The Narrative Creation of Self in the Fiction by African-American and African-Caribbean Women Writers.

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The narrative creation of self in the fiction by African-American and African-Caribbean women writers

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THE NARRATIVE CREATION OF SELF IN THE FICTION
BY AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND AFRICAN-CARIBBEAN WOMEN WRITERS

A Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

The Narrative Creation of Self in The Fiction

This study entails an examination of the works of six authors (Maya Angelou, Audré Lorde, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and Simone Schwarz-Bart) whose works are shaped by values and perceptions influenced by their experiences of sexual, racial and social marginalization. While I acknowledge differences in origin, beliefs and personality, I explore the common ground which unites them, and more specifically the complex ties that bind their individual "writing I" with their environment--"communitas," to use Victor Turner's term. This study is also an exploration of the modes in which these six writers create their idiosyncratic selves out of the continued tension between the writer's "I" and the "communitas" to which she claims to belong. Furthermore, while addressing the links that connect these authors' works with larger literary categories (i.e. the novel, autobiography, African-American and Caribbean literary traditions, literature written by women), I distinguish what is specific to each of these narratives in their affirmation of distinct black female selves.

In my first chapter, I investigate the social and historical strictures that have governed the development of both specific black narrative traditions in the New World and of the so-called "black female literary tradition" since the publication of Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Following my initial discussion of the trope of confinement in works by black women, in my second and third chapters I explore the diverse representations of place and time within black cultures from Africa and the diaspora. In chapter IV, I discuss the particular constraints that determine the construction of specifically female identities in the texts by these six authors. This discussion takes into account: the role of female-male relationships, the retention of strong African-centered traits concerning maternal roles and mothering; and the crucial part played in most of these texts by same-sex bonding and identification. In the fifth chapter, I study more closely two autobiographies (Lorde's and Angelou's) and show how they partake of the self-genesis of black women's selves in America.
and the Caribbean. Finally, to avoid the essentialist fallacy, my conclusion is open-ended; I demonstrate how these six authors' narrative techniques and uses of voices re-affirm the constant need to merge the individual and the communal voices in an ultimate celebration of identity and continued survival against all odds.

Throughout this study, my intention is to show that each author's definition of an idiosyncratic female--or male--self depends in part on spatial, temporal and social paradigms of blackness and femaleness. These individual definitions serve as a chronicle of the way in which multiple social, cultural, historical and linguistic factors create ever-expanding black female literary traditions in the Americas.
INTRODUCTION

My intent in this study is a multiple one: I propose to examine the works of six authors (Maya Angelou, Audré Lorde, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and Simone Schwarz-Bart) whose texts are supported by a body of values and perceptions that have been shaped by their individual experiences of racial-, social-, and gender-identity and marginalization. In one case, sexual preference contributes to the author’s sense of difference.

The leading axis of my research has been to locate and explore the common threads which bring these texts together, despite the conspicuous cultural, historical, linguistic and geographical differences that exist between these six writers’ experiences as artists, women and descendants of African slaves. Nevertheless, these connecting “threads,” to use one of Paule Marshall’s recurrent images, all converge in determining a common ground particular to the narratives of African-American and African-Caribbean women in the Americas. Therefore, while addressing the links that connect these texts with larger categories (i.e. the novel, autobiography, African-American and Caribbean literary traditions, literature by women), this study also clearly purports to foreground the specificity of each of these narratives. I propose to show what is each writer’s contribution to representations of black female-and male-selves within the American diasporas.

My theoretical approach has been most influenced by recent developments in post-Freudian, post-Marxist feminist critique, as well as by current Afro-Americanist and Caribbean scholarship. Besides reading Bakhtin, Barthes, Ross Chambers, Gérard Genette, James Olney and Patricia Meyer Spacks and their interpretations of the theory of narrative and literary genres, I have particularly relied on the works of critics and writers such as Hazel Carby, Hélène Cixous, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Robert Hemenway, Barbara Johnson, Deborah McDowell,
Barbara Smith, Monique Wittig and others who are particularly interested in questioning and re-formulating traditional definitions and theories concerning "race," gender and culture.

Although this study, for the sake of academic clarity and length constraint, limits itself to the study of black women writers from the New World, it would be both impossible and artificial to read these texts from a strictly gender-restricted, monoracial perspective. A clearly intertextual subtext supports my readings of these six African-American and Caribbean female writers, one that comprehends both the works of other writers within the body of black literatures from the Americas, while also extending to other writers within the literatures in English and French written by male and female--whether black or white--authors. It is indeed not possible to read Paule Marshall or Simone Schwarz-Bart these days without being aware of the works of such important authors from Africa or the Caribbean as Buchi Emecheta, Maryse Condé, Mariama Bâ or again, Michelle Cliff. Likewise, it would be self-defeating to neglect the important scholarship that is coming out of Africa, the Caribbean and Europe, concerning literatures which, until very recently, were totally marginalized and neglected because they had been written by women, blacks, or, as it were, authors who belonged to both groups. Whenever possible, I have quoted from such non Anglo-American sources, essentially as an indication of the necessarily intertextual, and international, nature of this field of study and scholarship.

Furthermore, it soon became apparent that such an investigation of texts by black female authors from the Americas, although foregrounding discussions on "race" and cultural differences, should strive to stay clear from any reductive, essentialist interpretations of literature as the reserved domain of any one group of individuals, for whatever reason, be it class privilege and status, national origin, color pigmentation, or gender identity. In this respect, I subscribe to Gayatri Spivak's comments that "knowledge is made possible and is sustained by irreducible difference not identity," and that "knowledge is never adequate to its object" (In Other Worlds, 254). While some of the most exciting scholarship to date concerning black literatures has been that of African-American critics such as Valerie Smith, Houston Baker, Jr. and Barbara Christian, among others, whose essays proved
invaluable for this study, African-American literature, as well as contemporary writings by women --
by their sheer numbers and diversity--cannot be made the reserve of one group of readers or critics,
for whatever "politically correct" reason this may be. In her incisive comments on Barbara Smith's
essay "Towards A Black Feminist Criticism", Deborah McDowell noted that the concept of black
feminist criticism needs to be redefined to include "any criticism written by a Black woman
regardless of her subject or perspective--a book written by a male from a feminist or political
perspective, a book written by a Black woman or about Black women in general, or any writings by
women" ("New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism", 191). Inasmuch as this short study focuses
specifier "y on the works of very diverse and talented black female authors from North America and
the Caribbean, I would hope to contribute in a small part to this stimulating and thriving new branch
of scholarship.

Within the same range of ideas, I have deliberately avoided using the term literature in the
singular when describing texts from multiple origins and pertaining to different genres, and preferred
the plural form wherever possible. For the same reason, in my extensive discussion of female
identities in chapter IV, I decided to speak of selves--and more specifically "black female selves"--
rather than using the reductionist singular "self." Therefore, rather than one single literary model of
black femaleness, or maleness for that matter, I would like to suggest that there exists a multiplicity
of black narratives, both by male and female authors, that cover a wide range of individual, social,
ideological, cultural and sexual differences, and that all converge in defining the black literatures of
the diaspora, whether written in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese or Dutch.

One final clarification needs to be made concerning my choice of subject and texts. When
deciding to use the term "Caribbean," my intention was not to limit myself to the strictly
geographical aspect of the term. Indeed, given the severe economic--and at times political--constraints
that control the lives of the people of the Caribbean and its diaspora throughout North and South
America, Africa and Europe, I have chosen to include in my study authors such as Paule Marshall,
whose work manifests a distinct consciousness of their Caribbean origins and set of values--albeit
transplanted to the metropoles of North America--and who use the Caribbean basin as a central locus
for their narratives. It should be also noted that the identification with the Caribbean islands can be
on a more spiritual or mental plane, one connected with the creation of self and sense of survival as a woman, as is the case in Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Whether it be a geographical reality or a more spiritual locus, the Caribbean—as does Africa, in the case of Angelou's autobiography—plays a decisive role in several of these narratives, as a metaphorical space of the self and of blackness.

In my first chapter, "Writing The Self, Narrating Blackness, Voicing Womanhood," I undertake to define how theoretical definitions of narrative and self apply—or do not apply—to the domain of black literatures, and in particular to those texts written by black women. I suggest that the distinct narrative strategies and rhetorical techniques used by black female authors since the days of slave narratives contributed to establish specific literary traits: they both enrich the black literatures of the Americas and act as a counterpoint to those African-American and Caribbean texts which have been "canonized," by an essentially white, male-centered critique and literary establishment.

In my second and third chapters, "Place and Displacement in Fiction by African-American and African-Caribbean Women Authors," and "Time As A Re-Appropriated Continuum In Black Literatures From The New World," I explore the connection between the sense of discovery/recovery of the self and the concept of a "chosen place;" I also investigate the manner in which specifically black concepts of time govern the existence of black societies and their artistic and intellectual interpreters in the New World. I also show how these cultures from the diaspora developed their own locales of resistance as well as counter-time systems to support the burdens of slavery and racial discrimination. I go on to analyze how most of the quests of self which can be found in these texts are articulated around geographical matrices of discovery/recovery of the self: the American South and the Caribbean, and in one case, Africa. These places play parallel roles in replenishing the spiritual self vis-à-vis the depersonalizing effects of life in Northern, industrial, urban centers. Finally, I explore the crucial intersections of African-centered (i.e. synchronic) concepts of time, with a female perception and consciousness of temporality which Kristeva, Hortense Spillers and others have eloquently written about.
In the following chapter, "The Construction of Black Female Selves and Identities," I investigate the crucial traits and matrices that control specific constructs of female identities and their literary representations in the black diaspora. I show how the absence of a positive self-image due to racism and self-hatred is a recurrent theme in these texts; after analyzing the often problematic relations between males and females in communities where the familial dislocations caused by slavery have left their mark, I go on to study the idiosyncratic definitions of mothering and maternal roles which have emerged throughout black cultures in the Americas. By investigating what is one of the most original aspects of these cultures as reflected in their literatures, I foreground the importance of cross-generational as well as non-biological mothering relationships that can be found in just about every text under consideration in this study. Finally, I investigate the role played by same-sex bonding and identification in the texts by these six authors. Although this study did not set out to be an analysis of representations of the constructs of hetero- and homo-sexualities in black communities from the New World—-with the obvious exception of Lorde's autobiography—-the recurrent discussion of topics pertaining to sexuality in general and to the complex nature of male-female, as well as same-sex relationship (whether merely social or explicitly erotic) led me to develop in greater depth than I would have expected these issues. This exploration of the constraints that control the specific constructs of masculinity and femininity in these texts leads me to consider Morrison's "deconstruction" of heterosexual conventions (in particular in Sula) as well as Naylor's analysis of the mechanisms of homophobia (in The Women of Brewster Place). This also causes me to question the frequency of these themes in texts by black women authors, and their near-total absence in the literatures by their male predecessors, whether on the American mainland or in the Caribbean.

My fifth chapter on the "Tropes of Empowerment in The Autobiographies by Angelou and Lorde" expands upon my comments on place, time and self-creation in relation to black women's personae. Although the other narratives in my study do not present themselves as strictly autobiographical, they do share with Angelou's and Lorde's texts a concern with assertion of self and voice, and the re-claiming of lost or neglected traditions and lives through the appropriation of language on their own terms. Lorde's Zami, A New Spelling of My Name and Angelou's I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, on the other hand, while presenting themselves as autobiographies,
subvert the conventions of this multifaceted "genre" in ways which I explore and attempt to explicate, particularly in my discussion of each author's problematic relationship with autobiographical "truth."

My conclusion on "The Uses of Voice(s) and Narrative Strategies in The Fiction by Black Women from The Diaspora" rather than closing on what is an ever-expanding subject of enquiry, remains an open-ended approach of some important questions which the craft and rhetoric of these six talented writers force us to ask: how do black female writers accommodate their idiosyncratic voices with wider, communal voices? Can one, in this day and age still posit a specifically "black female literary tradition"? What are the particular tools which black women from the United States, Barbados or Guadeloupe have at their disposal to confront these crucial issues governing narrative and voice strategies. These strategies are not mere parochial devices reserved to a few isolated communities; rather, they raise quintessential questions concerning the form of the increasingly intertextual, cosmopolitan and multicultural literatures of the years to come. Not surprisingly, these seemingly "regional" and "marginal" texts--according to conventional definitions of culture and literature--offer some of the first answers to what is an ongoing debate among all those concerned with the fate of writing.

Indeed, my intent throughout this study is to show how each writer's definition of a female--or male--self depends in part on spatial, temporal and social paradigms and constructs of blackness and femaleness. These individual definitions serve as a chronicle of the way in which multiple social, cultural, historical and linguistic factors have contributed to create ever-expanding black female literatures in the Americas.
CHAPTER I: Writing The Self, Narrating Blackness, Voicing Womanhood.

-A: Narrative and Self.

In parallel to an increased attention to the concept of self and its relation to the creative process within literature, there has been a growing rhetorical emphasis in contemporary criticism on the narrative strategies and uses of voice in literary texts. Moreover, the rules that control narrative—understood as a sequence of linguistic signs—as well as the complex question of what defines a narrator and an author and his or her relationship to the text have become major preoccupations for literary criticism.

One can, arbitrarily, accept Gérard Genette's definition of narrative as "the representation of an event or sequence of events, real or fictitious, by means of language, and more particularly, by means of written language" (Figures of Literary Discourse, 127). Not only does this definition of narrative posit a literate, i.e. written, mode but furthermore, it supposes the participation of someone (the narrator/author) without whose voice the text would not be in itself a narrative. The pervasive presence of a person and of a determinate intelligence and moral sensibility behind the text, forces the critic to interrogate the identity of the narrator—or multiple narrators—that select(s), order(s), render(s), and express(es) the literary materials and linguistic signs that structure a text. This necessary reflection upon the nature of the narrator's identity and voice(s) leads us to question the place which identity and self occupy in defining a critical discourse; indeed, identity and what one defines as the "self" are situated at the core of the writing consciousness that articulates literate discourse(s). As a matter of fact, as Genette and others suggest, a narrative follows the particular structures that are imposed by a given author, and which result from the writer's deliberate manipulations of language and of literary conventions within a given cultural, linguistic and historical context.

The concept of the individual and of what is traditionally defined as the "self" has been critical to Western societies and philosophical systems ever since the days of Aristotle and Plato.
With the emergence of the Renaissance and of more secular representations of humankind, Man -- in both his biological and metaphorical dimensions--has stood as the necessary gauge of all things and remained at the core of cultural, social and ideological representations of the world. Indeed, the self stands at the center of any creative process; this is especially true of autobiography, an enterprise that purports to write about the self in an attempt to reconcile one's life with one's self, and order the experiences of a specific writer's lifetime.

Studies such as those by Genette and Todorov, as well as those initiated by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in the field of black literatures--as illustrated most recently by his essays in The Signifying Monkey--demonstrate a tendency to think of literary works as modes of speech which are conceived as literate utterances. Therefore, any study of the narrative strategies of given texts will necessarily have to deal with the particular author's or narrator's uses and levels of voice(s) within these texts. It will also have to address the specific representations of the self that articulate the texts by this author.

Furthermore, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis has convincingly demonstrated, narrative structure is the "place where ideology is coiled"; in effect, narratives cannot be separated from the ideological contexts in which they are embedded, and of which they form significant constructs. Indeed, as DuPlessis notes, "narrative structures and subjects are like working apparatuses of ideology, factories for the 'natural' and 'fantastic' meanings by which we live . . . Indeed, narrative may function on a small scale the way that ideology functions on a large scale--as a 'system of representations by which we imagine the world as it is' " (DuPlessis, 3).

In the case of narratives that deal with the sensitive issues of representations of "race" and gender, the issue of ideological constraints is of paramount importance. As DuPlessis suggests, the European nineteenth-century romance plot, for instance, functioned as a trope for the sex-gender systems and representations of British and Continental societies of the post-Romantic era. Moreover, as Gates and other critics have demonstrated in the recently published Race, Writing and Difference, ideological constructs of what Western discourses since the eighteenth century refer to as
'race' have had a disproportionate influence upon Western literate, as well as non-literate, perceptions and representations of non-Western cultures, societies and individuals.

-B: Writing the Self.

Ever since the first artistic depictions of the prehistoric era, as well as the earliest literate endeavors ranging from the Hindu Upanisads to early Christian texts, the self has located itself at the center of all conscious efforts on the part of humans to write or depict their experiences and visions as men and women interpreting the world.

Freud and his followers have made us aware of the difficulty of defining a tangible, precise self. The inherent multiplicity of narrating voices that, according to critical theorists, control literate discourses, in a "constant tension between the one and multiplicity" 1, finds an echo in definitions of the self which are caught between a drive towards oneness and an evolving sense of becoming. James Olney remarks that "the self . . . is infinitely difficult to get at, to encompass, to know how to deal with: it bears no definition; it squirts like mercury away from observation; it is not known, except privately and intuitively . . ." (Metaphors of Self, 23). In effect, one might say that any attempt to posit the self is parallel to a definition of identity as "a process, a continual creation, partly in negation of [forces] that deny individuality and self-determination" (Byerman, 7). The self oscillates thus between two poles: oneness and the sense of a "realized self," which would be supported by a conception of life as "a unitary and unifying thing, present totally in every part of the living being" (Olney, Metaphors of Self, 27); on the other hand, a sense of the self as a process of becoming, which the works of Rousseau, Nietzsche and W.B. Yeats—as well as, as I will demonstrate, more recent texts by Maya Angelou and Audré Lorde among others—all point to. This second definition of self is one in which no set definition of a human identity can be posited once and for all; rather, one finds a multiplicity of selves-in-becoming which ground the individual's identity. Expanding upon her definition of métisage, Françoise Lionnet writes that it is "a concept of solidarity which demystifies all essentialist glorifications of unitary origins, be they racial, sexual, geographic, or cultural" (Lionnet, 9). This flux between oneness and multiplicity of selves is of course crucial within the domain of literature, wherein by definition, complex relationships between
narrator, author and text prevail, as well as equally crucial questions concerning the identity of the
said narrator and author, as I suggested earlier.

Not surprisingly, in a day and age where more and more critics proclaim the disappearance
and absence of the modern author, and its replacement by the Text, women writers, as well as male
and female authors whose traditions do not pertain to a strictly Western cultural heritage, are eager to
proclaim the centrality of their cultural identities and experiences. These culturally marked and
sexually diverse identities often lie at the core of the narratives written by non-white or female
authors. Foucault claims that

Writing has become linked to sacrifice, even to the sacrifice of life: it is now a
voluntary effacement which does not need to be represented in books since it is
brought about in the writer's very existence. The work that once had the duty of
providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill, to be its author's murderer, as
in the cases of Flaubert, Proust, and Kafka. (Foucault, 142-43)

Yet, most African-American, Caribbean and women authors are intent upon writing their
existential selves into their texts, and therefore proclaiming their presence as fully-fledged participants
in the human experience. Indeed, recent feminist psychoanalytical theorists such as Nancy Chodorow,
Jane Flax and others, have revised the orthodox Freudian accounts of the influence of gender on
identity. Whereas in Freudian theory the presence—or absence—of the phallus characterized gender
identity, for post-Freudian feminists, female identity must be thought of as an alternative, rather than
an inferior, identity; it is one that is largely shaped by the privileged relationship with the mother, as
I shall discuss in a further chapter. After indicating how girls' egos are not bound by the same rigid
and precise constraints as boys', Chodorow comments that "the basic female sense of self is
connected to the world; the basic male sense of self is separate" (126-27).

This study thus proposes to explore the conditions and strategies that control and make
possible the creation (identified with each writer's idiosyncratic uses of discourse and artistic
conventions) as well as the constructs of distinct selves—connected with social and cultural
constraints—which can be found in the texts of contemporary African-American and African-Caribbean
women writers. Moreover, these constructs are strongly determined by ideological definitions of
"race," gender and cultures which are prevalent in the societies to which these authors belong, either
as members of ethnic minorities within the West, or again as inhabitants of the Third World. Teresa de Lauretis's vindication of a feminist model of identity that is "multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory . . . an identity made up of heterogeneous representations of gender, race, and class, and often indeed across languages and cultures" (DeLauretis, 2), implies that any attempt to define a "black female identity" will have to take into account these heterogeneous representations of female selves. In effect, according to social, cultural, linguistic and geographical as well as historical differences, constructs of black women's selves will necessarily manifest themselves in highly idiosyncratic and diverse modes. One of the intentions of this work is to explore whether the cultural and geographical differences between, for instance, the French Caribbean milieu depicted in Schwarz-Bart's Pluie et vent sur Télumé Miracle and Marshall's Brooklyn-based Brown Girl, Brownstones, or the Sea-Islands in Naylor's Mama Day, are of such importance as to render any confluences of existential and critical experience and interpretation impossible.

Ideological and socio-economic strictures will therefore weigh upon any attempt to yield to a reductive conception of identity when reading texts written by black female authors: in effect, as Hazel Carby, Deborah McDowell, and other critics have recently suggested and as I will argue hereafter, the very idea of a specifically "black female language" and accompanying identity is a highly debatable one.

In such a critical endeavor therefore, one must both steer away from a "simple and reductive paradigm of 'otherness'" (John Carlos Rowe, 68) as well as avoid what Valerie Smith names the "perils of uniqueness" linked to a uniform vision of a single, sociologically-constrained black female identity ("Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other'", 50). Indeed, as Mae Gwendolyn Henderson suggests in her essay on the crucial dialogics and dialectics that articulate the African-American female literary tradition, one must develop "a model [for this tradition] that seeks to account for racial difference within gender identity and gender difference within racial identity". Henderson then suggests exploring a critical sensitivity to the "internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity," a subjectivity that is structured by "a multiple and complex social, historical, and cultural positionality" (Henderson, 18-19).
Recent work by Barthes, Todorov and Ross Chambers has forced us to reconsider what has been traditionally, and loosely, defined as "fiction". Furthermore, recent critical re-appraisals and readings of Bakhtin have helped us rediscover the hybrid, "heteroglot" nature of fiction and in particular the novel, which for the Russian critic was the heteroglot genre par excellence, inasmuch as all (literate) utterances are characterized by heteroglossia. Not only does the language of fiction manifest itself in social dialects which are expressions of social identity; the Russian critic also insists upon the centrality of the intersection of the writing consciousness with that of other(s); in the case of novelists, the "heteroglossic voices of the other(s) . . . coexist in the consciousness of real people, first and foremost in the consciousness of people who write novels" (Bakhtin, 292).

Bakhtin reinstates thus the social, ideological dimension which had been erased from the nineteenth-century bourgeois definitions of fiction. Yet as Barthes notes in Le degré zéro de l'écriture, fiction and more specially the novel and history are intimately connected in that "in both we find the construction of an autartik [sic] world which elaborates its own dimensions and limits, and organizes within these its own Time, its own Space, its population, its own set of objects and its myths" (Writing Degree Zero, 45). Not only does fiction attempt to insulate itself in its own self-defined universe, but it also purports to deform and travesty facts into the fictional "fact": "the teleology common to the Novel and to narrated History is the alienation of the facts" ("la finalité commune du Roman et de l'Histoire narrée, c'est d'aliéner les faits"). In effect, bourgeois ideology and its mythology of the "universal" claims to "[give] to the imaginary the formal guarantee of the real [while] preserving in the sign the ambiguity of a double object, at once believable and false" (47) ("donner à l'imaginaire la caution formelle du réel mais laisser à ce signe l'ambiguïté d'un objet double à la fois vraisemblable et faux") (28). Nevertheless, in Western, traditionally male-centered societies, the "universal" has been usually perceived and defined up till recently as an upper-class, Eurocentric, heterosexual vision of the world.

The blurring of such categories traditionally defined as "fact" and "fiction," as well as "truth" (as opposed to the false), is of course crucial in the case of autobiography: Timothy Dow Adams

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suggests that as a "genre," autobiography should not be viewed as historically accurate, but rather as
metaphorically authentic. As I will develop more extensively in my chapter on works by Audré
Lorde and Maya Angelou, autobiography is a crucial place in which to locate the complexities of the
identity of the writing self. In effect, autobiography is par excellence a genre—however problematic
this "genre" remains to define—wherein can be found the constant tensions that articulate the self.
These tensions occur between what Olney calls the "oneness of self" which the critic sees as "the
essential condition of selfhood" (Metaphors of Self, 24), and an awareness of an incompleteness of
being, since the life experience which is the basis of the narrative is perforce unfinished at the time
of the writing of a specific autobiography. Even more so than fiction, autobiography—"a monument of
the self as it is becoming" (Olney, Metaphors of Self, 35)—while it proceeds from an acute sense of
the narrator's past, and an equally sharp awareness of the moment of the writing act, must also allow
for a vision of an evolving self-in-becoming. Angelou's experiences of coming-to-writing through
autobiography, and her accompanying sense of intense existence through writing as well as Lorde's
vindication of a multiple persona that refuses to give up her idiosyncratic differences, both illustrate
the specificity of autobiography and of the transformations of self that it manifests.

-C: Narrating Black Selves.

In the introduction to Race: Writing and Difference, Gates notes that "ironically, Anglo-
African writing arose as a response to [Western] allegations of its absence," and that "their recording
of an authentic black voice . . . was the millenial instrument of transformation through which the
African would become the European, the slave become the ex-slave, the brute animal become the
human being" (11).

Gates's comments focus on the essentially historical and political context of the inscription of
black voices in Western literatures as the prelude to the emergence of a different cultural and literate
heritage. Indeed, a sense of "a separate Western literary tradition, a tradition of black difference"
(Gates, 12) is crucial if one wants to have a proper understanding and critical reading of texts by
black male and female authors up to the present.
If one looks more closely at texts that center around a definition, or again an evolving depiction of the self, as does autobiography, one cannot help but draw a parallel between what Gates calls the "animosity of influence" at play between black and white cultures of the Americas and the origin of the autobiographical impulse: Patricia Meyer Spacks notes that "all autobiographers wrestle with the truth of personal identity. [In individual autobiographies], the effort to assert a distinct identity seems a way to defend against the world's encroachment on the self; all suggest some attempt to invent a valid identity for defensive purposes" (Spacks, 15-16).

African-American and African-Caribbean cultures have long posited their existence and intrinsic values by using figures of resistance and overt opposition: this goes from the widespread practice of "marronnage" throughout the Caribbean to revisionist readings of the Western literary canon, such as Césaire's *Une tempête* after Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, to "signifying upon" (or against) both the canon and the very founding texts of distinct black literatures in English and French, as is the case with Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* or again with Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de violence*.

Although the "repudiation principle" (to use Houston Baker's terminology) played a crucial role in the emergence of a distinct black tradition, early black authors and writers of nineteenth-century narratives did not only write against their oppressive environment or the social conventions of their times. They also wrote for their lives; as Gates remarks, "We black people tried to write ourselves out of slavery, a slavery even more profound than mere physical bondage. Accepting the challenge of the great white Western tradition, black writers wrote as if their lives depended upon it . . ." (Gates, *Race*, Writing and Difference, 12-13).

Again, one cannot help but notice the remarkable confluences between literature as an act of writing-the self and texts that bear an unmistakable autobiographical stamp. As Spacks suggests, "autobiographies affirm identity . . . [and] autobiography assures its author of his existence beyond all possibility of philosophical denial" (19). In effect, the titles of some of the founding texts of African-American literature, Jarena Lee's 1836 spiritual autobiography, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Written by Herself*, as well as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of The
Life of Frederick Douglass. An American Slave. Written by Himself, proclaim the authorship and humanity of the two writers, while underlining the unescapable contradictions of their lives both as black Americans and slaves, or as in Lee's case, as an American female of color. While both authors wrote their way out of bondage, they also inscribed their particular humanity and voices by empowering themselves through writing. Paradoxically, this act of self-empowerment through literacy was made possible by mastering the very symbol of Western cultural domination and rational discourse.

The texts of Lee, Douglass and Harriet Jacobs clearly give evidence for the development of a distinct black narrative tradition, one intrinsically linked to the presentation of autobiographical texts focusing on various aspects of development of a concept of black selves. Yet, the obstacles that the authors of these early, and predominantly autobiographical narratives, had to overcome were huge. Classical Western autobiography proceeded from a strong sense of self: Jean-Jacques Rousseau defied the readers of Les Confessions to equal his life achievements and autobiographical feat without ever questioning his existence. More recently, Gertrude Stein or Sartre could engage in re-defining the traditional terms of narratives of the self (in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas and in Les Mots); black male and female authors on the other hand had to create their own space of literate and autobiographical writing within the boundaries of a society that denied them their very existence, both as individuals, and as a community. As Robert Hemenway remarks, writing about the self presents black authors with an immense difficulty: "Black American autobiography is a unique genre. Black autobiographers usually are people who have forged their identity despite attempts to deny them a sense of personal worth; the tension between individual and stereotype, between what one thinks of himself and what white society expects him to be, confers special energy to the autobiographical prose" (Hemenway, 278).

Indeed, writing and reading become "acts of literacy" for black writers from the diaspora who describe the conditions of their oppression even as they affirm their dignity and equality as English- or French-speaking blacks. To quote from William Andrews's milestone study of the first century of African-American autobiographies, one can concur with the critic's assertion that "the
history of Afro-American autobiography is one of increasingly free storytelling, signaled in the ways black narratives address their readers and reconstruct personal history, ways often at variance with literary conventions and social proprieties of discourse" (To Tell A Free Story, xi). Any discussion of a specific African-American--and to a large extent African-Caribbean--literary tradition must necessarily include the two crucial tropes which identify literariness and around which the discourse on black literature in America has been more specifically articulated:

-the first one is the African-American 's "two-ness," as defined by W.E.B. DuBois in The Souls of Black Folk: "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body . . ." (16-17).

-the second trope is concerned with the African-American's--and Caribbean's--"invisibility" for which Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man established a lasting paradigm, despite the absence of fully-developed female characters in this novel. This invisibility can also be read in the absence, until very recently at least, of black discourses and sensibilities from the dominant, and univocal canon of Western literatures in French or English, an absence which causes Gates to write that "the trope of blackness in Western discourse has signified absence at least since Plato" (Race, Writing and Difference, 6-7).

For black women writers, the difficulty of writing their selves, and the resulting rhetorical invisibility and absence, increases since they have had to write from their own experiences against sexist and racist practices. These practices originate both in the patriarchal establishment and within the male-centered black literary tradition. One of the most outspoken of nineteenth-century black intellectual women, Frances E.W. Harper, the acclaimed author of Iola Leroy (1894), wrote in an essay on "Woman's Political Future" that "if the fifteenth century discovered America to the Old World, the nineteenth is discovering woman to herself . . . ." In an almost feminist echo of DuBois's famous assertion that the "problem of the color line is the problem of the Twentieth Century," Harper added that "today we stand on the threshold of woman's era, and woman's work is grandly constructive" (Carby, 301).

Contemporary feminist critics such as Hélène Cixous have likened the status of women and the women who came before them to that of colonial people and societies; Cixous writes in her
manifesto, *The Laughter of The Medusa*, that "as soon as [women] begin to speak, at the same time that they're taught their name they can be taught that their territory is black; because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark. You're afraid" (247). In the same appropriative and indiscriminate equation of gender oppression with racial discrimination—an appropriation which presents ideological problems of its own—Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar stress the parallels that existed between women's conditions in nineteenth-century England and America, and the conditions under which black slaves had to toil and survive in those same societies: "just as blacks [in the South] did, women in patriarchy have traditionally cultivated accents of acquiescence in order to gain freedom to live on their own terms" (*The Mad Woman in The Attic*, 74). The traditional racial invisibility of blacks in America, epitomized by Ellison, must therefore be compounded by the added dimension of gender; in Barbara Smith's words, "black women's existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these, are in the 'real world' of white or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown" ("Towards A Black Feminist Criticism", 157).

The woman of color in the Americas experiences something not unlike the "twoness" that DuBois ascribed to African-Americans in general; although one might better describe it as a "threeness" (a condition of invisibility and discrimination based on perceptions of "race," gender and class), black women in the New World experienced life and wrote—when they were authors—from the perspective of a "multitiered," triply divided personality, as women, blacks and individuals associated with the working-classes. As Mary V. Dearborn notes, the ethnic woman in America, "writes with a sense of divided self, of being both determined by ancestry and entirely self-made . . . the dominant theme of her fiction is the tension between ancestral and communal definitions of self" (55).

As a close reading of black women's texts, as well as other black texts for that matter, indicates, rather than merely narrowing down to one, essentialist "arch-text of Blackness," these narratives thrive in a diversity of voices, genres and themes. There remains however an unmistakable common ground of experience that, in the case of African-American or African-Caribbean women, goes back to a shared African heritage and history of slavery, constructing as it were, a female lineage within the societies that constitute the Americas.
In the past ten years a lively and crucial debate concerning the existence of a black female literary tradition and of its intrinsic characteristics has arisen, goaded on by the works of Barbara Smith, Deborah McDowell and Hazel Carby among others. Smith's "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism" (1977) played a fundamental role as one of the very first attempts to posit a black feminist--and lesbian--critical discourse within contemporary critical rhetoric. Smith was intent upon exploring the intersection of sexual and racial politics with the issue of black and female identity, and showed how race and gender politics were quintessential elements of black women's writings. However, people such as McDowell soon faulted Smith for her essentialist concept of a "black female language" which was to embody the existential experiences of black women, along with her equally essentialist conception of a distinct black female identity.

Deborah McDowell took Smith to task for her imprecise definition of a black feminist aesthetics and language, noting that Smith "fails to describe or provide examples of this unique language" (McDowell, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism", 189). By forcing critics of African-American literature to adopt a clearer definition of black feminist criticism and enlarging its scope to black males, white women as well as males writing "from a feminist or political perspective," McDowell was cautioning her peers against a facile reliance on essentialist definitions, or again reductive definitions of a would-be black female "consciousness" or "vision".

Whereas McDowell's 1980 essay "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" was an indication of the growing importance of the theoretical debate within the world of Afro-Americanists, Hazel Carby's Reconstruction of Womanhood (1987) approaches the more-than-a-century-old heritage of black women writers and orators from a historical and intellectual perspective. Debating the existence of a--or several--black female literary tradition(s) therefore, remains a controversial task. While some critics, such as Mary V. Dearborn, claim that the ethnic woman's "double consciousness" often manifests itself in a "curious and varied alliance with the literary tradition," and that "literary tradition, like ancestry, is inevitable" (55), other critics still challenge the very existence of such a tradition.
This is the case with Hazel Carby, whose main reason for questioning the reality and viability of a black feminist discourse and literary tradition is its "reliance on a common, or shared [black female] experience [that] is essentialist and ahistorical . . . Black feminist criticism presupposes the existence of a tradition and has concentrated on establishing a narrative of that tradition." Carby concludes by saying that "black feminist criticism [should] be regarded critically as a problem, not a solution, as a sign that should be interrogated, a locus of contradiction" and adds that her own study Reconstructing Womanhood "does not assume the existence of a tradition or traditions of black women writing" (Carby, 14, 16). Although the same critic dismisses black feminist criticism as "essentially defensive in its posture, attempting to discover, prove and legitimate the intellectual worthiness of black women" as subjects or creators (Carby, 16), her project paradoxically supposes a clear intellectual lineage from early nineteenth-century women down to the present. As Valerie Smith remarks, while Carby is most critical of "traditions of Afro-American intellectual thought that have been constructed as paradigmatic of Afro-American history" (Carby, 16), and "asserts that she is not engaged in the process of constructing the contours of a black female tradition, [she nevertheless] establishes a lineage of black women intellectuals engaged in the ideological debates of their time" (V. Smith, "Black Feminist Theory", 48).

The polemic surrounding the existence and nature of a specifically black female literary tradition seems therefore to remain as complex and inconclusive as ever. In Barbara Christian's words, "the term black feminist criticism continues to be undefinable—not fixed . . . an indication that so much still needs to be done—for example, reading the works of the writers, in order to understand their ramifications" ("But What Do We Think We're Doing Anyway?", 72).

Another black critic has also taken to task the very concept of "tradition," from a black woman's and writer's perspective: as in an echo of the debate around the concept of Tradition in the earlier part of the twentieth century, Mary-Helen Washington remarks that:

the term [tradition] has often been used to exclude or misrepresent women . . . The creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of power not of justice, and power has always been in the hands of men . . . Women are the dispossessed. Our 'ritual journeys,' our 'inarticulate voices,' our 'symbolic spaces' are rarely the same as men's. [This fact] and the appropriation by men of the power to define tradition account for women's absence from our written records (Invented Lives, xvii).
Interestingly enough, Washington’s questioning of an established African-American tradition is germane to Gilbert and Gubar’s de-construction of T. S. Eliot’s concept of Tradition, which for the two feminists is part of the “emergence of the modern male discourse [and an] attempt to construct his story of a literary history in which women play no part” (No Man’s Land, 154).

- D: Black Women’s ‘Margin of Existence’ and Coming Into Voice.

It seems difficult to attempt to base the heritage from which black women in the Americas have been writing solely upon an essentialist, or a-historical, foundation. Indeed, if these women from the American Northeast, Guadeloupe, Barbados by way of Brooklyn, and the Deep South, share anything, it is an acute awareness of historical, sociological and geographical constraints. These strictures have influenced and molded a common ground of human experiences, emotions and reminiscences which provide the site where one should look if one claims to define the identities of women in the New World whose ancestors were brought from Africa.

As I suggested earlier, class, “race” and gender construct an undeniable “triple-consciousness” for the female descendants of slaves in America and the Caribbean. Furthermore, as I shall now discuss, specific historical and sociological conditions, as well as perceptions of place and space, have great bearing upon the particular modes of existence--and therefore identities--for blacks, and in particular black women, in the Americas.

Any critical reading of or discourse on texts written by African-American or African-Caribbean women poses the question of the nature and status of their texts within the larger body of black literatures from the diaspora. In effect, if one takes an overview of the historical development of these literatures, it is remarkable that the seminal texts that have been used to support the controlling tropes of “twoness” and “invisibility” that govern these literatures--from Equiano’s Life to Douglass’s Narrative and Ellison’s Invisible Man--have all been texts written and narrated by males. A most paradoxical, albeit involuntary, effect of “mise en abyme” is at work here: the very texts that purport to establish and document a neglected literary tradition by illustrating both its idiosyncracies
and its previous invisibility, proceed in fact essentially from a rather visible and univocal male authority and authorship. This predominantly male-centered vision of writing results from the fact that, until recently at least, in the black literary tradition, “women’s writing is considered singular and anomalous, not representative and universal . . . and writing about black women [one of the traits of black women’s literature] is not considered as racially significant as writing about black men” (Washington, *Invented Lives*, xx).

Paule Marshall gives a perfect example of the complexity of black women’s invisibility when she reminisces about her childhood as the daughter of a transplanted Barbadian family in Brooklyn, and notes that “[her] mother and her friends were after all the female counterparts of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Indeed, you might say they suffered a triple invisibility, being black, female and foreigners. They really didn’t count in American society except as a source of cheap labor . . . And they fought back, using the only weapon at their command: the spoken word” (“From the Poets in the Kitchen”, 27). In this specific case, the traditional "twoness" of blacks has been contrived into the "triple invisibility" of black immigrant women workers from the Caribbean.

As has often been the case with disenfranchised groups, black women have used the power of words and language to assert their existence. Indeed, from the early days of slavery on, blacks in the New World learnt to put words to good use; in the sugar plantations of the Caribbean or again the Southern plantocracy, "[the planters'] patriarchy was the bedrock upon which the slave society was founded and slavery exaggerated the pattern of subjugation that patriarchy had established" (Carby, 24-25). As William Andrews has demonstrated, however, the master-slave relationship often followed a dialogic pattern in which the terms of the relationship "were often the subject of negotiations in and through dialogic verbal jousts" from jokes to open speech acts of defiance (*To Tell A Free Story*, 275). Both Douglass’s *Narrative* and Jacobs’s *Incidents* are examples of the power that slaves acquired through the negotiation of speech acts, as in the case of Douglass’ confrontation with his master’s slave-breaker Covey (103-04) or again Jacobs’s control over the matter of her marriage to a sympathetic white man in her text (chapter VII). Words have always been weapons in the mouths of the disenfranchised, as Schwarz-Bart’s *Télumée* evidences when she says of her mother.
Victoire that "[n]otre mère [. . .] tenait la parole humaine pour un fusil chargé, et ressentait parfois comme une hémorragie à converser, selon ses propres termes" (Pluie et vent sur Télimée Miracle, 31)  

The literate power of black women slaves, however, always remained very fragile. They were continuously imprisoned within the conventions of late eighteenth- or nineteenth-century ideologies of womanhood and the resulting plantation romances and novels: these texts portrayed slave women as "unfeminine" creatures, fit only for physical work; yet they were also feared for being overtly feminine, and were depicted as lecherous monsters to which "powerless" white men always fell prey. Indeed, as Angela Davis notes, "judged by the evolving nineteenth-century ideology of femininity . . . black women were practically anomalies" (5).

The contradictory expectations put upon black women by the conventions of, for example, nineteenth-century "True (white) Womanhood," as well as the economic imperatives of the slavocracy, explain why "the female-male relations within the slave community could not conform to the dominant [white] ideological patterns" (Davis, 13). Furthermore, in contrast to the highly hierarchical relations between the sexes that prevailed in the upper classes of the antebellum South and sugar plantations of the Caribbean, the relations that existed between men and women within the slave quarters appear to have been much more equal ones. Indeed, as Davis remarks, not only did black women bear "the terrible equality in oppression" with their male companions in the sugarcane- or cotton-fields, but "they enjoyed equality with their men in their domestic environment [and] also asserted their equality aggressively in challenging the inhuman institution of slavery . . . at every turn" (Davis, 19, 25). In effect, not only did a complex family-life develop within the slave quarters encompassing husbands and wives, but letters and diaries left by nineteenth-century black women--particularly on the American mainland--clearly indicate cases of "marriages based on mutual affection," and of "tender tales of courtship and young love" (Dorothy Sterling, x, xv).

Male-female relations were not the only essential relations that developed during the somber days of slavery: for survival's sake, female slaves were forced to develop other means than language in order to counter the sexist and racist modes of oppression which they experienced daily, both in
the American South and in the Caribbean islands. Black women, both free and in bondage, derived a strong sense of identity from their sheer numbers and from the tight-knit communities which they formed for practical and protective reasons. Consequently, their masters and mistresses, and later on, employers, experienced a definite inability in entering their private world, once they had left the "big house" or the fields. Yet, despite the existence of strong family ties among male and female slaves, the brutal conditions of bondage, as well as the constant precariousness of their positions within the planiocratic economy tended to destabilize long-lasting relations between male and female slaves. This resulted in black women drawing together; Deborah Gray White notes that it was "probably easier for slave women to sustain stable emotional relationships with other bondwomen than with bondmen," and that "male-female relationships were fraught with more uncertainty about the future than female-to-female relationships. The female network and its emotional sustenance was always there" (White, 132).

Each of the texts that I consider stresses in its idiosyncratic way the importance of this "female network," enacted in as many oral, social, spiritual, or literate rituals as the diversity of the black diaspora of the New World allows for. This specifically female network is of course observable in early narratives by women slaves, as with Harriet Jacobs's account of how her grandmother was instrumental in securing for her the crucial safety of a place of hiding, unbeknownst to practically anyone else on the plantation (Incidents in The Life of A Slave Girl, chapter XXI). Indeed, this form of cross-generational female bonding played a central role in the consolidation of black female identities, as is evidenced in Marshall's Praisesong for The Widow or again in Schwarz-Bart's Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracé. A perfect example of this type of bonding can be found at the beginning of Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, when Janie's grand-mother empowers her grandchild with the voice to preach from the pulpit of her own experience and persona as a black woman--reminding Janie of the quintessential power of words to define oneself in adversity, and goes on to say: "Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high but they wasn't no pulpit for me, so whilst Ah was tendin' you of nights Ah said Ah'd save de text for you" (32).

In a striking parallel, Télumée's grand-mother, Reine Sans Nom is the one who transmits the oral and ancient cultural knowledge to her grandchild and her young friend Elie (76-79). Maria Tatar
and Ruth B. Bottingheim and other feminist critics have suggested that in the Western tradition, fairytales and folk-stories are the locus of a forgotten female, oral tradition which has gradually been erased; in a parallel way, one can say that the transmission--both oral and more recently, literary--of an African-derived folk-culture within the black diaspora has been crucial in bringing about an awareness of distinct African-American and African-Caribbean literary traits.

Inasmuch as the oral folk-tales—which in the American South, as well as in "contes créoles" from the French Caribbean, were often narrated by women—were not considered to pertain to "high culture," they were often discarded and went unrecorded by the authorities of the (white) cultural establishment. Not surprisingly, one of the very first people to pay serious attention to this often female-centered tradition of story-telling was Zora Neale Hurston in her landmark stories published in *Mules and Men* (1935).

In the continuing debate about the existence and specificities of a black female literary tradition, Mary-Helen Washington writes that "if there is a single distinguishing feature of the literature of black women [it is that] it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women [. . .] women talk to other women in this tradition, and their friendships with other women are vital to their growth and well-being [and are] an essential aspect of self-definition for women" (*Invented Lives*, xxi). As I suggested earlier, all of the texts I have chosen for my study clearly participate in the affirmation and construction of what William Andrews has termed the "precarious margin" of a community of black women, one that is "a female world of love and ritual [. . .] a very private world of emotional realities central to women's lives [that was built around] social conventions and rituals which accompanied virtually every important event in a woman's life;" this "precarious margin" also manifests itself at times in "generic and unself-conscious patterns of single-sex or homosocial networks" (*To Tell A Free Story*, 254). My discussion of Morrison's *Sula*, Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Lorde's autobiographical *Zami*, will further explore the signification of these tropes of both "unself-conscious" and conscious same-sex identification and bonding.

It would of course be antihistorical and artificial to leave out of the universe of female bonding the relations that have always existed between white and black women within American and
Caribbean societies, both during slavery and since. In the majority of cases in the texts I am discussing however, these relations are represented in a hierarchical and class-defined manner. This is clearly the case in Schwarz-Bart's depiction of the relationship between Télumée and Mme Desaragne, the wealthy planter's wife who has hired her as a maid. This is equally the case in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* where Mrs Breedlove works as a house maid for a white family on the other side of town, and consequently neglects her own children in favor of the "pretty" blue-eyed, corn yellow-haired girl, the child of her masters, in a clear manifestation of an obsessive identification of the good and the beautiful with white people and values (86-87). Another example of unequal relationship between white and black female characters can be found in Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*: Harriet Amron, the descendant of a Philadelphia slave-trader, who sees neighboring black children as "dark knots of figures," believes that she can actually bribe or buy off the "friendship" of Merle Kimbona, so as to get back the love of her husband Saul (438-43). Harriet's materialist commodification and trivialization of her relationship with Merle is a modern echo of the financial predicaments in which women such as Harriet Jacobs found themselves when seeking to gain their freedom. Indeed, the fact that their emancipation from bondage depended on the good will of sympathetic whites outweighed any sense of female solidarity in Jacobs's mind. As Mary-Helen Washington has remarked about Harriet Jacobs's heroine, "the buying and selling of Linda Brent . . . is an act that demonstrates the white woman's power and the black woman's powerlessness" (*Invented Lives*, 11).

There existed, of course, a number of white women, notably among the abolitionist groups in the nineteenth century, whose perceptions of black women were not totally distorted by the official ideologies of patriarchy and racism prevalent at the time. However, as Hazel Carby has suggested in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, and as the complex ties which women as different as Harriet Jacobs, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston and others maintained with their white female friends--whether they be friends, mentors, patrons, or readers--seem to indicate, an authentic and lasting sisterhood between black and white women was difficult to achieve. This was particularly true as long as the articulations of gender, race and class, specific to American history and society, were not recognized. Indeed, one of the few illustrations of a genuine, albeit short, friendship between women of different
colors can be found in Morrison’s Beloved: it depicts the encounter between a pregnant, fugitive
Sethe and Amy Denver, a white woman equally on the run, who helps the fugitive slave deliver her
baby Denver and make it safely to the river that will take her and her child to freedom. Morrison is
very careful to stress both the gender and the class nature of this chance encounter and momentary
solidarity between "two throw-away" women when her narrator reflects that "a pateroller [sic] passing
would have sniggered to see two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws, a slave and a barefoot
white woman with unpinned hair, wrapping a ten-minute-old baby in the rags they wore" (Beloved,
84-85).

Black women in the Americas consequently occupied a singularly "precarious margin,"
isolated both from most white women by racism as well as from their male companions by gender
difference and sexist biases. Until Alice Walker’s recovery—in her landmark essay, "Looking for
Zora" (1975)—of Zora Neale Hurston’s central role as a cultural anthropologist, folklorist, writer and
intellectual figure during the Harlem Renaissance, almost no woman writer figured among the
established figures of African-American literature, with the possible exception of Gwendolyn Brooks.
Women artists were essentially relegated to the early musical tradition of the blues and classical jazz
era. The same can be said of the Francophone and Anglophone Caribbean, where with the exception
of the "problematic" cases of Mayotte Capécia in Martinique—the author of two virulently
"assimilationist" texts, Je suis martiniquaise (1948) and La Négresse blanche (1950)—and Jean Rhys, a
white creole from Dominica, women authors were absent from Caribbean discourse until Sylvia
Wynter’s early works (The Hills of Hebron, 1962) and those by Maryse Condé and Schwarz-Bart in
the French-speaking islands.

Critics have suggested a historical explanation for the absence of women’s voices from the
body of officially "canonized" African-American or Caribbean texts; the earliest known and circulated
slave narratives, which are in effect the cornerstones of an authentic African-American narrative
tradition, were written by men. Consequently, these male-centered texts "enshrin[ed] the cultural
definitions of masculinity" by describing "not only a journey from slavery to freedom but from
slavehood to manhood" (Valerie Smith, 35). This was true for the American mainland at least, and

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until the very recent recoveries of major authors such as Hurston, Larsen or Jacobs. As Frances Foster notes, although they belonged themselves to an oppressed group, "black men in the Americas shared the nineteenth-century predilection for defining women in terms of manners, morals and motherhood, and for limiting the female protagonist to the genteel writing designed for the woman reader [. . .] few slave narrators appear to have noticed that their pictures of slavery were essentially masculine" (Foster, 66).

James Olney, in the coda to his essay on the autobiographical narratives by Douglass and Booker T. Washington, suggests a major difference in similarly autobiographical narratives written by black women and notes that "autobiographies in the Jacobs-Hurston tradition [. . .] are much less concerned with racial encounters than with sexual encounters, much more trained on the relationships of men and women, whether black or white, than on the relationships of the races, black and white" ("The Founding Fathers-Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington", 22).

Once again, the impossibility of setting up a unique model of a "black literary tradition" is apparent: male slave narratives such as Douglass's or Booker T. Washington's, while affirming the essential dignity of their authors, also inscribed themselves within the quintessentially American tradition of the "self-made man" story. Slave narratives by women, on the other hand, did not follow the same direction; whereas in one critic's words, "every anthology of Afro-American literary tradition has set forth a model of literary paternity in which each male author vies with his predecessor for greater authenticity, greater control over his voice, thus fulfilling the mission his forefathers left unfinished" (Washington, Invented Lives, xix), black women's oral and literate traditions have not proceeded from a similar "anxiety of [paternal] influence." Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, in her essay that elaborates upon what she considers a distinct "black woman writer's literary tradition" asserts that:

Unlike Bloom's "anxiety of influence" model [. . .] and unlike Gilbert and Gubar's "anxiety of authorship" model [. . .] within a white patriarchal tradition, [her] present model configures a tradition of black woman writers generated less by neurotic anxiety or dis-ease than by an emancipatory impulse which freely engages both hegemonic and ambiguously (non)hegemonic discourse (Henderson, 37).

In effect, early texts by black women, such as Jacobs's Incidents in The Life of A Slave Girl seem more intent in exploring inner spaces and relations within a given community than being
directed outwards, as the texts recounting the male slaves' escape to the North typically represent. As Valerie Smith comments, "Jacobs's tale is not the classic story of the triumph of the individual will. . . it is more a story of a triumphant self-in relation" (33). Jean Fagan Yellin's untiring scholarship asserted Harriet Jacobs's full authorship and forces us to focus on the fascinating confluences and differences between Douglass's and Jacobs's texts. When confronted with similar bondage and racial prejudice, and the added threat of sexual abuse, what caused "Linda Brent" not to escape to the North were essentially domestic, and as it were motherly--and according to conventions, quintessentially "feminine"--considerations. Indeed, where male slave narratives emulated at times the stories of traditional eighteenth- or nineteenth-century male archetypal Western "overreachers" such as Tom Jones, Julien Sorel, Pip or Eugène de Rastignac, Harriet Jacobs had to evolve her own narrative mode by incorporating both the conventional rhetoric of the earlier Western traditions of the sentimental novel--one supposedly more acceptable to nineteenth-century definitions of "women's literature"--while appropriating to her narrative a plot "more compatible with the received notions of masculinity than with those of [nineteenth-century womanhood]" (Valerie Smith, 28).

Furthermore, as I will suggest in my chapters on the construction of specific female identities and communities in the New World, representations of motherhood play a crucial part in establishing black female selves, despite remaining highly distinct from the accepted maternal roles common to masculinist and Eurocentric cultures.

-E: Narrative and Spatial Confinement in Black Women's Texts.

Jacobs's text is also an essential gauge in the manner in which it establishes distinct literary traits of African-American literary traditions through its idiosyncratic uses of place and space, which I will discuss more in depth in my chapter on place and displacement and the construction of black female identities in the texts of my study.

The "precarious margin" which black women until very recently at least have occupied in the hierarchy, culture and relation to the powers-that-be of their respective societies is made perfectly emblematic by Jacobs's escape into the "loophole of retreat" of her grandmother's garret crawl-space.
In the ex-slave's own words, this was a "dismal hole [which] was to be [her] home for a long, long time" (Incidents in The Life of A Slave Girl, 116) out of mere survival's sake. From this nine-by-seven-foot and three-foot-high space she was able to hear and keep an eye on her loved ones, first among whom were her children, even as she transformed this refuge into a "keyhole through which she unlock[ed] further mysteries of the power relationships in her world" (W. Andrews, 258). Moreover, "Linda Brent" also subverts the traditional controlling power of the male gaze which Irigary has elaborated upon: she spies upon her former master, unbeknownst to him, since he actually believes that she has succeeded in escaping to the North (Incidents, chapters XXI through XXIX).

