

1999

## **Family Portraits: Contemporary Women Novelists and the Nuclear Family.**

Tamra Lynn Horton  
*Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_disstheses](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Horton, Tamra Lynn, "Family Portraits: Contemporary Women Novelists and the Nuclear Family." (1999).  
*LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses*. 7091.  
[https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_disstheses/7091](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/7091)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [gradetd@lsu.edu](mailto:gradetd@lsu.edu).

## INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

**The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.** Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

Bell & Howell Information and Learning  
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA  
800-521-0600

UMI<sup>®</sup>



**FAMILY PORTRAITS:  
CONTEMPORARY WOMEN NOVELISTS  
AND  
THE NUCLEAR FAMILY**

**A Dissertation**

**Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**in**

**The Department of English**

**by**

**Tamra Lynn Horton**

**B.A., University of California, Davis, 1988**

**M.A., University of Wyoming, 1990**

**December 1999**



UMI Number: 9960062

Copyright 1999 by  
Horton, Tamra Lynn

All rights reserved.

UMI<sup>®</sup>

---

UMI Microform 9960062

Copyright 2000 by Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against  
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

---

Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company  
300 North Zeeb Road  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

©Copyright 1999  
Tamra Lynn Horton  
All rights reserved

## **Acknowledgments**

I entered Louisiana State University's doctoral program in English in the fall of 1991. After eight long, arduous years, five of which were spent writing (or not writing) the dissertation, I can claim the title of doctor. There were many moments when I doubted that this day would come. The following people, however, helped me keep the faith.

I would like to thank Dr. Dana Nelson for originally agreeing to be my dissertation chair, for reading early drafts of my proposal, and for putting together a second dissertation committee for me when I had yet to complete the writing before she moved on to another post. I could not myself have gathered together a better committee, and one that so well-suited my interests. I would like to thank my committee members, Drs. Carl Freedman, Elsie Michie, and Rick Moreland, for their time, patience, and invaluable feedback. And I would like to thank Dr. Patrick McGee, who agreed to be my new committee chair even though he had never even met me. Pat, you have the attributes of the ideal dissertation chair--you kicked me in the pants when I needed to be motivated and you let me slide when you knew further critiquing would be redundant. Though I enjoyed my course work at LSU very much, I regret never having taken a critical theory course from you. My analytical abilities would have been better for it, and the effort required by you to guide me through this project would have been greatly reduced. Thank you so much for your tireless attention, your endless re-readings, and most of all, for your boundless enthusiasm.

I would like to thank my friends Marlene Tromp and David Lippert who finished their doctorate programs long before me, and who never ceased reminding me that if they could do it, I could too. Thank you both for your encouragement, for your insight into how insignificant and yet how important this process is. I also want to thank my friends here in Baton Rouge, Allyson and Stuart Corder and Amy Baptist, who welcomed me back to the South and helped me feel at home once again. I thank the Shrums for their encouragement, their ardent support, and their sincere interest in my life and happiness. I want to thank my grandparents, Eleanor and Frank Pillsbury, who showed me that one can find someone to love no matter what age one reaches. I want to thank my grandparents, Lillian and Jimmy Horton, who often when I come to visit, pull out a now tattered and faded but still legible spelling test I received a 100 percent on when I was six.

I want to thank Sam Silvas. Thank you for having the audacity to introduce yourself. It is because of your example--your commitment to your writing, your vision of yourself first and foremost as a writer--that I had the courage to return. And it is because of you--your daring to join me in Louisiana, your insistence that sometimes we work and sometimes we play--that I have finished.

Finally, I would like to thank my father, Monty Horton, my mother, Willa Horton, and my sister, Tina Horton. Though the reader may suspect otherwise, I am among those fortunate few who have been able to take for granted the love and support of a nuclear family. I am the result of an unplanned pregnancy to teenage parents. My father entered the work force to support a wife and child when he was only nineteen.

He took me backpacking and hunting and came to my dance recitals and school plays. He encouraged me to grow up to be whatever I wanted to be, no matter my gender. My mother finished high school at night, for often pregnant girls are segregated away from the rest of the students. She helped me with my math and drove me to my Girl Scout meetings. She so supported me in my drive to become an English professor that she willingly took me and my dog in, though I was over 30 and my dog was ferocious. And my sister, my best friend, always made me feel like she wanted to be me even after we both grew better. Thank you. I love you very much.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .....	iii
Abstract .....	viii
Introduction	
“Family Works”: Confronting the Fetishization of the Paradigm of the Nuclear Family .....	1
Chapter One	
“One Day A Story Will Arrive in Your Town”: Narrative as Subversion of the Paradigm of the Nuclear Family in Leslie Marmon Silko’s <i>Almanac of the Dead</i> ..	14
Individualism and the Disruption of Familial Relationships .....	27
The Irresistible Allure of the Nuclear Family .....	39
Re-Envisioning Familial Relationships .....	51
Communal Consciousness: The Almanac .....	60
Chapter Two	
Mud Mothers, Matriarchs, and Madwomen: African American Community and the Paradigm of the Nuclear Family in Gloria Naylor’s <i>Linden Hills</i> and Toni Cade Bambara’s <i>The Salt Eaters</i> .....	74
<i>Linden Hills</i> .....	82
Repudiating Materialism .....	90
Circumscribing the Family .....	94
Classism and the Fostering of Racial Self-Aversion .....	99
The Futility of Efforts to Escape Class .....	106
The Nedeed Homestead .....	113
<i>The Salt Eaters</i> .....	124
Chapter Three	
“Lloyd’s Cheeks Show His Shame”: The Nuclear Family and the Threat of Sexual Variation in Carolyn Chute’s <i>Merry Men</i> .....	149
Voicing Censure: The “Civilizing” Influence of Community .....	157
Gender Enforcement and the Channeling of Sexuality .....	163
Espousing Class: The (Dis)Agreeable Solution .....	177
Paternity: Carnal Evidence .....	187
Suppressing Defiance though the Fetishization of the Nuclear Family .....	193
Conclusion	
Infanticide: Visions of the Apocalypse .....	203

<b>Works Cited</b> .....	<b>209</b>
<b>Vita</b> .....	<b>216</b>

## **Abstract**

A society whose economy becomes increasingly dependent on commodity fetishism cultivates obsessive materialistic desire in its subjects. The demand for mass consumerism buoys reification, a mania wherein human beings are analogous to goods and vice versa. Successful reification depends upon hegemonic apparatuses: social, legal, and political agencies of dominant ideology. Reification is perhaps most fully realized in the form of fetishized human relationships. In the United States today, the most coercive and unassailable hegemonic apparatus is the institutionalized nuclear family, a social and legal affiliation between individuals so dogmatically fetishized as to have become compulsory. Contemporary American women writers are asserting opposition to this institution.

I begin by suggesting that Leslie Marmon Silko's use of magical realism in the novel *Almanac of the Dead* serves as a narrative device meant to disrupt the continuity of contemporary rationalization and resist the forces of assimilation, including the fetishization of the nuclear family. I proceed to examine Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, suggesting that both entreat readers to recognize the impending desecration of the African American community that will come of allowing cultural ideals to be displaced by capitalist values and the myth of individualism. I suggest that each novel utilizes the disembodied female voice to demonstrate that the persistence of patriarchy will undermine efforts to resist reification, and that the nuclear family, completely naturalized within capitalistic hegemony, is the means by which patriarchy is perpetuated. Finally, I conclude with



an analysis of Carolyn Chute's *Merry Men*, suggesting that Chute draws explicit connections between disenfranchisement, heterosexism and the tradition of the nuclear family.

Within their novels, these writers critique our compulsion to fetishize the nuclear family. They conclude that the idealized nuclear family is an oppressive and ultimately unattainable archetype staunchly preserved primarily for its serviceability to capitalism. All four writers suggest that just as capitalism reifies human beings, so too the hegemonic operation of herding them into nuclear families alienates and estranges them. Thus it is that each of their novels concludes with the self-destruction of the community depicted within its pages.

**Introduction**  
**"Family Works":**  
**Confronting the Fetishization of the Paradigm of the Nuclear Family**

In borrowing for my title the catch phrase of a community service message repeatedly broadcast by one of the U.S. network television stations, I call attention to the extent that Americans are indoctrinated to internalize the paradigm of the nuclear family. Seemingly innocuous, network community service messages typically reduce some of the most complex of society's problems to ten-second sound bites. These statements suggest that many of our nation's difficulties could be solved if we would only, for instance, stop to "Thank A Teacher," resolve to "Just Say No," or realize that "Family Works." Of course these slogans fail to address even to the smallest extent the complicated history of such issues, as for example why the mission of educating the youth of America has been relegated to an altruistic career wherein teachers are supposed to survive on the thanks of a nation rather than adequate pay. That it is necessary to broadcast such messages of affirmation indicates the extent to which these ideas fail to be successful ideologies. Today, the nuclear family is suffering what Terry Eagleton terms "a crisis of legitimacy." Eagleton explains:

Advanced capitalist society still requires the dutiful, self-disciplined, intelligently conformist subjects which some see as typical only of capitalism's 'classical' phase; it is just that these particular modes of subjectivity are locked in conflict with the quite different forms of subjecthood appropriate to a 'postmodernist' order, and this is a contradiction which the system itself is quite powerless to resolve. (42)

The family remains a successful hegemonic apparatus, one that is capable of producing "dutiful, self-disciplined, intelligently conformist subjects." Likewise, the nuclear

family continues to be capitalism's most enthusiastic consumer. Yet, a rising divorce rate<sup>1</sup> is merely one indication of the extent to which the institution is in jeopardy.

Some believe that the nuclear family is simply one more facet of life that has become subject to postmodern dilemmas concerning meaning; others see the disappearance of the nuclear family as a positive shift brought about by a changing social order. There are those, however, who view the demise of the nuclear family as an indication of a selfish, hedonistic impulse of what has become in their view a valueless society. In their minds, the paradigm of the nuclear family must be preserved at all cost. In terms of the family then, the current line of defense seems to be a heightened fetishization. Media endorsement of what some took to be an unquestionable fact, the value and legitimacy of the institutionalized family, is one example of such fetishization.

The phrase "Family Works" is a double entendre. While it plays upon the notion that there are artifacts or "works" produced by the family, it simultaneously suggests that families are successful, they "work." The four novels I will discuss here have been written within the last two decades. The authors are part and parcel of a culture in transition, and their novels are informed by the "crisis of legitimacy" enveloping the nuclear family. I maintain that these novelists are participants of a larger movement: contemporary American women writers whose trend is to resist the fetishization of the nuclear family. As such, these writers suggest that in fact family does not always "work" and that the "works" a nuclear family produces, its members

---

<sup>1</sup>Reportedly between 40 and 50 percent of marriages in the U.S. now end in divorce.

and mores, are not necessarily exemplar. Here, then, I would like to explore more thoroughly examples of the fetishization of the nuclear family from both the media and culture, examine briefly the community of contemporary American women novelists to which Silko, Naylor, Bambara, Chute belong, and offer my reasoning for selecting these four novels from an exhaustive list of titles that examine the fetishization of the paradigm of the nuclear family and the resulting consequences.

If we consider the various forms in which narrative can reach an audience in the late twentieth century, we recognize that the television commercial is probably the most effective tool for commodity reification and cultural hegemony. Images of the nuclear family pervade commercials. The days are gone, however, when only mothers were chastised for purchasing the wrong detergent. Today's market demands that upwardly mobile households have no less than two participants in the work force. Thus, children are portrayed as successfully fulfilling their responsibilities within the family by knowing how to use soap in the dishwasher. Fathers are depicted as benevolently meeting their increased obligations by successfully following mothers' instructions to heat pre-cooked and pre-packaged meals. Advertisers rely on the nuclear family as a reliable market for products. As a result, advertisements advocate and validate the nuclear family as the most sound organizational structure for human relationships. The

industry achieves its greatest success by its very adaptability.<sup>2</sup> For example, within the last twenty years the advertising business shifts from predominantly employing Anglo actors to utilizing people from a variety of races, and the accomplishment there is two-fold. Foremost, the messages target a larger audience and thereby increase the consumer market. At the same time, the industry *appears* to have altruistically adopted a multicultural spirit; it thereby promotes its own image as a benign entity that reflects rather than promotes values. Establishing the facade that the narratives of which commercials are comprised reproduce rather than dictate ideology is critical to disguising the industry's role in cultural hegemony. Once this pretense is accomplished, the move to champion rather than cloak the process of reification is purported as leading to innovative and creative art rather than naked commercialist propaganda.

Take for example the recent sport utility vehicle (SUV) commercial that featured a garage door slowly opening and the automobile gradually emerging in hesitant lurches, all to the soundtrack of a woman giving birth to a child. The commercial value of this message is clear. The SUV is allocated the status of family member. Deciding between brands is shown to be as important as the decision to have a child. The vehicle is endowed with human characteristics associated with birth, life, love; hence, it

---

<sup>2</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno explore this feat in their treatise on the culture industry: "Its very vagueness, its almost scientific aversion from committing itself to anything which cannot be verified, acts as an instrument of domination. It becomes a vigorous and prearranged promulgation of the status quo. The culture industry tends to make itself the embodiment of authoritative pronouncements, and thus the irrefutable prophet of the prevailing order" (147).

becomes allied with notions of protection and safety. The automobile is simultaneously elevated to the position of infant and parent, as the advertisement feeds on the individual's desire to procreate and caters to the individual's fear of endangerment and aspiration to guard against it. More importantly, though, the SUV is a recent model innovation. It was created specifically to transport families, and it has revitalized the automobile industry. Its success depends upon convincing the potential consumer not simply that he or she needs the vehicle to transport the family, but that he or she first needs a family. The commercial wherein the SUV is reified as a family member (and thus family members are correspondingly reified as commodities) has all the earmarks of a creative piece of advertising. It combines what appears to be two radically dissimilar events (a car emerging from a garage and the birth of a child) to create an unique conception of the product. It is brief, and it has no voice-over. It is pithy, and it inspires curiosity. It is intrinsically pure and unabashed reification; consequently, it is successful as a result of its own admission as such.<sup>3</sup> The commercial is a model example of triumphant consumer ideology during late capitalism.

---

<sup>3</sup>Eagleton discusses such self-awareness: "Ideology is supposed to deceive; and in the cynical milieu of postmodernism we are all much too fly, astute and streetwise to be conned for a moment by our own official rhetoric. It is this condition which Peter Sloterdijk names 'enlightened false consciousness' -- the endless self-ironizing or wide-awake bad faith of a society which has seen through its own pretentious rationalizations. . . . This new kind of ideological subject is no hapless victim of false consciousness, but knows exactly what he is doing; it is just that he continues to do it even so" (39).

We should compare this advertisement to another for the SUV. An additional element accounting for the vehicle's success is what is termed its "off road" capabilities, that is its capacity to withstand rough terrain. This explains the plot of the commercial wherein a mother, clearly on her way to work, searches the vehicle frantically for a pacifier that belongs to the child in the back seat. The slogan reminds the audience: "Life's adventures come in many shapes and sizes." The highly recognized anthem of pluralism from the 1970's, "Everyday People," concludes the commercial. The typical SUV consumer will rarely if ever drive the vehicle across unexplored terrain. Such owners are too preoccupied with the various responsibilities of family life, ones that direct them down city streets rather than across undeveloped territories. However, they pacify themselves in the knowledge that the vehicle is capable of playful exploration. For the mother in the commercial, the promise of adventure is supposed to substitute for its apparent actualization. Likewise, she is supposed to be appeased by the knowledge that hers is a shared lot. She is one of the "everyday people," and like them she may have temporarily resigned herself to the responsibilities of family life, but she has the potential to escape should she wish. As the commercial affirms, however, her life is more adventuresome than she guesses. Grappling to meet her family's needs while simultaneously participating wholeheartedly in the workforce is an adventure in itself, if she would only come to realize it.

Together these two commercials, along with the many others for the SUV, invoke at one moment visions of spontaneity and exploration and at the next nurturing images of devotion to family. The narratives are predicated upon a populace's

willingness to accept the nuclear family as the basic model for human relationships. They work to contain experiences that contradict the cohesiveness and adequacy of the nuclear family model by first acknowledging and then allaying concerns. The commercial as narrative attempts to subsume any divergent perspective to create a meta-narrative that encompasses all possible impressions of life. The sheer percentage of the narratives employing the nuclear family attests to the extent to which the relationship has been fetishized, and reification serves to encourage consumption by disguising products as simply one more family member. This vision of social homogeneity has come to symbolize the mania of advanced capitalism so often critiqued in contemporary American women's fiction.

The fetishization of the nuclear family does not take place merely at the narrative level of culture. People's lived lives are continually affected by what has come to be a heightened obsession with promoting strict adherence to the paradigm of the nuclear family. One can measure the extent to which Americans are indoctrinated to internalize the paradigm of the nuclear family by an examination of contemporary conventions regarding pregnancy and biological parents' responsibility for raising their offspring. A portion of the 1997 Welfare Reform budget was designated for the reduction of teenage pregnancies.<sup>4</sup> An overwhelming number of women who later become lifelong dependents upon Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC) originally

---

<sup>4</sup>States that reduce annually the number of teenage pregnancies (in or out of wedlock) without an increase in abortions (to women of any age) are granted additional block grant funds for the following fiscal year.



apply for the subsidy because they are indigent pregnant minors. Reformers believe that decreasing the number teenage pregnancies will reduce the cost of welfare. This also entails the conviction that women who become pregnant as teenagers are less likely to finish high school, are less likely to receive further education or training, and are unlikely to be able to support themselves and their family. Current campaigns aimed at teenagers encouraging abstinence (and in only some states the use of condoms) arise as much from the concern that early pregnancy will reduce the young woman's chance to become self-sufficient as they do from the fear of the spread of HIV.

Conversely, Americans spend billions of dollars annually on fertility drugs and procedures. In 1998, the cost of one attempt at invitro fertilization for a California couple, using her egg and the sperm of her husband who had previously had a vasectomy, was \$28,000. Each attempt thereafter went for the reduced price of \$6,000. It has been reported that infertility has not risen as much as one might suspect, however, but that instead people are delaying pregnancy. Women (and men) are not so much attempting to overcome infertility as they are endeavoring to procreate beyond their primary reproductive years.

The irony here is clear: Americans spend millions of tax dollars to discourage the most fertile of its populace from being sexually active while simultaneously investing similar amounts of money attempting to prolong reproductive capabilities for its populace less likely to be fertile.<sup>5</sup> Youths are *discouraged* from becoming parents,

---

<sup>5</sup>As early as 1970 this incongruity was being examined. Shulamith Firestone wrote of it in *The Dialectic of Sex*.

and older adults are *encouraged* to do so. This paradox occurs mainly as a result of the fact that children are viewed as the *property* of their biological parents and as such their financial responsibility. Consequently, children born to teenagers are likely to come at a cost to the state; children born to overage adults are likely to generate a good deal of income for the medical industry. As such, teenage pregnancy is discouraged through stigmatism because the parent(s) is not capable of participating in capitalism and instead a welfare is necessary to assist the family in meeting its needs. Conversely, fertility technology is offered as the savior of the barren because it assists in the circulation of capital and thus buoys the socio-economic order.

We can theorize alternatives to the nuclear family, even ones that only vary the paradigm slightly, but they appear preposterous and abnormal by our ideological principles. For example, imagine the standard practice is that children are raised by their grandparents. Young people are encouraged to procreate. Their parents naturally assume responsibility for the child. Liberated of the obligation of raising children, the young people are then free to pursue their interests. Once *they* became grandparents (when *their* children reached childbearing age) those once young people then raise children, *their* grandchildren. The idea of adopting such a system sounds foreign, unnatural, even barbarous to a society that views children as the property of biological parents. (Yet one often sees the bumper sticker: "If I had known grandchildren were so much fun, I would have had them first!") In fact, some children are raised by their grandparents, but such households are viewed as a deviation from the norm and its members are expected to offer explanations as to how their predicament came to pass.

The nuclear family is fetishized in Western culture to the extent that any household that does not contain a mother, a father and their biological child(ren) is stigmatized. Be they only minor anomalies like a single parent household, grandparents or other relatives raising a child, parents who have adopted a child, partnered adults without children, or any other version thereof, these individuals will be continually called upon to explain how they created a social unit other than that of the biological nuclear family. They will be subjected to such questions as, "How is it that your child's mother (or father) does not live with you?", "Why are you raising your grandchildren?", "Why did you have to adopt a child?", or "Why can't you have children?" These households will be repeatedly compared to the nuclear family standard, and they will be expected to explain why it is they do not meet its criteria. (Their *failure* to do so will be implicit in these questions.) Modifiers will be used to explain how they deviate from the nuclear family; for example, they might be a "blended" family (meaning there are two divorced parents who have married and brought into the new household children from previous marriages), or they an "extended" family (meaning relatives of the nuclear family are also members of the household). These modifiers themselves attest to the fact that in the United States, the nuclear family remains the sanctioned model by which families are judged, even though the prototype is rapidly vanishing. Repeatedly, contemporary American women writers resisting the fetishization of the nuclear family expose this very contradiction.

What follows is a representative list of titles by contemporary American women writers.

**Table One: Representative Novels that Critique the Nuclear Family**

- 1981: *Tar Baby*. Toni Morrison.  
 1982: *The Women of Brewster Place*. Gloria Naylor.  
 1984: *Machine Dreams*. Jayne Anne Phillips.  
 1985: *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*. Carolyn Chute.  
 1987: *Ellen Foster*. Kaye Gibbons.  
       *Mama*. Terry McMillan.  
       *Love Medicine*. Louise Erdrich.  
 1988: *Letorneau's Used Auto Parts*. Carolyn Chute.  
       *The Bean Trees*. Barbara Kingsolver.  
 1989: *The House on Mango Street*. Sandra Cisneros.  
       *Jasmine*. Bharati Mukherjee.  
       *The Joy Luck Club*. Amy Tan.  
 1991: *How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. Julia Alvarez.  
       *Typical American*. Gish Jen.  
       *A Thousand Acres*. Jane Smiley.  
 1992: *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Dorothy Allison.  
       *Postcards*. E. Annie Proulx.  
 1993: *Pigs In Heaven*. Barbara Kingsolver.  
       *Shipping News*. E. Annie Proulx.  
 1994: *bone*. Fae Myenne Ng.

Naturally, this list is by no means exhaustive; instead, it simply exemplifies a sampling of novels, any one of which could have been examined in this project. Crucial to each work is the questioning of the fetishization of the paradigm of the nuclear family. The resistance to such fetishization comes in a variety of forms, as in *Letorneau's Used Auto Parts*, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and *A Thousand Acres* wherein a young woman's vulnerability to incest testifies to the novel's opposition to the valorization of the nuclear family. In *Shipping News*, *The Women of Brewster Place*, and *The Bean Trees* the prevalence of other forms of domestic violence serves to destroy the myth of the nuclear family as sanctuary. The novels *bone*, *Ellen Foster*, and *Jasmine* examine the

despair that predominates in the lives of family members who fail to meet the expectations imposed by the hierarchy of the nuclear family. Each of these novels, in ways, turns upon the issue of the failure of the paradigm of the nuclear family to live up to its ideal and meet the needs of its members.

The time frame this list covers is not meant to indicate a definitive beginning or end of a movement of contemporary American women writers to resist the fetishization of the nuclear family. One could argue that the family in many ways has always been a concern of American women writers. Instead, what we find here is an element of their fiction that reflects an increased misgiving regarding imposed family structures and the adequacy of the paradigm of the nuclear family, one which roughly coincides with the heightened fetishization of the nuclear family that characterized the Reagan-Bush years and persists today.<sup>6</sup>

What does it mean when one suggests that contemporary American women writers are resisting the fetishization of the nuclear family? How does one go about exacting such a precise and politically-charged design from novels as varied as the

---

<sup>6</sup>The slogans discussed at the outset of this essay often came directly from crusades championed by these presidents. Nancy Reagan sponsored the "Just Say No" campaign. Teachers were often the recipients of the "Thousand Points of Light" awards promoted by Bush. Quayle's infamous blunder regarding the television show *Murphy Brown* and its refusal to espouse the ideal of the nuclear family revealed the extent to which these candidates for re-election failed to understand how the standards they espoused in their "Family Values" campaign did not in fact reflect their constituents' situations. That the "Just Say No" and "Thousand Points of Light" programs continue to receive funding today (Statistics contradict the effectiveness of the former, and investigative reporters discovered that the latter is top heavy, its funds allocated mostly to administration rather than to award recipients.) attests to the tenacity of campaigns whose main design is to reinforce hegemony.

ones discussed here? This is the task I have chosen to perform within these chapters.

What ensues is an examination of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, 1980; Carolyn Chute's *Merry Men*, 1994; Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*, 1985; and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, 1991. I have proposed that within the context of these novels, the following occurs. First, all four novels reject capitalism as an economic system capable of adequately providing for *all* members of a community. Second, the novels judge that capitalism in the United States is predicated upon the flawed ideal of individualism: a belief in the ability of each and every member of the market system to succeed within the structure. Third, these novels locate the family as one site wherein members of the community are taught to revere the individualism ideal and to endorse the tenets of capitalism. Fourth, the novels all draw explicit connections between disenfranchisement and the tradition of the nuclear family.

**Chapter One**  
**"One Day a Story Will Arrive in Your Town": Narrative as Subversion of the  
Paradigm of the Nuclear Family in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead***

A society whose economy becomes increasingly dependent on commodity fetishism cultivates obsessive materialistic desire in its subjects. The demand for mass consumerism buoys reification, a mania wherein human beings are analogous to goods and vice versa. Successful reification depends upon hegemonic apparatuses: social, legal, and political agencies of dominant ideology. Reification is perhaps most fully realized in the form of fetishized human relationships. In the United States today, the most coercive and unassailable hegemonic apparatus is the institutionalized *nuclear family*, a social and legal affiliation between individuals so dogmatically fetishized as to have become compulsory. Those who fail to embrace the model are held suspect and routinely silenced via alienation, disgrace, and if necessary, violence.

Contemporary American women writers are asserting opposition to this institution. A leader among them is Leslie Marmon Silko, whose novel *Almanac of the Dead* depicts dystopias in which the forces of capitalism and fascism in the continental Americas have partnered to create a phantasmagoric reign of terror. Crucial to Silko's fictional world is an authenticated history of the oppression of indigenous Americans: North, Central, and South American Indians whose lineages were interrupted by agents of imperialism. This history is combined with and complicated by the mythology of the almanac from the novel's title, a collection of ancient notebooks that foretell both European domination of the New World and the end of that domination. Similar to a host of contemporary American women writers, Silko utilizes magical realism to

construct imaginable alternative realities to the despotism, the commercialism and the obsession with technology that characterize modern-day life.

Within the novel Silko posits the following: 1) Colonization effectively disrupts familial (including sexual) relationships for both the colonizers and the colonized. 2) The modern-day fetishization of sexuality and the nuclear family (part and parcel of each other) serve to perpetuate the legacy of colonization. 3) Resistance to and triumph over capitalism will entail a re-envisioning of familial relationships. 4) The narrative form of magical realism offers an alternative understanding of consciousness, one that provides a renewed insight necessary to subvert advanced capitalism's power structures. I intend to chart these motifs in the novel by illustrating them in the following characterizations and subplots: 1) As a member of the Laguna Pueblo, Sterling represents tribal nations, respectively referred to as the colonized and the conquered in the novel. His banishment from his reservation exemplifies how colonization effectively disrupts the historical formation of familial relationships. 2) Seese and her companions are Caucasian Americans from unknown backgrounds whose distinguishing and identifiable characteristic is that they are "white." They represent those individuals who are afforded privileges not granted to non-whites; they are the descendants of the colonizers/conquerors in the novel. As members of the bourgeoisie, they are particularly susceptible to the pressure of conformity. Their exploits illustrate how the modern-day fetishization of the nuclear family serves to perpetuate the legacy of colonization. 3) The Cazadors are of Spanish and Indian descent, mixed-origins, descendants of both the colonizers and the colonized. They are



also smugglers and revolutionaries. Their operations thwart the embedded legal power structures that protect capitalism. The Cazadors' resistance to and triumph over the law subvert hegemony. Their familial structures challenge the idealized nuclear family model. 4) Finally, I will examine the narrative form of magical realism in the novel, particularly in the configuration of the almanac and the power it exerts on the shape of the future. I will suggest that the almanac's power to predetermine events offers an alternative understanding of consciousness, one that subverts advanced capitalism's power structures. In *Almanac*, Silko wields a paradox--the degradation and destructiveness of the nuclear family model that is nevertheless idolized and coveted--unveiling the element of social hegemony that Gramsci describes as the "consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life" (12).

In his defense of Marxist literary theory in the first chapter of *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson outlines a generally recognized historical sequence of modes of production and their corresponding ideological coding. It is important to note that Jameson insists that these categories not be viewed as rigidly diachronic. Intersections abound. Earlier modes of production and ideological codes are continuously revived, and later ones are anticipated by the appearance of their rudimentary elements. It would be a mechanical over-simplification to view history as adhering to these strict classifications. However, this chronology lends insight to the role the narrative form of magical realism plays today.

.

**Table Two: Modes of Production and Their Corresponding Ideological Coding**

<b>Mode of Production</b>	<b>Ideological Coding</b>
Primitive Communism or Tribal Society	Magic and Mythic Narrative
Hierarchical Kinship Societies	Kinship
Oriental Despotism	Religion or the Sacred
Oligarchical Slaveholding Society	Citizenship in the Nation State
Feudalism	Personal Domination
Capitalism	Commodity Reification
Communism	Communal Association, presumably (89-91)

Ideological coding serves to rationalize (and disguise) corresponding modes of production. Catherine Belsey, in her examination of the way in which realism has performed the work of ideology, contends that classical realism assists in the construction of subjectivity: a sense of the obviousness of individualism, wholeness, self-recognition, and a perceptible human nature. She points out that such realism "roughly coincides chronologically with the epoch of industrial capitalism" (51). Capitalism, she explains, is best served by an ideology that "emphasizes the value of individual freedom, freedom of conscience" (51). Individuals who believe in their own autonomy willingly labor for wages and amass consumer goods. Belsey relies on the Althusserian model that designates literature to be one of the Ideological State Apparatuses: social institutions such as "the family, the law, the media and the arts, all helping to represent and reproduce the myths and beliefs necessary to enable people to work within the existing social formation" (46). Classical realism assists in maintaining hegemony as it substantiates "the reader's existence as an autonomous and knowing subject in a world of knowing subjects" by drawing the reader into a collusion that projects an unfractured, discernible reality in the form of an all-inclusive

plot" (52). This realism authenticates the notion of a reader's capacity to apprehend the world as intelligible. It corroborates self-determination by depicting "individuals whose unfettered consciousness is the origin of meaning, knowledge and action" (51). To use Jameson's model, then, classic realism functions as ideological coding for capitalism by reinforcing the reification of the subject into a self-aware entity.

Belsey insists, however, that a reading of classic realism can allow one to recognize that the notion of a harmonious self is deceptive because "In its attempt to create a coherent and internally consistent fictive world the [classic realist] text, in spite of itself, exposes incoherences, omissions, absences and transgressions which in turn reveal the inability of the language of ideology to create coherence" (56). Classical realism, according to Belsey, assists in the construction of subjectivity, but its internal "incoherences" unmask the illusion of a unified subject and divulge the inconsistencies of hegemony. A narrative technique that *purposely* sets out to accomplish the same, namely to subvert the illusion of a unified subject, would thus challenge the ideological code of capitalism. Such a text would promote communal association, the ideological coding of communism of which Jameson writes. Magical realism would be one such radical, subversive realism. Unlike classical realism, magical realism distorts perceptions, reinvents reality, disrupts cognition, and resists material constructions of the world. Supernaturalism, magic, telepathy, and mystical powers are utilized within a realistic narrative to destroy the reader's sense of a discernible reality and a coherent self. Notions of time and space are collapsed as are genealogies, or individuals' connections to one another. As such, magical realism challenges the reader's sense of

his or her own self-awareness and autonomy, offering instead diaphanous incohesive realities that exist more often as a result of incomprehensible forces than as a consequence of human determination. In fact, one may go so far as to suggest that authors who employ magical realism as a narrative technique do so in a conscious effort to undermine hegemony.

Analyses of magical realism as post-colonial discourse have linked the alternative forms of reality envisioned in that narrative form with methods of resistance utilized by marginalized cultures. Jeanne Delbaere describes magical realism as "a clash between a mythic (magic) view of the world and European rationalism (realism)" in her analysis of its use by Canadian writers.<sup>1</sup> J. Michael Dash identifies "marvellous" realism as a written record of an alternative imaginative technique employed by the colonized to resist their erasure from history (66). Stephen Slemon argues magical realism is a "psychic liberation from Old World domination and its cognitive codes" (14). Comprehensive as they may be, these various definitions often neglect to link emphatically the contemporary narrative technique with its historical predecessor: magic and mythic narrative; as a result, its important affiliation with primitive communism and tribal society is frequently underestimated or ignored. I would argue

---

<sup>1</sup> In this essay, Delbaere offers a brief but detailed history of the development of magical realism that is invaluable. She explains: "It is generated by the clash between the reader's rational way of looking at reality and the mythic world views of the indigenous people or the exuberant, popular and exaggerated vision of local rural communities. Freed from the limitations of the individual point of view and of a controlling authorial voice it bursts out in a carnivalesque plurality of voices which tell and retell *their own* stories without any inhibition" (99).

that writers who employ the narrative form of magical realism are not simply searching for surrogate histories or providing contrasting visions of power relations. In addition, they specifically embrace the political and economic structures of communalism as a viable alternative to the forms of capitalism practiced in the late twentieth century.

To some extent, critics have made a tenuous connection between the issue of the family and magical realism, most often in discussions emphasizing community. P. Gabrielle Foreman notes: "'Magical realism,' unlike the fantastic or the surreal, presumes that the individual requires a bond with the traditions and the faith of the community, that s/he is historically constructed and connected" (370). Patricia Hart links the two as well when she speaks of "magic feminism" which includes a work that "selects, bends, and warps events in order to portray life not as it is, but as it could be if men and women loved each other and themselves better" (106). In fact, many of the novels critiqued in discussions concerning magical realism are in fact epic tales of family history, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* being the prototypical example. While critics seem ready to agree that magical realism often encompasses a reexamination of the individual's relationship with the greater community, few have argued that this emphasis on community entails a revised perception of familial relations as well. I would like to suggest that discussions of writers who employ magical realism as a narrative technique warrant an examination of the function family plays in their writing.

Magical realism offers a disruption to the continuity of contemporary rationalization. In the United States, the nuclear family has become a fetishized ideal.

To fetishize is to imbue an object with magical power, to offer unquestioning reverence or devotion to the object, to eroticize the object. Lukacs writes, "The fetishistic character of economic forms, the reification of all human relations . . . these things transform the phenomena of society and with them the way in which they are perceived" (6). The nuclear family in the United States is fetishized (worshiped, revered, eroticized) and the result is a reified social understanding of the options of familial affiliation. In exploring the term *ideology*, Eagleton explains, "Ideology freezes history into a 'second nature,' presenting it as spontaneous, inevitable and so unalterable. It is essentially a *reification* of social life" (58-59). When one fetishizes an object (in this case a social relationship), one makes of it more than what it literally is. This reified definition of the object has been successfully consolidated as the ideology when the members of the society accept the definition as "natural and self-evident."

