to be reared by her own mother, Toussine Lougandor. Toussine sees to Télumée’s education in the ways of women, both practical and supernatural, placing her under the tutelage of conjure woman, Ma Cia. The novel progresses along the themes of self-discovery and acceptance. There is a marked lack of linearity; the novel is advanced by life experiences and feelings rather than time and years. The novel exists in a peculiar timelessness, aided by the isolation of the community in which it takes place.

The narrative is set in the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, in a small town named Fond-Zombi. The town’s name oozes magic, for it means “a valley bottom peopled by spirits or ghosts” (Jones, ix). This presents a marked difference from the

²⁹ Wallace is referring to the continuous absence of father figures within the Lougandor women’s life. I suggest this statement can be expanded to their insistence on matrifocality.
experiences of Lizzie and Ella. Lizzie’s change occurs outside of a supportive community. There is little magical acceptance in small town Alabama, hence her lonely and isolated conversion to the communal “I.” Ella has to move physically to New Orleans, a place more accepting and supportive of alternative epistemes and a multiplicity of being. Télumée does not have to move anywhere. She is physically born into an incredible community open-minded to the vast possibilities the spirit world possesses. Télumée’s own grandmother, Toussine Lougandor, stands as a character shrouded in magic and mystery. She is referred to by the townspeople as “Queen without a name,” for legend has it that children fathered by spirits have no name. It is within this community that she develops. She is immersed in the transcendent Black Maternal from birth: “The novel opens with…the narration of the matriarchal lineage into which Télumée is born and inscribed, in which she will participate, and which she must assume fully in order to perpetuate it” (Scharfman 89). The racially gendered inheritance explored at the beginning of this chapter is her birthright. These women are not constrained by the linguistic lack that plagues Westernized black women. Their lives, their town, their community is steeped in a powerful magic that is decidedly feminine in form.

Madam Toussine teaches her granddaughter respect for this potential power that surrounds her. It is also Madame Toussine who expands upon Télumée’s potential by placing her under the tutelage of the obeah woman, Ma Cia. Ma Cia, a woman described as “closer to the dead than the living,” encourages and expands Télumée’s comfort with the spirit world: “Close to her, I felt myself become a spirit. Every morning

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30 This idea of the meaning of Toussine’s name comes directly from the introduction to the English translation of Bart’s “Bridge of Beyond.” Author Bridget Jones discusses this idea on page x.
I woke up drenched in sweat, resolved to leave the forest and live in my own body and woman’s breasts” (Bart, 125). There is no necessity for the inanimate objects that usually define the transcendent Black Maternal, for both of these women are alive. They do not have to communicate through a proxy, for they train Télumée in person from childhood. Specific tenets of the transcendent Black Maternal remain, such as Télumée’s beginnings as a novice, or apprentice:

Ma Cia initiated me into the secrets of plants. She also taught me the human body, its centres, its weaknesses, how to rub it, how to get rid of faintness and tics and sprains. I learned how to set people and animals free, how to break spells and turn sorcery back on the sorcerers. (130)

But Ma Cia’s teachings go far beyond the deceptive simplicity of healings and spells; she and Toussine expose her to the never-ending possibilities that Afro-Caribbean ontology and epistemology encompass. Ma Cia teaches the power to transform into any being that inhabits the forest around them, an opportunity Télumée herself feels hesitant to take advantage of: “But whenever she was at the point of telling me the secret of metamorphosis, something held me back, something prevented me from exchanging my woman’s shape and two breasts for that of a beast or a flying succubus, and so there the matter rested” (130). Madam Toussine exposes her to the world of the Flying Africans, a legend that becomes a reality for Télumée as she learns to fly on her own: “I would lie on the ground and try to dissolve my flesh: I would fill myself with bubbles and suddenly go light—a leg would be no longer there, then an arm, my head and whole body faded into the air, and I was floating so high over Fond-Zombi it looked no bigger to me than a speck of pollen in space” (104). Télumée has incredibly powerful experiences within the auspices of the transcendent Black Maternal. This magical tutelage, though just as graphic and visceral as the experiences of Lizzie and
Ella, fails to be as specific in its purpose. Lizzie’s transformation is orchestrated in order to bring her mother, Sarah, into the matriarchal fold. Ella enters into the communal “I” to reveal the story of Mammy and Lowly’s experienced truths. But Télumée’s entrance into the communal “I” with Toussine and Ma Cia fails to display such specificity. Yes, she learns to heal and expand into many different modes of being, but it is important to note Télumée’s relative freedom with her knowledge. She is allowed the luxury of picking and choosing what she wants to experience and how far she will go. Télumée learns to fly, but she refuses to allow herself to change shape. This agency is refused to both Lizzie and Ella. I suggest that it is this agency, this freedom, that affords Télumée the opportunity to grow old and enjoy the reverie of old age. The transcendent Black Maternal fails to expose a life-altering purpose for Télumée because it is an everyday occurrence in the magic of Guadeloupe.