Black literatures, cultures and peoples from the diaspora have long posited sites of escape and resistance which are intrinsic to their need for spiritual survival as distinct people and descendants of forcibly displaced Africans. Such locales have varied from metaphorical and spiritual Guinea, the "Guinée" which is the home of the dead in the oral tradition of the Francophone islands, to Haiti, "the first independent black nation," or as in the case of Marshall’s Praisesong for The Widow, Africa as represented by the Caribbean island of Carriacou, in a reversal of the "middle passage" and of the location of the promised land. It can also be represented by the barren or inhospitable mountains and swamps of the Caribbean or from the American South to which many slaves escaped in the past, as is the case with Linda Brent's temporary hiding in the mosquito-, reptile-infested Snaky Swamp, in Jacobs' text (chapter XX). It is also of course symbolized by the North, to which Morrison's Sethe in Beloved successfully escapes, or again by Canada, a long-hoped for place of refuge and dignity that appears in several spirituals as well as in the title of Ishmael Reed's riotous Flight to Canada.

Geography therefore has always been an essential component of the several black identities that have emerged in the New World. In effect, each of the journeys of retreat or refuge—either in a metaphorical or actual manner—has resulted in the construction of private spaces both of male and female selves, of what William Andrews calls "psychosocial spaces" of blackness. However, as I will elaborate more at length in my chapter on place and displacement, the emergence of specifically
female traits within African-American and African-Caribbean literatures call up certain recurrent
tropes of place and space that appear within the very first texts written by black women.

Black males' quests often took them away from their original communities in an outward
motion: this is the case with Wright's young Richard's flight to the North as well as with the
Invisible Man's escape from the Southern college he attends at the beginning of Ellison's text; it can
also be found in several of Baldwin's heroes. Black women's quests, on the other hand, have often
been charted in equally spiritual and geographical terms which correspond to the spatial constraints
within which women have had to evolve in traditional cultures, and which I shall develop further.
Deborah McDowell has written that "the journey of the black male character in works by black men
takes him underground. It is a 'descent into the underworld,' and is primarily political and social in
its implications," as in Wright's Black Boy, Ellison's Invisible Man or Baraka's The System of
Dante's Hell. Conversely, according to McDowell, "the black female's journey . . . though at times
touching the political and social, is basically a personal and psychological journey" ("New Directions
for Black Feminist Criticism", 157). Rather than representing a severing of ties with the place of
origin, black women's journeys often constitute what Mary-Helen Washington calls "a reverse Middle
Passage, taking them and us from the United States to the West Indies, to Africa and back to the
United States again," as is clearly the case with the various locales in Marshall's Praisesong for The
Widow ("Afterword", Brown Girl, Brownstones, 324). As a closer reading of our texts will show, the
American South, the Caribbean islands, and in one instance, Africa, do indeed play a major role as
spiritual locales of retreat and psychic recovery for several female characters--and a few male ones--
from these various narratives.

Black women also sometimes run away just as men do, as is the case with Morrison's Sula,
Helga Crane in Larsen's Quicksand--who goes off to Europe--Téfumée's mother Victoire, or Maya's
beautiful, yet distant, mother in Angelou's I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings. At other times, they
attempt to recover their identity and find empowerment through mental growth and increased self-
confidence, despite a hostile environment that denies them any existence; this is of course the case
for "Linda Brent," as it remains more than a century later for Marshall's Selina in Brown Girl,
Brownstones, and for Hurston's Janie in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Such women fight against
situations reminiscent of the ones described by Gilbert and Gubar in their depiction of the "anxiety of confinement," found in nineteenth-century texts by Anglo-American women writers such as Austen, the Brontës, or Emily Dickinson. This sense of confinement is both a literal and figurative one: "... figuratively, such women were, locked into male texts, texts from which they could escape only through ingenuity and indirection. It is not surprising, then that spatial imagery of enclosure and escape... characterizes much of their writing" (The Mad Woman in the Attic, 83).

These same words could have been used to describe the predicament of Harriet Jacobs's narrator in her famous account of her seven-year-long self-imposed confinement in her grandmother's attic. Furthermore, one finds the same trope of confinement in Morrison's description of Geraldine— one of many Southern bourgeois "thin, particular brown girls"—and of the fits of depression and rebellion against the tight-knit world and staunch conventions that control such women's lives in Morrison's The Bluest Eye. These women are alienated from their Southern, rural roots and have become the hostages of what Susan Willis calls the "upper reaches of bourgeois reification"; Geraldine and other "sugar-brown Mobile girls [who] move through the streets without a stir [. . .] are not fretful, nervous or shrill"; indeed, they "go to land-grant colleges, normal schools and learn how to do the white men's work with refinement; home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul" (The Bluest Eye, 68).

This sense of stifling confinement is also physically present in Luther Neeed's forced seclusion of his wife Willa Prescott Neeed in Naylor's Linden Hills, as it is also conspicuous in Larsen's description in Quicksand of Helga Crane's flight to Europe in a move away from the strictures of racial classification and hierarchies, only to discover that she cannot escape from her racially-mixed identity and culture.

The trope of confinement therefore manifests itself in the attempts made by characters such as Helga Crane to escape from the oppressive social and racial constraints by which they are categorized in racially-divisive societies in which they are forced to "wear the mask," to use Paul Laurence Dunbar's metaphor of the double-identity of blacks in the Americas. This is of course literally the case, as I will discuss, in Morrison's The Bluest Eye, where young Pecola Breedlove in
a pathetic travesty of Dunbar's oft-quoted trope of the mask, actually attempts to acquire a new racial (i.e. white) identity. It is also the case in a reverse mode in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* when Kiswana Brown rejects her "white" Christian name, and engages in a process of ideological rebirth that, so she hopes, will bring her a new spiritual identity.

Confinement can also be perceived at the more metaphorical level of narrative discourses to which minorities and in particular black women from the Americas have been relegated over the centuries. Once again, Hurston's work is emblematic of the many constraints that have governed black female writers' lives. In her discussion of Hurston as "an ethnic female author," Mary V. Dearborn remarks that the author of *Mules and Men* "confronted each of the factors that have so often complicated ethnic female authorship: questions of genre, interrelationship of identity and authorship in ethnic women's lives," among other issues. Hurston's complex and controversial personality, the range of her work from ethnographical collections to fiction and journalistic essays, and her lifelong struggles to be acknowledged as a leading black and female voice within American literature, seem to concentrate on her person some of the crucial questions which still dominate the debate around black women's literature. These would include the terms and conditions of female empowerment, the deliberate subversion or manipulation of genres the multiplicity of voices (similar to Bakhtin's concept of "polyphonic discourse") that can be found in many writers' works, and, the tension between an ancient oral, "feminine" tradition of story-telling, and the more formal, indeed male-centered, conventions that governed Western literatures up till recently.

As Chesnutt and DuBois had done before her, Hurston was interested in exploiting the rich materials made available to her in the spirituals, worksongs, proverbs, porch "lies" of the people she met during her trips through the South and the Caribbean. In order to interpret the rich lore and vernacular culture of the people among whom she had grown up, the Barnard College graduate was forced into the position of a de facto "cultural translator," to use Hemenway's expression. She was a mediator between a white, "literate," essentially male-centered world, and the universe of voodoo charms and conjuring techniques that she observed during her trips to Southern, black rural or urban communities.
Hurston's posture as a mediator corresponds in effect to a discursive tradition within African-American literature in which the spokespeople for the black community locate themselves, at some point at least, outside of their group. This posture can be found in Douglass's description of the "rude and apparently incoherent slave songs" that he heard while still in bondage (*Narrative*, 37). Interestingly enough, black women—possibly because of the sense of continued connection with the outside world which post-Freudian feminists see as part of the female psyche—and which I mentioned earlier in reference to Chodorow, Flax and Dinnerstein, and their revision of Freud's theories—do not situate themselves in a totally external mode. Indeed, Hurston did not place herself outside of the black oral folk tradition—in the manner that Wright does in *Black Boy* for instance—but rather, fully empathized with this tradition, while attempting all through her career as an author to re-create it in a more literary idiom.

By adopting a mediatory pose, Hurston located herself as the "threshold figure" that Barbara Johnson sees as emblematic of the inside/outside structure of her texts; in the same critic's opinion, the "gatepost stance between black and white cultures" which Hurston adopted, with other black female writers of her time—such as Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen—was, "very much part of her Harlem Renaissance persona" (Johnson, "Thresholds of Difference", 279). Hurston's stance brought her much criticism on the part of her black male peers during her lifetime; they dismissed her for, among other things, her "minstrel techniques," and for having pandered to a condescending white audience. In an arresting manner, the same tension between an inside and an outside focus is found in as recent a work as Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), where Mama Day's granddaughter Cocoa, a stubbornly emancipated young woman who has moved to New York, cannot break from or escape the danger from the darker forces of her native Sea Island. Once again, where male heroes escape (Douglass, young Richard) or decide to hibernate (Ellison's nameless invisible protagonist), the heroines of women's narratives choose to maintain a spiritual, if not physical connection with their locale of origin (Linda Brent, Hurston, Naylor's Cocoa in *Mama Day*, or again Marshall's Avey in *Praisesong for The Widow*).

The emergence of an autonomous black female voice is very much at stake in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In a key scene at the beginning of the text, Janie's husband Joe
Starks abruptly censures his young wife when she is called upon to speak up; he declares that "mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (69). Starks here clearly delineates the patriarchal conventions concerning the limitations of what a woman's public and private sphere ought to be. As the narrative evolves, Janie comes to think "about what had happened in the making of a voice out of a man."

The remarkable irony about Hurston's famous text is that while the novelist was denied a fully-fledged voice during her lifetime by her male peers and the literary establishment at large, she actually denies her character Janie full control over her own story, once the framing dialogue between Janie and her friend Phoeby has been set up in the first chapter.

In effect, Hurston's narrator can never quite let go of her hold over the text; "Hurston does authorize both Janie and her voice. By Hurston's writing down, author(iz)ng Janie's life, Janie's entire past becomes present . . . Time no longer limits Janie" (Wendy J. McCredie, 28). Against the limitations of time and space, words do in fact yield power, not only as articulate signs, but also as signs that can transform one's perception of reality: Janie's story metamorphoses Phoeby who concludes the story-telling session by saying: "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid myself no mo'" (Their Eyes Were Watching God, 284).

Hurston's narrative in Their Eyes Were Watching God is therefore as much about issues of literary authority as it is about authorship; it "establishes a voice of authority not only on the simple level of authorship but also on the more complex level of self-authorization" (McCredie, 26). Hurston's strategy of authorial empowerment in the novel is only possible through her "stealing" Janie's story, and by claiming as her own an oral tradition, in a highly articulate and literate mode. Her predicament is quite representative of that of black women authors from America and the Caribbean who have had to create, in the recent past, idiosyncratic literate voices of their own; while caught in the "double-voicedness" (or rather, the multivocality) of black women's "multitiered" personae, these voices are perforce different from both white feminist and black male voices.

In the very ambiguity of her textual double-voicedness that acts as the literate manifestation of her "gatepost stance," Hurston delineates in her own terms the extremely vulnerable margin of existence which characterizes black women in the Americas. She also proves to be a brilliant
strategist, one who uses traditional African-American techniques of dissembling and ornatory subversion (namely tricksterism) to assert her control over narrative. In her essay about identity in fiction and fact, Patricia Meyer Spacks writes that "the autobiographer's 'fiction' is stronger and more telling than his 'truth,' and adds that "novelists and autobiographers necessarily depend upon artifice—shaping, inventing, selecting, omitting—to achieve their effects . . . Both communicate vital truths through falsifications. To tell a story of the self is . . . to create a fiction" (310-11).

Although Spacks' essay was written on aspects of so-called mainstream Anglo-American autobiography, it addresses issues which are central to narratives of the self written by black authors, and in particular by black women. Hurston's appropriation of tricksterism corresponds to yet another essential dimension of black literatures from the Americas. In her apparent confusion of the distinction between facts and tales, or to use one of her terms, "lies," and of the difference between oral traditions and established "Literature," Hurston was actually developing authorial strategies of her own. These strategies enabled her to circumvent the dilemma of having to inscribe her renditions of her experiences as a Southern educated black woman within the constraints of traditional narrative genres which were alien to her particular authorial needs, to her sensibilities as a woman and finally, to her black, Southern cultural heritage. Moreover, in her ambivalent attitude to fact and fiction, Hurston was pointing in the direction that recent developments in critical theory have accustomed readers and critics to look for, concerning rhetorical devices and narrative strategies. Indeed, as recent developments in literary critique tell us, a writer's use of voice(s) may change according to this writer's audience, to the cultural and linguistic tradition that he or she is writing from, or again according to the genre and narrative that she or he follows.

In Hurston's case for example, as Hemenway remarks, "only when addressing a predominantly black audience did she feel the freedom to express the private self; in other cases, she either tried to hit a straight lick with a crooked stick, masking her feelings in irony, or defused potentially troublesome issues with wit, humor, and stylistic ingenuity" (288). As is the case with the other female authors whose works I discuss in this study, Hurston was left essentially with the resources of her intelligence and cultural traditions as well as her artistic creativity and literary genius to construct idiosyncratic voices, and as it were, a "tradition" of her own. As with her heroine Janie,
although Hurston—as well as Nella Larsen or Gwendolyn Brooks, in the case of her unjustly neglected *Maud Martha*—had come into her own voice, it had no "recognized authority" behind it to sustain it.

Consequently, Hurston, and women writers after her, have had to claim an authority against this "non-authoritative past" which stifled their voices for so long. Black women authors in particular have had to maneuver in the interstices that were left them, and have done so as masked tricksters and mediators between white and black societies and cultural differences. In so doing, they have acted as the heirs of African griottes and Caribbean obeah women who have always connected their magic powers with creativity in general; speaking of the ties between writing and magic, Hurston wrote in *Mules and Men* that "belief in magic is older than writing. So nobody knows how it started. The way they tell it, hoodoo started way back there before everything" (193).

Black women writers have also acted as intercessors between male and female perceptions, black and white societies, as well as between heterosexual and homosexual sensibilities in some cases. In so doing, they claim their place in the long line of woman conjurers and artists who, through the centuries, have yielded spiritual as well as verbal power all the way from Africa to the Americas.
ENDNOTES

1. "une tension constante entre l'un et le multiple", Philippe Lejeune, Je est un autre, 35.

2. This heteroglossia is essentially focused on fiction and would not extend to poetry for which Bakhtin offered what remains a highly controversial interpretation.


4. For a further discussion of the metaphorical dimensions of autobiography, see James Olney, Metaphors of Self and Timothy Dow Adams, Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography, to be published at the University of North Carolina Press, Spring 1990.


6. "Our mother [. . .] looked on human speech as a loaded gun, and, to use her own expression, talking often felt to her like an issue of blood" (The Bridge of Beyond, 24).


9. Besides Hurston's quintessential Mules and Men, concerning voodoo and black Southern-and Caribbean-magic beliefs, one should also read Marjorie Pryse's essay on Hurston in Conjuring, Pryse, Ed. as well as Alice Walker's essays on the 'ancient powers' of black women in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens.
CHAPTER II: Place and Displacement in Fiction by African-American and African-Caribbean Women Authors.

Ever since the days of the Roman Republic when Cicero, in *De Inventoribus Rhetorica*, elaborated upon the "potential interrelationships of setting and action that an orator may exploit" and the "opportunities [that places] offer for carrying out the action under discussion" (Eleanor Winsor Leach, 75 n1), time and space have constituted crucial matrices of literature, as Leonard Lutwack, E. Relph, Georges Poulet and other contemporary critics have demonstrated. Later on, French Neo-Classicism defined the concept of "la belle nature" whilst the European Romantics developed a poetics of landscape that sought to re-invest nature with a power and meaning of its own, often reflected in the writer's own "paysage intérieur." In our time, Eudora Welty, in *The Eye of The Story* (1979) has reflected on the importance of locale for writers--in particular Southern authors--and noted that "[p]lace in fiction is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced, in the novel's progress . . . Feeling profoundly pertains to place [and] place in history partakes of feeling as feeling about history partakes of place" (122). Interestingly, the American South--a region which has been at the origin of much of African-American literature, from Charles Chesnutt up to Ralph Ellison, Morrison and Alice Walker--is an area that developed a pervasive resistance to modernity and a highly selective interpretation of history and memory (as Lewis P. Simpson's *The Dispossessed Garden* brilliantly demonstrates); it has consequently retained in its literary expressions a strong sense of place and origin. For African-American authors such as Wright or Walker, the South was both a place from which to flee (the white, segregated South) and a place where the characters found their roots (the black South).

One can say that, with the development of the genre of the novel from the eighteenth century onward, environment became one of the central focuses of a "literature whose form was primarily spatial and whose space was that of a map" (John Vernon, 37). The precision and importance of locale in the works of writers such as Flaubert or Henry James have often been discussed. Yet, if one distances oneself from the mainstream of Western texts, and confronts those texts that have been written by men and women from the black diaspora, it is impossible not to
notice the centrality of locale in their works also; this appears in their very titles: Claude Mc Kay's *Banana Bottom* and *Home to Harlem*, Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Speak*, Giovanni's *Room*, or again, *Another Country*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*, or Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*, and many other novels including the banks of Edouard Glissant's *La Lézarde*—named after a Martinique river that is emblematic of the entire island—and Aimé Césaire's celebrated *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. These titles refer to some aspects of place found in literature: the place of origin (*Banana Bottom*, the "pays natal"), the place of livelihood and survival (*Brewster Place*, Northern mill towns in Toni Morrison's novels), or again places that are symbolic and meaningful to the peoples of the black diaspora (*Beale Street, Harlem, Canada, La Lézarde*) as well as places that have a significance for the narrator of a specific text. This is of course the case with Giovanni's rooftop room in Paris, the "other country" and locale of exile for Baldwin's tormented male and female characters, who are doubly marginalized by their race and sexual preferences or again with Paule Marshall's "chosen places" to which both Merle Kimbona and Avey Johnson are drawn from their very different life experiences.

The trope of place has thus played a central role in the development of literature in the mainstream as well as according to black traditions; as Ralph Ellison once suggested, "[i]f we don't know where we are, we have little chance of knowing who we are, that if we confuse the time, we confuse the place; and that when we confuse these we endanger our humanity, both physically and morally" (*Shadow and Act*, 74). Indeed, as Melvin Dixon has commented in his recent study of geography and identity in African-American literature, spatial patterns have pervaded most of black literature in America since its inception: ". . . images of journeys, conquered spaces, imagined havens, and places of refuge have produced not only a deliverance from slavery to freedom, but, more important, a transformation from rootlessness to rootedness" (*Ride Out The Wilderness*, 2).

In the case of black women authors, the importance of place must be compounded by the particular role that space occupies in the definition of female identities, whether they belong to the developed industrialized world, or to third world communities from the Americas or other continents.
As Lutwack has remarked in his comments on the strong connections between heroines and descriptions of houses in British and American literatures, "it is no accident that emphasis on place begins to assume real importance in fiction when the plight of female characters is the subject" (Lutwack, 109). It would be somewhat surprising were this emphasis on place and women, and on the need for a personal space akin to Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own," not to appear in contemporary works by black authors, wherein these writers explore at length the destinies and lives of African-American and African-Caribbean women. This is all the more crucial that in its development, critics of black literatures in the Americas have sometimes posited that "blackness itself was a region," to use Gates's terms, and that this aspect of black literatures identifies them in a mode similar to regionalism for other authors.

Indeed, within the body of texts written by black female writers from the Americas, the manifestations of place reveal some striking concerns: there seems to exist a remarkable tension between an extremely strong sense and need of place, defined as the place of origin or of spiritual rootedness, and an inordinately acute expression of placelessness and displacement, one linked to the sense of spiritual exile experienced by most peoples of the black diaspora. This tension between nostalgia for place and displacement is quite unlike what one finds in other works from the English or French-speaking literary traditions. Furthermore, a closer look at the dynamics of place in these works reveals an uncertainty about its very nature and the status that place occupies in these texts. The reader and critic must therefore investigate what is the range of meanings and significances that place carries in texts written by black women from the Americas? Additionally, this investigation should elucidate the ties that connect the black woman's status as a member of an oppressed, racial minority and cultural community that was forcibly removed from its place of origin, with her inclusion in a gender group which Cixous has likened to the "dark continent" of humankind, as I indicated earlier ("The Laughter of the Medusa", 247-48). How do black female writers from the New World reconcile their racial and cultural blackness with the metaphorical black continent which French and American feminists distinguish as the locale to which women in Western societies have been relegated in the past?
Ever since the first African slave was taken from African shores to those of America and underwent the grueling trials of the Middle Passage, the black experience in the Americas has been inherently marked by psychological, spiritual and spatial displacement and a sense of dislocation of self.

As anthropologist Dominique Zahan has remarked in his investigation of African spirituality and religions, "the mastery of the self goes together with the conquest of space" (Zahan, 57). Africans who were brought to the Americas however, did not--initially at least--participate in the conquest of the open spaces of the New World which was so determinant in the formation of the new American societies, as the Spanish Conquista or the march toward the North American Far West illustrate 3. Indeed, one can read the imperialistic strategies displayed by various Western powers as an affirmation of the "metaphoric equation of woman and land" according to male ideologies (Bröck, 79); one can also interpret them as manifestations of what Claudine Herrmann sees as two characteristics of space and its susceptibility to (male) urges of conquest: "[un espace matériel et un espace mental] deux catégories qui ont en commun de pouvoir être envahies: l'une par la violence, l'autre par l'indiscrétion" (Herrmann, 137) 4.

African slaves were treated as mere property and were not allowed to occupy, let alone own, any space which they could claim as their own; furthermore, the uprooted Africans were inhabited by a sense of dispossession when entering their new homelands of forced exile. As Beverly Ormerod remarks when discussing Caribbean francophone authors, the "motifs of loss and exile," symbolized by the Middle Passage, lend this particular literature "the proportions of the archetypal cosmic myth" (Ormerod, 1). This is evidenced in Marshall's Praisesong for The Widow, when Aunt Cuney discusses her African Ibo ancestors, in keeping with a common belief among slaves and their descendants, in particular those of Ibo tribal origin, that "after one's death, one's spirit would return to the house of the ancestors" (38-39); consequently, suicide was not uncommon in the ranks of Africans newly disembarked upon the shores of America (Barthold, 176). Aunt Cuney's Ibo ancestors
decided, after landing from a slave ship at Tatem, in the Sea Islands, to return to Africa "when they realized there wasn't nothing between them and home but some water and that wasn't giving them no trouble . . ." (39). At this point of the Africans' tragic odyssey in Marshall's text, Africa is still clearly "home" for them. Cuney then says of her grand-mother who told her the story about the African slaves: ", . . . she just picked herself up and took off after 'em. In her mind. Her body was always usta say might be in Tatem, but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos . . ." (39).

African-Americans and African-Caribbeans, and their spokespeople in particular, have had therefore to confront the issue of place, a place of origin, or rather place of "rootedness" that lies at the very core of their quest for identity and of their unique "twoness" as both Africans and Americans, as W.E.B Du Bois magistrally defined it in The Souls of Black Folk. The form and strategies of this quest for a truly African-American identity necessarily operate in a very different mode from those of Euro-Americans writers from the New World whose sense of origins and cultural "roots" were acknowledged from the beginning of their American odyssey. Furthermore, as Sabine Bröck has remarked in a discussion of Marshall's works, black women in the Americas faced a unique predicament; not only were they writing "against and [had] to break the patriarchal pattern of representation woman = land . . . but since the heyday of Victorian ideology and so-called science [they had] to function as the embodiment of "space/boundary/obstacle for the white male [and] as the perfect site (and lure) of his transgression" (Bröck, 79-80).

As Barbara Olomade has commented, the predicament of women's sense of placelessness was compounded in the case of black female slaves: although "black women moved through the white man's world: through his space, his land, his fields, his streets and his woodpile," ("Hearts of Darkness" 355), they never had a place which they could claim their own in full security. Whatever place black women slaves considered theirs was either patronizingly granted to them by their white masters and mistresses, or else appropriated clandestinely at great risk for themselves, as the episode of Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs' "loophole of retreat" tellingly shows.

The African-Americans' deprivation of places that they could claim as their own—with the exception of the Maroon communities that escaped slaves established from Brazil to the Florida marshes—account for the fact that in several instances a black community was not primarily a

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geographical locus but rather something akin to Victor Turner's definition of a "communitas," namely "the repository of the whole gamut of the [African-American] culture's values, norms, attitudes, sentiments and relationships" (Victor Turner, 103).

Such a non-territorial definition of community is central to several of our texts; Audré Lorde's fascination with her mother's place of origin, the island of Carriacou off the coast of Grenada, is emblematic of the tension between the urge for a place of rootedness and a sense of displacement that can be found in black women's texts. As Lorde clearly states at the beginning of *Zami*, for her, the idea of "home" was associated with her mother's native island, Carriacou, and yet for a very long time, she did not believe that there existed such a place in reality: "she told us stories about Carriacou, where she had been born, amid the heavy smell of limes . . ." (*Zami* 13). In fact, this magical home takes on the aspect of an ultimate goal and place of return which the girl Audré has to deserve: "... if we lived correctly and with frugality, looked both ways before crossing the street, then someday we would arrive back in the sweet place, back home" (13). Indeed, even when years later, she finally discovered the location of Carriacou on a map, as part of a degree requirement, she could hardly believe in its physical reality, as if in an echo of Melville's comment on Queequeg's native island: "It is not down on any map; true places never are" (*Moby Dick*). This "elusiveness of place" leaves its mark on much of African-American and African-Caribbean literature: one finds it for instance, in a comment from Naylor's *Mama Day*, concerning the main locale of her story, Willow Springs Island, which has been relegated, as a result of various historical accidents, to some sort of legal vacuum, at least as far as the laws and customs of the white American mainland are concerned. Speaking of the period of the Civil War, at a time when the islanders were de facto free people only belonging to themselves, one character remarks that "the laws on slaves [didn't] apply because . . . the land wasn't then--and isn't now--in either [Georgia or South Carolina]" (5).

In a striking parallel, throughout Lorde's biomythography, her mother's island remains an unmapped, mythical island of womanly love, "Carriacou, a magic name like cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, the delectable little squares of guava jelly," some sort of make-believe "sweet place somewhere else which they had not managed to capture yet on paper," (*Zami*, 14) as a figment of her mother's fantasy or crazy geography. In Lorde's case nonetheless, her sense of having access to a very private,
magic place of origin, unknown to the larger world, is compounded, once she reaches sexual maturity, with her creation of a womanly universe, a Caribbean equivalent to the famed island of Lesbos. For Lorde therefore, the mythical dimensions of a locus that is also the source of a female tradition and lineage coalesce with the physical, geographical existence of this particular place. In fact, the writer creates her own erotic and mythical geography-of-being. In so doing, Lorde reminds us that throughout history and the evolution of artistic expressions, woman has been depicted as being herself a place, the place where human life finds its source as D.H. Lawrence’s male characters so often experience.

One finds this representation of the woman as place of origin in Naylor’s *Mama Day*, for example, when she writes of her heroine as a locus of eroticism; "she ain’t flesh, she’s a center between the thighs spreading wide to take in . . . the touch of feathers. Space to space." (140). By positing such a geography of womanly bodies, or what the author of *Linden Hills* in a recent talk on her work, referred to as a "female landscape" ², Naylor and Lorde reiterate the lasting links that women have maintained with place throughout their history. Toni Morrison, who has always manifested the keenest sense of place in her own novels, providing her readers with exact addresses and topography, comments on this unique bond by saying that the very strong sense of rootedness that one finds in *Sula* for example, "is just a woman’s strong sense of being in a room, a place, or in a house." She adds: "I do very intimate things 'in place': I am sort of rooted in it, so that writing about being in a room looking out . . . is probably very common among most women anyway" (Michael Harper and Robert Stepto, 213).

This sense of intimacy certainly delineates several of the relationships that female characters in these works maintain with others within a larger community, as my discussion of figures of mothering and female bonding in chapters IV and V will demonstrate. One does not find a similar intimacy between male figures in these texts, with the exception of younger males, as is the case for instance with Morrison’s Guitar and Milkman in *Song of Solomon*, or again with Naylor’s Willie and Lester in *Linden Hills*. Morrison actually opposes this sense of female rootedness and complicity to the archetypal "Ulysses theme" that she distinguishes in the lives of many black men, in their compulsion to leave home and "go find what’s around the corner," which has been frequently
denounced as a trait of irresponsibility on the part of these men but which Morrison sees as "one of the most attractive features about black male life" (Harper and Stepto, 227).

In her own particular terms, Lorde re-affirms another one of the tensions that control so many texts written by blacks within the American diaspora: the opposition between a distant home, from which one has had to uproot oneself (Africa, the Caribbean or the American South), and the place of forced exile and material survival, in her parents' case, "this cold and raucous country called america [sic]" (11). Each writer's connection with place however, greatly varies: it can be essentially a spiritual one, as is the case with Lorde's Carriacou, or more basically, the quest for and need to ground one's roots in a particular locus that becomes central to a narrative and to its characters, as when the fledgling writer moves into her apartment on Spring Street, New York, "... not exactly an enchanted palace, but it was my first apartment and it was all my own," the first place the writer could claim for herself following "the trauma of calling [herself] independent" (Zami, 115). Interestingly, Carriacou, the near-mythical place of motherly origin and of womanly bonding in Zami also appears in Marshall's Praisesong for The Widow where it becomes the locale of Avey's spiritual retreat and inspiration.

-B: Establishing Place:

-1) Place as An Obsession.

It is hardly surprising that texts written by descendants of slave women who were forbidden to own or claim any space of their own and were subsequently effaced from the surface and memories of their respective new countries should manifest an intense urge for rootedness. Such an urge appears in Schwarz-Bart's texts: both Pluie et vent sur Télimée Miracle and Ti Jean L'Horizon begin by very lyrical and minute descriptions of the respective locales where these stories occur. As a matter of fact, the opening words of Ti Jean seem almost to dismiss the authenticity and existence of the place of the story, and consequently of the narrative itself, as if the historical upheavals that led to its sanctioned existence as a colony of the West were still barely conceivable: "L'île où se déroule
cette histoire n'est pas très connue. Elle flotte dans le golfe du Mexique, à la dérive, en quelque sorte, et seules quelques mappemondes particulièrement sévères la signalent" (9). These lines take us back to Lorde's scrutinizing of maps to attempt to locate and ascertain the existence of her mother's near-mythical island of origin.

Thus, not only is the place of the narrative—in this case, Schwarz-Bart's Caribbean island—most difficult to locate, but if it is found to have a tangible existence, it has little value in the eyes of the colonial rulers; in effect, as the Guadeloupean writer notes, "c'est une lèche de terre sans importance, et son histoire a été jugée une fois pour toute insignifiante pour les spécialistes..." (Ti Jean L'Horizon, 9). These same "specialists" can be found striding up and down the barren hills of Bourne island in Marshall's The Chosen Place. The Timeless People. American technicians from the ominously named Center for Applied Social Research, such as Saul Amron and his assistant Allen Fuso: they have decided once and for all to pull this island that looks like "a nation God has forgot" (125) out of its "Dark Ages" and put it on the map of the "civilized" world. One finds the same echoes of administrative and technological contempt in Glissant's remark about the respective colonizers' views of distant places such as his fictional island of Lambrianne, still under colonial rule: "on méconnait ces terres lointaines, qui ne paraissent dans l'imagination des hommes du Centre qu'à la manière de paradis en fin de compte assez peu sérieux" (La Lézarde, 16).

The necessity to rescue given places from the oblivion of the past—the domain of the "then and there"—and to provide the necessary evidence of their tangible reality in the world of the "here and now," is therefore crucial in the texts of black authors writing on the Caribbean and Black America. Speaking on the work of the famous Trinidadian novelist V. S. Naipaul, Michael Dash commented on the fact that, while in his works "Trinidad appears as a place on the rim of the world," Naipaul seems obsessed with documenting a "stable center [and by] an attempt to establish a zone of clarity and order, an ordered landscape in the midst of 'the horror of disorder' that apparently characterizes the Caribbean" (The Plantation System Colloquium, April 27, 28, 29, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge).

One can therefore speak of an obsession with place in these works, as if to prove the point made by geographer and theoretician E. Relph that "to be human is to live in a world that is filled..."
with significant places: to be human is to have and to know your place . . . places are indeed a fundamental aspect of man's existence in the world [. . .] they are sources of security and identity for individuals and for groups of people" (1, 6). One can certainly say that the preoccupation with a proper grounding of these texts and their characters into place is related to what James Olney sees as the twofold bios that controls the autobiographical impulse and that bridges the present moment with the historical past 9.

Following Schwarz-Bart's initial (and merely apparent) dismissal of her compulsion to write about Guadeloupe and especially the fictional hamlet of Fond-Zombi as a useless endeavor, the Guadeloupean author adds, comparing the Caribbean island locale with legendary cities from the past: "Pourtant ce lieu existe et il a même une longue histoire, toute chargée de merveilles, de sang et de peines perdues, de désirs aussi vastes que ceux qui hantent le ciel de Ninive, Babylone ou Jérusalem" (10, Ti Jean L'Horizon).

These Caribbean--or in Morrison's and Naylor's cases, remote Southern--communities exist on the very margin of the assumed "familiar" world, i.e. the Western universe that extends from North America to Western Europe. In an echo to Schwarz-Bart's comment on her island that seems to float adrift, Paule Marshall, in the opening chapter of The Chosen Place. The Timeless People, depicts her characters approaching Bourne Island from the air; they first see it floating at the very edge of the insular archway that extends from the Florida keys to South America: Bourne Island actually constitutes the easternmost boundary of the Americas, and sits as if it had "broken rank and stood off by itself to the right, almost out in the Atlantic" as some kind of stepping stone between the Americas and Africa (13). While Bourne Island, Glissant's Lambrianne, Lorde's Carriacou, or Schwarz-Bart's Guadeloupe can be misconstrued as mere insular outposts or appendices in reference to the American mainland, they are actually intimately connected to a much larger universe than their size and geographical isolation would at first lead us to believe.

These sites of rootedness for the Americas' black diaspora are indeed the stepping stones and beacons of an uninterrupted chain that connects--despite the historical disruptions--the old motherland (Africa) with the black communities of the New World, both geologically and spiritually These
islands and lost rural communities become the loci of rootedness, the places where one is spiritually
re-born, as the name Bourne Island seems to suggest. This rootedness plays a crucial role in the
literatures of the descendants of forcibly transplanted Africans into the New World. As E. Relph
remARKS, "to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul . .
. To have roots in a place is to have a secure point from which to look out on the world, a firm
grasp of one's position in the order of things, and a significant spiritual and psychological attachment
to somewhere in particular" (3, 6). Much of African-American and Caribbean literature is structured
by the inevitable tension between, on the one hand, the quest for roots and what Morrison calls the
"life-giving, very, very strong sustenance that people get from their neighborhood"—the place from
which blacks in the Americas locate their cultural roots and difference, ("Intimate Things", 214)—and
on the other hand, the difficulty that people in a state of spiritual exile have in finding such rooted
places. As Naylor's Mama Day or Praisesong for The Widow, as well as Morrison's Song of
Solomon suggest, the exiles' re-connection to the locus of initial origin can be sometimes an
essentially figurative one, one that is not always self-conscious but rather sustained by the collective
memory of the community's past, and by the rich oral literatures that are rife in the black Americas,
and of which Pilate's and Shalimar's preservation of the "song of Solomon" is but one example.

Outsiders such as Marshall's technicians or Glissant's impersonal politicians and administrators
misread such places as mere backwaters. This is, on the writers' part, an updated gloss on the
traditional image of the apparently "rooted" yet confounded Westerner lost in the midst of the
"wilderness" of uncharted continents and dark-skinned people (as with Conrad's Marlow in The Heart
of Darkness). These intruders do not have a "caring" relationship to place, to use one of Relph's
terms; rather, they symbolize a technological and materialist world where, to quote the geographer
"[people] possess space by building and organize it mainly in terms of material objects and functions"
(Relph, 2, 3). Conversely, in the texts we are concerned with, one finds people for whom space is
structured in terms of myth, ceremony and ritual, and who know how to understand and "read" these
landscapes of lushness and poverty. Marshall's Avey Johnson and people of Bournehills,
Schwarz-Bart's Reine Sans Nom, as well as Sidney and Ondine in Morrison's Tar Baby soon learn
that these god-forsaken places, these "îles[s] à volcans, à cyclones et moustiques, à mauvaise
mentalité" (Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle, 11) \(^{11}\), are not only locales forsaken because of their "mauvaise mentalité;" they are also the places of arrival and departure in a spiritual journey which these characters all find themselves embarked upon at one time in their existence. By the same account, these forgotten and remote locales, Carriacou, Guadeloupe, the Sea Islands in Marshall’s Praisesong for The Widow and Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day, or again Morrison’s Shalimar in Song of Solomon and the Isle aux Chevaliers in Tar Baby actually represent the spatial links of the chain-of-being that structures this journey through rootedness and rebirth and that lies at the very heart of these texts.

Despite their minuscule size, these islands and isolated hamlets exist both at a figurative and at a symbolical level. As the Guadeloupean novelist notes, "le pays dépend bien souvent du cœur de l’homme: il est minuscule si le cœur est petit, et immense si le cœur est grand" (Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle, 11) \(^{11}\). In effect, the "minuscule" size of the place of origin or that which serves as the background for the text, often accounts for the expanse of creative imagination that so many of its exiled sons and daughters seem to possess; as Schwarz-Bart also notes, "la réalité nous l’agrandissons; du fait de notre insularité, peut-être avons-nous besoin de cet agrandissement" ("Interview avec Nicole Zand", 19) \(^{19}\).

The narrators’ first task in these texts is thus to assert the physical dimensions of the chosen locale of the narrative. While Lorde never actually explores the geographical reality of Carriacou for us, Marshall sets up the physical environment of her narrative in a very gradual manner; she first gives us an overview of the entire chain of islands, then takes her readers on an inside exploration of Bourne Island—from the westernized neighborhoods of the affluent local elite to the apparent "backwardness" of Boumehills district—an exploration that parallels the main characters’ personal growth and questions concerning their motivations for being at Bourne Island. This topographical exploration of the island culminates in the technicians’ survey of Boumehills, a district which is emblematic of the spiritual resistance that its people maintain vis-à-vis the encroachments of the modern world and of "progress." Yet, despite the intensity of Avey Johnson’s experiences in Carriacou, as Marshall’s heroine flies over the isolated island, on her way back to North America,
she comes to doubt the very existence of the place; she reflects that "[e]verything [is] fleeting and ephemeral. The island [was] more a mirage than an actual place. Something conjured up perhaps to satisfy a longing and need. She was leaving Carriacou without having really seen it" (Praisesong for The Widow, 254). The physical dimension of these places is not therefore necessarily the most important aspect in these texts; rather, the symbolical and figurative traits of these "chosen places" give these islands, sea landings and rural communities, which to the outsider might appear as "sleepy, unprogressive and stagnant [. . .] the sure identity and pride that [these] materialistic outsiders cannot comprehend" (Trudier Harris, 71). Place is not always therefore an essentially geographical locus that can be reduced and circumscribed in "realistic" terms. Rather, it must be understood as a locus wherein psychological, spiritual and emotional needs reveal themselves and can be fulfilled, ones that are central to the destinies of blacks and females as experienced in the Americas. In the case of black women, their double marginalization from the very locales of power and social status renders their access to places of their own much more urgent and problematic, as most women-authored texts since Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in The Life of A Slave Girl clearly indicate.

Marshall's latest novel, Praisesong for The Widow sets up a clear opposition between the affluent, 'modern' world of North America and the locale of spiritual rebirth emblematized by the Caribbean. The modern universe is represented by Avey and Jay Johnson's suburban house at the symbolically named North White Plains, USA, a place of enclosure for Avey, who thinks of it with "a peculiar clogged and bloated feeling in her stomach" (181) as opposed to the intense sense of spiritual rebirth that she experiences during a cruise in the Caribbean; at one point of her quest of self-discovery while in Carriacou, Avey reflects: "Could this be Avey Johnson talking so freely? It was the place: the special light that filled it and the silence" (170).

Lorde's mother's Carriacou reappears thus as the locus of Avey Johnson's spiritual renewal at the very center of Marshall's text, at the time of the traditional yearly excursion out to the island for the ritual of the "Beg Pardon." In conclusion, one can say that the function of place in the texts that we are considering is multiple; it can be both a locus of spiritual re-immersion and rootedness, an opening to the world since in one writer's words, "Les Caraibes sont des appels vers l'ailleurs, l'Autre" ("The Caribbean is an urge towards the Elsewhere and the Other." Glissant, "Opening
On one hand, islands and hamlets represent the absolute opposite from enclosure and oppression and seem to correspond to an attempt to deliberately reconstitute something akin to the classical "locus amoenus". On the other hand however, these islands and remote communities can be seen as loci of enclosure, "enfermement" in French, a word which is also used to characterize forced seclusion of anyone who does not fit into a given norm; they become thus the locales from which one can free oneself only through a deliberate effort of imagination or of artistic creativity. These lost places, these outlying islands and villages are possessed by the spirit of "enfermement," one that has relegated women and other social outcasts--both categories being often assimilated as with the medieval hexes--to the outer margins of the "dehors"; writing on women and space, Claudine Herrmann notes that "[e]lles reviennent de loin: de toujours: du "dehors," des landes où se maintiennent en vie les sorcières, d'en dessous, en de ça de la "culture" (Herrmann, 41)".

-2) Place as A Persona:

Not only is place of paramount importance in the texts comprised in this study, but at times, as if to illustrate the intense dependence that can emerge between characters and the locales they inhabit, place takes on an existence of its own. It can be counted as a full persona within the plot of the narrative; to use Morrison's words, in such cases, "the author decides to make the town, the community, the neighborhood as strong a character as [she can]" (Harper and Stepto, 214). When, in Song of Solomon, Milkman embarks upon the quest for his roots and reaches Danville, the land of his ancestors addresses itself to the young man and his companions:

[It was] a farm that colored their lives like a paintbrush and spoke to them like a sermon. 'You see?' the farm said to them. 'See?' See What you can do? ... Stop picking around the edges of the world [. . .] Grab this land! Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it . . . multiply it, and pass it on--can you hear me? Pass it on. (Song of Solomon, 237-38).

For Edouard Glissant, the literatures created within what the Martinique writer calls the "système des plantations" demonstrate "a conception of landscape as one implicated in history . . . landscape..."
becomes a speaking character" ("Opening Address"). Such is the case with Naylor's Brewster Place, which grows as a person would, from being "a bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the aldermen of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Realty Company," to its period of youth, when there was "a sense of promise in the street and in the times [since] the city was growing and prospering" and ultimately to its decaying old age (The Women of Brewster Place, 1-2).

In this case, it is not so much the people who choose to live at Brewster Place who are foregrounded, but rather, the seedy, run-down, yet tight-knit and self-supporting street that chooses to take them in, or conversely, reject them. Like so many other places of refuge for the descendants of African slaves on American soil, Brewster Place is a "no-other-choice" place of refuge and survival; when Mattie Michael has to let go of her house after failing to secure her son's freedom from prison, she has no other place left to go to; indeed, "Brewster Place knew that unlike its other children, the few who could leave forever were to be the exception rather than the rule, since they came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason" (4). As with The Bottom in Morrison's Sula "[a] hilly land, where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down . . . and where the wind lingered all through the winter" (5), or again as with Boumehills district in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, the survival of such places of forced refuge depends on unsaid rules that warrant a certain amount of communality and solidarity among its people, in particular its women.

In Linden Hills, Luther Nedeed devises a scheme to outdo the white speculators in Wayne county and, by selling his land to the descendants of poor black sharecroppers, becomes the wealthiest man in town. In order to turn Linden Hills into a showcase, "an ebony jewel," he is very careful to "weed out anyone who threatened to produce seeds that would block the light from his community . . . He'd cultivate no madman like Nat Turner or Marcus Garvey in Linden Hills" (9, 11). Nedeed's greed and appropriation of other people's places--and eventually lives as in the case of his wife--replicates in a chilling manner the societal oppression that has made an all-black enclave like Linden Hills possible in the first place. This self-protective attitude can also be based on more complex and deep-seated prejudices, as occurs when "the two", Lorraine and Theresa, a lesbian
couple, settle in Brewster Place; "they now claimed Brewster Place as home. And Brewster waited, cautiously prepared to claim them, because you never knew about young women, and obviously single at that" (129). In this case, the place has become a distinct being, indeed a male persona referred to as Brewster, that looks on disapprovingly, and reflects the inhabitants' extreme reticence to accept in their fold "the two," a reticence that will quickly turn to openly homophobic hostility that culminates in Lorraine's murder.

Sometimes also, the particular locale rejects the exterior intrusion in self-defense: such is the case with the reactions of the people of Bournehills in The Chosen Place. The Timeless People when faced with the outside world: the intruders are represented by the North American technicians who suddenly show up in these forsaken hills and can only relate to the environment in a utilitarian and functional mode. The preoccupation and denunciation of materialism and class privileges is conspicuous in Marshall's depiction of the local elite such as Bourne Island's Lyle Huston, who lives ensconced in material comforts and post-colonial mimicking of the former masters in his ostentatious mansion in the capital city. As John McCluskey, Jr. remarks, Marshall's "division of the island into two parts, one for the enlightened, civilized civil servants, and the other for the more traditional and seemingly enigmatic peasants, "is reminiscent of Claude Mc Kay's Banana Bottom where "a Caribbean woman who has returned from England is instrumental in bridging the Western and traditional black worlds (McCluskey, Jr., 329).

Place does not therefore necessarily submit to the whims and dictates of humans. Rather, as in these three examples, it only yields to those men and women who share a common "care for place,"--to use Relph's terminology--and have the proper knowledge and understanding of what such places are about: they can relate to place as to a locus from which meaning can be derived, and from which an articulate Weltanschauung discloses itself. Others cannot reach this privileged relationship to locale: in The Women of Brewster Place, Kiswana Brown does find a sense of identity--one that is defined however by a sense of heterosexual alliance as opposed to the "two"--rather than a class-based identity which Kiswana does not share with most of the working-class women of Brewster. On the other hand, once she is confronted with the harsh realities of Brewster Place, Lorraine will not, or cannot learn the proper code of survival in a highly sexist, violent and
homophobic environment. Where Luther Needed is incapable of growing as a sensitive person and of finding his humanity in the very place which his ancestors settled, Lester and Willie become adults as they descend the Dante-like "series of eight curved roads that ring themselves around the hill" that lead to the hell of the Needed home (Linden Hills, 2). Remarkably, except for Morrison's Sula, no woman experiences such an initiatory progress in any of these texts. Their psychic development follows a cyclical rather than a purely linear direction as I will show in my discussion on the ties between black women and time. Finally in Marshall's The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, Philadelphia heiress Harriet cannot overcome her growing discomfort in an environment which she does not understand, trust or control. Her first reaction to the island betrays the Northeastern woman's personal and cultural biases: "It struck her as being another world altogether... because of the shadows [in the hills] Bournehill scarcely seemed a physical place to her, but some mysterious and obscured region of the mind which ordinary consciousness did not dare admit to light" (21). Conversely, her husband Saul Amron, who typifies at first the quintessential unfeeling technocrat, slowly finds a sense of harmony and communion with the challenging environment of Bourne Island, even as he relinquishes some of his cultural and classist prejudices: Saul subsequently grows as a person, as a result of this discovery and empathy with his temporary environment.

According to the respective narratives, and to the various characters' sense of connection—or lack of it—with their social, cultural, and geographical environment, and ultimately with their own identity, the role of place in these texts varies from a mostly favorable one to an essentially hostile and restrictive role, as if in a reversal of the classical trope of "locus amoenus". In the case of most of the female characters however, as with Morrison's Ruth Dead, Jadine, or Hagar, or in the case of Naylor's Willa Prescott Nedeed in Linden Hills, place is an essentially restrictive and oppressive locus—in a social, geographical, or psychological way—from which only the most adventurous or rebellious person will be able to escape, as evidenced by Morrison's Sula and Pilate or again by Marshall's Silla and Avey Johnson.
-C: Place as A Negative Limitation of Self:

1) Place as A Threatening Environment.

Not only does place often take on an existence of its own, but it also sometimes clearly opposes the will of people. Such is the case with much of the natural environment in several of these works, set in the Caribbean or in the American South. Nature proves to be as undecipherable and resistant as women have been according to the representations in conventional patriarchal ideologies; expanding her metaphor of woman as the "dark continent," Cixous continues: "The 'Dark Continent' is neither dark nor unexplored--It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. And because they want to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent, with its monuments to lack" ("The Laughter of the Medusa", 255). Where Western outsiders only see the impenetrability of American or Caribbean landscapes, people with close ties to the communities of the American South or the islands described in these texts possess the proper understanding of, and have access to, these seemingly hostile locales.

Marshall's early story, "To Da-Duh, in Memoriam" is a telling example of the touching and peaceful confrontation of two generations and cultures, a milder version, as it were, of the themes that develops in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. The narrator, a first-generation New York Bajan, on her first trip back to the island, finds herself busily "attending to the alien sights and sounds of Barbados, the unfamiliar smells" (96); while she is quite at home in the urban jungle of New York which she attempts to convey to her Bajan grandmother, she finds herself totally disoriented in this new environment; the canefields are full of "canes clashing like swords above [her] cowering head" (100), and when her grandmother takes her to the tropical forest, the city child finds it "a place dense and damp and gloomy and tremulous with the fitful play of light and shadow . . . a violent place, the tangled foliage fighting each other for a chance at the sunlight . . . " (101).

One finds the same sense of disorientation and unease during the hike on which Miranda (Mama Day) takes George, the big city-boy, through the Sea-Island woods where "there were more lessons to be learned . . . They were a bit wilder, stray creepers to tangle up his foot and let him
stumble, a sight more hilly so he'd get a little winded, patches of waist-high bulrush for him to wade through" (Mama Day, 205). An identical sense of a hostile, and barely tame nature pervades the texts of Francophone Caribbean authors, for whom canes and the hot, monotonous, prison-like canefields are the very emblems of slavery and the past oppression of blacks. One finds this image of adverse environment in Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle, when Télumée is forced to leave the fairly safe seclusion of the hills at Fond-Zombi, to make a living cutting cane. She goes to cut the cane and realizes the depth of her oppression and that of her people:

Peu à peu, je me faisais maudite et quelques jours plus tard je n'attachais plus les cannes mais j'y entrais avec mon vieux coutelas, dans la volige des piquants et des essaims d'abeilles, de frelons qui se levaient avec le soleil . . . Là, dans le feu du ciel et des piquants, je transpirais toute l'eau que ma mère avait déposée dans mon corps. Et je compris enfin ce qu'est le nègre. (200) 15.

While this hostile surrounding binds and oppresses the Guadeloupean cane-cutter, it paradoxically causes her to discover her status as one among many "nègres" who allied tricksterism and a fierce sense of independence in order to survive through slavery: "vent et voile à la fois, tambourier et danseur en même temps, feinteur de première, s'efforçant de récolter par pleins paniers cette douceur qui tombe du ciel . . ." (200) 16. However, in a condemnatory glosse on the importance of the cane industry within the Caribbean economies and social history, Schwarz-Bart situates the death of Amboise, Télumée's friend and one of the strongest male characters in the story, during a manifestation of male and female cane-workers he has helped organize at the local sugar-mill.

This sense of discomfort caused by an unfamiliar surrounding does not only intervene when a city person is plunged in the midst of the wilderness; the reverse can also be true, namely in the brutal encounter between someone who comes from an essentially traditional, rural society, and the pressures of the Western industrialized world. This is the case with Schwarz-Bart's Télumée, whose impressions of France-- relayed through the stories told by her friend Amboise who has actually made the trip-- are all steeped in images of coldness and barrenness. In a recurrent dream that she experiences while working as a maid for a white planter's family, the young Guadeloupean servant sees herself as a hostage of cold Europe, "[c'était l'"hiver et je servais comme domestique dans une ville française . . . la neige tombait sans arrêt sur la ville et je ne m'en étonnais pas, elle me semblait chose toute naturelle." (112) 17. After having experienced a rebuff from her mistress, the
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distraught young girl dreams that she strips entirely, and walks off into the snowstorm: "Je sentais se roidir mes muscles jusqu'à ce qu'ils se transforment en glace et je tombais, morte" (113).

Images of the brutal, impersonal coldness of the Western world are recurrent in the descriptions of place that structure these texts. One finds them in the gloomy Christmastide atmosphere that permeates Naylor's *Linden Hills*, and, in particular, in her description of the desperate physical and affective starvation imposed by Luther Nedeed—himself totally controlled by coldness and insensitivity—on his wife. One also finds it in the attack on the Western, capitalist dream of the city illustrated by Marshall’s depiction of the bleak industrial landscape and its artifacts: the numbing factory, filled with decaying machinery where Silla works, or again young Vere’s adulation for race cars in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless people*.

This is the brutal universe in which Silla and Deighton and their neighbors attempt to survive in *Brown Girl, Brown Stones*. For Silla, exiled in Brooklyn, "the island [i.e. Bimshire] does not even exist as a potential place" and she remains "bent upon her single goal: to reach that other future place, her own house" (Brdck, 86). Indeed, Silla is driven by an exacerbated enterprising spirit, akin to capitalistic obsession with accumulation, that keeps her going and realizing the exiled Bajans’ "consuming ambition; to 'buy house' [symbolized by her obsession with brownstones] and to see the children through" (Marshall, 'From The Poets in The Kitchen', 26), whereas Deighton does not have the resilience to fight back and survive in the same way. Whenever he discusses any financial plans—usually linked with property and land—these are connected with the "old country," Bimshire --i.e. Barbados—and not North America. Just as nature or city environment usually will not yield to humans, objects and machines that are part of these landscapes tend to eschew the control of the men and women who attempt to master them.

-2) Place as Confinement and Oppression.