Gramsci speaks of social, intellectual, moral and political hegemony, of hegemonic and dominant groups (59). The reified family performs as a hegemonic institution, instilling and preserving in the individual the very ideology that creates and maintains the family as an unquestioned institution. William Pietz explains, "The magical moment of fetish formation in this process is the transition of the general form into a *universal* form, its modal shift from existence and possibility to necessity--the mysterious transubstantiation of common social practices into custom or law sanctioned by the community as a whole" (146). In short, the family is fetishized (glorified, if you will) to the point that it is only recognizable in its reified form (the

nuclear family, with only a limited number of acceptable variations). This circumscribed family model is an ideological one that is irrefutable and intrinsic to our sense of ourselves. It is an instrument of hegemony that substantiates its own conventionality. It is a bastion of conformity.

Magical realist novels frequently concern the family, are in fact often novels detailing domestic life. If one agrees that magical realism has as its goal a disruption of hegemony, what better place to expect the writer to start than with the most coercive and unassailable hegemonic apparatus--the family? And in the United States--the institutionalized nuclear family. *Almanac of the Dead* is a detailed genealogy. It is a story that concerns itself with the lineage of indigenous Americans and the pedigrees of the Europeans who came to rule over them. This is a narrative about family that simultaneously celebrates kinship and denounces the fetishization of the family. It is a mythic tale of the spiritual potential of human kind.

*Almanac of the Dead* is comprised of over seven hundred pages and chronicles the actions of more than fifty characters. The title of the book refers to a collection of ancient notebooks that predict the end of the white man's exploitation of natives' land, a predetermined fate of the Americas as foreseen by the almanac. The notebooks are held in protection by Zeta Cazador, a Spanish Indian, and are to be translated by her sister, Lecha, and transcribed by Lecha's assistant, Seese. Seese, an Anglo woman, pursued Lecha after seeing her on a televised talk show. Lecha is a clairvoyant who can find the missing if they are dead, while Seese is a mother whose child has been kidnapped by its father's lover. Zeta lives with the nephew she has raised, Ferro, a son

Lecha abandoned. Zeta and Ferro smuggle drugs into the United States. They have two assistants. Paulie, a white man who is Ferro's lover and aids in the smuggling, has been with them the longest. Sterling, a Laguna Pueblo Indian who has been exiled from his reservation for failing to prevent a Hollywood movie crew from photographing sacred sites, is recruited at the beginning of the novel as their groundskeeper. All have come to reside together in a fortress ranch house outside of Tucson, Arizona. Unbeknownst to them, each character has a pivotal part to play in ensuring that an impending revolution will take place.

When we look at the novel as a whole, we can determine a somewhat simple foundation to the otherwise complicated plot. Seese and Sterling, two individuals whose alienation is partially the result of their own complacency, represent what could be characterized as polar opposite communities: Seese is a descendent of the colonizers and Sterling of the colonized. They converge on the home of the Cazadors, criminals and revolutionaries aggressively challenging the lingering effects of colonialism, contemporary capitalism, and its resultant inequitable distribution of power. Both Seese and Sterling are psychologically wounded as a result of the breakdown of their families. Seese has lost her son, Monte. Sterling has been ostracized from his tribe.

*Almanac of the Dead* valorizes ethnocentrism as a necessary and worthwhile stage in the process of subverting the lasting effects of colonialism.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Silko

---

<sup>2</sup>In his examination of the effects of colonization, Albert Memmi validates xenophobic and racist views held by the oppressed. He writes, "In the eyes of the colonized, all Europeans in the colonies are *de facto* colonizers, and whether they want to be or not, they are colonizers in some ways. By their privileged economic position, by belonging



privileges primitive tribal versions of community over those based upon European models. Nevertheless, pluralism is offered as the indispensable condition of hope for the human race. The microcosmic world of the Tucson ranch house, for example, is one identifiable pluralistic province. It offers an incursion against totalitarian forces of capitalism by providing refuge to individuals from a variety of cultural backgrounds, each of whom is escaping the personally devastating consequence of commodity culture, namely the destruction of their families.

Critics have often zeroed in on the issue of sexuality in *Almanac of the Dead*, noting that eroticism is grounded in cruelty, hostility, and violence and virtually reifies the continued domination by the colonizers of the colonized.<sup>3</sup> Characters are distinguished by their sexual appetites (or lack thereof). Sexual activity is more often the occasion of power struggles in the novel than of anything resembling human intimacy. A character's willingness or unwillingness to build something resembling a family shapes his or her fate. Thus, Beaufrey kidnaps and murders the child, Monte, in retaliation for Seese and Eric's procreation. Edith Kaye's attempted seduction of

---

to the political system of oppression, or by participating in an effectively negative complex toward the colonized, they are colonizers. . . . By their whole weight, intentionally or not, they contribute to the perpetuation of colonial oppression. If xenophobia and racism consist of accusing an entire human group as a whole, condemning each individual of that group, seeing in him an irremediably noxious nature, then the colonized has, indeed, become a xenophobe and a racist" (128). Silko espouses ethnocentrism, a form of the xenophobia and racism of which Memmi speaks. She suggests this ideology might assist in diminishing the self-hatred the colonizers have instilled in the colonized.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, St. Clare.

Sterling could be seen as a strategy to winning his hand and thereby his pension.

Characters are not simply punished in the novel for failing to create the nuclear family or rewarded for establishing some idealized version based upon tribal models. Instead, the disintegration of human relationships, sexual exploitation and deprivation are the direct effects of lingering colonialist power structures; therefore, no character escapes unscathed.

The novel depicts growing tensions between identifiable agents of imperialism and the descendants of the Indians and culminates on the verge of a revolution.

Whereas Silko explicitly identifies the historical moments and characters responsible for the colonization that so effectively disrupted the indigenous cultures and lineages--referring, for example, to Charlotte and Maximilian's reign over Mexico and the U.S. army's treatment of Geronimo and the Apaches--the two factions are not in modern day identified strictly by race in this context. By the novel's conclusion, the Cazadors go their separate ways to participate in the apocalypse independently of each other. Lecha "adopts" Seese, who has been devastated by a violent encounter that leads finally to her recognition that her child is lost to her forever. Sterling returns to his reservation and silently prepares himself for the imminent revolutionary onslaught. The novel's resolution fuses Native American animism with the Marxist structure of community and imagines a pluralistic society that includes eco-warriors, nationalists, poet-lawyers, holistic healers, medicine makers, homeless veterans and a variety of other revolutionaries from different races and of mixed race. "All these scattered crazies," as Lecha deems them, "and their plans would complement and serve one another in the

chaos to come" (755). In the bulk of the novel, then, Silko examines the preconditions necessary for revolution. As we shall see in the following examination, characters learn to reject explanations of desires and behaviors that are based upon a European understanding of history, and instead they adopt interpretations that essentialize and valorize characteristics, community structures, personal interaction patterns, and belief systems of the colonized as acts of resistance.<sup>4</sup> Nationalism is a prerequisite for unification and collective identification in the novel, and ancestry and familial legacies are crucial steps toward nationalism in that they provide the foundation for alliances. Silko locates the family as the site at which the aftermath of colonization can most readily be witnessed. New visions of familial relationships--communalism, animism, kinship, tribalism, to name a few--offer resistance to colonial power legacies and the potential for healing the ruptures caused to the indigenous cultures and lineages.

From the viewpoint of the dominant system, fetishized human relationships are preferable to actual ones for subduing potential opposition because they are prefabricated and circumscribed, and thus their participants are more readily controlled. A limited perception of spiritual potential reinforces the belief that rebellion is ineffectual. Given that the first connection one individual has to another is ancestral, the birth of a child to a mother, it comes as no surprise that familial relationships would

---

<sup>4</sup>Silko is not the first, of course, to make such a suggestion. Franz Fanon advocated in 1968, "the Third World starting a new history of Man, a history which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which will also not forget Europe's crimes, of which the most horrible was committed in the heart of man, and consisted of the pathological tearing apart of his functions and the crumbling away of his unity" (315).

be an effective site for fetishization. Individuals subdued from birth are less likely to envision unorthodox existences. Similarly, it is unlikely subjects will be able to fathom aberrant ways of being in the world when their primary human relations are preordained and fixed. Jameson asserts:

It should be clear that the autonomization of the family as a private space within the nascent public sphere of bourgeois society, and as the "specialization" by which childhood and the family situation are qualitatively differentiated from other biographical experiences, are only features of a far more general process of social development, which also includes the autonomization of sexuality. (64)

The process of autonomizing and specializing of which Jameson speaks correlates to fetishization. Fetishization requires undue focus on the subject and a dissection of the parts from the whole that allows for the aggrandizement of one part over another. Here, Jameson points out for us the functions the fetishization of the family and the autonomization of sexuality serve in privatizing community. Presumably, this rift would be undone once capitalism is superseded by communism, once the ideological coding of communal association prevails. As we shall see, Silko's interpretation of the family in the novel embraces not merely the tribal kinship of primitive communism but a notion of a collective consciousness contained in magic and mythic narrative as well.

### Individualism and the Disruption of Familial Relationships

*Almanac of the Dead* explores the devastating consequences of the colonization of the Americas, repercussions that affect the European descendants of the original settlers, the succeeding generations of indigenous people, and the subsequent offspring of mixed origin. In this tale, the absence of positive familial relationships is the direct

result of the colonization the novel traces. Silko blames European invasion of the Americas for the estrangement that characterizes human existence in the years since colonization. All characters in the novel lead disenfranchised fractured lives as the result of existing within the confines of the imperialistic mercantilism that becomes successful capitalism in the United States and less-subtle versions of despotism in countries to the South.

At every turn in *Almanac of the Dead*, the colonizers are characterized as having behaved contemptuously towards the subjects that constitute their own family. These people are distinguished by their indifferent dispositions; evidence ranges from "their flimsy attachments to one another and their children to their abandonment of the land where they had been born" (258). Forsaking their homeland and kinsfolk, the colonizers establish unchecked, absolute power over the inhabitants of the Americas, and this power affects them extraordinarily: "Nowhere except in the Americas had the colonial slave masters suddenly been without their own people and culture to help control the terrible compulsions and hungers aroused by owning slaves" (425). The tendency towards self-destruction, a result of their failure to honor their ancestors, is the legacy bequeathed to the colonists' descendants: "Europeans did not listen to the souls of their dead. That was the root of all trouble for Europeans" (604). Likewise, "They failed to recognize the earth was their mother" (258). Failure to acknowledge their connection to their people, their homeland, their ancestors, and even their earth allows the Europeans to develop insatiable appetites for destruction and to disregard the impact of these demands. European reign over the Americas is called the Death-

Eye Dog epoch in the novel: "Death-Eye Dog has been seated on the throne for five hundred years. His influence has been established across this entire world" (252).

Death-Eye Dog epoch is synonymous with colonialism; the name for the colonists' "flimsy attachment to one another" is *individualism*. In their discussion of post-colonial literature, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin write of "a continuing dialectical pattern [that] emerges between a traditional insistence on the collective, family, group, and society, and the opposed demands of the European ideology of the independent 'individual' whose social inflection is one of the strongest trace marks left by Europeanization on the post-colonial world" (114). Silko pillories a people who would readily forsake the community for the individual; individualism becomes analogous with cannibalism, sadism, and destruction in *Almanac*. The indigenous cultures become infected by this European disease. Emphasis on individualism distinguishes the idea of the nuclear family from alternative family patterns.

Sterling is a representative of tribal society in the novel. His experiences exemplify how colonization effectively disrupts the historical formation of familial relationships, substituting the ideology of individualism for one of communalism. A particularly telling observation in *Almanac* illustrates the fortitude of the disease of individualism. The old-timers point out to Calabazas that "once the whites had a name for a thing, they seemed unable ever again to recognize the thing itself" (224). The old-timers recognize that the act of naming for the colonizers is a process of restriction and enforcement. Eagleton identifies this as one of the elements of *ideology*, "a matter of 'fixing' the otherwise inexhaustible process of signification around certain dominant

signifiers" (195). This operation serves to oppress the characters of indigenous ancestry in the novel. Sterling spends his impressionable years in boarding schools. He knows he "might not have been sent away so young if his parents had not died. Still, that had been the policy of the federal government with Indians" (88). Any and all of Sterling's grandaunts would have cherished raising him, but Sterling is vulnerable to the authorities because his is no longer a nuclear family once his parents die. In this instance, a demarcated definition of family invalidates Sterling's grandaunts as an option. Unattached to a legitimized hegemonic apparatus, Sterling is dispatched to boarding school where the colonizers will further restrict his resources by making it impossible for him to learn his native customs and religion. Forced to attend school away from the reservation, "the children had to learn what they could about the kachinas and the ways to pray or greet the deer, other animals, and plants during summer vacations, which were too short" (88).

Exalted to apotheosis, the doctrine of individualism devalues a person's relationship to the community. Dependence upon the community is maligned. The only acceptable reliance is that of a child upon a parent. The term *family* is circumscribed to specify filial relationships only, thereby eradicating the individual's attachment to the community. Social and political hegemony constrains and enforces meaning; *family* comes to be legally defined by its nuclear components: parents and children. A minor child without parents, regardless of whether or not he has members of the community who are willing to care for him, is considered orphaned and thus becomes a ward of the state. The federal government, a hegemonic apparatus, aims to

perpetuate ideology. While it has the power to award custody of the child to a member of the community, it does not choose to do so in Sterling's case. In this instance, the dominant hegemony would be better served by placing the child of indigenous ancestry in a boarding school where he is more likely to come to accept prevailing ideology.

Worshipping ancestors, honoring nature gods, these are the religious ideals Sterling would learn from the Laguna reservation. The Laguna Pueblo community stretches its boundaries to include dead forebears and animals and plants living on the earth. Principles of this kind threaten the cohesiveness of the ideology of individualism perpetuated by the colonizers and challenge its dominance. Silko's old-timers contend that the colonizers are blind to "the thing" once they have established "the name for the thing." The colonizers fail to (or choose not to) recognize the very *thing* (the essences) that embodies family--familial relationships, affections and a willingness to accept their accompanying responsibilities--as a result of *naming the thing* the nuclear family. The villainy, as the old-timers recognize, is that the colonizers' way of delimiting and defining reality in fact obfuscates it, serving thereby to dismantle alternative ideologies sustained by Native Americans in the novel.

Sterling is eventually banished from his home, and all of the elements contributing to his expatriation involve his detachment from the reservation and his lack of family. Sterling is loved by his aunts but is in want of the strength and solidarity that can be provided by extended familial connections. Raised within a matriarchy, Sterling is reluctant to enter the patriarchal power structure of the nuclear



family.<sup>5</sup> Silko writes that "His main trouble with marriage was that he was not used to telling anyone else what to do. He supposed *that* might be traced back to the way Aunt Marie had raised him when his parents were both gone" (86). Sterling's discomfort with the conflictive and denigrative characteristics of modern-day sexuality in the novel leads to his near asexuality. Shanghaied by his co-workers, Sterling visits Janey, the Anglo prostitute who is temporarily providing her services to the men of Winslow, Arizona while her broken-down vehicle is repaired. The men come to call her services "the deluxe," but for very different reasons. Sterling enjoyed "how Janey had undressed him and how she had told him to close his eyes and leave everything to her. For Sterling that would always be 'the deluxe'" (85). In contrast, the Mexicans and Hopis are dumbfounded that Sterling closed his eyes. Janey's "powder-blue eyes and her white-blond hair" and "the pink--bright pink" skin had been her deluxe characteristics for them. "You didn't get any of that with the Winslow whores even as teenagers. Well, how could a Navajo or Mexican or Negro, even as a teenager, ever give you that bright shade of pink. All dark meat to begin with" (85). The privileging of Anglo characteristics, the disparagement of Indian women, images of consumption,

---

<sup>5</sup>Paula Gunn Allen's treatise on "Ritual Gynocracy in Native America" provides insight into the symbiotic relationship Sterling has with his aunts: "Certainly, there is reason to believe that many American Indian tribes thought that the primary potency in the universe was female, and that understanding authorizes all tribal activities, religious or social. That power inevitably carries with it the requirement that the people live in cooperative harmony with each other and with the beings and powers that surround them. For without peacefulness and harmony, which are the powers of a woman's heart, the power of the light and of the corn, of generativity and of ritual magic, cannot function" (26).

and even child abuse constitute eroticism in this world. Hegemonic duress insures that the colonized come to assent to the doctrine that maligns them, as exemplified by the extent to which the Mexican and Hopi men of Winslow have embraced the standards of the hierarchy. Sexuality and the nuclear family depend upon patterns of male dominance here; Sterling's passivity makes him ill-suited to participate.

Janey is triumphant individualism personified because she actively collaborates in her own commodification. The novel suggests as well that her success is the result of her "whiteness," and her place in the hierarchy that glorifies the Euroamerican physical traits of the conquerors. The measure of how the hierarchy is established through the reification inherent in capitalism is emphasized by Janey's success in Winslow. She offers her personal belongings as barter for the car parts the mechanic needs: "When she started to open the fifth or sixth suitcase, the mechanic said he had waved his hands at the pile of furs and shoes and told her that was enough down payment" (83). At the end of her short stay in Winslow she is able to pay the mechanic in cash: "All of them were a little amazed that Janey had made enough in five days to pay for eight Chrysler valves and a camshaft" (85). Commodification is inherent in the doctrine of individualism. Janey achieves affluence and accumulates materialistic goods by prostituting herself.

Sterling's scrape with Edith Kaye, a woman from his tribe, is the only other description of his sexual activity in the novel. Edith Kaye is a large woman, widowed three times, and notorious for her sexual appetite: "Edith Kaye had had her eye on Sterling when he first returned to Laguna to enjoy his retirement" (92). Her tools for

seduction include her waterbed, which she explains allows her to be on top of a man without crushing him. She quickly gets angry when Sterling resists: "The way she had been yelling and the hatred in her face had terrified Sterling" (93). Sterling equates his near escape from her waterbed with battle scenes: "He remembered reading an account of combat soldiers who described how endless ten or twelve feet were" (93). Whereas Janey's attentions were "the deluxe" for Sterling because she seduced him, Edith Kaye's aggression terrifies him.<sup>6</sup> Sterling's unwillingness to assume a dominant male role prevents him from establishing a relationship with a woman and creating for himself a nuclear family. Here we see he is similarly anxious about a woman taking that position. Sterling's discomfort concerns the coupling of hostility with sexuality, and in *Almanac of the Dead* the two are always joined. Sterling's rejection of Edith as a suitor has dire consequences for him, for she speaks against him at the Council meeting:

"Sterling had realized he might have escaped with only severe reprimands, years of community service and a heavy fine, if it had not been for Edith Kaye" (92). Sterling's passivity, his reluctance to head a family, his failure to find hostility erotic, these characteristics distinguish and alienate him from the other characters of the novel.

---

<sup>6</sup>Many differences can be noted between Edith Kaye and Janey, the most distinguishing one being race. In addition, while Janey serves as an object of continued fantasy for Sterling, Edith Kaye is a source of anguish. Janey accommodates her customers' illusions regarding women in general and a white woman in particular; as a prostitute, she adapts herself to men's desires. In contrast, Edith Kaye's sexuality expresses her own wants and needs; she is the sexual consumer. Symbol and means of her transience, Janey's sexual berth is appropriately a vehicle. Edith's bed is in her home; she is entrenched within the tribal community. Edith's is a waterbed, made of a natural element as opposed to Janey's which is a machine. These differences serve to locate Janey within the culture of the colonizers and Edith among the colonized.

These characteristics divide him from the community at large and thus eventually help lead to his ostracism from his tribe.

It would be a mistake to conclude that in the novel Silko rejects the family paradigm categorically. Instead, she draws a clear distinction between the demarcated family of the conquerors' making that is a mere tool in the reification process, and the spirit of familialism. In an interview, Silko describes her own upbringing: "In the Pueblo tribe the people are communal people, it is an egalitarian communal society. The education of the children is done within the community, this is in the old times before the coming of the Europeans. Each adult works with every child, children belong to everybody" (qtd. in Irmer, 2). Regardless of his long absence, Sterling is a member of the tribe, a constituent of the reservation, a "child" of the community. Though his aunts may have died, he does have cousins, family members. Nevertheless, Sterling's community, his extended family, banishes him from them unfairly. Silko interrupts herself in her description of the Pueblo tribe, quoted above, to explain that the communalism she describes existed prior to "the coming of the Europeans," before the colonizers disrupted their community structure. This same schism is depicted in Sterling's relationship with his tribe. His parents have died. Due to his long periods of absence, his aunts favor him when he returns from boarding school, eliciting jealousy from their own children. He refuses Edith Kaye, the reservation woman with whom he could have aligned himself. Aunt Marie's death clinches the Tribal Council's resoluteness. Sterling knows: "It was far better to have friends and in-laws vouch for your good deeds and truthfulness" (96); but Sterling discerns he has no one--no family,

no wife—who might plead for leniency for him. He has no one as a result of the federal government's policy to send an "orphaned" Indian child to boarding school off the reservation, and this lack of affiliation fuels the tribe's suspicion. In addition, he has not accepted a patriarchal role (as a result of growing up within a matriarchy) that would consequently allow him to bridge that gap, create a family, and establish a means of affiliation.

Distortion and confusion perpetuated by salient ideology permeate all aspects of characters' lives in *Almanac*. At the Cazador ranch, Sterling grapples with melancholy and the pain he experiences from being banished from his reservation:

Sterling had been carefully following advice printed recently in a number of magazines concerning depression and the best ways of combating it. He had purposely been living in the present moment as much as he could. One article had pointed out that whatever has happened to you had already happened and can't be changed. Spilled milk. But Sterling knows he's one of those old-fashioned people who has trouble forgetting the past no matter how bad remembering might be for chronic depression. (24)

One can imagine the cursory, inept advice offered by these magazines, texts riddled with clichés and platitudes of the "spilled milk" variety. "Get on with your life," "water under the bridge," "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps," "forgive and forget." Such banality is the cornerstone of individualism, where a person is expected to purge himself of sorrowfulness and regret and hasten towards a state of self-possession. The conflict Sterling experiences between his purposeful efforts to live in the moment and his difficulty in forgetting the past illustrates the disparity between the "European ideology of the independent 'individual'" and the "insistence on the collective"

identified by Ashcroft, et. al. Sterling's boarding school education, where the students no doubt learned to absorb without question the material published in textbooks, makes him particularly vulnerable to printed claims by those who profess to be authorities. His cultural heritage conflicts with the advice, however, in that it stresses remembrance, observation, and history. Sterling has been trained to devalue such characteristics in himself, calling them "old-fashioned." His boarding school education has successfully conditioned him to strive continuously to reject his own understanding of himself and his (lack of) connection with his community and accept instead the standardized ideology of individualism. In a letter to James Wright, Silko writes, "At Laguna, when someone dies, you don't 'get over it' by forgetting; you 'get over it' by *remembering*, and by remembering you are aware that no person is ever truly lost or gone once they have been in our lives and loved us, as we have loved them" (qtd. in Wright, 29). Silko's explanation of Laguna Pueblo convictions reflects upon Sterling's situation. Sterling is mourning the loss of his home, the death of his aunt who died as a consequence of his ostracism, the demise of his affiliation with his community. He tries to practice the magazines' advice to "get over it by forgetting," contrary to his own cultural desire to "get over it by remembering." Sterling attempts to acquiesce to the salient ideology of individualism.

*Almanac of the Dead* fittingly concludes with Sterling returning to his tribe. He is haunted by his time at the Cazador ranch. He dreams of the armies of Native Americans engaged in revolution described in the almanac. He grieves over Seese and the child she lost. Sterling wanders the reservation, visualizing herds of buffalo

grazing below the mesas. He is uplifted by the sight of ants laboring together to bring food underground. He terminates his magazine subscriptions, deciding they only describe "a world that had never really existed except on [their] pages" (757). Instead, Sterling contemplates his own existence: "What had happened to his life? Education, English, a job on the railroad, then a pension; Sterling had always worked hard on self-improvement. He had never paid much attention to the old-time ways because he had always thought the old beliefs were dying out. But Tucson had changed Sterling" (762). Sterling serves several roles in the novel. He is his tribe's scapegoat, for he is banished not because of his own actions but because someone must account for past transgressions against the tribe. He is confidant and teacher to Seese, who learns to trust him. He is a philosopher and a historian, pondering the past and questioning the ethics of the laws, policies, and actions of agents of the U.S. government. He is a messenger who brings news of the giant stone snake to Lecha, and by that means to other dissidents. Sterling functions as a force passively resistant to ideology in *Almanac of the Dead*. The rift between himself and his tribe illustrates the profound effect the dominant hegemony has upon dissident cultures; his fortitude despite the imposed isolation exemplifies the power of passive resistance to hegemony. His return to the reservation signals his rejection of the ideology of individualism with its doctrine of "self-improvement" that oppresses him and all the descendants of the colonizers and the colonized. His renewed interest in "old-time ways," his visions of buffalo returning to the plains, his admiration of the collective activity of the ants, these portend a future wherein the familial structures of primitive communism and tribal society will prevail.

### The Irresistible Allure of the Nuclear Family

Seese and her wealthy, white companions are afforded privileges not granted to non-Caucasians. As such, they are particularly susceptible to pressures to conform to hegemony, as in doing so they are likely to be rewarded personally and financially. They, especially, are romanced by the modern-day fetishization of the nuclear family. In the transformed climate of cruelty and subjugation that characterize the Death-Eye Dog epoch, however, few are able to establish or maintain genuinely supportive human relationships. Nearly every character in *Almanac of the Dead* routinely traces his or her emotional splintering to a destructive familial relationship. Descendants of the colonizers, in particular, bear the stamp of their ancestors' decadent and cruel appetites. Seese resents her parents' marital arrangement, her father handing over the "salary a lieutenant commander flying combat received" in exchange for her mother's tolerance of his continued absence. Seese believes that "her father and mother had gotten even with one another; but Seese did not feel the score had been settled between herself and either of them" (57). David remembers "his father as a silent, angry man whose thinning gray hair stood on end when he was drunk. David had been happiest as a child on the nights when the old man did not come home" (552). Before he committed suicide, "Seese had asked Eric if going home for a visit might cheer him up. Eric had managed to laugh, then shook his head. West Texas was the source of his depression in the first place" (57). Beaufrey recalls that he "had been a byproduct of his mother's last menopausal fling in Paris. She had never wanted children because of the nuisance and the damage they did to the figure . . . . Beaufrey and his parents had loathed one another" (536).



Serlo was raised by his grandfather: "His parents were divorced and neither had wanted him. The old man did not consider massaging the boy's arms and legs at night homosexuality" (546). Alienated and demoralized, these estranged descendants of the colonizers flee their fractured families, yet they are unable to eschew the haunting promise of the family idealized.

The process of reification affects every moment and every level of human interaction. Lukacs describes this social effect that envelopes and thwarts the individual's capacity for understanding and insight:

It stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can 'own' or 'dispose of' like the various objects of the external world. And there is no natural form in which human relations can be cast, no way in which man can bring his physical and psychic 'qualities' into play without their being subjected increasingly to this reifying process. (100)

One may go so far as to say that it is through reification alone that the ideal of the nuclear family is perpetuated. The foundation of the nuclear family, marriage, is a site of drastic confusion, at the very least. Here, historical issues of lineage and property rights, more contemporary understandings regarding kindred responsibilities, and modern day fancies of true love mix to create ephemeral convictions. As Engels points out, the institution of marriage itself is based on the concept of slavery: "The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of women, and modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as its molecules."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>The etymology of "family" described by Engels is worth repeating here. He explains, "The original meaning of the word 'family' (*familia*) is not that compound of

Steeped in emotionalism, shrouded by ceremony, substantiated by convention, marriage is in all likelihood our most steadfast and occulted tradition. "Tradition-making," as Frank Lentricchia points out, "is a process of historical repression engineered not by the dead but by the living, for the living and for those who shall live" (124). The effect of such invested repression is that the participants are primed to embrace misinformation. The population willfully deludes itself regarding the one institutionalized relationship unabashedly founded on the exchange model. One outcome of this beguilement is the general mystification of human relations. Within *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko dismantles the self-imposed delusion surrounding the foundation of the family—the sentimentality of marriage. Far from simply the spiritually and legally-binding union of two heterosexual individuals, marriage in the novel is designed solely to perpetuate the tradition of the nuclear family and thereby capitalism.

Marriage degenerates from a meaningless union to a horrific and grotesque province in this world. However, even the characters most alienated from the institution feel compelled to worship at its altar. When David rejects Eric, Eric turns to Seese, who is pregnant with David's child, for comfort and compassion. Seese and Eric gaze at the coast and observe a "dog shit a load the size of a wedding cake. 'Wedding cake?' Seese

---

sentimentality and domestic strife which forms the ideal of the present-day philistine; among the romans it did not at first even refer to the married pair and their children, but only to the slaves. *Famulus* means domestic slave, and *familia* is the total number of slaves belonging to one man. As late as the time of Gaius, the *familia*, *id est patrimonium* (family, that is, the patrimony, the inheritance) was bequeathed by will. The term was invented by the Romans to denote a new social organism whose head ruled over wife and children and a number of slaves, and was invested under Roman paternal power with rights of life and death over them all " (66).

had said, starting to laugh. 'Yea, a wedding cake,' Eric had said, and then they had both laughed and laughed" (60). Eric and Seese disagree on the impact David's proclamation will have upon the two of them. Eric asks Seese to marry him; he assumes that David has finally chosen Beaufrey over both Seese and himself. Seese refuses Eric's proposal and defends herself against Eric's assumptions. The interchange upsets Eric. He inhales "heaping spoonfuls" of cocaine, then reflects on his childhood. "When I was in high school," Eric begins, "I used to imagine or pretend--yeah, pretend. I liked to pretend I was an orphan. No living relatives anywhere in the world" (61). The cocaine calms Eric, and soon he and Seese make a game of his past: "They had finished off a quart of tequila, talking about how they would go back to Lubbock as husband and wife and pick up Eric's inheritance from Granny, drawing interest these past four years until Eric 'came around'" (62). The evening is the final shared moment between Seese and Eric before he commits suicide.

Within this simple scene, Silko examines the far-reaching coerciveness of social hegemony. She also suggests that marriage has become mechanical and futile, a modern-day institution that merely purports to be the embodiment of genuine human bonds and dependencies. All of the marriage symbols (and incentives) are here: lovers, a proposal, fertility, a wedding cake, an inheritance, relatives, home. The scene's players feebly struggle to mimic the expected ceremonial union. The symbols of marriage, however, are nightmarish and distorted. The lovers are already rejected; the proposal is an effort to stave off despair. The "bride" carries another man's child; the wedding cake is composed of dog feces. Implicit in the episode is the failure and futility of the nuclear

family--Eric was so estranged from his Texas clan that he solaced himself by pretending he was an orphan. The inheritance is a form of duress; the relatives have repudiated the "groom" due to his homosexuality, and Eric cannot return home. The scene contains foreboding as well. Seese senses Eric's desperation and depression. She makes a game of imagining a nuclear family for the three of them, a "normal," socially acceptable climate in which they might survive. Her effort is an attempt to alleviate Eric's despondency; however, she unknowingly divines the violence to come.

Gramsci asserts that social hegemony is comprised of 1) "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group," and 2) "the apparatus of state coercive power which 'legally' enforces discipline on those groups who do not 'consent' either actively or passively" (12). In *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko establishes the fetishized nuclear family as perhaps the most powerful location of social hegemony, where spontaneous consent from the masses is secured and state coercive power is maintained. That aspect of hegemony most difficult to fathom and to bear is the spontaneous consent secured from the masses--the tolerance of dictums that misrepresent and distort, the subsequent internalization of those falsifications, and the ultimate surrender to self-destructive ideology.

Silko examines how the reification of the family enfeebles all of the colonizers' descendants, not simply Seese and her entourage, by making them blind to the inconsistencies in their lives. Trigg, a Tucson developer, is another such example. He resents his parents who cannot find time even to spend a Christmas with him after his

debilitating accident. He dreams of earning enough money to finance research that will assist him in regaining use of his legs. He imagines himself, "speeding along the beaches heading for [his] mother's place in Palm Beach. He would buy a white 3-piece suit for the occasion. All it would take was enough money and his mother would be telephoning to invite him for tea" (388). Alegria, the architect from Mexico City, thinks of girl friends from boarding school: "They wanted only to burp babies wearing satin baptismal gowns and to enjoy the wealth that rightfully was theirs" (667). Seese, finding herself pregnant with Monte, "had stood her ground. No abortion this time. The pregnancy had put her on a different footing with Beaufrey. Pregnancy worked to her advantage" (52). Trigg, Alegria, and Seese are entangled in the family romance. Emphatically, the three reject the fabled nuclear family. Trigg recognizes that his parents are indifferent to his needs at best, repulsed by his condition at worst. Alegria concedes that her death would have little impact on her mother and father. Seese realizes the crippled relationship between her parents was not affected by the presence of a child whatsoever. Contradictorily, all three have visions of what a successful nuclear family would be.

An explanation of this incongruity can be found by examining the role capital plays in these characters' visions. Trigg hopes to buy himself his former physical abilities; improved physical stature will win him his mother's renewed interest. The ability to reproduce earns for Alegria's friends a reliable position in a financially stable household. Seese exploits her pregnancy to secure power in her relationship with David and Beaufrey. All three characters unconsciously barter familial potential for human

affection and security. Their human qualities and conditions have been reified into commodities; their interactions with one another are exchange activities. As Landry and MacLean suggest, "Commodity fetishism designates a double movement within ideology and everyday practice, the simultaneous reification of social relations, which become things in themselves, and the personification of the products of our labor, which acquire a life of their own" (51). Trigg, Alegria and Seese simultaneously loathe the nuclear family structure from which they have escaped and labor to recreate it in their lives. Silko shows that by institutionalizing the nuclear family, revering it as the foundation of social order, and thus deploying it in such a way as to control the populace, the colonizers have created a social institution that ultimately reproduces decadence and horror.

Like familial ties, sexual relationships for the Euroamericans in the novel are reified and consequentially identity is distorted and marred. In *Almanac*, the descendants of the colonizers are afforded privileges not granted to non-Caucasians, with a few exceptions. As such, they are likely to benefit from the dominant ideology. Before fleeing to Tucson, Seese resided in an apartment owned by the lawyer searching for Monte; the Cuban maid the lawyer provides for Seese, Elena, lives there as well. Seese rationalizes the maid's resentment towards her: "Elena knows that if she were blond and that skinny, she would be living here. So the hatred, Seese reasons, is not of me. Elena hates all skinny, blond women" (46). Seese is the recipient of entitlements granted by the dominant ideology; Elena is subjugated as a servant. Seese is granted the role of matron and Elena relegated to the role of maid, yet neither recognizes the source

of this division and estrangement. Both fix on Seese's physical characteristics as the cause of the hierarchy. Those characteristics, however, are strictly features of race as a cultural category. In fact, "blond" and "skinny" are the tags that fetishize the physical propensities of the colonizers. Eagleton examines this coercive force of ideology:

"Projection, displacement, sublimation, condensation, repression, idealization, substitution, rationalization, disavowal: all of these are at work in the text of ideology" (185). The relationship between Seese and Elena is infused with these various forms of self-denial and repression of which Eagleton speaks. For example, Seese and Elena "repress" their feelings of helplessness which derive from their dependence upon the lawyer; likewise, they "displace" their resentment of him and fix it upon each other. Shulamith Firestone adds that such behavior is frequent among women: "The tool for representing, for objectifying one's experience in order to deal with it, culture, is so saturated with male bias that women almost never have a chance to see themselves culturally through their own eyes. So that finally, signals from their direct experience that conflict with the prevailing (male) culture are denied and repressed" (157).

Firestone's argument suggests, then, that because they are women, Seese and Elena are especially imperiled by this facet of ideology. Neither woman is financially secure. Both rely upon the lawyer's continued support of them and thus his estimation of their worth. Their value is determined by his judgment.