Ma Cia and Madam Toussine steadily collapse what critic Gil Hochberg refers to as the “facile distinctions” between history and memory: “…pointing out the fact that the ‘maternal’ (private, familial) memory is often subordinated to, and manipulated by, the master’s history” (3). These women revise history and mothering, and expand the borders of the transcendent Black Maternal even as they participate within each ideology’s dynamic. Télumée’s female ancestors find no need for transmissions through inanimate objects or the deteriorating body of a female novice. They are interacting with their apprentice on a daily basis. In this privilege, the women harness the ability to take the transcendent Black Maternal to a new and different level of resistance. Gone are the attempts simply to counteract the advantaged stories of the
master’s history. These women begin to subvert and reclaim storied figures and ideals of the Western experience for their own:

The first section establishes Télumée’s distinguished genealogy and heritage: she belongs to a family of mythical heroines, superwomen. The names of her foremothers make this obvious: Minerva (the warrior/protector goddess of wisdom), Queen-without-a-name, Victory, Télumée Miracle...Thus Schwarz-Bart inverts and subverts the common practice of giving slaves “mock-heroic names” with Greek or Latin resonances and invests her characters with genuine heroism. They become indeed “conquering heroines.” (Wilson 186)

These women are not rejecting all things male and patriarchal as incorrectly suggested by many other readings of this novel. They are making adequate use of that which is helpful to them, removing the privilege so often accompanying this information and accepting it upon their own terms. This is not so much a rejection as it is an embracing of other ways to be, particularly, the communal “I.”

The impact of Télumée’s entrance into the communal “I” is more substantial than that which Lizzie and Ella experience, and most significantly, trauma-free. Ronnie Scharfman insists that the “kind of bonding we find in Schwarz-Bart’s novel is more inclusive, more permanent, more pervasive than [usual]” (92). Télumée moves beyond the simple trinity of the transcendent Black Maternal. She develops into a communal being who can become any woman within her matriarchal line: “And the river flowed over me and I bounded and surged, and I was Adriana, down and up, and I was Ismene of the great pensive eyes, I was Olympia and the rest, Ma Cia in the shape of a dog” (Schwarz-Bart 145). Télumée’s abilities are expanded beyond the embodiment of all things matrilineal. The amplified powers of the communal “I” allow Télumée to become other animals and even her one true, male love, Amboise.
Even as the Lougandor women take the conflation of mothering, memory, and the power found in alternative ontologies and epistemologies, critic Gil Hochberg warns against the dangers of their specific incarnation of the transcendent Black Maternal:

[T]he inclusion of this negation of motherhood within matrilineal narratives functions as an inner disruption; breaking the coherence of the framing maternal narrative directs our attention to the limitations of these narratives as a source of women’s liberation…[the novel] directs a reflective, critical look at the overoptimistic celebration of maternal memory…[it] risks re-imposing the burden of remembering on women who are thus demanded to subordinate their story (and present) to the story (and past) of “their people”; demanded to pass on the traumatic memories as well as the stories of stoic survival…committing themselves to the making of generations. (6)

This is a critique that can be expanded to each of the novels examined in this chapter. In crying for the rights of the individual, Hochberg removes these works from their distinctly non-Western tradition of community. The individual and her ancestors are not mutually exclusive of each other, but are continuously entwined. The story of the ancestors provides the rootedness that is necessary for the person to prosper. The individual is not sacrificed to communal “I,” for they mutually exist. Toni Morrison speaks of this mutuality in her essay, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”:

“There…[are] spaces and places in which a single person [can] enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community” (339). Hochberg also appears to treat time as a linear permutation, another decidedly Western novelty. For these women who exist in the ontology of the supernatural, time is far from linear. Ayo insists that “we are a forever people,” and in this sense, past, present, and future exist as one. There are few if any distinctions. This reality runs parallel to the trinity identity of the communal “I.” Foremothers and descendants exist as one in the circle of time.
CONCLUSION

FUTURE PATHS

This project only begins to outline the formidable task of weaving together three distinct traditions, black feminist theory, maternal theory, and psychoanalytic theory, in a manner that aims to expand the boundaries of each. It continues in the vein of projects of maternal theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Gloria Wade-Gayles, and Andrea O’Reilley. The further intersection of French, feminist, and African American literatures proves that these oft-mined ores remain rich areas for continued exploration. A comparative study of the African diaspora remains necessary to showcase the diverse characterizations of black literary mothers still evolving. Newer and lesser-known authors continue to contribute new contexts for re-examining more established writers.