The often tense and distrustful relations that exist between several of the characters in these texts act as comments on the forced exile imposed upon Africans and their descendants in the Americas. From the moment that they were first transported as slaves, African men and women could
only view their New World environment, however vast and pristine, as a space of enclosure and constraint, one where they had to perform forced labor. Lewis Simpson, among others, has discussed this trope of enclosure in reference in particular to the "Southern dream of an enclosed plantation world" which the Southern scholar names the "garden of the chattel" in his 1975 essay, The Dispossessed Garden. This image of imprisonment and displacement can be found throughout all of African-American, and much of Caribbean literature; it is most conspicuous in the early slave narratives, but also appears in a transposed mode, in the "underground" trope which is so crucial in Wright's story Man Who Lived Underground and in Ellison's Invisible Man. It also appears in the description that Morrison gives of the motives for her hero Milkman's decision to go looking for his roots; as an inhabitant of a large Mid-Western city in the Great Lakes region, Milkman is a landlocked person; indeed, "truly landlocked people know they are . . . Once the people of the lake region discover [that the Great Lakes are themselves landlocked], the longing to leave becomes acute, and a break from the area, therefore, is necessarily dream-bitten, but necessary nonetheless. It might be an appetite for other streets, other slants of life." (Song of Solomon, 163). Milkman in effect has no sense of connectedness with his roots or his inner self; as his exploration of his family's origins takes him geographically further away, in widening circles, from his middle-class milieu, first to Danville, and later on to Shalimar in the South, he discovers a sense of community, of cultural heritage and collective responsibility to his past; finally, "with this release of personal ego, he is able to find a place in the whole" (Dorothy H. Lee, "The Quest for Self", 353). The image of enclosure and metaphorical captivity does not only operate within traditional black communities that have retained links with their past of bondage; it also controls the lives of those blacks who have fled their birthplaces in search of a new life and of the affluence of the modern world. As if in a modern echo of the horrific accidents suffered by slaves during their work, particularly in Caribbean sugar-mills, Deighton Boyce in Brown Girl, Brownstones is one of many casualties of the ruthlessness of the industrial, "modern" world, when it comes to "making it." He is literally crushed by this technical world while working one of its machines, "a slim figure with an ascetic's face standing amid that giant complex of pistons and power," who is almost destroyed by "the huge hungry maw of the machine opening while [he tends] it absently" (155). As his daughter Selina
reflects with despair, the injury inflicted by the machine only serves to doubly maim a man "already crushed inside" by life (155). In the same way, young Vere is killed at the Bournehills car races by the very automobile—a symbol of the industrialized world where he has had to temporarily exile himself to find work—he has never been able to master totally, one that simply disintegrates as it crashes at the very moment of Vere's final technical triumph.

This controlling sense of enclosure is therefore particularly strong in the works of black women authors, doubly entrapped as victims of racism and sexism, and has been ever since Harriet Jacobs's remarkable slave narrative. Sula, Avey Johnson, Jadine in Tar Baby, the narrator in Zami, Etta Mae Johnson in The Women of Brewster Place, are all women who need to get away from the oppressive constraints which racism, sexism and poverty have put on their lives. Indeed, just as with Jacobs’s tiny attic space or Woolf’s fragile privacy of her chamber, Merle Kimbona’s room in Marshall’s The Chosen Place, The Timeless People is another remarkable emblem of a female space of confinement that Merle has somehow managed to transform into a place of (black) female identity: "It expressed her: the struggle for coherence, the hope and desire for reconciliation of her conflicting parts, the longing to truly know and accept herself" (401-02). This figure of confinement acts on a double level: it is the manifestation of these women's physical imprisonment, as well as a bitter comment on their children's absence—the offspring of their past seclusion—from whom they have been forcibly separated as is the case with Linda Brent and Merle Kimbona.

Sometimes, as with Naylor's Eula Mae, black women discover that they can never escape from their plight wherever they go: "Eula soon found out that America wasn't ready for her yet—not in 1937. And so along with the countless other disillusioned, restless children of Ham, with so much to give and nowhere to give it, she took her talents to the streets. And she learned to get over" (The Women of Brewster Place, 60). Where Naylor, in the same book describes the imprisonment of urban women trapped in the brutal reality of inner-city ghettos, other characters are equally trapped in isolated, rural communities from which they do not even get a chance to get away; this is the case with Celie, in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, whose only relationship to the outside world comes from her writing to God, her sister’s letters from Africa, and more crucially, her meeting Shug, the
roaming blues singer. Celie's sense of reclusion, albeit on a smaller scale and with the exception of
the one outing to the bar where Shug performs, is reminiscent of that experienced by Morrison's
Ruth Dead, or by Naylor's Theresa in *The Women of Brewster Place*.

The tragic story of Willa Prescott Nedeed in *Linden Hills*, whom Nedeed has locked up in his
basement—a former morgue—clearly elaborates upon the two meanings of the term confinement; Willa
is kept a recluse both for having just given birth to her son and as a revenge for having "betrayed"
him. Typically, as Lutwack has noted in his discussion of Henry James and of *Madame Bovary*, the
oppressive limitations of spatial openness and the diminishing vistas afforded to Isabel Archer, Emma
Bovary as their seclusion augments, "[go] hand in hand with sexual unfulfillment" (Lutwack, 113). In
Willa's case, these limitations clearly accompany outright physical denial and oppression as a wife
and a mother; as her condition worsens and that she fears that she might be dying, Nedeed's wife
sits on her cot: ". . . being deprived of the infinite expanse of the stars or the sound of waves from
a bottomless ocean, she had to anchor the questions and answers for her limited existence to the
material enclosed within those four walls" (267). Once again, albeit in a negative mode, the
"fundamental and primitive association of body and place" (Lutwack, 113)—and in particular, the
female body—is perversely re-affirmed in the denial of Willa's physical existence and needs.

The confinement of Naylor's heroine to a cot in a dark and damp basement with her dying
son as sole company is both a modern-day redaction of Linda Brent's hiding in her "dismal hole,"
and a horrific and perverse variation of the tropes of forced displacement and enclosure that have
controlled the existences of so many blacks in the Americas, and black women in particular. Richard
Wright's or Ellison's images of the Underground can be interpreted, if one applies to them Robert
Stepto's types of narratives (immersion, ascent and hibernation), as necessary transitions before a
movement of rebirth, whereas Willa's descent into the Hell-like basement of the Nedeed mansion
takes her to a netherworld that is located at the very foot of Linden Hills and at the center of the
monstrous universe that Luther Nedeed has created for himself and those he controls. What sets off
as a one-way voyage, without any redeeming qualities for Willa becomes an inward journey during
which she re-discovers her lost identity (277-78). Tragically, Willa finally re-emerges from the near-
annihilation of Nedeed's netherworld with her dead son, only to meet her own death in the sacrificial
blaze that also engulfs her husband and his prized home at the end of *Linden Hills* (300-04). Nedeed's major failing—very much like that of Macon Dead in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*—is his inability, or rather his refusal, to acknowledge a sense of rootedness and connectedness with his past and with his people. He wants to "weed out" from his prospective tenants and buyers those "who had rooted themselves in the belief that Africa could be more than a word; [and that] slavery hadn't run its course . . . people [who] looked back a millenium, and if they could sit on Linden Hills for a millenium they'd produce children who would dream of a true black power that spread beyond the Nedeeds" (11).

Luther Nedeed and Macon Dead in *Song of Solomon* have abandoned their sense of roots—and consequently of any spiritual place—and have adopted the constraints and prejudices of the rampant materialism and the thirst for power that surrounds them. When Milkman is about to leave on the quest that will take him back to the South, at the place of his ancestors, his father only has these words as advice: "'You'll own it all. All of it. You'll be free. Money is freedom, Macon. The only real freedom there is' " (163). Whereas Milkman eventually learns—with the help of his aunt Pilate, a root-and a conjure-woman, who has always retained strong ties with her origins and her environment—to strip himself from all the unnecessary accoutrements of material success, his father and Gloria Naylor's Luther Nedeed never reach such a level of self-knowledge. Rather, in a destructive act of revenge on the woman he had carefully 'picked' to be "the perfect woman for Tupelo Drive" (67), Nedeed deliberately sacrifices his wife Willa, the one person who might have helped him discover his suppressed humanity. As a matter of fact, for Nedeed the heart of his troubles lies in the fact that, since his father's time, ". . . women had changed dreadfully. Ideally, he should have married a woman who was the age of his fathers' wives—sixteen, seventeen at the most. But today that was impossible because they were pampered and irresponsible" (67). Consequently, Willa has to be "taught a lesson", and she will have to endure it, until he decides that she is ready to come back upstairs. As in a modern Gothic tale where repressed sexuality and the macabre seem to control people's lives, Willa is sacrificed and united with the ghostly shadows and "perfumed fragments" of the other Nedeed women who were also the prisoners of the same antechamber of death before her time, and who surrounded her during her confinement with traces of their "sad, twisted lives" (205).
In effect, Willa Nedeed's effacement from the world of Linden Hills is tragically emblematic of the dangers that Naylor—and Morrison, as I will discuss hereafter—denounce as they depict characters who have lost touch with their historical and spiritual roots.

-D: The Chosen Place(s): Place as A Locale of Rebirth.

Not all of the texts considered in this study look at Place exclusively as a trope of displacement and disconnectedness. Within the long history of slave rebellions and "marronage," both on the American mainland and in the islands, place has also functioned as a locus of refuge and resourcement, the ultimate "loophole of retreat". This has been the case ever since the days of slavery, and the settlement of the first Maroon communities in Jamaica as early as the 1640's as well as in the Brazilian "free republic" of Palmares in the eighteenth-century; this experience was repeated through the 1850's from the swamps of the American South to the rain forests of Suriname and French Guyana. As Ralph Ellison comments in his recent essay "Going to the Territory," for black slaves, "geography was fate . . . the Mason-Dixon line had taught them the relationship between geography and freedom [. . .] it was no accident that much of the symbolism of our folklore is rooted in the imagery of geography . . . slaves had learnt (that) freedom was to be attained through geographical movement" (131). For black women, the sense that "geography is fate" was doubly true; they found themselves bound as slaves and as women to the whimsical geography to which forced displacement from Africa had relegated them. When Morrison's Sethe had a chance to run away from bondage in Beloved, she did so regardless of what had happened to her husband Halle, once he failed to show up at their secret meeting place, as he should have. In other instances, black women turn the tables on the constraints of place: this is the case with Jacobs's Linda Brent when she goes so far as to write her former master to make him believe that she has succeeded in escaping to the North, while remaining in hiding at his plantation, within earshot from him.

Ellison's sense of "geography as fate" appears very clearly in Marshall's use of Bournehills as a topographical symbol of a universe and Weltanschauung that date back to times immemorial before slavery, namely the pristine world of African traditions and spirituality. It is also conspicuous
in Naylor's use of the Sea Islands, an exemplary milieu of an indigenous African-American culture and socialization process, in her latest novel *Mama Day*, and again in Schwarz-Bart's and Glissant's references to the hills and forests of their native isles as places of authenticity and resistance throughout history. In the latter critic's words, the Carribean highland country which is the domain of "la forêt marron" is "le symbole du passé, de la fidélité à l'Afrique et aux traditions, du refus de la servilité. Elle est le refuge du quimboiseur [the root doctor] Papa Langoud" (Glissant, *La Lézarde*, 88). In *Ti-Jean L'Horizon*, Schwarz-Bart deliberately opposes the mountainous "pays d'En-Haut" with the plains where predominate the plantations and the canefields: En-Haut is where live the descendants of the Maroons, runaway slaves from the times of slavery:

Là sur un plateau d'accès difficile, vivait un petit groupe de solitaires définitifs, de farouches complètement retranchés du monde et qu'on appelait les gens d'En-Haut. . . . [Ils] s'estimaient supérieurs à tout l'univers, car ils descendéaient en droite ligne des esclaves qui s'étaient révoltés autrefois, avaient vécu et étaient morts les armes à la main . . . Ils ne se tourmentaient pas, [ils] savaient, savaient qu'un sang noble courait dans leurs veines (*Ti Jean L'Horizon*, 14).

Furthermore, as a locus for a sense of community and a possible refuge, place operates as an essential matrix of a pressing need for identity. Indeed, once Milkman has wrested himself from the constraints of his middle-class, Midwestern, urban milieu, one of the first revelations that he has when finally reaching the small community of Shalimar, his family's cradle, has to do with a sense of connectedness to place. As he sits listening to the tales of two women who are the village eccentrics, Grace Long and Susan Byrd, he reflects that "he didn't feel close to them, but he did feel connected . . . Back home he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to anyplace or anybody . . . But there was something he felt now--here in Shalimar, and earlier in Danville--that reminded him of how he used to feel in Pilate's house" (*Song of Solomon*, 296).

This coming to terms with a "chosen place," to use Marshall's terminology, a place that is not necessarily one's birthplace, lies at the very heart of two works that I wish to consider more closely: Angelou's *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* and Marshall's *Praisesong for The Widow*. Each novelist, in her own manner, addresses this issue which remains crucial for the narratives of self written by black women—and their male peers—in the Americas.

Published in 1987, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* is both the continuation of Angelou's autobiographical enterprise—and its fifth volume—and a thorough appraisal of her years
spent in Ghana. Indeed, Angelou's African odyssey posits the author’s claim to a geographical space of her own, and the re-appropriation of a historical territory that has been denied to her and her people for centuries. Where women--white and black--have traditionally been relegated to inner, spiritual spaces and chambers, Angelou proclaims her need for an external, physical space: although the narrator in All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes always remains cautiously aware that Black Americans in Africa "had left one familiar place of painful memory for another strange place with none,"(40) the urge to "come home" and the "need to believe in Africa's maternal welcome"(40) controls Angelou's emancipation from the strictures of her American environment. With her son Guy as the closest thing to a home she has known in a long time, the narrator's first days in Africa are steepled in a constant sense of elation, until reality brutally erupts, in the form of a drunk driver injuring Guy; despite the agony brought by this accident and the first misgivings caused by inevitable administrative round-abouts and red-tape, Angelou's hopes and almost obsessional need for a place of her own prevail for quite a while.

Early on, Angelou writes: "We had come home, and if home was not what we had expected, never mind, our need for belonging allowed us to ignore the obvious and to create places and even illusory places, befitting our imagination"(19). Not unlike Lorde's repeated attempt to create a place of womanly love for herself and her kin, or Merle Kimbona's decision to come home to Bourne Island, after years of living an irresponsible, bohemian life in "decadent" England, Angelou thirsts for a place that she can call her own, one where "black and brown skin did not herald debasement and a divinely created inferiority" (16). Interestingly, her account of her African years, which is filled with historical data, also resorts to the mythical and the surreal when it comes to describing Africa as a chosen place of being; Angelou comments that "[o]ur people had always longed for home. For centuries we had sung about a place not built with hands, where the streets were paved with gold, and were washed with honey and milk. There the saints would march around wearing white robes and jeweled crowns . . . In [our] yearning [for a desired destination], heaven and Africa were inextricably combined." (19-20). Besides the clear rhetorical influence from the Black church, one finds striking similarities between this evocation of a mythical/biblical Africa of milk and honey--one that calls up evocations of the Biblical Queen of Sheba and her fabulous kingdom--and the
description that an old man from Carriacou gives Avey Johnson of the "old-time creole dances" that are performed during the annual ritual of the Beg Pardon on that island:

'So you know, you remember Juba!' And from the way he said it... it was as if he meant more than just the dance. He might have been also referring to the place that bore the name: Juba, the legendary city at the foot of the White Nile. And it was clear that he wasn't thinking of the forgotten backwater it had become... but the city as he remembered it from memories that had come down to him in the blood: as Juba, the once-proud, imperial seat at the heart of the equatoria (Praisesong for The Widow, 178).

One sees therefore, that even as they are living in an African environment, or relating to one in their minds, these narrators remain torn between the evidence of what they see or know (the dilapidated Sudanese town of Juba, the aggravating inefficiency of the newly-independent Ghanaian civil service), and their almost desperate desire to retain somewhere in their souls and memories a preserved sense of Africa the motherland, from which their ancestors were wrested away. Lorde's and Angelou's texts proceed both through nostalgia for a lost past (Lesbos/ancient Africa) and by impulses towards a utopian future wherein African-Americans will be able to reunite their sense of identity with a given place, just as lesbian literature often posits utopian spaces of womanly love, as I will argue later.

Paradoxically, Angelou's African experience both makes her "become something other, another kind of person," (174) and face the uniqueness of her dual heritage, as a person of African descent born on American soil. Indeed, the memory of Africa was never lost throughout the history of the black communities that settled by force in the Americas, as is evidenced by the innumerable folk-tales, songs and sayings about the "old country": going back to "Guinée" after one's death or again the haunting African-American tales of the flying black men and women that Morrison and Naylor so magistrally integrate into the narratives of Song of Solomon and Mama Day. In Marshall's work, Merle Kimbona's coming to terms with her complex self and past is revealed by her final decision to go back to her former husband in East Africa, and to the child that he has kept from her as a result of her "scandalous" conduct in London. In Praisesong for The Widow, Avey Johnson's excursion to Carriacou brings to her mind "frames from a home movie she remembered [her daughter] Marion had made her last trip to Ghana" (187).
However, Marshall's essential locale of return and rootedness of self is the Caribbean, as in Lorde's and Schwarz-Bart's texts. Avey Johnson's trip to the islands is paradigmatic of the African-American's quest for identity and spiritual roots: it follows the delayed trauma that she experiences after her husband Jay's death, a mere physical one since he had "simply ceased to be" as a spiritual person years earlier, one night of the winter of 1945 when, "a man eager to be gone [. . .], he had taken with him the little private rituals and pleasures, the playfulness and wit, the host of feelings and passions that had defined them in a special way back then, and the music that had been their nourishment" (Praisesong for The Widow, 136). Avey's cruise is thus concomitant with a need on her part to start afresh in her late years, with a sense that her mind was like "a tabula rasa upon which a whole new history could be written" (151). This rebirth however, can only take place after Avey has actually rid herself, or rather cleansed herself of the old ties and prejudices that kept her bound to the middle-class, suburban life that she and Jay had secured for themselves. This previous life clearly sacrificed the world of sacred African rituals and racial myths--represented both by her great-aunt Cuney's role as conjure woman and spiritual mentor at Tatem Landing and by her rebellious Ibo ancestors--to the materialistic comforts of the American way of life in the symbolically named North White Plains. As Keith Sandiford has remarked, in Avey's recurrent dream of her aunt, "geography succumbs to mythology" (380), and places tend to become undifferentiated: just as Avey must leave the materialistic wasteland of the northern white plains, she must also jump boat and forsake the cruise ship--fittingly called the Bianca Pride (my emphasis)--and take one of the small local boats over to Carriacou, in order to participate in the annual cleansing and libation rituals presented to the "Old Parents" on the island.

The reader experiences a continuous conflation of places in Marshall's novel, as if one locale recalled another one, according to an invisible web of narrative threads: the boat excursion to Carriacou brings back memories of family outings up the Hudson river to Bear Mountain when Avey was a child; simultaneously, while waiting for the boat to come into dock, "she [had] the same strange sensation as when she stood beside her great-aunt outside the church in Tatem, watching the elderly folk inside perform the Ring Shout" (190). Moments later, when she finds a seat on board the Carriacou ship, Avey has a "shock of recognition" that makes her mistake the island women "sitting
there in their long somber dresses, their black hands folded in their laps..." (193) for the presiding mothers at her own mother's church, many years earlier.

One of the unifying metaphors that controls much of Praisesong for The Widow is therefore that of threads, not unlike Morrison's use of images of connectedness in her portrayal of Milkman's discovery of self. Early on, in Marshall's text, during the boat ride up the Hudson, the sudden apparition of "disreputable types" had made young Avey become aware of multiple yet invisible threads, that "didn't come from her, but from them, from everyone on the pier, including the rowdies," and that caused her to "cease being herself [and] become part of, indeed the center of, a huge wide confraternity" (191). As the novel is about to conclude, and Avey is ready to leave Carriacou, having undergone a ritualistic rebirth of soul, and a cleansing of body, the same metaphor of threads recurs; "and for the first time since she was a girl, she felt the threads, that myriad of shiny, silken, brightly colored threads... looking on outside the church in Tatem, standing waiting for the Robert Fulton on the crowded pier at 125th Street, she used to feel them streaming out of everyone there to enter her..." (249). Ritual and myth are clearly two of the unifying "threads" in Marshall's novel, if one accepts Saniford's argument that what is at work in her text is "a confrontation between the claims of history and the claims of myth" (372). This is evidenced both by Avey's struggles with her history, and by Cuney's appropriation of the African past symbolized by the myth of her Ibo ancestors. Indeed, as Gabrielle Rolin notes, even when Avey has regained the safety of her Northern residence, she remains forever connected by these threads to another universe which she has discovered, the "other self" of her inner geography ("son autre moi") and of her people (Rolin, 11).

As Marshall suggests in the title of The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, locale, time and people are inextricably connected. Both in her own texts, and in those of the other women authors discussed here, place in its present, distant, reclaimed or lost aspects is a fundamental matrix without which any construct of self as a black person from the Americas, and especially as a woman participating in a unique experience-of-being, would be impossible. Whether they re-appropriate and create their own geographical space, as Angelou does in the African episode of her autobiography, or learn to adjust to—even as they transcend—the strictures of their given environment, as do Marshall's
or Schwarz-Bart's protagonists, the female characters in these texts point to a crucial confluence between a sense of place and a sense of one's self in the psyches of black women from the diaspora. Furthermore, as Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle illustrates, the geographical reality of a place, such as the young Guadeloupean's island, can be replaced by a more abstract, figurative sense of place: Guadeloupe is no longer the mere backdrop for a quest of self, but rather, it becomes the very locus where Télumée's meditation upon her destiny—as well as her people's—takes place; in Toumson's words, her island becomes at last "un lieu où s'éprouve un ordre historico-culturel" ("a place where a historico-cultural order is experienced" [Toumson, 73]). Place in these texts becomes therefore, in a figurative and emblematic mode, the locus where time in its historical and mythical dimensions inscribes itself upon the minds of black women and men from the Americas.
1. See in particular Henry-Louis Gates, Jr.'s discussion of the South and the African-American artist in "The Afro-American Writer and the South", The Southern Review and Modern Literature, Eds. Lewis Simpson, James Olney, and Joe Gulledge. 138-42. Gates contends that in black women's tradition, "the South is a kind of nesting ground, a place to which we turn from the inside to create our fictional worlds" (139).


4. "[a material and a mental space] two categories of space that have in common the fact that they can be invaded: one by violence and the other by indiscretion" (my translation).

5. Gloria Naylor, "A Reading from Mama Day", Tulane University, Newcomb College Lecture series, New Orleans, April 12, 1989.

6. "the island on which our story takes place is not well-known. It floats, forsaken, in the Gulf of Mexico, and only a few especially meticulous atlases show it" (Between Two Worlds, 3).

7. "To tell the truth, it is a completely unimportant scrap of earth, and the experts have once and for all dismissed its history as insignificant" (Between Two Worlds, 3).

8. "So misunderstood are these faraway lands which appear in the imagination of the central government like some kind of tropical paradise, not to be taken too seriously" (The Ripening, 22).


10. "And yet the place does exist. Moreover, it has a long history, full of wonders, bloodshed and frustrations, and of desires no less vast than those that filled the skies of Niniveh, Babylon, or Jerusalem" (Between Two Worlds, 4).

11. "[These] volcanic, hurricane-swept, mosquito-ridden, nasty-minded island[s]" (Bridge of Beyond, 3).

12. "A man's country may be cramped or vast according to the size of his heart" (Bridge of Beyond, 3).

13. "We enlarge reality; and possibly because of our being an island, we need this enlargement" (my translation).

14. "They come back from afar; from always, from the "outer world", from the heaths where the witches are still in existence, from beneath, from beyond "culture"" (my translation).

15. "Gradually I made myself accursed, and a few days laster I was no longer tying up the canes but going in among them with my old machete among the flying prickles and the swarms of bees, and the hornets that rose with the sun . . . There amid the fire of the sky and the prickles, I sweated out
all the moisture my mother had ever put in my body. And I understood at last what a Negro is" (The Bridge of Beyond, 196).

16. "wind and sail at the same time, at once drummer and dancer, first-class sham, trying to collect by the basketful the sweetness that falls scattered from above" (The Bridge of Beyond, 196).

17. "It was winter and I was a servant in France. . . . Snow was falling ceaselessly and it seemed to me quite natural" (The Bridge of Beyond, 106).

18. "Then I felt my muscles stiffening until they turned to ice, and I fell down dead" (The Bridge of Beyond, 106).


20. "[It is] the symbol of the past and of allegiance to Africa and to traditions, and of the refusal to be servile. It is the haven of the root doctor, Papa Langouë" (The Ripening, 70).

21. "There on an almost inaccessible plateau, lived a small group of real solitaries, people who had cut themselves off from the world once and for all, and who were called the folk Up Above . . . They regarded themselves as superior to all, for they were their direct descendants of slaves who in the past had risen in revolt, and had lived and died bearing arms. They did not fret or wonder about the color of their guts; they knew that a noble blood ran in their veins." (Between Two Worlds, 7).
CHAPTER III: Time as Re-appropriated Continuum in Black Literatures from The New World.

Among the authors under consideration, Maya Angelou's work clearly locates itself in a precise historical context. It illustrates Keith E. Byerman's remarks that the autobiographical act on the part of black authors is a process that posits a continuum, one in which "identity becomes a process, a continual creation partly in negation" against those forces that would deny its very existence (Byerman, 7). While figures of confinement and constraint play a crucial role in the configuration of space in texts by black women from the Americas, their use of time responds to other dimensions that are particular both to the black experience and to the female condition in the diaspora.

Paul Ricoeur, Georges Poulet and other critics have demonstrated the pervasive presence of temporal tropes in contemporary texts and their tight control of quintessential narratives of Western modernity such as Proust's A La Recherche du temps perdu, Woolf's Mrs Dalloway or again Thomas Mann's Der Zauberberg. Yet, when one confronts texts which have been relegated at the very margin of the accepted Western canon because of their gender-, class- or race-related focus, or again those texts that were written in reaction to this Western literary tradition--as is the case with most of African-American and African-Caribbean texts--one must necessarily address the entire relation between time and narrative from a new perspective. What is the place and the function of time in literatures which result from the unique ordeals of forced bondage and exile experienced by Africans and their descendants over three centuries, indeed a period that witnessed some of the most traumatic disruptions in the evolution of humankind? Furthermore, how does the traditional exclusion of women from official, historical time--as has been the case in Western societies at least--manifest itself in texts authored by black women from the Americas?

One must necessarily go back to the African origins of black societies from the diaspora to account for the concept of time that evolved within these communities. At the same time, it is impossible not to take into account the particular and excruciating experiences of slavery that Africans encountered in the New World, and which had such a lasting impact on their culture and their relationship to the spatial, temporal and social environment in which they had to live.

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Although it would be perilous to generalize about one single African culture and Weltanschauung, and while we must necessarily distinguish between different types of African societies (urban, rural, coastal, those from the savannas, mountains or confines of the desert, or again Moslem, Animist, or Christian ones), one can nevertheless affirm that African societies at the beginning of the slavery era were essentially traditional, rural and pre-industrial communities. These civilizations—not unlike those that prevailed in Europe through the late Middle ages—retained a strong sense of the sacred that pervaded and structured most moments of an individual’s existence. Ugandan scholar John S. Mbiti has noted in his groundbreaking study on African Religions and Philosophy that the African individual "is immersed in a religious participation which starts before birth and continues after his death" (15). As Evan M. Zuesse notes in a study of African cosmology and religions, space and time were crucially instrumental in the articulation of a specific African spirituality: "If space articulates the immanent presence of the divine, it also presents the danger of banalization. There is need for constant renewal of a transcendental perspective, even to keep clearly in mind the holiness of space. This renewal can only occur through the rituals of time" (Mbiti, 108).

Time, as transcendence of one's limitations—in particular those imposed by space and geography—and in its uses of ritual, is thus an essential key to understanding the sacred in traditional African societies. In his meticulous analyses of two specific African cultures, the Mbuti Pygmies from Central Africa and the Ila people from Zambia, Zuesse demonstrates the extent of the cyclical nature of time for many Africans, as opposed to the linear concept of temporality which has been common to the Western world since the Copernican revolution. The black resistance to a Western-defined concept of time and to a Eurocentered sense of History appears in the following remark by Edouard Glissant in Le Discours antillais that "l'obstination à considérer le temps comme un vécu naturel ... reflète bien une réaction instinctive globale contre la prétention d'imposer un temps historique, qui serait celui de l'Occident". The same critic then adds, speaking of the peasantry from Martinique, that "[le paysan martiniquais] ne prétend pas vous imposer 'un' temps donné. Il marque son histoire 'à côté' de la vôtre ... l'une des conceptions les plus terrifiantes de la colonisation [a
Interestingly, Glissant's remarks on the "univocality" of an exclusively Western-defined history rejoins the objections that Julia Kristeva and other feminists have made against the very notion of history—as commonly understood in the West—as something "linked to the cogito, to the paternal function, representation, meaning, denotation, sign, syntax, narration, and so forth" ("Women's Time", 8). Where the Martinique writer and other black male intellectuals from Africa and the Americas reclaim their share of world history from a black perspective, African-American and African-Caribbean women have had to confront their double exclusion, as black females, from Eurocentric, male-defined history. Mary-Helen Washington comments on the critical reception of her first anthology of texts by black women, Black-Eyed Susans, in such terms: "Susans was a first step toward power, for it celebrated the legends of black women, weaved dreams into myths that allowed us to recover and name our own past" (Washington, Midnight Birds, xiii). Recent feminist criticism has focused on the repetitive, rhythmical nature of female-centered time, one that is not totally alien to the cyclical organization of traditional, rural African societies; in a seminal essay on the specificity of women's time Kristeva notes that:

As for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations. [...] There are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose regularity and unison with [...] extrasubjective time, cosmic time occasion vertiginous visions and unnameable jouissance. ("Women's Time", 16)

Zuesse, for his part, in his study on African spirituality notes that in an agricultural economy like that of the Ila group from Uganda, time is organized in a ceremonial manner according to the cycle of the moon and weather variations that control the crops and the rhythms of plantation. Indeed, the "ritual calendar expresses the ecological interdependence of [the Ilas'] universe and reveals how this mutuality operates" (109). Mbiti notes that while in "Western or technological society, time is a commodity which must be utilized, sold and bought, in traditional African life, time has to be created and produced. Man is not a slave of time; instead he 'makes' as much time as he wants" (19). Thus, in traditional societies thus, men and women generate their own idiosyncratic sense of temporality according to their needs of the moment. This temporality is connected with
religious or agricultural cycles and rituals, and has nothing to do with a mechanistic regulation of
time such as it occurs in Western industrial societies. This Euro-American vision of time is manifest
in the representations of museums and public monuments across the Western world, landmarks which
in Mary-Helen Washington’s words "all [witness] the historic power of men to mythologize
themselves, to remake history, and to cast themselves eternally in heroic form, [a history] where there
is hardly a trace of women’s lives" (Midnight Birds, xiii).

Traditional African societies stressed therefore a synchronic vision of time wherein the
repetition of past moments and potential future recurrences guaranteed a continuum of the temporal
cycle. Women in African sub-Saharan societies were, and remain, essential participants in the social
and cultural activities of their communities with noticeable variations in status and societal roles
according to their respective times and communities. As the traditional birth-givers and transmitters of
the cycle of life, African women found themselves at the center of the synchronic cycle of time that
sustained these societies. However, their own biologically-determined, temporal constraints of
gestation—as mothers, wives, or in any other female function—were sometimes at odds with the
patriarchal strictures of time that controlled the daily lives of their societies. Recent works by African
female writers such as Mariama Bâ’s Une si longue lettre and Buchi Emecheta’s numerous novels are
telling illustrations of the complex tensions that co-exist(ed) both in traditional and contemporary
African societies between African women’s specific needs and well-being and the constraints of the
respective indigenous culture to which they belong(ed) ². As is the case with Mbiti’s study,
Dominique Zahan has elaborated upon the "regressive" nature of traditional African communities and
on the fact that since they focus on the past, they "find justification and meaning of [their] actions . .
in time already elapsed. [Their] reasoning is thus "regressive" . . . the aim is to trace the present
from the past and thereby justify it" (47). This past-oriented justification of one’s existence could not
be possible without the presence of tradition which holds such a strong grip on African societies;
Zahan adds that for Africans, "[t]radition is above all the collective experience of the community [. .
.] a means of communication between the dead and the living [. . .] a sort of tacit agreement
between the past and the present" (48).
Despite the violent disruption caused by slavery, there are several traces of such a "collective experience of the community"—with the understanding of community as one similar to Victor Turner's definition of "communitas" which I discussed earlier—in texts by black writers from the Americas. Community can be defined by place: all the places in these narratives constitute examples of tight-knit communities that have indeed survived and held together through a sense of geographical rootedness in locales of refuge and survival, as well as an acute sense of historical continuum and an almost Bergsonian use of memory-as-recollection of one's origins. Speaking of her novel, Schwarz-Bart comments that Télumée's existence—based on that of an old woman the novelist used to visit in her youth—is a sum of the lives of numerous Caribbean women:

C'était une amie, un peu 'sorcère'. Je l'ai connue pendant mon enfance [. . .] Sa vie résumait toute une fresque, toute une tranche de vie des Antillais [. . .] En réalité ce n'est pas sa vie, mais une collecte de moments privilégiés, de moments de son enfance; c'est une espèce de mémoire que j'ai voulu restituer ("Sur les pas de Fanotte", 15).

It would be naive to suggest that traditional, rural African societies had no sense of the future, nor of a slow historical evolution and transformation through the ages—something that the numerous African oral traditions, oral genealogies and myths of origin easily discount. It remains evident however that the concept of change and evolution did not have the same weight in these cultures as they have had, from the late Middle Ages onwards, in Western societies. As Zahan remarks, for the African "the supreme ideal is the indefinite repetition of the normative past . . . the ideal does not constitute a model or standard tied to the future but rather an ensemble of values ascribed to the past" (51). A continuous repetition of cultural, social and spiritual beliefs—through rituals and the consolidation of myths—if one defines myth as a system of hereditary stories held to be true by a particular community and buttressed by rituals, namely the prescribed forms of sacred ceremonials particular to that society—provided traditional societies with a sense of relative continuum and security. These communities were, typically, at the mercy of failed crops, droughts, natural disasters, wars, plagues like those described in the opening chapters of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart when the narrator comments:

The year had gone mad. Rain fell as it had never fallen before . . . that year the harvest was sad, like a funeral and many farmers wept as they dug up the miserable and rotting yams. One man tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself. (Things Fall Apart, 26-27).
Interestingly, one finds the same unpredictability and harshness of Nature in the texts set in the New World; Sula's return to Medallion is accompanied by a plague of robins, the people at Bournehills can barely make a living from their barren land, and in Pluie et vent sur Téhumée Miracle, the frequent hostility of natural elements that prey upon humans has caused one critic to speak of a "Sumature" (Toumson, 49).

However, transplanted African communities in the Americas could not merely resume their cultural and religious beliefs once their forced removal from the motherland had occurred. Rather, as Melville J. Herskovits has demonstrated in his discussion of the complex "cultural dynamics" at work in the black communities from the diaspora, the "Negroes who were brought to these reaches of the New World [. . .] were not passive agents in the process, but the limits imposed on them in making their adjustment [. . .] laid more specific and more severe restrictions on them than are ordinarily operative in contact between peoples" (Herskovits, 223). In his analysis of the sudden coming-into-contact of different cultures, such as the one that occurred during the colonization of the Americas, Herskovits has clearly shown that in some cases the very brutality of this contact caused the dominated group to accentuate the values of their native culture, and endeavor to recreate, in reality or metaphorically, such a lifestyle. If one applies this observation to the African communities of the New World, one can see that despite the local social, political, economic and religious variations pertaining to the European groups with which the slaves came in contact, the displaced Africans succeeded in not only retaining, but also creating a spatial, temporal and spiritual environment in which to survive their harrowing ordeal, as I suggested earlier.


Slavery was not only an irreparable breach for the black exiles with their natural African environment; it proved also to be an excruciatingly traumatic fracture with their original sense of a cyclical, flowing continuum of time. Whereas while still free they had primarily concentrated on their connection with the ancestral figures and those values from the past that provided the norms and ideals of their society, as displaced Africans in bondage in a hostile environment the slaves had to
focus suddenly on an uncontrollable and ominous future, while sacrificing the sense of a historical
continuum. In the case of the French Caribbean, the wrenching of the slaves from their native
homelands had serious effects upon the resulting cultures that emerged in Martinique, Guadeloupe,
and in a very distinct form, in Haiti. Critics have commented on the recurring tropes of dereliction
and "orphelinat" in French Caribbean literatures; for example, Jean Bernabé underlines the crucial
place of Reine Sans Nom's tale of origins told to young Télumée and Elie (76-79) by calling it an
"anthropogénèse" and by adding that in the "tradition orale créole [. . .] on ne trouve pas d'épopée,
et pratiquement pas de grands mythes des origines" (Bernabé, 125) 4.

As Roger Bastide, Robert Farris Thompson, Lawrence Levine and others have demonstrated
in recent years, one of the striking aspects of the black societies of the Americas has been their
resilience in the face of oppression and destruction, and their ability to maintain clearly African
cultural and spiritual traits even after they had been seemingly dispossessed of all their African
heritage. In his discussion of what constitutes culture in Black Culture and Black Consciousness,
Levine clearly stresses that culture is an ongoing process that inscribes itself in space, and foremost
in time: "culture is not a fixed condition but a process; the product of interaction between the past
and the present. Its toughness and resiliency are determined [. . .] by its ability to react creatively
and responsively to the realities of a new situation" (5). The idiosyncratic conception and uses of
time particular to blacks in the Americas certainly figure as a most prominent example of the creative
responses that their new milieu triggered in African slaves. The Bergsonian concept of time which
postulates that "in place of a determinism of cause and effect [there is] the feeling that any moment
can be realized as a new moment, and that time can always be freely created from the present
moment forward" can be applied here (Poulet, 35). It is possible to say that one of the main goals on
the part of African slaves from the moment that they reached American soil was to re-appropriate
their past and consequently regain control of their time. Blacks in the New World found themselves
cought in an unprecedented conflict of having to accommodate their collective consciousness of being
African-Americans--or African-Caribbeans--with their knowledge of an idiosyncratic, distinct historical
past, as displaced Africans (Toumson, 46-47).
In their thorough studies of the black societies that emerged in the Americas as a result of slavery, Bastide, Farris Thompson, Eugene D. Genovese and others have focused on the conspicuous Africanisms that one observes to this day from Brazil across the entire Caribbean all the way to New England; they have shown how these traits were not, in their origin, so much manifestations of cultural survival and resilience as they were deliberate cultural and social expressions of a forced adaptation to an entirely new milieu. Bastide remarks in *African Civilisations in The New World*:

In one sense it was possible for the African to preserve memories of his past [while] on the other hand, the new modes of production enforced by the [plantation system] accustomed people's bodies to different motor habits [and] a whole new range of social conduct. Thus while the slaves' minds might remain African, their actions were gradually being Americanized. (90).

Remarkably, this dichotomy between a new environment and a continuing spiritual attachment to Africa is not unlike women's sense of inadequacy in being caught between a male-defined time/history and their sense of their own female-centered temporal cycles. The de facto creolization of African people in bondage did not occur overnight; as Genovese has remarked, the plantation system was based on a contradictory aspiration that attempted to "preserve as much as possible of [an] older way of life . . ." while attempting to instill "factorylike discipline into a working [slave] population engaged in a rural system that . . . remained bound to the rhythms of nature and to traditional ideas of work, time, and leisure" (Genovese, 286). The rural aspect of the economies of pre-capitalistic plantation societies is noticeable in the organization of the calendar at Marshall's Bourne Island: "The year in Bournehills was divided in two. There was 'in crop' . . . until as late perhaps as the end of June," a time of busy activity, occasional weekend dances and "money enough sometimes for a man to replace the worst of the rotted sidings on his house. Then there was 'out of crop' from June to the end of the year, with the men idle, the silent factory . . ." (The Chosen Place. The Timeless People. 267). Indeed, as the previous chapter indicates, slaves from the very beginning were careful to secure for themselves some loopholes of spatial and temporal autonomy away from the ever-inquisitive eye of the white master (and mistress); in these places of refuge they could re-create expressions and rituals of the African homeland. According to Genovese, "the plantation system served as a halfway house for Africans between their agricultural past and their imposed industrial future" (289).
As a result, one can say that the very concept of a specific "black time"--which has been so often derided in common racist jokes about "coloured people's time" or again "l'heure C.F.A." in francophone Africa (in reference to the "franc C.F.A.," the common currency of what used to be known as la Communauté française d'Afrique)--lies at the heart of the definition of a distinct black Weltanschauung that has evolved in North America, the Caribbean and colonial Africa.

For black female slaves, the constraints of servitude were twofold: the Western world infringed upon their personal sense of time by imposing the demands of a profit-induced reproduction of slaves upon their natural biological rhythms. Bondage also forced the descendants of African women--and men--to adapt to a linear concept of time, while they attempted to retain a sense of synchronicity. For many black women in the Americas, the forced juxtaposition of an idiosyncratic female time with the constraints of time imposed by the white plantocracy compounded the hardships of having to live as females within a male-defined temporality. The place accorded to women within the slave-system was distinctly different from that made to white women; as Angela Davis, Dorothy Sterling, and Herbert Gutman have convincingly argued, compulsory slave-labor resulted in an unparalleled social--and sexual--equality between black males and females, at a time when upper-class white Southern women were imprisoned in the ideology of White Womanhood and femininity. As Davis notes, "since [black] women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labor-units, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned" (Davis, 5). Dorothy Sterling notes that "there was little division of labor [between black male and female slaves] except on largest plantations but [that] some jobs were always assigned to women," (13). However, the concept of "feminine" and "masculine" labor was an extremely expandable one, and "in the cotton, tobacco, corn and sugar-cane fields, women worked alongside their men" (Davis, 8). Women could also be found in coal mines, iron foundries or as lumberjacks and ditchdiggers, as well as in the more conventionally domestic, "feminine" occupations at the planter's house 7. The division of labor therefore was not an absolutely rigorous one, as that propounded by nineteenth century white definitions of gender-roles; rather it was one that adapted itself to the oppressive constraints of the slavocracy and to the needs of male and female slaves at a certain time and place. Interestingly, one
finds echoes of this antebellum non-gender specific distribution of chores, and of its cross-gender communality of responsibility and decision-making in Audré Lorde’s comments about her parents in pre-World War II Harlem: "They shared decisions and the making of all policy, both in their business and in the family." After describing her parents’ buzzing retreat behind the closed doors of their bedroom, Lorde adds: "Then the two of them would emerge and announce whatever decision had been arrived upon. They spoke all through my childhood with one unfragmentable and unappealable voice" (Zami, 15). This sense of a communal voice indicates that despite the horrors of exile and slavery, a strongly black-centered identity maintained itself within the Americas, one that found its expression in specific visions of time among other things.

This distinctly black conception of time appears as a conscious resistance to externally-defined values and criteria which were imposed upon black communities by the white, Eurocentric ruling classes for whom time was defined as an expandable commodity that could easily be disposed of according to the needs of the capitalistic economy *. Commenting on the frequent complaints found in planters’ papers and journals on the "laziness" and lack of a sense of time on the part of their slaves, Genovese says that this supposed shiftlessness "represented at once a defense against an enforced system of economic exploitation and an autonomous assertion of values generally associated with preindustrial people" (286). Carrying this discussion to the spiritual plane, Levine argues that much of the remarkable religious manifestations of slave life carried out in religious meetings and other gatherings, were indeed the expression of a sense of change and of a need for transcendence; according to the historian—who bases his statement on the reactions of some early nineteenth century Quaker observers at a 'lack camp-meeting where they experienced the emotional immediacy of past, present and future religious events as performed by blacks—"the thin line between time dimensions is nowhere better illustrated than in the slaves’ visions of the future, which were of course, a direct negation of the present" (Levine, 38).

This fusion of temporality in its conventional terms has led Bonnie J. Barthold—who interprets the slave revolts in the Americas as "symbolically at least [. . .] attempt[s] to murder history" (27)—to note that "the dynamics of black time must be recognized as different from that of contemporary
mainstream Western culture" and to posit, with other recent critics, a latent tension within black fiction between the conventions controlling Western history and African-American myths (Barthold, 18).

This tension is most apparent in the case of black women who have been and remain caught between the strictures of Western time and the more idiosyncratic ones that control them in their more private environments, as females and as members of an oppressed racial group. Female characters in the texts we are discussing usually confront time both from a female, gestational perspective as well as from a black, synchronical one. Black female characters in these novels inherit the tradition of black resistance emblematized by the Maroons' re-creation of black-centered communities away from the centers of white colonial control. They equally respond to the need for women to assemble in relations of affiliation and complicity that may at times exclude males. In the autobiographical recollections of her youth, belle hooks describes such a black-centered, woman-defined community—not unlike Marshall’s description of the assembly of "black poets in the kitchen":

> There is a deeper intimacy in the kitchen on Saturday when hair is pressed, when fish is fried, when sodas are passed around, when soul music drifts over the talk. We are women together. This is our ritual and our time. It is a time without men. It is a time when we work to meet each other's needs, to make each other beautiful in whatever way we can (belle hooks, "Black is a Woman’s Color", 382).

Morrison’s Pilate in *Song of Solomon* is another example of someone who very clearly operates according both to an African and female time-cycle. Her very origins seem to point to an idiosyncratic temporality that has removed her from conventional chronology; having been born without a navel as a result of her mother’s death in childbirth, Pilate is an enigma for people around her who remain "convinced [that] she had not come into this world through normal channels" (28). Pilate Dead’s idiosyncratic individuality and relation to time are thus literally inscribed in her body and onto her absolutely smooth stomach. As Valerie Smith writes, Pilate’s "expansive vision" of the world around her appears in her "cyclical, mythic vision of time. She believes that one can never escape one’s past, that it exists in dynamic relationship to the present [. . .] To her mind, one’s sense of identity is rooted in the capacity to look back to the past and synthesize it with the present" (Self-
Not only does Pilate operate within a unique time-dimension; she also behaves in a way that perpetuates recurrent African and female cycles-of-being that anchor her in an authentic womanly, and African-American culture. Her house—which constitutes the core of her universe and intimate identity—has the reputation of being a "wine-house," (38), and is indeed a place where unannounced visitors "ate what they had or came across or had a craving for" (29). Food and liquids flow from Pilate's hands in a cyclical, repetitive mode; when her brother Macon Dead catches a glimpse of her as he walks past her place, she is busy "stirring something in a pot. Wine pulp perhaps," while her daughter and grand-daughter sing and occupy themselves with other "feminine" chores (290). When a pregnant Ruth Dead comes to Pilate for comfort and advice, Pilate reaches out to give her a peach, and following her sister-in-law's refusal, offers her cornstarch with the advice that "when you expectin, you have to eat what the baby craves" (132). Months later, when Ruth learns of Hagar's desire to kill Milkman, she goes back to Pilate's house that "smelled fruity," and "remembered how the peach had nauseated her the last time she was there" (135). When the conjure woman ritually offers her another fruit, Ruth, marking the cyclical repetition of occasion and place that defines Pilate's woman-centered universe, comments: "The last time I was here you offered me a peach. My visit was about my son then too" (139).

The rites of preparing or sharing food constitute therefore a central aspect of the community of women assembled around Pilate, her daughter Reba and grand-daughter Hagar. They suggest a cycle of synchronic time that is not unlike the recurrence of seasons and natural phenomena which frame Morrison's other novels. Where Sula is structured according to the years—1919 to 1965—during which the narrative takes place, The Bluest Eye is articulated around the seasons that witness Pecola's tragic destruction. The characters' existences are indeed punctuated by the recurring flow of seasons, although their lives do not necessarily echo the images of renewal and rebirth traditionally associated with Nature. At the very beginning of The Bluest Eye, the narrator notes:

Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did (The Bluest Eye, 9).
By the end of the novel, the seeds which Claudia and her friend Frieda ordered finally arrive, but Pecola's illegitimate baby is still-born, as if the community's "overwhelming hatred for the unborn baby" (148) had been stronger than any natural urge for survival. The fact that Nature has gone awry—as the storms and tornadoes in the text emblematize (146)—signals the end of an age of certainty and of a continuum of cycles (birth, maturation, death, rebirth) by which the community had learnt to survive: "What is clear now is that of all that hope, fear, lust, love and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too" (9).

The recurrence of natural phenomena—in parallel to the lives of the characters, particularly female ones—can be construed as an elaboration upon the common association between woman and Nature*. This is the case when Sula returns to her hometown in Morrison's second novel: indeed, Sula's return is "accompanied by a plague of robins" (90), an inexplicable phenomenon that the inhabitants of Medallion take as an ominous sign of the eruption of evil among them. The people of Medallion however have developed a rather fatalistic view of the natural calamities that threaten them; rather than attempting to find some synchronic meaning to the plagues that assail them, they see them as elements of an ever-returning evil:

They did not believe Nature was ever askew—only inconvenient. Plague and drought were as 'natural' as springtime[...]. The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance. (Sula, 90).

Rather than having a clear vision of their destiny and of their place in time, the members of the black community at Medallion resort to a fatalistic acceptance of their fate, one that also seeks out scapegoats to account for their bad luck and misfortunes. When Sula comes back, her unusual behavior—by communal standards—immediately singles her out as an expiatory victim for all of the community's problems and ills. Noting that in The Bluest Eye Pecola's rape intervenes in the spring—conventionally a season of hope and rebirth—and that she goes crazy by the summer, Barbara Christian writes: "Setting is organic to [Morrison's] characters' view of themselves[...] Nature, both constant and forever changing, is the basic metaphor through which Morrison's use of inversion of the truth is sifted, so that the seasonal flows of birth, death, and rebirth is inverted in the human society" (Black Feminist Criticism, 48, 58).
Humankind has always attempted to impose some order upon the erratic fluctuations of nature that jeopardize even the most predictable cyclical phenomena such as crops, the seasons for planting seeds etc. Song of Solomon presents the reader with a remarkable contrast between a masculinist, historical perception of time and a much more diffuse, syncretist approach of temporality: this occurs in the confrontation between Milkman and his friend Guitar when they discuss the goals and ideology behind the secret society called the Seven Days. The purpose of this black secret society is to exert retribution for the crimes committed against other blacks; as Guitar explains to his friend, "[the secret of the Seven Days] is time. To take the time, to last" (155). The retribution of the secretive Days against the crimes of whites occurs diachronically, while the ideology of the group is clearly an example of an African-centered synchronicity imposed upon a Western temporal diachrony. Commenting that the Days have been operating for several years already, Guitar adds that their goal is to "keep the ratio [of racial murders] the same," and that the seven anonymous members act on assignment: "If the Negro was killed on Wednesday, the Wednesday man takes it; if he was killed on Monday, the Monday man takes that one. And we just notify one another when it's completed, not how or who"(159).

In a terrible paradox, the Seven Days therefore adopt the blind, undiscriminating violence of their enemies in their scheme for racial revenge. Rather than freeing their members of the oppressive past from which they have barely escaped, the Days re-enforce the oppression of time which keeps them spiritually hostage. As Valerie Smith remarks:

Guitar's hold on historical time tightens as his commitment to the Days increases [. . .] This kind of rigidity [of revenge]-specifically this willingness to appropriate the oppressors' rules--imprisons Guitar and the other Days within the very system they attempt to subvert (Valerie Smith, Self-Discovery and Authority, 152).

One can oppose a female sense of temporal revenge to the Days' extremely masculinist conception of their relationship to past and present. Circe, the old black midwife and former servant in Song of Solomon, who lives in a crumbling old house in the woods, keeps watch on what once was her white masters' property which she has deliberately let go to ruin. She now waits for her own death in the midst of the rubble which is all that is left of her masters' pride and arrogance. As K. Byerman writes, Circe's revenge is a thoroughly-thought one; she has "wilfully outlasted the Whites [. . .] to destroy everything they found precious" (204). Yet, Circe knows the price of keeping control
of one’s existence to the limit and of such an absolute revenge; as her "wild and filthy" appearance
and her "eyes [that] looked crazy" attest in the presence of Milkman, the old woman knows that the
"golden-eyed dogs" that surround her and guard the rubble with her, will probably survive her and
make a feast of her own remains, once she is dead (Song of Solomon, 241-50).

The hold that the past sometimes keeps on the minds and actions of those living in the
present time of these texts is not always as balanced and harmonious as in Pilate Dead’s case: this is
particularly true in Morrison’s latest novel, Beloved. Indeed, much of this text is concerned with the
complex and painful links which tie African-Americans, to this day, to their tragic past and to the
memory of their ancestors. Morrison’s novel deals with the tension between a necessary intimacy
with one’s past, and the conscious will not to let oneself be trapped by this very same history.
Sethe’s mysteriously “sweet, if peculiar, guest” Beloved (57) forces the older woman to deal with a
past which she has carefully shelved aside. As a matter of fact, the increasingly preying relationship
that establishes itself between Sethe and the enigmatic young woman literally feeds on Beloved’s
tyrannical devotion to Sethe and on her need to be emotionally nurtured by the older woman.

Speaking of Beloved’s delight in hearing stories, the narrator notes:

It became a way to feed her [Beloved] . . . Sethe learned the profound satisfaction
Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved)
because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She
and Baby Suggs had agreed that it was unspeakable (Beloved, 58).

When the past comes back to claim the minds of those living in the present, it can lead to
destruction and insanity; this is what threatens to happen in the tense relationship that evolves
between Beloved and Sethe, until the older woman just about surrenders her life to the spirit that has
come back to haunt her from her past:

Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child [. . .] The
bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more
those eyes that never used to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no
longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking
her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with
it, grew taller on it (Beloved, 250).

One of Sethe’s neighbor’s, Ella, articulates the need to keep one’s autonomy vis-a-vis the burden of
history, however irrepresible and overwhelming it be; as Morrison’s narrator reflects, when Sethe’s
murder of her children becomes known, ". . . whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present . . . Daily life took as much as she had. The future was sunset; the past was something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out" (Beloved, 256).

Speaking of the need to keep in spiritual contact with one's past, Toni Morrison declares: "When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself;" the novelist then goes on to elaborate on the dangers that threaten the "totally self-reliant" who have "no conscious historical connection" ("Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation", 344). In forcing us to take into consideration a given society's connections with its past, Morrison clearly follows in the path of anthropologists such as Marcel Griaule who spent so many years studying the ancestral cults of African tribes such as the Dogons from Mali. As is the case in the exchange between Milkman and Guitar concerning the Seven Days, the point that Morrison is making when depicting the growing tension between Sethe and Beloved is about the extent to which descendants of Africans in the New World must remain loyal to their unique heritage of suffering, without becoming its prisoners. While they clearly feel compassion for their enslaved ancestors, they must also learn to live with the terrible burden of knowing that there is nothing they can do to alleviate the pain of those gone before them. Ultimately, the question that confronts Milkman, Sethe—as well as Telumé, Merle Kimbona, Angelou's narrator at the former slave-trading post at Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, or Lorde when she evokes her mother's island of origin—is whether, and how, one should relive one's past, and how to incorporate it into one's present consciousness-of-being.