Racial characteristics are the effects of social reification, features severed from the body and transformed into signifying physical attributes that are marketable. This reification enables Seese to dismiss Elena's animosity by repressing the true source: the

inequitable divisions originating from distinctions based upon race and class (and gender). Likewise, Elena is manipulated into believing she would attain Seese's status were she only to become "skinny" and "blond."<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, what is accomplished by this reification is that both women subscribe to an ideology that alienates them from one another. Seese and Elena live together, their housing provided by the lawyer. The lawyer employs Elena; Seese is his kept woman. Elena's race qualifies her to be the lawyer's maid, Seese's grants her the status of his whore. The distinction between their positions is sustained largely by the women's confidence in their own commodification. Both are servants in one capacity or another to the lawyer, yet there is an unspoken understanding between them that Seese is superior to Elena because Seese possesses the fetishized physical characteristics of Caucasian females. They "spontaneously consent" to their own commodification because they have internalized the values perpetuated by the dominant ideology. Just as Alegria, Trigg and Seese comply with the force that mystifies the nature of the relationships that constitute the nuclear family, so too Seese and Elena accept the power that establishes fetishized physical characteristics as legitimate commodities.

Sexual activity is the purest commodity in *Almanac of the Dead*. Sex is always a means by which to procure power, achieve status, or accomplish an objective. Sex is "swapped" for drugs, assistance, information, or used as a "decoy," a stepping stone, a

---

<sup>8</sup>One could easily argue that such a transformation *is* plausible in countries where technological processes--plastic surgery, hair dyes, skin bleaching--encourage and enable individuals to all but erase physical characteristics of race.



status symbol. When Lecha first meets Seese, who has come to Root's trailer looking for her, "Lecha assumes this is one of Root's customers, one of those young women who swap sex for drugs" (166). Seese's relationship with David serves a specific purpose for the sycophants: "Seese was the decoy. Because Beaufrey was as anxious as David was about his masculine image" (59). In a similar fashion, Seese later does sleep with Root in hopes that he might assist her in unloading her kilo of cocaine: "If she let Root keep humping, he might come, and if he came, he might help her" (597). Ultimately, the distinction between prostitution and gratuitous sex is depicted as a false dichotomy because all sexual activity is predicated upon gain, whether it be financial or otherwise, and this is reminiscent of Engels' description of the family as property. Unlike Janey, who openly markets herself and thereby readily accepts her own commodification, Seese veils her status as a whore somewhat by the legitimacy of an alleged "relationship" with the lawyer.

In the novel, the commodification of human beings ultimately results in a prevailing climate of sadistic sexuality. Beaufrey "despised public sentimentality over infants and small children. In private, these same infants had their heads smashed or vaginas ripped; after all, they were the private property of their fathers" (536). Sexual exchange ranges from interchanges by willing participants to the domination of the defenseless, and both are depicted as entailing violence. Molestation, rape, and bestiality become standardized, even preferred erotic practices under the conquerors. Serlo's grandfather introduces his grandson to zoophilia: "How casually the old man had unbuttoned the fly of his trousers, then slipped his hard dick into the milk cow's heifer

tied and hobbled in the barn" (657). Characterized as the only true blue blood in the novel, Serlo practices a "technophilia" that signifies the depth to which the conquerors have descended: "Serlo had been ahead of his time with his fetishes of purity and cleanliness; there were insinuations his sex organ touched only sterile, prewarmed stainless steel cylinders used for the artificial insemination of cattle" (547). The reign of Death-Eye Dog epoch is synonymous with sexuality anchored in violence in *Almanac of the Dead*. Silko insinuates that an inability to procreate may be the consequence of such appetites. Characters become obsessively concerned with reproduction (with or without a woman). Seese first has an abortion and then loses Monte to infanticide. Serlo and Beaufrey's preoccupation with procreation technology that would eliminate the mother appears to be at once a cause and a consequence of the Europeans' infertility. Their visions of escaping the earth and its "inferior" inhabitants, living on a self-sufficient station in space, and virtually cloning themselves is the final phase of the process of the colonists' self-destruction that the almanac foretells.

Upon the reader's first encountering them, the sexual and emotional alliances between Seese, David, Eric and Beaufrey might appear to be an alternative to monogamy and the nuclear family. Eric chastises himself for over-reacting when he learns of David's newest love: "Wanting David all for himself was just a stupid version of the Bible Belt bourgeois Eric rejected" (59). All four scorn their pasts. They are repelled both by their parents' commitment to the nuclear family model and subsequent failure in practicing it. However, no matter what alternative form of family they attempt to establish, their learned destructive tendencies will contaminate those attempts.

Human interaction during the Death Eye Dog epoch is characterized by objectification, possessiveness, martyrdom, and complacency; it routinely escalates into violence. As descendants of the conquerors, they are prone to such dispositions. Beaufrey wins David because he has the capital to sponsor David's photography. Motivated by his despair over losing David, Eric kills himself. David exploits Eric's suicide, rendering photographs of his dead body into art. Seese witlessly loses her friend and her child to Beaufrey's sadistic predilections. Beaufrey has Monte tortured and murdered and utilizes photographs of the act in his pornography business. Isolated at the ranch in Columbia, Beaufrey spurns David and then encourages in him a mixture of paranoia and narcissism that eventually leads to his death. When they triumph, those of the group do so by transforming one of the others into an object. The personal ability to objectify another human being, to make him or her into a thing, grants extraordinary power, the power of life or death.

Though theirs is a pluralistic rather than a nuclear family in that it consists of several adults (and later a child) who engage in hetero-, homo-, and bisexuality with numerous partners, their family is organized around competition and possessiveness that leads to their own holocaust. Their homicidal inclinations indicate the colonists' penchant for self-destruction in the novel. Individualism mutates into a literal survival of the fittest. Only the most sadistic among them, Beaufrey, remains alive and emotionally intact. Seese's story in the novel ends in surrender. She relinquishes any hope of finding her son. Monte's legacy will be that he is immortalized in the almanac, as Seese types in a vision she has of him in a dream. The almanac now includes its first

entry from a member of the colonizers' descendants. Fittingly, it is an homage to a dead child, a eulogy to the defunct colonial family patterns of the modern world. The demoralized Seese is last seen hugging "Sterling one last time, tears streaming down her face" (756). Lecha has assumed responsibility for her. Presumably Seese will participate in the ensuing revolution: she will continue to transcribe the almanac. In this role, one that entails recording rather than creating or even translating, Seese evinces the limited influence Euroamerican culture will have on the post-revolutionary world of *Almanac of the Dead* wherein the fetishized nuclear family will be displaced by communal alternatives.

#### Re-Envisioning Familial Relationships

As it is both a history of time and a chronicle of people's lives, special attention is paid to genealogy in *Almanac of the Dead*. Readers are provided a clear understanding of which characters descend from indigenous people, which from Europeans, and which characters are of mixed ancestry. Those of mixed ancestry are characterized by their acceptance or denial of their heterogeneous lineage. As might be expected, they are distinguished by the pride or shame such ancestry instills in them. Zeta and Lecha Cazador's maternal grandmother, Old Yoeme, was Indian. Their grandfather, Guzman, was an emissary of the conquering forces and colonial overseer. Old Yoeme describes to her twin grandchildren their family tree: "Guzman and my people had made an agreement. Why do you think I was married to him? For fun? For love? Hah! To watch, to make sure he kept the agreement" (116). Old Yoeme deserts her husband and children when the imperialistic forces violate treaties and first exploit

then massacre Indians. Years later when Yoeme returns, her children "want the dirty Indian out of there" (115). Yoeme's children resent her for her desertion of them. In her absence, they have come to identify themselves solely by their father's racial heritage: that of the conquerors. The twins Zeta and Lecha, however, are mesmerized by Old Yoeme, her powers, her stories, and the almanac she bequeaths them. Old Yoeme confides to them, "All these years I have waited to see if any of you grandchildren might have turned out human . . . and I was almost to give up hope. But then you two came" (118). Descendants of both the colonizers and the colonized, Zeta and Lecha become smugglers and agitators for the nationalists' cause. They thwart the entrenched power structures that protect and perpetuate capitalism. Zeta and Lecha will participate in the revolution foreshadowed in the almanac that promises to bring about a new world order. The Cazadors are subversives; their familial patterns challenge the idealized nuclear family model.

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin point out that: "Abrogation is a refusal [by the colonized] of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words" (38). In the novel, Lecha "abrogates" the fixed standard of a supposedly inherent "maternal instinct" that has become the assumed priority of women who give birth. Unlike Sterling, who is a passive resister in the novel, Lecha Cazador is radical indigenous defiance personified. Each and every one of Lecha's actions serves to violate and thereby challenge the dominant hegemony; she is a force that disrupts the seamlessness of ideology. Lecha abrogates the hegemonic definition of family. First

and foremost, Ferro is fatherless. Bearing in mind that the novel is an *almanac* preoccupied with the facts surrounding genealogy, lineage, and pedigree, this omission is paramount. All the characters in the novel spend moments reflecting upon their disheartening relationship with their parents. Sometimes the reader is provided lengthy details regarding a character's triangular relation to a mother and a father; other times this information comes only in the form of a brief aside. Occasionally, the mother is absent from the child's life, now and then the father is. It is important to note, however, that Silko calls our attention to this absence for every major character (and nearly every minor character) except Ferro. Ferro's father is not named, nor is the fact that he is not named either stressed or down-played. The omission serves to foster the sense that Ferro alone is fatherless, immaculately conceived if you will. This gap is a characterization tool that invests in Lecha qualities of mother supreme, fertility goddess, all-powerful procreator. It is ironic, then, that Lecha deserts her son.

Lecha absolves herself of any maternal responsibility, leaving Ferro for Zeta to raise. She "decided to go. To get out of the Southwest, to explore new territory . . . . For whatever reasons, Ferro had not spent much time with his mother while he was growing up" (100). Lecha resists the ideological force which alleges the mother must nurture and raise her child, a defiance that reveals the opposition between the nature of family subscribed to by the Native Americans and that imposed by the dominant ideology. As Nancy Hartsock formulates, "The fact that women and not men *bear* children is not (yet) a social choice, but that women and not men rear children in a society structured by compulsory heterosexuality and male dominance is clearly a societal choice" (233).

While Hartsock's assertion comments on the status of gender in determining child rearing responsibilities, it can be expanded to include biological parentage as well. The fact that a biological mother bears the child is not a social choice, but that this same woman is responsible for rearing that child is. Few of the characters of indigenous ancestry in the novel are raised by their biological mothers. Sterling's parents are killed in an auto accident. Old Yoeme escapes Guzman's plantation leaving her children behind. Lecha leaves Ferro with her sister. For the indigenous population in the novel, biological motherhood is not awarded the status and consequent obligation the connection confers for the descendants of the conquerors. Lecha, Silko's heroine of indigenous ancestry, is unresponsive to the patriarchal ploys and the cultural biases that would pressure her into adopting a parental role she is unwilling to assume.

The difference between the colonizers' and the colonizeds' familial relationships and consequently their potential for survival in the new world is perhaps best epitomized by comparing Lecha and her son, Ferro, to Seese and her son, Monte. In many ways, Seese is the antithesis of Lecha. Whereas Lecha acts; Seese reacts. Lecha is a seer, Seese is blinded. Whereas Lecha quits her son; Seese's is abducted from her. Lecha almost appears to have propagated without a man; Seese is manipulated by men into terminating a pregnancy. Seese does not resist the role of caretaker, but she is utterly incapable of functioning as one. As a result of her cocaine and alcohol dependency, she fails to protect her son from her criminal companions. Throughout the course of the novel, she searches futilely for Monte without ever obtaining a clue as to who kidnapped the child or where the boy might be located. Unlike Lecha, who

abdicates the charge of mother, Seese finds herself challenged to prove her claim that she is one: "The police seemed to want proof that she had really had a child in the first place. But the neighbors did not recognize her or remember Monte in the stroller" (112). Despite the fact that the room is filled with nursery items and that Seese produces photos of the baby, she has failed to perform satisfactorily the duties of a mother—parade her child for the world to see, protect it from harm's way: "Seese had suddenly been aware that her own words sounded thin, and the details of her story did not seem convincing even to her anymore. She could imagine how she must sound to the police detectives" (112). The authorities, disciplinarians for the state hegemonic apparatus, instill in Seese uncertainty and recrimination, a task of far greater importance to the dominant ideology than that of searching for the lost infant. Unlike Lecha, who thwarts hegemony by refusing the title of mother, Seese advances it by relinquishing the title in atonement for her failure to fulfill the ideologically prescribed duties.

While Seese is not simply a demonized Anglo mother, incompetent enough to allow her son to be kidnapped and murdered, Zeta is not a bastion of maternalistic devotion, akin to Sterling's Aunt Marie, raising Ferro to be the champion of the indigenous population. While Silko insists that ethnocentrism will provide the colonized with the pride necessary to assert themselves against the forces of advanced capitalism, she does not depict a future world wherein tribal people simply supplant Euroamericans. (She does, however, suggest that the Euroamericans are in danger of creating just such a scenario given their current self-destructiveness.) Instead, she posits that all familial relationships, both the colonizers' and the colonizeds', have been



disrupted by the forces of imperialism. Zeta's mission is to retrieve and protect the land stolen from Indians. Mother Earth is the family member she most aggressively safeguards. Reverence for the earth is critical to the population's survival in the novel, but it is not meant to supplant familial devotion. As a result of her albeit admirable pursuit, Zeta neglects the child she has been appointed to raise.

Lecha, Zeta, and Ferro's relationship to one another is rife with animosity, resentment, apathy, but nonetheless love. These relationships have led to some controversy among critics and reviewers regarding humanism in *Almanac of the Dead*. One reviewer expresses concern: "One wonders why Silko's characters (Indians, as well as Anglos and those of mixed race) should be so dark, indeed perverted—to the point where some passages are exceedingly painful to read" (Knickerbocker, 13). Another reviewer charges that Silko's "sufferers hate all others who suffer" (West, BR8). In discussing an opening passage of the novel in which Ferro, Lecha, and Zeta are reunited after Lecha's long absence, critic Gregory Saylor writes, "This initial scene sets the stage for the frightening characters of *Almanac* to appear, indeed many of them are already in the kitchen. . . . The hatred that this "family" feel toward one another is palpable even in the first few paragraphs" (Saylor, 102). Without a doubt, *Almanac of the Dead* is a somber novel peopled with villains and permeated with brutality. It is a mistake, however, to condemn the characters dismissively without first searching for some meritorious quality. Silko writes in a letter to a friend: "We are told we should love only the good and the beautiful, and these are defined for us so narrowly" (qtd. in Wright, 41). Readers may be repelled by Ferro, a manipulative drug dealer who abuses

his lovers, both Paulie and Jamie. At times, he loathes his mother and the aunt who raised him. He is dangerous and calculatingly cruel. Nevertheless, Ferro cannot be disparaged as evil incarnate. Despite his malevolence and the fear he may instill in readers, one must acknowledge that Ferro is loved by Jamie, Paulie, and Zeta.

In Zeta's mind, her twin's recklessness produced at least one valuable consequence: a child. Zeta remarks, "Lecha's best stunt had been the birth of Ferro one Friday morning" (125). Zeta is committed to raising that boy. Zeta's smuggling operation necessitates that Ferro, younger than the other students, stay at a boarding school. The nuns at the school question the practices of a working woman. As a result, Ferro grows to distrust his aunt, believing she simply does not want him. Only as an adult does he come to realize that she was in fact protective: "It was dangerous business. It wasn't any place for a little child" (182). Zeta protects Ferro, sees to his education, and establishes him in the family business when he comes of age. While she does not desert him as did Lecha, she does not dote on him either. She responds honestly to his questions about his mother, and refuses to let him feel abandoned:

When Zeta had told Ferro that his mother had left him in Tucson because she could not be bothered with a tiny baby, her eyes had told him that she did not want him feeling sorry for himself. She did not believe anything teachers or psychologists might say about the ill effects of rejection upon the child. Her eyes said that what was good or necessary for white people was quite different for them. (187-8)

Zeta emphatically rejects the doctrine of individualism, along with its most adamant subscribers, dismissing such theories as only "good and necessary for white people."

She protects Ferro against the propaganda espoused by the boarding school teachers and the psychologists, the very same professionals who influenced Sterling to his detriment.

In her dedication to subverting capitalistic power structures by means of her smuggling operation, however, Zeta condemns Ferro to the same fate as Sterling; namely, he becomes a boarding school ward. As a result, Ferro fears "his aunt did not raise him out of maternal love but out of duty" (183). Zeta prides herself on her accomplishment, thinking: "In spite of her sister, Ferro had got raised, and that was all that had mattered" (189). In contrast, even as an adult Ferro feels inadequate and continues to resent his "motherlessness." (189). Zeta accepts the responsibility of raising her sister's child, but does not find it necessary to see to it the child knows he is loved. Zeta has made resistance to the conquerors *the* priority in her life. She disputes the conquerors' rights to the land and is absorbed by concerns over the property rights of the indigenous: "Every waking hour Zeta spent scheming and planning to break as many of their laws as she could" (133). In her zeal to accomplish this mission, however, Zeta loses sight of the importance of familial love. Unlike Sterling, who lacks a protective family but basks in his aunts' love, Ferro's home and family is a veritable citadel, but he labors under the misconception that neither his mother nor his aunt love him. Unfortunately, Zeta underestimates the importance of familial bonds. By treating Ferro first as a ward then as a business partner, Zeta falls into the trap that so effectively dehumanizes individuals. By rejecting the importance of family outright, interpreting it to be solely the invention of the colonizers, Zeta has robbed herself and Ferro of familialism and created an alienating structure similar to that of the conquerors.

One of the crucial climaxes in the novel concerns the moment Zeta is dumbstruck by the realization that she loves Ferro very much, that he is like a son to her. Ferro learns that his boyfriend has been murdered, and Zeta rushes to console him in his heartbreak: "Zeta was afraid Ferro might want to follow his boyfriend to the grave. Zeta's grief had surprised her, and she felt a terrible pain in her chest as if her grief had crowded her heart against her ribs" (702). Zeta suddenly understands the mistake she has made:

She and Calabazas had been fools. . . . What good had all their talk of war against the United States government done? What good had all their lawbreaking done? The United States government intended to keep all the stolen land. What had happened to the earth? The Destroyers were killing the earth. What had happened to their sons? She loved Ferro; she didn't want him to die. (702)

Though the relationship the people have with the earth finally evolves into the most fundamental alternative to the paradigm of the nuclear family in *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko does not prioritize people's commitment to the planet over their dedication to one another. Silko distrusts primacies in general: individualism (an over-emphasis on the individual's capabilities), the nuclear family (an undue accentuation of a family pattern), zealotry (blind devotion to a cause). Zeta and Lecha are models of resistance to hegemony in that they challenge the forces of capitalism by subverting its ideology; they consciously refuse to accept its fetishes. Zeta and Lecha will enthusiastically welcome the revolution and eagerly join the insurgent forces. Resistance to and triumph over capitalism entails a re-envisioning of familial relationships. The Cazadors successfully subvert hegemony. Their familial structures challenge the idealized nuclear

family model. Their minor triumphs over capitalism, however, have come at a cost to their son, Ferro. He, like all the other characters of the novel, is a product of a disrupted familial relationship. Ultimately, the Cazadors' is not a family prototype for the new world order.

### Communal Consciousness: The Almanac

Silko's reconceptualization of family in *Almanac of the Dead* includes not simply the tribal kinship of primitive communism but the collective consciousness of magic and mythic narrative as well. The almanac loosely defines "Narrative as analogue for the actual experience, which no longer exists; a mosaic of memory and imagination" (574). Narrative for the colonized is nothing less than a collective consciousness, a communal understanding of the past, present, and future that collapses time. An incident that occurred centuries earlier is thereby granted the same significance in the present as one that occurred just seconds before (and vice versa). The crime for which Sterling is punished is one example. The accusations against Sterling stem not so much from the fact that he failed to prevent a Hollywood movie crew from photographing a sacred stone snake as from the fact that approximately twenty years before his birth his tribe's stone idols had been absconded by archeologists. At his trial, those who testify against him recount the story of the stolen idols. All are aware that Sterling played no part in this previous crime, but the sacrilege committed against the tribe seventy years earlier is as significant if not more so than the one occurring in present time. The tribe has continued to grieve the loss of the two stone idols which they call "Little Grandmother" and "Little Grandfather." The Hollywood movie crew's invasion of

restricted sites desecrates community-held beliefs; the theft of the stone idols robs the tribe of its spiritual ancestors. The actions are condensed to a single offense--the violation of the tribal community by outside plunderers--and as a result are viewed as one event by the tribe, despite the passage of time. In addition, the telling and retelling of the story of the stone idols influences the tribal members, thereby affecting the community consciousness. Thus, Sterling becomes as much at fault for the theft of the stone idols as for the prohibited photography. Communal consciousness simultaneously reveals itself in storytelling and is impacted by the telling of stories. As such, past experiences bear on current events and the present likewise sways the community's understanding of history. "Narrative," Silko explains of her tribe, "is the only way they keep track . . . . Nothing written down. All in the human memory and kept collectively." Thus, she explains, narrative is "always contemporaneous--past, present, and future always in one moment" (qtd. in Perry, 323). In *Almanac of the Dead*, stories are constantly in flux as is time, truth, understanding, and certitude because they are determined by storytelling.

*Almanac of the Dead* actually contains within it a collection of competing "almanacs" or narratives. Frequently, these stories are set apart from the rest of the text with subtitles, graphics, reduced margins, or italics. They include the original collection of ancient notebooks and Yoeme's and Lecha's additions which are all parts of *the* almanac Lecha and Zeta have been entrusted to protect. In addition, there are Trigg's diaries, Clinton's notebook and radio broadcast transcript, the village sorcerers' remedy for illness and evil, Angelita's chronicle of imperialist crimes, and Wilson Weasel Tail's

poetry, among others. Likewise, visual narratives are part of the novel as well. These include Beaufrey's dissection films, the videotapes of tortured prisoners directed by the Argentine and the Mexican police chief, and David's photographs of Eric's suicide. Here Silko blends the "magical" with the "real," emphasizing narrative's ability to shape reality. As we shall see, these various narratives vie for supremacy, for the power of being the dominant record of history and thus a determinant force of the future. They are the stories of the assorted factions involved in the escalating hostilities that will soon erupt in all out war in the novel. Individually and collectively, these narratives are simultaneously false and true, real and imaginary, in that reality can be dictated by the victor's vision, but subverting narratives will encroach upon that "reality."

In this way, "magical" and "real" lose meaning to some extent. In fact, Gabriel Garcia Marquez alleged that "I don't write anything unreal or unbelievable or even improbable" (qtd. in Delbaere, 90). Silko herself contends of *Almanac of the Dead*: "This whole novel is about reasserting claims for ideas and the truth that all people in America--African, Mexican, Native and Anglo Americans--forget" (qtd. in Kellener, 1). Magical realism utilizes mythology, and mythology is in a sense an alternative version of history, thus Marquez and Silko assert that their narratives are not "unreal" but simply forgotten truth. Such truths are found in the notebook of the snakes from the ancient almanac. Yoeme tells Zeta that "the notebook of the snakes was the key to understanding all the rest of the old almanac" (134). There are five entries in this particular notebook. The first entry describes a "sacred messenger spirit" snake that lived "once near Laguna village." It also records the snake's prediction of an

apocalypse. The second entry describes a "parrot trader" who will bring a story signaling the people to prepare. The third speaks of Quetzalcoatl and the rebirth of humanity. The fourth simply states, "Sacred time is always in the Present." The fifth and last is numbered one through seven and appears to be a dictionary definition for the word *almanac* with the exception of number seven which reads: "Madrid, Paris, Dresden, Codices" (136). Here Silko blends poetry, story, historical detail, particulars from the novel's plot, and precise definition, providing "the key to understanding" the ancient almanac (and for some the novel itself). After translating the notebook Yoeme had given her, Zeta is disappointed. "This did not seem to be the 'key' to anything," Zeta thinks, "except one old woman's madness" (134). However, as the novel progresses, these entries begin to correlate with events in the novel. The spirit messenger snake that lived near Laguna is akin to the stone snake unearthed by Sterling's tribe on the Laguna Pueblo reservation. The parrot trader, as well, could refer to Tacho, the character who is directed by macaws to lead Mexico's insurrection. These fictional details are blended with historical ones. Quetzalcoatl is the fair-skinned Aztec god, known as the Feathered Serpent, who was driven into exile and whose return is predicted. Montezuma welcomed the conqueror Cortez because he mistook him for the long absent Quetzalcoatl. Madrid, Paris, and Dresden are the European cities that hold the only known preserved Mayan codices in existence. These codices are almanacs, and they predicted Cortez's conquest of the Aztecs.

The distinction between those details that can be obtained from history books and those that are the novel's fictionalized events is blurred, however. To some extent,



that blurring is predicated upon the reader's selective ignorance of history. Silko relies on the fact that most readers do not recognize "Quetzalcoatl" and do not know of the existence of the Mayan codices, artifacts belonging to indigenous Americans that are at present day the property of the conquerors and housed in museums in their major cities.<sup>9</sup> Upon learning later in the novel that these details of Native American history are not of Silko's imagination but historical facts, the reader will find his or her understanding of history challenged. It is thus that Silko begins the task of "reasserting claims for ideas and the truth" that have been forgotten. In addition, once readers are forced to acknowledge a certain ignorance of history, their confidence in their ability to separate what is fiction and fact in the novel is completely undermined, and the realms of "magical" and "real" or of "true" and "untrue" are consequently much less fixed.

It can be inferred that the sacred texts held by Lecha and Zeta are codices that were never discovered by the conquerors, who subsequently confiscated or destroyed those almanacs they did uncover. The recognition that such almanacs, ones that are said to have preordained historical events, do in fact exist works to substantiate the powers of the novel's fictional almanac. This almanac is founded upon concrete Mayan texts which contain prophecies that came to pass, and it contains references to Indian mythology. These, in turn, are blended with the fictional background of the novel in that they allude to characters and events that take place within the context of the novel.

---

<sup>9</sup>Comparatively, the words "Jefferson," "Declaration of Independence," and "Washington D.C.," terms in ways analogous to those Silko is working with, would be much more familiar to readers.

This fusion of mythology, history, and fiction obscures the boundaries of the real and the imagined. In addition, the novel follows the process of the almanac being translated and transcribed, which results in additions to the text of the almanac that reflect the present context of the novel. Such fusions lend to the almanac its power seemingly to portend the future from the historical past and the textual present of the novel.

Moreover, this power is wielded to challenge the coherency or accuracy of what has been deemed historically "true," and posit instead the possibility of alternative but no less authentic versions of history, ones that incorporate the existence of spirits and the validity of myth.

When we speak of hegemony, reification, and ideology, we are attempting to examine the ways in which a collective (mis)understanding or a communal (un)consciousness that buttresses capitalism is created. These terms have come to be utilized in a theory of consciousness that emphasizes the roles cohesion, acquiescence, certitude, and coercion, to name just a few of the effects, play in swaying a populace to exchange its labor. The power inherent in capitalism is mystifying and illusive. Marx examines the magical element of this process in *Capital* when he speaks of the commodity as "a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties":

So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing *mysterious* about it . . . . But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something *transcendent*. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it *stands on its head* . . . .

A commodity is therefore a *mysterious* thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour: because the relation of

the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. . . . There is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the *fantastic* form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the *mist-enveloped* regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings *endowed with life*, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. This I call the *Fetishism* which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (italics mine, 71-72)

Marx describes the mystification process of commodity fetishism that empowers capitalism. The capitalistic mode of production is dependent upon the fetishization of commodities, the process whereby the "social relation between men" is transformed into a "mysterious" "transcendent" and "fantastic" "form of a relation between things." Such a "mist-enveloped" mode of production is akin to religion in that it "endows with life" what is otherwise inanimate. Capitalism, then, requires of its populace a leap of faith that bestows upon commodities a property not inherent in them. Returning to the earlier table in which Jameson's description of the modes of production and their ideological coding is laid out, we are reminded that this "leap of faith" is there termed "commodity reification." If we acknowledge that the impending mode of production, communism, will have affinities with the original mode of production, primitive communism or tribal society, we must also concede that the corresponding ideological coding, communal association, is likely to share qualities with the original ideological coding, magic and mythic narrative. This becomes even more apparent when we recognize that the present

ideological coding of our current mode of production already contains elements of mystery and the fantastic, is in fact dependent upon the power of fetishization.

This recognition undermines distinctions to be made between the real and the magically real as well. For if the reality constructed by capitalism requires trust in the value of the commodity, an assurance as to the power of a monetary system, the fetishization of capital, then what makes the magically constructed world of capitalism any more real than another one? Hartsock answers the question: "Despite the perverseness and perniciousness of the ruling group's vision, it can be *made real* because of the power of the ruling group to define the terms for the community as a whole" (132). Hegemony "makes real" the "vision" of capitalism. The fetishized commodity is no more (and no less) real than the fetishized stones stolen from Sterling's tribe, but "reality" is differentiated from magical reality in that the latter is not substantiated by the current ideological coding. In fact, by positing alternative and no less legitimate objects of fetishization, magical reality functions as a subversive narrative to that coding. The competition between dominant and subversive narratives in the novel in some ways parallels the conflict between dominant ideology and the subversive one--magical realism.

As explained earlier, there are several narratives within *Almanac of the Dead* competing to be the dominant record of history. The dominant record of history, in turn, will be the determinant force of the future. To some extent, Silko distinguishes between those narratives which represent the colonizer's history and those that represent the colonized.

The meaning of the novel, however, is that these histories are intertwined and that all subjects have come to be dominated by the ideology of capitalism which subsequently is destroying the viability of community and rendering all people inhumane. Thus, destructive narratives are distinguished from revitalizing ones not by an affiliation with the colonizers rather than the colonized, nor by themes of brutality or violence, but by their distinctive feature of glorifying commodification. These narratives illustrate the power capitalistic ideology has to regulate the lives led by the characters in the novel.

Entries from Trigg's diaries, for example, detail his reason for obtaining an MBA: "What I need from life only money can buy" (385). In this narrative as well, Trigg justifies utilizing his plasma donor center to murder the homeless for financial gain: "I could do the world a favor each week and connect a few of the stinking ones up in the back room and drain them dry" (386). Trigg's diaries reveal his preoccupation with dreams of building a financial empire and the lengths he will go to to accomplish such a feat. Likewise, Beaufrey profits from the commodification of torture, brutality, and death: "Beaufrey was in partnership with a rare-book seller in Buenos Aires with a complete line of dissection films and videotapes for sale" (102). These videotapes are presumably films of the torture produced under the name of "police interrogations" in Mexico. Furthermore, "The video cameras and equipment had been gifts of the United States government" (341). In contrast, David's photographs that render Eric's suicide as art are differentiated from Beaufrey's crass snuff films by their aesthetic merit: "David's work was about to redefine the terms *portrait* and *still life*"; however, in the end their "value" is similarly reduced to the capital they raise: "Suddenly it was as if all the work

David had done to create the Eric series had been destroyed, because all the sets of limited-edition prints had been sold and less than \$10,000 remained after the lawyers had been paid" (553). For the conquered as well, the distinction between destructive and rejuvenating narratives hinges upon commodification. "Sorcerers" are distinguished from the rest of the indigenous population by the use to which they put magic and narratives: "The village of sorcerers had got rich making up and selling various odd sorts of alleged 'tribal healing magics' and assorted elixirs, teas, balms, waters, crystals, and capsules to the city people, mostly whites" (478). Trigg's diaries, Beaufrey's videotapes, David's photographs, the sorcerers' remedy poems, these narratives glorify capitalism. More importantly, though, they directly affect lives.

Trigg drives down the price of land in downtown Tucson by opening up plasma centers that draw the homeless and poor. He then purchases these "uninhabitable" neighborhoods, converting condemned property that houses squatters into habitats for the middle-class. Draining the homeless of their blood and harvesting their organs is only the final embodiment of his exploitation of the impoverished he chronicles in his diaries. Beaufrey's dissection films and videotapes are provided by what Gramsci terms "the apparatus of state coercive power which 'legally' enforces discipline." The equipment to make the films is provided by the U.S. government to the Mexican police. The police in turn videotape their torture of prisoners, who consist mainly of members of opposing political factions. The politics motivating the torture are suppressed, and the videotapes are sold as pornography. The profits, in turn, support police forces and their practice of torturing political prisoners. The recorded narrative funds the process.

David's talent attracts Beaufrey, who becomes his lover, manager and benefactor. As a result, David discards Eric, who then commits suicide. David photographs Eric's dead body, manipulates the image, and renders it into art. Beaufrey markets the photographs, and David achieves the fame he covets. What is crucial to note here is the cyclical nature of this process. Commodification concurrently destroys people and produces capital; this capital in turn funds the commodification process which again destroys people and produces capital. The characters of *Almanac of the Dead* are controlled and dominated by an ideology that robs them of their humanity. As Beaufrey, perhaps the most depraved character in the novel, notes:

David was worth more dead than he had been worth alive. The Eric series would appreciate in value, and even pictures of David's corpse would bring good prices. Beaufrey knew Serlo disapproved of selling these photographs; but here was what gave free-world trade the edge over all other systems: no sentimentality. Every ounce of value, everything worth anything, was stripped away for sale, regardless; no mercy. (565)

Here we see the culmination of the reification process. Human beings are robbed of life, transformed into objects, refashioned as a commodity. Commodities are infused with value, granted life, privileged over human beings. In *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko contends that the narratives of destruction that currently inform world views are predicated upon commodity fetishism which robs the living of life. Silko offers magical realism and animism as possibilities for counteracting the impending doom; her narratives of revitalization place value in the living.

Although she espouses Marx's theories and admires his research of tribal community structures, Angelita La Escapia cautions in *Almanac of the Dead* that "Marx

had also been a European and those following after him had understood the possibilities of communal consciousness only imperfectly" (291). Angelita credits Marx for a meritorious examination of tribal social and economic structures (the primitive communism to which Jameson refers), but she admonishes Marxism for failing to recognize the significance of communal consciousness to the success of those structures (what Jameson terms magic and mythic narrative). All of the elements necessary for the overthrow of capitalism exist in the realm of the magical and converge together at the end of the novel. Here inanimate objects are imbued with life and animate objects are personified; these beings subsequently protect characters and guide them in a revolution to overthrow capitalism through the power of narrative. The theft of the "grandparents," the stone idols given to Sterling's people by the kachina spirits, figures in the trial that determines Sterling's expulsion which sends him to Zeta and Lecha's home. The stone snake unearthed by the plutonium miners on Sterling's reservation faces south, the direction from which the resistance will come. Ogou, the spirit who lives in the blade of Clinton's knife, protects him and encourages him to broadcast calls to war to his fellow African Americans. Roy's green beret keeps his thoughts crystal clear and allows him to organize an army of homeless people, some of them Vietnam veterans such as himself. Menardo's grandfather tells him stories of Prince Seven Macaws and the two sorcerer brothers who destroy him. Menardo becomes a wealthy leader of mercenary forces that garrison capitalists' interests; his servant, Tacho, and Tacho's twin brother, El Feo, figure in Menardo's downfall. Macaws choose Tacho as their servant, explaining to him the significance of dreams and directing him to lead the people north. Souls of



children who died under the age of two hover near ceilings; the absence of such souls warns El Feo that his companion is a sorcerer. The spirit of the coca leaves empowers the Indians, providing them a drug that debilitates Europeans. A spirit settles into Mosca's shoulder, leading him to join the insurrection. The Hopi leader writes to prisoners. He tells them stories about Corn Mother and Old Spider Woman; the stories are retold within the men's dreams and encourage them to revolt. All of these forces affect change by bridging gaps between the spiritual and the natural world. Here fetishized objects (stones, a knife, a beret, coca leaves) and personified entities (macaws, a person's shoulder, the souls of children) nurture interaction between people of seemingly opposing communities, encouraging them to align themselves with one another and envision themselves as kin, as a family, as Mother earth's progeny come to rescue her from the destructive legions.