In her essay, “The Race for Theory” (1987), Barbara Christian outlines her exasperations with the newfound affinity at the time for applying theory to literary works. She critiques theory’s penchant for “linguistic jargon, its emphasis on quoting its prophets…its preoccupations with mechanical analyses of language, graphs, algebraic equations, [and] its gross generalizations about culture” (Christian 350). Christian insists that these linguistically acrobatic exercises succeed in two ways. First, the reverence of theory simply replaces one hegemony for another. The academy’s obsession with theory prevents the necessary advent of the “energetic emerging literatures in the world today” (Christian 349). For Christian, theory’s duplicitous largesse silences those in the academy who do not eagerly accept its sometimes
confusing and contradictory conclusions on human interaction. Secondly, and most importantly, the academy’s narrow definitions of literary theory fail to recognize the myriad ways in which other peoples and artists have approached the process of critiquing literature: “[f]or people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic” (Christian 349). Christian refers to the black community as a “race of theory,” alluding to its ever-present penchant to theorize “… often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking… more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure which is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative” (349). It is within Christian’s assessment that I plan to expand my first chapter’s treatment of bell hooks’ “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance.” The use of hooks in the critique of Hurston and Morrison pays homage to Christian’s advisement for black critics against being enraptured by theory’s call. I wish to find an Afro-Caribbean author whose work would allow me to continue to analyze works within hooks’ theoretical framework. My past research into Afro-Caribbean women’s fiction focused on mother-daughter relationships: a shift needs to be made to encompass mothers and sons. Future research should center on expanding the criticism available on black women writing about mother-son relationships.

This project’s second chapter goes against Christian’s exact purposes outlined in “The Race for Theory.” It is my contention that black literature can handle the rigors of Kristevan psychoanalytic theory just as adeptly as those of black literary theory. Christian disagrees with the way that French feminist theory has become an authoritative discourse that excludes the realities of black women in its resolute abstract
nature: “I and many of my sisters do not see the world as being so simple. And perhaps that is why we have not rushed to create abstract theories” (356). My second chapter portrays black women’s multiple abilities to complicate and develop the theory of these French feminists. The application of Julia Kristeva’s maternal characters to the fiction of Condé and Ansa brings a concreteness seldom attained in the French theory. Further, grounding the critique in the maternal theories of black feminists Patricia Hills Collins and Gloria Wade-Gayles aids in weaving the tangible and the conceptual. Michael Awkward sees the potentialities theory provides the black critic: “its employment…has indeed deepened our received knowledge of the textual production of black writers” (361). To accommodate the language of Christian, black women’s fiction adds dynamism to the fixed ideas of French feminist theory.

I would like to continue to explore French feminism’s theories on the female body in regards to the transcendent Black Maternal. How does the French feminist idea of “writing the body” apply to the physical trauma experienced by Lizzie and Ella? How do black women complicate French feminists’ notions of what Christian refers to as biological determinism (356)? Christian’s essay lends itself to a dichotomous system of organization as this project expands. The first section would feature chapters that examine the different ways black women have theorized about their own literatures, thereby fulfilling Christian’s insistence that blacks remain a race of theory. The second section would investigate how literary black mothers complicate the mainstream theory Christian disdains because of a race for theory.

This project provides many opportunities for sprawl, particularly within the realm of a continuing exploration of maternal characterizations of black mothers. Future
scholarship includes an exploration of good or ideal mothers in the works of Nella Larsen, Ntozake Shange, Gloria Naylor, and Mariama Bâ. Interesting conclusions can also be culled from investigating those women who choose not to become mothers through self-induced abortion or welcomed miscarriage. These characterizations appear in the autobiography of Audre Lorde and the literature of Michèle Lacrosil and Jacqueline Manicom.

I believe that my project furthers several projects that other scholars may find useful. The transcendent Black Maternal as a taxonomic theory remains easily applicable to other authors with similar themes of female ancestral inheritance and magic. It can also be expanded beyond the black experience, for other multi-ethnic female authors can feasibly complicate the transcendent Black Maternal within their own racial cosmology. The works of Amy Tan and Cristina Garcia appear highly applicable, but I would also be interested in how Afro-Latin and Afro-Brazilian authors adapt the transcendent Black Maternal for their own. The visceral communication with ancestors found in the transcendent Black Maternal also provides a rudimentary exploration of the effects of trauma theory. A future scholar specializing in trauma theory can easily build upon the physical manifestations visited upon Lizzie and Ella.

My work on black mothers remains within only a small hemisphere of the African diaspora. It provides a springboard for the multiplicities available in black motherhood. I would enjoy seeing other scholars continue to apply black feminist maternal theories to African, Aboriginal, and Afro-Latin women’s fiction. Increased variance in the portrayal of black mothers can only aid in battling the pejorative stereotypes that belie the rich literary lives of these brave women.
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