Although the temptation of insanity seems very close at hand when the devouring relationship between Beloved and Sethe manifests itself, the fact that Sethe finally exorcizes her attraction to the young woman—and consequently to her past—seems to indicate that for Morrison at least, the moment has come for her narrator to re-order time, and ultimately, the manner in which literary discourse addresses it. Whereas in The Bluest Eye and Sula Morrison constrains diachronical time into a more fluid, cyclical temporality, in particular by cycling her male characters—Jude, Ajax, Cholly—in and out of this more synchronic, female-centered time, in Beloved the terms of her discussion are reversed: Morrison seeks to find an idiosyncratic way in which to address her personal
past as a black woman, and the collective past of the American descendants of African slaves. In her own redaction of the longstanding debate about the need for a protest literature—illustrated by Baldwin's early essays as well as by the Irving Howe-Ralph Ellison polemic—Morrison has clearly chosen to address the emblematic issue of slavery in a highly poetic, and feminist mode.

The texts which we are considering provide therefore multiple examples of the characters' reclaiming their past and present time—as Blacks and women—and of what Ralph Ellison calls the American's "unwritten history" that "is always at work in the background to provide us with clues as to how this process of self-definition has worked in the past (Going to The Territory, 144). Furthermore, this investigation of a reclaimed past and history, specific to the black societies of the Americas, enables us to delineate the links between history, literature and myth. According to Glissant:

le lien primordial entre une perception d'histoire et une ambition de littérature s'esquisse dans le Mythe [. . .] Le Mythe est le premier donné de la conscience historique, encore naïve, et la matière première de l'ouvrage littéraire" (Le Discours antillais, 138) 11.

In the case of Schwarz-Bart's novel of female affiliation—a text which clearly posits a matrilinear hierarchy that finds its origin in an ancestor symbolically named Minerve—the emergence of an historical consciousness is unseparable from the construction of a female mythology of origins. Underlining the fact that males are conspicuously absent—or remain silent—in the Lougandor family of whom Téflumée is the last descendant, Roger Toumson comments on the emergence of a historical awareness within the French Caribbean islands:

[Le thème obsédant de la mère au centre de l'oeuvre] donne sa cohérence au roman. Le mouvement qui s'y accomplit d'un retour à la mère est en même temps un retour à l'origine [. . .] La perception de l'avènement historique de la collectivité humaine afron-balmaise est le corrélat, sur le plan individuel, du mystère de la naissance, et réciproquement. (Toumson, 48) 12.
As I will develop in my more detailed discussion of Lorde’s and Angelou’s works, some of these texts clearly situate themselves in a specific historical context, albeit one defined according to an essentially masculinist history. This is evidenced in Angelou’s work where most of the public, "historical" figures are male (Kwame N’Krumah, Martin Luther King, Muhammad Ali) while most of the personae pertaining to the writer’s private sphere are female—Momma, Angelou’s mother, the other women in Stamps—or younger males: her son Guy and her brother Bailey. Indeed, Angelou’s five-part autobiography covers a time span from the late 30’s up to the present; Morrison’s *Sula* goes all the way back to the European battlefront in World War I and moves up from the 20’s and 30’s through the second World War, all the way to the Civil Rights 60’s; the opening chapter of *Song of Solomon* gives the exact time and date of Robert Smith’s failed attempt to fly off from the roof of “No Mercy Hospital” as “at 3:00 P.M. on Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931” (3). Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* spans a period from the 30’s through the 60’s; *Linden Hills* juxtaposes the present time with the forgotten lives of several generations of Nedeed women in the early nineteenth century, symbolized by the entries in an 1837 Bible by one Luwana Packerville, which Luther Nedeed’s secluded wife discovers accidentally (117). Another case in point is, of course, Morrison’s *Beloved* that explores in depth the spiritual impact of slavery; Schwarz-Bart’s narrative, although not as chronologically precise as Morrison’s or Angelou’s texts, clearly refers to the slavery era in Guadeloupe as well as to the many labor conflicts and strikes that affected the sugar-cane industry in the French islands in the period between the two World Wars; Marshall’s stories and novels can also be situated within a historical frame: "Brooklyn" (early 50’s), "Reena" (the 60’s with the Civil Rights movement and the beginning of Women’s Liberation), and of course *Brown Girl, Brownstones* that starts just before World War II and extends to the late 50’s, while spanning the Caribbean and African-American worlds.
These texts therefore present themselves within the frame of what one could call "official history," one that responds to the linear definition of time and chronological progress as it is commonly understood according to white, masculinist, Western terms. Yet, if one is to consider these narratives more closely, one notices that they do not always fit into a neat, linear progression of time as defined by narrative conventions. Even though *Linden Hills* is clearly encased in the Christmastide period that extends in this particular case from December 19th (chapter II) to December 24th (last chapter), it only takes the reader a short time to realize that the inserted passages in italics do not pertain to the same time reference; rather, they belong to the autonomous time of the basement in which Willa Prescott Nedeed is kept hostage. In many ways, the fate of Luther Nedeed's wife and son constitutes a sub-text within Naylor's novel, one that posits its own temporality and terms against an overriding linear concept of time which in Kristeva's words "is readily labeled masculine and [. . .] is at once both civilizational and obsessional" (18).

While the outside world forces its brutal chronology upon Luther's debilitated wife—in the form of the picture albums of the previous Nedeed women she accidentally comes upon in the basement (203-209)—Willa's personal sense of time slowly becomes blurred, even as she fears that her own identity as wife and mother might be vanishing: "she now looked up at the clock on the basement wall and the westward angle of the metal hour hand told her it was nine o'clock. But nine o'clock in the morning or the evening? Nine o'clock of what day? Of what season?" (204). Ultimately, Willa's sole connection with any sense of time is provided by her accidental discovery of the pathetic recipes and journal entries written by her predecessors in misfortune; it is also sustained by her re-discovery of her identity not only as a wife and mother but as her own self, as she discovers when bending over a pool of water:

She found that an image would form if she brought it down to her waist. As the water came to rest, a dim silhouette appeared in front of her, rimmed by light, there was the outline of her hair, the shape of the chin [. . .] it was impossible to determine the shape of her eyes, even from the side, but this was enough. No doubt remained—she was there. (*Linden Hills*, 268).

In reclaiming her lost image from the depths of the dank, sinister basement to which patriarchy has relegated her, Willa Prescott Nedeed posits what Kristeva calls a "recognition of an
irreductible [female] identity, without equal in the opposite sex." This identity, according to the French feminist critic rejoins "the archaic (mythical) memory"—represented here by the forgotten lineage of Willa's predecessors—and "situates itself outside the [masculinist] linear time of identities which communicate through projection and revindication" (Kristeva, 19-20).

Willa's only tangible consciousness of a temporal dimension is thus made available to her by her own reconstructing and reclaiming the silenced and lost lives of other black women before her:

she still dug into the box, enduring the dust that entered her nose and dried her throat, hoping that something of Luwana Packerville's was wedged in between the thick, heavy cookbooks [. . .] she had hoped to find some other records left by Luwana Packerville, but the woman seemed to have disappeared (Linden Hills, 139).

One of the writers who has concerned herself the most with the entire concept of time—and with what in her particular definition she calls "timelessness"—is Paule Marshall, whose second novel bears the very word in its title. By investigating Marshall's uses of time in The Chosen People, The Timeless Place and in Praisesong for The Widow, and by comparing these texts with Morrison's, Naylor's and Schwarz-Bart's, I intend to demonstrate how African-Americans (and African-Caribbeans), and in particular their women writers, have redefined a concept of time that is different from the Western, white Eurocentric definitions according to which American societies are supposed to operate. By stepping on American soil, African slaves moved from a society where every activity was invested with a sacred dimension to a universe where the profane and the sacred were kept quite apart. In the process of their forced Americanization, these men and women ended up being deprived of their own sense of time; Barthold notes that it was "within this secular context that the slave-owner became the archetypal owner of time" (23); the same critic goes on to establish a parallel between economical dispossession and dispossession of time in present-day America. If one looks at the texts, it appears that the strenuous occupations of factory-work (such as the jobs that occupy Marshall's Silla and Deighton, or young Audré), and the hardships of field-labor, whether in the canefields of Guadeloupe—or as with those of Florida in Marshall's The Chosen Place, The Timeless People—as well as Mrs. Breedlove's numbing work in The Bluest Eye, do not afford the characters any time to develop a private universe of their own. As Trudier Harris, in her study of work relationships between black and white females notes, until quite recently "control of time, wages
and work was solely in the hands of the white woman [. . .] The mistress expects the maid to be a good mammy simply because, she believes, it's in her blood" (From Mammies to Militants 10, 20).

As Morrison’s Beloved and Song of Solomon, as well as Marshall’s Praisesong for The Widow, illustrate, the renewed contact with and reclaiming of their African past remains crucial to the spiritual balance of African-American men and women. This fact also points to the equally inescapable and mythical dimension of the past as experienced by blacks in the Americas: they must both learn how to incorporate its tragedies into their own psyches while relating to a more general African and American historical identity.

-D: Myth As A Stay Against Time’s Acceleration.

As Barthold remarks, for Africans, "myth provides a counter to the dipossession from time and a stay against time’s acceleration" (22). A mythical interpretation of the universe and its temporal continuum pervades much of black culture, both in Africa and in the Americas, as a means of bridging the gap between seemingly unreconcilable universes and cultures.

The mythical aspect of several characters in the texts under scrutiny is symbolized in the opening remarks by Télumée concerning her grand-mother Toussine, an ancestor-like figure: "j'en étais venue à considérer Toussine, ma grand-mère, comme un être mythique, habitant ailleurs que sur terre, si bien que toute vivante elle était entrée, pour moi dans la légende" (11). Sometimes, the link between the fictive personae’s experience of present time and their past has become totally blurred. This is obviously the case with Macon Dead in Song of Solomon: he has sacrificed any sense of continuum with his origins to an all-engulfing materialistic urge that lands him in a spiritual no man’s land; in so doing, Milkman’s father comes to symbolize a rigid masculinist linear conception of time that refuses to incorporate the lessons from the past with the experiences of the present. Conversely his sister, Pilate, is invested in Morrison’s novel with the role of an "intermediary between the spiritual and the material world," as a "Keeper of Time whose role is as much intuitive as conscious" (Barthold, 179). This is particularly conspicuous in Pilate’s spiritual and
magical powers that result in her almost literal birthing of Milkman against his own father's will.

More often than not in these texts, the characters who have the ability and gift to share a quiet intimacy with the spirits of the dead are women: this is certainly the case with Morrison's Pilate, who often communicates with the dead, her father in particular. Indeed, "death held no terror for her [since] she knew there was nothing to fear." Following Reba's birth while Pilate is still on the road, Pilate's father comes to her and orders her to "go back to Pennsylvania and collect what was left of the man she and Macon had murdered" when still children (148). One finds the same ease to hold dialogues with the spirits of the dead in Sethe's case in Beloved and with Schwarz-Bart's Man Cia and Reine Sans Nom. This intimacy with the dead can also be observed with Marshall's Avey Johnson and Aunt Cuney and also, increasingly, with Naylor's Willa Prescott Nedeed, as she discovers the traces and fates of her deceased, imprisoned predecessors.

Recent critical readings of African-American literatures suggest that much of this fiction is the expression of a confrontation between myth and history, as defined according to the paradigms of Western thought. As Barthold suggests, while the Modernist hero of contemporary literature may want to rebel against history, as does Joyce's Stephen Daedalus, who wishes to "recover from the nightmare of history," in black fiction "the rejection of [Western] history is not an escape but a confrontation, an attempt to demolish the prison itself rather than to flee it" (78).

One of the most striking examples of this tension between Western-controlled concepts of temporality and a recourse to a mythical, cyclical continuum of time is at work in Paule Marshall's novels, in particular in The Chosen Place. The Timeless People and in Praisesong for The Widow. As Sandiford writes, "Marshall has created a fictional drama in which the worlds of history and myth are placed in open and explicit antagonism, and the central character consciously apprehends the dilemma of a personal choice between the claims of history and the claims of myth" (372). Paul Ricoeur has defined mythic time as the time that "takes us back before [the split between epic and historiography] to a point where [time] still embraces the totality of what we designate it as, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, human existence" (105). This sense of an urge for a totality of human experience appears in the very title of Marshall's The Chosen Place. The Timeless People;
in this novel, the confrontation between a technological, and strictly linear vision of history and of "progress"—as defined by the technicians who draw up development plans back in New York, London or Paris—and a non-Western concept of time is most conspicuous. The technological approach is embodied in Allen Fuso's "carefully planned schedule and well-ordered days" doing field-work and research (152), and in Saul's well-meaning, yet totally irrelevant address to the people at Bournehills about the reasons behind his presence among them: "We've come to learn [. . .] In fact you might say that the next six months to a year will be mainly a period of learning and getting acquainted on both our parts [. . .] We want to find out firsthand how you go about your day-to-day life in Bournehills" (141).

If one is to sum up the attitude of most of these outsiders who have come to Marshall's island to force it out of the "Dark Ages," it is that they can only think in purely external, economical, and efficiency-oriented terms; consequently, they cannot envision some deeper, more ancient constraints that may have as much to do with the present social and economical condition of Bournehills as the successive failed economical plans of their predecessors. In its most extreme form, this blindness to a world they cannot fathom leads someone such as Saul's wife, Harriet, to confess in a letter to a friend back in Philadelphia that "I was never one to dwell upon the past. I suspect it's this place. I don't know what there is about it, but it seems to have a way of driving you in on yourself and forcing you to remember things you hoped you had forgotten" (236). Most unwittingly, Harriet's words hit the very core of the uniqueness of Bourne Island—and in particular its Bournehills district—the very quality that Marshall names its "timelessness."

For someone who knows how to observe—as Saul Amron learns to do later on in the novel—Bourne Island, and in particular Bournehills, is a place where the conventional chronological separations of time, according to Western definitions, become totally blurred: the outsiders' exploration of Bournehills district, with Merle Kimbona as their guide, takes on the form of a literal and metaphorical travel through time:

As they penetrated deeper into Bournehills, people began to appear [. . .] Pausing in the fields or along the road they would slowly raise their right arm like someone about to give evidence in court [. . .] It was a strange, solemn greeting encompassing both hail and farewell, time past and present (The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, 103).
Bournemills therefore clearly does not belong to a universe where time is perceived in a strictly linear mode and where all phenomena can be ascribed to scientifically intelligible causes; rather, it is a locus where the memories of the centuries of bondage and rebellion that hold the possible key to a true future of freedom and pride are conflated with the reality of a present of neglect and poverty. The synchronical nature of time at Bournemills becomes apparent as Saul travels across the region on his field trips:

He could not rid himself of the feeling that something about the place was eluding him, some meaning it held which could not be gotten at through the usual methods of analysis [. . .] Sometimes driving past the old man Mr Douglin [. . .] or seeing the ancient windmill standing intact out in the yard, he would be struck by the feeling, too fleeting to grasp, that he had stumbled upon a world that was real, inescapably real, yet at the same time somehow unreal; of the present but even more so of the past" (The Chosen Place. The Timeless People. 216).

The pervasiveness of a past which is imbedded in the present time and landscape in a synchronic mode manifests itself both in the preservation of archaic, reactionary traditions from the colonial days--such as the visit of absentee British landlords--and also in the prevalence of ritual in the island. As Saul tells Merle, Sir John's inspection tour of the failing Cane Vale sugar factory is akin to a grotesque replay of history with "Sir John playing to the hilt the eighteenth-century absentee landlord come out to the colonies to look over his holdings" (225). Whereas some would like to believe that colonial times are still on the agenda, for the majority of the islanders, the present time is not defined by their former masters nor is it determined by the new economic (Western) masters. If one follows Ricoeur's definition of the relation between myth and ritual that "myth enlarges ordinary time (and space), whereas ritual brings together mythic time and the profane sphere of life and action" (105), one can say that The Chosen Place. The Timeless People is an exemplary illustration of this bridging of the profane and of the sacred universe. Ritual and prescribed ceremonials play a crucial role in Bourne island society as they do in so many traditional, remote communities. Many of these rituals are clearly connected to African sources, while also deeply rooted in beliefs found in peasant, agricultural communities throughout the world: such is the case at the rumshop where Saul is a witness to a lively debate about some historical aspects of the legendary revolt of the rebellious slave Cuffee Ned, against the British during colonial rule. At one
point in the heated discussion, a man, "huge, with massive limbs"—who is portrayed as an African chief "presiding over the mighty palaver in the men's house, [his bed] made of packing cases [like a] royal palanquin" (123)—punctuates the debate with ritualistic outpourings from the bottle of white rum. The liquid actually becomes the equivalent of the African palm wine that is commonly used on both social and religious occasions:

The bottle of white rum he held within the great curve of his hand, the palm wine with which he kept the palaver and made libation to the ancestral gods. And each time he filled the glasses ranged before him on the counter he made a point of first pouring a drop or two of the rum on the floor beside his improvised bed (The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, 123).

The very purpose of the ritualistic libation to the ancestors is of course intimately linked with the evocation of Cuffee Ned’s momentous rebellion, one of the founding moments of the island’s collective past and sense of identity. Harriet, utterly devoid of any understanding of historic events, writes about it in these terms: "[It] is the story of a slave revolt that took place in the district long ago, and which, I might add, everyone talks about as if it happened only yesterday. But then nothing is ever forgotten, it seems, in Bournehills. They’re really very strange people. They even speak of the dead as if they are somehow alive" (234). Harriet, in her blind ignorance, only sees the rituals of the dead as some eerie tradition; old Delbert, the chief-like figure in the rumshop, on the other hand, thinks of the dead to whom he offers libations as a category similar to those the Africans call the "living-dead." Mbìti writes that, for Africans, "[the living-dead] are the closest links that men have with the spirit world [...] they speak the language of men, with whom they lived until 'recently' and they speak the language of the spirits and of God, to whom they are drawing nearer ontologically" (Mbìti, 83).

Contact with the dead does not only occur through the intercession of the ancestral spirits and of the gods; it can also take place in a more prosaic manner, as is the case in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People when the rumshop regulars congregate for a ritualistic "pig-sticking," common to all rural societies throughout the world. The occasion is not so much making food provisions for the lean months, but rather a celebration to come closer to, and, as it were, coax, the unfathomable mystery of death and of the world beyond. This is enacted throughout the ritual in the dialogue between the killer and the animal:
All right now, stop your foolishness, and know you got to die.' And surprisingly enough, the pig obeyed . . . The stifled scream of protest and terror died, cut off somewhere deep in the constricted bowels and the sow lay as if suddenly resigned to its fate . . . It lay quiet for a long moment, already dead it appeared. But soon the first slow paroxysm began, a massive shudder that was pain, yes, but also, oddly enough, what almost seemed a kind of relief (The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, 254-56).

This slaughtering can also be seen as the sacrificial act of giving, one required to restore order to a threatened community and warrant its spiritual and material survival in the face of repeated adversity. Indeed, this sense of a necessary restoration of order permeates much of Marshall's work and can be found in the uses she makes--besides the preceding examples--of Carnival in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, as well as of dance and spiritual cleansing rites in Praisesong for The Widow.

In her discussion of black fiction from Africa and the New World, Bonnie Barthold mentions the importance of black authors' focus on the sense of madness and chaos of time, for which she sees examples in Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, as well as in the battle royal and Harlem riot scenes in Ellison's Invisible Man. As many critics have shown, literature is one of the many modes through which humankind has attempted to re-establish some sense of order in a universe where irrational behavior and passions are rife. However, as Ricoeur demonstrates in his discussion of myth and ritual, long before societies evolved their own body of written literatures, symbolical ceremonials and sacred myths were used as intercessors of order and as powerful instances of re-enactment of past events in a present context. This cyclically organized re-enactment of sacred, legendary moments of a community's past, was usually centered around the commemoration of a cultural hero(ine) or a founding event, whether a historical one or a legendary one. As Zsuse F. notes in his study of the "primordial madness" that he distinguishes in the rituals of sacrifice in various African societies, "often the entire society celebrates its participation in transcendental time through commemorating the deeds of the common culture hero. By reenacting his deeds, everyone becomes him" (110). Common rebellious heroes and heroines are numerous in black societies throughout the New World: one only has to think of Haiti's Toussaint L'Ouverture and Makandal, of Jamaica's Nanny, of Guadeloupe's Mulâtresse Solitude, and, for continental America, of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Sojourner Truth and many others.
If one turns to the specific novels under consideration, it appears quite conspicuously that Morrison’s Halle in Beloved and Son, the intruding dreadlock-man in Tar Baby, or again Marshall’s Aunt Cuney and Merle Kimbona, as well as Schwarz-Bart’s Toussine—described as "un être mythique"—all share something with their rebellious Caribbean or African-American predecessors. In fact they provide another example of the "tenacious hold on history" that Barbara Christian sees as symbolic of the Bournehills people in Marshall’s novel. In some cases, the very absence of a rebelling ancestral figure can prove disturbing to the society’s image of self. Commenting on the fact that Martinique’s most famous historical figure is Victor Schoelcher, the white French abolitionist, Glissant writes: "Le manque de grande figure populaire d’un héros n’est pas imputable à une logique de la défaite. C’est sa particularité d’un peuple assuré de son identité de transformer en victoire mythique une défaite réelle [. . .] les défaites des héros sont nécessaires à l’unanimité des peuples" (Le Discours antillais, 135-36) 15.

In several black communities from the New World, the commemoration of cultural heroes is the occasion for many lively celebrations and festivals. These celebrations (Martin Luther King day and Juneteenth in the U.S.A., John Canoo in the Bahamas, Carnival and "vidé" in the French Caribbean, among others) 16, are occasions to pursue the ritualistic repetition of a primal history that structures these societies, while elaborating upon common patterns. As Zuesse notes from his African examples, "although the mythic culture-heroes established the basic structures and relationships in the distant past, later generations continued to refine and elaborate the patterns so as to result in the humanized complex world of the present" (111).

The resulting celebrations offer a sense of communal participation and of ritualistic reversal of social-cultural behavior at certain given periods (of which the antique Saturnalias or the present-day New Orleans Mardi Gras or Trinidad Carnival are perfect examples). As Marshall clearly shows in the Carnival episode in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, such celebrations call for rituals where the entire society is re-united in a spirit of commemoration; it is the case with the Bournehills steelband’s yearly re-enactment of the momentous episode of Cuffee Ned’s rebellion at Pyre Hill. This celebration is both a historical, musical and visual event, characterized by the "slow dragging shuffle" of the Bournehills march, that seems to emblematize the drama of the island’s
history and the accompanying soul-searching into memories of slavery and suffering:

It was an awesome sound—the measured tread of those countless feet in the dust and the loud report of the bracelets, a somber counterpoint to the gay carnival celebration. It conjured up in the bright afternoon sunshine dark alien images of legions marching bound together over a vast tract... [in] an exile bitter and irreversible in which all memory of the former life and of the self as it had once been had been destroyed (The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, 282).

Rather than being a merely archaic, quaint demonstration of a forgotten past—as Harriet Amron perceives them to be—the Bournehills musicians and shufflers are the keepers of the past, and of the racial memory of their people: "It was an odd, unnerving look they bent on the spectators straining away from them against the buildings, one which insisted that they acknowledge them despite the crude silver at their wrists... and above all in some bold, retributive way that would both rescue their memory and indemnify their suffering" (283). Furthermore, not only does this re-enactment tell the specific history of Pyre Hill, but also that of many other people attempting to reclaim control over their history; "They were singing... of Bryam, Cuffee and Pyre Hill, of a particular event, place and people, simply telling their story as they did each year. Yet... it didn't seem they were singing only of themselves and Bournehills, but the people like them everywhere" (286). Paradoxically, this repossession of one's communal past goes hand in hand with the scenes of disruption and of deliberate chaos that one traditionally associates with carnival: it is a time when sexual license and promiscuity, theft, adultery, property damage, and other forms of social misconduct are permissible, establishing a world of dis-order in the face of order and control. The extreme instance of this may be seen in Harriet Amron's reactions in the novel: her obsession with order actually leads her to be the first victim of this self-generated chaos. Her initial pleasurable sense of "being borne along, almost without a body or will of her own, by that great swollen tide of humanity [..] a huge, harmless, amoeboid mass that took its shape from the streets" (292), soon turns to increasing panic, as she feels that she does not control anything anymore. She attempts, in a totally grotesque manner, to re-impose some sort of logical order—or explanation—to what is happening around her:

... Being young they were impetuous, headstrong, foolish. They needed direction. 'Do you realize where you're headed?' It was her voice suddenly shouting in the uproar. 'Don't you see you'll wind up in the bay?' (The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, 294).
Yet, what really surfaces, after Harriet's failed attempt at rationalization, are all of her deepest, unfathomable obsessions and fears; "she watched, terror-stricken, those green-clad hordes stream past her round the corner [. . .] She would never have believed there were so many—all with the same young, set black faces and far-seeing eyes—on the island, in the world" (297). It is precisely because she is intent on remaining a mere outsider to the place and people she finds herself with that Harriet's puzzlement soon turns to hysterical repulsion. At no point can she emotionally or intellectually connect with the meaning of the Carnival ritual or of the re-enactment of Cuffee Ned's revolt at Pyre Hill against the British. Harriet becomes thus the very victim of the chaos which she has frantically attempted to control; she only succeeds in calling up "some dark and unknown part of herself" (97) which had surfaced a few weeks earlier as a result of her passing association with local Bourne island socialite, Lyle Hutson. In so doing, Harriet illustrates the failure to accommodate herself to a new environment and her inability to integrate its idiosyncratic sense of time; indeed, as B. Christian remarks, "for Vere, Allan Fuso, and Harriet [. . .] the discrepancy between what their cultural and personal past has been and how they conceive of the present begins to surface more and more in the face of Bournehills' tenacious hold on history" (Black Feminist Criticism, 106).

-E: Sacrificial Order and Controlled Disorder.

The need for sacrifice seems intimately linked with the tension between necessary order and deliberate disruption that has always ruled societies. Typically, it seems that this provoked chaos can only be abolished by ceremonial, and usually symbolical, sacrifices. The use of sacrifices is required to bring back a lost harmony to the community; once again, one finds some interesting parallels between African customs and those found in the New World: speaking of the New Year's festival of the Ilia, Zuesse writes that at these events, "the spirits come so near that they possess many people outright," before mentioning the tradition of "bands of youth [that] press through the streets singing scandalous songs" and choose sacrificial victims and scapegoats, who usually have "no redress" (116). The function of these rituals of sacrifice that Zuesse also found in the Ga tribe of Ghana, is to
restore a sense of order to the society: "through the sacrifices, the living and the dead are brought into a harmony; [families congregate to] offer sacrifices to the clan ancestors from the foods harvested during the previous months" (116).

Just as the ancestral, mythical figure controls most of the seasonal and agricultural cycles of traditional African societies, the communal heroes are at the very center of the ritualistic, sacrificial repetition of the collective past of black communities in the New World. Glissant comments on the interconnection between myth and ritual sacrifices that "dans le Mythe [comme dans la tragédie grecque] l'avènement d'une harmonie collective suppose le sacrifice rituel d'un héros [ou] son échec apparent" (Le Discours antillais, p.7, 138).

In Marshall's The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, the sacrificial victims are those who cannot accept their limitations or who do not submit to the communal spirit. Harriet deliberately refuses to understand the values of Bourne society; this is symbolized in a grotesque mode by her inability to see what others do: "Glancing bewilderedly around, she saw then that they were all staring with a strange fixity straight ahead, utterly absorbed in what seemed some goal or objective visible only to them" (295). Young Vere, an islander who has gone to America to make it and come back somewhat disillusioned, is also a sacrificial victim for not acknowledging his lack of complete control over the "technological monster" that he assembles for the annual Boumehills car race. The fatal carcrash in which he dies operates as a gloss on the spirit of disruption and disharmony that is always at work in the universe and threatens destruction at any moment:

The collapse was so total it seemed deliberate, planned, personally intended. It was as if the Opel [. . .] had possessed a mind, an intelligence, that for some reason had remained unalterably opposed to Vere, so that while doing his bidding [. . .] it had also at the same time been conspiring against him and waiting coolly for this moment to show its hand [. . .] Vere in foolishly allowing himself to be taken in by what he had believed was its promise of power, was simply a hapless victim. (The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, p.367)

Marshall's Vere and Harriet, by yielding to the all-consuming linearity and efficiency of Western temporality, have failed to recognize the importance of black temporality and its accompanying timelessness. In so doing, they have become slaves to the hegemony of a Western, masculinist order that attempts to regulate all things and beings, as Télumée notes when going to work for her wealthy white masters at L'Habitation Belle-Feuille:

Chaque chose avait une place, une heure, une raison d'être bien précise, rien n'était
laissé au hasard et un sentiment d'éternité se distillait dans l'air [. . .] C'était un temps sans surprise, sans nouveauté qui semblait tourner sur lui-même, les gestes glissaient chacun leur tour, l'un après l'autre, dans l'ordre, tout au long de la journée (Pluie et vent sur Télémène Miracle, 91). 18

It is the same perfectly regulated, "white" time that monitors the lives of people such as Naylor's Nedeed and Morrison's Macon Dead in Song of Solomon: in explaining to Milkman the origins of his own father's curious name, Macon Dead tells his son that "Mama liked it. Liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out" (54). Once again, Milkman's father's spiritual rootlessness originates in his disconnectedness with his past, and his deliberate refusal to take any historical perspective into account. Indeed, Macon Dead is a black caricatural version of the aphorism that "time is money". After warning his son to stay clear from his aunt Pilate, ("she's a snake, and can charm you like a snake, but still a snake") (54), Macon Dead concludes his admonitions with these words: "Boy, you got better things to do with your time. Besides, it's time you started learning how to work. You start Monday [. . .] Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things . . . Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (Song of Solomon, 55).

Macon Dead, as is the case with Naylor's sinister Luther Nedeed in Linden Hills, resuscitates and appropriates the all-controlling time from the days of slavery which Genovese found to be so prevalent in many planters' accounts and diaries. Remarkably, most of the characters in control of other people's lives and sense of time in these novels are males; they inscribe their perception of time in a diachronic, non-repetitive frame, as my earlier discussion of the Seven Days indicates. What appears as an essentially sex-related issue does suffer some exceptions; one only has to think of the couple formed by Silla and Deighton in Marshall's Brown Girl, Brownstones, where the author reverses the cliché of the strong male and submissive female. Whereas Silla learns to accommodate herself to her new environment, and to actively manage and control her sense of time and place to seek social and material gratifications, Deighton remains forever on the margin of white, Western society. When his wife takes it upon herself to sell the piece of land he has clung to—for essentially sentimental reasons—back in the islands, Deighton is still daydreaming about his "big plans" of making it ("Everybody gon say: Deighton Boyce is one man that makes good money and lives good") (85); he continues to dream of settling back, one day in the future, in the homecountry.

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Deighton's adhesion and hypnotic worship of Father Peace's sect, following the shock of his factory accident, is another instance of his denial of Western time, and of his refusal to let it rule his existence. Unfortunately for him, the chronometrically-regulated society in which the "beautiful-ugly" Deighton has chosen to live, has no patience or place for someone like him who wishes to live by different rules. Once he finds out that Silla has forged his writing to go ahead and dispose of his property in Bimshire, out of intense shame, and in a desire for revenge, Deighton goes off to spend every penny his wife has made in the sale, on a totally extravagant and erratic shopping spree. This causes shock and dismay to Silla, who has adopted the North American ethos of thrift and hard work which her husband has always refused. Deighton is consequently crushed, and becomes another sacrificial victim of the tensions between order and disruption that regulate societies; Marshall writes that he perhaps "sensed that, like his defeat [when refused a job in accounting], his loss of the land now was simply his due. Moreover, it brought a kind of perverse gratification, a terrifying exultation. There were sins, perhaps, lodged in him and charging the air around him that demanded his perpetual sacrifice" (115).

One finds the same urge to live vicariously through "big plans" in Morrison's Tar Baby where Son, the dreadlock man, himself an outsider to mainstream American culture, fails to connect with his environment and act upon the injustices that he sees around him both in the technological, materialistic environment of the American mainland and in the Caribbean Isle des Chevaliers.

Those characters who do withstand the tensions between chaos and order, and manage to manoeuvre between the crushing constraints of technological temporality and a properly black concept of timelessness are those who have always retained--or else have regained--a historical perspective connected with a feeling for myth and ritual. Three cases in point are three female protagonists in these texts: Morrison's Pilate, Marshall's Avey Johnson and Schwarz-Bart's Reine Sans Nom. Born with a difference, a "belly that looked like a back . . . a stomach as blind as a knee" (149), that made her male friends freeze and women whisper in her back, Pilate has deliberately shut herself off from the concerns of the materialistic, technological world that dominate her brother's mind. Rather, she is concerned with maintaining an intimacy and a spiritual closeness with the dead, in particular.
with her father, who as B. Barthold notes, is "both her 'mentor' and a source of comfort" (178). In a striking parallel with the African belief in the existence of the "living-dead," Pilate does not believe that her father is completely dead; as if to prove her point, she--unwittingly--carries his bones around with her, believing that they are those of a white man who was murdered by her brother. Nevertheless, whatever the identity of this dead man may be, Pilate in so doing demonstrates a complete connection with her own sense of time and the past of her people. Susan Willis notes that Pilate, by being "outside all the potentially limiting aspects of blood relationships and traditional forms of social behavior [and] apparently without a past and a place [. . .] embodies the 'mythic hero' first portrayed by Faulkner's Sutpen" (Willis, "Eruptions of Funk", 274). She is also what Barthold calls "a traditional Priestess, an intermediary between the spiritual and the material world" (179). Pilate is the one character who has an understanding of the nature of time and the means through which one can escape from its tyranny; whereas Maco Dead is a "repudiator of time" (Barthold, 179), his sister is clearly its keeper.

One discovers the same sense of intimacy with the dead in Schwarz-Bart's novel. When Reine Sans Nom takes her grand-child to visit the conjure woman Man Cia in the forest, she tells the magician about a recurrent dream she has had which she fears might be a forewarning of her upcoming death. Once Man Cia has reassured her that this is not the case, Reine Sans Nom--the widow of one Jérémie--pours a little sauce on the ground as a libation, before helping herself to the stew; the conjure woman cannot help but say:

'Ah . . . les morts se servent en premier, maintenant?.
-Tu le sais, répondit grand-mère en souriant, Jérémie a toujours eu un faible pour la daube de cochon planche.
- Et comment va-t-il ? s'enquit gravement Man Cia.
-Il ne m'a pas oubliée, dit grand-mère heureuse, il vient me voir toutes les nuits, sans faute. Il n'a pas changé, il est pareil que de son vivant" (Pluie et vent sur Télumde Miracle, 59-60).

One finds here again a perfect illustration of a specifically black concept of temporality that incorporates both ritual and synchronic time, and which Marshall refers to as "timelessness." Rather than seeing life as a limited period that goes from birth to death, Reine sans Nom, Pilate and other men and women of African descent see time as an essential continuum in which there is an intimate relationship between the time of the individual and an overall controlling time where past and future
are contained within the present. Death in particular—and thus the connection with one’s ancestors and past—is not a one-time incident, but rather a progressive accomplishment, that can take several generations to be completed, and must be followed according to carefully defined rules and customs of burial, mourning, offerings to the departed souls etc.

In her essay on Morrison, Susan Willis characterizes “funk,” a term central to African-American culture, as “really nothing more than the intrusion of the past into the present” (“Eruptions of Funk”, 280). In its mythical dimensions, illustrated by Morrison’s Pilate, or Son in Beloved, this funk re-connects men and women with a sense of continuum from past through present.

As Barbara Christian writes about The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, “timelessness becomes the major character in the novel to which the individual personalities are subordinated [...] in Bournehills, the past is vivid, refusing to be hidden by an illusory present. There is no pretense as there is in other areas of the world that things have changed for the better” (103). As Christian, Sandiford, Hortense J. Spillers and others have indicated, Marshall’s novels document the characters’ slow transition from illusion to truth about themselves and their history. In some cases, they emerge stronger and more assured about themselves, as is the case with Merle Kimbona and Saul Amron in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. In other instances, they end up being destroyed by the fears and illusions that they have kept within and which can no longer be sustained or suppressed: this is of course the case with Harriet Amron, and also with Deighton Boyce in Brown Girl, Brownstones.

One of Marshall’s characters who undergoes a crucial and emblematic experience of self-revelation and truth is Avey Johnson, in Praisesong for The Widow. As Christian has remarked, the four sections of the novel (“Runagate,” “Sleeper’s Wake,” “Lave Tête” and “The Beg Pardon”) correspond to the stages in Avey’s emergence from her spiritual sleep to a rediscovery of her self. This happens through a gradual stripping away of her middle-class values and illusions—connected with her life in the affluent and manicured suburban North White Plains—and her spiritual and bodily cleansing, as in the ritualistic “lave tête” which she undergoes at Carriacou, under the guidance of Lebert Joseph, who is her intermediary with the world of the "Old Parents, the Long-Time People" (166). He remains in spiritual contact—as did her grand-mother and her aunt Cuney—with the memory of the many African nations that were deported to the Americas (the Arada,
Among these, the Ibos are notorious for the fierce resistance which they demonstrated against being enslaved: as Avey's grandma told her when telling her as a child about the Ibos:

The minute [they] was brought on shore they just stopped . . . and taken a look around. A good long look. Not saying a word. Just studying the place real good. Just taking their time and studying on it.
And they seen things that day you and me don't have the power to see (Praisesong for the Widow, 37).

As Sandiford notes, in their legendary rebellion against the slaveowners' will, the Ibos "refused to be dragged into Tatem's secular temporal dimension, to have their time confounded with that of the enslavers" (377). In doing so, they also "effectively inaugurated for their Tatem heirs a historical agenda of resistance, denial, and affirmation. Avey's life text had been set irrevocably" (Sandiford, 377). One can consequently read the novel as the affirmation of a continuity of the original Ibo myth of assertion and resistance, and a deep sense of continuation of Ibo time. One encounters numerous examples of conflation of time and places throughout Praisesong for The Widow in the common features of several of Avey's life episodes; this occurs for instance in the description of the excursion to Carriacou, as her impressions conflate with her memories of trips up the Hudson when still a child. But then again, both of these ship voyages indirectly cause the reader to think of the initial Middle Passage episodes which brought African slaves to the New World. In one of the most forceful passages in the book, after having suffered a sudden malaise aboard the symbolically named Emmanuel C that takes people on the Carriacou excursion--indeed, an intensely religious, Christ-like experience in its revelatory aspects--Avey lies dimly awake in the deck-house: suddenly her mind undergoes a sense of conflation of time that connects the widow directly back with her African, and slave past:

She was alone in the deck-house [. . .] Yet she had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon the one filling her head. Their suffering--the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space--made hers of no consequence (Praisesong for The Widow, 209).

Immediately after this temporal epiphany of the very meaning of the pain of the memory of slavery for Avey and her people, she undergoes the ritual cleansing, "wash-down" and actual "kneading of
the flesh" under Rosalie Parvay's care; this constitutes the first stage of the Beg Pardon ceremony (215-224). As with Lebert Joseph—and also Morrison's Pilate, Schwarz-Bart's Man Cia and Reine Sans Nom, Naylor's Mamma Day, or again Lorde's women of Carriacou—Rosalie is endowed with the gift of spiritual knowledge, the "special powers of seeing and knowing. Li gain connaissance," (218) to use the Carriacou patois expression. Avey's heightened consciousness of her place in time and history occurs precisely during the "Lave Tête" and "Beg Pardon" episodes, during which "her apprehension of time and space assumes the archetypal quality of the consecrated [Tatem] Landing" where the Ibos were disembarked (Sandiford, 385). Indeed, as the same critic continues, one of Marshall's most successful endeavors in her latest novel is that she "taps the full power of myth to transform the constituents of Avey's surroundings and to heighten her consciousness of both people and things" (385). The key figure to this re-connecting with the mythic time of the African ancestors and that of Tatem Landing is, of course, Lebert Joseph whose "spontaneous productions of the mythic past through vocal and choreographic performances vindicate Great-Aunt Cuney's visions and the Ibo ethos" (Sandiford, 386).

As is the case with Merle Kimbona—but in a more achieved manner—or again as Maya Angelou did upon leaving Ghana at the end of her African experience of self-discovery, Avey Johnson thus reconstructs herself and asserts her newly found consciousness, both as a woman, a black person, and a member of a larger community scattered throughout the New World. As the many examples from these authors' texts show us, such a spiritual recovery of one's past, and therefore of one's control of time, is impossible without a rigorous acknowledgement of one's self and origins; those who dismiss history or disregard its implacable lessons are bound to fail, just as the innumerable projects to reconstruct the forsaken Boumehills according to the rules of "progress" and advanced Western technology have miserably failed. If one is to retain a lesson from these novels, it is that time does exist in a flux and a continuum that binds us to those of our predecessors whose myths and histories control our lives to a large extent, while also connecting us to those who are not yet born and who, in turn, will be controlled by our memories.
ENDNOTES

1. "[The peoples'] persistence in considering time in terms of a natural experience [. . .] reflects very clearly a general instinctive response against the ambition of imposing a "single" historical time, that of the West" (Caribbean Discourse, 92).

2. "[The Martinican peasant] will not attempt to impose on you any set notion of time. He will offer a version parallel to your own [. . .] One of the most disturbing consequences of colonization could well be this notion of a single History, and therefore of power, which has been imposed on others by the West" (Caribbean Discourse, 93).

3. I am particularly indebted to Professor Anthony Barthelemy who brought my attention to the role of time in relationship to gender issues in Emecheta's oeuvre, a point which he has developed in his essay, "Western Time, African Lives: Time in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta", Callaloo, 12 (1989), 559-74.

4. Concerning this aspect of my discussion, see Bastide's African Civilizations in The New World, 90-92.

5. "She was a friend, a kind of witch I knew during my childhood. Her life summed up an entire fresco, a slice of Antillean life . . . In fact, it is not so much her life as a recollection of privileged moments, of events in her childhood; it is a kind of memory that I wished to render" (my translation).

6. "In the creole tradition there is no epic, and hardly any myths of origins" (my translation).

7. For a further discussion of this issue, see Angela Davis, Women, Race and Class, chapter I.

8. For a discussion of the resistance of African traits to the capitalistic ethos, see Wade Nobles' essay, "Africanity: Its Role in Black Families."


11. ", . . the earliest link between a view of history and the urge to write can be traced back to myth [. . .] Myth is the first state of a still-naive historical consciousness, and the raw material for the project of a literature" (Caribbean Discourse, 71).

12. "[the obsessive theme of the mother at the center of the book] ensures the consistency of the whole novel. There is both a return towards the mother and a return towards origins . . . the perception of the historical emergence of Afro-Antillean humankind is correlative, on an individual level, with the mystery of birth and vice-versa" (my translation).

13. "I came to regard [my grandmother] as some mythical being not of this world, so that for me she was legendary even while still alive" (The Bridge of Beyond, 3).

14. For further readings concerning black heroes and rebellion leaders in the Americas see in particular Eugene D. Genovese, From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in The Making of The Modern World (1979) which describes the part played by Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner; Richard Price, Maroon Societies (1973) that analyzes the emergence of maroon communities.
and their leaders in the Americas; the literature on the Haitian Revolution is specially rich: see in particular, C.L.R. James' classic *The Black Jacobins* (1938) as well as the controversial *Les Marrons de la liberté* by Jean Touchard (*American Trans. The Haitian Maroons*, 1972).

15. "The absence of an outstanding popular figure (of a hero) does not result from the logic of defeat. A self-confident people has the ability to transform into a mythical victory what may have been a real defeat . . . One can go so far as to argue that the defeats of heroes are necessary to the solidarity of communities" (*Caribbean Discourse*, 68).

16. For a further discussion of black festivals and celebrations in the Americas, see Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, chapters IV and V.

17. "... in myth (as in Greek tragedy) the achievement of collective harmony assumes the ritual sacrifice of a hero, at the very least his apparent failure" (*Caribbean Discourse*, 72, note 2).

18. "Everything had a place, a time, a precise reason; nothing was left to chance; the air itself distilled a sense of eternity [...] it was time divested of novelty or surprise, seeming to spin on its own axis. All day long, each action smoothly succeeded another in its proper order" (*The Bridge of Beyond*, 85).

19. "Oh" said Ma Cia. "So the dead are served first now, are they?"
"You know Jeremiah always had a weakness for stewed pork," said Grandmother, smiling.
"And how is he?" asked Ma Cia gravely.
"He hasn't forgotten me," said Grandmother happily. "He comes to see me every night without fail. And he hasn't changed, he's just the same as when he was alive." (*The Bridge of Beyond*, 53).
CHAPTER IV: The Construction of Black Female Selves and Identities

The majority of the models of psychological and societal growth common to Euro-American cultures, and the resulting figure of a separate, distinct human ego, have been based in essentially white Western and male-centered paradigms. As Susan S. Friedman has remarked, some of the early theoretical discussions of autobiography and of the emergence of an autobiographical self, such as those found in Gusdorf’s groundbreaking essays, remain "premised on a model of the self that he identifies as endemically Western and individualistic" (Friedman, 35). Indeed, Gusdorf’s assertion that autobiography can only arise where there is a sense of the "isolated being," and could not occur in a context where "the individual does not oppose himself to all others" (Gusdorf, 29-30) only stresses the Western, and ultimately male-centered, premises of such a statement. The recent revisions of theories of the self that have been developed by post-Freudians and French and American feminists such as Chodorow, Irigaray, Kofmann and others, have attempted to redefine the origins of the self, and in particular of the process of female individuation. Chodorow and Irigaray, in diverse modes, argue that psychoanalysis still remains the most adequate system and structural account to analyse the psychological development and socialization of men and women 1. Although this chapter does not intend to follow a strictly psychoanalytical line of discussion, the terms of the debate articulated by Nancy Chodorow, Lacan and others are crucial to any discussion of the development of an autonomous female self as illustrated by black women authors. This study will also draw on the social and cultural factors which condition the debate surrounding a race-and-gender-defined identity which some critics would have defined as a "black female identity" that they locate within the works of black women writers from the Americas.

In a commentary on the early psychological development of the child, Chodorow writes that "a person’s self, or identity, has a twofold origin and twofold orientation, both of which derive from its early relational experiences. One origin is an inner physical experience of body integrity and a more internal 'core of the self'" (Chodorow, 67). She adds that "the second origin of the self is
through demarcation from the object world. Both ego boundaries (a sense of personal psychological division from the rest of the world) and a bounded body ego (a sense of the permanence of physical separatedness and of the predictable boundedness of the body) emerge through this process. The development of the self is relational" (Chodorow, 68). The child's sense of separate self and of basic relatedness to the outer world co-exists with his/her sense of an inner 'core of the self' and articulates the very debate surrounding the autobiographical act, and for that matter, any literary endeavor that purports to write from and/or on the self. Where James Olney says that one of the forms of autobiographical impulse represents "a consciousness, pure and simple, consciousness referring to no objects outside itself, to no events, and to no other lives" ("Some Versions of Memory", 239), other critics stress the oppositional nature of any definition of the psychological or the autobiographical self. As Chodorow argues in her configuration of a specific female self in pre-oedipal childhood, "feminine personality comes to be based less on repression of inner objects, and fixed and firm splits in the ego, and more on retention and continuity of external relationships" (Chodorow, 169). The same critic goes on to say that "growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others," and that their sense of self is defined by "more flexible and permeable ego boundaries." Consequently, Chodorow suggests that while "the basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate," since boys have a "greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation" (Chodorow, 169). Recently, other feminist critics have expanded Chodorow's argumentation and proposed that "a distinctive female 'I' implies a distinctive value system and unorthodox developmental goals, defined in terms of community and empathy rather than achievement and autonomy" (Abel et als., The Voyage In, 10).

-A: A Multiplicity of Female Paradigms

When one considers specific texts by black women authors, tropes of an inner-self and of outer-connectedness appear conspicuously from one text to the next as do the use of mirror images. (Interestingly, the mirror trope appears in French literature by women as far back as Madame de Lafayette's Princesse de Clèves and is also present in Madame de Duras's Ourika (1823), the first
French novel to depict a black woman as a main character). Do these tropes follow strict gender distinctions, or rather, should one not speak of multiple constructions of distinct black female individualities? In the latter case, instead of following a uniform model of personal growth, each person is subject to specific psychological, cultural, social and historical factors that help define them.

In the case of the particular texts under investigation, one notices the diversity of images that articulate each narrative: the mirror-trope is present in *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*, as well as in *The Bluest Eye* and Morrison’s *Beloved*, whether the reflecting gaze be that of a parent, a friend or a stranger. The trope of the mother as the primal other appears prominently at the beginning of *Zami*, as it does in Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and again in *Beloved*, whereas the mother’s absence is crucial in Angelou’s *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, as in Schwarz-Bart’s novel or again in the case of Morrison’s heroine Sula.

The importance of mothering relationships that do not necessarily follow a biological lineage, and the connection between artistic creation and childbearing—or its absence—both occupy another crucial place within these texts, as evidenced by Morrison’s *Sula, Song of Solomon*, and Naylor’s *Linden Hills* among others. In some cases, as with *Beloved*—as I will discuss at length further—refusal of the traditional maternal obligations is at the center of the narrative, forcing us to question the social and cultural categories that define women in patriarchal societies.

Furthermore, all of these texts firmly establish paradigms of bonding and of what Joan Lidoff calls the “female poetics of affiliation” that exist between women, either on an intra-racial or on a crossracial basis. This sense of bonding can also extend to males, as evidenced in the novels by Morrison and Angelou, as well as overlap age and family barriers. Interestingly, not only do all these texts address issues of sexual politics from a female perspective, but they do so within the larger context of the latent tension that exists between the heterosexual and the homosexual aspects of each individual’s psychological make-up. Writers such as Lorde, Naylor, Morrison and Marshall deal openly with homosocial or homoerotic aspects of female, or male bonding—to use the terminology developed by Eve Sedgwick in her 1985 groundbreaking study *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*—in modes that are almost totally absent from black male literature—with the notable exceptions of Baldwin and Samuel Delaney, both openly gay male writers.
The authors included in this study, in their concern for tropes of female bonding, share therefore a tradition with other female authors from the white dominant cultures of their common languages: Margaret Atwood, Monique Wittig, May Sarton, Marguerite Duras, Doris Lessing and many others. Although black women in the Americas have experiences in common as females (as mothers, wives, or again unmarried, childless women), which they share with their white, or Native American, or Hispanic, or, again, Asian sisters, the condition governing their ancestors' coming to the New World in the first place still has a very strong hold over their destinies and the shaping of distinct black, female individualities on American soil. The regions where these women happen to live, whether the American mainland or the Caribbean islands, the rural South, the Northeast, or the West, have an additional importance, as do their social background, their professional occupations, their marital status, their philosophical and religious beliefs—or absence thereof—and also their sexual preference.

It is therefore impossible to tie down these various authors to one particular normative paradigm of black female selfhood. Recent analytical theories, however, have demonstrated the role that the perception of certain norms can have in the construction of a child's psyche. Lacan stressed the central role of the "mirror stage" in the child's progression from an indistinct, fragmented and partial sense of his/her self to a more homogeneous one, one that precedes the child's entrance into the symbolic domain of logos at the oedipal stage. Following the French analyst's demonstration, post-Freudian feminists such as Nancy Chodorow, Jane Flax and Dorothy Dinnerstein have argued that "since the boy comes to speak with the authority of the father and all fathers before him, those figures of public power who control the discourse and its economy of selfhood, the male experience is identified as the normative human paradigm" (Sidonie Smith, 12). Although it might be tempting to establish a "counter-paradigm" for a "female economy of selfhood," it is impossible in the light of the diversity of human experience not to take into account the differences in life experiences that are culturally and socially rather than biologically determined, differences which are "reproduced by the familial and cultural structures of power constitutive of patriarchy" (S. Smith, 13).
By concentrating on specific texts, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Téluémée Miracle*, with additional attention to *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Beloved*, we shall see how these texts revise and expand the post-Freudian interpretations of the construction of male/female identities, in particular in their use of the tropes of mirrors and reflecting images. The mirror and its reflection acts both in a passive and active mode. While Lacan and Sartre—in *L'Etre et le Néant*—and others have stressed the essentially alienating aspect of the mirroring relationship among adults, psychology and psychoanalysis have taught us that the mother's gaze is one of the central matrices of the child's sense of his/herself and psychological development. Commenting on Lacan's "stade du miroir," D.W. Winnicott writes that "[i]n individual emotional development the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face" (Winnicott, 111). Indeed, Lacan's mirror stage plays an essential role in the French philosopher's theory of the child's initiation into the social community and accession to the law of the symbolic, from an initial stage of narcissistic identification with the same (who can be the mother or another primary caretaker) to the construction of an autonomous self. Shari Benstock notes that "the developing child drives toward fusion and homogeneity in the construction of a 'self'... against the effects of division and dissolution" (Benstock, 12). The trauma that accompanies the dissolution of personality is specially noticeable in Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* which Phyllis R. Klotman characterizes as "a female Bildungsroman, a novel of growing up young and black and female in America" (Klotman, 123).

It is remarkable that Morrison should have chosen as the theme of her first novel the emblematic tale of one young girl's tragic failure to construct her own self; Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Téluémée Miracle* also deals with the issue of the emergence of one young woman's personality, and makes use of the mirror image, although with a different effect than in *The Bluest Eye*. Writing on the Guadeloupean author's novel as well as on Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, Josie P. Campbell remarks that "the 'regard' [in the Lacanian sense where the gaze is but a function within a largely unconscious discourse] is a pivotal experience for the protagonists, an experience felt through reflections in the eyes, the loving gaze, mirrors, or other reflective surfaces." Reflections—or lack of them—convey both literal and symbolic meanings in terms of action, character and theme, as is the case with Téluémée's mutual recognition of her grandmother Reine Sans Nom.
"who is the ideal and the future reflection of herself" (Campbell, 397).

The confrontation between the self and the other—or what Glissant refers to as "le Même" and "le Divers"—has been particularly acute within the regions of the Americas where slavery was prevalent. One of the earliest investigations of the mechanisms of psychological, social and cultural tensions found between the categories of the identical and otherness—tensions that can lead to mental alienation—can of course be found in the works of Martinique-born analyst Franz Fanon. These studies were crucial to a proper understanding of the psyche of the former colonized people throughout the world. The persistent longing for the acknowledgement of one's existence in the eyes of the Other (i.e the white world) or others (one's parents, relatives, friends) dominates The Bluest Eye while the slow emergence of the consciousness of a homogeneous self articulates Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle. As a matter of fact, the very text in The Bluest Eye is controlled by figures of dissolution and division which Benstock considers characteristic of the developing ego and perceptions of a child. The increasing syntactical and typographical disorder that invades Morrison's text—in the form of the three versions of the "Dick and Jane" reader lines that open the novel—underlines the reader's sense of "pervasive trauma of dislocation suffered by young Pecola, [her friend] Claudia, Soaphead Church [who promises her blue eyes] and the entire community" (Melvin Dixon, 143). Indeed, as Dixon notes, The Bluest Eye is a "study of a community out of touch with the land and the history that might have saved them" (143); it is also a bitter reflection upon the destiny of spiritual and geographical displacement that structures in different ways the existence of many blacks, in particular black women, in the New World and can cause a sense of disconnectedness of their personality.