Here, then, is where we return to the issue of the fetishized family. The plot of the almanac describes the fortitude of the earth despite its assailants. "The evocation of Mother Earth throughout *Almanac*," Rachel Stein asserts, "is clearly oppositional, rather than sentimental, representing the contrasting vision of the animistic dispossessed and the objectifying Destroyers. The revolution between the 'haves and have nots' will be a war for Mother Earth" (142). The "have nots" in the novel will be assisted in their efforts by the supernatural, omnipotent, unassailable force of the almanac. They will prevail as a result of their willingness to act cohesively and their readiness to rely on their collective consciousness: their narratives. Silko explains, "Somewhere along the line you realize that all of everyday life is made of narrative. That you need narrative to

live your life. That you can't get up out of the chair and walk back to the front of the house without narrative, really" (qtd. in Perry, 43). The collective conscious of the disenfranchised, in the form of narrative, empowers the colonized and other sympathizers to retake the land from the capitalists. These narratives animate all things on the earth and the earth itself, and they allow people to see themselves as merely one component of a world invested with life. Throughout the novel, Silko repeatedly insists that the conquerors' rudimentary error has been their inability to perceive their familial relationship to the earth: "They failed to recognize the earth was their mother" (258). The effects of materialistic exploitation are depicted in incestual terms: "The white man had violated the Mother Earth, and he had been stricken with the sensation of a gaping emptiness between his throat and his heart" (121). Infanticide is fostered as the earth's only possible course of action: "The earth had been blasted open and brutally exploited, it was only logical the earth's offspring, all the earth's beings, would similarly be destroyed" (718). To combat reification, the only viable path left for the indigenous population in the novel is revolution of the people, reclamation of the land, rescue of the earth, and a redemption of the great Mother. In the end, *Almanac of the Dead* resists the fetishization of the nuclear family and propounds instead a vision that incorporates many versions of familial relationships--communalism, animism, kinship, tribalism--versions that subvert fetishized nuclear family and offer instead an all-inclusive vision of familialism.

**Chapter Two**  
**Mud Mothers, Matriarchs, and Madwomen:**  
**African American Community and the Paradigm of the Nuclear Family**  
**in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters***

Many African American women writers today explore the complicated tasks of reclaiming African American traditions, sustaining qualities characteristic to the African American people, and preserving the African American community in the postmodern atmosphere of unabashed commercialism that thrives on similitude. The family has been posited as one locality for such preservation efforts, albeit a problematic one, for in the African American community the family serves not only as a stronghold against the legacy of slavery and the lasting effects of racism, but also, as in other communities, as a vehicle for the perpetuation of patriarchal power and capitalistic ideology. In Althusser's words: "The ideology of the ruling class does not become the ruling ideology by the grace of God, nor even by virtue of the seizure of State power alone. It is by the installation of the Ideological State Apparatuses in which this ideology is realized and realizes itself that it becomes the ruling ideology. But this installation is not achieved all by itself; on the contrary, it is the stake in a very bitter and continuous class struggle" (250). The practices of slavery--the custom of selling family members away from each other, restrictions against marriage, masters' unlimited sexual access to slaves' bodies--hindered slaves from creating and sustaining family. As slaves were denied the right to establish legally recognized families, the nuclear family came to serve as a location of resistance, as evidence of the African American community's continued perseverance and survival; and like capitalism itself, it becomes an emblem of freedom. Michelle Wallace explains, "Even after

Emancipation, patriarchy's various economic, political, educational and social arrangements, as they determined the relations between white men and white women, were scarcely suitable for the majority of blacks, although where they were suitable--for instance, among middle-class blacks--they were revised and applied as soon material conditions allowed" (231). Capitalism and the nuclear family come to signify freedom in particular for people who were denied the right to accumulate capital and establish families by a racist patriarchal capitalistic society; however, these markers of freedom were not necessarily intrinsic to their culture, were in fact determined through their prohibition. One can identify a transition in African American women's literature from complete devotion to family in early works, perhaps best illustrated by Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, to a widespread skepticism regarding the institution that appears in recent works, such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Institutions that epitomized freedom in earlier writings--education, employment, property ownership--are often either contested or rejected outright as artificial aspirations in more contemporary literature. In rejecting those institutions glorified by capitalism, these writers resist the Ideological State Apparatuses of which Althusser speaks and challenge the dominant ideology. These writers seek to identify structures and patterns, needs and desires distinguishable as African American, and in doing so to subvert the ruling paradigm. Often this effort takes the form of creating a space inhabited solely by blacks free to create and nurture their own society: Eatonville in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the Bottom in *Sula*, Willow Springs in *Mama Day*. The narrative technique of magical realism has emerged as another effort to establish

African American cultural heritage and to imagine alternative destinies to the limited ones prescribed by white capitalist patriarchy.<sup>1</sup>

Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* was first published in 1980 by Random House and Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* in 1985 by Ticknor and Fields. The concern expressed in Bambara's book regarding the dissipation of the black community's values, goals, and commitment to African American empowerment reaches all out reproach in Naylor's indictment of the black bourgeoisie depicted in her novel who have forsaken the community in lieu of personal success and prosperity.<sup>2</sup> At the close of the 1970's, Bambara seems to have feared what Naylor later likewise experienced and despaired of--that individual gains borne of civil rights laws and affirmative action programs had undermined community activism and inspired once unified revolutionaries first to settle for begrudging tokenism and later to revise history by recasting that tokenism into successful individualism and entitlement. Charges of elitism or classism are not unfamiliar to the African American community and surface in the past and present in many forms. Distinctions based upon being a house as

---

<sup>1</sup>Wendy K. Kolmar does not use the term magical realism; however, she makes a similar point regarding women's literature in general. She argues that whereas, "the affect of the classic supernatural story seems to be to make us cling more closely to the rational side of those [prescribed] dichotomies, to reinforce the readers' sense that the world is in fact dualistic, that the present is distinct from the past, the living from the dead, the natural from the supernatural," those written by women "seem to challenge this dualistic view of the universe" (236-7). I have discussed this same issue in a previous chapter in an exploration of an argument developed by Catherine Belsey.

<sup>2</sup>Joan S. Korenman explores a similar issue, the advent of black nationalism and the rejection of the matrilineal heritage, focusing on both these authors but not these same texts.

opposed to a field slave, color prejudices, the theory of the talented tenth—reproaches against such internalized discrimination permeate African American literature. Gender relations as well have long been critiqued as a means whereby discrimination is self-imposed within the community. Bambara herself is credited with publishing the first anthology, her 1970 collection *The Black Woman*, that brings attention to issues facing African American women, ones that were being neglected by the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation Movements. In 1989 when Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* was made into a television miniseries starring Oprah Winfrey, the story captured America's heart and softened it, albeit briefly, on the plight of poverty-stricken black women, humanizing for the audience what has become the stereotype of the welfare dependent in the American imagination. While these women's collective works clearly share common themes, *Linden Hills* and *The Salt Eaters* in particular are compatible texts. In some ways these novels mirror each other in their depiction of a black woman's struggle against the confines of capitalism and patriarchy; in other ways they compliment one another in their alternate conceptions of how those foundations of power will impact the African American community.

Both *Linden Hills* and *The Salt Eaters* are configured so that their focal point is a woman confined. Willa Nedeed is actually imprisoned in her basement, Velma Henry is stranded atop a stool in a hospital room. Each novel concerns itself with how the woman arrived in this position, and each concludes that the community is simultaneously responsible for and impacted by the woman's predicament. Willa Nedeed's personal narrative is likewise the history of *Linden Hills*; so too Velma

Henry's life story is the chronicle of Claybourne, Georgia. The individual is inseparable from the community in these novels. The communities in both novels, then, are somewhat uninformed of the leading character's plight. For instance, Luther provides reasonable excuses for his wife's absence from holiday events and neighborhood functions, thereby concealing the fact he has imprisoned her; and important figures in Velma's life—her sister, Palma, her husband, James, her friends, Jan and Ruby—discuss Velma's recent erratic behavior in the space of the novel but are never made aware that she has attempted suicide. Yet, in *Linden Hills* Willie Mason is tormented by concerns for the absent Mrs. Nedeed, and in *The Salt Eaters* Palma reads the abrupt and premature termination of her period as a sign that something is awry with her sister. In this way each novelist works with the notion of a communal consciousness, a general empathy that connects human beings whether they are as close as two sisters only a few years apart in age or as distant as a twenty-year-old male poet and a thirty-seven-year-old wife and mother who come from two separate classes and have never met. An individual's unexplained absence disrupts and disturbs community life; personal catastrophe comes of and symbolizes the widespread malaise affecting the community. So the accounts of how and why Willa Nedeed became incarcerated and Velma Henry attempted suicide are likewise the stories of the community's disintegration.

Each novelist emphasizes this interconnection between individual and community not only through telepathic moments between characters, but also via physical geography that situates characters near to and dependent upon each other.

*Linden Hills* and *The Salt Eaters* both provide readers with very detailed descriptions of the community's geographic layout and the history of its development. In fact, the blueprints of Linden Hills and Gaylord Hill (the setting for most events in *The Salt Eaters*) are nearly identical. We are told in *Linden Hills* that in 1820 Luther Nedeed's "double great-grandfather bought the entire northern face of the plateau" and "built a two-room cabin at the bottom of the slope--dead center--with its door and windows facing the steep incline" (2). In *The Salt Eaters*, the Southwest Community Infirmary, established in 1871, sits at the base of Gaylord Hill facing upward. Sloping up from Luther's home in *Linden Hills* is the land that becomes the wealthy black neighborhood of the novel's title, and Putney Wayne, a black community as poor as Linden Hills is rich, is perched on top where the hill plateaus. The white community of Wayne County takes up a second face of the hill and expands onto the plateau and the land beyond Putney Wayne. In *The Salt Eaters*, above the Southwest Community Infirmary on Gaylord Hill sits the post office, then the Academy of the 7 Arts, then the Regal Theatre which together make up "the prime real estate of Black turf" (120). Beyond Gaylord Hill sits Gaylord Heights and Transchemical which employ the people of Clayborne as domestics and plant workers.

*Linden Hills* and *The Salt Eaters* offer fictional renderings of the actual landscape of the United States, where race and class segregation predominate. Affluent blacks must pass through Putney Wayne to reach Linden Hills, both in the figurative sense of escaping poverty to achieve wealth and in the literal sense of coming to their homes in Linden Hills on a daily basis. The working people of Clayborne ride buses



that carry them up Gaylord Hill, out of their own neighborhood, and into the homes and business of the wealthy (presumably white) residents of Gaylord Heights.<sup>3</sup> The neighborhoods of Linden Hills and Gaylord Hill are black pockets in an otherwise white terrain. The inhabitants maintain a tentative hold on a piece of a hill continually encroached upon by voracious white leaders with rival interests quick to cite laws, institute policy, falsify records, or in the end resort to violence to usurp the inhabitants' right to that land. It is incumbent upon community members to unite and protect their community and one another lest they lose what little they possess. What they possess, however, is very different in the two novels. While the Luther Nedeed dynasty symbolizes for its black community the possibility and potential, "to turn the memory of [its] iron chains into gold chains" (12), the Infirmary archway of *The Salt Eaters* is inscribed with the words: "Health is my right" (119). Both institutions offer messages of hope for a persecuted population, but the former locates that hope in access to capital, the latter in the entitlement to wholeness and well-being. Naylor's community rests upon an individual homestead, one that exudes its inhabitant's wealth and success, a house expanded and modernized over the years and attesting to the reliability of capital accumulation. The foundation of Bambara's neighborhood is a hospital, a building that services the community, a stone structure linking the present to the past and affirming the indisputable rights of the people. *Linden Hills* concludes with the

---

<sup>3</sup> As might be expected, the complex history and geography of these communities makes them difficult to describe. For a helpful diagram of Claybourne, Georgia see Gloria T. Hulls' "'What It Is I Think She's Doing Anyway.'"

demise of a flawed community nucleus and *The Salt Eaters* with the rejuvenation of community confidence and pride; thus both novels criticize capitalism for its desecrating impact on the African American community.

Both Naylor and Bambara insist upon anchoring their communities in history and connecting their characters to the past, yet they also suggest that destiny is shaped in the moment, that circumstances and the conditions of a community are not indomitable. Naylor devotes a lengthy introduction to the chronicle of Linden Hills' development. In the middle of her tale, Bambara describes the establishment of the Infirmary by free coloreds, and frequently her older characters reflect upon the past, providing readers with additional historical details. Yet, the action within both novels takes place within a short period of time—six days in *Linden Hills* and only a matter of hours in *The Salt Eaters*. In addition, both writers focus on the lives of an individual woman but are sensitive to the many voices that make up a community. Thus, Velma Henry and Willa Nedeed, though at the forefront of their tales, are accompanied by a myriad of other dynamic and interesting characters. In this way both writers balance the significance of the individual with the importance of a community, suggesting that the destiny of the community is irrevocably tied to the mental health of the individual. At issue, then, is the use of a woman driven to madness as a vehicle for depicting the community's ailment.

Significantly, the woman functions as a vortex in each novel. In *Linden Hills*, Luther Nedeed's home is the nucleus of Linden Hills, and Willa Nedeed is entombed in the basement. The poets Willie Mason and Lester Tilson are drawn down into Linden

Hills to Luther's home and to Willa's "rescue." In *The Salt Eaters*, the Southwest Community Infirmary is the hub of Clayborne, and Velma Henry sits in the center of a room in the middle of the Infirmary. Various community leaders, visitors to the Infirmary, and students of the Academy have been enlisted to witness or to assist in her healing. Both novels entreat readers to recognize the impending desecration and destruction of the African American community that will come of allowing cultural ideals to be displaced by capitalist values and the myth of individualism. More importantly, however, each novel utilizes the figure of the ailing woman/wife/mother at the community's heart and the disembodied female voice to demonstrate that the persistence of patriarchy will undermine any and all efforts to resist reification, and that the nuclear family, completely naturalized within capitalistic hegemony, is the means by which patriarchy is perpetuated. Both *Linden Hills* and *The Salt Eaters* suggest that unless this woman is freed, unless she is healed, unless patriarchy is dismantled, the community will be drawn into her despair and likewise destroyed.

### *Linden Hills*

Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* has been read as an allegorical tale similar to Dante's *Inferno*,<sup>4</sup> one that depicts the moral and spiritual disintegration of an African American community that has embraced capitalistic values, namely materialism and self-absorption. The community of Linden Hills is encircled by eight roads. The first five are consecutively named First through Fifth Crescent Drive. The last three are all

---

<sup>4</sup>See Saunders and Ward for detailed readings along these lines.

designated Tupelo Drive. In this neighborhood the most wealthy home-owners inhabit properties at the bottom of the hill. As a result, the young man who inhabits 100 First Crescent Drive, Lesterfield Walcott Montgomery Tilson, is considered by the community to be its least prominent citizen; in contrast, the gentleman who owns 999 Tupelo Drive, Luther Nedeed, is the double great-grandson of Linden Hills' founder and its grand patriarch.<sup>5</sup>

First purchased in 1820 by the original Luther Nedeed, the once worthless land that makes up the Linden Hills district gains value over the years and eventually attracts the attention of covetous white city officials. To thwart these voracious municipal leaders from appropriating the property, the Nedeeds offer thousand-year-and-a-day leases to the tenants, insuring that Linden Hills remains in the hands of blacks. Later generations of Nedeeds aspire to transform Linden Hills into a monument to black prosperity, creating the Tupelo Realty Corporation that screens applicants and insures that residents meet rigorously high status criteria: "Tupelo Drive and Luther Nedeed: it became one cry of dark victory for blacks outside or inside Linden Hills"

---

<sup>5</sup>Barbara Christian takes issue with the notion of Luther Nedeed as a patriarch, arguing that in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*, "Naylor shows the inaccuracy of such terms as *matriarch* or *patriarch* as they apply to Afro-Americans" (110). Christian notes, "Nedeed is not so much a patriarch as a manager, who must hold to rules that are actually determined by whites" (123). The distinction here is similar to the one often made between *prejudice* and *racism*, *racism* being *prejudice* combined with the power to enforce this bias. In this sense, Luther is barred from being a patriarch as the values of the microcosmic world of Linden Hills are determined by the macrocosmic white culture. Likewise, the power Luther wields is restricted to the borders of his prized community. While Christian's point is an important one, I will continue to use the term patriarch throughout this essay in its familial sense as a man who rules a family, clan, or tribe, a progenitor, a person who is regarded as a founder.

(16). Wealth, prestige, power, these are the aims of the tenants of Linden Hills, and a move down the hill and closer to Luther Nedeed indicates the extent to which one has realized the objective. A stream borders the top of Linden Hills and separates it from Putney Wayne, an impoverished neighborhood home to poorer blacks. In an effort to demarcate themselves from their black neighbors in Putney Wayne, whom they consider to be their inferiors, the Linden Hills residents post a sign at the community's entrance that ironically reads, "Welcome to Linden Hills." At the same time, its Tupelo Reality board does everything in its "power to keep those dirty niggers out" (135).

The narrative takes place within a time frame of six days (December 19th through 24th) and follows the efforts of two twenty-year-old poets, the aforementioned Lester Tilson and his friend Willie Mason, as they make their way down into Linden Hills doing odd jobs to raise cash for Christmas presents. Lester lives with his mother and sister in the outermost house in Linden Hills, one that was willed to him by his grandmother, a woman who despised the Nedeeds. As one who resides just on the periphery of Linden Hills, Lester sits on the fence post, as it were. He takes for granted the comfort his family's minor prosperity provides him. At the same time, however, he is acutely aware of the many in the underclass who have been sacrificed so that a few can achieve their social and economic goals, and he accordingly sits ever-poised to criticize the inhabitants of Linden Hills for their failings and judge them inhuman. Raised in a large family in a small apartment in Putney Wayne, Lester's friend Willie experienced poverty and witnessed domestic violence first-hand; as a result, he is more reluctant to dismiss Linden Hills as venal. As he reminds Lester, "Because these folks

in Linden Hills didn't want that kind of life doesn't make them freaks" (58). The two young men provide the reader with different viewpoints on materialism and its place within and affect upon the African American community. Like Lester, Willie rejects the ideology of individualism proffered by the standardized education he received, one that routinely erased African Americans' historical achievements. However, unlike Lester, who abruptly dismisses people without considering the complexity of their choices, Willie tentatively accepts people, revising his opinions only if evidence warrants it. Willie's views express the naiveté and limited experience of a twenty-year-old, but he willingly reassesses them in an effort to gain clarity. His tolerance makes him amenable to Willa Nedeed, and his glimpse of her reality, conveyed to him through both clairvoyance and an actual encounter, impacts his world view and forces him to grasp the consequence of the Nedeed men's visions that are the foundation of the Linden Hills dream, to see for himself the inescapable effects of capitalism and patriarchy on the African American community.

As the novel begins, Willie is renting an apartment on Wayne Avenue, the first street just outside Linden Hills, where he observes and records the toils and triumphs of African American life. With Lester as his guide, Willie is allowed brief glimpses into the personal lives of the affluent residents of Linden Hills, and he comes to view with both awe and aversion the estrangement and self-effacement that result from the residents' insatiable ambition. As each day passes, the young men come closer and closer to the horror that awaits them at the bottom of Linden Hills: Luther Nedeed has entombed his wife and son in the basement of his home. Unwilling to recognize that

his white son resembles his Nedeed octoroon foremothers and convinced that the child is not his progeny, Luther imprisons his family ultimately expecting to gain a confession of infidelity and renewed submission from his wife. As she sits in the basement clutching her son who has died, Willa Prescott Nedeed discovers the keepsake remnants of the forgotten Nedeed women—Luwana Nedeed's bible, Evelyn Creton Nedeed's cookbooks, Priscilla McGuire Nedeed's photo albums—and learns that Linden Hills is founded upon a patriarchy that subsumes women's lives within the Nedeed vision, appropriates their bodies for the creation of a single male heir and then erases them from the Nedeed family history. When Willa's son dies, she lets out an inhuman cry that is carried on the wind through Linden Hills to Putney Wayne and beyond. Her mental strife and emotional anguish prey on Willie, who can neither sleep nor create poetry for the visions of pain and misery that incomprehensibly torment his thoughts. *Linden Hills* culminates in a blaze that destroys not only the Nedeed homestead but Luther, Willa, and their son. In the last moments of the novel, Lester and Willie watch the futile efforts of firefighters, "expect[ing] to see three bodies brought out, but one massive bulk was covered and carried to the ambulance" (303). The nuclear family pyre that concludes *Linden Hills* is but the last of a series of violent incidents Willie and Lester have witnessed repeatedly during their sojourn in the community.

Critics often casually note the number of estranged families and incidents of barrenness in the novel.<sup>6</sup> Barbara Christian analyzes the self-destructive tendency of the Linden Hills community and concludes: "By placing the pursuit of money and power above all else, the Nedeeds fragment the black community and destroy the goal for which they have sacrificed family feeling, love, fraternity, pleasure, the very qualities that make life worth living, qualities which are central to liberation and empowerment" (123). In her review of *Linden Hills*, Sherley Anne Williams sees these forfeitures less as sacrifices and more as sins, and she faults the novel as a result: "Although *Linden Hills* has many compelling moments," William writes, "the 'sins' of this community--hypocrisy, loveless marriages and marital infidelities, idleness--seem too trivial to carry the weight of Naylor's expert literary attentions" (10). Margaret Homans observes that "the narrative details the childlessness, through accident or choice, of each family or individual in Linden Hills" (378), and in his reply to Homans' essay, Henry Louis Gates too comments that more often than not, Willie and Lester are employed by "a strange (usually unmarried) man" (610). Each of these critics notes that the typical Linden Hills family is fragmented, barren, loveless and vacuous, yet none take up the point at length. Instead, Christian relegates "sacrificed family feeling" to one of the many consequences of the community members' over-ambitiousness. Williams views the "loveless marriages and marital infidelities" as minor transgressions committed by Linden Hills' inhabitants. Homans sees childlessness in the novel as

---

<sup>6</sup>For a detailed examination of the earlier critical debate regarding the novel, see Wallinger.



Naylor's way of paying homage to the classic texts to which Homans compares *Linden Hills*, and Gates invokes the detail of the unmarried men in a discussion of homoeroticism in the novel. In fact, Naylor specifically describes the composition of each character's family, frequently emphasizing an alarming emotional dearth, and this point has been virtually ignored by most critics. Each violent end depicted in *Linden Hills*--Winston Alcott's marrying despite his love for a man; Chester Parker's refurbishing his deceased wife's room during her funeral, preparing it for his waiting new bride; Laurel Dumont's plummet to the bottom of a diving pool that is as empty as her life with her husband--has its seeds in the fetishization of the nuclear family under capitalism.

*Linden Hills* essentially consists of two parts. One part unfolds the stories of the individual residents' emotional crimes as Willie learns of them; the other is the story of the Nedeed women's lineage which the imprisoned Willa unearths and Willie strangely intuits via telepathy. Willie's journey chronicles his efforts to earn a wage, and it exposes at what personal cost the almighty dollar is obtained. Willa's journey records the toll marriage and motherhood have taken on the Nedeed women. Capital and lineage are forever joined in Linden Hills, however, as it is rumored that the original Luther Needed "sold his octoroon wife and six children for the money that he used to come North and obtain the hilly land" (2). Later this same Luther buys an octoroon woman he then makes his wife. Linden Hills is built upon the fruits of slavery, for Luther sells human beings to purchase the land and purchases a human being to establish a lineage; he thereby fixes the pattern of reification that only

promises to cease with the novel's final holocaust. As a result, Willie Mason and Willa Nedeed's journeys—one a search for money and the other an examination of family—are implicitly bound together. At the outset, their convergence is predetermined, and this merger takes place first in the realm of dreams and premonitions and later in one final encounter. Here Naylor coalesces allegory with magical realism to challenge the hegemonic acculturation that produces communities such as Linden Hills. G. Michelle Collins has argued that Naylor's novels "use the magical or supernatural to demonstrate that there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in our Cartesian, humanist philosophies . . . . They represent a very specific indictment of a rationalist, capitalist ideology of self as commodity, independent of history and culture" (681). Willie's magically real visions of Willa convey a communal understanding and responsibility that transcend the restrictions of the individualized nuclear families (predicated upon indentured women) that are enforced by the Nedeed men's vision of African American potential.

By examining the two parts of *Linden Hills* in this manner, one learns that the structure of the nuclear family is at odds with the inherent potential of the African American community in the novel, that it is in fact as debilitating, if not more so, than the values of capitalism. Ultimately, the fetishism of the family is shown to be an intrinsic part of capitalism, one that disguises from its adherents capitalism's dominion. Most critics of Naylor's novel focus on how the self-effacing force of capitalism, individualism, and what has come to be called the American Dream are shown to be destructive to African American community. Instead, I would like to show how the

nuclear family has the structure of a fantasy which is at the forefront of both Willa Nedeed's narrative and each of the residents' narratives as they are encountered by Willie Mason. In fact *Linden Hills* is preoccupied with revealing the how capitalism, individualism and the fetishized family are intimately bound together.

### Repudiating Materialism

Willie and Lester first arrive at the idea of doing odd jobs in Linden Hills for Christmas money with the help of Ruth Anderson. Once a tenant of Fifth Crescent Drive, Ruth left her husband, denounced the Linden Hills community, and now is remarried to Norman Anderson and living in Putney Wayne. Ruth declares: "I'm never going back down there again. I've had that life, Norm, and I lasted six months. Those folks just aren't real" (39). Ruth comes to the idea of Willie and Lester working for the residents of Linden Hills after one of its tenants offers to employ her to wash windows, supposing that Ruth is "moving in that sort of crowd now" (40). Insulted by her former neighbor, who assumes that since Ruth has left Linden Hills she must be down on her luck and in need of work, Ruth explains: "I told her that I not only didn't do windows, I didn't have to do housework because my husband provides for me very nicely, thank you" (40). Only Laurel Dumont, a woman living on Tupelo Drive who begins to question her own happiness, senses Ruth's new-found contentment: "Strange, she [Laurel] had started calling out of pity for Ruth: a broken marriage and losing that house on Fifth Crescent Drive. . . . But slowly, very slowly, she began to sense that Ruth was actually pitying her--as if Laurel were mired down on Tupelo Drive and the best thing that could have happened to Ruth was that divorce and moving back to

Wayne Avenue" (241). Ruth understands what the residents of Linden Hills have failed to discern, that their community traps its inhabitants with visions of power, glory and wealth that are obtainable and yet finally dissatisfying. They believe that Ruth is in exile, whereas Ruth believes she is one of the few lucky ones who has managed to escape.

Ruth and Norman's marriage is the standard by which all other relationships in the novel are measured. Their apartment is sparse, but "visitors found themselves thinking, What a nice feeling to be allowed into a home" (33). There is a synchronicity to their relationship. When they share a cup, "It soon appeared unthinkable that there should be more than one cup between them since they never reached for it at the same time" (34). Ruth proudly tells Willie and Lester that she and Norman "take turns making the bed and scrubbing the toilet" (37). Sharing, sacrifice, a gracious give and take, this characterizes the Anderson marriage which survives despite tragedy and deprivation. Biannually, Norman suffers from a three-month bout of paranoia that has come to be called "the pinks." Norman envisions pink mucus invading his body, boring into his skin, and when suffering from these delusions he tears and rips at his flesh with anything readily available: "Jagged sections of plates and glasses, wire hangers, curtain rods, splinters of wood once part of a dresser, coffee table, or her [Ruth's] grandmother's antique music box" (34). One season when Ruth finally decides to leave Norman, her ovaries become seriously inflamed just as he begins to experience the pinks. "His brain screamed, Scrape them off. But Ruth was sick, and he could never stop" (36). Norman fights his urge to mutilate himself in order to help

Ruth, who is writhing in pain; Ruth overcomes her pain to grant Norman permission to scrape at the invaders. In the end, Ruth stays because of what she views as Norman's valiant and self-sacrificing attempt to safeguard her. She urges Norman to repeat their mantra asking, "'What rules in this house?'" , to which he responds, "'Love rules in this house, Ruth.'" (38).

Difficult as it is to view the Anderson's marriage as a benchmark by which others in the novel fail to compare, it is in fact the most triumphant. Thus *Linden Hills* questions whether or not marriage is a viable institution. Ruth and Norman's selflessness is admirable, particularly compared to the egocentricity customary to Linden Hills, but their altruistic offerings are reminiscent of the O. Henry tale in which the destitute young husband sells his heirloom watch to buy his wife a comb for her hair as she simultaneously cuts off and sells her hair to purchase him a chain for his watch. As a result of their willingness to sacrifice for each other, Ruth and Norman lead incredibly meager lives consisting of Styrofoam cups that cannot be transformed into shards for self-mutilation, the remaining three pieces of furniture that Norman has not destroyed, and a bank account that periodically gets emptied for his hospital bills. Ruth is rewarded for her loyalty with every dime Norman earns, foot rubs, and Norman's laughter, which "had a way of rounding off the missing notes in her soul" (35). She pays for it, though, by being childless, a point emphasized by the inflamed ovaries. Naylor's choice of "the pinks," a color perhaps closer to the actual hue of what

is typically deemed white skin,<sup>7</sup> suggests that what ails Norman is his inability to ward off the ever-encroaching weight of a power system customarily governed by whites. Norman Anderson, a resident of Putney Wayne with little or no resources to achieve the financial independence enjoyed by those in Linden Hills, will always be plagued by "the pinks," or white sovereignty. In contrast a man such as Maxwell Smyth, a Linden Hills resident whose "blackness began to disappear" as a result of his self-restraint and resolve, prevails due to his willingness to embrace white values, to assimilate rather than resist the pinks, as it were. Ruth repudiates a life mired in materialism in Linden Hills where the "folks just aren't real" for a life "ruled by love" but lacking nearly any basic comforts. There is truth in Ruth's claim that she does not have to do housework for a living; however, she is in fact a waitress, so the point is debatable. Naylor's characters are in a double bind, for the residents of Linden Hills are destroyed by their willingness to assimilate white values and the residents of Putney Wayne ravaged by an exploitative economic system that for the most part benefits whites. In this way Naylor avoids the trap of romanticizing poverty and demonizing wealth, concentrating instead on the task of predicting the impact capitalism has on the African American community, namely that it will render the culture barren, stripping it of its intrinsic heritage and reducing it to sterility. As we shall see, Linden Hills is conspicuously childless, save the dead son of Willa and Luther Nedeed, but so too are these paragons of devotion, Ruth and Norman Anderson.

---

<sup>7</sup>For instance, when Lester spies his sister's boyfriend on a date with a white woman he calls her "that pink job" (84).

Part of what elevates this relationship above others in the novel is Willie Mason's adoration of Ruth. Willie eagerly embraces Ruth's idea that money could be made working in Linden Hills thinking: "Ruth wanted him to go into Linden Hills and he would go. He was just sorry that she hadn't asked him to go into hell for her so he could really prove himself" (41). Willie longs for Ruth and has a reoccurring dream where he admiringly gazes upon her naked form in her husband's presence and with his approval. At a wedding Willie watches the bride and groom "and he imagined himself and Ruth gliding out there on the polished oak floor. She would be looking up into his eyes just like that woman was all dewy and covered with cream lace" (84). Willie's erotic and romantic fantasies are at odds with Ruth's marital status; furthermore, they rival the actuality of Ruth's life and his own, both of which lack stability and comfort. His daydreams of domestic bliss contrast with the tangible lives of the members of both the Putney Wayne and the Linden Hills communities. The nuclear family is predicated upon the glamorization of marriage. The novel's protagonist covets another man's wife and engages in wedding and consummation fantasies; Naylor thereby illustrates the acculturation process that assures the perpetuation of the paradigm of the nuclear family.

### Circumscribing the Family

Significantly, Willie and Lester's first job in Linden Hills is washing dishes at a wedding reception. Winston Alcott of Second Crescent Drive faces the dreaded day of his marriage to a woman. Winston and his best man, David, are in fact lovers, but

They had moved beyond that years ago. Because when two people still held on like he and David, after all the illusions had died, and accepted the other's lacks and ugliness and irritating rhythms—when they had known the joys of a communion that far outstripped the flesh—they could hardly just be lovers. No, this man gave him his center, but the world had given him no words—and ultimately no way—with which to cherish that. (79-80)

Winston has been manipulated by an anonymous letter to his father, presumably written by Luther Nedeed, intimating that he is homosexual. The letter writer threatens next to inform the senior partner at the law firm that employs Winston, and thereby destroy Winston's career. Winston marries in order to suppress the rumor. While chauffeuring the groom and groomsmen to the wedding, Luther pontificates on marriage: "All you bachelors can take it from a seasoned married man—in spite of occasional drawbacks, it can be a fulfilling way of life" (75). David responds by pointing out that it is not the only successful way of life, that single men live in Linden Hills as well. To this, Luther admonishes: "But where are they living, David? In those small apartments on Second Crescent Drive. And who would want to spend the rest of their lives there? No one's been able to make it down to Tupelo Drive without a stable life and a family" (75). Hypocrisy and deceit permeate Winston's narrative and establish the tone that characterizes family relations throughout the novel. Winston hopes to maintain his relationship with David after his marriage, but David rejects Winston's proposed charade of disguising the truth of homosexuality under the pretense of mere friendship. Winston sees heterosexual marriage as a prerequisite to material success, commenting sarcastically on his impending nuptials: "And they lived happily ever after until the next floor-wax commercial" (76). David, however,



criticizes Winston for his willingness to deceive and manipulate a wife in the drive for social acceptance and upward mobility that compels him to repudiate his true self.

This conflict is accentuated by the foregrounding of Luther Nedeed's hypocrisy. "Seasoned married man" that he is, Luther's current "occasional drawback" is his wife's feared infidelity, and his present "fulfilling way of life" includes the imprisonment of his family. Luther in fact controls the Linden Hills residents' social ascent and perpetuates the facade of "a stable life and a family" as criteria for success in the community, and this exemplifies how power is wielded to perpetuate the status quo. While the truth behind Luther's fabrication regarding his marital bliss may seem sensational and unreal, it symbolizes the fantasizing and fetishizing required to substantiate the ideal of the nuclear family. Luther's cant is inspired by the Nedeed traditions rather than a realistic belief in the ability of Linden Hills residents to provide a lasting legacy and descendants, as proven when he later reflects:

Give Winston four or five years and he'd break down. So what had he accomplished by forcing that marriage? He had bought himself a little time, that's all. He had temporarily filled another home. They didn't understand the importance of a family, of life. All of those sacrifices to build them houses and they refused to build a history. Father, forgive me, Luther almost whispered aloud, but sometimes I wish you had left me another dream. (286)

In this rare moment of honesty and contemplation, Luther identifies for the reader the weaknesses implicit in the paradigm of the nuclear family but fails to recognize them for himself. The Nedeed vision of a stable life and a family is so circumscribed it alienates rather than unites the African American community. Moreover, the vision has been tainted by the capitalistic ideal of individualism that can thrive only by the defeat

of communal history. David challenges Luther's limited definition of success, implying that he and Winston could have built a life in Linden Hills had their relationship been accepted, but Luther's inherited and sanctioned view of the family prevents him from recognizing this alternative. Luther's gifts of a home on Tupelo Drive and "a platinum-and-diamond key-shaped necklace . . . and matching cuff links" to Winston and Cassandra Alcott are in fact rewards for their acquiescence and inducements to further conformity (87).