-B: The Distortion of Self: Reification and Self-Hatred.

This sense of forced displacement generates a loss of identity among several of the key characters in Morrison's The Bluest Eye as well as a dispossession process which leads to a reduction from otherness to sameness. Lorain, Ohio is a universe that is inhabited by "grotesques whose psyches have been distorted by efforts to assume false identities and their failures to achieve
meaningful identities, or simply their inability to retain and communicate love" (Darwin Turner, 362). Pecola Breedlove and Télumée—as well as young Maya in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* or Marshall's Selina in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*—exist in a hostile universe that denies them existence by not even acknowledging their presence. One of the most telling illustrations of this recurrent theme of non-recognition of the "other’s" existence occurs when little Pecola goes to Yacobowski's Fresh Veg store:

> He urges his eyes out of his thoughts to encounter her. Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space, he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. *He does not see her, because there is nothing to see* [my emphasis]. How can a fifty-two-year-old immigrant store keeper . . . see a little black girl? [author’s emphasis] (*The Bluest Eye*, 42).

In a recent interview, Morrison commented on some aspects of the denial of the existence of blacks in American society and, in an echo of one of James Baldwin's early essays, noted that "... in becoming an American, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt for me—it's nothing else but color. Wherever they were from, they would stand together [. . .] So in that sense, becoming an American is based on an attitude: an exclusion of me" ("The Pain of Being Black", 120). Although Télumée's destiny is not engulfed by a sense of seclusion and final mental alienation similar to Pecola's, she also experiences in some instances a hostile denial of her being. This is particularly the case in the young Guadeloupean's interactions with the local whites, whether they be native creoles or "métropolitains" sent from France. As Josie P. Campbell comments, "the positive reflection of Télumée's soul is offset by the numerous negative variants of non-reflecting surfaces found in her encounters with members of the white community" (Campbell, 397). One such instance of a non-reflective encounter with another takes place in presence of a white planter's wife, Madame Desaragne, for whom Télumée is to work at the Habitation Bellefeuille:

> Venant à moi, depuis le perron où elle se tenait, la descendante du Blanc des Blancs m'apparut . . . deux yeux d'un bleu intense m'examinèrent, et le regard me parut froid, languissant, désinvolte, tandis que Madame Desaragne m'interrogeait avec insistance . . . (*Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*, 90) ².

Not surprisingly, Madame Desaragne's lack of acknowledgment of the young black servant's identity metamorphoses itself, in an all too eager recognition of Télumée's--physical--presence when the young
A girl comes under the controlling gaze of her master, Monsieur Desaragne: "... je me retournai pour voir M. Desaragne, immobile, au milieu de la cour, me contemplant de ses yeux gris, un peu verts, mystérieusement narquois" (110). Whereas the planter's wife abolishes Télumè's very existence, Desaragne's visual appropriation of her over-emphasizes her presence. The young black woman's discomfort encompasses most of her interaction with white society, where she feels surrounded by "des yeux métalliques, perçants, lointains sous lesquels je n'existais pas" (90). This unease is emblazoned in a recurrent and enigmatic dream, a "rêve étrange" that she has; in this dream, she sees herself as a transplanted servant somewhere in France during a snowy winter: "Les Blancs avaient des yeux curieux, c'étaient des sortes de brisures de miroirs dépolis, où rien ne se reflétait..." (112).

Besides the familiar images of coldness—both meteorological and affective—used here to describe the world of the colonizers and whites in general (as in Camara Laye's L'Enfant noir or Claude McKay's Banjo as well as in Marshall's description of Merle Kimbona's years in London or again of Avey Johnson's life in North White Plains), one notes the prevalence of the image of non-reflexivity that articulates most of the instances of "regard" from white gazer to black person. The man's lustful gaze posits an essentially non-acknowledging specular rapport between him and the woman, and therefore, the other; any system of female-defined interrelationship between the subject and other(s) must thus organize a different mode of specularity than the one promoted by masculinist desires.

Just as one can read Morrison's The Bluest Eye as a deliberate dis-articulation of narrative and voices, one can follow Pecola's tragic destiny as an illustration of a levelling into nothingness of her very sense of being. This negation of self occurs in an environment where, as Audré Lorde has remarked, "racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision" which renders black women—heterosexual as well as lesbian as I shall develop hereafter—invisible (Sister Outsider, 42). Pecola's obsessive desire to be recognized by the outside world—which she time and again attempts through failed seduction—echoes her entire family's behavior of self-denial and their obsessively mimetic and destructive impulses. This is brought about by the Breedloves' belief in their ugliness, a
belief that only intensifies their social marginalization: "They lived [in a storefront] because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly" (The Bluest Eye, 34). Except for her father—who could not love her without violating her physical person—"the rest of [Pecola’s family] wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them" (34). In a pathetic manner, this obsessive ugliness becomes the family’s distinctive brand of identity, despite the fact that it has been entirely defined and imposed from the exterior, white world, in an illustration of Glissant’s comment that "la pulsion mimétique est peut-être la violence la plus extrême qu’on puisse imposer à un peuple; d’autant qu’elle suppose le consentement (et même la jouissance) du mimétisé" (Discours antillais, 63-64). Not only does Pecola not encounter a positive image of herself as a black child, and as a little girl at home; her schoolmates also help perpetuate the worst stereotypes which are constructed by the dominant culture and social groups. In a poignant scene, a group of black schoolchildren ritualistically re-enact the biases and prejudices of the world at large, and project their unconscious self-hatred upon the chosen scapegoat, Pecola, who becomes an unwitting expiatory victim for all of the conflicts that have overwhelmed her and her community:

'Black e mo. Black e mo . . .'
They had extemporised a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult . . . That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborate hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn . . . (The Bluest Eye, 55).

Pecola’s mother Pauline is entirely steeped in what Phyllis R. Klotman calls the "Shirley Temple sensibility"; while she is expecting Pecola, Pauline spends her free time in movie theaters. On those occasions, she exists vicariously through the lives of Jean Harlow, Clark Gable, and many other white actors and actresses: "there in the dark her memory was refreshed and she succumbed to her earlier dreams. Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another--physical beauty" (The Bluest Eye, 97). Pauline—and ultimately, Pecola—is representative of the tragic results of the forced socialization of non-white women into Euro-American models of romantic love and beauty; this ideology of romance is best illustrated of course by the Hollywood film production, in which the epitome of the good, the true and the beautiful is, without fail, the blond, blue-eyed film star.

The young black girl and her mother do not have the psychological defenses and resources
of an equally young Maya; when she happens to see a movie with a white actress who looks just like her elusive, light-skinned mother, the narrator of *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* recognizes that "the woman that [the audience was] adoring could be my mother's twin, except that she was white and my mother was prettier. Much prettier." (115). One would search in vain for such self-confidence in *The Bluest Eye*: if one applies a Lacanian interpretation to Pecola's absence of self-esteem, it is possible to say that the only way in which the young girl could regain a proper sense of self—and of her own beauty, an issue that is critical for her as well as for other black female characters—would be by the full mirroring acknowledgment of her person through the eyes of another (in the psychological dimension of the term "other"). Téluémée's "other" is Reine sans Nom, and for a time, her childhood friend Elie; Maya's "other" is her grandmother; Selina's "others" are both her mother Silla and her father Deighton; Lorde's narrator's "others" are the many women with whom she is involved, affectively and erotically, throughout *Zami*: Milkman's "others" include his mother Ruth, his aunt Pilate, his friend Guitar, and ultimately the black community of which he learns to become a part.

Pecola never has such an "other" to find herself with; while the mother is often the primal other for a child, Pauline, submerged as she is by the artificial values of Hollywood movies, is tragically incapable of seeing life and beauty in her daughter. As a matter of fact, when Pecola is born, Pauline cannot hide her extreme disappointment: "She looked different from what I thought. Reckon I talked to it so much before I conjured up a mind's eye view of it . . . a cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (*The Bluest Eye*, 99-100).

Without a proper affective nurturance, Pecola cannot develop a positive sense of self; she is thus awarded a negative, distorted sense of her identity from the very moment of her birth, when "Pauline looks at her infant daughter and then looks away" (Madonne M. Miner, 187). The mother's gaze drifts away, never to acknowledge her child again; the absence of the mother as a nurturing force controls much of *The Bluest Eye*, as it does the development of Sula in Morrison's second novel. Pauline's daughter in *The Bluest Eye* does understand however that the source of her unhappiness resides in her denial by others, and that whoever controls the gaze has the power to
establish the parameters of what is beautiful or not, let alone what is good or evil. One occasion where she is re-enforced in this belief occurs during Pecola's accidental encounter with Geraldine, the mother of one of Pecola's classmates. Geraldine is one of many "thin brown girls" who have grown up in Meridian, Mobile, Baton Rouge or any other city in the Deep South; she has continuously striven to eliminate the slightest remains of black "funkiness" from the odorless and colourless universe in which she has locked herself up. Upon finding Pecola in her home, Geraldine instantly knows that "she had seen this little girl all of her life" (The Bluest Eye, 75), and that she symbolizes everything that Geraldine hates about other blacks, and ultimately, about herself. As Madonne M. Miner notes, "Pecola for Geraldine serves as symbol of everything ugly, dirty, and degrading. Physically as well as symbolically, Geraldine must negate Pecola, must deny the eleven-year-old access to her world" (Miner, 186). Where the neighborhood Polish grocer does not even see the Breedlove child, Geraldine sees her only too well, to the disadvantage of Pecola.

Obsessed as she is by her sense of continuous rejection, Pecola therefore takes one ultimate, desperate step: "It had occurred to [her] some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say beautiful, she herself would be different" (The Bluest Eye, 40). Being different for Pecola signifies being white, that is, beautiful; and in her particular distorted perspective, it means gaining control over her senses—essentially her eyes—and acquiring blue eyes. Pecola's ultimate insanity and obsessive desire to reorder her sensory perceptions illustrates the power that the denial of one's existence in the perceptions of another can have. As Miner concludes, "[by] covering ears, eyes, and nose, Pecola attempts to shut out the testimony of her senses. Reminded of her own ugliness or that of her world, she repeatedly resorts to an elemental self-denial" (Miner, 188).

Remarkably, the tragic, obsessive self-denial of one's physical, racial appearance is also found in two novels by Mayotte Capécia, one of the very first black francophone women writers from the Caribbean: Je suis martiniquaise (1948), and more revealingly so in La Négresse blanche (1950). In a very harsh attack that he launched upon his compatriot's texts, Frantz Fanon noted, in Peau noire, masques blancs, Capécia's desire for "a kind of lactification," a whitening of the black...
race to "save the race," not uncommon to the black bourgeoisies of the colonial Caribbean. Recalling the incident during Capécia's childhood where the future author had tried to cover with ink a white French schoolmate, Fanon adds that since Capécia "could no longer try to blacken, to negrify the world, she was going to try in her own body and in her own mind, to bleach it". Fanon concludes his attack on the female writer by saying that not only has "Capécia definitely turned her back on her country . . . There is an aura of malediction surrounding Mayotte Capécia. But she is centrifugal, Mayotte Capécia is barred from herself" (Black Skin, White Masks, 45, and note 12, 53). It is also of note that up till now—and possibly as an indirect result of Fanon's staunchly race-centered and masculinist attack on Capécia—very little work has been done on this tragic, early French Caribbean literary figure.

As Lacan and others have demonstrated, the power of one social group over the other has as much to do with who controls the regard/gaze as it has with the ability to construct and control language and, ultimately, to name and designate the other. Just as African slaves were unable to retain their original names, several of these texts depict characters—usually female servants—whose original names are arbitrarily changed or dismissed; this is the case with young Maya, whose employer, one Mrs Cullinan, renames her "Mary" because, in her words, Maya's original "name's too long. I'd never bother myself (I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, 104). A similar act of control over someone's persona through naming occurs in Beloved, when Baby Suggs's "good" philanthropic white employer in Cincinnati renames her Jenny, adding: "If I was you, I'd stick to Jenny Whitlow. Mrs Baby Suggs ain't no name for a freed Negro" (142). But as Baby Suggs thinks to herself, the name of course means much more than it might appear to a benevolent, yet ignorant stranger. Following the employer's recommendation to Baby Suggs, the narrator comments in these words: "Maybe not, she thought, but Baby Suggs was all she had left of the 'husband' she claimed . . . the two of them made a pact; whichever one got a chance to run would take it; together if possible, alone if not, and no looking back" (142).

The same importance given to naming appears in the Guadeloupean community's decision to rename Télumée's grandmother Toussine as Reine Sans Nom: one can hardly imagine a more
symbolic name. The majestic Toussine becomes literally the one who cannot be named despite, or rather because of her numerous qualities and virtues. As Scharffmann writes, Toussine's new name is "the Name-of-the-Mother. [It manifests] the impossibility of language to encompass her in a name" (92). While naming in self-contained black communities often defies the conventions and logic of Western culture, naming within the frame of sex-gender differences as patriarchy defines them often contributes to perpetuating the exploitation of women as do Luther Nedeed's authoritarian assertions about his wife and her "treachery" (Linden Hills, 19). Another telling example of the extreme sensitivity of the naming issue within black communities and of their interaction with the dominant white cultures in the Americas can be found in Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. Following Mrs Cullinan's arbitrary decision to rename her Mary, Angelou's narrator thinks to herself that:

> Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being 'called out of his name'. It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely constructed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, jings, dinges, blackbirds, crows, boots and spooks.
> . . . For a few seconds it was a tossup over whether I would laugh [. . .] or cry (imagine letting some white woman rename you for her convenience). My anger saved me from either outburst. I had to quit the job (*I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, 106).

-C: Male and Female Interaction in Black Communities from The Americas.

In an interview with *The Black Scholar*, Maya Angelou, when asked about her conception of the relationship between black men and women, noted a major difference between African-American women and their white counterparts; contrary to white women who have been socially and culturally relegated to the parlor, the bedroom, the kitchen or the nursery by their husbands, "black men have never been able [to do that] to [their] women. There's a qualitative difference in our approach to ourselves" ("An Interview With Maya Angelou", 52). This statement brings to our attention the risk of wanting to promote a uniform model of otherness that would not take into account essential socio-cultural, historical or psychological aspects that pertain to a specific group of people, or to an individual.

Several of these texts present a reversal from the absence of an individuating reflexivity to
an all-controlling masculinist gaze that proceeds to appropriate the existence of the autonomous female. Pecola, her mother Pauline or Télumée in their daily work as maids, or again Hagar in her failed relationship with Milkman in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, are denied an existence on the part of their white interlocutors. Yet these texts also offer many examples of males who seek to appropriate for themselves the existence of women through their female desires and bodies. Luce Irigaray has said of this figure of male appropriation of the female "object" that the male's constant "attempt to specularize and to speculate" leads woman to become "the 'object' to be investigated by man's eye." (*Speculum of The Other Woman*, 145) ¹. Historically, black women, in and out of slavery, have been commodified by numerous men: white men—as illustrated in Linda Brent's description of her white master, and by Télumée's incident with her master—but also black males, as with Zora Neale Hurston's Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and her conflictual relations with her second husband, Pecola's seduction and rape by her father Cholly, or again in Lorraine's confrontation with the youth gang in *The Women of Brewster Place*. In all these instances, the male's persistent gaze becomes an "exploration of all the inner cavities ... with the help of ancillary light and mirror of appropriate sun and mirrors" that finally reveal to him that "those mines contain no gold" (Irigaray, 145). In these texts, the male gaze/regard paradoxically proclaims its sovereignty over the "feminine" as subject, while denying the feminine any concrete existence as a person, and in particular, as a black woman.

Black males themselves have not escaped the all-inclusive, yet destructive gaze of the white world; one can think of Ellison's Invisible Man, Baldwin's Rufus in *Another Country* or again Marshall's Deighton in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. One of the most poignant examples of the victimization of black males—and females—by the intrusion of a white gaze appears in *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola's father, Cholly, when still a young man, flirts with a girl down South during a wake; they elope into the woods, and are in the midst of awkward lovemaking when a group of white Southern men comes upon them, turning the inexperienced erotic scene into one of heinous voyeurism that keeps the two black youths captive. Cholly, unable to re-assert his manhood under the threatening control of the white men, can only unleash his hostility and frustration onto his companion, Darlene:

*There was no place for Cholly's eyes to go. They slid about furtively for shelter,*
while his body remained paralyzed . . . He could do no more than make-believe. The flashlight made a moon on his behind . . . Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it--hard long and painfully, he hated her so much" (The Bluest Eye, 117).

Darlene, on the other hand is reduced to frozen and silent humiliation: "Darlene did not move. Cholly wanted to strangle her, but instead he touched her leg with his foot . . . she reached for her underwear with her eyes closed . . . when she found them, she put them on with the movements of an old woman" (118). This scene clearly involves a case of displaced anger and vicarious affirmation of male authority; since Cholly cannot get back at the white men, he directs his retribution towards his female companion; as is often the case, the woman becomes the intermediary--albeit unwilling--"object" between the two male poles of a negotiation of power and general control: "Sullen, irritable [Cholly] cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters . . . they were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless . . . Hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal" (119).

Yet, as Frederick Douglass's Narrative illustrates in a telling manner, black males have often been able to regain control of their identity, if not in the moment itself, at least in the writing of that particular moment; just as Douglass entirely erases the existence of his companion and wife-to-be, he also clearly reclaims a narrative authority from the beginning of his text. Similarly, Baldwin in If Beale Could Talk allows his male voice to take over the control of a text that is supposedly told from the perspective of Tish, a nineteen-year-old black woman 12. In Morrison's The Bluest Eye on the other hand, not only does Pecola never gain authority over her own existence but she also never really has any kind of control over the narrative that is told from different voices, while never really including her own.

In other instances, the essence of a character's individuality can manifest itself through an idiosyncratic trait of that person. Such is the case in Morrison's Beloved, where Paul D. who has come back to Sethe, notices the strange quality of being that Beloved, the mysterious young woman who has moved into Sethe's home, generates wherever she is:

"Beloved was shining and Paul D. didn't like it. Women did what strawberry plants did before they shot out their thin vines: the quality of the green changed . . . that's how Beloved looked--gilded and shining . . . In the evening when he came home, her shine was so pronounced he wondered why Denver and Sethe didn't see it. Or
maybe they did" (Beloved, 64).

Paul D. interprets Beloved's "shining" in a clearly masculinist mode, as a physical, erotic manifestation of Beloved's female personality, one that clearly establishes her as a distinct being with an autonomous sexuality whose shining is "scandalous" inasmuch as it suggests a sexual identity away from the voyeuristic male gaze, in an almost masturbatory mode. Paul D. is clearly disturbed and possibly threatened by the evidence of Beloved's "shining": this particular trait of the young woman is all the more striking since not all female characters in Morrison's latest novel have such strongly defined personalities. For example, Sethe's daughter, Denver, who has led a lonely childhood without playmates, becomes so attached to the strange young woman with "a skin without lines" that when she mistakenly believes that Beloved has left as abruptly as she had arrived, she reflects that "this is worse than when Paul D came to 124 [Sethe's and Denver's house] and she cried helpless into the stove." The narrator proceeds to say of Denver that "[t]his is worse. Then it was for herself, now she is crying because she has no self" (Beloved, 123).

The lack of a strong sense of identity can thus be explained as a consequence of the character's experience of rejection, solitude, or again because of a sense of insecurity. Sheer discrimination and the hardships of slavery, however, could also historically account for an absence of self-image, in particular when the surrounding culture constantly reminded black women--and men--of their "sub-human" status. Such is the case with Sethe's step-mother in Beloved, one day that she reminisces on her life, after having been bought into freedom by her son Halle:

Sweet Home [the last plantation where she worked] was a marked improvement. No question. And no matter, for the sadness was at the center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home. Bad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was that she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like (Beloved, 140).

Baby Suggs at least had the comfort of knowing that her son Halle would not abandon her. For those however who find no solace or support in the company of those closest to them, it is not unusual to be drawn to others who are equally as ostracized and invisible to mainstream society in most circumstances. In The Bluest Eye, the only people who find any time for little Pecola are the three
prostitutes who live above her place, China, Miss Marie and Poland, and more pathetically, Soaphead Church, a self-proclaimed "reader, adviser and interpreter of dreams" who is himself treading a very fine line between reality and madness. Someone else might have sought out the candidly unromantic philosophy that the three "merry gargoyles" entertain about life; "they hated men, all men, without shame, apology or discrimination. They abused their visitors with a scorn grown mechanical from use" (47). Yet, Pecola needs a sense of re-assurance that the three prostitutes cannot give her, and that she believes she has found in Soaphead Church's raving delusions.

Tragically, the only identity that Pecola achieves by the end of Morrison's harrowing tale of destruction reaped by self-hatred is that of a scapegoat and a suffering victim. In an environment where blackness is debased to being synonymous with filth, and where black females are seen as sexual commodities, the victims soon become the victimizers, as is the case with the children who taunt Pecola, or again with Cholly whose "most perverse act of his life, the rape of Pecola, is a product of his confusion of violence and love" (Byerman, 188), in an environment that has denied him, as it will Pecola, any socially acceptable mode of expressing himself and his true feelings as a black person. In the tragic instance in which Cholly rapes his daughter, the father clearly cannot fully accept his daughter as a person; rather, he perceives and resents her as the being who causes him to feel guilt and a psychotic mixture of hatred and tenderness, as was the case in his earlier foiled seduction of Darlene in the woods:

Cholly saw [Pecola] dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt... the sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence... He wanted to break her neck—but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her—ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year old daughter? ( The Bluest Eye, 127).

The terrible irony of the rape-scene in The Bluest Eye is of course that Cholly both posits Pecola's existence—as a sexual person—and negates her autonomy and dignity as a human equal in the course of his rape of her.

Morrison's first novel forces us therefore to explore a universe where blacks, and in particular black women, are reduced to a status of pure commodities, mere "objects" that fall prey to the sexual urges of black men and to the controlling gaze of the outer (white) world whether it be that of their employers, shop-owners, or strangers. The pervasive sense of self-hatred that plagues
several of the black characters in *The Bluest Eye* establishes blackness as a distorted gauge equivalent to failure and ugliness, and reduces any sense of a distinct self from the level of being a subject to that of being a mere object. As Keith Byerman comments, "[t]he Breedloves are so absorbed in variations of self-hatred that they see each other only as objects" (190).

Sexism in its guise of the continued devaluation of the black woman and mother occupies a central place in these texts. Luther Nedeed's callousness to his wife in *Linden Hills* is based on what he senses to be his wife's "betrayal" of his "natural" patriarchal privileges and authority. This includes having given him an inadequate heir, "a son, but a white son. The same squat bowlegs, the same protruding eyes and puffed lips [as he had] but a ghostly presence that mocked everything his fathers had built" (*Linden Hills*, 18). His authority is symbolized by his conferring to Willa her "real" name as his wife. It is remarkable that Nedeed cannot separate his wife's physical characteristics from her intellectual "flaws": "The long neck, small breasts, thick waist. Woman. She became an instant irritant to Luther, who now turned her presence over in his mind several times a day. Somewhere inside of her must be a deep flaw or she wouldn't have been capable of such treachery. Everything she owned he had given her--even her name--and she thanked him with this?" (*Linden Hills*, 19). Luther Nedeed's clear sense of outrage is compounded by his perception of his wife as a mere piece of ownership, one that should enhance his sense of hegemony rather than threaten it, as is obviously the case for him in this passage. Luther's limitless arrogance rings as a grim verdict for Willa who remains a hostage of his insensitivity and mental violence in the old morgue of his ostentatious Tupelo Drive mansion.

As is the case in Cholly's brutal seduction and rape of Pecola, one can detect in Nedeed's callous constraint of Priscilla's freedom a constant urge on his part to transgress his own prerogatives and go beyond what he sees as his male space. In her essay on *The Bluest Eye* that reads Morrison's novel as a revision of the mythic accounts of Philomela and Persephone, Madonna Miner notes that

> Obviously, male-violating-female functions as the core action within Philomela's story . . . just as the basic mythemic act (man raping woman) robs the woman of identity, so too the mythemic interact; dependent upon familial roles for personal verification ("mother of," "sister of," "wife of") the female must fear a loss of identification as the family loses its boundaries—or [. . .] as the male transgresses these boundaries . . . Male realms expand as those of the female suffer an almost fatal contraction (Miner, 178-79).
The spatial contraction of female space emblematized by Willa's confinement in *Linden Hills* echoes the ever-expanding mental confinement that closes upon Pecola in Morrison's novel; this closure is illustrated by the narrative being taken over by voices other than Pecola's which becomes more and more inarticulate. As Melvin Dixon writes, "Pecola's distance from the text and from society increases greatly when her most intimate spaces--the home and parts of the body--are violated when she is raped by her father . . . The syntactical and topographical disorder reveals the increasing violation of physical, social and personal space" (144).

The negotiations of the terms of spatial autonomy between male and female spheres have often been presented in a conflictual mode in literatures in French and English, from *La Princesse de Clèves* and *Pamela* down to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Wittig's *Les Guérillères*. This is also the case in the texts under consideration, as the preceding discussion demonstrates. One author however--Toni Morrison--has held to a distinct, and highly idiosyncratic vision of the dynamics that control the interactions between men and women. Rather than discussing the terms governing the relations between black males and females from a perspective of rigid sexual politics, Morrison suggests a sociological and cultural interpretation:

I think there is a serious question about black male and female relationships in the twentieth century. I just think that the argument has always turned on something it should not turn on: gender. I think that the conflict of gender is a cultural illness. Many of the problems modern couples have are caused not so much by conflicting gender roles as by the other 'difference' the culture offers (McKay, 421-22).

Indeed, Morrison's novels have always stressed both the uniqueness of the black cultural experience and difference, as well as the centrality of male-female bonding in this culture, not so much to re-assert heterosexuality in any way, but rather, to question some of the assumptions under which it operates in the contemporary world; as we read *Song of Solomon* for example, we are led to ask ourselves what causes a young woman such as Hagar, Milkman's unhappy girlfriend, to go insane because of a young man "for whom she believed she had been born" (127).

While focusing her attention on same-sex bonding as with Sula and Nel or Milkman and Guitar, Morrison forces us to reconsider the ways in which men and women meet, court, make love, marry (or not), and more often than not, separate. One can definitely speak of an inclusionary pattern.
in the novelist's works, one that attempts to incorporate differences rather than set up separate communities, as is the case in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, or as with the female-run community in *Pluie et vent sur Téléumée Miracle*. Morrison affirms the specificity of black women from the Americas: "there is something inside [black women] that makes [them] different from other people. It is not like men and it is not like white women. . . . When [my women] sing the blues it is one of those 'somebody is gone' kind of thing but there is never any bitterness" (Bettye J. Parker, 255); yet she remains very attentive to the uniqueness of the black male experience. The novelist has commented repeatedly on what she sees as "male"-and female--"rhythms"; a "male rhythm" according to the novelist, would include a sense of outward space, a recurrent urge toward adventurousness, which Morrison calls the "Ulyssian theme" in black male life (Parker, 256). This is the force that drives Milkman on his outward quest for his origins as it does the entirety of *Song of Solomon*; this drive is not limited to males of course. As Morrison has made clear in comments about her heroines, Sula, Pilate Dead and the Peace women, all participate in this "male" sense of adventurousness.

Rather than culminating in an open conflict, male-female relationships need to be constantly redefined and negotiated. Morrison's inclusionary perspective stems from her own experience. In her discussion of the tradition of story-telling in her family, she notes that it was a "shared activity between the men and the women" and further, that there was "a comradeship between men and women in the marriages of my grandparents, and my mother and father" before concluding that "there were no conflicts of gender in [the area of story-telling] at the level at which such are in vogue these days. My father and my mother did not fight about who was supposed to do what. Each confronted whatever crisis there was" (McKay, 415-16). This comradeship can be found in several of the cross-gender relationships she creates in her novels; Pilate and Milkman, Paul D. and Sethe in *Beloved*, Sula and the men who court her, Cholly and Pauline in the first years of their life together in *The Bluest Eye*. This comradeship does not always last, as the estrangement of Macon Dead and his wife Ruth in *Song of Solomon*, and that which arises between Cholly and Pauline illustrate.

Morrison also clearly refuses to lay the blame of cross-gender conflicts solely on men; after remarking that she is not interested in presenting heroines who are exclusively "brave and wonderful"
(McKay, 419), the novelist remarks that "some women are weak and frail and hopeless" and as an illustration, comments on the tragic fate of Hagar, Milkman's girlfriend in *Song of Solomon*. According to the novelist, the young woman who is struggling with her "predator . . . anaconda love" for Milkman (*Song of Solomon*, 138) is driven to insanity and to her death by her lack of connection with others, men in particular, and an absence of a sense of community; "Hagar does not have what Pilate had, which was a dozen years of nurturing relationship with men" (McKay, 419). Morrison's comments can be seen as an echo to the cautionary remarks she made some years ago, when answering a question on the need for a model of black feminist critique, she declared:

I don't have much to say about [the necessity to develop such a model] except that I think there is more danger in it than fruit, because any model of criticism or evaluation that excludes males from it is as hampered as any model of criticism that excludes women from it (Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", 344).

While they clearly interpret the world from a black, female perspective, Morrison's novels stand in a unique intersection of gender, culture and race confluences. Naylor's and Lorde's works force us to reflect upon the conditions that create and support sexism and more specifically heterosexism, where Marshall's, Angelou's and Schwarz-Bart's novels explore the struggles of women against racism, classism and patriarchal prejudices throughout their communities; Morrison's work re-unites all these themes through her unique craft and inspiration.

-D: The Affirmation of Self and The Community of Female Affiliation.

Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* does not present the same paradigm of negative individuation as Morrison's first novel does. Indeed, despite the hostility that Télumée encounters when at the Habitation Bellefeuille, and although she does at time question her physical appearance--remarking that "Dieu m'avait mise sur terre sans me demander si je voulais être femme, ni quelle couleur je préférais avoir" (116) --Schwarz-Bart's heroine is firmly grounded in a culture and a community in contrast to Pecola's increasing sense of alienation from herself and her people. In Schwarz-Bart's novel--as well as in *The Women of Brewster Place*, or in Morrison's description of Shalimar in *Song of Solomon* or again Marshall's portrayal of Bournehills in *The
Chosen Place. The Timeless People—the self-contained black community exists as evidence for the historical resistance—as well as the forced exclusion from the mainstream society—of the descendants of Africans against destructive forces from the past (slavery) as well as continued racism and, in the case of Fond-Zombi or Brewster Place, sexism. The Guadeloupean novelist’s text bears evidence of the heroine’s continued development of self-image, from the re-assuring awareness of others—women in particular—in the first section entitled "Présentation des miens" ("My People") to the emergence of a distinct self in the second half of the text, "Histoire de ma vie" ("The Story of My Life"). Ronnie Scharffmann writes that the text is "the story of identity triumphant through female identification [and] 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" (Scharffmann, 89). In her chapter on the emergence of female slave networks during slavery, Deborah Gray White writes that the plantation system and labor constraints developed a sense of bonding and community among slaves women: "It they seemed exceptionally strong it was partly because they often functioned in groups and derived strength from numbers" (White, 118). These economical and cultural strictures caused the slaves to "develop a consciousness grounded in their identity as females," as well as their sense of "self-reliance and self-sufficiency" (White, 120). This self-reliance is noticeable in the lineage formed by three generations of Lougandor women in Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle.

Above all, the young Guadeloupean woman is fortunate to be essentially surrounded by beings who not only acknowledge her presence and beauty, but also include her in a deeply loving gaze; the two main influences in her early years are her grandmother, Reine Sans Nom, and her first love, Elie. Reine Sans Nom takes the place of Télumée’s mother, Victoire, who disappears early on in the text, as she follows a lover to another island. Scharffmann notes that the mutual gaze of recognition that Télumée and her grandmother exchange constitutes the basis of their relationship and is "constitutive of [the young girl’s] very being and identity" (Scharffmann, 125) as a "petite nègresse irréductible, un vrai tambour à deux peaux" (Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle, 94) 14. If the young woman has a sense of following her "destinée de nègresse, de ne plus être étrangère sur la terre . . ." and of having found her "place exacte dans l’existence" (125) 15, she owes it in great part to her grandmother’s attentive and affectionate gaze that literally anchors her into reality when she feels the
temptation of insanity that hovers over the small island. This is the case when a drifter, Germain, murders Télumée's self-effacing father, l'homme Angebert; this sudden, irrational act is a reminder that insanity lies close to the surface in the minds and landscapes of the island, and that it remains a permanent threat to the fragile equilibrium of the small black communities at Fond-Zombi and elsewhere in the New World. As the narrator adds, "la folie frappe et elle assaille, et l'on tue et l'on se fait tuer [. . .] lorsque la folie antillaise se met à tournoyer dans l'air au-dessus des bourgs . . . une angoisse s'empare des hommes à l'idée de la fatalité qui plane au-dessus d'eux . . ." (38, 41).

This latent insanity keeps Schwarz-Bart's Toussine in a three-year-long reclusion and silence, in limbo between life and death; it is the same powerful force that drives Hagar in her failed murder attempt against Milkman. In the weeks following Hagar's insane act, Milkman's mother, on a visit, notices the young girl's "wilderness": "... here was the wilderness of Southside. Not the poverty or noise [. . .] but the absence of control [. . .] Here one lived knowing that at any time, anyone might do anything. Not wilderness where there was system, or the logic of lions, trees, toads, and birds, but wild wilderness where there was none" (Song of Solomon, 138).

Significantly, in Schwarz-Bart's text, Reine Sans Nom addresses her granddaughter on numerous occasions as her "petit verre de cristal," thus confirming the mirroring relationship that binds her to Télumée; this is not however a restraining, threatening type of reflexive bonding, as the one that emerges between Beloved and her mother Sethe, following the mysterious young girl's return in Morrison's novel. Furthermore, during the years of happiness that Télumée shares with Elie, the young girl finds the comfort and recognition of his love, once she gets away from the oppressive anonymity of her work at the Habitation Bellefeuille: "... nous étions sur le bord du lit et ses yeux étincelaient dans la pénombre, m'examinaient avec douceur et précaution, un peu de biais, sur les bords des paupières me semblait-il" (105).

In another remarkable instance, shortly after her master's failed attempt to seduce her, and her "strange dream" of wintry France, the young Guadeloupean experiences one of her first impulses of self-confidence, as she walks back to the familiar scenery and people at Fond-Zombi: "Et maintenant sur le chemin de Fond Zombi, j'étais une femme libre de mes deux seins et je sentais à chaque pas les yeux d'Elie contre les miens, ses pas à l'intérieur des miens . . ." (115). As Elie's
relationship with Télumée cools off, when, unemployed and overcome with self-doubt, he drifts toward the beautiful yet insincere Léaëtizia, he confronts Télumée’s anger, "les yeux perdus dans un somme" ("his eyes lost in a dream") (164). Later on, as Elie’s mind irreversibly moves towards insanity, his gaze changes again and is no longer capable of including those he once loved; he becomes a victim of his failure to connect and to see others: they in turn deny him any substantial existence: ". . . de temps en temps aussi, il jetait un regard à la dérobée, espérant un signe quelconque de l’entourage, une marque d’admiration ou de mépris” (158). As a reward for his growing sense of alienation from others, Elie only encounters indifference, not even contempt. In the difficult days that accompany Télumée’s separation from Elie and her growing recognition of his mental disorder, Reine Sans Nom remains her fast anchor, the one person in whom the young girl finds confirmation of her own existence. The grandmother has herself had to confront despair and near-madness earlier in her life, when she lost her eldest daughter and house in a terrible fire. After a long period of silence and sullenness however, she opted for life; emerging from her self-imposed retreat, she delivered Télumée’s mother Victoire. Having taken refuge at Reine’s cabin in her own moment of self-doubt, Télumée entreats the old woman with the following words: "... en ce moment-même j’ai lâché mon chagrin au fond de la rivière, et il est en train de descendre le courant [...] parle-moi de la vie, grand-mère, parle-moi de ça..." (165).

Schwarz-Bart’s novel presents an example of a successful construction of individual identity through a deliberate and conscious effort to retain a sense of female affiliation and community. As Milkman’s slow maturing towards a distinct self-awareness in Song of Solomon demonstrates, lack of a proper connection with the community can in some instances cause major problems to the characters of some of these texts. In the case of Son and Jadine in Morrison’s Tar Baby, the novelist reflects that the central question in her text is "what they felt about who they were, and what their responsibilities were in being black. The question was for each whether [Son] or [Jadine] was really a member of the tribe" (McKay, 422). This alienation from one’s community is also very strong in the case of Marshall’s Deighton Boyce in Brown Girl, Brownstones: at the end of the celebration of Gatha Steed’s wedding, the older Bajan man—who has never made it materially in the same manner as most other participants at this celebration of the Bajan community’s economic and social success—
finds himself emblematically locked out of the final dance circle while the revellers sing the ominous lines to a song that seems to announce his final fall: "'Small Island, go back where you come from [. . .] but still Deighton remained, staring with exquisite pain at their disdaining backs, transfixed by those piercing voices" (Brown Girl. Brownstones 147, 150).

-E: A Multiplicity of Mothers: Figures of Mothering and Maternal Roles

Recent works by American or Continental feminists have explored the historical, cultural and social constraints that structure what has long been referred to as the "maternal instinct." As Adrienne Rich comments in her ground-breaking study Of Woman Born, "Motherhood, in the sense of an intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child . . . is one part of female process; it is not an identity for all time" (37). Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and others have proposed that "[mothers] identify more closely with their daughters than their sons [and that] female identity is shaped primarily by the fluctuations of symbiosis and separation from the mother" (Abel et als., 10).

As a matter of fact, representations of motherhood greatly vary within the range of these texts, as opposed for instance to nineteenth-century fiction by white women that tended to write the mother out of the text (Mary Shelley, George Sand, Kate Chopin) ²¹. The mother-daughter bond is crucial for instance in Hurston's autobiography; when reminiscing upon her mother's death, the narrator writes: "She looked at me, or so I felt, to speak for her. She depended on me for a voice [. . .] I was Mama's child" (Dust Tracks on A Road, 87, 91). One of the most unconventional types of mother-children relationships can be found in Morrison's description of Eva Peace and her daughter Hannah in Sula. The Peace women's conception of motherly love is a distant, non-committal one. They are not bound by mutually dependent relationships, as the text suggests: "under Eva's distant eye, and prey to her idiosyncracies, her own children grew up stealthily" (41). As a matter of fact, the one emotion and sense of bonding that these women transmit to their children, is their gift for "manlove", their pursuit of sexual and affective gratification from one day to the next, since they "simply loved maleness for its own sake" (41), and believe that "all men [are] available [to] select from among them with a care only for their tastes" (119).
Nevertheless, the issue of motherly responsibilities and of maternal love is present throughout Sula, in particular in a poignant exchange between Hannah and her mother concerning the nature of this relationship (67). Eva Peace and her daughter Hannah are not presented as having the conventional "maternal" characteristics expected of women in their relations to their children. As Hannah, who is Sula's mother, remarks to her neighbors, "You love [your child] like I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference" (57). Sula overhears her mother and is stung into bewilderment: several critics have suggested that her later sense of rootlessness can be partially accounted for by her sense of a lack of proper mother-daughter filiation.

The expectations and constraints that are associated with motherly love—or the lack thereof—are thus conspicuous in Sula, particularly in Eva Peace's decision to immolate her son Plum. He has returned shell-shocked from the war and has been vegetating since on drugs and alcohol, in an apparent desire to return to the security of the maternal womb. His mother decides that if he cannot live a normal life, she must find a way to assuage his pain, so that he can at least "die like a man" (72). Eva's ritual-like sacrifice of her son "like an avenging deity who must sacrifice its creation in order to purify it generates contradictory feelings of shock and relief in the minds of the reader" (Spillers, "A Hateful Passion, A Lost Love", 199). In an ironic reversal of fate, Eva's daughter Hannah, is in turn accidentally killed by a fire while Sula looks on, "not because she was paralyzed but because she was interested" (78).

As Spillers remarks in her essay on Sula, the "enormous consequences of being loved or not" articulate most of the relations between the characters, male and female. Despite the unusual kind of affective interaction that takes place between the Peace women from different generations, Spillers suggests that "Hannah and Eva have been Sula's principal models" and that "they have also determined certain issues which she will live out in her own career" ("A Hateful Passion", 200). Must we therefore look in their direction for an explanation of Sula's "enigma", and what Spillers calls her "radical amorality"? Sula "lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her" (100), and certainly, Sula's "odd way of looking at things" (104) can be ascribed to her way of looking at herself and at her place in her world. One can say in fact that Sula eschews the pitfalls of
compulsive mimetism that often seems to control the interaction between the self and the other. Sula’s “difference” that remains so enigmatic to her community, results from the fact that she does not bother to yield to the rules and constraints of her environment; when she is the butt of the local black men’s scorn and malicious gossip about the "unforgivable thing" and sin, namely sleeping with white men (112), she remains unruffled: "Sula acknowledged none of their attempts at counterconjure or their gossip and seemed to need the services of nobody" (113). Furthermore, as also happens in Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place, albeit for different reasons, when Sula does not "honor" the local women’s husbands with the proper attention, "trying and discarding [their men] without any excuse [they] could swallow" (115), she incurs the women’s fury, as if her indifferent promiscuity were an insult to these women’s sense of worth. As the text suggests, one of the keys to Sula’s uniqueness and appeal is that she does not posit herself within a mirroring relationship to the world and those around her; in the narrator’s own words:

Sula was distinctly different. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life . . . There was no other that you could count on . . . there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow . . . She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for things, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments--no ego. For that reason she felt no compulsion to verify herself--be consistent with herself (Sula, 118-19).

Like Pilate Dead and Ralph Ellison’s invisible, nameless protagonist, Sula is left to create from scratch her own persona, one that does not refer to a pre-existing model of womanhood, heterosexuality or again motherhood: in a confrontation with Eva who asks her when she intends to marry, "have some babies" and "settle down", Sula retorts: "I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). Sula—as well as Pilate Dead, and to a lesser extent Nel—is thus set upon creating her own persona and sense of community, ones which are self-centered and self-defined, as opposed to being imposed by exterior pressures, as is the case for Selina in Brown Girl, Brownstones. The sense of absolute freedom generated by Morrison’s "pariah" heroine (Sula, 122) causes Audré Lorde to write of this novel that "Sula is a totally incredible book [one with which Lorde is] particularly identified . . . because of the female-outsider idea. That book is one long poem. Sula is the ultimate black female of our time, trapped in her power and in her pain" (Claudia Tate,
Another critic sees Sula as characterized by her "nubile singleness" and her "refusal of the acts and rites of maternity" which set her apart as an outsider, and consequently as one who is an "antipassionate spectator of the human scene" (Spillers, "A Hateful Passion", 200-202), who can seemingly watch her mother burn to death without any visible emotion (78). The same critic adds that Sula is one among many of Morrison’s characters who is controlled by a "radical amorality and a radical freedom" (Spillers, 202) in her refusal of a conventional "feminine" role as a mother, wife or lover. As Morrison suggests and as I will develop herafter, the key to Sula’s "oddness" can probably be traced to her being an incomplete artist, someone who lacks the shaping visions of a particular art or craft (Sula, 121). As the novelist confessed, creating this character proved to be quite a challenge: "[W]hen creating Sula, I had in mind a woman of force . . . she doesn’t stop existing after she dies . . . Her attempt to be domestic [when she meets Ajax] is the thing that makes [him] leave her because he liked her for what she was" (McKay, 254).

Sula is emblematic of what Lorde calls the "female-outsider," one who refuses to submit to the prescribed code of behavior that controls most Western societies when it comes to how women should—and should not—act and who "sets out to define her own values and her specific mode of individuation" (Tate, 115). After commenting on the fact that she did not want to paint Sula as a classic type of evil force" nor did she want to make her "freakish or repulsive," Morrison elaborates further on the challenge that her character represented for her;

She will do the kind of things that normally men do, which is why she’s so strange. She really behaves like a man. She picks up a man, drops a man, the same way a man picks up a woman, drops a woman. And that’s her thing. She’s masculine in that sense. She’s adventuresome, she trusts herself, she’s not scared, she really ain’t scared. And she is curious and will try anything . . . and that quality of masculinity . . . in a woman at that time is outrage, total outrage" (Michael Harper and Stepto, 215-27).

Barbara Christian has suggested a similarity between Morrison’s heroine and several black male heroes such as Ellison’s Invisible Man, or Wright’s Damon Cross in The Outsider: as her male counterparts do, Sula "seeks her own individuality as a means to self-fulfillment" (Black Feminist Criticism, 54). As is often the case with Morrison’s novels, the reader of Sula is left in a situation of "moral limbo", one in which "an absolute suspension of final judgment" is required (Spillers, "A
Hateful Passion", 202). As with Cholly's rape of Pecola, Sethe's murder of Beloved, or Eva's sacrifice of Plum—all acts involving parents and their offsprings—the narrator and the text itself do not pronounce a final verdict that would settle the matter once and for all. Rather, as Spillers suggests, "the reader resents the authorial manipulation that engenders such [contradictory] feelings. [Eva Peace's immolation of Plum], so violently divergent from the normal course of maternal actions and expectations, marks a subclimax" (199).

While re-affirming the importance of mothers as central figures of identity and anchoring of the self, and as a "unifying thematic motif" that directs the reader to "the importance of origins and nourishment in combating alienation and the dissolution of a stable community" (Dorothy H. Lee, "The Quest for Self", 359), Morrison like several other contemporary black women writers, deliberately questions the conventions surrounding motherhood and the expected "deceptions or allegiances of kinship" (200, Spillers), just as she questions the rules governing traditional heterosexuality.

While also focused on the life of a multi-generational family, Paule Marshall's Brown Girl, Brownstones investigates the role and meaning of mothering and of maternal love from a totally different perspective. As Mary-Helen Washington notes, Marshall's novel is an essentially tragic one; it presents a story that revolves around the "monumental tragic figure of the mother," Silla Boyce, who is a preeminent figure in the Bajan community in Brooklyn, "a pioneer . . . cutting the bush for those behind her, crushing whatever is in her way," one who is the "avatar of the community's deepest values and needs" (Washington, "Afterword", 313). The crux of the narrative depicts the complex interactions between the mother, Silla, and her daughter, Selina, who is portrayed as "the old child, the observer, the figure of redemption" (Washington, 313).

Despite all her courage and her persistence in fighting back and in not letting herself be crushed by the system, Silla becomes absorbed in the strategies of survival in a hostile, alien world. She is also drawn into a struggle for power, however minimal this power may prove to be for a migrant Caribbean woman in America. She does not hesitate, for instance, to evict one of her tenants and fellow Bajans, Suggie Skeete (who is depicted as a promiscuous, sensual woman), for being an
"undesirable" boarder. Silla's relationship with her two daughters and her husband is very different from those at work in the Peace family: Silla acts in an authoritarian manner with her two daughters, Ina and Selina, and above all, does not shy away from plotting during months to sell her husband's piece of land back in Bimshire. This plot of land had remained Deighton's main connection with the island of his youth and with the "real world," as it stands defined by this dreamy, unpractical man. In an arresting reversal of conventional roles--according to the terms of Western, capitalist patriarchies at least--Silla becomes the successful entrepreneur, while Deighton's loss of his land symbolizes for him the relinquishing of his last grip on reality.

Deighton's failure also figures as the impossible quest for an elusive sense of wholeness, the search for what James Clifford, writing on Raymond Williams and "ethnographic allegory," calls a "happier place, a lost, 'organic' moment in an edenic past and place," adding that "wholeness by definition becomes a thing of the past . . . accessible only as a fiction" (Clifford, 114). Indeed, when the Bajan man, crushed by this loss which he interprets as sheer betrayal on the part of his wife, turns to the religious vagaries of the sect of one Father Peace, Silla does not hesitate to report his illegal migrant status to the authorities. Deighton ultimately dies in unclear circumstances during his forced repatriation to Bimshire, within sight of his island.

Deighton's enigmatic disappearance and death raise the issue of the absence of strong male figures in several of these texts, and in particular, those that take place in a Caribbean setting. Discussing Schwarz-Bart's first novel and the opposition between the "natural," biological paternal figures who disappear or die--such as Jérémie and Angebert--and the abstract, yet towering presence of the white planter figure, the "père juridique" (legal father figure), Roger Toumson notes the "absence [et] silence des pères" ("the absence and silence of the fathers") in Pluie et vent sur Téhumée Miracle. Citing the example of Jérémie's being subjugated by Reine Sans Nom, or again Angebert's deference towards Victoire, the same critic adds: "les couples s'y constituent sur la base d'une inversion des rapports. L'homme n'est pas superordonné à la femme; il ne lui est pas non plus apparié, il lui est subordonné" (Toumson, 46-48). The same remark holds for Morrison's Beloved, where male characters, with the exception of the rather elusive Paul D., play a very minor role, in an interesting contrast with Morrison's other novels where male-female relationships occupy a central
Silla's disposal of Deighton's property presents the reader of Marshall's first novel with ambivalent feelings concerning the strong Bajan woman. In a key scene, the mother confronts her husband on his philosophy of life—expressing her totally materialistic conception of the world, one that sees her husband as a "piece of man"—and tells him: "You ain no real-real Bajan man. What Bajan would have his head turn by some bogus God? [. . .] 'It's not that I's avaricious or money-mad' she whispered to herself, [. . .] 'but c'dear, if you got a piece of man you want to see him make it out like the rest. You want to see yourself improve. Isn't that why people come to America?" (Brown Girl, Brownstones, 173-74). Silla's reaction of contempt towards a man who does not measure to her expectations is nurtured by a cultural context—namely the transplanted Bajan community—wherein sex-roles are rigidly defined; it is not alien either to the predicament of many new migrants to America who have no other choice but to succeed and become as American as anyone else in their new country. Silla embodies the strong materialist and acculturative drive that controls many first generation immigrants; she also expects Deighton to succeed according to the rigid societal conventions of gender roles that she has had to live under. One can also ask oneself whether Deighton's tragic death is not ultimately in keeping with his life: he pays the price of having continuously entertained a fantasy of the world—and in particular of Barbados, a re-created locus within this fantasy—rather than having accepted it as it was.

Despite this aspect of her personality which causes the mother to say of herself that "Silla ain nice," Washington asserts that "Silla is not a monster" but that, rather, she "reflects more clearly and more intensely our own struggle between innocence and guilt, our own contradictions and failures" (Washington, "Afterword", 315). One cannot help noticing, however, that Silla's qualities come out essentially in her complex relationship with her daughter Selina, whose redemption and growth of identity would be impossible without Silla's nurturing example. Washington comments that "Silla becomes comprehensible to us as Selina, the record-keeper and witness, passes from childhood innocence into maturity and experiences the adult pain . . . the grown-up black pain—of Silla's life" (315). As Selina matures, she discovers the hidden facets of her mother's personality, "the wild teenager dancing herself in a frenzy, longing for a better life, the passionate and mysterious lover, the
scorned wife..." (Washington, 315). As she reaches her decision to leave the city, on a journey that will probably take her back to her mother's native island, Selina can at last identify with the girl that her mother once was, "who had stood, alone and innocent, at the ship's rail, watching the city rise glittering with promise from the sea" (Brown Girl, Brownstone, 307).

Silla is driven by an undefinable "dark force" that distinguishes her in Selina's eyes. The young girl senses her mother as she walks home from the factory, a stern figure "amid the green and the bright-figured houses dresses of the women lounging on the benches there... every line of her strong-made body seemed to reprimand the women for their idleness and the park for its senseless summer display" (16). In opposition to her younger sister Ina, who is tyrannically pressed into submission by Silla, Selina's relationship to her mother is a highly ambivalent one, one that has still room to grow. This is most conspicuous in the very tense scene that follows Deighton's maniacal shopping spree. While Ina runs away in shock at the spectacle of her father's defeat,

Selina remained. Obscurely she knew that this was her place, that for some reason she would always remain behind with the mother... Selina's sense of retribution for her defeat at [her mother's] factory turned bitter in her mouth. For there was a part of her that always wanted the mother to win, that loved her dark strength and the tenacious lift of her body (Brown Girl, Brownstones, 133).

The reader's resistance to Silla's personality is due in part to the fact that, in a much more forceful manner than Merle Kimbona in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, or Avey Johnson in Praisesong for The Widow, Silla is made to personify the entire Bajan community: she takes on its qualities and its shortcomings, and above all, its successful socio-economic integration into North American society as it manifests itself during 'Gatha Steed's wedding extravaganza (134-150). Indeed, she "stirs both the pity and awe because she is the community. She symbolizes its power, she reflects its values, she embodies its history. Her sorrow is the sorrow of the race" (Washington, "Afterword", 316). Not only does Silla embody the moral strength of the exiled Caribbean community; she also personifies the beauty of the island women, her contemporaries and those who came before her:

She was handsome, as the women from the hills of Barbados sometimes are, a dark, disquieting beauty... which underscores their atonal speech... Silla had learned its expressions early from her mother and the other women as they paused in the cane fields and lifted their sun-blackened, enigmatic faces to the sea... They seemed to use this beauty not to attract but to stave off all that might lessen their strength" (Brown Girl, Brownstones, 135)
Whereas Deighton finds himself more and more alienated from the Bajan community, Silla symbolizes a communal identity. She is someone who exists essentially through her interactions with her people; as Selina remarks to herself, "she could never think of the mother alone. It was always the mother and the others, for they were alike—those watchful, wrathful women..." (10).

Selina finds herself caught between her mother's somber strength and beauty, and her father's carefree and warm sensuousness, allied to his totally unpractical philosophy of existence. Although these two strains coexist in her, Selina's process of maturation signifies that she will clearly have to find a compromise between materialistic realities and more spiritual aspirations. Selina's personality is more reflexive and withdrawn than her mother's, and yet she does learn to become her own woman. She is someone who has always been "listening unnoticed in the corners of rooms, absorbing culture and tradition," the "griot of [her] community" who "remains throughout the novel somewhat of an outsider" (Washington, "Afterword", 318). The tensions that control the relation between Silla and Deighton are reflected in Selina's own ambivalence of feelings towards each of them.

The young girl's feelings towards her mother vacillate throughout the novel between fury and admiration; as Jane Flax argues, a too close identification between daughter and mother can have some severe effects on the development of the child's core identity. Selina must find her own space and pace of growth in order to define an autonomous self away from her mother's towering influence and persona (Flax, 20-25). Indeed, it is only in the very last pages of Marshall's text that Selina, having come to terms with the growth of her own self, can finally accept the mother for what she is. As Washington notes, "Literature has rarely revealed so passionate a relation between mother and daughter as we see in Brown Girl, Brownstones" (321). Yet, despite Selina's violent fits of anger at her mother for letting her father fall apart and go his own way, Silla "never teaches Selina the ways of compromise nor female self-abnegation" (Washington, 321). Quite to the contrary, the mother teaches her daughter to be her own person, as well as instructing her in the endurance and the fortitude that have kept her and the Bajan people afloat in a hostile universe since the time of their forced exiles in North America. In a compelling discussion between mother and daughter that follows Selina's refusal to accept the award from the Bajan Business Association, and their ensuing bitter...
argument about Deighton's sudden death at sea, Selina finally acknowledges the debt that she owes her mother and recognizes a female affiliation to Silla: "Everybody used to call me Deighton's Selina. But they were wrong because you see, I'm truly your child. Remember how you used to talk about how you left home and came here alone as a girl of eighteen and was your own woman? I used to love hearing that and that's what I want. I want it!" (Brown Girl, Brownstones, 307). In this instance, Marshall's text offers us an example of a successful merger between mother and daughter, a resolution of their former antagonisms in the new coexistence of two equal personalities; "Silla's pained eyes searched her adamant face and after a long time, a wistfulness softened her mouth as if she somehow glimpsed in Selina the girl she had once been" (307).

In coming to terms with the necessary tensions that control people's lives and that are emblematized in the dichotomy between Deighton's and Silla's personalities, Selina finds herself as her own woman, both as the daughter of her poet father and of her materially successful mother, and ultimately, as a member of the Bajan community in Brooklyn. Susan Stanford Friedman suggests that Marshall's Brown Girl, Brownstones is a "Kunstlerroman [that] records the tension between communal identity and the search for autonomy" within the constraints of race and gender individuation (51); Selina's alienation from her cultural, historical community is slowly overcome by the example of her formidable mother, and Silla's "way with words [that] casts a net over all who come into her path" (Friedman, 50). Indeed, it is Silla who "introduces her daughter to the meaning of the communal identity" and to a sense of an "unbroken identification between herself and her mother" (51) which is a continuation of what Chodorow refers to as the "two-person relationship of infancy" (96).

Another trope of the mirroring reflection of the self appears towards the end of Marshall's novel, although this time, it suggests a conflictual image rather than a possibility of merging between self and a superimposed image; it follows a crucial scene during which Selina has to put up with the patronizing and racist remarks of a white woman who has seen her dance. Selina goes back to look at herself in a window:

She peered shyly at her reflection . . . she was seeing clearly for the first time, the image which the [white] woman and the ones like the woman saw when they looked at her . . . her dark face
must be confused in their minds with what they feared most: with the night, symbol of their ancient fears... with the heart of darkness within them and all its horror and fascination" (Brown Girl. Brownstones, 290-91).

In a comment on this parody of the Conradian metaphor of blackness, Friedman adds that "in contrast to the imago of the Lacanian mirror stage, the false self (reflected) in the mirror is not Selina's creation, but rather the cultural meaning of black womanhood that she has internalized and must destroy" (51). Selina cannot however rid herself at once of this superimposed image of herself; "she struck the reflection until the entire glass wall trembled--and still it remained, gazing at her with her own enraged and tearful aspect" (Brown Girl. Brownstones, 291). In contrast with Sula's apparent absence of a specific self-image, Selina's "false reflection" of a culturally and racially determined identity is not unlike Pecola's distorted image of herself. Selina however has the example of her mother and of a successful community to protect her from succumbing to the controlling gaze of the dominant culture as well as from yielding to the temptation of insanity that finally submerges Pecola. In Friedman's words, "the lesson of the mirror [for Selina] is the lesson of collective identity in both its alienating and transformative aspects" (51). Reaching maturity and an idiosyncratic sense of self for Selina means coming to terms both with her mother's communal strength, and identifying with this same strength, while making it a liberating rather than an enclosing force.

Instances of problematic mothering can also be found in these texts as examplified by Naylor's Cora Lee and Morrison's Ruth Dead. Cora Lee in The Women of Brewster Place never quite seems able to make out the exact number of children that she must care for. Indeed, one has the feeling that they only exist for her as long as they remain a mass of babies. Cora Lee has always been obsessed with children from her childhood days, when she could play with toy babies, and later on with "real babies" who "just seemed to be coming--always welcome until they changed..." (113). Cora Lee can only acknowledge the existence of these babies as doll-like creatures that confirm her own existence as a mother, one who wishes that they would never grow: "why couldn't they just stay like this--so soft and easy to care for?" (111). Cora Lee's obsession echoes Jane Flax's observation that for some women, "the wish to have a baby is also a wish to be a baby to redo the early developmental process with the 'good mother'' (36). Alas, Cora Lee's babies grow up and soon
join the ranks of the "wild-eyed and dumb beings" akin to the "shadows [who sometimes went back home with her at night] and would often lie about their last names or their jobs or about not having wives" (The Women of Brewster Place, 113). As is the case with Pecola, who "tortures herself because she cannot look like her doll" (Susan Gubar, "The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," 303), Cora Lee cannot make the universe of her fancy correspond to the real world in which she is trapped. Both women need the vicarious identity of the toys or dolls that they play with to define themselves in an environment that denies their existence.

Another instance of problematic maternal feelings is found in Ruth Dead's torturous relationship with her son Milkman in Song of Solomon. Ruth survives in a vacuum of stunted feelings that hold her hostage between the memory of an adored but deceased father and the very real hatred that her husband Macon Dead, expresses towards her: "... Ruth began her days stunned into stillness by her husband's contempt, and ended them wholly animated by it" (11). As is sometimes the case, the mother clings to the affection of an infant, in this case Milkman, both affectively and spiritually, as the scene where the janitor comes upon her breastfeeding her grown boy illustrates (13-14). Tragically however, while she still feeds him, Ruth cannot adequately nurture Milkman, caught as she is in her own contradictions and the haunting memories of a father too fondly loved. Milkman's true nurturer and literal birther is his aunt Pilate, to whom Ruth has to turn when her husband stops sleeping with her and threatens to make her abort and to kill her (123-25). In an interview, Morrison stressed this aspect of Pilate's persona, commenting on her "strong maternal instinct [as a] part of her other-worldliness" (McKay, 419); indeed not only does Pilate give up her life of wandering to protect and nurture Hagar, her irresolute grandchild, but she also "creates a family of women very much like that of Eva Peace" (Byerman, 202).

As Ruth confesses to her son, only Pilate's conjure interventions saved him from a terrible fate: "she saved my life. And yours, Macon. She saved yours too. She watched you like you were her own. Until your father threw her out" (125). Indeed, as the conclusion of the novel indicates, while Milkman is Ruth's biological successor, a "wished-for bond between herself and Macon, something to hold them together and reinstate their sex lives ... her single triumph" (131-33), he is above all his aunt Pilate's spiritual heir. As the novel progresses, Milkman learns to incorporate
Pilate's cross-generational wisdom and heritage that she transmits to her grand-daughter Hagar -- who cannot use it--and her daughter Reba, as well as ultimately to her nephew, in the form of the traditional song of origins that accompanies Milkman on his quest.

Rich, Chodorow, Lorde and others have insisted on the mother-daughter relationship as a crucial element of the construction of the female self. Yet, as a close reading of black literatures from the diaspora shows, the female axis of affiliation does not manifest itself exclusively in a mother-daughter direction, although this lineage remains extremely important. Schwarz-Bart’s novel, as well as the relationships between Momma and the narrator in Angelou’s I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, or again the close ties between Milkman and Pilate in Song of Solomon or those between Man Tine and the narrator in Joseph Zobel’s French Caribbean classic La Rue Cases-Nègres, all point to the centrality of cross-generational, non-conventional mothering relationships in texts written by blacks from different cultural traditions across the Americas. Since in Chodorow’s words, “mothering is most eminently a psychologically-based role,” (Chodorow, 32), nothing prevents the existence of substitute caretakers in place of a biological mother, when the latter is deceased, absent, unavailable because of professional or economic imperatives, or again uninterested in her “maternal role.” In some rare cases--as in Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow with Lebert Joseph’s mentor-like relationship to Avey Johnson as a possible substitute for mothering during her spiritual rebirth at Carriacou--the caretaking figure can be a male. One striking similarity between these texts--to which one might add Baldwin’s Go Tell It On The Mountain and Ellison’s Invisible Man for example--is the prevalence of elderly substitute maternal figures such as Reine Sans Nom, Aunt Florence in Baldwin’s first novel or Mary Rambo in Ellison’s text. As Angela Davis in Women, Sex and Class, bell hooks in Ain’t I A Woman and others have demonstrated, historical factors account for the fact that in black communities throughout the Americas kinship extends to non-relatives and that the mother figure is often the grandmother, an aunt, an elder sister, sometimes a neighbor, or again, a woman who cannot have children of her own. This flexibility of family roles is in a continuation with African cultural traits of "survival of the tribe" as well as of "oneness of being". Biological
mothers are often conspicuously absent from these texts, as with Téluémée's mother Victoire who leaves with a lover, or again when they only make brief appearances as is the case in the first half of Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*.

The heritage of slavery and the extremely harsh economic and labor conditions that prevailed for most black women until very recently in continental America, and still prevail in the Caribbean, explain the specificity of mothering in these regions. As Deborah Gray White remarks, "given the circumstances [of slavery], the responsibilities of motherhood had to be shared, and this required close female cooperation [black women consequently] developed an appreciation of one another's skills and talents" (127-28).

Similarly, after noting the very difficult living conditions that existed in the French Antilles until after World War II, novelist and critic Maryse Condé questions the supposedly innate maternal instinct of Caribbean women and remarks that "... la qualité de mère n'est pas donnée à toute femme du seul fait de son sexe. Aucune femme n'est spontanément éducatrice. Cela repose sur un ensemble de dons personnels et un accord individuel avec l'existence que les femmes dans leur ensemble ne possèdent pas d'emblée" (Condé, 42).

In her discussion of black literatures from the Americas and Africa, Bonnie Barthold notes that in black societies, "the Mother is defined by her independence, chosen or imposed, from any individual man and her relationship to her children ... Typically, the Mother is nobody's wife" (122). After giving *Pilate Dead* and Ernest Gaines's *Miss Jane Pittman* as examples of independent maternal figures in black literatures, Barthold adds that in black communities, "motherhood becomes a chosen role [and the black mother's] care of the younger generation a mythically conceived celebration of the continuity of a people" (123).

Several of these texts offer images of strong elderly women—Schwarz-Bart's *Reine Sans Nom*, Morrison's *Pilate*, Angelou's Momma in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*—and an inspiring male elder, Lebert Joseph in Marshall's *Praisesong for The Widow*. The recurrence of these elders as central figures points to the place that older relatives or neighbors occupy in traditional black communities of the Americas—and Africa for that matter—a social trait which only recent
urbanization and forced economic migrations have caused to change. Noting the scandal caused in Medallion's black community by Sula's decision to put Eva into a white old people's home, Morrison comments, stressing an essential cultural difference between African-Americans and mainstream America: "We take care of [old people] like they took care of us. Anyway, the older you get the more prestige you have. There is nothing prestigious about being young" (Bettye J. Parker, 255).

The recurring presence of older women in these texts brings to mind the concept of matriarchy which has often been used indiscriminately in sociological or cultural discussions of black societies; (as I will suggest hereafter, Naylor and several other black intellectuals have taken exception to this Eurocentric definition of gender relations in black communities from the Americas). Angelou's Momma, who runs the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store for the entire township of Stamps, Arkansas, is not only the earliest role model for Angelou's young persona in the text; she is also the literal and figurative nurturer and protector of the black community in this tiny place. She is someone who could afford to "[lend] money to Blacks and Whites alike during the Depression" (I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, 181) and was the "only Negro woman in Stamps referred to once as Mrs" (46). Her store was the "the lay center of activities in town [where] barbers sat their customers in the shade on the porch of the Store, and troubadours on their ceaseless crawlings through the South, leaned across its benches and sang their sad songs of the Brazos" (7). Whether she faces outright impudence and racial abuse on the part of some "powhitetrash" children who frequent her store, or during a visit to a local dentist who refuses to pay her back a favor from the Depression days, the grandmother retains perfect control and poise over her adversaries. The narrator lapses into a parody of a "tall-tale" when recounting the (imaginary) outcome of the grandmother's visit to the racist dentist's office:

Momma pulled herself back from being ten feet tall with eight-foot arms and said 'You're welcome for nothing, you varlet . . .'
On her way out, she waved her handkerchief at the nurse and turned her into a crocus sack of chicken feed (I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, 186).

The narrator's parody acts as a counterpoint to the grandmother's straightforward account of the incident (188) and serves to diffuse her somewhat majestic figure that permeates the text. Indeed,
despite their immense qualities, these elderly female figures have their faults: Angelou's Momma is almost fanatically opposed to the use of profanity around her (100), while Morrison's Aunt Pilate is depicted as unorganized and bohemian to a fault, in contrast to the neurotic orderliness of Macon Dead's household; this causes Milkman to think of her at first as "the queer aunt . . . whom he hated because he felt personally responsible for her ugliness, her poverty, her dirt, and her wine" (Song of Solomon, 37). As Scharffmann suggests, in Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle, the young heroine sees Reine Sans Nom as "both mythical and human, powerful and frail" (Scharffmann, 92).

All in all, these matriarchal figures appear to be human and fallible, in stark contrast with "the supreme matriarch--alone, self-sufficient and liking it that way" that Gloria Naylor describes as having "[permeated] the American consciousness to the point of influencing everything from the selling of pancakes to the structuring of welfare benefits" (Naylor, "The Black Matriarch"). In the same essay, Naylor concludes that "such a matriarch is nowhere to be found," and suggests that contemporary data on black societies and households should incite researchers to speak of a matrifocal--i.e. a household where the father is absent--rather than matriarchal organization of black families headed by women.

Angelou's Momma, although she has been married three times, lives on her own with her grandchildren Maya and Bailey; her latest husband, a Mr Murphy, only makes a fleeting appearance through Stamps, just in time for one of his former wife's "extensive Sunday dinners" (45). Although Pilate had lovers during her itinerant years, she "refused to marry the man who was eager to take her for his wife" since she "was afraid that she wouldn't be able to hide her stomach from a husband forever" (Song of Solomon, 147). Reine Sans Nom has remained single since the death of her beloved Jérémie with whom she remains in spiritual contact with the help of her conjurer friend Man Cia (Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle, 59-60). Contrary to the racist caricature of the Mammy matriarch, that has been circulated in various forms by the dominant cultures of the Americas, all these women share the same drive for survival despite their status as racially despised humans and economically exploited women who are also frequently at the mercy of sexual abuse. As Angela Davis and Adrienne Rich have shown, "the black mother's [or grandmother's, aunt's, neighbor's] 'power' as 'matriarch' is drastically limited by the bonds of racism, sexism, and poverty" (Rich, Of
Indeed, as long as a black woman--or any other woman who is part of a culturally, racially or economically oppressed group for that matter--has to head alone a family and struggle to protect, feed and educate her children, it seems totally irrelevant to speak of such a woman's "power" or independence.

Although Télumée finds renewed nurturance in her grandmother and, later on, in the community of female lineage of which she has become a part, she has been deprived of a sense of biological motherhood, not unlike Pecola after her rejection by Pauline, or as is the case also with Angelou's young persona during her years spent at Stamps with her grandmother.

Interestingly, Télumée is let go by her mother Victoire at the time when the young girl is becoming a woman, and a potential rival for her mother, creating thus the conditions for a delayed Oedipal conflict; (one finds a parallel phenomenon in the tense relationship between Angelou's Maya and her elusive and very sensuous mother). Despite the fact that she does find her place within a female lineage of affiliation, Télumée never bears children and remains, in Rich's words, an "unchiled woman" (Rich, 252). As a matter of fact, the only child she ever becomes involved with, once an adult, is Sonore, a frail young girl who is given away to Télumée by a mother already burdened by too many children. Sonore's irruption in Télumée's life provokes a physical reaction in Schwarz-Bart's protagonist:

Je me mis à songer, considérant mes entrailles qui n'avaient pas fructifié, le ciel couleur de plomb, l'affolement de cette femme, et lui prenant l'enfant des mains, je sentis remuer en moi quelque chose d'inaudible et d'oublié depuis bien longtemps et c'était la vie . . . Sonore était restée à mes côtés, mon surveun [. . .] Je m'étais mise à reprendre . . .(Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle, 227) *.

Besides the physiological or accidental causes that explain the absence of maternal reproduction, the history of black communities in the New World is rife with accounts of slave women deliberately refusing to give birth to future slaves, and subsequently having recourse to abortions, and other forms of infanticide. Morrison's Beloved is a recent literary illustration of an ancient practice that started from the moment that a slave woman set foot on board a slaveship.
Where childlessness was viewed in traditional African societies as a disgrace and the worst possible thing that could happen to an African woman, female slaves—who were often excellent caretakers of their masters’ children—sometimes preferred to kill their children than to rear them into bondage. As historians of the slavery period have demonstrated, common use was made of advertisements announcing the sale of female slaves in the following terms: “breeding-slaves,” or again slaves in “child-bearing period,” and “breeding period.” Besides positing a reification of the female body, these terms clearly stressed the commercial value of black women who were of reproductive age. Occasionally, the slavemasters would even offer rewards to those women—or men—who accepted to be used as breeders. The plight of barren women was therefore particularly severe in a system where women were merely considered as potential breeders of additional chattel labor at the discretion of the planters’ or overseers’ whim.

Although some female slaves saw pregnancy as a means of obtaining a few meager advantages, “breeding was oppressive to all fertile black slave women” (Chodorow, 41). In his study on Slavery and Social Death, Orlando Patterson notes that in Jamaica during slavery, “not only was the mortality rate abnormally high, but more extraordinarily, slave women absolutely refused to reproduce—partly out of despair and outrage, as a form of gynecological revolt against the system, and to a lesser extent because of peculiar lactation practices” (133). When not for historical or protective reasons, black women often felt a great ambivalence when confronted with the possibility of giving birth to future slaves; shortly after she discovers Sonore’s disappearance, Télumée reflects that “[l]y a le temps de porter un enfant, il y a le temps de l’accouchement, il y a le temps où on le voit grandir, devenir pareil à un bambou au vent, et comment s’appelle le temps qui vient ensuite? . . . C’est le temps de la consolation” (Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle, 235). In her own study on slavery, Angela Davis underlines the predicament of slave women by writing that abortion was not for them “a stepping-stone towards freedom,” but an act of desperation, caused by the oppression of slavery (Davis, 204).

In the childless Guadeloupean woman’s case, becoming a substitute mother results in a failure, since her adopted Sonore is lured away by the deranged Ange Médard. In her study of female authors from the French Caribbean, Maryse Condé suggests that the recurrent theme of
childless women in these francophone literatures is not accidental, but rather that it reflects upon the
tensions that control their female authors' lives and their literary creations. These tensions are not
unlike the "profound anxiety about biological motherhood" that critic Valerie Smith reads in Alice
Walker's "enthusiastic pursuit of Hurston as a literary foremother" (V. Smith, "Black Feminist
Theory", 49); Condé notes:

On admettra que ce refus de la maternité n'est pas le fruit du hasard. Avec
ensemble, les femmes écrivains venues d'horizons si divers s'insurgent contre les
images véhiculées par l'oralité et qui imprègnent si puissamment toute la société.
Depuis des générations, les femmes aux Antilles assument une multiplicité de rôles,
assurent l'entretien et l'éducation de leur nichée au détriment de leurs joies
personnelles . . .

Le rejet de la maternité peut aussi s'entendre non seulement comme le rejet
inconscient ou conscient des images traditionelles et dominantes, mais comme une
mise en demeure adressée à l'homme qui trouvait jusqu'ici dans l'abnégation de sa
compagne des raisons de persévérer dans certaines attitudes (Condé, 46-47) .

Condé draws our attention to the contrast between the tropes used by francophone women authors
who, according to the critic, remain "prisonnières des images du passé et accordent à leur mère une
place prépondérante," and the absence of real maternity in most of these authors' private
existences. The Guadeloupean critic concludes her analysis of the representations of maternity in
francophone Caribbean literatures with the abrupt comment that "volontairement narcissistes, les
femmes écrivains ne se préoccupent que d'elles-mêmes et de leurs ascendances, sans songer à
l'héritage qu'elles laissent" (46). Such a judgment must be modified when one thinks of the critical
role that "unchilded" women have played in all societies despite the severe prejudices under which
they fell; this is the case with many artists and creators whom Rich refers to as evidence that
"[m]any of the great mothers have not been biological" (Rich, 252). One can cite, among others,
Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, Simone de Beauvoir, Camille
Claudel, and Frieda Kahlo. If one considers black societies from the Americas, it is striking that
several notorious female artists, particularly blues or religious singers, either never married or never
had children, for a number of reasons which had to do with personal beliefs as well as with
economic and professional choices: this was the case with Bessie Smith, Billie Holliday, Mahalia
Jackson, among many others. Rather than establishing rigid distinctions, it is preferable to conclude
with Rich, speaking for women, that "we are, none of us, 'either' mothers or daughters; to our
amazement, confusion, and greater complexity, we are both" (Rich, 253). The trope of "the woman in us" must not be restricted however merely to females; as Lorde, Sedgwick and other critics writing on sexual politics have shown us, the feminine, and as it were, mothering urge exists in all of us, albeit usually at a totally repressed level of awareness. Audre Lorde declares during an interview with Adrienne Rich that:

The Black mother who is the poet exists in every one of us [males and females] . . . The possible shapes of what has not been before exists only in that back place, where we keep those unnamed, untamed longings for something different and beyond what is now called possible . . . but we have been taught to deny those fruitful areas of ourselves. I personally believe that the Black mother exists more in women; yet she is the name for a humanity that men are not without. But they have taken position against that piece of themselves . . . a position throughout time" (Lorde, Sister Outsider, 100-01).

-G: Same-sex identification and bonding: Homosexuality and Homophobia.

Any investigation of the constructs of sexual politics must explore the configurations of the "feminine" and the "masculine" in any given male or female self. Homosexuality--male or female--symbolizes in a crucial mode the confluences and tensions of these feminine and masculine constructs within, as it were, the frame of a "neutral ground" of sexuality. Homophobia is another aspect of denial of the other's--or of one's own--self that is directly connected with sexism, in particular those homophobic attitudes directed against women whose lifestyles isolate them from the mainstream. It is remarkable to note that whereas homosexuality is conspicuously absent from most of male-authored black literature from the Americas--except in its most cliché, hostile representations as in LeRoi Jones'/Imamu Baraka's The Toilet or in Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice, and with the notable exception of the works of James Baldwin and Samuel Delany--it does constitute an important theme of the literature written by black female authors. As a matter of fact, with the exception of Simone Schwarz-Bart, all of the authors in this study have dealt with relationships that can be characterized as either openly or latently homoerotic or homosocial, according to the case; these relationships occur between both females and males.

Friendship between women is an area which has not been properly investigated until recently. Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde and others have written quite at length on this rich topic, and
the necessity to re-assess the signification of intense bonds between women that have generally been
seen as non-sexual; Rich declares that women "need a lot more documentation about what actually
happened. I think we can also imagine it because we know it happened. We know it happened. We
know it out of our own lives." ("An Interview With Barbara Smith", 39). Gloria Joseph notes in
commenting on Rich's remarks that "the question must be raised of what happens when there is the
desire on the part of women to love sexually, to fondle, to caress, and to spend inordinate amount of
time together . . . The erotic feelings and expressions [of close childhood friendships and close-knit
adult friendships] have had to be 'put on hold' or indulged in and not named" (Common Differences,
195).

Speaking of the urge for same-sex closeness and intimacy that binds humans, and in
particular black women, Morrison declares: "We read about Ajax and Achilles willing to die for each
other, but very little about the friendship of women, and them having respect for each other, like it's
something new. But Black women have always had that, they have always been emotional life
supports for each other" (Washington, Midnight Birds, xvi). Indeed, one of the best examples of
female bonding which does leave open the discussion of the possible convergence between a platonic-
type friendship and an erotic one is found in the friendship between Sula and Nel in Sula. This
relationship has in fact spurred an intense debate among feminists, and in particular lesbian feminists,
as to its exact nature. It seems difficult to follow Barbara Smith in her defense of a strictly lesbian
reading of the text, in Smith's words, "... not because [in Sula] women are 'lovers,' but because
they are the central figures, are positively portrayed and have pivotal relationships with one another"
and that their friendship is "suffused from the start with an erotic romanticism" ("Towards A Black
Feminist Criticism", 175). One should rather call for, with Deborah McDowell "a firmer definition of
lesbianism and lesbian literature" while agreeing that in such an ambiguous case "reading Sula solely
from a lesbian perspective overlooks the novel's density and complexity" (McDowell, "New
Directions for Black Feminist Criticism", 190).

It remains clear, nonetheless, that the sense of bonding that emerges from the novel clearly
calls into question traditional patriarchal and heterosexist definitions of same-sex relationships. From
the beginning, the two women's friendship evolves under the acute sense of their vulnerable
difference and their knowledge that "they were neither white nor male . . . all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them" and that they would have to "set about creating something else to be" (52), not unlike gays and lesbians who have to establish types of bonding outside all existing models.

Nel's and Sula's meeting also answers their mutual wish to find another to dream their adolescent dreams along with, to find in "[someone'] eyes the intimacy they were looking for" (51-52). Furthermore, although both engage in heterosexual relationships, the two women at different times in their lives realize that something is missing from these encounters. Upon her return to her hometown, while reflecting on the years of wandering that have taken her away from Medallion, Sula realizes that she has not found the comfort she was seeking despite the many liaisons she has had:

The men who took her to one or another of these places had merged into one large personality: the same language of love, the same entertainments of love, the same coolings of love . . . They taught her nothing but love tricks, shared nothing but worry, gave nothing but money. She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman (Sula, 121)

It takes Nel much longer to discover the depth of her bonding with her friend; when Sula comes back to Medallion, she discovers that Nel has been re-claimed by the rules and institutions of patriarchy. Where the two friends once shared Sula's vision of the "slant of life that makes it possible to stretch life to its limits," Nel, in marrying Jude and adopting a conventional lifestyle—in Sula's mind at least—has become like "one of the spiders whose only thought was the next rung of the webb . . . more terrified of the free fall than the snake's breath below" (120). There is no doubt for Sula that her longtime friend has bought into the dominant, oppressive ideology that causes Nel to tell a bed-ridden Sula, "You can't do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man" (142).

Not unlike the women at Brewster Place when they confront Lorraine and Theresa, or the other women of Medallion who are jealous and afraid of Sula's renewed sense of uncommitted freedom, Nel cannot imagine that a woman can be both married and have retained her own autonomy, or that she can be her own woman without necessarily "acting like a man". Nel has in fact internalized the terms of exchange which Structuralist anthropologists after Lévi-Strauss have designated as the operating constructs that control the interactions between men and women in most societies. To use terms developed by Hélène Cixous in an interview with Verena Conley on the
conditions of a "feminine libidinal economy," one can oppose Sula's "supple" relation to property, one that "can stand separation and detachment," and consequently, "the other's freedom," to Nel's much more rigid conception of her relation to property (i.e. her conjugal situation) which is one of rigid appropriation. To quote Cixous, Sula comes closest to a "feminine libidinal economy, one which tolerates the comings and goings, the movements, the écart (space, interval, gap)" (Conley, 57). Nel has a possessive and accumulative conception of love, one that is summed up in her reproachful remark to Sula about men: "They worth keeping, Sula" (143). The remarkable irony is of course that Nel loses Jude to Sula, while Sula, who for once has met her match in the devil-may-care, adventurous Ajax, becomes momentarily intrigued by the possibility of possessiveness and monogamy.

The bonding between Nel and Sula reverses in an arresting manner the traditional patriarchal polarity between two competitive males and one female. In Morrison's case however, the triangular relationship does not operate so much out of a keen rivalry as out of a sense of profound lack on the part of the two women; the most unbearable aspect of Nel's loss of Jude is not so much that she does not own him anymore, or that she has lost him to Sula, but rather, that she has also lost Sula and can no longer confide in her, as she would before. At this point, the text operates an arresting slippage from the affective to the physical, and from the male lover to the female "homegirl":

That was too much. To lose Jude and not to have Sula to talk about it because it was Sula that he had left her for [. . .] now her thighs were truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart and both of them who left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away (Sula, 110-11).

Although nothing in the text up to this point indicates a conscious erotic attraction between the two friends, this passage does seem to point to a circumlocutory exchange between Nel and Sula, as if Jude's love and body were missed by Nel after all only because they had also become Sula's. Sula, for her part, professes that love and therefore men, can only be shared; she never imagines that by taking Jude from Nel she might jeopardize her friendship with the young woman.

In her depiction of this profoundly moving and unsettling relationship, Morrison deliberately interrogates the assumptions and limitations that one usually assigns to heterosexual types of bonding: how far does friendship have to go before it becomes love, albeit one of a platonic nature? Why is
it, that even when they attempt to do so, lovers rarely become companions and vice-versa? Such are some of the questions that Nel meditates long after Sula's death, once that she has become an elderly mother, who ever since the day that Jude had walked off with Sula "had pinned herself into a tiny life" (165). Only when she walks home from old Eva's burial does Nel finally piece the parts of her life together, and understand the exact equation that Jude and Sula held in her life; in the poignant last sentences of the novel, Nel reaches a fuller knowledge of the meaning of her bonding with Sula: "All that time, all that time I thought I was missing Jude. And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. 'We was girls together,' she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl!" (174). The novelist explicates her choice of subject with these words:

... what I was trying to say in Sula, when Nel discovered that it was not her husband that she had missed all those years, but her friend Sula. Because when you don't have a woman to talk to, really talk to, whether it be an aunt or a sister or a friend, that is the real loneliness. That is devastating. And it is the same with men needing the company of other men (Paula Giddings, "The Triumphant Song of Toni Morrison", 30).

The emergence of a discourse on female social and/or erotic bonding has been paralleled by a growing awareness of the existence of a blatant homophobia present in social, cultural and ideological constructs that articulate Western societies and the subcultures that participate in these societies. If one defines homophobia as an irrational fear of male or female homosexuals, an anxiety that barely tolerates their "difference" while expecting them to be invisible, it is possible to distinguish some interesting confluences with the grudging place which was--at best--accorded blacks in American society or colonial societies in the Caribbean, as second-class citizens and invisible men and women. It would however be perilous to attempt to draw too rigid a parallel between the situation of lesbians and gay males in the Americas and that of the black population in general; there are enormous social and class differences between the experiences of oppression of a middle-class white male homosexual who is a well-paid professional in a big city, and the condition of an African-American female factory-worker or Caribbean field-hand, whether she be homosexual or heterosexual. Indeed, as Eve Sedgwick notes, "the first great heuristic breakthrough of feminist thought [has been] the long, painful realization, not that all oppressions are congruent, but that they are differently structured and so must intersect in complex embodiments" ("Across Gender, Across
Nevertheless, the reader must interrogate the recurrence of the theme of—essentially female—homosexuality in these texts, and the intersection between lesbianism and womanhood that they seem to point to. The recurrence of this theme is all the more noticeable since as Gloria I. Joseph remarks, "the fact and idea of homosexuality among women as an issue in the sexual socialization of Black women is a story with silences and denials as its most salient features. Female homosexuals . . . were viewed as 'something that wasn't supposed to be'" (Joseph and Lewis, Eds., 189). The ludicrous paradox that resulted from the denial of the reality of female homosexuality was that young girls--black and white--were actually warned to "stay away" from the dangers of something which was not supposed to exist. The homophobic myth of the homosexual child-molester is illustrated in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* when Theresa, a lesbian, helps a little girl who has fallen from her skates and cleans her wound; no sooner has she done so that the child's mother rushes out and grabs the child, "her voice just half an octave too high," as she asks Theresa, panick-stricken: "What are you doing to her?" (157).

Indeed, Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* presents the most fully-realized discussion of lesbianism among these novels, in particular in the penultimate piece entitled "The Two". Lorraine and her lover Theresa move into Brewster Place from nearby black bourgeois Linden Hills upon Lorraine's urging, as a result of what she senses to have been her former neighbors' intolerant prying; yet, the welcome at Brewster Place is hardly warmer than that of other environments. Rather, its inhabitants maintain a cautious observing stance, one that becomes more and more reticent with time; furthermore, while expressing the heterosexual women's fears of competition from "the two," the community's final satisfaction delineates the self-imposed demands that a patriarchal social system puts upon women: "... when no wild music or drunken friends careened out of the corner buildings on weekends, and especially when no slightly eager husbands were encouraged to linger around that first-floor apartment and run errands for them, a suspended sigh of relief floated around the two" (129). Ironically, the lesbians' polite indifference towards the rules of heterosexual courtship are resented by the other women as an affront to their own vulnerable status as second-class individuals:

... the two in 312 were that way. And they seemed like such nice girls. Their regular exits and entrances to the block were viewed with a jaundiced eye. The quiet that rested around their door on the weekends hinted all sorts of secret rituals,
and their friendly indifference to the men on the street was an insult to the women as brazen flaunting of unnatural ways" (The Women of Brewster Place, 131).

Yet, despite all their discretion and smiles, there soon appears to be something "too nice" about the two women that fuels the homophobic gossip of the people of Brewster Place, "supported by the sheer weight of their numbers and comforted by the woven barrier that kept them protected from the yellow mist that enshrouded the two as they came and went on Brewster Place" (132). Whatever they do, the two lovers find themselves in an impossible situation: were they perceived as heterosexual, they would be seen as a permanent threat to the other women in the neighborhood; yet, if recognized as homosexual, they are looked upon as perverted freaks. In an important essay on lesbianism in black literature—or rather what Bonnie Zimmermann prefers to call "what has never been"—Barbara Christian re-affirms the importance of the theme of lesbianism in recent literature by Afro-American women writers; she notes that beside Naylor’s first novel, Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, Lorde’s Zami, and Ntozake Shange’s Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo all "refute the falseness and one-dimensional aspects of the stereotypes [concerning the black lesbian as] not so much a woman as a defective man, a description that has sometimes been applied to any negroid-looking or uppity-acting black woman" (Christian, Black Feminist Criticism, 190-91).

One can indeed wonder whether part of the hostility directed at female homosexuals who were depicted as wanting to "act as a man" is not the result of a cultural prohibition within Western societies (and also African-American society) "against usurping the prerogatives or the appearance of the male" (Joseph, 191). The "closeted" homosexuals’ repression and denial of their identity and the deliberate blindness on the part of society concerning "what has never been" has resulted in a silenced literary past, one that has been buried deep—not unlike early black texts—and which only painstaking efforts and unbiased readings can attempt to recover. This has been recently the case with Gloria T. Hull’s “recovery” of the works of black author Angelina Weld Grimké, one of the first known black lesbian writers.

In the essay mentioned previously, Christian goes on to analyze the process through which Lorraine and Theresa in The Women of Brewster Place are denied any real existence at Brewster, isolated as they are from an organized lesbian community:

Naylor’s use of the word 'nice' takes on precious irony when the community decides that the two women are lesbians . . . the community cannot claim that they
are ugly, mannish, or man-haters. Naylor underscores how denigrating stereotypes are by having the people refer to the two women as ‘the lighter skinny one’ and the ‘short dark one,’ their appearances being their means of identification rather than their names. Not until the two move inside their apartment and speak to each other do they become Loraine and Theresa, distinctive persons with names” (Christian, 191).

In a pathetic trope of displaced prejudice, the very people who are the victims of racial and sexist oppression from the larger society are the first ones to ostracize the two lovers out of ignorance and fear of what they do not understand. Mattie Michael is one of the very few people in the community who stops to think about the meaning of the two lovers’ relationship, during a conversation with her neighbor Etta:

‘But I’ve loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man’ Mattie was pondering. ‘And there been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did.’

[...]

‘Maybe it’s not so different,’ Mattie aid, almost to herself. ‘Maybe that’s why some women get so riled up about it,’ cause they know deep down it’s not so different after all’ (The Women of Brewster Place, 141).

As is the case with the trauma of racial self-hatred, the enduring denial of one’s erotic and affective preferences generates self-doubt and self-destructive feelings in the minds of lesbians and gay males: this is clearly the case with Naylor’s Lorraine who has internalized a lot of the homophobic prejudices that regularly confront her both at Brewster Place and in the larger world. She is above all unreasonably concerned about the community’s approval of her as a person, and of what “they”—a word that rings continuously in her speech—will think of her. Theresa on the other hand has little patience for other people’s bigotry and for “a bunch of ignorant niggers with the cotton still under their fingernails because of you and your theys. They knew something in Linden Hills, so I gave up an apartment for you that I’d been in for the last four years” (134).

Constant self-disapproval of one’s lifestyle, and the need to justify oneself in the eyes of others is necessarily very taxing on the two lovers’ relationship; Theresa is both attracted and exasperated by Lorraine’s lack of self-confidence:

The very softness that had at first attracted her to Lorraine was now a frequent cause for irritation . . . Theresa hadn’t known that this softness filled Lorraine up to the very middle and that she would bend at the slightest pressure, would be constantly seeking to surround herself with the comfort of everyone’s goodwill, and would shrivel up at the least touch of disapproval (The Women of Brewster Place, 135).
In an echo to Pecola’s befriending of Soaphead Church, the only outsider with whom Lorraine is able to establish any kind of normal relationship is an old janitor, Ben, a drunkard, who drinks away his sorrow over a departed wife and daughter; in a moment of cruel irony, Lorraine, who continually dismisses her own sexual “difference” claims that she doesn’t “feel any different from anybody else in the world” when she is with Ben, an equally ostracized person.

Lorraine’s atrocious gang-rape by a group of young thugs reaffirms the limited space that is allowed women, and particularly black women, in a masculinist society. It is also a chilling reminder of the constant threat and reality of what is commonly known as “fag/dyke-bashing,” one aspect of sexist aggression that is only starting to be regularly reported and addressed in Western societies. There is indeed literally no room for defenseless women, let alone gay males and lesbians, in a world in which, according to Theresa’s words, “as long as they [homophobic heterosexuals] own the whole damn world, it’s them and us, sister–them and us” (166).

Lorraine’s rape and murder repeats Cholly’s rape of Pecola, or Germain’s crazed murder of l’homme Angebert in Schwarz-Bart’s novel; once again, economic and racist oppression causes victims to become the oppressors and killers of their own kin, men and women who happen to be equally discriminated against, because of sexism or of homophobia. Such is the case in The Women of Brewster Place with C.C. Baker and his friends on the block, destitute young black males who "continually surname each other Man and clutched at their crotches". Not only is C.C. highly insecure concerning his manhood, but someone like Lorraine proves to be too great a challenge to his sexist frame of mind: "He knew of only one way to deal with women other than his mother [by sexually appropriating them]; indeed, "the thought of any woman who lay beyond the length of [his fly's] power was a threat" (162). Tragically, both Lorraine and her male aggressors suffer from a similar lack of a positive self-image, as the text suggests in its mention of the "million nonreflective mirrors in the steam" of which these troubled youths would be "baptized" (169). Lorraine’s brutal realization of the threat that looms ahead of her is not so much presented as the indictment of a sole group of unemployed, young black male teenagers; rather, the author clearly wants to bring our attention to the fact that these young thugs are emblematic of much deeper, more vicious impulses and frustrations that regulate the lives of the disenfranchized and ostracized peoples in modern
societies:

[Lorraine] turned to run in the direction of the formless thuds behind her. She hadn't really seen them so they weren't there. The four bodies that now linked themselves across the alley hit her conscious mind like a fist and she cried out, startled . . . she had stepped into the thin strip of earth that they claimed their own. Bound by the last building on Brewster and a brick wall, they reigned in that unlit alley like dwarfed warrior-like kings. Born with the appendages of power, circumcised by a guillotine, and baptized with the steam from a million nonreflective mirrors [my emphasis], these young men wouldn't be called upon to thrust a bayonet into an Asian farmer, target a torpedo, scatter their iron seed from a B-52 into the wound of the earth [. . .] they only had that three-hundred foot alley to serve them as stateroom, armored tank, and executioner's chamber. So Lorraine found herself, on her knees, surrounded by the most dangerous species in existence—human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide (The Women of Brewster Place, 169-70).

The horrific absurdity of a universe where equally victimized people set up roles of "they" and "us" appears in the very last paragraphs of "The Two" when an atrociously maimed Lorraine mistakenly confuses old Ben with one of her aggressors and brutally kills the old man with a brick in what she imagines to be an act of self-defense. Not only does the young lesbian succumb to the hatred and violence of the world of "theys" that has so obsessed her during her lifetime; out of a literal and figurative—blurring of her own image and of that of others around her, she ultimately kills Ben, the only person besides Theresa, who has reached out to her out of his very own pain and social marginalization.

The common homophobic reticence to discuss the "unspeakable" is conspicuous in Marshall's The Chosen Place, The Timeless People where Merle Kimbona's past, and in particular her years spent in England, long remain shrouded in mystery, until she eventually opens up in a conversation with Saul, on the exact nature of her relationship with her English friend. Hortense Spillers seems to doubt the exact nature of this friendship and dismisses it with the statement that "the relationship between Merle and her London patroness . . . is not to my mind, a major thematic issue in the novel," before adding that "it is not absolutely certain that their encounter is sexual, but I assume that it is and that the ambiguity concerning it in Merle's mind is intended to show her ambivalence along a number of stress points" (Spillers, "Chosen Place, Timeless People", note 6, 173).

Spillers's usually insightful critical reading seems to have overlooked the fact that Merle's words leave very little doubt as to the erotic dimension of this relationship. Despite its intimacy
however, this affair bears very little resemblance to that between Lorraine and Theresa. Merle's involvement develops within the stifling confines of a strict hierarchy of class, race and social barriers; speaking of her former friend, Merle says:

She was much older than the rest of us and the one with the money. Her family was one of those upper class types you hear of over there [in England] who don't seem to mind having produced a degenerate or two and they gave her whatever she wanted. She mostly used the money to buy foolish people like me. She collected people the way someone else might paintings or books, the bitch (The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, 328).

Merle is still clearly bitter about this entire episode of her life as the kept friend of a wealthy white woman, although she never actually uses the term lesbian to define the relationship. She is equally angry against those who will not easily forgive the ones who have strayed out of the paths of what society defines as normalcy. This unforgiving attitude is symbolized by Ketu, the African man whom she dates after having finally broken up with her English friend; after he has been informed of the exact nature of their liaison by the jealous English woman, Ketu rejects Merle as unworthy of him and of his love. In Merle's own words,

I tried explaining of course, over and over again. But it was of no use. He couldn't understand any of it. If it had been a man, he might have felt different. But carrying on with some woman! Taking money from her! . . . I stood for the worst that could happen to those of us who came to places like England and allowed ourselves to be corrupted. I wasn't Merle to him anymore, a person, his wife, a mother of his child, but the very thing he had tried to avoid all his years there (The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, 334).

One can assuredly read this passage in the light of Chikwenye O. Ogunyemi's interpretation of the relationship between the two women according to colonialist, power-related terms. Ogunyemi writes that Merle's white lover is an emblem of Britain that "in a symbolic, neocolonialist move, sets the African husband and the West Indian wife against each other, recklessly and treacherously destroying the budding relationship between black people in Africa and the diaspora; she has economic control, and her tactics are to divide and rule" (Ogunyemi, 71).

Yet, if one takes into account the implications of latent homophobia in most cultures, and particularly in patriarchally-defined ones, it is impossible not to realize that in Ketu's eyes, Merle is guilty for more than one reason: she has betrayed the conventional limits of a woman's role, therefore usurping male prerogatives; secondly, she has betrayed her responsibility as a member of the race while in "enemy territory," by not only being promiscuous but allowing a white woman to
corrupt her; she is consequently unredeemable in the African man's eyes.

If Merle seems lost to the race for Ketu, she finds hardly more understanding on the part of Saul; once she has made her confession to the American scientist, he can only express paternalistic skepticism: "... for some reason, probably my male arrogance, I've never been able to take that kind of thing between women very seriously" (327). It is a rather bitter irony that Merle's uprighteous condemnation of her English friend's manipulation of her—an outrage that is not devoid of some homophobic undertones—should meet with such open rejection or intolerance on the part of her male lovers. Marshall's further treatment of homosexuality, again in a negative mode, can also be found in a few allusions to a male character in Brown Girl, Brownstones: during a meeting of the Bajan Association, Selina, "alone with her confusion, despair and savage thoughts," notices the expressions of the other youngsters, a "prim, pious, pretentious pack . . . No boy's hand had ever gained access to those breasts or succeeded in prying apart those clenched knees. Her cold glance swept the young men: Queers!" (226). While Selina's confusion could be put on the account of the tensions between the sexual socialization of young Bajan women of her age-group and her first erotic impulses, her comments about a young man, Julian Hurley, as "that fairy," and someone who in the narrator's words, had his "sly eye on her" while his "effeminate hand [hailed] her" (227) point to a clearly homophobic perception of men and women who do not follow the pre-ordained gender roles assigned to them by a masculinist society in both of Marshall's texts. Ironically, it is the "desexualized" person—according to heterosexist definitions—namely the homosexual boy, who is the one perceived by Selina to be making sexual overtures to her.

The only developed male homosexual relationship that appears in any of these texts can be found in Naylor's Linden Hills. A subplot within the novel depicts the last days that Winston Alcott, who is about to marry, spends with his former lover David. Naylor's text is as much an empathetic discussion of homosexuality and a deconstruction of the motives behind homophobia as it is an analysis of the economical, social and cultural factors that structure the institution of marriage. On their way to the ceremony, the bridegroom and his party are reminded by Luther Nedeed that "No one's been able to make it down to Tupelo Drive without a stable life and a family" (75); a few months earlier, Winston's father, upon receiving an anonymous letter insinuating that his son was
gay, had instructed Winston in the following terms: "Remember who you are and where you are. A law firm like Farragut and Conway would kick you out tomorrow if you sneezed wrong. So do you think a black man can afford to have these types of rumors hanging over his head?" (77).

Interestingly, Naylor depicts Winston's lover, David, in a situation not unlike that of one woman abandoned for another by an irresolute man who intends to retain full control over the lives and emotions of those he has involved himself with and ultimately shattered. In their last stormy discussion before his lover decides to go ahead with his plans to marry, David confronts Winston who has repeatedly assured him that his wife-to-be "doesn't count and you know it" and that "she can't touch what we have between us" (76, 79). David denounces Winston's self-hatred and fear of living openly as a gay man--("I can't live with you. Not in Linden Hills. That would be suicide, and you know it") (78)--and his resolution to conform to the expectations of heterosexism that he perceives as a sign of cowardice by remarking to his lover: "They made you a good son, a promising young lawyer, and now they've made you ashamed of what you are. You can go ahead and run from it. But don't expect me to run with you" (80). The estranged lover concludes his remarks with words which emphasize the gender-roles that Winston, as a "reluctant homosexual," has identified with throughout his relationship with David: ". . . since I can't be your wife, I won't be your whore" (80).

In this instance, the pressure felt by Winston to conform to heterosexist rules has clear economic undertones; in the milieu which the young black man envisions for his future professional and social success, there just would be no place for an openly gay person. In the same way, when thinking of David, "this man [who] gave him his center," he knows that "the world had given him no words--and ultimately no way--with which to cherish" what he has experienced (80). Conversely, economic gratifications reward the "reformed" homosexual; at the end of the wedding banquet, Luther Nededd announces to the newly married couple that since Winston "has taken the step which will insure the stability and growth of Linden Hills," he has decided to present him with "a mortgage on Tupelo Drive" (86-87). Winston's re-integration into the economy of heterosexual lifestyles--at the full expense of the feelings and happiness of his wife-to-be who is the victim of this pathetic situation--brings him therefore full social and financial recognition and status. His ultimate "success" is
symbolized by his accession to property at Tupelo Drive, the "black bourgeois" status neighborhood. If for no other reason, by securing reproduction of the species, heterosexuality is seen as a viable, profit-making way of life from an economic perspective, while the traditional yet biased vision of homosexuality as an anti-family, anti-children lifestyle supports the idea that gays and lesbians are not reliable economic agents.

Fear of homosexuality can also be explained by ignorance and confusion. Such is the case with the narrator in Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*; one of the books that the young protagonist reads is *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe-Hall, a landmark work in early lesbian literature. Still almost a child, the young narrator cannot distinguish between her natural physiological growth and the fantasies that she has assimilated from various sources:

> For months, the book was both a treat and a threat. It allowed me to see a little of the mysterious world of the pervert . . . I was certain that I didn't know any perverts . . . true freaks, the 'women lovers' captured yet strained my imagination. They were, according to the book, disowned by their families, snubbed by their friends and ostracized from every society (*I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, 266).

As a result of her mistaken belief that lesbianism is a biological condition, and her subsequent understanding that "'lesbian' was synonymous with hermaphrodite," Angelou's narrator's confused mind sways between a "bleeding heart for the downtrodden misunderstood lesbians" (266), and an irrational fear that something abnormal might have occurred to her body, since it does not seem to manifest the usual physiological transformations that one would expect in a sixteen-year-old girl of a few decades ago. Angelou's persona finally goes to her mother to find the consolation she needs that all is well with her and that she is not growing into a lesbian; her mother gives her straightforward answers concerning female sexuality and sexual organs, and the re-assurance that she had "made arrangements, a long time ago, to have a boy and a girl. Bailey is my boy and you are my girl. The Man upstairs, He don't make mistakes. He gave you to me to be my girl and that's just what you are" (271). This statement both consolidates the strong mother-daughter bond that culminates at the end of Angelou's novel, while establishing a simplistic, and strictly biologically pre-determined interpretation of gender identity for the young woman.

As a conclusion, one can say that when confronted with the issue of male or female
sexuality—and in particular homosexuality—black women writers from North America—to whom one should add Rosa Guy for the Caribbean—seem to address the subject in a far more objective, and less passionate manner than could be found in the works of many male authors up till recently. 

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ENDNOTES

1. Sarah Koffmann, however, in L'Enigme de la femme has rigorously re-assessed Freud's discourse on female sexuality; she also underlines how in Freud's 1913 conference "Die Weiblichkeit," the Austrian analyst elaborated various discourses on female sexuality—in particular on woman's "original bisexuality"—as a strategy to deny more thoroughly his own femininity and paranoia (cf. in particular, L'Enigme de la femme, 14-16.).

2. Sedgwick contrasts the homosocial, i.e. the existence of social bonds between persons of the same sex with the homosexual wherein the erotic potential of such relationships is expressed. Sedgwick also notes that, contrary to female bonding, male bonding usually presents a sharp discontinuation between the domain of the homosocial activities (sports, men's clubs, fraternities, etc.) and the purely homoerotic; cf. in particular: "Introduction", Between Men.

3. When male homosexuality is alluded to in the literature written by black, heterosexual male authors, it is frequently referred to in a derogatory manner, or else in an indirect mode. One such example of indirection is found in Ellison's Invisible Man: the hero, upon his first job-seeking interview, is received by the son of the white philanthropist Emerson. Emerson, Jr. is described as a caricature of the white closeted homosexual of the "liberated" Jazz Age, an Angst-ridden aesthete, one who sees an analyst and reads Freud's Totem and Taboo, frequents the Harlem clubs, and other "rendez-vous for writers, artists, and all kind of celebrities" (182). In a revealing passage, the text indicates that the young white man's "long hip-swinging stride [. . .] caused [the hero] to frown" (176). Interestingly, female homosexuality seems to have been totally left out of the "canon" of African-American male literature.


5. "Coming towards me from the porch where she had been sitting was the descendant of the White of Whites . . . Two intensely blue eyes examined me—a gaze that struck me as cold, languid and cavalier—while Mme Desaragne questioned me closely" (The Bridge of Beyond, 90).

6. "I turned around to see Monsieur Desaragne standing still in the middle of the yard looking at me out of grey eyes tinged with green and mysteriously quizzical" (The Bridge of Beyond, 103).

7. "distant metallic and piercing eyes which abolished my existence" (The Bridge of Beyond, 106).

8. "The white people had strange eyes . . . like bits of frosted glass that gave no reflection" (The Bridge of Beyond, 106).

9. "The pressure to imitate is, perhaps, the most extreme form of violence that anyone can inflict on a people; even more so when it assumes the agreement (and even the pleasure) of the mimetic society" (Caribbean Discourse, 46).

10. Concerning the uses of naming in Morrison's works and her black characters' refusal to be dehumanized by the uses of white naming and accompanying "nigger jokes," see Keith Byerman's Fingering the Jagged Grain, 192-94.

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11. Concerning the appropriation of the specular by the male gaze, see Irigaray's discussion in "Any Theory of The 'Subject' Has Always Been Appropriated by The 'Masculine'", Speculum of The Other Woman, 133-46.


13. "I thought how God had put me on earth without asking me if I wanted to be a woman or what color I'd like to be" (The Bridge of Beyond, 110).

14. "A little Negress that was irreducible, a real drum with two sides" (The Bridge of Beyond, 88).

15. "my destiny as a Negress, that I was no longer a stranger on the earth . . . and felt I was in my right place in life" (The Bridge of Beyond, 119).

16. "Madness strikes, and men kill and are killed. When, in the long blue hot days, the madness of the West Indies starts to swirl around in the air above the villages, bluffs and plateaux, men are seized with dread at the thought of the fate hovering over them" (The Bridge of Beyond, 34).

17. "We were sitting on the edge of the bed, and his eyes glittered in the half light, looking at me gently, warily, a little askance it seemed to me" (The Bridge of Beyond, 34).

18. "And now here I was on the way to Fond-Zombi, a woman in free possession of myself and my two breasts, and at each step I felt Elie’s eyes against mine and his steps within mine" (The Bridge of Beyond, 109).

19. "He also glanced around from time to time, hoping for some sign from the spectators, some mark of admiration or contempt" (The Bridge of Beyond, 154).

20. "At this very moment I have left my grief at the bottom of the river. It is going down stream, and will enshroud another heart than mine. Talk to me about life, grandmother. Talk to me about life" (The Bridge of Beyond, 163).

21. For a more informed discussion of this issue, see The Mother-Daughter Plot by Marianne Hirsch, Indiana U P.

22. For further readings on this, see Hortense Spillers’ essay, "A Hateful Passion, A Lost Love", Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship, Ed. Shari Benstock. See also Morrison’s remarks on her female characters in Bettye J. Parker, "Complexity: Toni Morrison’s Women".

23. "Couples [in Schwaiz-Bart’s novel] are based upon a reversal of relationships: man is not superior to woman nor is he coupled to her; he becomes her subordinate" (my translation).