When David reads a Whitman poem in toast to Winston and his new wife, Willie comprehends the relationship between the two men and wonders: "If they had meant that much to each other, why in God's name was he getting married?" (90). The exchange between Willie and Lester that concludes Winston Alcott's scenario answers the question. Lester states, "I told ya I had a feeling about them two -- queer" (90). To this Willie thinks to himself: "There was definitely something very queer about that cake, that champagne fountain--the diamond key glittering on that woman's neck . . . . But what ever had gone down between those two guys must have been something very special" (90). Lester quickly scorns what he has witnessed, using the term "queer" in its derogatory sense signifying a homosexual man. Willie responds using the same word, amending it to mean "odd" or "questionable" and using it to refer to the wedding rituals rather than to the relationship between Winston and David which Willie recognizes as "something very special." Winston has not imagined his predicament, one that Lester's reaction to the toast affirms.

Whereas Ruth and Norman Anderson choose love over superficial tokens of success, Winston Alcott sacrifices love for prosperity. The wedding scene is mired in confusion and contradiction. Watching the reception, Willie "secretly felt a bit proud that someone black could afford all this"(82), yet "couldn't help feeling that something was missing from the jeweled sparkle in the air" (83). Synchronicity characterizes Ruth and Norman's relationship, and David and Winston's is described as "centered." In fact, later we will see these same images--synchronicity and centering--developed at length in *The Salt Eaters*. These intangible attributes contrast starkly to the opulence of the wedding reception that inspires Willie's pride but causes him to recognize vaguely the absence of harmony. In *Materialist Feminisms*, Landry and MacLean assert:

Ideology, including metaphysics, does not develop independently of other forms of social production. The practice of ideology critique therefore historicizes and rematerializes ideology by disclosing how it works to conceal the very means of its own production; to show, in other terms, that what ideology offers as natural or given or real has been constructed in particular and interested ways. (66)

Naylor repeatedly links marriage and the cultivation of the nuclear family with materialism, prosperity and success, thereby revealing the extent to which the institution is perpetuated by a system of financial rewards. In her examination of the law and patriarchal relations, Carol Smart verifies the existence of such a reward system that relies upon "the social and legal *need* and support for the marriage contract" but could be eradicated "by withdrawing the privileges which are currently extended to the married heterosexual couple" (225). Naylor's critique of ideology rematerializes

marriage, exposing with certitude that marriage is not so much a prediction of prosperity as prosperity is the remuneration for marriage.

### Classism and the Fostering of Racial Self-Aversion

Xavier Donnell is first introduced to the reader as the impudent young man from Third Crescent Drive who refuses to come to the door when he calls on Roxanne Tilson, Lester's sister, and then as the deceitful one who tells her he has not been invited to Winston Alcott's wedding only to be spotted there by Willie and Lester with a white woman on his arm. Thus it is a surprise when his narrative opens: "Xavier Donnell was falling in love with a black woman" (97), and we learn the woman is Roxanne Tilson. Xavier anxiously realizes "that if he didn't take some sort of drastic action, he would ask Roxanne Tilson to marry him. And the only thing that frightened him more than that was the thought that she would say yes" (99). The "drastic action" Xavier chooses is to seek the advice of Maxwell Smyth, a fellow executive at GM and his mentor. Here Naylor parodies the narcissist who fancies himself a self-made man, for Maxwell's distinctive characteristic is that by means of elaborately controlling his diet, he has insured that "his --- don't smell" (106). While Maxwell's humorous efforts are ludicrous, such a mentality has a sinister effect on the African American community nevertheless. Maxwell choreographs his every waking moment, from waiting three seconds before pulling the key out of his ignition to deciding whether or not to smile at his secretary. His pretentious industriousness allows him to function on three hours of sleep, thus enabling him to outperform others first in college and then on the career fast track. His environment, like his life, is painstakingly controlled; as such, he avoids

erratic activities including sex: "He didn't consider it a great deprivation because before he was even thirty, an erection had become almost as difficult to achieve as an orgasm, and hence he would save himself the trouble until he was married and just had to" (104). So while Ruth and Norman Anderson remain childless as a result of the pinks, so too is Maxwell Smyth impotent, despite his successful participation in the economic and power schemes largely controlled by whites. Thus it is unfortunate that Xavier Donnell seeks his advice regarding marriage.

Predictably, Maxwell rejects the idea of Xavier's marrying Roxanne. He begins with a tirade about black women in general, accusing them of everything from parasitism to gluttony, but his reasoning finally hinges on Roxanne's accomplishments. Maxwell turns black women's achievements, ones that mirror his and Xavier's own, into marital disadvantages: "When they've done that four- or six-year stint at the Yales, Stanfords, or Brandeises, they no longer think they're women, but walking miracles. . . . They're hungry and they're climbers" (109). Maxwell concludes with the consolation: "This whole planet is full of women to choose from if you're willing to branch out" (111). The discussion is interrupted by Willie and Lester, who have been cleaning out the Donnell garage. A debate ensues between the four men as to whether or not blacks are responsible for their own economic condition, upon which point Maxwell brandishes a layout from *Penthouse*, one that features a black woman, to illustrate America's changing attitudes towards blacks. Willie and Lester object, pointing out that the woman's leopard-skin costume, her iron chain accessories, and the jungle background all reinforce conceptions of blacks as the noble savage. Maxwell then

triumphantly turns to the last page of the photo spread: "The model had snatched the chain and brought its mysterious holder to her feet. One leg was raised in victory on the shoulder of a scrawny white man in a safari outfit, and his thick bifocals had slipped below the bridge of his nose" (115).

Maxwell faults accomplished black women for being "hungry climbers," then takes pride in a nude photo spread of one depicted as a sexually *hungry* feline victoriously *climbing* the white man. Moreover, his measure of African American achievement—a black woman featured in a pornographic magazine owned and run by white men—epitomizes the slave to master relationship in which black women's sexuality belonged to and was exploited by the slave holder. Maxwell suggests that the last photograph upsets the onlooker's expectations, thereby subverting the power dynamic that reputes blacks are inferior to whites. However, despite the last cursory picture, the previous eight pages of the photo layout exploit representations of black females as wanton, bestial and masochistic and thereby reinforce sexist and racist stereotypes which imply that women, and in particular black women, enjoy their own sexual exploitation and abuse. Maxwell's example accents the deplorable misconception to which he has succumbed. To his mind African American success can only be witnessed if seen against a background of white power. He argues that black women "who've distinguished themselves in the world are into white men" (108); likewise, he suggests that Xavier will find a suitable mate only if he is "willing to branch out" from black women. Maxwell's illustration of African American success is thus the photograph of a black woman who seemingly conquers a white male.

Maxwell's definition of black prosperity is forever dependent upon the framework of whiteness, whether it be a trophy spouse or a prized position in a predominately white corporation.

Maxwell Smyth's advice leaves Xavier Donnell in a predicament which is the inversion of Winston Alcott's. Winston is maneuvered into marrying a black woman despite his love for David, and Xavier is advised not to marry a black woman despite his love for Roxanne. Each is told that his preferred choice for a life partner will be a detriment to his career and social status. Second Crescent Drive and Third Crescent Drive are linked together in the depiction of men sacrificing their emotional well-being for prestige and affluence.

Willie and Lester's task on Fourth Crescent Drive for Chester Parker is a simple one—they are to steam off the wallpaper in Lycentia Parker's bedroom. The job must be accomplished quickly and quietly as Lycentia's wake is being held downstairs, and Chester prefers not to be reproached by the community for his indiscretion. He is refurbishing his deceased wife's bedroom, preparing it for his next bride before his dead wife is even buried. Couched within this scenario, one of shameful glee over the death of a spouse and indecent anticipation of replacing her, is a discussion among those community members in attendance. They are fervently criticizing the city's recent decision to build new low-income housing in Putney Wayne.

The councilman for Linden Hills is in attendance, and he explains to the contentious group that new housing is necessary, that living conditions are so poor in the existing tenements an outbreak of diphtheria has caused the death of a child. The

community members respond in a variety of ways, one bemoaning the cost of welfare and food stamps, another fearing increased crime, still another concerned over a disproportionate ratio of Putney Wayne to Linden Hills children in the schools, arguing that as a result, "the teachers will be overloaded with a lot of remedial cases and trouble makers." (133). Luther Nedeed arrives at the wake and assuages the attendees' fears: the project has been circumvented by a heretofore unheard of coalition between the Tupelo Realty Corporation and the Wayne County Citizens Alliance, the homeowners association of a nearby white neighborhood, a group reputed to be "full of some of the most despicable racists on this side of the continent" (137). Luther confirms the duplicitous nature of the union between the two communities, pointing out to the residents of Linden Hills:

You're only saved from being beneath their contempt because your education and professional status are above reproach and, more often than not, above theirs. But the people who would move into that new development don't have that saving grace, so the Alliance is free to engage in myths about inferior schools and deteriorating neighborhoods while all they're really fearing is the word *nigger*. And they've no intention of letting the county finance a breeding ground for their nightmares. (137, italics hers)

Luther's declaration emphasizes the sanctimonious behavior of the Linden Hills residents, for they have just been making the very assertions Luther repudiates to be myths engaged in by whites. In fact, Luther is aware of his neighbors' attitudes, and his description of such opinions is meant to shame his listeners as well as solidify them in their mutual conspiracy. His declaration that the Wayne County Citizens Alliance fears "the word *nigger*" more accurately characterizes the Linden Hills residents, for they



must rely solely on their superior "education and professional status" to safeguard them against the racist slur. The homeowners of Linden Hills utilize the term to refer to the residents of Putney Wayne in an effort to wield the power of class against racism, but they are painfully aware it is a futile, self-denigrating tactic.

Luther justifies Tupelo Realty Corporation's coalition with the Wayne County Citizens Alliance. He rationalizes that should the white citizens forsake the area as a result of Putney Wayne's expansion, the Linden Hills community would be devastated: "My realty company wouldn't be able to finance another mortgage, and I'd have to watch the property values of Linden Hills go plunging into an abyss" (138). Luther's concern reflects the change the community has undergone as the result of gradually and increasingly embracing the values of capitalism. Whereas the original Luther Nedeed willingly purchased a worthless piece of land and devised a plan to make a living off of it, later generations rely on human commodification to substantiate the value of the land. Linden Hills has become more prosperous and consequently racist as time has passed, for in assimilating the values of capitalism, the residents have imbibed racism: prejudice combined with the power to affect the lives of others. In aligning themselves with Wayne County Citizens Alliance against the needs of the Putney Wayne inhabitants in an effort to insure the value of their property, the Linden Hills residents have forsaken the African American community.

Perhaps the most significant observation Luther makes comes at the end of his declaration. Neither Wayne County nor Linden Hills wishes to "finance a breeding ground." Fertility and progeny again are at issue. However, whereas Winston and

Cassandra Alcott are rewarded for marrying and thus establishing the sanctified unit for procreation, the poorer blacks who inhabit Putney Wayne are suspect for accomplishing the same. In her discussion of the economics of reproduction Marilyn Waring describes the process whereby reproduction is restricted, limited and thereby controlled. "This is the categorization," she writes, "and subsequent institutionalization, of who does (and doesn't) and/or should (or shouldn't) reproduce. It is distinguished and characterized in the oppressions of ageism, classism, racism, 'development,' colonization, neocolonization, religious fundamentalism, and homophobia" (189). Linden Hills' efforts to restrict or discourage the growth of Putney Wayne, both geographically and procreatively, is akin to genocide and marks the extent to which the residents will go to assimilate.

As Willie watches the mourners at the wake feast and listens to their hypocritical exchange, he finds the rhythm, tone and import of the event familiar. He hears the iambic "click-scrape" of knives and forks on plates, watches the mourners' reflections in their plates and in the glass tabletop, and finds himself reciting Wallace Stevens' poem "Cuisine Bourgeoise," beginning "These days of disinheritance, we feast on human heads." Keith Sandiford points out that Willie envisions the transformation of "the diners at Lycentia Parker's wake from a solemn assembly of middle-class mourners into macabre images of self-devouring cannibals. . . . With heads bowed over reflecting glass plates, they are not only consuming portions of rare roast beef, but they are also consuming the reflecting images of themselves consuming rare roast beef" (212). Images of death and cannibalism predominate in this subplot. The occasion for

the gathering is a wake, and the widower is destroying the deceased's belongings to make way for another wife. The Linden Hills community members align themselves against Putney Wayne, thereby insuring the continued deprivation and disease that have already killed one child. The gatherers feast on animal flesh and in doing so seem to devour reflections of themselves.

### The Futility of Efforts to Escape Class

Reverend Michael T. Hollis's story begins with his drinking his customary third Scotch prior to ten in the morning. Laurel Dumont's begins with Willie and Lester discovering her broken body at the bottom of her empty diving pool. Despite their enormous accomplishments, Reverend Hollis and Laurel Dumont feel their lives are meaningless, and their ensuing misery causes them to destroy themselves, Laurel quickly and overtly by committing suicide and the Reverend more slowly and subtly through alcoholism. Both come from humble, rural beginnings and are supported by their families in their efforts to obtain an education, marry well, and establish themselves in triumphant careers. Consequently, both are bewildered to find that they are unhappy despite the fact they have achieved their dreams. The examination of despondency that constitutes these two character's narratives problematizes the single most popular tactic used to escape class—higher education. The estrangement Hollis and Dumont experience is a common occurrence, for individuals who attempt to escape their class often end up disdaining their cultural heritage, ashamed of their less fortunate family members, arrogant and alienated, belonging neither to the class they escape nor to the one they reach. Naylor suggests that desolation and self-destruction

frequently plague those who envision social mobility as a means of repairing the maladies of class.

Both Reverend Hollis and Laurel Dumont begin life protected and guided by a grandmother who provides for them their lifelong ambition: his to become a minister and hers to swim competitively. In and of themselves, these aims seem modest and benign. Reverend Hollis got the call to preach "when he was twelve years old, sitting in the fifth row of his grandmother's weather-beaten church" (157). "When Roberta [Laurel's grandmother] had realized that it was impossible to keep Laurel away from the water, she made sure that she learned to swim" (218). Michael Hollis graduates from college, goes on to Harvard Divinity School, and, together with his wife Marie, a graduate of Radcliffe, accepts a "post at Sinai Baptist, the coup of his career, the one that came complete with a home in Linden Hills" (162). Laurel swims for UC Berkeley, has a successful career with IBM (one that lands her picture on the front page of *The New York Times* business section), marries Howard Dumont, "the first black D.A. in Wayne County, hand-picked to be the next state attorney general" (232), and moves into 722 Tupelo Drive, "The twelve-room stone Tudor [that] had belonged to the Dumonts for over sixty years" (231). The ensuing alienation each experiences is prefigured first by their isolation from their families and later by their estrangement from their spouses.

On Fifth Crescent Drive, Lester and Willie assist the Reverend Michael T. Hollis in preparing for the annual Christmas party he hosts for the children of Putney Wayne. As the young men load decorations, food and presents from the Reverend's

home into a truck to transport them to the church, Reverend Hollis is upstairs dressing for the task of leading Lycentia Parker's funeral service. While they work, Willie tells Lester his memories of attending the Sinai Baptist Christmas parties— refreshments, big gifts, going away with an armload of food, and the Reverend Hollis who would "stand there in the pulpit with his Santa Claus suit and always end up by saying, 'Remember, Christ gave you Christmas but Reverend Hollis gave you the cranberry sauce'" (154). Upstairs, Reverend Hollis too reflects upon the parties. He finances them himself, as the church board insisted "all allocations for 'foreign communities' were already tied up building mission homes in South Africa" (163). The parties fulfill Hollis's personal mission of encouraging people from outside of Linden Hills to attend his services, for the Reverend despairs over the contrast between the lively congregations of the storefront Baptist churches he attended his entire life and the cold, spiritless Linden Hills worshipers whose postures "stiffened under the cashmere, silk, and beaverskins" they wore to Sinai Baptist services (162). The Reverend laments that "In spite of the multimillion-dollar credit union, his presidency at the Northeastern Baptist Council, his seat on the governor's planning board—somehow, he had no ministry. And the ministry was his life" (163). As a growing emphasis on capital and power has crept into Reverend Hollis's ministry, it has become less satisfying to him and more banal. The Linden Hills parishioners' wealth and affectation function as barriers to spirituality, and in their minds the Reverend's duties to improve their financial status through the church's credit union and to secure them public clout through his political posts outweigh the importance of his tending to their souls. A true minister at heart, Hollis

deteriorates as a result of these responsibilities that are discordant with his earliest mission. The benevolence he displays by giving lavish Christmas parties for the Putney Wayne community is tainted by his misguided desire to be recognized for his charity that culminates with his vainglorious pronouncement that has him competing with the very master he once pledged to selflessly serve.

The most devastating consequence of Reverend Hollis's self-betrayal becomes apparent when his thoughts turn to his beloved wife Marie, now estranged from him:

She followed him away from Boston, accepting that her own career would have to be put aside because there was a strange correlation between a community's increasing need for ministers and decreasing need for psychologists. She even understood that the discovery of his sterility, which deprived her of the children that could have then filled up her life, was some how much more devastating for him than her.

But after twelve years, Marie could not understand the other women. (161)

Once again Linden Hills is plagued by barrenness, but for the Hollises infidelity is the greater burden. The Reverend's transgression is heightened by his chosen profession, one that carries with it the assumption of constancy in marriage. Hollis breaks his vow not only to his wife but to his god, and this breach signals the extent of the Reverend's faithlessness, the magnitude of his crime. His wife has left him, alcohol-clouded images of anonymous trysts haunt him, and anxieties concerning his congregation's awareness of his sins torment him. His suspicions drive him from the very people he intended to serve. In an intoxicated stupor, he attempts to inspire his parishioners by delivering a traditional, animated, vocal funeral service for Lycentia Parker, one that calls on the audience to rejoice in their grace. The Reverend's exuberant performance

causes the Linden Hills congregation great discomfort, and they refuse to participate in the call and response format. All is saved, however, when Luther Nedeed takes the pulpit to deliver a conventional eulogy that inventories the deceased's triumphs:

"Luther Nedeed had just placed Lycentia Parker's life into the hands of a savior they could understand--they had saved themselves. This very building stood as a living testament to that and that was the gospel they wanted to hear under its gold-leafed ceiling" (184). The Linden Hills residents have little need for the aid Reverend Hollis would provide, for they must place their faith in themselves rather than in a god. Belief in a divine creator would require a duty to humanity, and such matters conflict with their self-interests. While the Reverend resents his parishioners' egoism, he in fact shares this very trait. As a result he can no more escape this community than he can guide it.

Laurel Dumont's breakdown is signaled by a long overdue visit to her grandmother, Roberta, in rural Georgia. She comes in search of "home" and leaves hoping to find it back in Linden Hills. Shortly thereafter she gives up, stops going to work, and fills her days listening to classical music in the room in her house remodeled specifically for that purpose. Her husband's announcement that he is leaving because he is unable to endure her morose self-destruction barely makes an impression upon her. When Roberta arrives, determined to help her granddaughter, Laurel refuses to talk about anything but the music the two of them have sat through the entire day. Roberta acquiesces, commenting that the last one Laurel played, Mahler, reminds her of Bessie Smith, Billie Holliday, and Muddy Waters, musicians she wished she had found

Laurel listening to. Laurel replies, "All that moaning about Jim Crow, unpaid bills, and being hungry has nothing to do with me or what I'm going through" (236). The exchange sets the tenor for the visit as Laurel is defenseless against a growing despair, unable to find meaning in her present life and incapable of uncovering tools from her past to assist her. Her disdain for blues musicians that sing of the triumphs, follies, exploits, accomplishments and failures of African Americans attest to the extent that she is immersed in a disaffected community and alienated from her cultural past. Neither her excursion to her grandmother's Georgia home nor her return to the one she and her husband have spent ten years in in Linden Hills brings her closer to rescuing herself.

At the core of Laurel's despondency is the widening gap between herself and her husband seemingly caused by their career demands. Work obligations supersede personal affairs, and commitments increase as they become more and more successful, demanding all of their time and attention. The fissure between them eventually widens to a chasm: "Some women would have filled that space with children. Then each could have grasped the infant's hand and let it masquerade for the flesh of the other" (232). At first opposed to the Olympic-sized diving pool Laurel wants to install, her husband finally agrees, hoping that, "if there was a pool, there might be a chance for a family; and if there was a family, there might be a home" (233). No explanation is offered for Laurel and Howard Dumont's childlessness save the lack of time they spend together and their growing estrangement. However, the scenario challenges readers to examine the drive to procreate and ask whether or not a common yet unconscious motive is to



mend a ruptured relationship. In the end, Luther Nedeed notifies Laurel that her husband has filed for divorce and informed the Tupelo Realty Corporation that he does not intend to return to Linden Hills. His permanent absence nullifies the Dumont lease. Laurel protests saying she is a Dumont, but Luther explains that unless there are children set to inherit, in Linden Hills a spouse cannot assume the lease owned by a family. This interchange emphasizes the patriarchal nature that continues to dictate inheritance practices and cultural legacy today despite the shift to a two-income household that relies on women's participation in the employment market. Furthermore, it accentuates the notion of women as mere procreation vessels, a theme that will be examined at length in the discussion of the Nedeed women. This transaction is the last detail leading to Laurel's changing into her swimsuit and purposely diving thirty feet into an empty pool. Laurel's entropy ensues not because she lost sight of some sort of mythic discernible value system. The alienation she experiences is inevitable given that all she might envision for herself is dictated by capitalism, and capitalism compels her to participate in her own reification.

In *Linden Hills*, the grandmothers of Michael Hollis and Laurel Dumont figure as ancestor characters—wise mentors who provide stability, love, and guidance to their progeny. The fact that ancestor figures are shown here to assist the characters in developing their personal objectives suggests that the objectives themselves are not necessarily dishonorable. Capital accumulation is part and parcel to their success, however, and the more wealthy the two become the further they drift from their "historical connection." In her discussion of the ancestor figure in African American

literature, Toni Morrison emphasizes that she strives to show "that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection" ("Rootedness" 344). Their financial success makes them seemingly self-reliant--successful individualism personified--and gains them entry into another class. Individualism requires one to be self-made, free of cultural debts; thus one's social mobility necessitates a break between oneself and one's cultural past. The great misfortune here is that the ancestors themselves lead the characters to establish such aims, believing strongly in the soundness of their offspring's efforts to be included where they were once excluded. Cornel West points out, however, that "class structures--across racial and gender lines--are reinforced and legitimated, not broken down or loosened, by inclusion. And this indeed is the American way--to promote and encourage the myth of classlessness, especially among those guilt-ridden about their upward social mobility or ashamed of their class origins" (520). Frequently parents envision education and career success as the means whereby their children may escape poverty or even the middle class. Still, any goals involving an effort to escape one's class will be inherently alienating and will reinforce rather than dismantle class structures.

### The Nedeed Homestead

Willie and Lester's efforts to find work doing odd jobs for Linden Hills residents end on Christmas Eve at the home of the grand patriarch himself, Luther

Nedeed.<sup>8</sup> Their journey follows both chronological and spatial order as chapters are distinguished and even titled by dates--December 19th, December 20th, etc.--and each day finds them progressively further down into Linden Hills. Naylor provides realistic details, credible motives, and comprehensible explanations of the various facets of the journey, lending this section the feel of authenticity and normalcy that substantiates the existence of a concrete reality. The text is frequently interrupted, however, by Willa Nedeed's thoughts concerning her imprisonment and the discoveries she makes during the confinement; these sections operate within and against the principles of realism. The narrative here is at times garbled, at times lucid. Willa's discoveries and subsequent revelations, from photographs that seem to capture Priscilla McGuire Nedeed's slow but sure effacement from her family to Evelyn Creton Nedeed's recipes that include mysterious ingredients supposedly imbued with unnatural powers, could be genuine or they may be the ravings of a woman slowly going mad. Within these sections of the novel distinct details such as the noise the pipes make when Luther opens them to grant water to his wife and child are mixed with thoughts so confused that readers sometimes ascribe them to Willa and at other times attribute them to earlier

---

<sup>8</sup> After Willie and Lester discover Laurel Dumont's body, the shaken young men are led by Daniel Braithwaite to his home. Braithwaite resides next door to Luther Nedeed and is Linden Hills' historian. Critics seem to agree that the character is named after William Stanley Braithwaite, a poet, critic, editor and teacher at Atlanta University. There are several interesting discussions of Braithwaite's role as historian in the novel, including the one by Teresa Goddu. For our purposes, the most noteworthy detail of this visit is that Braithwaite casually notes that he is a widower of twenty years, and it appears he has no children. As this is the last stop before the young men reach their final destination and encounter Willa Nedeed, Braithwaite's solitude is a final example of the barrenness characteristic of Linden Hills.

Nedeed women. All the while Willa's thoughts appear to have extraordinary power as they torture Willie and seemingly draw him down to her.

Juxtaposed as they are, the two sections of the novel work to accustom readers to phantasm, to initiate them to the existence of the unreal. Cornel West argues that "an undeniable feature of postmodern culture [is the fear of] pervasive violence." He explains that "the hidden injuries of class, intraracial hostilities, the machismo identity taken out on women, and the intolerance of gay and lesbian orientations generate deep anxieties and frustrations that often take violent forms" (520). Willie learns that the tangible, material world germinating in Linden Hills is simultaneously representative of the status quo and yet so grotesque and violent as to seem implausible: Winston Alcott's committing himself in marriage to a person he cannot possibly love or desire, Maxwell Smyth's illustrating the ascension of blacks in the United States with a nude photograph of a black woman hunting the white man, the Tupelo Realty Corporation's coalition with the Wayne County Citizens Alliance, a minister's infidelity to his wife. What the Linden Hills community perceives to be real, meaningful, and important in fact becomes so; what they determine to be criterion of success then is. The pact between the Tupelo Realty Corporation and the Wayne County Citizens Alliance will perpetuate poverty, disease, and racism all in the name of protecting property values. The marriage between Winston Alcott and his bride will be recognized as a legitimate family with the sanctioned right to inherit property in Linden Hills. Willie's epiphany occurs not because he is stunned and ashamed to find that disloyalty and betrayal permeate an African American community whose sole mission was once to nurture the

members of its race. Instead, it is the result of his comprehending that reality, for themselves, for their neighbors, and for the thousands of black Americans striving to reach Linden Hills, is determined by this community and others like it. Willie learns that his existence is malleable and that capitalistic ideology shapes it. Capital imposes meaning, distorting and reshaping the consequential and the insignificant. The individual is reified in that materialistic principles influence and reconfigure commitments one makes to one's race, community, family, spouse and perhaps even self. In such an insane but very real world, derangement--Norman Anderson's occasional bouts with schizophrenia, Laurel Dumont's clinical depression and consequent suicide, Willa Nedeed's delirium--appears to be a rational response. Furthermore, Willie's intuition and premonitions regarding the fate of Willa Nedeed become reliable resources rather than questionable eccentricities, tools with which to combat capitalistic ideology.

As the material reality of Linden Hills is systematically questioned, the chimerical nature of Willa Nedeed's telepathy and the horrific and unbelievable circumstances of her imprisonment become plausible. She unearths the evidence of the Nedeed foremothers only to discover that they were routinely and methodically expunged from their families' lives.<sup>9</sup> Any question as to whether or not the fetishized family is a complicit partner of materialism is set to rest by Willa Nedeed's narrative. Willa's discovery of a bible belonging to her first predecessor, Luwana Packerville

---

<sup>9</sup>For a compelling examination of the Nedeed women and domestic violence, see Restuccia.

Nedeed, is accompanied by a telepathic moment. She thinks to herself, "There can be no God. . . . Then opening the cover, there in a delicate, curled scroll were those very words" (93). Willa finds that Luwana used the bible as a diary, wrote in an epistolary form, and addressed the letters to herself since she had come from slavery and had "no mother or father, no sister to call [her] own" (120). From these entries Willa learns that Luwana expected marriage would provide her salvation and freedom; however, the original Luther, Luwana's husband, manumitted his son but chose not to do the same for this wife. Willa identifies with Luwana. Having not received a marriage proposal until late in life, "She thought her marriage would set her free" (117). Willa dreaded the burden of being forever single; as a consequence, she embraced Luther's loveless yet genuine marriage proposal and subsequently found herself isolated and alone, separated from her female friends who had not been so fortunate: "She had tried at first but there was less and less to talk about: their new job—her new baby. Their problems with finding a decent landlord—her problems with finding decent silverplate. What they heard the governor say about new tax shelters--what Luther said about it" (121). Willa realizes she has been complicit in her own systematic enslavement to family (her new baby), in her materialistic desires aroused by marriage (decent silverplate), and finally in her submission to capitalist patriarchy (her deference to Luther's views on tax shelters). Luwana grieves over literally being her husband's (and thus later her son's) slave and laments having no one to whom she can express her pain. Willa regrets the desperate need to be a wife and mother that led her eagerly into self-imposed servitude and willing isolation, a status so unassailable that no one questions her absence from

the community. Luwana's diary ends with her telling her nonexistent reader about the silence that has been imposed upon her in the house that is her prison: "I have passed one full year without talking to my husband and my son" (124). Willa's narrative begins with her observation regarding the futility of voicing resistance to her imprisonment: "Hours ago she had decided that she would scream no more" (67). Whereas Luwana and Willa across the generations were led to believe that marriage and family would mean for them freedom, respectability, status, and hopefully a modicum of happiness; instead they have been stifled.

Willa next uncovers the cookbooks of Evelyn Creton Nedeed. Willa "could visualize the shelves [Evelyn] kept them on. The same cherrywood cabinet that now held her own paperback guides for countless diets and nutrition plans" (140). Amongst the cookbooks Willa finds two unusual notebooks containing recipes comprised of mysterious ingredients. She recognizes that Evelyn spent years attempting to create an aphrodisiac that might bring her husband to her bed:

It was the shame-weed that told her pages ago what Evelyn Creton was actually doing. . . . And she remembered being so ashamed of her great-aunt, Miranda Day . . . . Coming with her cardboard suitcases, loose-fitting shoes, and sticky jars of canned whatever. Toothless but ready with a broad grin; almost illiterate but determined to give her very loud opinion regardless of the subject or the company. "Child, y'all sittin' there complainin' 'bout them wayward boys. Ain't never seen an onery man yet who didn't come round if you get you'self a little shame-weed and bake it up in somethin' sweet." And perhaps if she hadn't been so eager to quiet the old woman, to move her out of the room away from the amused and contemptuous eyes of her teenaged friends, she would have also heard about the ivory-root, white pepper, and sassafras. The amaranth seeds, snakeroot, and dove's heart that Evelyn Creton kept mixing and measuring page after page, month after month. (148)

Willa reflects upon the unnaturalness of the separate bedrooms she and Luther keep and "his total absence at night after she conceived" (149), and she concludes once again that her plight has been the same as her predecessor's. Crucial to the discovery, however, is Willa's memory of the scene with her own great-aunt, Miranda Day. Willa and her girlfriends are pining over unrequited love. Miranda offers homespun advice to secure men's lust. Willa is ashamed of her great aunt--the trappings of rural poverty, the old-fashioned and unscientific remedy she offers--and fears her friends' ridicule. The scene emphasizes the notion that women unknowingly perpetuate their own self-effacement by idealizing love. Miranda advises them on how to obtain a man rather than cautioning them against being overly eager to do so. Willa thinks about her recent efforts to improve her marriage, returning from New York with shopping bags full of beauty supplies, "confident that Lancome had told her to 'believe in magic,' so that change was definitely on the way" (149). The irony is that the magical ingredients that Miranda described and Evelyn Creton mixed, the potions the young girls dismiss as antiquated and unscientific, have been replaced by expensive consumer products--make-up and perfume--with packaging that promises the same effect. Women are doomed to isolate themselves through marriage and family repeatedly from generation to generation, for they are taught at an early age that these are worthwhile goals. Any reservations they might have are alleviated, for they are duped into believing that each generation has improved upon the last's efforts, has eliminated previous flaws in the institution. Mixes made from natural and free ingredients give way to modern consumer products and guides. "There was no where else to turn except to her piles of



*Cosmopolitans* and *Ladies Home Journals*," Willa ruminates. "She wasn't going out into the woods like Evelyn Creton or Mama Day to dig up shame-weed" (148). The same cabinet that held Evelyn's cookbooks now holds Willa's diet and nutrition guides; each generation has its own view of how to rectify the defects in themselves in order to infuse the nuclear family with happiness. Women are now coaxed into believing that *purchased* items and advice are superior to the knowledge and experience of their female antecedents, that the failures suffered by their predecessors are eliminated by the scientific, antiseptic, processed commodities now available to them. The tragedy is that neither works. Evelyn's mixture does no more to entice her husband than do Willa's spending trips to New York. Willa's grasp on reality weakens when she finds Evelyn's recipe for face cream and comprehends the circularity of the trap. Evelyn's mixture includes henna and umber, ingredients used to darken her skin; Willa coats herself with bleaching cream. Lighter skin, darker skin, better meals, more exercise, each generation succumbs to a new set of standardized ideals that promise to make them happy as wives, mothers, women while the institution itself remains steadfastly oppressive.

Lest Willa think that Luwana Packerville and Evelyn Creton were victims of their own peculiar generations and passive natures, she is confronted with the photo album collection kept by her most recent predecessor, Priscilla McGuire Nedeed, a woman who "ran for president of the local Association of Colored Women three years in a row -- and won. She urged her friends to get tickets for *A Doll's House*, and later would think *Lady Chatterley's Lover* the most important book of the decade" (208).

Priscilla's albums chronicle first her life: a photo of herself on the running board of an old Packard, t-strap shoes, cigarette hanging from her mouth. They then capture her marriage: "The bride was laughing openly in the next picture. Bent dangerously over the railing of a steamship, her fur boa and loosened curls flying in the wind" (207). Finally, the photo albums depict her family: first Priscilla seated in a chair with her husband's hand on her shoulder, next Priscilla held down by the child that is in her lap, and in later photos "as the child grew, the height of his shoulder cast a faint shade across Priscilla McGuire's body" (208). Eventually engulfed by the shadow thrown by her grown son, Priscilla's face is replaced in the last photo by her scribbled word, "me."

Whereas Luwana's diary and Evelyn's cookbooks were written in their own hand, and thus could be interpreted as their individual distortions of reality, Priscilla's photographs are the registers of indisputable modern technology. Willa must either accept the reality that they depict, that Priscilla was obliterated from her family by the presence of her husband and son, or question her own sight and sanity. This deduction disturbs Willa so greatly, she responds by locating her reflection in a pan of water, substantiating her presence for herself, and concluding "that she had actually seen and accepted reality" (268). Willa judges that she is in fact in charge of her faculties, so she determines she must simply reason her way out of the basement. This she does by contemplating the decisions she has made that brought her to this point in her life: "Her marriage to Luther Nedeed was her choice, and she took his name by choice. She knew then and now that there were no laws anywhere in this country that forced her to assume that name; she took it because she wanted to. . . . she wanted to be a Nedeed.

After all, every literate person in the Western world knew it was a good name" (278).

Willa deems the desire to be a Nedeed a rational one, reviews her six years of marriage and confirms for herself that she could "be acquitted as a good mother," "be acquitted as a good wife" (279). As a result domestic duties call; so she believes her next steps should be first to put the basement in order (for she had destroyed most of its contents in a fit of rage and grief) and then walk up the basement stairs and next clean the house. Upstairs, Willie and Lester assist Luther in decorating the Nedeed Christmas tree, covering it in Luther's antique heirloom ornaments and following the tradition of lighting it with real candles. As Willie brings the tree top down from the storage room, he stumbles and recovers his step by resting on the frame of the basement door, thereby undoing the bolt and unknowingly liberating the imprisoned Willa.