24. For a further discussion of these terms, see Wade Nobles’ essay, "Africanity: Its Role in Black Families".

25. "Women are not natural mothers simply because of their sex. No woman is born a spontaneous educator. This quality is based upon an addition of personal talents and an idiosyncratic empathy with life which women, as a whole, do not automatically possess" (my translation).

26. "I began to ponder, thinking of my own entrails, which had not born fruit, of the leaden sky, and the woman’s distress. And receiving her child from her hands, I felt something inaudible and long forgotten stirring within me: it was life . . . Sonore stayed with me, my young shoot . . . I had begun to grow again" (The Bridge of Beyond, 224).
27. For further references on this issue, see Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering, footnote p. 33; see also Davis' Women, Race and Class. Davis comments that black women "resisted and advocated challenges to slavery at every turn" (21), and gives as example the case of Margaret Garner, the fugitive slave after whom Morrison molded Sethe in Beloved. Garner, when she was caught near Cincinnati, attempted to kill herself, and did succeed in killing her daughter, saying that "now [her daughter] would never know what a woman suffers as a slave" (Davis, 21).

28. "There is a time for carrying a child, a time for bringing it forth, a time for watching it grow and become like a bamboo in the wind. And what is one to call the time that comes after that? The time for consolation" (The Bridge of Beyond, 233).

29. "It is easy to see that this refusal of motherhood is not the consequence of mere chance. As a whole, these women writers, despite the diversity of their origins, all rebel against representations that have been circulated by the oral culture, and that permeate the entire Antillean society. Women in the Antilles have held a multiplicity of positions, while also caring for the well-being and education of their household, even as they sacrificed their personal joys . . .

This rejection of motherhood can also be understood not only as the unconscious or conscious rejection of traditional, dominant representations, but also as a warning directed to men who, up till now, found in their female companions' abnegation reasons to uphold certain attitudes" (my translation).

30. "prisoners of the images of the past, they foreground their mothers [in their works]" (my translation).

31. "often narcissistic, female writers are only concerned about themselves and their offsprings, and do not pay attention to the legacy they are leaving" (my translation).

32. Concerning the absence/silence about homosexuality in the literatures from the Americas up till recently, one notes two remarkable things: when--assumably heterosexual--male authors do mention homosexuality, they almost always describe it in disparaging, and as it were, homophobic terms. Such is the case not only in Ellison's Invisible Man, but also in Hemingway's often-quoted comments on Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in A Moveable Feast as well as--to take an African author--in Wole Soyinka's description of a African-American gay man in The Interpreters. Secondly, whereas, American, and remarkably African-American, literatures are now beginning to address the issue of female and male homosexuality in less judgmental terms, this important dimension of human behavior and sexuality remains almost totally invisible in literatures from the Caribbean, and in particular, from the francophone islands. Interestingly, the francophone islands also have produced less black women authors than the anglophone islands (and certainly than the American mainland): it would be interesting to explore the sexual politics aspect of this absence of female, gay and lesbian voices in Martinique, Guadeloupe and Haiti.
CHAPTER V: Tropes of Empowerment in Audré Lorde’s 
and in Maya Angelou’s Autobiographies.

As my discussion in the previous chapters underlines, an acute sense of place and 
displacement, the need to re-appropriate time on one’s own terms, as well as specific representations 
of mothering, femaleness and female bonding structure the texts which I chose for this study.

In this chapter I wish to explore the modes in which tropes of place and time, the female 
self, and difference articulate the texts written by Audré Lorde and Maya Angelou. Lorde’s Zami: A 
New Spelling of My Name and Angelou’s I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings and All God’s 
Children Need Traveling Shoes—which constitute the first and fifth parts of Angelou’s ongoing 
autobiography—offer important differences in form and content; they are alike, however, in that both 
of them are remarkable attempts to posit an autobiographical construct of self, and are indeed the 
only explicitly autobiographical endeavors among all the texts in my study. Furthermore, I wish to 
investigate the manner in which these texts—in their very structure and representations of the self— 
question the premises governing autobiography as a genre; in particular, I propose to explore the 
problematic relation that emerges between the private self and textual self-representations, and which 
Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Robert Hemenway and others have discussed in their readings of 
autobiographies authored by black women from the Americas. I also propose to delineate the 
complex relationship between each author’s idiosyncratic self-definition and her sense of group 
identity—as a black person and a lesbian for Lorde, as a black woman and an American expatriate for 
Angelou.

-A: Exclusion as A Trope of Difference in Lorde’s and Angelou’s Autobiographies.

Using Philippe Lejeune’s definition of autobiography—"a retrospective account in prose that a 
real person writes of his/her own existence"—one can say that Lorde’s Zami: A New Spelling of My
Name, as well as Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, come closest to a conventional definition of autobiography, although, each bears the undeniable mark of its particular author's literary genius and imagination.

As previous chapters have suggested, specific tropes of temporal synchrony, kinship, female affiliation and bonding, as well as same-sex identification appear throughout the texts written by black women from the New World. In this chapter, I want to demonstrate that Lorde and Angelou—albeit in dissimilar modes—address other issues which remain crucial to the destinies of African-American and African-Caribbean women: I am referring in particular to the place that silence, forced invisibility and the sense of defining oneself in non-traditional terms (according to prevailing patriarchal conventions) occupy in their works. I shall also explore the tropes of empowerment which structure these narratives of individuation.

Both writers share a common experience of social exclusion: Angelou as an unmarried young mother, and later on as an exiled African-American in Ghana; Lorde as a black poet, and also as a lesbian feminist and mother, fighting for economic and physical survival. The texts of both women manifest in most distinct and creative ways the power of their voices against the silences forced upon them as minority writers excluded from the Western canon. In the case of black women, the exclusion operates in a twofold mode. With Lorde, this exclusion becomes a triple one: the poet is rejected as a black person, as a female, and finally as a lesbian. Similarly, Angelou's experiences in the segregated South and as an African-American in Africa cause her to experience a deep sense of difference and sometimes alienation from white sexist codes of morality as well as from African rules governing kinship and gender roles.

The tropes of invisibility and silence are perfectly fitting to the status of black women in Western societies, women such as Marshall’s or Lorde’s mothers as well as Angelou’s young alter ego or again adolescent Télumée in Schwarz-Bart’s *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*: all these women were relegated to the kitchens and backyards of the economic and political powers-that-be in America or the Caribbean; despite this relegation, they ultimately found their voices and a new identity as black women from the Americas. Silence, and the concomitant struggle to find a voice and tell one’s individual history—in opposition to the patriarchal proclamations of official history by
those whom Lorde addresses as the "white fathers" (Sister Outsider, 81)—remain two central tropes within the lives of women in general, as Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God or Woolf's Mrs Dalloway demonstrate. This silencing, however, is an even more pressing reality for those women who have been denied their very existence for economic, class and race reasons as have been minority women in the West. In her essay on "The Transformation of Silence into Action," Lorde comments on the particular predicament of African-American women: "Withi/ this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible [...] and on the other hand have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism" (Sister Outsider, 82).

Paradoxically, the silencing of minority women while rendering them invisible as individuals to the white population has also made them more visible to each other: this visibility stems from a sense of bonding and communal experience and from the continued perception of blacks as living emblems of the Western representations of Difference. Two poems from Lorde's admirable collection The Black Unicorn (1978) address the centrality of silence and invisibility in the lives of women of color and in the author's own existence in particular. In "For Assata," she writes:

In this new picture your smile has been to war
you are almost obscured by other faces
on the pages
those shadows are sisters
who have not yet spoken
[...]
I dream of your freedom
as my victory
and the victory of all dark women
who forego the vanities of silence
who war and weep

Silence and powerlessness have also been the share of those whose social identity has been rendered invisible by "heterosexism" defined as the societal pressures that assume sexuality and love to be "universal" concepts only in their heterosexual manifestations. Bonnie Zimmermann remarks that "lesbian criticism begins with the establishment of the lesbian text: the creation of language out of silence" (Zimmermann, 208); the transformation of language from muteness to an instrument for action is precisely what is at work in the texts by Lorde and the many lesbian writers—black and white as well as Latina, Native American and Oriental—who are currently re-claiming their silenced
voices, keeping in mind that ". . . it is better to speak/ remembering/ we were never meant to survive" (Lorde, "A Litany for Survival" The Black Unicorn). Indeed, noting the compounded difficulty of being both black and "out" as a lesbian in the 50's, Lorde reflects upon the fact that she hardly knew any other black lesbians at that time: "We recognized ourselves as exotic sister-outiders who might gain little strength from banding together. Perhaps our strength might lay in our fewness, our rarity" (Zami 177). She then stresses the paradoxes of the "visible invisibility" in which black lesbians, even more so than other black women, were trapped: "Sometimes we'd pass Black women on Eighth street--the invisible but visible sisters--and our glances might cross, but we never looked into each other's eyes. We acknowledged our kinship by passing in silence, looking the other way" (180).

The very tensions which are manifest in Angelou's and Lorde's texts (blackness and lesbianism, the North American/First World vis-a-vis the African/Third World) force each author to remain intensely sensitive to the origins and construction of identity, the nature of power, and of power's workings within the very ranks of the oppressed, whether they belong to a racial or sexual minority, or both. As Lorde stated in an interview with the feminist journal Hot Wire: "Because we are oppressed, we must be very careful not to believe that it gives us carte blanche to take advantage of the privilege that results from oppressing others" (Jorjet Harper et als., 6). Being part of historically oppressed groups gives Angelou and Lorde a sense of the responsibilities and complexities which accompany the construction of difference in Western societies; their autobiographies clearly address the urge experienced by black women in the New World to redefine their individuality from a locus of regained authority.

Indeed, both authors' contribution to the body of literatures written in English follows a polyphonic--in Bakhtin's sense--merging of voices, rather than a uniform, controlling voice of unanimity. Angelou's and Lorde's texts provide us with exemplary paradigms of a sense of self that is born from, "examining difference while moving together" as the poet commented in a recent interview, (Jorjet Harper, 4). In Lorde's case, this multivocality posits a locus of individuation which
proceeds by inclusion, rather than exclusion and additional marginalization: "When we define
ourselves, when I define myself, the place in which I am like you and the place in which I am not
like you, I’m not excluding you from the joining—'I’m broadening the joining." In Angelou’s case,
the author’s discovery of self relies more immediately on a need to come to terms with her past as a
transplanted African in the Americas and with the constraints of contemporary history (i.e. the
African independences). Where one would expect a journal kept in exile, one finds a very personal
reflection upon some of the most important events to take place in post-colonial Africa, one in which
the idealized representations of an African motherland rid of its invaders conflicts with the economic
and political realities of post-colonial societies. In Lorde’s *Zami*, instead of the linear, diachronic
autobiographical narrative which could be anticipated, one discovers with delight a text that presents
itself as poetry, as diary and as "biomythography." The poet’s text becomes thus one that generates a
multiplicity of textual selves, even as the narrator attempts to merge the identity of the "self-in-
writing" with her past selves as well as with her new-found persona, Zami; in effect, in Lorde’s
lesbian utopia of mythologizing of the female self, "a plurality of identities (black, female, lesbian),
(and) a line of women (her ancestors, her mothers, her lovers) coalesce into one name" and one
persona (Raynaud, 223). Lorde’s text of genesis becomes an unwitting female-centered response to
Gusdorf’s remark that autobiography "shows us not the objective stages of a career . . . but reveals
instead the effort of a creator to give the meaning of his own mythic tale" (48).

While Barbara Smith’s contention that Morrison’s *Sula* is "an exceedingly lesbian novel"
("Towards a Black Feminist Criticism", 157) remains as I discussed earlier, problematic, *Zami* clearly
vindicates the buried traditions of lesbianism by using them as its main inspiration; it also clearly
posits the need to name the "unspeakable" as well as to find the proper words for feelings and
experiences that have not been properly documented before in the autobiographical tradition.

-B: The Re-Appropriation of One’s History in Angelou’s All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes.

As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and other contemporary critics have shown, Blackness has come
to represent the ultimate trope of Difference within the confines of Euro-American cultural premises

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This representation of blackness as the ultimate difference was re-enforced in the Sixties: in the U.S.A, during the emergence of the civil rights era and of the "Black Power" movement; parallely, the outburst of the independence movements that swept Africa from Algeria to Mozambique during the same decade fueled the communities of the black diaspora with a renewed sense of pride in their African heritage even as they manifested political, social and cultural resistance against Western values.

Although they do not claim to be historical chronicles, Zami and All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes are deeply grounded in a sense of history, or, more specifically in the attempt to reclaim or rather re-create one's own history from the silences of "official," white history. They also clearly locate themselves within the specific dimension of a time of feminine subjectivity, as Kristeva defines it in her essay on woman's time, one that "... essentially retains repetition and eternity," as opposed to "time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding... the time of [patriarchal] history" (16). Lorde's and Angelou's autobiographical projects thus constitute a deliberate re-appropriation of one's past in reaction to the forced silences of official history concerning those disenfranchised groups that have always been defined by the powers-that-be as the ones "without history." In their specific explorations of the buried past of racial and sexual minorities of the Americas, these texts are also a response to the "absence terrible de mémoire collective" ("the distressing absence of any collective memory") that characterizes, according to Edouard Glissant, the cultural and social identity of the francophone Caribbean community, among other invisible ones in the New World.

One example of this reclaiming of an obfuscated past occurs early on in Zami, when Lorde's young persona is told by Ginger--who will become her first female lover--about Crispus Attucks, a black man who was the first to die during the Revolutionary War; still in shock about her ignorance, the narrator reflects that "[she] had been taught by some of the most highly considered historians in the country. Yet, I never once heard [Crispus Attuck's name]. What did that mean about the history I had learned?" (133). Nevertheless, Zami is essentially a myth-making enterprise, one that does not so much concern itself with "factual," historical events as it does with what one critic calls "the telling of a myth that re-enacts the beginning, goes back to the roots, the authentic, the 'native'" (Raynaud,
In their insistence on re-appropriating and conserving their historical memory, *Zami, I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* are unlike Zora Neale Hurston's works, where characters such as Nanny, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, tend to turn their back on the past and its painful connotations for African-Americans, or Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* which only proceeds from the colonial past, and will not come to terms with the present realities of the independent Caribbean world. The events in Lorde's autobiography range from the breaking out of the second World War to life during the Fifties in America and Mexico, and go from bohemian circles to working-class communities in and around New York City. Angelou offers us an insider's look at the excitement and the regained sense of pride that prevailed in Ghana, shortly after its independence from the British under Kwame N'Krumah. One gets the sense that history in the making is more than a mere backdrop to Angelou's text, as evidenced by the presence of personalities such as Malcolm X or President Tubman from Liberia in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*. The small community of Black American expatriates which included Angelou, W.E.B Du Bois, his wife Shirley Graham, and others have deliberately chosen Ghana as a place where, as Angelou remarks, "[Blacks] were capable of controlling [their] cities, [their] selves and [their] lives with elegance and success. Whites were not needed to explain the working of the world, nor the mysteries of the mind" (16).

As I suggested earlier, Angelou's temporary exile in Africa represents a deliberate attempt to establish a geographical appropriation of space, in a movement outward that contradicts the traditional representations of woman's space and place as essentially inward ones. Angelou opposes the transformation of her invisibility--as a black, heterosexual woman--into action to the traditional representations of woman's discourse as stasis. The proper articulation of the young Southern black woman's voice becomes the driving force that controls her autobiography; as someone who has experienced the excruciating barrenness and racial violence of the segregated South in the Thirties and Forties, Angelou needs to ground her sense of self in a place and time that will provide her with a sense of historical continuum and with a renewed sense of identity.
Yet, Angelou's very relationship to the African motherland is a problematic one: she can only hope to claim Ghana—i.e. Africa—as her home, after having let her imagination purge itself of all the haunting nightmares carried over from slavery. In one of several moments of self-revelation—reminiscent of Joycean epiphanies—that structure *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Angelou experiences a sudden vision at the slave-forts at El Mina and Cape Coast Castle: in an intense conflation of time and place, she sees the scores of chained black men, women and children who were brought through the gates of the forbidding forts on their way to the Americas. The Southern black writer—or African-Caribbean writer for that matter—shares the sense of the inescapability of one’s past, one which Léopold S. Senghor, George Lamming, among other black scholars, have commented upon: indeed, the black writer from the New World cannot fully awaken or escape from the nightmare of history. Angelou must watch "a troop of tragic players enter and exit the stage"(97) before she can come to terms with the signification of the predicament of the sons and daughters of the African diaspora. For those descendants of Africans, born out of Africa—simultaneously born outside Africa and borne out in the sense of being delivered from Africa—the mother-continent has always been as much a metaphysical place of yearning as a historical and political reality. One cannot therefore, read Angelou’s text as a mere transcription of a linear, diachronic vision of historical events however. The writer’s own expectations and idiosyncracies are at work in *All God’s Children*: the text transcends a mere travel chronicle to become one author’s coming to terms with her identity and her ambivalence when faced with Africa as an existential locus and not just a place of origins.

One of the most poignant moments in *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* occurs a few days before Angelou is due to leave Ghana and head back to America with the certain knowledge, "almost too painful to bear," that America is ultimately home for her (127). She finds herself in the midst of a small African village, Keta, from which many slaves had been sent off centuries before. Nevertheless, the memory of the "stolen mothers and fathers remained" (207) in the small community, and when the inhabitants are faced with this black stranger, the missing historical link between their tragic past and their present condition is discovered: indeed, they "saw their history
in [Angelou’s] face and heard their ancestors speak through [her] voice” (207). For Angelou, therefore, history can never be merely a bygone period of time, but rather the reenactment of human tragedies that control human fates and interactions up to the present. One incident in *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* bears evidence of the responsibility of each and all to their community and, ultimately, to the destiny of humankind. It is the highly dramatic encounter—between a former SS officer, Dieter, and a younger Israeli actor, Torvash—which the author unwittingly, but not totally innocently, provokes during her visit to the Berlin Festival as a performing artist. Despite their totally constrained comedy of manners—in which the two former enemies outdo each other in parlor courtesies—the two men are incapable of obliterating the horrifying plight of history that lies between them. No one, indeed not even Angelou, can afford to consider himself/herself “innocent” when faced with the unbearable evidence of the historical monstrosities and ghosts from the past which still loom ominously in European drawing-rooms as well as along the shores of Africa.

Angelou’s task in *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* is to articulate the possible relation between the metaphorical dimension of Africa as a haven/“heaven” and a place of longing (20), and the physical and political aspects of the newly-independent African nations which she documents so thoroughly. Indeed, it is only in their active participation in the construction of a new Africa—one that had not yet undergone the tragedies of civil wars, famines, devastating droughts, and neo-colonial domination—that Angelou and her group of political émigré friends can control and give a meaning to the historical fate that brought their ancestors to the forbidding shores of the New World. One can distinguish therefore two historical planes within the African episode of Angelou’s multi-volume autobiography: the first is the chronological recording of important facts, such as the failed coup attempt against N’Krumah (78-80) or again Malcolm X’s visit to Ghana and his chance encounter with Muhammad Ali (140-46). The second level pertains to a sense of a self which is still in the making, a black identity that has been denied an existence, and indeed silenced, both in the African past, when it was put into shackles at El Mina, and again in the societies of the Americas that developed out of slavery.
Angelou finally realizes that it is time for her to head back toward America since she has "gotten all Africa had to give [her]" (196). At the same time, Angelou's decision to leave Africa is one which occurs only after she has discovered the self that is deep inside her. As with many other people of African descent, her trip back to the motherland has taught her the uniqueness of the African diaspora's heritage which has helped them survive as blacks in a non-black environment while remaining strangers to other blacks that geography, history, culture, language and religion have often kept separate from them. Angelou must pass from a society deeply rooted in its past, its rituals of "courtesy and form, traditional dignity," (158)--not unlike the island society of Bourne Island in Marshall's The Chosen Place, The Timeless People--and go back to a place where being someone is impossible without becoming oneself. In other words, the expatriate African-American writer must learn to reconcile a synchronic vision of time and of her intense link with her African past with a more diachronic, indeed individualistic, conception of one's existence which the brutal encounter of African and European cultures has created over the centuries in the New World.

In an arresting manner, while increasing her sense of self-worth, Angelou's trips to Africa caused her to reflect upon the paradoxes of identity. Indeed, it was some years later, while she was in the midst of a group of beggars in Egypt that she realized the specificity of her Americanness and class-status, noting that "[she] was young, talented, well-dressed, and whether [she] would take pride in the fact publicly or not, [she] was an American" (Singin' and Swingin' and Getting Merry Like Christmas, 53). The most important aspect of Angelou's trip "back home" to Africa is thus both to more fully come to terms with her complex self and to discover that the old continent had never entirely let go of her, even after two hundred years of exile. In effect, Angelou's work--along with Marshall's Praisessong for The Widow or Césaire's Cahier d'un retour au pays natal--clearly indicates that Africa--as are, to a certain extent, the Caribbean islands--is as much a spiritual extension of the self as a specific geographical and historical locale.

-C: The Mythical Re-Creation of Self and The Invention of A Woman-Identified Past in Zami.

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Historical consciousness and the quest for one’s home is also inscribed in the idiosyncracies of private lives. Such is the case with much of Lorde’s poetry and her biomythography, *Zami*. Lorde has remarked elsewhere that "... our real power comes from the personal ... our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge ... Our visions begin with our desires" (Tate, 106-07). Lorde’s text combines the autobiographical urge to "tell the truth" of one individual’s life with the need to establish a counter-tradition as a black woman and as a lesbian. Moreover, her text sets out to posit a counter-myth of origins and of individuation that will address an essentially patriarchal historical order (Pryse and Spillers, Eds., 250). Furthermore, Lorde’s biomythography is intent upon re-creating a space of "lesbian consciousness" away from the assumptions and constraints of heterosexism.

In her interview with Rich, Lorde recalls being asked about the role of the Goddess in Africa and comments: "I had to laugh. I’m a poet, not a historian. I’ve shared my knowledge, I hope ..." (*Sister Outsider*, 105). Nevertheless, despite this assertion, the poet’s mythological construct of self repeatedly intersects with history: while Angelou was reading about the March on Washington in August 1963 in her African exile, Lorde was present at that March; as she writes in "Equinox," a poem from the collection *From A Land Where Other People Live*: "The year my daughter was born/ DuBois died in Accra while I/ marched into Washington/ to a death knell of dreaming/ which 250,000 mistook for a hope ..." Official history, however, does not occupy such a large place in Lorde’s text as it does in Angelou’s; rather, if one has the sense of a chronological progression and of a becoming, it is in a more private and indirect mode than in Angelou’s case. Indeed, Lorde’s *Zami* in its creation of a mythological, woman-centered past, is a work that questions the very conception of history as a “neutral,” public knowledge while equally subverting the historical “truths” perpetrated by a white and heterosexist world. The reader of *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* can establish a chronological chart of the brutal coming of age of young Maya in the form of a topological map of the various locales where life takes the narrator from Arkansas to Saint Louis and San Francisco. In Lorde’s case, one has to turn to the names, faces, and bodies—essentially female ones—that people the pages of *Zami* in order to discover the precise personal transformations which they recover, and consequently establish a geography of self-empowerment and individuation. This private geography ultimately posits a lesbian place of one’s own, a locus of consciousness from
which the writer affirms her true person. Indeed, where Angelou's text refuses the spatial constraints put upon women and sets out to create an unchartered personality and existence against the obstacles of racism and patriarchal condescension, Lorde must create her self against the homophobic hegemony that denies her very being. As the author of Zami writes at the time of her budding affair with Muriel: "Any world which did not have a place for me loving women was not a world in which I wanted to live, nor one which I could fight for" (197).

As Lorde has stressed repeatedly, she does not consider her text as an autobiography, but rather as a form of fiction, one that "has the elements of biography and history of myth [. . .] In other words, it's fiction built from many sources [. . .] You might call Zami a novel" (Claudia Tate, 115). Indeed, Lorde's text avoids easy classification as a literary document: it proclaims itself a fiction, yet incorporates passages of poetry and "prose poétique." It claims to be a biography, yet does not provide the usual list of dates and data that one would expect from such a text. The biomythography alternates the bold print of section titles with passages in italics that form "self-contained narratives" or again "litanies that must be spoken out loud" (Reynaud, 231) and which account for the polyphonic aspect of Lorde's text.

When dates are provided, they correspond to periods of intensely private crises in the life of the narrator (Gennie's suicide [96], the narrator's unsuccessful heterosexual liaison and resulting abortion [109-10], or again, her feelings of sexual frustration [118]) that do not pertain to what is traditionally regarded as public history. And yet history does erupt at all times into the world of a sensitive young black female who is struggling to discover her identity between the assembly-lines of an electronics plant, the gay cafés of New York's Greenwich Village, and the artist communities in Cuernavaca, Mexico: history also means marching in Washington for the Rosenbergs, or reading about the Supreme Court decision about the desegregation of schools while in a self-imposed Mexican exile.

History can also be interlocked with the very private, when privacy becomes a matter of public debate. In the case of openly gay and lesbian authors, such as Lorde, the very fact that they do give evidence to their existence, in the face of the homophobic threats and fears that silenced so many of their predecessors forever, can certainly be construed as a historical attempt to reclaim an
overlooked tradition. For African-American as well as Caribbean gays and lesbians, the silences of official history have been compounded by the traditional racist prejudices that, in a bitter irony, the homosexual community often adopted. In an address to the Women's Center at Medgar Evers College, Lorde rebuts the charge that "Black lesbians are not political, that [they] have not been and are not involved in the struggles of Black people . . ." She then goes on to mention the numerous political and cultural events which she was involved in from the early Sixties as a lesbian, adding: "But you did not know it because we did not identify ourselves," and continues her address by naming some of the many gay and lesbian African-American artists and literati:

When you read the words of Langston Hughes you are reading the words of a Black Gay man. When you read the words of Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Angelina Weld Grimké, poets of the Harlem Renaissance, you are reading the words of Black Lesbians. When you listen to the life-affirming voices of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, you are hearing Black Lesbian women. When you see the plays and read the words of Lorraine Hansberry, you are reading the words of a woman who loved women deeply 4.

-D: The Creation of A Place of Lesbian Consciousness and Community in Zami.

In her groundbreaking 1977 essay "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism," Barbara Smith writes about the "impossibilities of her essay," and of her awareness of doing "something unprecedented, something dangerous" by simply writing from both a black feminist and lesbian perspective. Smith also confesses to being overwhelmed by the immensity of the wall of silence and invisibility that remains to be overcome: "This invisibility [of the black lesbian], which goes beyond anything that either Black men or white women experience and tell about in their writing, is one reason it is so difficult for me to know where to start. It seems overwhelming to break such a massive silence" (B. Smith, 158).

The fact that until the recent "canonization" of Lorde's poetry (in the 1978 Norton edition of The Black Unicorn) the poet's work was only published in small broadside presses and only accessible to a limited, sympathetic audience can perhaps be interpreted as an illustration of the difficulty any dissenting voice experiences in being heard at large. One can subscribe to Hortense Spillers' remarks on Zami that "... the publishing center of gravity is shaking loose from its customary moorings as the marginal women's press begins to redescribe the lines of discriminative
power" (Conjuring, 258).

Lorde's creation of a highly personal enterprise and definition of a multiple self--as a woman, as a black person, as a divorcée, as a lesbian mother, as a black activist, as someone engaged in a long-lasting interracial relationship with her white lover--calls for its own mythography, and generates its own need for a feminist/lesbian "herstory" which includes defining a space for her specific concept of the female body as geography. The poet's exploration of the female body begins with her own, a body that longs for a sense of wholeness with the world around her, as she writes in the opening lines of Zami:

> When I sit and play in the waters of my bath, I love to feel the deep inside parts of me, sliding and folded and tender and deep. Other times I like to fantasize the core of it, my pearl a protruding part of me [. . .] Woman forever. My body, a living representation of other life older longer wiser. The mountains and valleys, trees, rocks, sand and flowers and water and stone. Made in earth (7).

This physical exploration soon proceeds to a longing for intimacy with those nearest to her, namely, in the young narrator's case, the mother. Years later, Lorde still remembers with emotion the occasions when she would "crawl against her [mother] . . . sliding [the water bag] down the roundness of her stomach . . . [shaking] it slowly, rocking it back and forth, lost in sudden tenderness, at the same time gently rubbing against [her] mother's quiet body" (Zami. 34). The first locus of bonding and physical desire with others resides thus within the mother's body as D.W. Winnicott and others have indicated. This sense of maternal bonding--which Lorde shares with Angelou, and with Marshall's Selina in Brown Girl, Brownstones--is a distinctly strong, albeit complex, one. Lorde and Angelou experience a relationship to their mothers that is both involved and at times, remarkably distant. Soon after the first pages of Zami, where the narrator evokes the intimacy of hairbraiding sessions while sitting between her mother's spread legs, and remembers the "warm mother smell caught between her legs, and the intimacy of [their] touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain like a nutmeg nestled in its covering of mace" (33), she recollects the cherished moments of daughter-mother bonding that "[she] missed so sorely when [their] real wars began" (33).
Indeed, in an arresting way--one that questions the limitations of her autobiographical enterprise--Lorde's mother all but disappears from the poet's text, only to reappear in its concluding lines. It is only once that Lorde has established her own place as a woman-identified person away--both
geographically and spiritually—from her mother and from their island of origin that she can reunite her newly-found lesbian identity with her mother's legacy:

Once home was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother's mouth. I only discovered its latitude when Carriacou was no longer my home. There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother's blood (Zami, 256)

For Angelou, an unwed mother who travelled the world with her cherished son Guy, home was not so much a specific place of security and comfort to come back to as it was a sense of belonging together with Guy; the author of I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, when asked in an interview about her reactions to her son's growing up and leaving her, confided: "... it was very hard for me, because he had been home to me, wherever we were, he was home" 5.

In a parallel mode, the urge to belong controls Lorde's Zami. Indeed, the quest for a home of one's own where it is possible to root one's identity of sexual difference acts as a crucial trope within the writings by gays and lesbians: it can be found in such diverse texts as Lorde's biomythography and Baldwin's Giovanni's Room as well as in Rita Mae Brown's picaresque Ruby Fruit Jungle or again the second part of Edmund White's ongoing autobiography, The Beautiful Room Is Empty. In addition to the usual emancipation from one's family that every child must undergo, Lorde's alter ego must also face the dilemma of affirming herself in her homosexual identity against the lifestyles of those very persons who have reared her and acted as her first role models. In Zami therefore, the heterosexually-defined family becomes an added obstacle and a superimposed model from which the narrator must move away; indeed, it is as if Lorde's family of affective and erotic election had replaced once and for all the biological one, and nurtured the homosexual "piece of herself" that had lain buried and silent until then. As White suggests in a recent essay, friends and lovers constitute the core of the extended, more flexible homosexual family: "Perhaps because I'm gay and unmarried, my friends have always been particularly important to me, as companions in pleasure, as consolation in defeat, as witnesses of the big events and small details of my life—and most of all, as beings for me to cherish and love" ("Residence on Earth, 135"). Indeed, White's remarks echo those spoken by Jewelle Gomez, a black lesbian, who speaking on the
same issue of a distinct homosexual "home of one's own," remarked that "the black lesbian writer must recreate our home, unadulterated, unsanitized, specific and not isolated from the generations that have nurtured us" (Gomez, 122).

As in the case of Paule Marshall's heroines, Lorde's mother belongs to a strong-minded group of Island women, immigrants who come looking for a better life in the yards and kitchens of Brooklyn and other places. Reflecting on her lover Muriel's Italian mother and on her own, Lorde notes that "[w]e had learned well in the kitchens of our mothers, both powerful women who did not let go easily. In those warm places of survival, love was another name for control, however openly given" (Zami, 214). These migrant women are the unknown bards mentioned by Marshall in her essay, the "female counterparts of Ellison's Invisible Man" who had "taken refuge in language" as their only homeland ("From The Poets in The Kitchen", 6-7).

In Lorde's case, however, these women have spiritual and mythical importance as well as being role models for everyday survival in North America. These women from Carriacou actually are emblematic in Lorde's work of the closest thing to a historical community of women-identified women. These were women who had to learn to bear with the absence of their sea-faring men, near-mythical women whose names ring like an echo of Wittig's lesbian "féminaire" in Les Guérillères 5: "Madivine. Friendling. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Granada, and so is their strength and their beauty" (Zami 14; in italics in the text). It goes without saying that these island women to whom Lorde's alter ego feels so intimately connected probably would not have been familiar with, or would have most likely rejected the term "lesbian," if one defines it in its strictly sexual implications. Yet, in a trope not uncommon to gay, and particularly lesbian literature—as illustrated most successfully in Les Guérillères—the formulation of a mythical, utopian same-sex community of females (or males) seems to be an essential part of the author's poetics. Interestingly, it is when the young narrator decides to move out of her mother's house, following her graduation from high school and the suicide of her best friend Gennie, that she first experiences a strong sense of communal identity with women other than her mother. This incident calls attention to the complexities of mother-daughter relationships depicted in these texts as I will argue hereafter. In effect, Lorde notes:

When I moved out of my mother's house, shaky and determined, I began to fashion
some different relationship to this country of our sojourn. . . . I made an adolescent's wild and powerful commitment to battling in my own full eye, closer to my own strength, which was after all not so very different from my mother's. And there I found other women who sustained me and from whom I learned other loving. How to cook the foods I had never tasted in my mother's house . . . How to loosen up and not be lost. (Zami, 104)

The female community of erotic bonding becomes therefore the new home for the homosexual woman when ties with the ancient homes of childhood are broken or no longer possible. In the section titled "The Last of My Childhood Nightmares,"--dated "My Mother's House, July 5, 1954," and situated during Lorde's intense affair with Muriel--the narrator writes: " . . . And then suddenly I realize that in this house of my childhood I am no longer welcome. Everything is hostile to me . . . This is no longer my home; it is only a past time" (199). Woman-to-woman love and erotic desires define a lesbian space of love that is home to Lorde and her lovers, as she discovers with delight upon her first sexual experience with a woman, Ginger: "Loving Ginger that night was like coming home to a joy I was meant for, and I only wondered silently, how I had not always known that it would be so" (139). Lorde's sense of a place of spiritual well-being is not necessarily a geographical one, as is the case with Angelou during her African exile; rather, the place where she experiences wholeness is a metaphorical one, a locus that must be generated and re-created at all moments. Speaking of her very early experiences of being "in the life," the poet notes:

For some of us there was no one particular place, and we grabbed whatever we could from wherever we found space, comfort, quiet, a smile, non-judgment. Being women together was not enough. We were different (Zami, 226).

As Claudine Raynaud remarks, the poet's quest for a spiritual/erotic home of her own, for Carriacou, for an authentic relationship with her mother "[goes] hand in hand with an acknowledgment of difference," (Raynaud, 240) and of the "very house of difference" (Zami, 206). This affirmation of difference stands in opposition to the "myth of sameness" which the poet sees as a threat that ultimately, "can destroy us" (Tate, 104).

-E: Speaking One's Truth(s): Silence and The Discontinuities of Autobiographical Individuation in Lorde and Angelou.

After recalling the impulse for authentication that controlled the early slave narratives,
Selwyn R. Cudjoe, in his essay on Maya Angelou's "autobiographical statement", suggests that "any discussion on the Afro-American autobiography is always likely to raise the question: 'Is it really true?'". The same critic proceeds to assert that in African-American literature, autobiography and fiction are "simply different means of arriving at or (re)-cognizing the same truth," namely the position of the African-American in American society (Cudjoe, 7-8). As the recent debates surrounding the identity of the author of "Linda Brent's" Incidents in The Life of A Slave Girl as well as the controversial reception of Hurston's autobiography Dust Tracks on A Road clearly indicate, African-American women authors have always had to confront the burning issue of the "truth" of the autobiographical text--and of its potential "lies", to use Hurston's term in defense of her narrative--both as women and as blacks. Indeed, the debate surrounding what Nellie McKay names the "promotion of an authentic self-in-writing" ("Race, Gender and Cultural Context", 176) remains very much at the core of the definition of African-American autobiography, whether written by men or by women: every black author in the Americas has to deal at one point or the other with specific narrative stratagems and tactics in order to posit the "truth" of his or her text.

The texts that we are considering at present lay claims to their respective truth(s) in different ways. Just as in I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings Angelou describes the cautious double-voicedness of her grandmother, "Momma's . . . African-bush secretiveness and suspiciousness" (189), she also recounts her own subterfuges of survival and manipulations of language. When in the same text, she is set in getting a job as the first black female streetcar conductor in San Francisco, she sends off a resume and comments: "I wove a cat's ladder of near truths and total lies. I kept my face blank (an old art) and wrote quickly the fable of Marguerite Johnson, aged nineteen . . ." (262).

In her radio interview, Angelou, when asked about her predilection for the autobiographic genre, commented on the almost accidental reasons and the challenges which led to her coming-to-writing through autobiography and added: "I love autobiography. I love the form. It challenges me to try to speak through the first person singular and mean the third person plural" . Similarly, Lorde, rather than claiming to create an orthodox account of the emergence of her self, seeks the source of her self-generation in the creation of an idiosyncratic mythology of womanly self. Zami does not
proceed from a narrow conception of identity; rather it asserts a multiplicity of being even as it "celebrates a myth, i.e., a truth, a power" (Raynaud, 234). Indeed, the biomythographer stresses the inclusionary sense of kinship that presided over the writing of her texts: "I write for these women for whom a voice has not yet existed, or whose voices have been silenced. I don't have the only voice or all of their voices, but they are part of my voice, and I am part of theirs" (Tate, 104).

In Angelou's case, on the other hand, the text does purport to follow the psychic, emotional and physiological development of a woman from childhood through her mature years. Yet, as I shall propose, Angelou's continuing autobiography presents many gaps and moments of discontinuity which can only cause the reader to wonder about the limitations of the author's enterprise, however remarkable her talent be. Indeed, when asked about the criteria she had chosen to select from the numerous incidents in her tumultuous existence, the author of *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* confessed her skepticism concerning the nature of autobiographical truth: "As for truth, I'm quiveringly uncertain of it . . . No, I know no absolute truths which I am capable of revealing" ("Shades and Slashes of Light", 3).

Interestingly, the relative value of autobiographical truths and reminiscences appears above all in the two writers' confrontations with the memories of those who have been the closest—emotionally and physically—to them. This includes Lorde's female lovers as well as Angelou's distant and dandyish father. However, the conflict concerning the limits of the autobiographical re-creation of one's self—and the selves of others—appears in its most intense form in both women's depiction of their mothers.

Lorde both praises her mother for giving her the strength to become the person she is at the time of the writing, and also faults her for her shortcomings. There are assuredly other reasons for the author's ambivalence, reasons that one can only guess at, through the gaps of a text that is constructed around what one critic calls "the breaks and interstices in the pattern of woman-making" (Spillers, *Conjuring*, 258). Lorde's mother is depicted both as a nurturing model and as an emblem of the effects of the imposed socialization of minority women by the forces of racism and sexism. In a recent essay, the poet writes that "[her] mother was a very brave woman, born in the West Indies,
unprepared for america [sic]. And she disarmed me with her silences . . . My mother taught me to survive from a very early age by her own example." Yet, in the same passage the poet writes that her mother’s “silences taught [Lorde] isolation, fury, mistrust, self-rejection, and sadness” (Sister Outsider, 149).

Remarkably, even as the author faults her mother for her silences, she avoids developing or mentioning certain issues throughout her text. The author’s family all but disappears in Zami following the opening pages, never to reappear again as a whole. Writing about the pernicious effects of silence upon her own life and other people’s in her essay on “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” Lorde notes that “[she] has come to believe over and over again that what is most important must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood” (Sister Outsider, 40). Yet, the reader is left to wonder about some of the discontinuities of Lorde’s biomythography: why does the narrative of a writer’s painful and lengthy coming-of-age and reconciliation with her sexual identity suddenly stop in the late Fifties? What of her long-standing lover Frances, and of the two children Lorde has borne as a result of a short-lived marriage, all of whom she has written elsewhere in essays and poems? What also of the father of her children who is never alluded to in the biomythography, let alone in other recent texts? In a few instances, the text offers some gaps through which the reader catches an instant glimpse of the haunting pain and the bitterness of what remains unsaid and unwritten despite the author’s urge to speak up.

As is the case with Zora Neale Hurston’s highly revised and controversial autobiography Dust Tracks on A Road, one often notes the author’s intrusion and deliberate control over the facts that she relates; whatever Lorde chooses to reveal in her text is assuredly a severely self-conscious and deliberate unveiling of what she considers to be the crucial elements in the construct of her true self. The issue of autobiographical truth lies indeed at the very core of Lorde’s enterprise, as the chance encounter with Muriel—one of Lorde’s most cherished lovers from the “coming-out years”—at a poetry reading in New York City some twenty years later, clearly shows. The narrator depicts the intense reunion in a few words:

I tell her, ‘I am writing an unfolding of my life and loves.’
‘Just make sure you tell the truth about me,’ she says.” (Zami, 190).
Despite its brevity, this exchange clearly underlines the complexities of Lorde's autobiographical project, one that purports to tell its "truth" while questioning its very limitations, and at the same time inquires into the very notion of accuracy. In its description of the 1955 New Year's day, Lorde's text is replete with exact information, down to the time that she woke up and the title of the song that she put on her phonograph on that memorable morning (193). One can certainly ascribe this remarkable accuracy of memory to the fact that this scene took place at the beginning of the narrator's intense affair with Muriel. Yet strangely, when the writer recollects her meeting with Afrekete--another extremely important event in her existence--her memory suddenly fails her, and forces her to admit the limitations of re-creating one's past: she recalls being at a bar in Greenwich Village, dancing the "slow fish," and adds: "the bar was not crowded which means it probably was the Page Three" (244).

Assuredly, Lorde's resurrection of a mythic womanly past and tradition can only collide with conventional, linear representations of time. Not only does memory prove to be unreliable, but time itself often conflates, refusing the reassuring linearity which has traditionally defined it in narrative. Almost at the end of the text, at a time when the author's alter ego has broken up with Muriel and is about to begin a series of relationships with black women, there is a sudden flashback as "another piece of [her]self turned over in the darkness, filled with a great sadness," about her last year at home, meeting her mother's "open eyes silently regarding [her] as [Lorde] crept around quietly" and the sudden realization that it was "the only time that I felt the full weight of my mother's pain at the hostilities forever between us" (230). In many ways, Lorde's use of gaps and silences converges with that of her literary predecessors; as Valerie Smith suggests in her study of Harriet Jacobs's Incidents, "by consigning to the narrative silences those aspects of her own sexuality for which the genre does not allow, Jacobs points to an inadequacy in the form . . . In the ironies and silences of her book, she makes not quite adequate forms more truly her own" (Self-Discovery and Authority, 43). Similarly, Lorde subverts the "traditional" genre and conventions associated with autobiography to reveal uniquely personal "truths" about her multiple, complex personae.
Angelou’s mother, in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, also occupies a peripheral--yet crucial--place in the first volume of her ongoing autobiography. In fact, young Marguerite and her brother Bailey are sent from one part of the country to the other, from one parent to the other and from parents to grandparents. The very elusiveness of the absent mother and father causes the children to entertain wild fantasies concerning Daddy and "Mother Dear". When little Marguerite finally gets to meet her mother, she is "struck dumb" by her beauty, noting that to "describe [her] mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colors of a rainbow" (58). Here again, one is struck by the difficulty that the autobiographical text—which Cudjoe characterizes as "objective and realistic" (Cudjoe, 10)—experiences in relating what it purports to be "facts". Indeed, Angelou’s narrator notes that "[she] could never put [her] finger over her [mother’s] realness. She was so pretty and so quick [that Angelou] thought she looked just like the Virgin Mary" (*I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, 67).

Not only is Angelou's Mother Dear surrounded by a glamorous halo; she also lives a life that attempts to be free of conventional gender-roles: although she has been trained as a nurse, while living in freewheeling St Louis, she prefers to "earn extra money cutting poker games in gambling parlors" (68); she does not expect her friend Mr. Freeman to act as a stereotypical male provider. Rather, while she is out at her business, Freeman stays at home, and "simply waited for Mother and put his whole life into the waiting. He never read the paper or patted his foot or radio. He waited. That was all" (69). Tragically, it is during these periods of unfocused waiting that the mother's lover begins the sexual harassment of Marguerite that will lead to his rape of the little girl.

Yet, despite her intense admiration for her distant mother, Maya's relationship with her remains an essentially impersonal one during her entire childhood. As a matter of fact, at the time of the narrator’s molestation by Freeman, we are never told about the mother’s feelings or reactions, besides the fact that "[she] brought flowers and candy" to the hospital where the young girl would have liked to remain the rest of her life (80-81). Not only are Marguerite mother’s feelings concerning the rape of her daughter never explicited, but the text makes us understand that the narrator’s state of shocked muteness was not long tolerated in her home; the writer comments matter-of-factly that : "[She] was punished for being so uppity that [she] wouldn't speak," before noting, as
if in a laconic afternote: "I have never known if Momma sent for us, or if the St Louis family [where the rape had occurred] just got fed up with my grim presence. There is nothing more appalling than a constantly morose child" (85-86).

Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos faults Angelou for her failure to depict a convincing relationship between her young persona and her mother Vivian. She remarks that Angelou's alter-ego seems to skip all of the stages of self-discovery of womanhood, only to discover belatedly a sense of self at the very end of *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, as she realizes that she has become her mother's equal, and that she discovers that she is indeed pregnant. Indeed, it is only when she reaches an adult age and begins to worry about the physiological transformations that she is undergoing that Angelou meets her mother at an equal level and is able to experience a sense of true intimacy and "mutual, adult admiration" between them, as two fully-grown women (261). Within the context of an African-derived extended family structure such as the one portrayed by Angelou, the maternal role is actually played by Momma, the grand-mother, rather than by the narrator's biological mother; Demetrakopoulos however, fails to integrate the important African dimension of kinship and maternal lineage into her critical reading of Angelou's text.

After a discussion of young Maya's delivery of a child at the end of the text, and the assertion that "birth as self-actualization or gender-realization [is] a very limited step toward consciousness," Demetrakopoulos concludes by saying that Angelou's persona "never comes to terms with the matriarchal face that her biological mother embodies. She paints it over with a daughterly love that the mother does not deserve and that is singularly unconvincing" (196-99). There is no doubt that Angelou's description of her relationship to her mother remains problematic and leaves the reader with several unanswered questions. Nevertheless, Angelou's text does also provide some threads of intermittent autobiographical "truths" which can only retain our attention; shortly after noting the difficulty she experiences in "putting her finger" on her "real" mother, the narrator reflects: "But what mother and daughter understand each other, or even have the sympathy for each other's lack of understanding?" (67). One cannot help but wonder whether a strong, unrequited urge for such an understanding—or at least sympathy for it—does not control the relationship between the young girl
and her mother during the years that they are kept apart.

Angelou’s first book is replete with authentic human tragedy that culminates in Marguerite’s rape. As is often the case with people who have experienced intense tragedy, Angelou—as with Lorde in instances that I will examine—does not always reveal the entire depth of her knowledge or of her suffering. In an emblematic answer to Claudia Tate, the author of God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes, when asked about the criteria she uses in her autobiography, remarked: "Some [events] never were recorded because they either were so bad or so painful, that there was no way to write about them honestly and artistically without making them melodramatic" (Tate, 7). Once again the reader and critic is confronted with the complexities of the autobiographical enterprise and of the tensions that exist between an abstract, "objective" truth and one author’s “truth-in-writing.”

-F: Speaking The Erotic:

One of the principal examples of silencing which has been imposed upon women throughout their history has been the forced obfuscations of women’s discourses on their physical desires and sexuality. One might also extend this remark to the discourses on marginalized forms of sexuality. In the case of lesbianism, the patriarchally-controlled cultures and languages of the West have appropriated the majority of discourses on feminine homosexuality. Consequently, lesbianism has been described in a totally exterior heterosexual, and, as it were, voyeuristic mode, from John Cleland’s Fanny Hill to Baudelaire’s "poèmes maudits" in Les Fleurs du mal or again Pierre Louÿs’s Chansons de Bilitis. It is only quite recently that anglophone—as well as francophone—lesbians have been able to reclaim a woman-identified erotic tradition, as is evidenced in the works of Lorde, Wittig and others.

Sexual identity lies at the core of Lorde’s self-definition as a black lesbian. The poet only starts to come to terms with her sexuality and her intimate feelings once that she has left her parent’s
home, thanks to another young black female, Ginger, a factory-worker at the electronics plant where
the writer had no other friends. In a reassuring and mirroring manner, Ginger is gorgeously fat, with
"snapping little dark eyes, [and] skin the color of well-buttered caramel" (139) and provides the first
erotic home for Lorde. Years later, in particular in the poems from the Black Unicorn collection,
Lorde was to "come home" to her African roots and aesthetics which had always been with her and
make extensive use of African—in particular from the Benin and Yoruba cultures—cosmology and
religious beliefs; this re-unification with her racial and cultural roots occurs in particular through her
involvement with the stunning Afrekete, a beautiful black woman with "her chocolate skin and deep,
sculptural mouth [that] reminded [Lorde] of a Benin bronze" (Zami. 244). Indeed, Afrekete, the last
lover in the text, is portrayed as an initiator and as a teacher of "new definitions of our women's
bodies" (250), one who made love to Auré on a midsummer moon night, and then just vanished,
leaving a message that she was going back to her seven-year old daughter whom she had left in
Georgia (250). It is also interesting to note with Judy Grahn that in the traditional Yoruba religious
pantheon, Afrekete, also known as Eshu, is a male/female divinity; Eshu/ Afrekete was initially a
female in ancient times, and remains the "rhyme god, the seventh and youngest in the pantheon [. . .]
As the trickster, he/she makes connections, is communicator, linguist and poet. Only Afrekete knows
all the languages of all the gods" (Grahn, 120-25) 4. The first step toward a metaphorical sense of
going home occurs therefore through the physical contact with the body of a loved one, one that
secures a sense of wholeness and of re-assurance in order to embark upon further explorations of the
self. In so doing, Lorde deliberately reclaims the territory of the erotic from the control of
heterosexism; she writes in her essay Uses of The Erotic: "In touch with the erotic, I become less
willing to accept powerless [or] resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial" (7).
In some cases, the seduction of the loved body remains a purely retrospective one, as with Gennie,
the first adolescent love, departed too soon: "May 22, 1949 Things I never did with Genevieve: let
our bodies touch and tell the passions that we felt . . . Ask her to take us away with her to Africa
next time. Write THE BOOK [sic]. Make love" (Zami. 97).

One of the most arresting aspects of Lorde's "fiction," and of its autobiographical thrust
toward spiritual and physical empowerment, is the use that the poet makes of eroticism throughout

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her text, reclaiming it as a nurturing force and as a means of empowerment for all women as well as
a cause for celebration rather than silence. Traditionally in her family, "the sensual content of life
was masked and cryptic," or again "attended in well-coded phrases" (32). Lorde establishes as it were
a geography of female desires and bodies, as well as a chronology of increasing physical longing. In
one of the last instances of an intimate communion between mother and daughter, Lorde evokes an
occasion during which she helped her mother in the kitchen with the traditional Caribbean preparation
of foods with a pestle, shortly after her first menstruation. Womanly odors and those emanating from
the food mingle in the narrator's memory, as do barely suppressed longings for the mother:

I felt the slight rubbing bulge of the cotton pad between my legs,
and I smelled the delicate breadfruit smell rising up [. . .] that was
my own woman smell, warm, shameful, but secretly utterly
delicious. [. . .]. As I continued to pound the spice, a vital
connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my
fingers [curved around the pestle] and the molten core of my body
whose source emanated from a new ripe fulness beneath the pit of
my stomach. That invisible thread, taut and sensitive as a clitoris
exposed, stretched through my curled fingers up my round brown
arm into the moist reality of my armpit

. . . (Zami, 77-78).

This moment of intense physical awareness echoes the confluence of language and
menstruation which critics have underlined in their reading of Angelou's I Know Why The Caged
Bird Sings. Françoise Lionnet comments on the slang connotation of "flowers," a black prostitutes'
term for menstruation which Angelou mentions in Gather Together in My Name (39) and which is
also found in the name of Bertha Flowers, young Maya's benevolent neighbor. She goes on to say
that "the juxtaposition between the slang word and 'literary' words point back to the narrator's
rediscovery of human language after her deflowering at the age of eight . . . Language and
menstruation are thus brought into implicit parallel as flow, voice, words, songs all connote by
association the fluid movements of music or text" (Lionnet, 134-35). This growing sense of physical
awakening displaces itself from the Lorde's body to her mother's—in a sublimated manner—and onto
her lovers's bodies. It is also geographically centered around Carriacou, the mythical island of
womanly love which opens and closes her autobiographical text. Rather than a mere chronological
progression in time like that of a typical Bildungsroman, the poet's biomythography therefore takes
the reader on the search of one black woman's exploring and becoming the confluence of the
multiple personae who define her: a woman, a black woman, a feminist, a mother, and a black feminist lesbian. Remarkably, the typographical multiplicity of textual signs reflects this multiple self.

In her essay "Paradigm," French lesbian critic and author Monique Wittig writes that inasmuch as the origins of lesbianism can be traced outside masculinist hegemony, it posits a "culture of undominated women, a culture outside the heterosexual social field" and adds that "lesbianism is much more than sexuality" (Wittig, 116-17). As Lorde defines the tight-knit lesbian groups she was associated with in New York and elsewhere in the 50's, it is clear that sexuality was only one way of relating and bonding for these women who "all cared for and about each other" and who were trying to "build a community of sorts where [they] could at least survive within a world [they] correctly perceived to be hostile to [them]" (Zami, 179). Sexuality is certainly crucial to Lorde's text but does not totally enclose the extent of her relationships to her female lovers, or sum up her entire allegiance to a community of "sistah-outsiders," such as Addie who was "Marie Evans beautiful, a wasted sister-soul" (226). Lorde frequently refers in her works to the term "outsider," as in her poem "Sister Outsider" (The Black Unicorn) in which she praises the strength and beauty of another woman-survivor, a mother like Lorde, out in the wilderness of homophobia and racism. The biomythographer has to chart her own road of self-discovery, as she notes in Zami: "There were no mothers, no sisters, no heroes. We had to do it alone, like our sister Amazons" (176).

Whereas male figures occupy a relatively important place in Angelou's autobiography—in particular her disabled uncle Willie in I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings and her son Guy in All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes—men are almost totally absent from Lorde's women-centered text. Of her well-loved but distant father, Lorde writes that "[he] leaves his psychic print upon me, silent, intense and unforgiving. But his is a distant lightning" (Zami, 3). Lorde's young and totally inadequate male lover abandons her while she is pregnant with a child that she decides to abort. In this woman-centered universe devoid of men, one does not, however, experience a female equivalent to what Baldwin termed the "male prison" in his essay on Gide's Corydon. Zami does however present a strong sense of psychological—and sexual—competition, with its accompanying train of
casual sex and infidelities, a competition wherein the voice of the controlling narrator sets the rules. Her text's depiction of the young women—black and white—with whom Lorde first experiences "the life" as a lesbian presents some common traits with the stories of initiation into manhood as told in several Bildungsromanen written by young males, both straight and gay. *Zami* however does present essentially nurturing images of relationships between women: "images of women flaming like torches adorn and define the borders of my journey, stand like dykes between me and the chaos" (3).

Despite the feelings of bonding that held lesbians together in the days of Lorde’s "coming out," *Zami* also tells of racial incidents that took place quite frequently within the homosexual community (222) as well as of the potential differences and tensions that were often left unspoken within the small, vulnerable groups of lovers and friends (205). Although Lorde desperately needed the protection and the secrecy of the closeted world of American lesbians in the McCarthy years during which she "came out," she never was deluded into believing that her blackness did not set her apart. In effect, the number of black women—and men for that matter—who were "out" in those years was minuscule: the odds against them were just too great, and they ended up being the "invisible ones" of the gay/lesbian movement well into the Seventies. Furthermore, the compounded forces of racism and homophobia resulted in the virtual invisibility of lesbians and gay men of color both from the public eye and from their own communities, as well as from the essentially white, middle-class homosexual communities.

As Lorde’s text shows, the American homosexual community in the 50’s, particularly around New York City, did offer a haven of sorts against the larger homophobic and racist environment; Lorde notes that "lesbians were probably the only black and white women in New York City making any real attempt to communicate" at the time (179). Yet, she could not escape the uncanny feeling of being both "a closet student and an invisible Black" (179). Furthermore, not only did Lorde have to confront racism from homosexuals and homophobia from blacks, but she also had to experience classism and racism when she started to work. As the account of the harrowing work she did at Stamford, Connecticut, shows, Lorde was only too aware that racism pervaded the industrial labor force and controlled relations between black and white workers: she had to run a commercial x-ray...
machine at an electronics plant where only Puerto-Rican and African-American women worked at the most dangerous posts, and where in order to increase productivity no security regulations were followed (125-47). Here again, racial solidarity and privileges proved stronger than same-sex bonding, and the pervasive homophobic environment, common to most of the blue-collar world, rendered any lesbian or gay identification almost impossible.

-F: Speaking Oneself Out of Silence/Naming The Nameless

Eroticism and sexuality play an equally crucial role in Angelou's work and are also connected with the writer's coming into her own voice and struggling with the constraints of silence. As with Lorde's forced abortion and her "coming out," the discovery of young Maya's physical nature and of her heterosexual desires, brings both joy and intense turmoil to the narrator. The attention Angelou receives from African suitors while in Ghana clearly has a pleasing effect on her and contributes to an increased sense of self-worth in someone who had been almost totally psychically destroyed following the rape at seven-and-a-half-years old which Angelou describes in I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings (70-80).

Following her insidious seduction and ultimate rape by Freeman, the young Angelou locks herself up in total silence. She is under the false impression that a man has died as a result of her having lied, out of fear, at the symbolic trial of her molester—who is later murdered in retribution; she consequently decides to stop talking to everyone except her brother Bailey. In "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," Lorde addresses her audience by saying that "each of us is here because in one way or another, we share a commitment to language and the power of language" (Sister Outsider, 43). In her own way, Angelou's alter ego discovered the powerful consequences of words and language years before Lorde gave her address on how she fought back against cancer and other menaces through the empowerment of language. However, rather than using language to her advantage, Angelou's narrator at first lets herself become a hostage of the very power of words that, in the young girl's mind at least, can kill. As Françoise Lionnet notes, Maya discovers language as a "potential killer," and as an "evil, uncontrollable polluting tool"
Paradoxically, she discovers that sound and words can be conquered and governed through her idiosyncratic command of silence, and that she sees as her skill to "eat up all the sounds" (85):

I discovered that to achieve perfect personal silence all I had to do was to attach myself leechlike to sound . . . I walked into rooms where people were laughing, their voices hitting the walls like stones, and I simply stood still—in the midst of the riot of sound. After a minute or two, silence would rush into the room from its hidden place, because I had eaten up all the sounds (I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, 85).

As the same critic notes, this self-imposed silence has both physiological and psychic manifestations: the narrator's "isolation and alienation are complete. She achieves control over yet other bodily functions, her tongue, her breath. She closes off all her orifices, paradoxically, by letting the outside world of sounds rush in, so that the inner reality of evil is prevented from rushing out" (Lionnet, 149). In effect, Angelou's young narrator is only rescued from her mute retreat of self-inflicted catatonic indifference through the care and persistence and above all, love of language and poetry, of one black female neighbor. Just as the power of language and words frightens the sexually-abused girl into an obstinate silence, it brings her back to an articulate affirmation of self. When her neighbor, one Mrs. Flowers, invites her for ice-cream and starts reading to her from a collection of poetry in a singing voice, young Maya's determination is shaken by the gently cascading, almost musical sounds she has just experienced: "It occurred to me that she expected a response. The sweet vanilla flavor [of the words] was still on my tongue, and her reading was a wonder in my ears. I had to speak" (97). Language proves therefore to be a crucial axis of identification and affirmation of self (first as a victim and later as life-affirming person) for the young girl. Indeed, as Angelou has often commented, using her metaphor of linguistic voraciousness, paradoxically this "period of muteness helped [her] become a writer . . . [She] would just eat books up and absorb all sounds around her" 14. Not only does the attention and care of the older woman restore young Maya to her sense of self, but it also "merges [her] with a community of others. Bertha Flowers is an ideal other but not a mirroring presence. She mediates and guides Maya's entry into a multiplicity of 'private lives'" (Lionnet, 153).

Reading and reciting poetry out loud becomes thus part of a healing process in which words are trusted once more as the enchanted gift that enable a young black Southern girl to be "invited
into the private lives of strangers, and to share their joys and fears," be they William Shakespeare or Paul Laurence Dunbar (98). Indeed, when one has the good fortune to attend one of Angelou's dramatic readings of her work, it seems almost impossible to conceive that this highly vocal and articulate artist was at one point tempted by the "delicious [sense] of not having to speak, never having to explain anything anymore".

Audre Lorde's own acquisition of a voice is documented in the section "How I Became a Poet": she tells of her mother's "secret and special relationship with words" and of the "picturesque constructions and surreal scenes" that would cascade out of her mouth (Zami, 32). She also tells us of the thrill and anxieties about being allowed to sit up with her two elder sisters and listen to their story-telling, while sharing only too brief moments of intimacy and inclusiveness with them (46-47).

While Angelou credits the "mother wit" of generations of rural blacks, and the popularity of the triumphant stories that black men told around the places where she lived as sources of her own craft (I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, 128), Lorde clearly connects story-telling to an essentially female, tight-knit oral tradition. She inserts her accession to writing and mythological self-genesis into a woman-identified lineage of bonding and storytelling, and comments: "I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as of her hidden angers". Here again, the sense of physical intimacy and woman-to-woman affiliation is important, as when she is sitting up with her sisters, or again, sitting between her mother's spread legs, having her hair combed, while listening to her voice and stories (33).

Because of the odds she has had to fight against in her private and public life as well as in her very painful, ongoing struggle with cancer, Lorde had to confront the threats of silence at an early stage, and has assessed the damage which denial and forced silence have exacted from humankind and from black women in particular. Zami is controlled by the urgency of vocal empowerment against the life-threatening realities of homophobia, sexism, and disease. Writing about her uphill battle with disease, the poet notes in her Cancer Journals: "silence and invisibility go hand in hand with powerlessness ... I had known the pain, and survived it. It only remained for me to give it voice, to share it for use, that the pain not be wasted" (16, 61).
The tropes of silence and invisibility are thus tragically relevant in the case of Lorde and of those whose very feelings of intimacy and bonding have turned them into outcasts, according to accepted conventions. While escaping the reality of blackness was hardly possible within the context of racially-divisive societies—except for those who could or decided to "pass"—denying one's feelings of homosexuality (or bisexuality) certainly was an option which men and women of all races, age-groups, religions and social milieus considered most seriously until the breaking of this silence by people such as Lorde, Baldwin, Edmund White and others. In a recent interview, the author of *Zami* comments once more on the silence that so many would still rather impose upon the voices of racial, gender or sexual difference:

> Silence never bought us anything . . . the lie has always been traditionally that if we do not speak what we know to be true, then we will be allowed to take part in the fruits of whatever the imperfect systems are that we live in. For the disenfranchised . . . this is patently not true.  

Yet, as the preceding discussion demonstrates, "speaking what we know to be true" remains a problematic task, even for such talented writers as Lorde and Angelou. The self that the writer knows to be her—or his—persona does not necessarily recover the self-representation(s) of the autobiographical text. Indeed, as a close reading of Lorde's biomythography constantly reminds us, the gaps and deliberate silences, more so than the spoken "truths" of her text, reveal the difficulty of the recovery of silenced, lost voices. As it were, Lorde's total control of her narrative barely relents long enough to allow her reader to raise some crucial questions concerning the nature of autobiography and its inevitable limitations.

One could say that what draws together works seemingly as different as Lorde's biomythography and Angelou's two autobiographical texts is their common desire to speak their truth, however unconventional and at times controversial, and in so doing empower themselves. As a result, both authors are confronted with some crucial challenges concerning their personal identities, their cultural, racial and affective allegiances and preferences. Both women also have ultimately to "come home": for Angelou, initially this means having a child when still a teenager herself (*I Know Why*...
The Caged Bird Sings) and many years later and miles away, coming to terms with the fact that despite her leave-taking from Africa, she "knew that [her] people had never completely left Africa. [They] had sung it in [their] blues, shouted it in [their] gospel . . . carried it to Philadelphia, Boston [or] Birmingham. We had changed its color, modified its rhythms, yet it was Africa which rode in the bulges of our calves, shook in our protruding behinds and cracked in our wide open laughter" (209). Likewise, the sounds of gospel and black music—as is the case also with Ellison’s Invisible Man upon his return to Harlem—act as a revelation of her newly-defined self upon Lorde’s narrator: she realizes that the time has come for her to pull together the multiple facets of her rich persona and give her a new name; “[The gospel music on Second Avenue] was like a surge of strength. It felt rich with hope and a promise of life, a new way through or beyond pain . . . I suddenly stood upon a hill in the center of an unknown country, hearing the sky fill with a new spelling of my own name” (Zami, 239). This new name spells itself in the multiple voices that construct the poet’s rich persona.

In a recent interview, Angelou confided that one of the biggest fears that she had when thinking of coming out of her self-imposed silence was that she would not be able to ‘place’ her voice, and that it would eventually leave her altogether 13. Both Lorde and Angelou are actively engaged in defining the terms of what Kristeva sees as the "signifying space" of a new generation of (European) feminists; although Lorde and Angelou are writing out of totally distinct historical, racial and cultural traditions, they do participate in a "both corporeal and desiring mental space," one that does not exclude but rather proceeds to include other generations of women before and around them (Kristeva, 33).

Lorde’s and Angelou’s texts are thus emblematic of a constant tension that controls the writings of women, and specially black women: where does the public domain begin, and where does the private universe terminate? Indeed, rather than searching out the specific boundaries between public and private domains, Lorde and Angelou question the very existence of such hard-edge distinctions. Furthermore, these texts force us to question how one should define the voice(s) that control them: multiple, both oral and writerly, lyrical as well as historical, confessional and public at
the same time. Because of their individual life experiences and of their sense of craft, each author
has explored more thoroughly one voice or the other; at first glance, Lorde's poetics might seem to
be couched in far more private, physical and erotic terms than Angelou's. Indeed, the orality of
Angelou's texts—which seem written to be read out loud—and her training as a performer confer a
strong public quality to her work. Moreover, because of her involvement in many public causes, both
in Africa and in the U.S.A, the author of All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes often appears to
be a "political" writer and a community-oriented one, who has no trouble discussing Panafri canism or
the Civil rights movement with her audience. As even a cursory reading of Lorde's work clearly
shows, however, the author of Zami is as aware and committed as Angelou, albeit in a more indirect
and lyrical manner. Nonetheless, neither of these writers lets ideologies control their art and craft: no
historical recollection or speech can replace the wonderful music and rhythm of Angelou's rich, deep
idiom and voice. No political manifesto or protest sheet can equal the severely lyrical sense of
exultation that one gets when reading Lorde's Coal, The Black Unicorn or Zami.

These works are structured around the tropes of growth from silence to empowerment and
from invisibility to visibility which are crucial to Lorde's and Angelou's texts. In this respect, they
are emblematic of the victorious struggles of black female authors to come into voices of their own.
ENDNOTES


10. This did not prevent the existence of an active lesbian/gay subculture in black communities--particularly in Harlem--as early as the 1920's. For further readings concerning this neglected aspect of African-American culture, see in particular Gloria Joseph's essay "Styling, Profiling, and Pretending: The Games Before the Fall," in Common Differences Eds. Jill Lewis and Gloria Joseph, particularly pp. 178-97 and 228-29. Concerning homophobia within the black community, see bell hooks's chapter "Reflections on Homophobia and Black Communities" in Talking Back, 1989.

11. For an analysis of racism in the labor force, see bell hooks' Ain't I A Woman, 132-37.


15. "Fresh Air".
CONCLUSION:

From the Singular to the Communal: Voice and Narrative Strategies in the Fiction by Black Women from The Diaspora

In a comment on the problematic nature of black autobiographies, William Andrews writes that "it seems much more fruitful to treat the form more as a complex of linguistic acts in a discursive field than as a verbal emblem of an essential self uniquely stamped on a historical narrative" (To Tell A Free Story, 23). This "complex of linguistic acts" appears not only in the more autobiographical texts but also in the other texts under consideration in this study. When Angelou's narrator is about to start school in San Francisco, she reflects that, like other black children in the same classroom, she "[was] alert to the gap separating the written word from the colloquial. We learned to slide out of one language and into another without being conscious of the effort" (I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, 209). Angelou's gift of linguistic ubiquity—connected with the sense of psychological multiplicity which one gets from her texts, as well as from the other narratives in this study—suggests as it were, duplicity on the narrator's part. It also underlines the central place that language and its multiple uses occupy in texts by black women from the American mainland and Caribbean.

Furthermore, as this study shows, there exists a constant tension within the texts I investigated between the emergence of the specific voices of black women writers and the acute awareness on the part of these same authors of their belonging to communities with their own history, culture and social traits. Indeed, if one follows Victor Turner's definition of a "communitas" as an essentially non-territorial community—one that must be understood for its "existential quality" since it "involves the whole man in his relations to other whole men"
(Turner, 96)—one can contend that the communities in these texts are above all cultural, historically-produced ones, for which the locale of Naylor’s Brewster Place acts as a fitting metaphor. Interestingly, Turner’s definition of communitas rejoins Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s comment on the fiction of nineteenth- and twentieth-century, white Anglo-American women writers that "in the distinctive narrative strategy of the multiple individual, the female hero fuses with a complex and contradictory group; her power is articulated and continued through a community..." (DuPlessis, 142). In the case of black women authors, one must keep in mind that "race," gender and social constraints have played a crucial part in the formation of the black communities to which they belong. Because of these very constraints, these women’s mode of empowerment and articulation of their power as well as the "multiple individualities" which define them, and which I have explored in this study, are truly idiosyncratic to the many cultural, historical black communitas from the Americas.

This study therefore is an attempt to locate the traces of the collective experience of communities within texts by black women from the Americas while distinguishing the possibilities and limitations of this "communitas" as they apply to each other. Whereas the French and British literary traditions since the English Romantics and Victor Hugo have devolved upon the image of the "inspired" poet/writer as prophet and "mage," black writers from the New World do not write out of the ivory tower; rather, as Morrison suggests, the black writer is faced with the necessary merging of a singular "I" with a communal "we,"—one that is explicit or not in the narratives in this study. In her essay on "Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison debunks the traditional Western myth of the writer in his or her splendid aesthetic isolation and comments: "[t]he treatment of artists by the people for whom
they speak is also of some interest. That is to say, when the writer is one of them, when the voice is not the separate, isolated ivory tower voice of a very different kind of person but an implied 'we' in a narration" (343) As a result, the black poets'/writers' voices—and in particular those of black women—are the voices of spokespeople rather than those of self-proclaimed visionaries. In so doing, black female authors participate in what Elizabeth Abel and other contemporary feminists have defined as a "distinctive female I," one that they define essentially through concepts of community and empathy rather than through autonomous individuation (Abel et als., 10). This sense of communitas—which Nathan A. Scott sees as equally crucial to Ellison's Invisible Man and defines as "a profound hunger for communitas... a yearning not for any simple kind of social structure... but rather for that spontaneous, immediate flowing from I to Thou"—is thus quintessential to the texts considered in this study. As well in their rhetorical expressions as in their borderline positions—between the white and black universes, between individual choices and communal concerns, and finally between masculine and feminine perceptions—black women from Brooklyn to Martinique have had to negotiate their fragile authority from the threshold places where they have usually been kept.

Nevertheless, as my earlier discussion of Schwarz-Bart, Morrison's The Bluest Eye or Lorde's Zami indicate, each writer's articulation of the tension between a solitary "I" and the communal voices that connects them with the wider communities of black women, and with Blacks as a whole, is an idiosyncratic one: accordingly, the particular narrative allows for more or less accommodation between the different terms that define the individual's persona. For Pecola Breedlove in The Bluest Eye, the merging of the individual and of the communal voices never happens; Morrison's heroine goes insane from never actually finding any of the
voices which belong to her, even as the narrative dislocates itself into mere threads of meaning, only to be finally articulated by Claudia MacTeer's own narrative. In Pluie et vent sur Téhumée Miracle on the other hand, as Scharfman has convincingly demonstrated, one observes the successful emergence and construction of a full grown person, Téhumée, despite the shortcomings and defeats (the loss of Sonore, the absence of her own children) that she must undergo. Lorde's biomythography probably illustrates at its fullest the tension between the idiosyncratic, and the longing for a communal voice: because of the multitude of stereotypes and cliches Lorde is writing up against in her text, she must both assert her personal voice at all cost, even as she claims to belong to a long lineage of women-identified women; she also lends her voice to all those women like her—whether black, lesbian or both—who had been rendered voiceless up till her time. Only through a deliberate attempt to (re-)connect with one's past and ancestors—in this case those women who came and wrote before each specific writer's time—does any sense of continuity and progression of being appear.

As Alice Walker suggests in her collection of essays, In Search of Our Mother's Gardens, the sense of connectedness with one's artistic and existential predecessors and with one's spiritual and aesthetic lineage is crucial to her work and to the works of black artists in general, as well as to the terms of the discourses which they choose to express themselves. In effect, the process of re-connectedness of the "I" with the writers' communal identity in these texts occurs through a renewed awareness of the multiplicity of rhetorical devices and stratagems that exist in all language.

Whereas for white women language had to be regained from the control and validation of their husbands and brothers, for women of color the repossession was a twofold one: both from the hold of sexism—including black men's control over their voices—and also from the grip of racism, a silencing imposed upon black women by both white men and women. As I have suggested earlier, the nature of this language continues to occupy a crucial place in any critical discussion on African-American literature in particular. In a recent essay, Gates seems to echo Deborah McDowell's sceptic query concerning the existence of a "monolithic Black female language" (McDowell, 154), when he writes that the recurrent tropes of a black literary tradition have been, "doubleness, alienation, equivocality" ("Talking Black", 21). Just as the personae that emerge from this reading of black texts are multiple, the rhetorical tropes and instruments used are equally multiple.

One of the most emblematic texts for a demonstration of the complexities of the oppression of black women's articulation of a voice of their own remains Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Recent critics who, with Alice Walker and Robert Hemenway have forced us to re-appraise Hurston's works, all concentrate on her use of voice(s) in her celebrated text as well as in *Mules and Men* and other works. In her essay on matrilineage and recurrent misreadings of literary precursors which she applies to Alice Walker and Hurston, Dianne F. Sadoff notes the "double perspective" that controls most of Hurston's oeuvre, as is manifest in her "gatepost stance" (Johnson, 205), one that clearly indicates Hurston's "liminality" between the "I" of her voice-in-writing and the "we" of the implied communitas she was writing about.

As with other women writers after her, Hurston had to rely on continual rhetorical
subterfuge and strategies simply to be heard, and consequently, read. Like Angelou, who made up a fictitious résumé in order to get a job at the San Francisco cable-car company, Hurston had to tread a fine line between "near truths" and "total lies". On the other hand, in her problematic relationship to her hypothetical audience, Angelou acts both as a messenger and as a cultural translator: she is a mediator between the spoken black vernacular she grew up with and the "proper" speech of school and of the larger society, as well as between the rich traditions of the black South and the new cultures in formation in California and elsewhere to which she is exposed (Lionnet, 160). In so doing, Hurston remains an exemplary case of the recurrent convergence of a singular identity with the communal voices which black women writers re-construct and interpret through their craft.

Angelou's self-conscious stance as a cultural go-between repeats Hurston's earlier engagement both as an all-black Eatonville, Florida native and as a Barnard Anthropology graduate who has returned South to collect data on a fast-dying culture and traditions, with the "spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that" (Mules and Men, 13). As Sadoff remarks, a "double-perspective aligns Hurston's stance and voice . . . To contain the difference between South and North, Hurston creates [. . .] a semifictional self-effacing narrator who presents her tales, a poseur" (Sadoff, 13). This "double perspective" is also manifest in Hurston's use of standard English and Southern black idiom which interact as verbal counterpoints throughout her texts. Nevertheless, despite her feelings of empathy and her conspicuous love for the culture which she is recording and observing, the "Zora" whose voice controls Mules and Men maintains a paradoxical distance from her hometown friends and relatives. This distance is most visible in what Hemenway characterizes as Hurston's use of an "educated innocent" narrative voice, the transitional voice of a town prodigal that obeys the
narrator's impulse "to lose the self in the art and wisdom of the group" (Hemenway, 221, 164-66).

Coming into one's voices is therefore crucial to all of these narratives that purport to describe their authors' complex personae; moreover, choosing one's voices is the distinguishing characteristic of all these texts. In his comments on language and its relationship to cultural heteroglossia, M. M. Bakhtin notes that novels are "orchestrated" by a "heteroglot sense of the world and of society," and that "language is present to the novelist only as something stratified and heteroglot" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 331-32). In all of these texts of self-discovery and genesis, the authors write to contradict the voices of patriarchal, white hegemony, even as they speak from the strata of myriad voices that live inside them. As Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar and others have shown in their revision of Harold Bloom's masculinist model of poetic precedence and influence applied to the works of women, the conditions of the "passage à l'acte" (coming-to-writing) is a crucial stage in the careers of women writers, as illustrated by Angelou's and Lorde's discussions of the circumstances in which they each became writers. In effect, Julia Kristeva has remarked that the traditional—in patriarchal terms at least—desire for motherhood manifests itself nowadays more and more in "the aspiration toward artistic, and in particular, literary creation" (31). Exploring the reasons for this displacement from literal—and from an experience common to many women—to figurative birthing and creativity, Kristeva adds:

Today many women imagine 'Flaubert c'est moi.' This identification with the potency of the imaginary is not only an identification, an imaginary potency . . . This identification also bears witness to women's desire to lift the weight of what is sacrificial in the social contract from their shoulders, to nourish our societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name what has thus far never been an object of circulation in the community: the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second
Echoing Virginia Woolf's thoughts about the existence of Shakespeare's sister, Alice Walker, Tillie Olsen and others have questioned the fate of women creators. They ask in particular what happened to women who lived in a time and place that denied them an existence, let alone the expression of any artistic talent, and force us to reflect on the "agony of the lives of women who might have been poets" (Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, 234). If black, did such a woman live "under some ignorant and depraved white overseer's lash? Or was she required to bake biscuits for a lazy backwater tramp, when she cried out in her soul to paint watercolors of sunsets . . ." (In Search of Our Mother's Gardens, 66). Similarly, Olsen in Silences interrogates the "silences where the lives never came to writing. Among these the mute inglorious Miltons . . . the barely educated; the illiterate; women" (10). In an equally important essay on the nature of female creativity, Susan Gubar discusses Isak Dinesen's story "The Blank Page" and its "bloodied sheets in [a] convent gallery"; the same critic goes on to establish a link between creativity and women's physiology, and adds that "many women experience their own bodies as the only available medium for their art, with the result that the distance between the woman artist and her art is often radically diminished . . . the woman artist who experiences herself as killed into art may also experience herself as bleeding into print" (296).

Several critics of African-American literature have noted how clothing and colours play a crucial role from J. Fauset's early stories to Toni Cade Bambara's The Salt Eaters and Morrison's novels, in particular in the definition of their female characters. The body is assuredly the most immediate form of unmediated "language" for those who have been made voiceless, as women, and in particular minority women, have been for a long time. Art, and
especially the "minor" folk arts, are another means of coming-into-their-voices common to many women and which they have adopted since time immemorial. In her groundbreaking essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" from the collection which bears the same title, Walker writes extensively on the quintessential importance of quilting--and in her own mother's case, gardening and creativity with flowers--as means to define an authentic poetics of creativity common to many black Southern women.

Remarkably, Walker's mother, as well as those women whose stories Hurston recorded, all had an artistic outlet in which to channel and express their suppressed creativity and imaginative persona, despite their experiences of male domination through words. This male hegemony through language is conspicuous in Hurston's Janie's conflictual relationship with her second husband Jody Starks whose repeated wish to be "a big voice" emblematizes the voice of male hegemony. As Gates comments, Starks's "big voice [in Their Eyes Were Watching God] comes to stand as a synecdoche of oppression, in opposition to the speech community of which Janie longs to become an integral part" (Gates, The Signifying Monkey, 200). Language as the emblem of masculinist logos and silencing also appears in a key letter-writing episode in Morrison's Song of Solomon: following a tense encounter between Milkman and his girlfriend Hagar, the young man goes home and decides to write a letter of farewell to his friend, with the conviction that his words will dispose of her fate in a neat and orderly way, showing thus the extent of the power of his words, which in this case, proclaim the limits of one woman's autonomy and act as a death-sentence for Hagar:

... having thought so carefully of what he would say to her, he felt as though he had already had the conversation and that settled everything. He went back to his father's office, got some cash out of the safe, and wrote Hagar a nice letter ... He did sign it with love, but it was the word 'gratitude' and the flat-out coldness of 'thank you' that sent Hagar spinning into a bright blue place where the air was thin and it was silent all the time ... and where everything was frozen except for an occasional burst of fire.
inside her chest . . . (Song of Solomon, 99).

Exploring the meaning of art in the lives of her mother and grandmothers and their continued creativity, Walker goes on to write:

for these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality . . . that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane (In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, 233).

This phase of coming-into-one's-voices proves much more problematic in the case of those women--and men--who do not, or cannot, find a proper channel for their potential creativity: they remain "unborn artists," as are Morrison's Sula and Cholly, or "failed person[s] of words, left dreaming like Pecola" (M. Dixon, 155). Commenting upon the immense odds accumulated against the existence and survival of black women artists, M. H. Washington re-affirms the centrality of the concept of culturally-produced communal experiences specific to black women and writes: "In order to develop the intrepid faith in her own work, the courage to defy restraint or convention or stigma, the artist is desperate for the nourishment and sustenance that come from community, from connectedness, [and] from [Adrienne Rich's words] ' a "dialogue with brave and imaginative women who came before" (Midnight Birds, 45).

-B: The Impossibilities and Obfuscations of A Black Female Language

Despite the persistence of the communality of experiences for black women from the diaspora, there remain innumerable obstacles which each of these texts confront and illustrate:
racism in all cases, often compounded by xenophobia, as is the case for Marshall’s immigrant women, class and caste prejudice as in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* or Naylor’s *Linden Hills*, or again homophobia from within the black community as evidenced in *The Women of Brewster Place* or *Zami*. Such obstacles render the adequate merging of singular and communal voices and identities extremely difficult, as the fate of Morrison’s Pecola brilliantly illustrates; when the merging between the individual "I" and the communal "we" fails, the protagonist remains an incomplete, alienated figure, comparable to an unfulfilled artist. The most striking example of an incomplete artist who does not ever find her proper voice is of course Morrison’s Sula: commenting on the persistent rumors concerning her heroine’s "strangeness" and "naiveté," Morrison’s narrator adds:

Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like an artist with no art form, she became dangerous (Sula, 121).

Sula’s “dangerousness” is the result of her not being rooted in a place, time or community; consequently, she does not possess a voice of her own by which to define and position herself in a hostile world. In his study of tropes of identity and territory in African-American literature, Melvin Dixon notes that what causes Sula to fail is precisely her unlimited urge toward freedom, as well as her “thrill of self-creation, a riding of the air” (154). Noting that Sula fails when her "wish for total freedom, for flight becomes as much a delusion as Pecola’s blue eyes," Dixon adds: "Sula succumbs to the ‘hollow’, as Plum did at the ‘hole’ of sleep, because [she] could not give adequate voice and action to her vision. Instead of flying, she descends to the loam of the very land that marked her from birth” (156).
In effect, following her return to Medallion after years of wandering, Sula only disconnects further from her peers, rather than re-connecting with the cultural and historical communitas of black women and men with whom she has grown up. In a world where the logos of the patriarchy constantly feels threatened by the "chaos of [female] creation" (Byerman, 203) someone like Sula, who cannot discipline the myriad voices within her, is perceived as an evil force and as a misfit. Indeed, those who do not have access to language, or again who do not control it properly are socially and politically doomed and treated as outcasts. Such is the case with Pecola and Soaphead Church in Morrison's The Bluest Eye; they belong to the group of those whom Olsen calls "the invisible, the as-innately-capable: the born to the wrong circumstances--diminished, excluded, foudered, silenced" (Silences, 39).

In her study of the relationship between Hurston and Walker and of the circumstances and importance of the latter writer's discovery of Hurston's works, Sadoff investigates black women writers' ambivalence about this literary lineage, as well as their "misreading of precursors, and [their] link to an oral as well as a written tradition" (5). According to the same critic, this situation leads several of these writers--including Walker--to an "idealized matriliney" [sic], "[that disguises anxiety even as it covers over] the troubling history of black women's motherhood" (Sadoff, 18).

In contrast with white women's texts which betray an anxiety of authorship--according to Gilbert and Gubar's revisions of Bloom's theories--African-American and African-Caribbean women authors, since Phyllis Wheatley and the early slave authors, have experienced the sheer danger of finding their own voices in the face of race, class and gender prejudices. In some cases, the prejudice was just too big and rendered the emergence of a black female discourse
impossible; this is emblematized by Pecola's fate in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* or again by Sula's "failure" and Jadine's lack of an articulate identity in *Tar Baby*, and their ultimate impossibility to create a language of their own.

In other cases, the obfuscation of black women's voices and matrilineal literary heritage has been so thorough that their reclaiming of such a lineage only succeeds after tremendous struggles: this is literally the case in Naylor's *Linden Hills* where Willa Prescott Nedeed must physically free herself from the tomb-like cave to which she has been relegated by her husband before she can regain a control over her life. It is also the case with Lorde's *Zami*, which, as I suggested earlier, constitutes a major step in reclaiming a black lesbian--literary tradition which has been long overlooked. Not only does a deliberate obfuscation or neglect of past texts by women make it difficult for their literary heiresses; the absence of an identified woman's literary tradition earlier in time can also be problematic when one discusses the emergence of certain literatures. Does the fact that up to the publication of Schwarz-Bart's novel, there were hardly any black Caribbean texts written by francophone women account for the low visibility of women authors in the French Caribbean, as opposed to the Anglophone islands and to the American mainland?

How do women writers such as Schwarz-Bart and Maryse Condé position themselves vis-à-vis a literary heritage in which one of earliest texts, *Les Gouverneurs de la Rosée* by the Haitian author Jacques Roumain, has been proclaimed the "roman des origines" from which every other text in this francophone tradition followed? Although French Caribbean critic Jean Bernabé specifies that "il serait exagéré de dire que tout roman antillais est la reprise ou encore la réécriture à l'infini de ce texte fondateur [Les Gouverneurs de la rosée]." Bernabé
distinguishes striking "jeu des correspondances implicites et explicites du texte de Roumain à
celui de Schwarz-Bart" before concluding that "un véritable travail opère dans le second texte
à partir du premier" (TED, 105). Despite his cautious denegations, Bernabé's remarks simply
annulate the creativity, originality, and literary importance of Schwarz-Bart's novels, and in
particular, Pluie et vent sur Télumé Miracle.

What is thus the significance of creating one's own literary space and traditions
against a heritage dominated by male figures (Césaire, Roumain, Fanon) and where the
concept of a community of female writers hardly exists? Moreover, these francophone
Caribbean literatures must negotiate the added difficulty of having to operate within a constant
linguistic dichotomy between the native creole idiom and the colonially-imposed language of
the French masters, creating what Bernabé calls "le mal diglossique des Antilles" that results
from "la domination et l'éviction du créole par le français" ("the evils of diglossia [that] have
led to the domination and eviction of créole by French" (112).

Intertextual influences have always occurred within the larger domain of the Caribbean
and North America, despite obvious linguistic, geographical and political barriers. These mutual
influences have taken place across generational differences, as Bernabé's comments on
Roumain and Schwarz-Bart, and Sadoff's discussion of Walker and Hurston suggest. Naylor's
Linden Hills is a textual verification of the importance of intetextuality for black writers, and
in particular, female authors. At the gloomiest moments of Willa's incarceration, the scrap-
books, recipe-books and other pieces of writing left by the other Nedeed women before her
prevent Luther Nedeed's wife from totally losing her sanity, and from being totally
disconnected from these women who suffered a similar fate. Even as she stares at Evelyn
Creton's last page of writing (204), Willa is haunted by the voices of her predecessors in
misfortune and by the traces of lives that once were. In a moment of total despair and frustration, Willa goes into a frenzy of destruction of all the books she can lay a hand upon. Paradoxically, however, the books, emblems of vanished and silenced women, resist Willa Nedeed’s urge to annihilate them:

Shredded paper floated around her feet in pastel heaps. She didn’t have to read them. She would read nothing else. Nothing. She just didn’t care anymore about their sad, twisted lives... She pulled at the pages between the covers of a heavily padded [photo] album, but the cellophane cut into her palms, resisting destruction... she slammed the album against the wall; it bounced back, fell open, and she found her frustration met by a pair of soft, compassionate eyes (Linden Hills, 205).

At the very moment therefore that Willa is ready to give up on her life, the inscriptions of the lives and experiences of women before her, joined to the silenced voices of the words and lines they accumulated over years of similar seclusion, unite to keep Luther’s wife sane. Willa’s discovery and re-ordering of the discontinued voices and texts of her predecessors structures the core of the novel and articulates the various stories which are embedded in this novel. Even though one can agree with some critics that the structure of Naylor’s second book lacks coherence and unity, it is still possible to say that despite its shortcomings, Naylor’s text raises the crucial question of the nature of a narrative and the way in which sub-plots and embedded stories constitute the final text that the reader experiences, while positing, as it were, the "internal intertextuality" of her novel.

Indeed, if one considers all the obstacles which the female--and male--writers of African descent have had to overcome in the Americas, the achievements obtained by these literatures over the past two centuries are remarkable. In a final section on the uses of voice and narrative strategies, I will propose that a deliberate attempt to merge the singular "I" with the "we" of the cultural and historical communitas as well as a complex interaction between

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individual, autobiographical voice and a communal, more public voice all continue to govern these texts and support the wealth and diversity of these literatures.

-C: Speaking in Voices Triumphant: Merging Individual and Communal Voices.

The texts that I have explored in my study posit therefore a multiplicity/duplicity of voices and linguistic acts: these voices and acts define several sub-texts and embedded narratives which have always characterized traditional black rhetorical games and rituals--both oral and literate--and consequently define a "narrative common ground" and a community of writing experience. This "poetical communitas" appears in concerns that are common to these texts, such as when the question of an adequate language is posed, i.e. the type of idiom which should dominate a particular text. Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for The Widow* clearly poses the need to identify and discuss essentially cultural and anthropological data from a non-scientific perspective. Furthermore, both *Praisesong* and *The Chosen Place. The Timeless People* integrate Caribbean patois in their narrative without being defined nonetheless as strictly Caribbean or regional texts. The same tension between a dominant language and a colonized one--essentially, a "language of one's own" and the language of others--is found in Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* where créole operates as a constant subtext of the "French" narrative. In other instances, the levels of discourse are not necessarily linguistic; they are related to psychological disorders, as is the case in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, or again grounded in rich oral and musical traditions as in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* or Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. This multiplicity of discourses also results from the particular nature of these authors' enterprises, as I demonstrated
concerning the genesis of a new persona in Lorde's *Zami*. Finally, the tension of voices can be read chronologically, as is the case in Naylor's *Linden Hills* where Willa Prescott Nedeed gradually uncovers the multiple layers of writings and lost voices that belonged to the women of the Nedeed family who were equally silenced before her.

Moreover, this narrative common ground—which is part of a historical, cultural communitas—is structured around the "trope of the Talking Book" which Gates and others in his wake see as the quintessential trope of the African-American tradition. This trope supposes a continuous intertextuality, both synchronic and diachronic, between the periods and the multiplicity of texts and voices that constitute this tradition. As Gates remarks in an elaborate discussion of this specific trope:

> it reveals [...] that the curious tension between the black vernacular and the literate white text, between the spoken and the written word, between the oral and the printed forms of literary discourse, has been represented and thematized in black letters at least since slaves and ex-slaves met the challenge of the Enlightenment to their humanity by literally writing themselves into being through carefully crafted representations in language of the black self (*The Signifying Monkey*, 131).

In his essay on "Hurston and the Speakerly Text"—a definition coined after Barthes's distinction between "writerly" and "readerly" texts, as well as from the African-American trope of the Talking Book—the same critic writes of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that Hurston's narrative strategy and "unusual form of the tale-within-the-tale [...] allows for [...] the representation of the forms of oral narration that [the novel] imitates so often—so often, in fact, that the very subject of this text would appear to be not primarily Janie's quest but the emulation of the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical structures of actual speech, an emulation designed to produce the illusion of oral narration" (*The Signifying Monkey*, 196).
Gates's comments force us to pay additional attention to the linguistic nature of any given text, whether it be fiction, poetry or a document that purports to establish certain biographical "truths." As M.M. Bakhtin writes in *The Dialogic Imagination*, "the central problem for a stylistics of the novel may be formulated as the problem of artistically representing language, the problem of representing the image of a language" (336); in the same chapter of his seminal work, Bakhtin goes on to develop his concept of heteroglossia and incorporates within its boundaries oral, regional, professional as well as technical idioms. Given the specific nature of black vernaculars within the Americas—be it Black English or Gullah in the United States, Sranang or Papiamento in Suriname and the Dutch Antilles, créole in Martinique, Guadeloupe and Haiti or the various Caribbean English dialects from the Anglophone islands—and their oral origins, any discussion of the linguistic nature of narrative strategies and typologies in black texts from the New World must necessarily take into account the confluence between the speakerly and the writerly in these literatures. It must also make place for the tension between individual and communal voices.

Among all of these texts, Morrison’s work points most emphatically towards an urge to merge the solitary "I" with a communal "we." This continued quest for connectedness and bonding is one that her male and female characters experience throughout her novels, as well as young and old—as Pilate’s relationship with Milkman in *Song of Solomon* indicates—and ultimately, people of different races. This rejoining does not always succeed, however, as my discussion of Sula’s failure to connect with her community suggests. Moreover, Jadine’s sense of rootlessness and her class prejudices in *Tar Baby* as well as the dislocation of discourse in *The Bluest Eye* or again at the end of *Beloved* indicate that such a merging of voices, if
desirable, does always remain a problematic one because of the weight of historical and societal constraints. One can say as a matter of fact that much of the discussion developed by Morrison in Beloved concentrates on the characters' conflictual relationship with each other and to their roots: it focuses in particular on Sethe and her past which is symbolized by Beloved. Remarkably, the issue of language, and of the problematic control of one's voice, intervenes at the end of the novel, as Morrison's narrative subverts the conventions of temporal and logical linearity. This is especially the case in two interior monologues—by Sethe and her daughter Denver—concerning the impact of the mysterious intruder's arrival upon their lives (210-17). The extraordinary power of language and of a communal voice erupts during the crucial scene where Sethe completes the painful separation from Beloved which she must undergo in the face of a latent threat of total physical—and spiritual—annihilation:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the podes off chesnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash (Beloved, 261).

Clearly in this passage, the power of the voices of the community of black women who have assembled, "grouped, murmuring and whispering," in front of Sethe's house (258) counter-balances Sethe's inability to articulate her terrorized love for the mysterious young intruder: Beloved has indeed taken control over Sethe's life, and leaves her feeling emotionally empty, and as it were, almost voiceless, once the young girl has gone. When Paul D. goes on a last visit with the prostrate Sethe, he senses that "[s]omething is missing from 124 [i.e. Sethe's home]. Something larger than the people who lived there, something more than Beloved or the red light. He can't put his finger on it, but it seems, for a moment, that just beyond his
knowing is the glare of an outside thing that embraces while it accuses" (271). Yet, as the conclusion of Morrison's latest novel shows, the spirit of communitas eventually prevails over the threat of alienation, claiming Sethe back to the world of the living and away from the dark forces come to haunt her from her past.

In an essay on Song of Solomon, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr. demonstrates how Morrison "is an inheritor as well as an innovator" of the "community of shared beliefs, practices, stories, and histories that is the folk heritage of Afro-Americans," and adds that "story-telling is the primary process in Morrison's fictional world" (193). Traditionally, story-tellers, blues singers, musicians, preachers and conjurers—as well as the obeah women, quimboiseurs and conteurs from the Caribbean—have been the tellers/performers of the rich oral traditions transmitted from generation to generation in the black Americas, and women have been at the forefront among them. In his study on the influence of traditional folk forms on recent African-American fiction, Keith E. Byerman notes that the blues performer "provides a personal version of a common condition and this linking of individual and the community makes him effective." The same critic goes on to propose that this sense of connection between individual and collective being is displaced to recent fiction by Morrison, Walker and Ishmael Reed—distinguishing them therefore from other works of contemporary "mainstream" modern literature which stress the dissolution of the self or an excessive sense of alienation and isolation. Indeed, according to Byerman, these three black authors "create paradigms from personal experiences and in their themes of love and trouble resemble the blues artist" (8).

The crucial confluence between the individual self and the communitas is absolutely central to Morrison's Song of Solomon where the knowledge and the art that accompanies
story-telling— not unlike the oral performances of the West African griots and griottes—
characterizes Pilate Dead: Milkman’s charismatic aunt emblematizes true knowledge and the
continuity of traditions in the face of rampant materialism and the threat of the loss of a
distinct black identity. In a key passage of the novel, while telling her life-story, Pilate teaches
Milkman and his friend Guitar the art of boiling a perfect egg—the symbol of the origin of
things in many civilizations, including African ones. Just as the egg forms a self-contained
object and a paradigm of wholeness, Pilate finds her spiritual wholeness by connecting herself
to others in the smallest events of her life. As Skerrett notes, Pilate’s "lesson is both practical
and spiritual" since she teaches Milkman "how to be a single, separate Afro-American person—
independent and idiosyncratic," while remaining connected to his cultural communitas.
Furthermore, as when she comforts Ruth, "Pilate’s storytelling is an art of love and nurture,
closely associated with food—an egg, a peach—and structured
to meet the needs of others, not self" (198, Skerrett).

As is usually the case with her work, Morrison however does not offer a ready-made
answer to the problematic relationship that exists between one’s individual sense of voice and
a sense of belonging to a wider community of voices. As she suggests in Tar Baby, in her
portrait of black socialite Jadine, finding and retaining an idiosyncratic self and voice while
claiming a community of one’s own, is not within reach of everyone. Jadine is a bright,
educated and ambitious young African-American woman, who has always lived a life of
material ease; however, although she belongs to a historically-oppressed group, she has no
sense of her roots and consequently, of who she is. Indeed, as Barbara Christian remarks à
propos of this novel, "the critical questions that Morrison asks are whether there is a
functionnal black culture in the present-day West, a contemporary black community that is
held together by bonds that work. Are blacks essentially upwardly mobile? Is color merely a camouflage? Is race in America operating as a communal bond or is it merely an indication of a past history? . . ." (Black Feminist Criticism, 69).

One might suggest therefore that with the maturation of a rich body of black literatures from the Americas, there appears a need to redefine the parameters of black identity, or as it were, black identities. Similarly, there is an urge to verify how the traditional tropes of "invisibility" and "doubleness" function vis-a-vis contemporary African-American or Caribbean societies and culture, in a day and age where for essentially material reasons, a distinct "commodification of blackness" operates from Hollywood to the Parisian night-life. It would indeed be very revealing to analyze the factors which accompanied the "sudden" success of black women writers in the U.S.A. over the past ten years, or again, the very recent acceptance of rap-music, at least by the mainstream cultures in North America and Europe.

While the sense of a communitas of shared history of racial and class oppression and slavery, as well as gender discriminations, unites texts written by black men and women from Harlem to Kingston, Pointe-à-Pitre and Bahia, it would be difficult not to take into account all of the social, cultural, linguistic and economic factors that cause the immense diversities of black communities in the New World. In his study of black lore which appropriates Derrida's concept of *différance*—as implying both "differing from" and a "deferral of"—Keith Byerman suggests that the inherently dialectical nature of folklore causes "folk history and lore [to] oppose oppressive systems of order," whether they be political, economic, religious, racial, sexual, aesthetic, or philosophical. The critic then goes on to propose that the influence of folk traditions upon contemporary black fiction produces "fluid identities" since "folk tales and
songs are given in different versions, and folk values are adapted to changing circumstances" (Byerman, 3-4). The multiple, "fluid" aspects of black identities in the New World, therefore, rather than going against the roots of specifically African-American or African-Caribbean concepts of self, find their source in the very resilience and adaptability that these black cultures have demonstrated from the very first days of African bondage in the Americas, and in the emergence of a variety of historical, cultural communities, not strictly bound by Western concepts of time or space. In the case of black women, physical and spiritual fortitude in the face of repeated sexual, racial and power abuse have re-enforced this strategy of survival.

The repetitive use of African-derived idiom and rhythms in Solomon's song in Song of Solomon is emblematic of the repetition and redaction of one's oral story/history which remains inscribed in the cultures of the peoples of African descent throughout the New World. This is also the case with An^e'o i's alter ego's revision of her grandmother's "tall story" account of her visit to the racist dentist's office in Stamps, as I discussed earlier. Equally important are those tales that establish the continued search of origins which haunts all the descendants of Africans in the diaspora: in this case, one does not witness the transformation of an initial story, but rather, the confirmation of its reality and as it were, spiritual efficacy: such is the case with Aunt Cuney's recounting of the arrival at Tatem Landing of her Ibo ancestors in Marshall's Praisesong for The Widow (37-39), or again the "explanation" that Man Cia and Reine Sans Nom give to Télumée about the origins of slavery in Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle (62).

Whether as re-phrasing or reiterative consolidation of a cultural identity, the "folk material stands as a group memory" and as a "body of wisdom, wit and story" (Byerman, 4).
This memory does not remain however a static one, as the various idiosyncratic ways in which each character from Merle Kimbola to Milkman to Willa Prescott Nedeed copes with his or her destiny as a black being, and as a woman, indicates. Furthermore, an active, shared memory and the sense of a historical, cultural communitas does not necessarily mean that there is a single paradigm of blackness, femaleness or, as it were, maleness. Naylor’s Theresa and Schwarz-Bart’s Telumée affirm their female beings in ways which are non-traditional according to those who would define being a woman in strictly heterosexual, or reproductive terms. Similarly, Morrison’s Milkman and Son—in Tar Baby—define their male identity in strikingly different modes: Milkman re-connects with the larger black community from which he has been estranged while Son remains an outsider to both white and black societies.

In his elaborate discussion of the concept of communitas, after noting that liminality, marginality and structural inferiority are conditions often connected with this concept, Victor Turner remarks that “prophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people, ‘edgemen’ who strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the cliches associated with status-incumbency and role-playing and to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination” (Turner, 128). If one only replaces the restrictive “men” by “humans,” it appears clearly that the anthropologist’s comments apply to the six authors comprised in this study. Undoubtedly, black women writers from the Americas write from a threshold of liminality and marginality, and share a “passionate sincerity” to rid the perceptions and literary representations of the societies they belong to of long-lasting misconceptions about “race,” gender-roles, sexual preference, among other topics.

In an interview she gave a few years ago, Morrison regretted the fact that “critics
generally don't associate black people with ideas. They see marginal people; they just see another story about black folks. They regard the whole thing as sociologically interesting perhaps but very parochial" (Claudia Tate, 121). The several narratives analyzed in this study are certainly the best evidence that "stories about blacks," whether old or young, male or female, married or homosexual, are certainly as much part of the common heritage and experience of humankind as any novel by Faulkner, Virginia Woolf or Flaubert. Indeed, it is by plunging into the very idiosyncracies of distinct black beliefs and cosmologies encountered in the diaspora as well as in the way certain behaviors reveal the humanity of New World blacks--in the way they live, love, overcome adversity and finally die--that these six female authors contribute in a critical manner to the universal body of literatures.

In one of those rare moments when the attentive literary critic is given to witness the birth of something radically new, Morrison, during an encounter with Gloria Naylor, then a fledgling writer, reflected upon the drive that caused her to undertake Beloved. Morrison noted the sense of "enormous responsibility" that she felt when beginning the writing, "the responsibility that I feel for the women I'm calling Sethe, and for all these people; these unburied, or at least unceremoniously buried people made literate in art" ("A Conversation", 585). Surely, through their deep sense of bonding with the community of those who came before them and those yet to come, as well as in their unique craft and use of voices, these six writers have in many different ways created, or at times, reclaimed to life female and male characters whom they have made forever alive and "literate in art". In so doing, these black women authors have forced us to interrogate the aesthetic conventions and social prejudices that kept the lives and voices of those same women and men they write about, buried and unheard but by a tiny number.
In a world where the very existence of literature and of any given text has been called into question by people as diverse and influential as Foucault, Samuel Beckett and Thomas Pynchon, writers who belong to "liminal" groups that have been marginalized because of their ethnic origin, their gender or their sexual preference, increasingly proclaim the reality of their existences and traditions even as they testify to the vitality of their narratives and of literatures in the making.

Where several recent texts from Pynchon's *V* to Camus's *La Stranger* confront their readers with a totally disconnected sense of characters and narratives, the six authors I chose for this study privilege cultural and poetical connectedness over the prevailing feeling of alienation that one gets from reading several of their European or American contemporaries. Whether in a triumphant mode, as in Schwarz-Bart's first novel or in Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, or in a much more painstaking manner, as with Lorde's *Zami*, each of these texts proclaims its own idiosyncratic narrative strategies and voices, and affirms that there is still room for a wealth of narrative discourses and for the richly complex, myriad individualities and communities of affinity that they celebrate.

2. See in particular Annette Kolodny’s remarks on "clothing as iconography" in "Some Notes on Defining a 'Feminist Literary Criticism,'" as well as Deborah McDowell’s essay, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," 157.


4. In an introductory essay to a collection of recently published black women’s narratives, Anthony Barthelemy discusses the strategies of obfuscation that black women had to develop in the early stages of African-American literature; the critic notes that the "tension of selling one’s self and one’s story to white America required self-censorship at best and mendacity at worst" ("Introduction", Collected Black Women’s Narratives, 5).

5. In the case of the French Antilles, the problematic precursor figure is Mayotte Capécia, author of Je suis martiniquaise, 1948 and La Nègresse blanche, 1950, whom I mentioned earlier. In his study on French Caribbean literature, Jack Corzani writes of Capécia's autobiographical Je suis martiniquaise, that “[j]amais une Martiniquaise n’a aussi naïvement et sincèrement avoué son acceptation de l’aliénation, son désir du blanchissement, son mépris du nègre ‘sauvage’: le roman n’est point une réflexion mais une simple transcription de l’expérience vécue ..., l’essentiel demeure cette plongée en profondeur dans la réalité psychologique antillaise. Et c’est bien là l’apport essentiel de Mayotte Capécia, devenue avec ses deux romans “exotiques” le symbole de l’alienation, attaquée violemment par les Jeunes Nègres comme Jenny Alpha ou Frantz Fanon, Mayotte Capécia qui n’avait jamais écrit de romans que par accident, s’est ensuite obstinément dérobée aux regards indiscrets jusqu’à sa mort aux environs de 1955” (Corzani, Littérature antillaise (Prose), Editions Desormeaux, Fort-de-France, 1971, 135.).

One can therefore say that Capécia constitutes ... counter-model of cultural and racial alienation, as well as one of physical absence and ultimate disappearance not unlike Nella Larsen’s "loss of voice" following the plagiarism scandal the African-American author was involved in. The younger women writers from the French Antilles, including Schwarz-Bart and Maryse Condé, as well as Jeanine Hyvrard, Michèle Lacroix and Myriam Werner-Vieyra have written despite or rather against this alienating tradition of "roman exotique des îles" or forced silences. The paradigm of matrilineal literariness common to African-American women writers does not therefore seem to function within the French Caribbean context in the same manner.

6. "It would be going too far to assert that every Antillean novel is the ad infinitum redaction or the re-writing of this founding text ... [there] operates an implicit and explicit intertextuality from Roumain’s text to Schwarz-Bart’s ... an entire enterprise [of re-writing] is at work in [Schwarz-Bart’s] text as a result of [Roumain’s]" (my translation).

7. One can contrast Marshall’s relationship to Caribbean English with the use which Jamaican poet Louise Bennett makes of Jamaican dialect in her works. According to Eintou Apenday, Bennett’s works “fulfill three important functions: (1) the documentation of [Jamaican] dialect, (2) the striking of a blow for the pride of the grass-roots Jamaicans in themselves, for this must happen when they see themselves reflected in the printed word, and (3) the ability to take punches at the untouchables of Jamaican society, be they in the political arena or in high

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social circles, as though coming from the mouth and mind of the disinherited grass-roots element." (Apandaye, "The Caribbean Woman as Writer", 66). While Marshall's work assuredly posits a reflection on the problematic realities of post-colonial Caribbean societies, it does not set out to follow the same linguistic or ideological agenda as do Bennett's poems, and certainly does not claim to document Bajan English in extenso for instance.

8. For further readings concerning this trope, see "The Trope of the Talking Book" in Gates' The Signifying Monkey, 127-69.
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