Unbeknownst to the men, Willa climbs out of the basement carrying with her the dead child, his funeral shroud a bridal veil she found below. Willa first cleans the kitchen then moves on to the living room to pick up the boxes and paper that protected the tree ornaments. Upon her appearance, Luther rushes Willie and Lester out of the house with the words, "Your checks will be in the mail," a final recognition of the system that controls them all (299). Luther then returns to prevent Willa, whose only mission is to clean, from escaping. Willa and Luther clash, the child's shroud gets ignited by the tree candles, and all three go up in flames along with the Nedeed homestead. In a conversation with Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor describes the ending of *Linden Hills*:

What eventually evolved through all the pain that she went through was the discovery that she liked being where she was—a conventional housewife. . . . what her self-affirmation became was acknowledging her conventional position. You see, I used to believe that self-affirmation meant you had to be totally unconventional. But to keep a house, especially the way my mother kept her house—against all odds—is really a creative statement. So a woman's affirmation doesn't have to be an executive chair at IBM or something like that.  
 ("A Conversation" 573)

Naylor talks of resenting her character Willa, wanting her to fight Luther and finding she only wanted to resume her domestic duties. Coincidentally, Naylor describes women's options in the form of a dichotomy: either women find self-affirmation in their domestic duties or they aspire to be capitalist moguls. These oversimplified options disguise the reality of most women's lives under modern capitalistic patriarchy; for, on average, women assume both domestic duties and participate in the work force, dividing their time between household and employer, rarely achieving the rank of domestic goddess or capitalist tycoon. These caricatures of women are in fact the fictions perpetuated by capitalism and patriarchy. The suppression of women's history disguises the numerous and various roles women have played throughout the past, a case made in point by Willa Nedeed's discovering evidence of the Nedeed foremothers and journeying through their lives. Willa in truth has lost her child, her belief in humanity, and her confidence in the social order; with this has gone her sanity. She is forced to mimic familiar routines, to rely on domestic habits when what is left of her body and mind escapes her prison. Having unearthed evidence of the historical obliteration of Nedeed women, having experienced her husband's will to power firsthand, having recognized that she agreeably accepted the chains that came with the

wealth and prestige associated with the Nedeed name, fetters that some feminists argue come in fact of accepting any matrimonial surname, Willa commits suicide and takes with her the master of her destruction.

*Linden Hills* ends on a very dire note indeed,<sup>10</sup> for Willa Nedeed's efforts to stave off insanity by pouring through her predecessor's possessions only substantiate the historical reality behind the unimaginable nightmare she is experiencing. The experiences documented by her foremothers Luwana, Evelyn, and Priscilla only confirm for Willa the horror of patriarchy and capitalism and validate the madness they induce. In *Linden Hills*, Gloria Naylor attempts to de-fetishize the nuclear family and historicize the process whereby gender roles have become fixed, and in seeking to do so she documents the lives of women dominated by capitalism and patriarchy. We shall find in our examination of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* that perhaps Willa Nedeed simply did not reach back far enough.

### *The Salt Eaters*

*Linden Hills* concludes with the successful suicide of Willa Nedeed; *The Salt Eaters* commences with the failed suicide of Velma Henry. Whereas *Linden Hills* culminates with the destruction of one stronghold of capitalism and patriarchy in the black community, *The Salt Eaters* ends at the moment of divine inspiration and communal consciousness that comes when the main character, Velma Henry, embraces mental health and accepts her role as a spiritual leader of her community. *Linden Hills*

---

<sup>10</sup>For another view see Masse. She suggests that Willa "unwittingly liberates [Willie] and all of Linden Hills by killing Luther" (249).

implodes: the needs, desires and hence values inspired by capitalism and embraced by the black community cause its collapse. *The Salt Eaters* explodes: the moment of Velma Henry's healing at the Southwest Community Infirmary is a detonation that sends energy, hope, clarity, and inspiration to Clayborne, Georgia and from there to the entire United States African American population. Willa Prescott Nedeed unearths the past in the basement of the Nedeed home, and it subsequently destroys her; Velma Henry recovers the past in the Infirmary hospital room, and it regenerates her. While the two novels depict drastically different consequences that come of the main characters' soul searching, both originate from the same impetus--the fetishized nuclear family. Willa Prescott Nedeed discovers that reification and patriarchal control are prerequisites for capitalistic empires such as Linden Hills. Velma Henry learns that her valiant efforts to fight racism and classism have been and will be continually undermined by sexism in the black community. *Linden Hills* concludes with an entire community passively watching a fire consume the foundation of the community and take with it the lives of its inhabitants: "They let it burn" (304). *The Salt Eaters* ends at the moment of healing and liberation for the Clayborne community that begins when "Velma, rising on steady legs, throws off the shawl that drops down on the stool a burst cocoon" (295).

Notoriously a difficult novel to read, *The Salt Eaters* skips between the convoluted thoughts of the suicidal Velma Henry as she reevaluates her past, the conversations between Minnie Ransom and Old Wife as they assess Velma's condition and the community malaise at large, James Lee Henry's reflections on the state of his

marriage and the academy he runs, and Fred Holt's repressed feelings of anger and grief over the loss of his first wife, Wanda, and the murder of his best friend, Porter.

Furthermore, the ponderings of at least a dozen additional characters are included--

M'Dear Sophie Heywood who is Velma's godmother and protector, Cora Rider who is a Clayborne "old-timer" and an audience member at the healing, Dr. Julius Meadows who has come to see the workings of the famed Southwest Community Infirmary for himself, and a host of others. In addition, the novel also shifts between past, present, and several different yet equally possible futures. For example, in one scenario Fred Holt brings his bus passengers into Clayborne safely, in another he purposely drives the bus through a railing and down into the marsh. In her essay "'What It Is I Think She's Doing Anyhow': A Reading of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*," Gloria T.

Hull provides readers and potential readers of the novel a fastidiously detailed unraveling of the novel's complicated structure and plot. She explains:

At its literal-metaphoric center, Velma Henry and Minnie Ransom sit on round white stools in the middle of the Southwest Community Infirmary. "The good woman Ransom," "fabled healer of the district," is taxing her formidable powers with Velma, who has lost her balance and attempted suicide. The novel radiates outward in ever-widening circles--to the Master's Mind, the ring of twelve who hum and pray with Minnie; to the music room cluttered with staff, visitors, and assorted onlookers; to the city of Claybourne surrounding the Infirmary walls--a community which itself is composed of clusters (The Academy of the Seven Arts, the cafe with its two round tables of patrons, La Salle Street, the park); to the overarching sky above and the earth beneath steadily spinning on its axis. From the center, the threads web out, holding a place and weaving links between everything and everybody. At the same time, this center is a nexus which pulls the outside in--setting up the dialectic of connectedness which is both meaning and structure of the book. (217)

In this groundbreaking essay, Hull untangles the complex workings of Bambara's novel and demonstrates that at its heart is a concern over a growing schism in the black community and the belief that "this enervating schizophrenia must be healed individually and collectively" (224). Uncovering the cause of the community rupture, one that is illustrated specifically by a woman's attempted suicide, requires that we focus specifically on Velma Henry's breakdown, for here we locate the vehicle by which Bambara illustrates the schism and offers a means of recovery.

Too often neglected in discussions of postmodern literature, Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* depicts a fragmented African American community, unencumbered by conventional notions of time and space, resisting assimilation into the reigning commercial, technological, postindustrial society, and daily confronting that society's systems of duress.<sup>11</sup> It might be the last outpost of resistance, or perhaps it is only one of many such local sites of defiance; either way, Gaylord Hill in Clayborne, Georgia champions a world where a respect for multiple and oppositional voices and perspectives somehow prevails. The novel begins with the contradictory and contesting question, "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" (3). The question is asked of Velma Henry, a young, suicidal, black, female community worker who throughout the entire novel sits on a stool in a hospital room. In that she remains stationary, Velma is an unconventional protagonist. As such she functions to disturb standardized and rational thinking concerning the importance of a focused point of

---

<sup>11</sup> An exception to this criticism would be Janelle Collins' essay, "Generation Power: Fission, Fusion, and Post-modern Politics in Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*."



view in a novel. While the novel concerns Velma's recovery from her suicide attempt, she does absolutely nothing to further her own revival, never moves at all. In spite of the modern emphasis on psychologists, self-help manuals, step programs, pharmaceuticals, psychoanalysis, and a variety of other proactive methods of coping with mental illness, in *The Salt Eaters* Velma Henry recovers when she answers to herself, "Yes." One cannot take this to mean that the novel underestimates the suffering Velma experiences or oversimplifies the difficulty of surmounting suicidal depression, however. In fact, in much the same way as *Linden Hills*, *The Salt Eaters* questions whether or not derangement is preferable to coping with the daily atrocity and abuse of contemporary life. As Minnie Ransome observes, "Wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you're well" (10). This novel is similar to other postmodern texts that work to reveal social reality to be a constructed illusion, that strive to uncover the deceptiveness of an organized historical continuity, and determine truth to be precariously founded upon repression and assembled from bits of truths. As such, *The Salt Eaters* equates the mental exertion required to have faith in capitalist ideology and confidence in principles of individualism with insanity.

While Velma spends the entire novel sitting on a stool in a hospital gown, catatonic in the eyes of her audience, in her mind she scrutinizes the events and choices that have driven her to slash her wrists and place her head in an oven. Several related circumstances have led to Velma's suicide attempt, but the reader must wade through the bulk of the novel before discovering the source of Velma's anguish. Reading Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day*, one does not learn until the novel's conclusion that

one of the two characters participating in the novel's dialogue is dead, has in fact sacrificed his life so that the other character may live. So too Toni Morrison masks the identity of the ghost in *Beloved*, revealing only later that she has been the victim of infanticide. *The Salt Eaters* functions in the same manner. The reader is supplied fragments of the story and must fit together the pieces to discern what led to Velma's suicide. The betrayal Velma experiences at the hands of a renowned black community leader sets in motion her breakdown, and this betrayal is duplicated in the form of her husband's infidelity. Both in turn lead her finally to attempt suicide. The incidents are interdependent, and together they signify how the patriarchy of the nuclear family and the community at large impact black women's lives to their detriment.<sup>12</sup> Velma's recovery from the suicide attempt comes about at the hands of the local healer, Minnie Ransom, and Minnie's spirit guide, Old Wife; these women lead Velma to the truth that she has continually denied, namely that she herself has otherworldly capabilities that must be nurtured. In this manner, Bambara uses magical realism to suggest that the source of resistance to patriarchy comes from strength and capabilities inherent in women yet suppressed by them.

At the outset, the growing problem of generating the nuclear family is identified as one element of the black community's disintegration. Minnie Ransom and Old Wife review the onslaught of emotional breakdowns they have been attending to and hypothesize as to the cause: "I'm telling you," Minnie tells her spirit guide, "when we

---

<sup>12</sup>Ann Folwell Stanford in fact argues that *The Salt Eaters* functions as a revision of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, focusing this time on gender erasure.

started letting these silly children arrange their own marriages without teaching them about compatible energies, about the powers, we made a serious mistake. More mix-match mating going on, enough to make you crazy" (44). Minnie notes that lately black women, "the daughters of the yam," are either "sticking their head in ovens and opening up their veins like this gal [Velma] or . . . they looking for some man to tear his head off" (44). She observes that in this recent behavior, their suicidal and murderous tendencies, they are "acting more and more like--I'sh potatoes," or whites. Minnie berates a recent patient who came in believing a song about how "a broken bucket" told her to attack her husband with a hammer. She interprets the message from the lyrics and diagnoses the woman with "a dormant nerve in the clitoris." Says Minnie:

And no wonder, no mating fuel there at all. But like I say, she got options. Just like the Liza in the song. She can just go ahead and fix the fool bucket herself and quit getting so antsy about it. Or she can go find a man that can. Always got options. . . . Ole no-count Henry ain't the only reality. Or she might try affirming his ability to wield a hammer or tote her some water and see what that'll do. (44)

Infamous for her own carnal exploits, Minnie Ransom is bewildered by the sexual conservatism of the younger generation. She and Old Wife are exasperated to find that this frustrated patient, unable to achieve an orgasm, is on the verge of killing her husband without so much as envisioning other resolutions such as trying to affirm her husband's "ability to wield a hammer or tote her some water" (explicit sexual instructions), "fix[ing] the fool bucket herself" (masturbation), or "find[ing] a man that can" (infidelity). Minnie argues that discord threatens many modern black relationships and has resulted in the community's self-destruction--women killing

themselves or killing their partners. In Minnie's mind, the younger generation of African Americans are replicating the same mistakes made by whites, namely that they are overly conventional, quick to marry, and unimaginative when conflict ensues. While Minnie does not reject marriage outright, she does have a very liberal view of it in contrast to the traditional codes and structures imposed by the institution. More importantly, Minnie criticizes conformity. She blames an escalating materialism and devotion to the status quo as causes of the deterioration of gender relations in the African American community: "Something's up in a fiercesome way between the men and the women," she notes (62). "The children are spoiling, Old Wife. Want their loving done with sweet-tooth cupcakes and shiny cars and credit cards and grins from white folks" (61). Minnie recognizes the growing materialism that has resulted from advanced capitalism and detects how human relations are being reified into relations between commodities. Consumerism and a dependence upon social approbation have affected the black community, according to Minnie; reification has impaired their sexuality and hindered their ability to love one another.

The marriage of James Lee and Velma Henry serves as a vehicle by which to critique that institution in the novel. It is in fact Velma's second marriage, her first apparently riddled with the deficiencies of which Minnie speaks. "Her first wedding, hasty as you please and in a night club too" met with community disapproval, "and when Velma had swapped that out-of-town-who's-his-people-anyway husband for a good home boy whose goodness could maybe lay her wildness down and urge her

through college," her family had rejoiced (12). James, too, has had previous relationships:

He'd thought himself deeply in love each time. And they'd loved him, at least they'd each said they did. But they kept killing his babies. Junk food addicts, toxemic pregnancies, miscarriages. Excited mothers-to-be, suddenly sullen and unreachable, terror-stricken, abortions. . . . And the new pattern of growth unfolded itself the minute Velma had winced and held him round, "What kind of poor, abused sistuh would want to kill your baby, James?" (99)

The community espouses traditional expectations regarding marriage and sexual relations. James should subjugate and edify his wife, "lay her wildness down and urge her through college." In exchange, Velma should willingly become a vessel for procreation. Velma married a man from outside the community and held the ceremony in a night club. James's lovers were either unable or unwilling to carry a child. These previous marriages and relationships are unorthodox and impermanent and thus futile in the eyes of the community. They are dismissed as rites of passage, necessary mistakes, wisdom bearing of experience, immature foolishness one engages in until one gets down to the serious business of creating the nuclear family. According to community mores, therefore, James and Velma's relationship should succeed because it follows conventions.

Velma and James seem the perfectly suited couple. They share the same values, a concern for their race, their community, and the planet. They are committed to changing the world. James runs a local outreach program called the Academy of 7 Arts and Velma assists; both participate in national civil rights efforts. Together they are raising a son. The nuclear family is more often depicted as an anomaly rather than a

standard in the African American community, but such portrayals have been criticized. Hortense Spillers has argued that "the African-American-father-gone is the partial invention of sociologists" (157). Carol Stack suggests that "the pattern whereby black children derive all their kin through females has been stereotyped and exaggerated in the literature on black families" (51). Michelle Wallace acknowledges this trend and admits to a fear "that black women writers were verifying the myth of the 'superwoman' by the creation of perverse characterizations displaying inordinate strengths and abilities as the inevitable booby prize of a romanticized marginality" (227).

Exaggerating the frequency of black matrifocal families accomplishes two ends. First, it excuses the disproportionate number of blacks living below subsistence levels, suggesting that the inability of blacks to escape poverty stems from their family structure and hence values. Second, it reinforces the middle-class white worship of the nuclear family, providing an imaginary and demonized alternative that functions as a threat to encourage conformity. The family Velma and James Henry create might be utilized, then, as a restorative example of African American relationships, successful assimilation, and triumphant dedication to the nuclear family ideal. Such mainstream practices, however, are the very customs being critiqued here.

In time, Velma herself miscarries; she cannot have children. Thus, she is similar to the previous women in James's life. In fact, searching for explanations of his wife's recent erratic behavior, James theorizes that "maybe the cracking had begun years earlier when the womb had bled, when the walls had dropped away and the baby was flushed out" (94). James's conjecture is problematic and indicative of stereotypes

regarding women's need to procreate. He characterizes his previous lovers as "junk food addicts" who have "toxemic miscarriages" or "abortions." He condemns his previous lovers for their terminated pregnancies, characterizing them as having chosen to abort or to make their bodies uninhabitable. Then he surmises his wife's miscarriage years earlier may be the cause of her recent despondency. James assumes that procreation capabilities determine women's physical and emotional well-being, that reluctance or inability to bear children is a sign of deviance or the road to psychosis, and this is a conviction he shares with society at large. In fact, pregnancy, miscarriage, fertility, none of these issues surface in Velma's thoughts; her attentions are focused, instead, on the overwhelming burdens she has assumed as a wife, lover, community leader, and woman. Ingratitude, betrayal, neglect—these are her troubles.

Sitting on the stool in the infirmary, Velma's thoughts turn to recent conversations and all the moments that she associates with them. In the first, she and James sit in a restaurant. Velma is telling a story about her brutal and disheartening encounter with civil rights leaders, and James interrupts to attempt a reconciliation. As James lectures her, Velma muses that "he no longer thought she was a prize to win," that she had become "just a quaint memory for him, like a lucky marble or a coin caught from the Mardi Gras parade" (20). Velma conceives of her married self in terms of coveted objects desirable for their elusiveness. Such things are precious the moment they are obtained but ordinary or even valueless to their possessor in time. They are rewards for prowess, trophies of achievement, substitutes for money. Velma finds James's oration tedious, and her thoughts turn back to her story. Velma has marched in

protest with others for miles and has arrived at the rally exhausted, dirty, feet bare and swollen. Her shoulders ache from the weight of her bag. She is menstruating and thus forced to use a filthy inoperable gas station toilet, "and like a cat she'd had to lick herself clean of grit, salt, blood and rage" (36). The assembly includes children and the elderly who have braved the self-righteous indignation of racist attackers, people of modest means who have risked what little security they have to show support for the Civil Rights Movement. The speakers, leaders of the Movement, arrive in an air-conditioned limousine dressed in silk suits and shiny boots. The rally is disorganized, and Velma steps away into the lobby of a hotel to phone for support in the form of food, water, medical attention, and other necessary accommodations for the mass of people. The speakers have lodging in the hotel, and Velma encounters them there:

The men without their sunglasses, hair glistening fresh from under stocking caps and fro cloths, the men carrying silver ice buckets and laughing with the women, the women clean and lean and shining, prancing like rodeo ponies--roans, palominos tossing their manes and whinnying down the corridor. And the man who would be leader.

Trying not to see them, but seeing them anyway, her eyes swimming in the mirror, slipping and sliding over a field of red silk. No bib overalls. No slop jars here. Just red silk lounging pajamas and silver ice buckets and those women. (40)

The incongruity between the deprivation outside--crowds of hungry people, tired from their long trek, weak from the abuse they received along the way--and the opulence enjoyed by the speakers inside the hotel unnerves Velma. She is further demoralized when one of the men ambushes her. In her state of fatigue and filth, Velma's presence in the lobby is intrusive. As a result, she is hastily, roughly ejected from the premises: "Her head snapped back in the rush and shove and all she could see, the landscape of



her world, was a blond hair between green threads on a field of red" (40). Velma recalls the detail of a strand of blond hair, presumably from one of the women accompanying the leaders, caught on the green and red silk lounging pajamas the man wears, visible to her due to his close proximity in the struggle. Velma collapses, as much from the scene she has witnessed as from the man's attack. She is dismayed by these leaders, men who rally the people around the issue of community pride, who preach solidarity, strength, and black self-esteem and then reward themselves with luxury and white women.

The two incidents are intimately joined in Velma's mind, not simply because James fails to listen to this particular story but also because both the conversation between her and James and the encounter she had with the civil rights leaders reveal the manner in which patriarchy works divisively against the black community. One way patriarchy functions is to commodify women, transform them into possessions valued for the status they convey. Velma senses that in this regard she is no longer of value in her marriage, "no longer a prize to win." In contrast, she recollects the blond hair on the silk pajamas—a strand of gold. Velma recognizes that women are commodified and detects their reified value—she herself a trinket or play money, those white women trophies or riches. Likewise, patriarchy devalues or cloaks the value of women's work. For this reason a black female marcher, an obvious participant in the struggle, a domesticated cat who cleans herself, is thoughtlessly jettisoned out the door while white female groupies, pampered ponies on display, are indulged and even courted. Finally, patriarchy essentializes women, reducing them to their reproductive functions. Bell hooks argues, "Individuals who fight for the eradication of racism or classism

while supporting sexist oppression are helping to maintain the cultural basis of all forms of group oppression. While they may initiate successful reforms, their efforts will not lead to revolutionary change" (39). These leaders have succumbed to the material rewards that come with fame; furthermore, they have contributed to the commodification of women. Consequently, they are induced to accept and perpetuate the very paradigm they oppose--racism. In this way classism, sexism, and racism are shown to be intimately joined. The men are unable (or unwilling) to recognize their own prejudice (racism) as it is disguised by a power configuration (sexism) they perceive as inherent in and natural to human relations. James and Velma are partners in resistance, together committed to improving conditions for their community and eradicating racism. However, their efforts to bring about revolutionary change are being impeded by the sexism inherent in their marriage and characteristic of the institution itself. In fact, James's misdiagnosis of Velma's grief, his essentializing of women in terms of their reproductive functions, is akin to the reification women experience in society at large.

All members of the community in some ways perpetuate this paradigm, whether they are beneficiaries of patriarchy or not. For example, during the course of the novel Velma's friends Ruby and Jan sit in a café waiting for her to join them, oblivious to the fact that Velma is hospitalized. Annoyed that Velma has stood them up and prompted by her absence, they discuss her recent erratic behavior. Ruby accuses Velma of becoming "self-centered," but Jan defends her, reversing the term and advocating a "centered self." Jan contends that "Velma has worked hard not to hollow out a safe

corner--yeh, quotes around the safe--of home, family, marriage and then be less responsive, less engaged. Dodgy business trying to maintain the right balance there, the personal and the public. . . . But it's good she has put herself at center at last" (241). As previously discussed, Velma in her current condition now sits at the *center* of the Gaylord Hill community, so although they are unaware of it, the terms in which Jan and Ruby couch their debate are uncannily appropriate. As an African American, Velma represents the "minority" and as a woman she further personifies the "marginalized," so in her position of centrality she subverts the notion of the homogeneous western white male as monolithic subject.<sup>13</sup> That she came by her current position of centrality as the result of a suicide attempt complicates the scenario. It emphasizes the obstacles Velma faces as a black woman and reinforces suspicions that women are recognized and appreciated only when their absence makes clear to others what they accomplish.<sup>14</sup>

Jan's definition of a centered self, though, problematizes the issue further as she accepts the dichotomy of personal/public, and applies it to Velma as meaning home, family, marriage/community. The extent to which this is naturalized by a capitalist

---

<sup>13</sup>In a recent essay, "Deep Sight and Rescue Missions," Bambara expresses interest in such terms that now frequently couch discussions regarding race. She writes: "What characterizes this moment? There's a drive on to supplant 'mainstream' with 'multicultural' in the national consciousness, and that drive has been sparked by the emancipatory impulse, blackness, which has been the enduring model for other down-pressed sectors in the U.S. and elsewhere. A repositioning of people of color (POCs) closer to the center of the national narrative results from, reflects, and effects a reframing of questions regarding identity, belonging, community" (162).

<sup>14</sup>This sentiment is repeated throughout the novel. For instance, James reflects upon Velma's absence from the Academy of 7 Arts: "It took him, Jan, Marcus (when he was in town), Daisy Moultrie and her mother (when they could afford to pay them), the treasurer of the board, and town student interns to replace Velma at the Academy" (93).

hegemony is illustrated by Ruby and Jan's blindness to the transformation imposed upon their friend who, unlike them, is a wife and mother. Jan and Ruby continually interrupt themselves with the phrase "quotes around the word" to indicate the tentative quality and intangible nature of concepts like "safe" and "personal," terms one often uses without serious thought. This device indicates the young women's unceasing effort to resist making unwarranted assumptions; it is a tactic used to compel recognition of our tendency to accept the confines of language and to view reality as it thereby becomes strictly defined. Yet Jan illustrates her argument regarding the importance of being "centered" by equating Ruby's retreating to her shop and to her jewelry making with Velma's commitment to her family, and she offers these as examples of "centered self" activities. The women have been so accustomed to the equating of a woman's self with her duties as mother and wife that they fail to recognize the unwarranted assumption they make. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich examines the mechanisms whereby motherhood becomes fetishized and points out: "Any institution which expresses itself so universally ends by profoundly affecting our experience, even the language we use to describe it. . . . Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of the self" (24). Jan and Ruby have accepted that Ruby's time spent on her art, her jewelry making, is comparable to Velma's time spent with her family, though the former is a self-involved activity and the latter entails a devotion to others. The danger in Jan's comparison is that it inadvertently reduces Velma's identity solely to her role as mother and wife, an

alteration so subtle as to escape even these women keenly alert to such presumptions. To some extent, these activities are comparable in that the time spent doing them is private and rewarding, or as Jan describes them: "Confined space, everything under your control" (240). Jan succumbs, however, to the age-old sentiment that suggests the home is a respite from worldly concerns. We saw this same scenario in *Linden Hills* when Willa Nedeed reflected upon her slow but sure alienation from her friends that came about as a result of her growing involvement in her family. Velma hardly seems the type to endure the self-imposed isolation Willa Nedeed embraced; nevertheless, the cultural mindset erases Velma's personal identity whether or not she chooses to accept such a fate.

The tautology characteristic of patriarchy, the all-encompassing effect such assumptions have on women can be seen in an argumentative exchange between James and Velma over the source of their marital difficulties. James defends himself saying, "All I said was you're giving the best of yourself away and come home so drained." To this Velma replies, "You said 'throwing away' the best of myself, as if the community--" (230). When James accuses Velma of "throwing away the best of" herself on community work, he does not mean she should take more time for herself. Instead, James means she is neglecting her husband, her child, and their home; he feels that their lives are all suffering as a result of Velma's growing responsibilities to work and to the community. Velma is forced to defend herself to her husband for being overly active in community affairs; Velma's friends commend her for not neglecting the community for personal interests, which they determine to be her domestic life.

Velma's suicide attempt is prompted not so much by her inability to stretch herself far enough to serve both her family and her community effectively, but by the fact that in doing so she has been effaced as an individual as a result. Jan suggests Velma reigns in her home as Ruby does in her studio, that these locations offer the women the opportunity for personal dominion unavailable to them in their community life. On the contrary, whereas Ruby's jewelry making is an individual activity of her making and command, Velma's performance as mother and wife carries responsibility to and for others, obligations to people other than herself. Thus when Velma searches for the tools to commit suicide, she fixes on an image of impenetrability and control--an egg timer--and she wishes: "To be that sealed--sound, taste, air, nothing seeping in. To be that unavailable at last, sealed in and the noise of the world, the garbage, locked out" (19). In fact, Velma's suicide attempt is in part an effort to escape the chaos of her family life--the duties, disappointments, and discord that can plague life at home. She fastens onto an ordinary household item and envisions that death will provide her a similarly enclosed space, one that will shield her from the "noise" and "garbage" that routinely accompany domestic life. A suicide attempt, not family life, has "centered" Velma. In the end, then, Ruby is correct in her assessment as any attempt Velma would make to maintain selfhood would be deemed "self-centered" or selfish. *The Salt Eaters* laments that under patriarchy it is paradoxically only through self-destruction that women can reclaim selfhood.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>This is a familiar theme in American women's literature in general and African American women's literature in particular, perhaps most notably rendered in Ntozake

Throughout *The Salt Eaters* social appearance is deceptive; men's accomplishments within the community are repeatedly revealed to be the result of women's labor. This dichotomy between appearance and reality then becomes a portal for the more mystical factors of the novel, narrative techniques that challenge notions of the world as a strictly rational, corporal place. One of the community workers describes her husband's notion of their domestic arrangement: "He makes up lists, see, of all the things he wants done and posts this list on the refrigerator door just like there were little kitchen fairies and yard elves and other magic creatures to get all these things done" (31). Of course the implication here is that there are such creatures--women. Velma recalls that she, like the other female members of the local community alliance, had begun to resent "being called in on five-minute notice after all the interesting decisions had been made, called in out of personal loyalty and expected to break her hump pulling off what the men had decided was crucial for the community good" (25). Velma's despair stems directly from the schizophrenia that results from the contradiction between reality as one experiences it and the illogical, delusional actuality fabricated by patriarchy. Her objection to James's infidelity is likewise couched in these terms: "You been lying for months now, complaining about *my* aloofness, *my* fatigue, *my* job, willing to totally mess with *my* sense of what's real in order to throw up this smoke screen" (231). Velma does not differentiate between the inequities of her married life and those of her life in the community, for they are

---

*Shange's for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbo is enuf.*

indistinguishably mired in the obfuscation that perpetuates patriarchy (and the patriarchy that perpetuates obfuscation). Velma's attempt to destroy herself, like Willa Nedeed's, merely preempts patriarchy's endeavor to do the same. Velma imagines she will find solace in suicide, asks her sister if she thinks suicides reincarnate more quickly. She gambles on the chance that there exists a reality beyond death and that it is less duplicitous than the one she currently experiences under capitalistic patriarchy. Her deterioration is both the product of and mirror to community disintegration, a collapse born of naturalized gender inequalities.

Velma does reincarnate, in a manner of speaking, as her failed suicide attempt brings her under the care of Minnie Ransom, community healer, and Old Wife, spiritual guide, and to the immediate attention of her godmother, Sophie, another woman at ease with the spiritual world. This trio reminds us in ways of the foremothers Willa Nedeed discovered in *Linden Hills*; unlike Luwana, Evelyn, and Priscilla, however, the examples drawn from these foremothers' lives draw Velma back from the precipice of death rather than send her over. Minnie, Old Wife, and Sophie each in her way pushes and cajoles, prods and entices Velma to heed the callings of the ancestors. Velma is forced to acknowledge once and for all the realm of the mud mothers, women who have called to her all her life from mirrors, dreams, and what she perceived to be hallucinations: "There'd been signs and times in church, in the attic, and the woods when Velma had started, gone mute, stared, become very still. . . . was no doubt rejecting [what she saw] before it could imprint on the mind" (294). Like others Velma has been conditioned to deny fantastic and otherworldly perceptions, so "of course she



would reject what could not be explained in terms of words, notes, numbers or those other systems whose roots had been driven far underground" (294). In attempting suicide, Velma rejects the false yet only tangible reality granted to her by patriarchy, and this move opens up for her a space wherein other realities are conceivable. Velma's physical and mental recovery occurs as the result of her locating this plane of existence, an alternate world that was always available to her.

The realm of the mud mothers offers a solution to the irresolvable dilemma of unifying the African American community as well. Velma recalls that prior to attempting suicide she had sought a way to "stay centered in the best of her people's traditions and not be available to madness" and in answer was provided a vision of the past:

Something crucial had been missing from the political / economic / social / cultural / aesthetic / military / psychosocial / psychosexual mix. And what could it be? And what should she do? She'd been asking it aloud one morning combing her hair, and the answer had almost come tumbling out of the mirror naked and tattooed with serrated teeth and hair alive, birds and insects peeping out at her from the mud-heavy hanks of the ancient mothers' hair. And she had fled feverish and agitated from the room. (259)

Both Velma's community and home life have failed her as a result of the patriarchal constraints on women and rewards to men inherent in both arenas. The visions of mud mothers offer not simply an alternative plane of existence but another model to emulate. The women are maternal figures both biologically and figuratively--mothers who tuck "babies in hairy hides" and matriarchs who call to Velma to join them. Most important, they are figures that predate capitalism: "Ten or more women with mud hair,

storing yams in gourds and pebbles in cracked calabash" (255). They belong to the primitive communism or tribal society mode of production, and they communicate via magic and mythic narrative that is this mode's ideological coding. Though they plague Velma throughout her life and cause her to fear for her sanity, in the end these "mothers of the yam" provide Velma a route out of catatonia. The mud mothers are not backbones of the fetishized nuclear family nor reified "trophies" or "prizes" for triumphant patriarchy; they are the essence of motherhood and womanhood prior to its distortion by capitalism and patriarchy. They provide Velma a glimpse of the female before she was encouraged to be feminine, motherhood before it was idealized, and womanhood before it came to be defined by sexuality and marriage.

As a result, the visions awaken in Velma an awareness of the extraordinary lives of the women around and before her--M'Dear Sophie Heywood, Minnie Ransom, Old Wife--and allow her to see herself as belonging to generations of women who in ways have been the unacknowledged community leaders all along. In finally heeding the visions, Velma awakens to the force of women and her own strength. Signs of their growing empowerment have been in evidence--Women for Action splitting off from the larger, male-dominated community alliance group, Jan considering running for the office Jay Patterson wants to hold, the Seven Sisters performance troupe advancing towards Claybourne--but Velma has been so enfeebled by the patriarchal forces that govern community and family as to have been impervious to the increasing role the

women have begun to play.<sup>16</sup> In *The Salt Eaters* Bambara insists upon the individual's connection to the community and the community's dependence upon the individual. By implication patriarchy, capitalism and racism, the diseases that plague the community and destroy the individual, can be subverted via a woman's belief in the divinity of the self and the community's commitment to the restoration of woman's place in it.

In "The Education of a Storyteller," Bambara writes of the forces that shaped her as a young girl:

Two types of stories struck me most at the time. One, about women's morality. Now, outside the community and in too many places within the community, "women's morality" had a very narrow context and meant sexual morality. One was taught not to be slack, sluttish, low-down, but rather upright, knees locked, and dress down.

But in the story telling arenas, from kitchen tales to outdoor university anecdotes, "women's morality" was much more expansive, interesting, it took on the heroic--Harriet T. and Ida B. and the women who worked with W.E.B. Du Bois, the second wife of Booker T. and the Mother Divine of the Peace and Co-op Movement, and Claudia Jones . . . . (251)

In this narrative Bambara speaks of the competing images of women that come to inform and dictate how women view themselves, images that are the basis of the "enervating schizophrenia" of which Gloria T. Hull spoke. The community is encouraged to define women by and reduce them to their sexual habits and mores, yet individual historians force a recognition of women's abilities, achievements, and even

---

<sup>16</sup>Nancy Porter focuses on the Seven Sisters troupe in an essay that posits friendship as the source of political strength, rather than the recognition of foremothers as I have done here.

escapades. Bambara distinguishes between "inside" and "outside" the community, indicating the extent to which hegemonic forces shape the community's understanding of itself and encourage self-policing. Likewise, she identifies sites of community resistance to such hegemony--women's kitchens, speaker's corners--and suggests that effective insurgency will necessitate the recognition of women's heroics, of their place in history and their impact on the community. In *The Salt Eaters*, the moment Velma recognizes her history and embraces her future, the community of Clayborne, Georgia experiences communal consciousness and collective feelings of benevolence that seem to extend to the world at large, what the novel calls the "Day of Restoration." Jan points to the skies for the cause, noting that Pluto, "A planet of immense power. Annihilation and transformation. The planet of complete and total change," is now being influenced by Scorpio (282). According to M'Dear Sophie Heywood, who teaches about, "the significance of certain tamperings with the script" of the Bible, this collective rejuvenation is literally the Armageddon: "The expressions about the second coming and Armageddon," she explains, "should be translated 'presence of Christ' and 'new age,'" (282). The reader, however, is lead to believe that Claybourne is revitalized by the act of one woman escaping depression and finding mental health, accepting the chaos and confusion of modern life, and choosing to embrace the role of spiritual leader in her community, recognizing the strength and capabilities inherent in women yet suppressed by them.

Both *Linden Hills* and *The Salt Eaters* resist the fetishization of the nuclear family, a mechanism for the perpetuation of the status quo. The fetishization of the

nuclear family depends upon an adherence to tradition and the unqualified acceptance of convention; it preserves habits and customs in the name of cultural heritage, but to the benefit of capitalism and patriarchy. Concepts of race in the United States play a crucial role in this fetishization in that the nuclear family ideal functions as both a valorized symbol of freedom for those who attain and sustain it and a demonized badge of failure for those who do not. Gloria Naylor and Toni Cade Bambara are two writers among a vast number of contemporary American women novelists who have attempted to reveal the threat the fetishization of the nuclear family poses.

**Chapter Three**  
**"Lloyd's Cheeks Show His Shame": The Nuclear Family**  
**and the Threat of Sexual Variation in Carolyn Chute's *Merry Men***

In her dedication to *Merry Men*, Carolyn Chute spells out in no uncertain terms for the reader, the identity of good and evil in this age of advanced capitalism. Here "family and community interdependence" are identified as "America's last vestiges of freedom." She condemns "modern 'education,' Big Business, and Mechanization" for its decimating effects on Americans' autonomy. She denounces "welfare lines, prisons," and slave wages as instruments of hegemonic control. The novel is dedicated to a dying breed—farmers and those who were born to be farmers--and Chute wishes for them that they may find the opportunity to practice their calling in a next life or world. Were this dedication not followed by the novel's prologue, one would expect *Merry Men* to be an unabashed glorification of the American agrarian tradition. The prologue, however, is a brutal glimpse into the ways of an early settler family. The Fitzgeralds have "a poor piece of land but they [make] it feed them" (xv). The family consists of a father and sons, a mother but no daughters. An Indian woman takes to coming to the cabin while the men are on their daily hunt, and the mother bakes biscuits for her "as much out of fear as generosity." One day the mother confesses to the father the story of this routine visit. "Furious to hear of all the 'wasted flour and lard,'" he hides in wait for the Indian woman the next morning and takes her down with one shot. The prologue concludes with the father and sons burying the woman while the mother lies prostrate on the bed "afraid . . . for there is always something to fear" (xiv).

It is this very contradiction, Chute's simultaneous homage to and critique of the American pioneer spirit, that has baffled reviewers and seems to have dissuaded many critics from examining her work. Chute is relentless in her pursuit of an honest and authentic portrait of the displaced working class--its sociodemographics, its history, its structure and its mores, be they inspiring or incriminating. Here she readily juxtaposes her dedication, which must really be called a prayer for the (non)working class, to a violent image reflecting the sense of entitlement that in some ways accounts for such people's continued survival. In doing so, she purposely questions the very foundations she champions--family, community interdependence, freedom, America. While *Merry Men* is certainly a scathing commentary on capitalism's undermining of American individualism, it also questions the tenets of that tradition itself. In typical Chute fashion, the reader is called both to embrace and to reject the doctrines that make up the tradition--patriarchy, xenophobia, privilege, power, and most importantly, what has become the sacred structure that perpetuates the tradition--the American nuclear family.

Like her previous two novels, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* (1985) and *Letourneau's Used Auto Parts* (1988), *Merry Men* is set in the community of Egypt, Maine. Egypt is a small town, and most of its inhabitants are descendants of the region's European settlers--the Fitzgeralds, the Hoods, the Soules, the Begins, the Dougherties, and the MacBeans, to name a few. Most people in Egypt are related to one another by blood or marriage (or both); they are hard-working individuals who are barely able to earn a living. By the conclusion of *Merry Men*, the community is stratified. Land clear-cropped by the now defunct paper mill has been subsumed by

developers eager to build high-priced vacation estates. Working people have lost their homes and land as the result of fewer jobs, lower wages and rising taxes; many have been reduced to living in Miracle city, a shanty town of trailer homes and particle board shacks. Their presence offends the town's newcomers, wealthy retirees and vacationers who find Egypt's tranquility and antiquatedness charming. Egypt's shift from a small town with an agrarian-based economy to an over-developed suburbia devastates most of the central characters in the novel and is the focus of the story. Critics who have looked at Chute's work routinely fix on the issue of class in her novels, and rightly so. Reviews of *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* were the subject of an examination of classism and elitism in the literary establishment.<sup>1</sup> Chute's novels have been discussed in articles centering on class and pedagogy and on class and canon formation.<sup>2</sup> *Merry Men* itself has been called a contemporary *The Grapes of Wrath*.<sup>3</sup> It is my intention here to explore what I think often goes unnoticed of Chute's work: that she is suspicious of the trend to fetishize the nuclear family. In fact, Carolyn Chute draws explicit connections between disenfranchisement, heterosexism and the tradition of the nuclear family.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud suggests that historically, the sexual act is the strongest source of satisfaction for man. The two-fold origin of civilization,

---

<sup>1</sup>See Christopher's "Lower-Class Voices."

<sup>2</sup>See Christopher's "Cultural Borders," Frus, and Campbell.

<sup>3</sup>See Burns. In fact, Burns argues that because Steinbeck sentimentalizes what Chute refuses to, she has created in *Merry Men* "a novel far superior to *The Grapes of Wrath*" (12).



he says, is "love," or the presence of the sexual object, and "work," caused by the need for subsistence. Together, these two demands encouraged man to live in groups as both were facilitated by the proximity or presence of others. "The element of civilization," he explains, "enters on the scene with the first attempt to regulate these social relations" (95). Civilization, then, is the regulation of conduct that makes communal living possible. Freud asserts that restrictions on behavior that made it possible for man to live in groups conflicted with his instincts, specifically the sexual instinct which originally knew no inhibitions. "Here, as we know," he writes, "civilization is obeying the laws of economic necessity, since a large amount of the psychical energy which it uses for its own purposes had to be withdrawn from sexuality" (104). Thus it is that Freud suggests that there is a direct correlation between "the economic structure of the society" and "the amount of sexual freedom that remains" (104). From this we can infer that as economies grow to depend on inclusiveness (i.e., global capitalism), civilization advances and the suppression of sexual variation escalates. As Freud points out, "The liberty of the individual is no gift of civilization. It was greatest before there was any civilization" (95). Thus has modern civilization evolved into an intricate system of constraints and prohibitions meant to uphold the economic system:

As regards the sexually mature individual, the choice of an object is restricted to the opposite sex, and most extra-genital satisfactions are forbidden as perversions. The requirement, demonstrated in these prohibitions, that there shall be a single kind of sexual life for everyone, disregards the dissimilarities, whether innate or acquired, in the sexual constitution of human beings; it cuts off a fair number of them from sexual enjoyment, and so becomes the source of serious injustice. . . .

Heterosexual genital love, which has remained exempt from outlawry, is itself restricted by further limitations, in the shape of insistence upon legitimacy and monogamy. Present-day civilization makes it plain that it will only permit sexual relationships on the basis of a solitary, indissoluble bond between one man and one woman, and that it does not like sexuality as a source of pleasure in its own right and is only prepared to tolerate it because there is so far no substitute for it as a means of propagating the human race. (104-5)

What I am driving at here is a causal relationship between class and sexual possibility.

When we talk about heterosexism, we are always talking too about class. Constraints made on sexual variation constitute civilization. Civilization makes community possible, and communities are really economic assemblies necessary for survival.

Civilization safeguards capitalism, it protects the economic system from the individual dissenter: "The power of this community is then set up as 'right' in opposition to the power of the individual, which is condemned as 'brute force'" (95). Civilization deems that monogamous heterosexual relationships sanctified by marriage best perpetuate capitalism. Civilization, then, is really acculturation and not to be equated with refining or improving, though the latter is of course how it has come to be viewed. Freud points out that we must be "careful not to fall in with the prejudice that civilization is synonymous with perfecting, that it is the road to perfection pre-ordained for men" (96).

In an effort to explore the ways in which *Merry Men* illustrates how sexuality is regulated to maintain the class system, I would like to utilize the theoretical paradigm posited by Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*. Freud calls attention to the fact that despite its best efforts, "Civilized society has found itself obliged to pass over

in *silence* many [sexual] transgressions which, according to its own rescripts [sic.], it ought to have punished" (105, italics mine). Sedgwick explicates the process whereby society attempts to deter, by feigning unawareness of, that which it cannot otherwise impede (i.e. sexual variation). In her extended introduction, Sedgwick makes the point that "the most significant stakes for the culture are involved in precisely the volatile, fractured, dangerous relations of visibility and articulation around homosexual possibility" (18). She situates the binary homo/heterosexuality both physically and historically, describing how despite the multitude of ways sexuality has been, can be and is expressed, it came to be defined by "the gender of object choice." She argues that upon the false dichotomy of homo/heterosexuality a slew of similarly reductive, indelible, inescapable, and potentially destructive antitheses have been developed and consolidated including private/public, knowledge/ignorance, majority/minority, natural/artificial, and same/different, to name a few. Sedgwick denies what some have suggested, that the very precariousness of identity categories will allow for the eventual collapse of such rigidly enforced differentiation. Instead, she insists that power is waged through the incoherency intrinsic to perpetuating these false, adversarial, and injurious demarcations (11). Sedgwick goes on to examine homosexuality and the effect of perpetuating the "open secret" which requires willful ignorance, silence and invisibility; she explains that it "performs the enforcing work of the status quo" (21) and "can be harnessed, licensed, and regulated on a mass scale for striking enforcements" (5). Sedgwick writes,

For surely, if paradoxically, it is the paranoid insistence with which the definitional barriers between "the homosexual" (minority) and "the heterosexual" (majority) are fortified, in this century, by nonhomosexuals, and especially by men against men, that most saps one's ability to believe in "the homosexual" as an unproblematically discrete category of persons. (83)

I mean to apply the theoretical framework of Sedgwick's argument to Carolyn Chute's *Merry Men* in two ways. First, I will suggest that Chute employs the threat of homosexual possibility and the very tangible presence of homosexuality in the novel to explore a multitude of issues including gender enforcement, sanctioned sexuality, and the definitions of monogamy, adultery, rape, paternity and ultimately, love. Second, I will examine how the imposed silence Sedgwick discusses concerning homosexuality is analogous to the insistence on the absence of class in the United States, a repression that would be comic were its consequences not so dire.<sup>4</sup> Both Freud and Sedgwick call attention to how civilization entails the appropriation of the power of the individual for the power of the community. The limitation of sexual variation is prerequisite for this seizure. Individuals are thereby controlled by community censure, regardless of whether or not there are grounds for such prohibitions.

In a 1985 interview with Ellen Lesser, Carolyn Chute discusses the reception of her first novel, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*; the exchange has become a common feature of any Chute criticism. Lesser describes a *New York Times* review that (mis)reads an opening scene of the novel—where Earlene Bean's grandmother overreacts when she

---

<sup>4</sup>Noam Chomsky argues, "In the United States you're not allowed to talk about class differences . . . . We're all just equal. We're all Americans. We live in harmony. We all work together. Everything is great" (106).

discovers her widower son and his daughter sleep in the same bed--as a scene actually entailing incest. Chute responds: "I think a lot of people just assumed it was incest because these characters are poor" (173).<sup>5</sup> I would like to suggest that the *NYT* review informed Chute's decision to recreate the scenario in *Merry Men*. In this novel, Chute is attempting to illustrate and subvert a particularly insidious aspect of poverty--the fact that in our culture it is often equated with perversion and depravity. As one of the communist students astutely remarks in Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, "class define[s] sex for your family and you" (285). Chute here challenges our conception of turpitude, our expectations of where we will find it, and our willingness to detect it despite its absence. In fact, I would like to go so far as to argue, by means of the paradigm developed by Sedgwick, that Chute anticipates the reader's conventionalism regarding sexuality and uses the reader's faith in the tradition of the nuclear family to expose his or her tolerance of and complicity in class inequities. A novel that is predicated upon an allusion to Robin Hood and his band of merry men demands the reader expect an analysis of class relations; so too the reader can anticipate an exploration of sexuality and gender.

---

<sup>5</sup>Jeff Foxworthy, a comedian whose routine consists of a litany of stereotypes concerning southern poor whites, is famous for his refrain: "You might be a redneck if . . ." If the popularity of Foxworthy's humor is any indicator, Chute is indeed correct in her assessment of the current cultural animosity directed against the poor. Typical Foxworthy witticism includes the following that appeared in his 1999 day calendar: "You might be a redneck if . . . your favorite topless bar is the one where your daughters work." Poor white Americans, which the term "redneck" implies, come under attacks that would not be so openly leveled at any other cultural group. Defamation based on class continues to be accepted and even encouraged.

Voicing Censure: The "Civilizing" Influence of Community

According to neo-conservative Margaret Thatcher, "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. " While Thatcher's sentiment may be debatable, it sums up perfectly Chute's Egypt, Maine. Here the family constitutes society, and one is recognized as an individual only if one strays from the fold. Moody's Variety & Lunch, a local convenience store and snack shop owned and run by the Moody family, sits in the center of town. In *Merry Men*, individualism is suspect and nonconformity inspires fear and distrust. Moody's Variety & Lunch is a family-run business; it serves as the town hub, and the town is in essence one large extended family. One generation of Moodys after another learns to stock the shelves, run the cash register, and cook the take-out. So too, Egypt's generations gather at Moody's, the youngest one learning from older ones what behaviors and beliefs are acceptable to the community, and these are often expressed as prohibitions. While much of the talk at Moody's focuses on national politics, in fact the purpose of these discussions is not to change society but to regulate community conduct, to censure those who dissent.

Eventually all of Egypt enters Moody's to pick up last minute groceries, buy a quick breakfast on the way to work or a ready-made pizza for dinner on the way home, or post notices on the bulletin board announcing wood for sale, a lost pet, or any of the innumerable other messages people attempt to publicize within their community. The official process of posting such notices almost seems unnecessary, however, as everyone who opens the bell-laden door to Moody's comes under the scrutiny of its

host of daily gatherers; as a result, one's personal business becomes general knowledge quickly in Egypt. A dozen or so never-empty rocking chairs sit in front of the cash register counter, block the store aisles, and in general make it difficult for anyone to escape Moody's without being the topic of intrigue for at least a moment or two. There is a high turnover among Moody's rocking chair occupants, as few in Egypt have the luxury of passing the entire day visiting with townsfolk. Sometimes the chairs will be filled with women and their children, but more frequently the store is packed with townsmen, the older ones monopolizing the chairs and the conversation, the younger ones respectfully standing about and listening. As Juliet Mitchell has argued, "Cultural conservatism by *both sexes* compounds an economic system devised to make humanity prey on itself" (127). As with most community gossip, much of what is said at Moody's is riddled with hearsay and misconceptions, a misguided brand of populism if you will, but now and again there are gems of truth. It is difficult to say which does more harm.

In Moody's, the conversation often focuses on the imminent demise of the nation. One day the crowd might ponder the morality of poverty: "What does the Bible say about food stamps? That's as good as thieving', ain't it?" (450). Another day those seated in the rockers discuss the prevalence of drug use: "You'll wake up one morning with one of your kids or grandkids standin' over you with a knife, saying he wants your wallet" (331). And of course gender is always a popular topic: "Guys at Moody's say men use logic. Women are just emotion" (136). However, conversation is just as likely to focus on local people and events. It is in Moody's that Forest

Johnson, Jr. first learns that his father did not sire him, and that this is common knowledge to the town. All rocking chairs come to a halt in Moody's as the gatherers listen to Louise Moody deny credit to the out-of-work Brian Began, who is attempting to get franks and beans for his hungry family. When Anneka DiBias mounts a "white kerchief rebellion" protesting hunting laws, deer hunters congregate at Moody's and denounce her.

Moody's obviously is a barometer of the community's "mood," and that mood is expressed through voice. Here people joke, complain, ridicule, and gossip at each other's expense. Noise predominates Moodys—bells on the front door jingle and even the rocking chairs, painted in bright colors, are loud. Though Moody's customers are in general Egypt's poor, they staunchly support patriotism, capitalism and the notion of American individualism. It is as if they utilize voice and sound to muffle that which conflicts with this ideology. Suspicion sets the tone of conversation, the topic is always one of conflict, and each speaker presumes all others in the audience are adversaries. As Frank Lentricchia writes: "No hegemonic condition is fatally fixed because no hegemonic condition rests on natural or God-given authority, though it is one of the key strategies of hegemonic education to inculcate those very claims" (79). The speakers in Moody's cite fictive interpretations of the Bible, law, and science as valid evidence that supports their homespun accounts of the reality. They have a personal stake in the audience's accepting those accounts, and authority is often determined solely by the volume of the speaker. Moody's patrons actively participate in the hegemony that oppresses them; they quell dissenters by silencing them. As with



any family, Egypt has its designated black sheep, and they are frequently the topic of conversation in Moody's but never do they speak at this venue. They are also the central characters of the novel and its impetus, for *Merry Men* is a character driven text.<sup>6</sup>

Readers are introduced to Lloyd Barrington, Gwen Curry, and Forest Johnson, Jr., three of the novel's four main protagonists, as young people. We meet Lloyd when he is eight, Gwen when she is twelve, and Forest at high school age. Lloyd first enters Moody's to post a notice on the board; it is there that he is forever branded a thief. Gwen stumbles into Moody's years later to find the fateful advertisement that leads her to contact Lloyd. Forest learns in Moody's the portentous truth of his ancestry and the information changes him for always. The crowd at Moody's detrimentally impacts each and every one of them. Eventually these characters play crucial roles in each others' lives, but as children they are mere acquaintances, if even that. The three are separated by class. Lloyd's father, Edmund Barrington, is a manual laborer, and Lloyd grows up in a modest house that is home to many members of his extended family. Forest's father, F.D., has inherited a small backhoe business from his own father, and for a time it supports three generations nicely. Gwen's father, Dr. William Curry, is a physician,

---

<sup>6</sup>Chute provides the reader "A Partial Cast of Characters" at the beginning of the book and a directive of sorts: "There are many characters in the book, many more than identified here in this list. Only a few characters are central . . . Just get into the story, and the characters who are meant to be in the foreground will make themselves apparent" (xi). In effect, Chute is suggesting a method of reading her novel, instructing her reader to focus on characters and characterization. The structure of the novel, by the author's own admission, encourages a character-based reading.

and his income allows for many luxuries including private educations for his daughter and four sons. Lloyd, Forest and Gwen represent the lower, middle and upper classes respectively, and the antagonism that grows between them on one level is the result of class conflict. Gwen marries "well" and eventually is a resident of what has become one of Egypt's affluent communities. She buys a renovated farmhouse that just happens to be the home Lloyd's family loses to back taxes. Forest inherits his father's company but none of his father's charm or benevolence; he takes sadistic pleasure in manipulating his employees into accepting less than minimum wage, a scheme made possible because there are so few jobs available. Lloyd goes away to college, but unlike so many of the others who did the same, Lloyd returns to Egypt. He works with his father as a gravedigger, cemetery caretaker, and general handyman for the town.<sup>7</sup> He assumes the heroic role of Robin Hood to which the title alludes. As such, he robs from the rich--stealing everything from Murgatroids (garden gazing globes) to a lifetime's accumulation of tools from Forest--and gives to Egypt's poor. Eventually, Lloyd undertakes the task of educating Gwen about those whose poverty make her life of luxury possible. Lloyd's efforts to seek retribution for the poor include some very bizarre antics meant to terrorize the wealthy. Instead of the morning paper, they wake up to uncanny full-sized replicas of themselves in caskets he has created and stealthfully placed in their yards. This culminates in the horrific final scene of the

---

<sup>7</sup>Possibly Chute had in mind these words from *The Communist Manifesto*: "The development of modern industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own gravediggers" (22).

novel where Gwen, who has fallen in love with this champion of the people, arises in the morning not to find a fabricated replica of herself in a casket but the remains of her exhumed father, casket and all. One critic has argued that Lloyd's "heroism, however well-informed and -intended, amounts to little more than housebreaking and guerrilla theatre, which ends confusingly and does nothing to slow the loss of farmland to 'the corporate regime'" (Farris, 43). The novel, however, cannot be read as simply a morality tale where wealth is equated with depravity and poverty with integrity, where capitalism is condemned and communalism is exalted. Particularly close attention must be paid to the fact that the dynamics that play out between characters are caused not simply by issues related to class but also to those regarding lineage, regarding family, regarding community. Much of the novel's plot hinges on characters' interrelatedness: "Everyone in this town is so related . . . that it . . . just all . . . crisscrosses" (588). The tragedy that befalls them is meant not only as a critique of capitalism but also as an indicator pointing to the dangers inherent in the fetishization of the nuclear family.

The interrelatedness of Gwen, Lloyd and Forest, as we shall see, illuminates conflicts based upon lineage and sexuality. Through the character of Anneka DiBias, Chute traces the path whereby individuals are encouraged to marry and consequently are thereby subdued. Chute here explores the false promise of marriage and procreation in particular. Anneka belongs to the generation following our three other protagonists. She is Lloyd Barrington's niece, the child of his wife's sister. Anneka marries Carroll Plummer, Lloyd's cousin and a man who is her parents' age. At a very young age, Anneka is astutely aware of class inequities, and she continually comes in

conflict with what Althusser calls the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA)—in her case the law, education, and institutionalized bureaucracy, in particular. She organizes demonstrations, writes letters to her representatives, and even creates a board game, a bleak version of Monopoly where combinations of "emergency expense cards" and "outlawed feelings cards" eventually land all players in jail. Yet Anneka, rabble rouser that she is, is enamored of marriage. In fact, when asked about her goals in life, she proudly announces: "I want to be a farmer's wife" (442). Anneka's story is especially demoralizing, for despite her rebelliousness, she is infatuated by the romance of the nuclear family, and the reader is lead to hope that she may find peace through love. Anneka's life intertwines with Gwen, Forest and Lloyd's, and her final state of desolation seems ultimately to be the impetus for Lloyd's decision to destroy rather than to embrace Gwen. The family Anneka begins bridges from Lloyd's generation to the next, and her fate emphasizes the repetitiousness of the cycle of poverty, the inability of even the most brave and ingenious to escape. Likewise, Chute here suggests that the blind faith in progress so inherent in the ideal of American individualism is actually a form of self-victimization.

#### Gender Enforcement and the Channeling of Sexuality

Lloyd Barrington is the hero of *Merry Men*, and he is one of civilization's discontents. He stages a battle against capitalism, against the economic system that enslaves him and the people for whom he cares. For this, many in his community distrust him, suspect him of everything from espionage to treason to indolence: "Some say there's something about the guy that's a little supernatural. But at Moody's Variety

& Lunch the wise men say matter-of-factly, 'Bullshit. Ain't nuthin' about it supernatural.' What Lloyd Barrington is, they say, 'is what you call *a bum*'" (267 italics hers). Lloyd's efforts are met with resistance from his community, for while the community is in effect being ravaged by the economic system, it nevertheless defines itself by its caliber of civilization, by its commitment to and observance of social praxes that perpetuate that system. As Eagleton explains, "A mode of domination is generally legitimated when those subjected to it come to judge their own behavior by the criteria of their rulers" (55). In keeping with their commitment to the "criteria of their rulers," the community accuses Lloyd of treachery against it, and it is observant. Lloyd *is* a spy; he spies on the wealthier members of the community, looking for an opportunity to disturb their contentedness. Lloyd *is* a traitor: he betrays his brother, Forest, betrays his love, Gwen; he betrays the people who have a vested interest in the perpetuation of capitalism. Lloyd *is* a vagrant: he moves from home to home, living nowhere in particular, making himself elusive to both the state authorities and the authority figures of the community. Lloyd makes himself invulnerable to nearly all the sources by which the community checks conduct, and so the community can only censure him for his activities. But Lloyd cannot escape his sexual instincts, and it is thereby that he is eventually subdued. As we shall observe, Lloyd is punished for any gender or sexual ambiguity he may express. His sexuality is channeled into the one sanctioned form, monogamous heterosexuality within marriage, and then this sexual object, his wife, is denied him.

Because Lloyd is a mythic Robin Hood figure, a champion of the people, much of his action and thought in the story concerns the ethics and the social affects of capitalism. He has a master's degree in Sociology and majored in Social Welfare for his B.A. His home is piled high with his reading material—newspapers, newsletters, journals, and books with titles like *America's Agriculture as a Culture: What Went Wrong?* He carefully tends the town's graves, even those out of reach and long forgotten. On the porches of those in Egypt who are in dire need, anonymously he leaves bags of groceries, jars of money, poems, and veterans' grave flags. "Your youngest boy might like the one on a stick to play with," he writes. "The rest . . . use them as rags" (266). Such a suggestion would be akin to treason to the crowd at Moody's. Few people understand Lloyd, but his friends are loyal. For instance, there is David Moody, a preacher without a congregation who talks in parables, and David Turnbull, a biker who has taught his dog to growl when Republicans are mentioned. Clearly the character of Lloyd Barrington is meant to be appreciated for his crusade against the forces of capitalism. He is also the character through which Chute explores gender enforcement, heterosexism, the morality of monogamy and adultery, the burdens and rewards of familial responsibility, and in essence, how sexuality is related to class.

As a child, Lloyd is a compassionate and gentle boy who writes poetry, plants saplings, worries about the inhumane treatment of animals, and visits housebound elderly neighbors with his uncle. Lloyd's mother passes away from cancer shortly before the novel opens, leaving behind a household filled only with men--Lloyd's

uncles, grandfathers, the occasional cousin or two, and the man he worships, his father Edmund Barrington. These are big, strong, hard-working men: "All the unks, Gramp B., and Gramp Fogg, and Edmund putting in such long days. Work. Work. Work. Work. Cattle, woods, sawmill, cemeteries . . . all the long days. Weekends as well "

(17). Lloyd's father is notorious in the town for his adultery, rumored to have begun even before his ill wife passed away. Edmund's passion, however, seems to bring him little pleasure. Instead, he appears almost to be on a suicide mission, one that consists of close calls and violent confrontations with Egypt's cuckolded husbands. The assaults Edmund routinely suffers as a result of his exploits are the outcome of men protecting their sexual possessions and defending their honor, and Edmund accepts the beatings because he believes they are deserved. In fact, he is punished whether or not the husbands learn the truth, often retching on the way home. "What means does civilization employ in order to inhibit the aggressiveness which opposes it, to make it harmless, to get rid of it, perhaps?" Freud asks. "His aggressiveness is introjected, internalized; it is, in point of fact, sent back to where it came from--that is, it is directed towards his own ego" (123). Edmund effectively learns to loath himself, but despite this he encourages Lloyd by example to emulate this same behavior. Edmund regularly utilizes Lloyd as a lookout during his clandestine meetings, leaving Lloyd outside in the vehicle with instructions to honk if he spots the husband coming home. Whereas some consider his taking Lloyd along exploitive, in Edmund's mind it is a masculine activity that is shameful but natural all the same. A unique intimacy grows between father and son as a result of this knowledge and complicity, "the pride in and fear of

these things that he knows, their confidences, their trust" (35). One facet of this intimacy is that since his mother's death, "Lloyd takes up his mother's side of the bed nowadays" (17).

Into this environment Chute places "Unk Walty," an uncle on Lloyd's mother's side who runs the Barrington household. Like all of the other men in the house, Unk Walty "has an inherited muscularity, the small-waisted, tensed-with-power look of a weightlifter" (11), but he is also an effeminate man, and the story at first hints and then later confirms that he is gay. Unk Walty serves as a role model different from Lloyd's father, coaching the serious child in playfulness, showing pride in his poetry, teaching him to care for others. Immediately there is friction established between Walt and Edmund's parental patterns, and we are led to believe that the basis of this discord rests in the innate contrast between their sexualities. This is perhaps most dramatically illustrated in the conflict that ensues between the two over the issue of suitable fantasy for male children and adults. Chute begins with the small detail of what supposedly is and is not appropriate for a male child's game of make believe, then develops it into the conundrum of enforced masculinity. The specter of gender-appropriate behavior plagues Lloyd throughout his life and later accounts in part for his isolation from the community.

After Lloyd posts fliers around town offering the services of "Super Tree Man," a hero who brings bring trees to the "shadeless," Unk Walty sews Lloyd an outfit for the part--green mask, polo shirt with STM stitched across the chest, bikini bathing



trunks over green tights. Edmund is infuriated to learn Lloyd has been roaming the town's streets in the costume and says:

"Let me get this straight, Lloyd. You have been running around in public with that rig on?". . . Edmund's lip curls. He tosses the towel into the dish drainer, then walks his hunched bulllike walk to a chair, jerks it out from the table, sits.

Lloyd's cheeks show his shame.

Walty says, "Ed, he's only a child. Only a little boy." (24-5)

Edmund's reaction to Lloyd's Super Tree Man costume reflects his anxiety and fear regarding his son's sexuality, or more accurately Lloyd's sexuality as it may be *perceived* by the community. The issue is exacerbated by the fact that the outfit is Walty's creation, a man whose homosexuality is willfully ignored by the family. It is not that Edmund disapproves of boys playing make believe in general. In fact, at a later date when Lloyd is dressed as a pirate, he notices: "Being a pirate, it's okay with his father. When his father sees him striding around with his sword and pirate hat, it's okay. Once Edmund even said, 'Yo mates.' Also his father doesn't mind his Civil War kepi or the World War II helmet or the Davy Crockett hat or the cardboard king crown " (46). Edmund approves of Lloyd pretending, as long as he assumes the role of very masculine characters--a pirate, a soldier, a king. All of these characters are similar in that they reflect masculinity that suggests oppression and violence: a pirate steals, a soldier kills, a king rules. In contrast, a superhero protects. Even though the attire is clearly based upon a masculine model, Superman, the STM costume is tight-fitted, colorful, and feminine in its resemblance to the attire a dancer wears. The other outfits consist of hats worn regularly by men only, and they are accessorized by weapons. In

fact, Lloyd continues his STM heroics, but he does so under the cover of night, sneaking out when his father and the others are asleep. He has effectively internalized the lessons his father has to teach him, accomplishing in secret what is not socially acceptable.

The issue of gender appropriate behavior is further complicated when Walty shows a proclivity for dressing up and shares this secret with Lloyd. At one point he dons cowboy attire:

Every inch of him is pure white. White ten-gallon hat. White shirt with tassels long as shoestrings so pretty they make watery ripples spilling from the V of the chest . . .

Lloyd is speechless, blinking.

Unk Walty turns around once, then strikes a pose. "Well! What do you think?"

"Neat!" chirps Lloyd, stepping closer. . . .

"I've always wanted to be a cowboy that sings . . . if I could sing," Walty admits.

"You could *save* people," Lloyd says.

"Why, of course!" Unk Walty agrees.

"And ladies would love you."

"Everybody would love me. Wherever I'd go, people would half faint and say, 'MY GAWD!!! It can't BEEEEEE!!! It's WALT FOGG!!! I can't believe my EYES!!!' They'd be after me with autographs books. Throwing me kisses." He signs, overwhelmed.

Would you ride bulls?"

"NEVER!!!"

Lloyd fingers the tassels that are slippery. They squiggle out through his fingers. "Come down and show Gramp Fog."

Unk Walty exaggerates holding the door shut against the rest of the household, then says with sorrow, "None of them would understand. They are all so . . . so . . ." He sighs. "so . . . well, you know, . . . so *serious*."

Lloyd rolls his eyes toward the door. "I know." (28-9)

All of what has come to be the cultural signifiers of male homosexuality, be they stereotypical or not, are here. Walt is "vamping," dressing in flamboyant costume,

parading for an audience, and envisioning being adored. Lloyd's point that ladies would love him is not of interest to Walt. He rejects the idea of taming or controlling the wild, massive bull, a fantasy presumably only of "masculine," heterosexual cowboys (a point reiterated through the novel via the hunting imagery). His fantasy is carried out behind a closed door, away from the rest of the men, "in the closet." Only Lloyd can appreciate his uncle's imaginative behavior, perhaps because it is similar to his own childlike play rather than what is deemed the "serious" behavior of heterosexual males. Young boys are allowed to play dress up, assuming they choose appropriately masculine roles. An adult male who enjoys dressing up, even as a masculine persona such as the cowboy, is outside the acceptable norm. The reader is first led to agree with Walty, believing Lloyd is "just a boy" who should not be shamed by his father for healthy, playful behavior, particularly a father who uses the son as sentinel while he commits adultery. But Walty's behavior is in some ways the logical progression of the boy's. It is the very thing Edmund fears, and it likewise excites any homophobic anxieties the reader may hold. Concern over gender specific clothing, toys, games, and fantasy for children is a familiar issue, and Chute plays upon it to question our sense of gender propriety. Indeed, Edmund's promiscuity might be considered one end of the spectrum of male behavior and Walty's role playing the other. The fact that they are each seemingly carried out in secret emphasizes how homosexuality is equated with adultery or prohibited heterosexuality—both illicit, both forbidden. Likewise it illustrates how civilization effectively renders invisible that which is unacceptable yet uncontrollable. As we shall see in a moment, however,

Chute will complicate the division even of monogamy and adultery and question the legitimacy of these designations.

The Barrington household itself, however, excites our suspicions regarding homosexual possibility. It is an all-male household; the men have "bodies of the gods" (11-12). Young male cousins occasionally join their ranks: "Such a spectacle these Plummer boys . . . . Easy muscularity . . . . At peace with their bodies" (30). Edmund sleeps with his young son: "Lloyd knows his father's silence. The silence that isn't sleep" (17). Their heterosexuality, then, is established by the presence of Unk Walty, by the ways in which they differ from him. Indeed, "Sexual orthodoxy is not self-contained but dualistic, a matter of relations" (Jehlen 269). All but Walty are employed out in the community; Walty tends the house. They labor and toil with large machinery; Walty cooks the food and cleans the ice box: "There's something about Unk Walty that makes it clear that the ice is the boss, Unk Walty the slave" (12). Unk Roger and Edmund are men of few words, impatient with Lloyd's need for attention, and quick to anger. Walty dotes on Lloyd and encourages him to be imaginative and artistic. This endless catalog of binaries allows the reader to interpret with confidence that the remaining men in the household are heterosexual specifically because they behave differently from Walty. In fact, we recognize it as the sanctioned male/female dichotomy. Walty appears to have assumed the traditionally female household and caretaker duties. When he creates lifelike full-sized human paper-mache figures--replicas of the various towns women Edmund had taken as lovers--dresses them elaborately, and poses them throughout the parlor, he shoulders another role

traditionally relegated to women: custodian of morality. Walt's creations are a reproach to Edmund for his immoral behavior, and they hinder the family from deliberately ignoring his activity. The replicas condemn Edmund for his dishonesty and deception; moreover, they expose Edmund's hypocrisy--how he can simultaneously be so apprehensive about what his neighbors may think or say about his son's sexuality (and by implication, Walty's) and so impervious to what is said of his own.

Unk Walty is the embodiment of domesticity and conventionality in the family. The novel champions the parental skills of a homosexual uncle, a favorite target for homophobia and pedophilia anxieties in our culture, over a biological father. In addition, Walty unmasks what Edmund and the others would like to ignore: the expectation of an adherence to sexual prescription (homophobia) and simultaneous violation of another related precept (adultery). Edmund is seemingly judged on moral grounds alone, but again such moral grounds are the very principles Chute wishes to challenge. She critiques the traditional nuclear family pattern championed as the best environment for children, and in this case substitutes an all-male household. She accomplishes this without exploiting the violent father prototype; Edmund is a loving father. Chute illustrates the process (enforced silence) whereby children are acculturated to manifest heterosexuality, and she offers a resolution to such indoctrination (compelling acknowledgment). Lloyd will take these lessons to heart, but they will manifest themselves in class conflicts instead of gender struggles.

Though Lloyd goes away to school, he returns home to work beside his father and marry a hometown girl, Sherry Soule. Characterized as the oldest, fiercest, and

most intimidating member of the tribe of beautiful, bossy Soule sisters, "Sherry knew the secret of the loaded pantry is more tender than any silly whispered word of love" (210). The most defiant of the Soule sisters, Sherry is self-confident enough to survive her family's criticisms and complaints about her husband. Raised by men, Lloyd is shy and awkward around this horde of close-knit, assertive women. In turn, the Soules are baffled by his college degree, his tendency to blurt out lines of poetry when they make him nervous, but most of all by "Lloyd's hair the trial of the family, the worst thing to happen . . . until what happened to Sherry" (190). Lloyd's long hair is the talk of the town: "Is that what college does for you? Gives you hair?" (189). In fact, Lloyd's own father has not spoken to his son or let him into the house, "Not since his 'goddam-commie-hippie-can't-tell-the-boys-from-the-girls look'" (217). Edmund, like the rest of the community, equates gender infraction with treason, gender conformity with patriotism. It is Sherry's own hair, in a way, that finally takes some of the attention and criticism away from Lloyd's. She undergoes surgery to have a tumor removed from her brain; consequently, her mind is as ravaged as her head is bald: "Sherry's head . . . not so blue-white and steely a head now as it was right after the surgery, and yet . . . her hair . . . it had been her glory once" (210). Though Lloyd's incapacitated bride seems still to long for her husband, calling out the sound "Lloy" repeatedly, the Soule family takes this opportunity to bring her back into their ranks. It is now Sherry's father that "carries Sherry like a bride" (192), and her wedding ring is taken from her under the auspices that she might hurt herself with it: "What would Sherry need a wedding ring for? Anyone would wonder" (227). The sisters express apprehension when Lloyd

even visits Sherry's bedside and tell him: "Nobody's really expecting you to have to help out" (194). Lloyd's children, too, are subsumed into the Soule household: "Lloyd knows his babies are Soule babies now. Sage and Leighlah. At home here now. Swallowed. Gone" (192). Lloyd's father-in-law, Merlin, practically refuses to acknowledge Lloyd is their father: "Dad says don't let Lloyd around these kids unless he's around to keep an eye on things" (219). Lloyd rightly recognizes that there is "Something between Merlin and Lloyd that must be owned. And Merlin now owns it. Owns the air around Sherry" (190).

While the Soules seemingly hold their responsibility to Sherry in high regard, in fact the burden of it falls on one of the youngest, Cassandra. The sisters routinely gang up on her, insisting not only that Cassandra continuously watch Sherry during waking hours, but sleep with her in the bed at night. When Sherry turns up pregnant again, clearly the result of secretive visits from Lloyd, the Soules are enraged as much by his audacity in refusing to concede their renewed ownership of Sherry as by the thought of their incapacitated daughter having sex. "Goddam sneak. Nothing worse than a sneak," one of the brother-in-laws says as he, Merlin Soule and others beat Lloyd. Lloyd is finally allowed back into his own father's house when he shows up nearly dead as a result of the flogging. Edmund Barrington, familiar with the condition, assumes Lloyd has taken after himself and "been cozyin' up to somebody's woman," but Lloyd corrects him: "I got this way by being faithful" (231). When Lloyd begins to recover he decides to cut his hair. "I want to be just a nice plain guy," he says.

Lloyd, the boy grown to be a man, does not fit Egypt's preconceived notions of gender and class. Few understand why a college-educated man would return to Egypt to work as a handyman rather than attempt to escape his class. Almost all are suspicious of him due to his appearance. It is appropriate that the town cannot get it straight whether Lloyd majored in socialism or sociology in college. The Soule family denies Lloyd any right to his wife and children and erases all evidence of Lloyd's presence in Sherry's life. While the Soules are devastated by what is basically the loss of a favorite daughter, they seem almost to prefer the incapacitated Sherry to the willful one who married the town miscreant. Lloyd's dissimilarity, symbolized by his long hair, centers around rigidly enforced gender roles in the novel. Men in the community take pleasure in hunting, sports, competition; none of these things interest Lloyd. In fact, like his Unk Walty, Lloyd assumes a more traditionally feminine role as a caretaker, tending to the graves of the dead and the needs of the living. The Soules are suspicious and resentful of Lloyd's inability and unwillingness to behave in a "manly" way. They relish the opportunity to repudiate Lloyd's role as a husband and father, his right to be the patriarch of a nuclear family. They beat him when he refuses to relinquish that role, enforcing with violence what was could not be imposed through condemnation. Lloyd obeyingly cuts his hair. The beating reaffirms Lloyd's masculinity for his father. Edmund welcomes his son, for Lloyd has seemingly followed in his father's footsteps in that he has confirmed his heterosexuality by impregnating his wife and validated his manhood by enduring the violence that results. The fact that Edmund was punished for his adultery and Lloyd is for remaining



monogamous emphasizes the hypocrisy of what is deemed impermissible in the paradigm of the nuclear family. The Soules deliberate refusal to recognize Lloyd's right to care for his family challenges our faith in the strength and virtue of family custom.

Interestingly enough, the overabundance of women in the Soule family likens them to the Barrington household of all males, and the image of a child sleeping with a same-sex family member is repeated here. Similar to the men in Lloyd's family, who are characterized as ideal specimens of physical masculinity, the Soule sisters are enticingly beautiful and abundantly fertile--femininity personified. The men in Lloyd's family are reserved and stoic. The Soule women are tyrannical. The Soules' heterosexuality is confirmed in the conventional manner, by their fertility and eagerness to marry: "the Soule sisters, the married ones and the unmarried ones and the soon-to-be ready ones, Soules forever, working together, mobilized . . . the true GANG" (208). Both families are amoebic in that the members behave so similarly they are indistinguishable, interchangeable.<sup>8</sup> Likened to a gang, this extended Soule family is depicted as a misdirected mob, and by implication so is the nuclear family in general. Lloyd finds himself castigated by both families and by both genders for his failure to conform to a prescribed gender role. He is accused of and battered for being a "sneak" by the Soules, an admonishment for covert sexual activity that is reminiscent of gay

---

<sup>8</sup>Hannah Arendt theorizes that "*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together" (44).

bashing. He is banished from the company of family for nonconformity, and for the bulk of the novel he is alone. The Soules, a cabal related by blood, illustrate how xenophobia is first cultivated from within the family. They illuminate the process whereby family becomes a force for hegemony, a protector of the status quo. In ostracizing Lloyd, they exemplify how taboos in the nuclear family against all but the most rigidly defined gender roles restrict unconventional sexual activity and thwart nonconformity.

### Espousing Class: The (Dis)Agreeable Solution

At the novel's conclusion, when Gwen Curry Doyle suffers a breakdown at the hands of Lloyd Barrington, the reader is unable to celebrate this final, devastatingly triumphant retribution against capitalism and the tradition of the nuclear family. In part, it is because the novel lends credence to the possibility of a relationship between Lloyd and Gwen that might have mended much that was awry in the community. More specifically, though, Chute has humanized the force of capitalism in the person of Gwen Doyle and encouraged us to sympathize with her. Chute names capitalism as the evil enemy, then gives that enemy a recognizable face and personable countenance knowing the reader will be unable wholly to dislike her. Chute entices the reader with the scenario where Gwen's money and her union with Lloyd might provide the necessary relief to the Egypt community, but in the end refuses to allow for such an over-simplified solution. Chute plays upon the reader's inclination to believe that love can fix what an inequitable economic system has destroyed, that given the opportunity

to simply recognize the cost of the system in human lives, some capitalists would gladly give up their wealth and power to rectify the situation.

Like Lloyd, Gwen loses a parent in childhood. She is twelve years old when her father dies. For some time, Gwen is convinced that her mother poisoned him, and the reader is never thoroughly persuaded otherwise. Gwen doubts her ability to assess reality, her capacity to remember clearly. Qualifications, redirection, and hesitancy distinguish her narrative; throughout she questions rather than speaks. Instead of a voice, Gwen has "A memory. Maybe it's not a memory to be counted on. Sometimes you can't trust memory. It's a thing that changes, one thing stepping out of another" (90). Gwen's schizoid disposition seems instigated by her mother. At best, Phoebe Curry, Gwen's mother, is contriving, deceptive, self-involved and prone to dramatics; at worst she is cruel and psychotic. She seems to be particularly fond of making sport of her husband and daughter, usually inducing her sons to join along. With the boys she is inclined to engage in horseplay that has sexual undertones, playing the coquette one moment and the martyr the next. Her odd behavior includes everything from the slightly inappropriate to the downright cruel. She roughhouses with her grandchildren, engaging them in a water fight that ends with her choking them with water from the gardenhose. She induces Gwen, her daughter grown wary of her, to confide the fact that she has begun menstruating, then tortures the girl by affecting nausea and crying out that something stinks every time Gwen comes near.

Phoebe and Dr. William Doyle have a curious relationship. Unlike William, who escaped his lower-class background via education, Phoebe comes from money and

cultivates those pretensions. Gwen's father is at his office six days a week doing "his good work, his 'sainted work' as Phoebe, her mother, always calls it . . . his 'gift to humanity' as Phoebe also always calls it" (73). Work in general would be an altruistic act to Phoebe's mind, as she can survive and even thrive without expending labor. Phoebe does not have a job, hates to cook, leaves the cleaning to the housekeeper, and prefers to spend time in her room supposedly reading. She amuses herself by planning silly yet mean-spirited practical jokes: "William would whip off the lid of the silver server and there was a roll of toilet paper. Or a light bulb. Or B&M Baked Beans still in the can. . . . 'Fell for that one!' Phoebe would chortle, looking directly through her cigarette smoke at William and around at each howling son" (82). Phoebe continually ignores, interrupts, or ridicules William, and this has the effect of deterring him from even speaking. Feeling bad for her father once in particular, Gwen asked him a question about medicine, hoping to distract him from Phoebe's ruthlessness: "Phoebe guffawed. 'Are you falling for that, Will!! The wily ways of a girlie-girlie trying to lure a man.' He said nothing to this, lowed his eyes to his plate . . . and had no answer for Gwen" (94). Gwen's memories are filled with similar incidents of her mother's alienating behaviors, many of which were targeted at her. Once Phoebe is laughing and clapping, encouraging Gwen's twin, Dennis, to run around the house dancing nude when the two were five-years-old at most. Gwen undresses and joins in yelling, "Mother! See!" to which: "Phoebe's voice is a thick low warning to Gwen. 'Don't you *ever* let me see you do that" (90-1, *italics hers*). Another time the three are in the den and Dennis asks why dogs hump people's legs: "With tinkly girlish giggles, Phoebe

bent to whisper the details into the curved foreverness of Dennis's ear. Dennis howled as though stung. Then he whispered up into his mother's ear" (95).

Phoebe's antics are designed to isolate and humiliate her husband and daughter. She treats her Gwen as if she were superfluous, the incidental twin of a valuable son. She brandishes her own sexuality as a tool to manipulate her sons into conspiring with her and in turn exaggerates her daughter's sexual mischievousness in an effort to debase her. She has no affection for or interest in her grandchildren. In fact, Phoebe Curry appears to be emotionally detached from everyone around her. She is an "anti-mother" who is not merely idle and indifferent to the needs of her family but thrives upon what anguish and degradation she can cause. Gwen and her mother are entangled in a version of the Electra Complex, complete with sexual competitiveness and the death of Gwen's father. Upon William's death, their contest takes a new direction.

Throughout the novel Phoebe is described in sensual terms: "The back of her neck is sweet like a girl's" (77). After her husband's death, however, she becomes ultra-impetuous and incredibly licentious. She begins taking the neighborhood kids out regularly for joyrides: "Phoebe struts right up to one of the windows. From the back, in her tight white pants and special wiggle, anyone's guess would be Marilyn Monroe" (115). Her sons begin to drift away from the family, a combination of their aging and their mother's growing volatility. At one point Dennis describes his mother as "a regular bucking young filly" (120) as the result of her capers. Another time, on one of the few occasions when Dennis joins his mother in her treks, she attracts the attention of a group of men drinking beers after work by coming up on them at dusk

and snapping their picture: "'You whore.' Dennis says this very low. But clear" (121). Unlike the boys, Gwen welcomes Phoebe's escalating mania, in part because she is no longer her mother's mark, in part because she desperately covets her mother's approval. Gwen views it as opportunity finally to be a favored child and cautiously joins Phoebe on the rides. Gwen hoards the cigarettes her mother doles out to her daughter and all other passengers and finds Phoebe's impish dares irresistible. As long as William was alive, Phoebe's sons had free reign to engage in sexual play with their mother, for the presence of their father masked any incestuous overtones. Gwen's presence, because she shares her mother's gender, serves as competition to Phoebe; Gwen likewise has the potential to expose her mother's behavior for what it is, for their shared gender implies shared sexual knowledge. When William dies the alliances shift, for Phoebe's sexuality now threatens her sons' sense of their mother's propriety but liberates Gwen. No longer needing to prevent her daughter from competing with her for William, Phoebe is free to serve as a model of female sexuality for Gwen. All these high jinks presumably come to an end when Phoebe's mother intervenes and moves her daughter and grandchildren from Maine to Connecticut, thereby commandeering the role of mother in this family. Interestingly enough, Phoebe's husband and children are mere pawns in her manipulations; it is her own mother who is able to intercede and exercise dominion over this unruly, impetuous "child."

After a sojourn of nearly 25 years, Gwen Curry Doyle returns to the community of Egypt, Maine an incredibly wealthy widow. She is an adult woman ducking her

mother's calls as any number of daughters might, but the history behind this relationship is complicated as the well reader knows. Gwen recently lost her husband:

Earl Doyle who is all. Mr. Diversity. Mr. Chairman of *every* board. Auto. Textiles. Broadcasting. Publishing. Energy. Pharmaceuticals. Film. Insurance. Agribusiness. Ice Cream. And a *very* concentrated interest in politics and education. Seeming serene, but really on constant alert, braced, ready, fit, fittest. The true conquistador. (275)

Gwen had been working as a newspaper photographer at one of Earl's papers when they met. She left her work when she became his third wife. Gwen's marriage allows her the time to transform her craft into art, her husband's wealth essentially eliminating the use-value of her labor. As Shulamith Firestone points out, though, "In addition to serving as a symbol of male luxury, women's increasing idleness under advancing industrialism presents a practical problem: female discontent has to be eased to keep it from igniting" (166). In Gwen's case, she spends her days alternately being a trophy wife, appearing at Earl's side for all of his social obligations, and anesthetizing herself through alcohol, therapy, and her photography. The truth of her life is that Gwen secretly fears and distrusts her husband, a man who wields so much power, "he scorn[s] even world and American history as 'trivia'" (549). Yet, Gwen cannot help enjoying the leisure Earl's riches and power afford her. Like her mother, Gwen has parlayed marriage into a means to idleness. Earl's sudden death (reminiscent of William's) leaves Gwen a magnate. Uncomfortable with that role, Gwen retreats to her hometown of Egypt and a newly-purchased house she has had renovated into an artist studio. Gwen's conflicts with her mother are reproduced in her marriage; disdain and ambivalence continue to captivate her attention. This is likely the basis of her

attraction to Lloyd. When she determines her money cannot purchase his respect and admiration, she pursues him with a vengeance.

Despite their class differences, Gwen and Lloyd seem a perfect match in more ways than one, and all correlate to family dynamics. At a young age both Gwen and Lloyd lose parents of the opposite sex, and they both likewise prematurely lose their partners in marriage to death. Their childhoods were dominated by licentious parents of their same sex. Similar to Edmund Barrington, Phoebe Curry was carnal, sly, compulsive and uncontrollable, an inappropriate parental figure by cultural standards. Though they resist wholeheartedly, both Lloyd and Gwen seem doomed in ways to emulate these parents. Both Gwen and Lloyd are childless—Gwen because she has no children and Lloyd because the Soules absconded with his. They are both isolated from the community, a fact symbolized by their having alternately resided in the same dwelling. In fact, Gwen's childhood, like Lloyd's, is dominated by imposed silences. The version of the Electra complex which Gwen endured was rife with secrecy and silence. Much of Gwen's childhood was spent in her room in self-isolation, the family's voices reaching her through a floor vent. Phoebe's practical jokes relied most often on everyone's willingness to keep quiet regarding the trick that was about to be played. Dr. William Doyle's foray into the upper class in some measure via his wife who already belonged seems to have been purchased with his patience and tolerance, his willingness not to speak of or protest against his wife's unpredictable and eccentric behavior. Eventually, he is silenced completely through premature death. As the result of growing up in such a hostile atmosphere, Gwen continually questions her memories



and her sense of reality. Gwen oscillates between alliances to class, to family, and to self. Likewise, plagued by the chimera of his community's beliefs and the barbarous reality that escapes them, Lloyd is burdened by self-doubt. Gwen is seemingly the force that could rectify Egypt's financial problems. She is uneasy about her incredible wealth, and she is inexplicably drawn to the unusual man she hires to deliver firewood. A union between Lloyd and Gwen seems to hold the promise of financial relief for the people Lloyd so loves, Egypt's poor. As well, these two forlorn and confused individuals appear to be each other's emotional savior.

The possibility of Gwen and Lloyd's union speaks to the reader's sense of justice and rectification.<sup>9</sup> Gwen's riches, inherited from a capitalist who is responsible in part for the region's economic decline, and Lloyd's principles might be unified to solve the problem of poverty in the region. The two alternately entice and scorn one another, a power struggle both within their relationship and between the classes they represent. Gwen invites Lloyd to a dinner party at her home where all the other guests are as wealthy and self-indulgent as she; Lloyd reciprocates by taking Gwen on a round of visits that include the destitute inhabitants of Miracle City. Both are affronted by the arrogance and superiority the other assumes while being a guide to his or her world, but they seem to bridge the abyss finally when Lloyd takes Gwen to meet his Unk Walty. The scene is one of domestic bliss unlike any either has experienced in their childhood.

---

<sup>9</sup>Butler would disagree. She sees in the class dynamics that play out here a similarity to *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and writes, "but Chute makes us know that *this* Mellors is not free for the taking" (57).

Walty is busy baking "Amish Friendship Bread." His companion, Morelli, works on the kitchen sink. Walty rarely leaves his apartment these days, but Morelli works, "runs all the errands and makes family appearances, and still squeezes time in for Walty" (662). During the visit Walty complains about being overwhelmed by the sourdough starter, which continues to reproduce itself. Morelli tells Walty, "Don't be a slave to bread dough" (663), a comment reminiscent of Walty's "slavery" to the ice. Walty refuses to discard it, though, because in his mind that would be killing it. Walty and Gwen take to one another. Gwen admires Walty's tailoring, the gowns that hang around Walty's apartment; she teases information about Lloyd out of Walty. Walty gently chastises Lloyd for not meeting his potential and brags of Lloyd's accomplishments to Gwen. He admires Gwen's beauty, compares her to Lloyd's mother, and gives her sourdough starter. Gwen is charmed, and as she steps out of the room she reflects upon how surprised she is to learn "how kindly and classy Walt Fogg turned out to be" (667).

The domestic tranquility here appeals not only to Gwen but to the reader as well. Walty and Morelli's home mirrors the nuclear family environment. Walty is sewing and baking, Morelli is doing home repairs. Although they chide one another, the two genuinely care for each other. Walty's generosity towards Gwen and concern for Lloyd fulfills traditional expectations of parental behavior. The reader recalls Walty's championing of Lloyd as a child and remembers Walty as a father figure. Walty's inability to discard even bread dough speaks to his simple kindness and frugality. Gwen and Lloyd warm to each other in these surroundings, for they seem to

provide the ideal intersection of Lloyd's working class background and Gwen's leisure class expectations. All of these elements work together to seduce the reader into investing hope in the possibility of an ingenious resolution. Walt's reappearance here functions similarly to the way his presence did in depictions of Lloyd's childhood household. This heart-warming home contrasts starkly to Gwen's memories of her own childhood. Moreover, Walty's amicability towards and fondness for Gwen are the antithesis of Gwen's experience with her mother (as were Lloyd's with Unk Walty and Edmund). Thus Walty's domestic homosexuality serves as a preferable alternative to the hostile heterosexuality Gwen knew a girl. The next brief chapter, one that is only seven sentences long and takes place while Gwen is out of the room, comes then as quite a shock: "Walt's voice goes deep and ugly. He leans onto the back of Lloyd's chair. "What's the matter with you, Lloyd? Our fearless fox. Can't you make up your mind when to strike? You going to drag this on forever with her? Like a crucifixion?" (667). Chute baits the reader (not to mention Gwen) into embracing a simplified caricature of the "motherly" homosexual male who will prompt his boy into marrying the rich girl and living happily ever after. She then unveils Walty's surprising complicity in Lloyd's undertaking and the pleasure he obtains from Lloyd's efforts to alarm the wealthy, to dismantle their serene assurance in the rightness of the world. Just as readers develop confidence in the possibility of a pluralized nuclear family, Chute disturbs our certitude. She refuses to endorse a paradigm that would not challenge the foundation but instead merely expand its perimeters. Lloyd's choice to exhume Gwen's father rather than to simply replicate Gwen herself in a casket,

emphasizes such resistance. Gwen's desire to infiltrate Lloyd's family, Lloyd's world, to secure from there whatever she found lacking in her own is in a way a capitalistic gesture. Lloyd thwarts her efforts by violently forcing upon her not merely an emblem of her incapacitating family but the dead father himself.

### Paternity: Carnal Evidence

If Gwen Curry Doyle's relationship with her mother is a version of the Electra complex, then Forest Johnson, Jr., whose desire to safeguard his image of his mother at the expense of his (biological) father, is certainly entrapped by a version of the Oedipal complex. In Forest's case, it leads him to reenact and reinvent the very family dynamics that repel him, to become the savage patriarch he abhors. Forest's teen years are plagued by sexual angst. In part, he is depicted as a "typical" heterosexual teenage male: "It has started to take charge of him, this one track of thought. Everything his eyes see takes on sexuality" (145). However, Forest's anxiety is more deep-seated than most, for Forest has overheard at Moody's that he is Edmund Barrington's offspring, the product of his mother's affair. The possibility of this is unimaginable to him as Bett epitomizes domesticity and motherhood, and mothers of course are not adulterous: "Her concerns remain most always within arm's reach. Her friends. Her sister. Her men: the two Forests. The perimeters of this respectable brick colonial" (132). Forest can barely conceive of his mother existing outside of the confines of family and home, her sexuality to him seems even less plausible: "He can't imagine her being pregnant with him . . . pregnant at all" (132). Were he and Lloyd Barrington not mirror images of each other, down to the detail of their two different colored eyes, Forest would be

able to deny the validity of the town's claim. To compensate, Forest has concocted a fantasy:

Alone in his bedroom of sailboats wallpaper, alone in the dark of too many midnights, he *sees*. The rape. . . . She would have been alone one day when Edmund Barrington came around with some pretense to get inside this house. . . . But Forest can't, in all his imaginings, imagine his mother with a lover, a passionate affair. A *permission*. He can't imagine her with anyone that way. She would not *reach* out. (161, italics hers)

This projection of rape allows Forest to tolerate his circumstances and makes it permissible for him to despise his father and half-brother. It accounts for his hatred towards his employees, dependents of his company and members of Edmund's class. For Forest eventually takes over his father's company: "You inherit the work. You inherit the town" (131). The town had joked about how loyal the employees of Forest's father were to him: "Guys stick with F.D. for years, grow old and die, and would if they could, *still* keep kicking in the clutch for F.D., even after death" (137). In contrast, Forest exploits his employees, refusing to pay minimum wage to a man who cannot read, for instance, under the pretext that his illiteracy might eventually cost the company money. To some degree, Forest's failure to live up to his father's altruistic standards is accounted for in the novel by the fact that he is not actually F.D.'s biological son, a truth made even more ironic by the fact that Forest is named for him. More likely, though, it is the burden of living with the open secret of his paternity that is the source of what becomes for Forest a repetition compulsion. As a teenager it causes him to fantasize habitually that his mother was raped; as an adult it allows him to justify repeatedly his exploitation of Egypt's indigent. It culminates when he

reenacts the fantasy, raping Anneka DiBias, the daughter of one of his employees. This occurs after he futilely shoots at Lloyd in a fit of fever, an action that would have served to eradicate what he has come most to hate—his biological father, his half-brother, and himself as they are all personified in Lloyd.

Forest's fears and concerns reflect the Puritan desire in our culture to separate sexuality from family, as if the two were not intimately connected, as if family was not dependent upon sexuality. He is tormented by the particular cultural impulse that denies the frequency of adultery, that in fact names such sexuality adultery at all. He is evidence of that desire and thus confirmation of what everyone knows but no one will candidly acknowledge: "It is said they [Forest and Lloyd] have the same birthday! Born the same day to different mothers. Born the same hour? The same moment?" (425). Thus, he is subjugated by the power over him such knowledge confers on the community. Forest responds to this subjugation by resenting those that he believes occasioned it—his father for begetting him, his half-brother for resembling him, and the community for stigmatizing him. He rejoins in the only manner he sees available to him, by embracing traditional values so as to be above reproach, and by exercising power over others' economic fate.

Forest is punished for class hatred in the form of his own offspring's resentment of him and his class origins, of course. His successful daughter fails to return home even for her grandfather's funeral: "*Linda*, Peggy and Forest's daughter. . . . The independent self-assured. Nice job in New York. It's the kind of thing you are supposed to get to brag about. But sometimes there's this perplexing shame" (418).

The shame here is not simply brought about by the parent's recognition that their daughter has forsaken her family and her class, but by their realization that they encouraged this rejection as a result of their own class biases. To Forest's chagrin his son takes as his bride a member of the Bean family made infamous in Chute's first novel: "It was plain to see that Amy and her people, the Beans and the Spillers, were heavy on Forest's mind" (295). Forest's concern stems from two sources. First, it is likely he resents Jeff marrying out of his class, for the Beans are among the horde of people that move in and out of Miracle City. It is just as conceivable, however, that Forest is preoccupied with the fact that the Beans are Lloyd Barrington's cousins and thus his own as well. Jeff eventually deserts the again pregnant Amy, abducts his son Eli, and returns to Egypt with the exotic Codi Peterson, a trophy of his success in California. Jeff has returned home to challenge the authority figure that continues to haunt him, and he spends his days provoking his father's animosity and indignation. Jeff and Codi regularly lounge in bed late into the day, and Jeff listens to the sounds of his father outside working. To Codi, Jeff ridicules Forest for his work ethic, his "faith in authority," and his "faith in *America*" (412). Jeff and Codi routinely disappear from the house to smoke marijuana, then return and neck openly in front of his mother, grandmother, and father. Jeff relishes the fact that these actions--his desertion of his family, his indolence, his flaunting of his sexuality--incite his father's ire. Jeff takes pleasure in imitating Forest's regional accent, in mocking his provincialism--both means by which Jeff can differentiate himself from his father. In turn, Forest enjoys the discord that escalates between Jeff and Codi as she grows tired of the trip, Forest

"watching with fascination and sad marvel this castration of his son" (311). Later Forest himself emasculates his son, forcing him to beg for work just like all the others (422).

Forest becomes possessive of Eli, envisioning in his grandson the opportunity to start afresh, that is to reproduce rather than reinvent himself. Like the Soules who attempt to eradicate Lloyd from their grandchildren's life, Forest becomes obsessed with preventing his "low dough" in-laws from contacting Eli and fears relinquishing the slightest claim to him. To preserve his hold over the boy, he concocts a story of threatened violence meant to make Eli fearful of Amy's father: "You see a blue-and-white Ford pickup slow up . . . . This guy is going to grab you, Eli, and you'll wind up with a great big fat pecker up your ass" (394). Forest exploits what is culturally the most effective threat, forced sodomy, in an effort to preserve his sole claim to his grandson.

The chronicle of Forest Johnson Jr.'s actions in the novel is an ever-escalating enactment or manipulation of cultural prohibitions, many of them encompassing sexuality. As a young man he survives by fantasizing about his mother being raped. As an adult he metaphorically violates his employees and literally rapes one's daughter. He teaches his children contempt for their own class. He attempts to slay his brother. He dreads the possibility that his son's marriage may be incestuousness, but he does not intervene. He welcomes the opportunity to emasculate his son. Ultimately he brandishes the worst violation known to him, the threat of violent homosexual



pedofilia. All of this Chute lays at the doorstep of his anxieties concerning his mother's adultery and his resulting lack of legitimized paternity.

Via the characters of Lloyd Barrington, Gwen Curry Doyle and Forest Johnson, Jr. in *Merry Men*, Carolyn Chute explores how sexuality is related to and inextricable from class. Sexuality functions as identity both in the various forms in which it can be expressed and in the ensuing parenthood that attends it. Issues of sexuality function as diversions. Homophobia and the concern for gender enforcement can be utilized to create conflict, fear, and tension among members of the same class, distracting them from the hegemonic forces that imprison them. One of the many ways this is illustrated in the novel is by the parable David Moody repeatedly tells about two moles so engrossed in fighting each other that they both fall easy prey to a hawk (402). Sexuality can function as a bridge between classes, and characters have the opportunity to escape class through their liaisons, as happens to a degree with Phoebe and William Curry, Jeff and Amy Johnson, Gwen and Earl Doyle, and Gwen and Lloyd. These interclass liaisons are stigmatized and thereby restricted, however; and it is by this mode that sexuality functions as a barrier between classes as well. The reproductive effects of sexuality are utilized to justify class distinctions. In this manner the Soules' copious fertility is allowed to account in part for their financial failure. Sexuality is a tool for punishing dissidence, both through force and denial. Forest rapes Anneka; Lloyd is refused Sherry's company. It is also a tool for rewarding conformity. Anneka DiBias and Carroll Plummer are thus compensated for their union. Finally, sexuality is reconfigured as property, the one thing the poor continue to own, the one thing they

can bestow.<sup>10</sup> Via the character of Anneka DiBias, Chute reveals how the fetishization of the nuclear family perpetuates these correlations between sexuality and class, enforces the status quo, and regulates human potential.

### Suppressing Defiance through the Fetishization the Nuclear Family

Anneka DiBias is distinguishable from other characters in the novel, and particularly from Lloyd Barrington, her ideological compatriot, by her insistence on vocalizing what others ignore or silently endure.<sup>11</sup> At seventeen, Anneka provokes the women of Egypt into staging a demonstration protesting a court ruling that found a deer hunter who mistakenly shot a woman hanging wash in her yard, innocent of manslaughter. "Mothers for the prevention of dead mothers," their placards read (396), an indicator as to how Anneka protests all but the most sanctified ideological apparatus--the nuclear family. Anneka writes to her governor, criticizing his recent thoughts on privatizing education. She develops a board game that parodies Monopoly, where players' inability to meet daily and emergency expenses causes them all eventually to land in jail; and in response to the practice of hunting racoons for sport, Anneka makes homemade bumper stickers that read: "Coon hunters have small peckers" (524). When the mill shuts down she organizes a picket by the workers, some

---

<sup>10</sup>It can also be sold, though prostitution is absent from this novel.

<sup>11</sup>Earlene Bean of *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* is in many ways Anneka's precursor. In an essay about several girl narrators including Earlene Bean, Renee Curry writes what could also be argued of Anneka: "These girls, like their authors, no longer wish to fake their innocence, nor to preserve the innocence of the surrounding adults. . . . In other words, girls are continuously resisting both patriarchy's constraints as well as the constraints of feminist portrayals of them as victims" (97).

of whom are her family members, "her only obvious reason to be here other than her usual unfettered blustery outrage" (604). Anneka's commitment to and faith in the power of communication and self-expression is best illustrated when she teaches herself sign language to converse with Carroll Plummer, a man she admires who is almost completely deaf.

Anneka is apt at recognizing the sources of her community's oppression, an insight that few in Egypt share. She blames not the hunters themselves, whom she considers blind disciples. Instead she recognizes, "It's money behind this and you know it! Guns, ammo, blaze vests, licenses!" (348). In a letter to the governor questioning the privatization of public services she asks, "If after a while all different things of the government are corporations, would Maine still be called a 'state'?" (487). She persists in her letter writing, despite receiving only form letters in answer explaining, "It's called the nuisance factor. Bzzzzzzzzzzzz. Sometimes it's all you got" (377). She taunts Forest, criticizing him for making his "fortune on the sweat and backaches of others" (445). She is outspoken and articulate, perceptive and argumentative, but she never discloses that she was raped. Forest is preoccupied with this concern: "Why hasn't she told anyone? This kid with a mouth you can hear for miles, mouth of big ideas, mouth that calls you names in the woods and through doors. Why hasn't she told on him? Why? Why? Why?" (448). Actually, Anneka does write an anonymous letter to the governor saying, "I'm not telling anybody else. I figured you'd stay pretty calm" (447). In this act of catharsis, Anneka explains to her reader that school prepared her for this violence, "all those years of waiting through all those

hours for the bell" (447). Although Anneka challenges hegemony on every front, confident in her perceptions and willing to risk her standing in the community, she recognizes rape as the one issue about which she must remain silent. She confides to the state, an unknowable void, and points out that its very institution equipped her with passivity and thus prepared her to endure the act. She cannot, however, articulate to her community that she was raped, for she recognizes that in our culture, issues of sexuality are taboo and violence is sanctioned. An accusation of rape against Forest would compel people to acknowledge what they intentionally repress. Facing resistance from her community for defending the rights of animals and of women is one thing, to experience this opposition or indifference in regards to her own physical and emotional experience is quite another. As her homemade bumper stickers make perfectly clear, Anneka understands that the greatest threat one can perpetrate is to question the sanctity of male sexuality.

An androgynous figure of sorts, Anneka is alternately described as masculine, as feminine, and as neither, these categories referring to sexuality as well as gender. When Forest first spies her he labels her "Miracle City" material, and his description reflects his assumptions about the poor: "Busty. Big-hipped. Big lips. Mouth purplish like a sore. Smacked by a hand? Or chapped by too much free run? Or chapped by indoors that feels like outdoors? Or from bad nutrition, eating shit food? So many poor these days" (305). It turns out, though, that she is the daughter of an employee and in fact lives on Forest's property in apartments Forest rents to his workers. Forest's wife, Peggy, develops a fondness for the young woman who seems to her: "A strong-

backed girl. Short-legged. Thick-hipped. The wide Nordic face. Face like snow" (375). When Carroll first takes close notice of her he thinks, "She is not the look-twice leggy beauty that her mother was. She's short-legged, short-bodied. Looks like it's drudgery for her to walk. . . . Short thick white braid has not one bit of sensuous swing and sway to it. On the scale of beauty, the girl could never live up to the Soule sisters. But . . . yes, fruit of the tree" (473). In contrast, she is called "little bitch witch" (471) by a local hunter who supposes she is, "Probably a dyke" (473). These characterizations reflect each speaker's opinion of her. Forest sees a trespasser, Peggy the daughter she misses, Carroll a spirited young girl, and the hunter a zealot.

Anneka continually resists hegemony and in doing so challenges gender roles. Spotting hunters, "Anneka mashes her face to the [car] glass, giving her wide mouth a grisly ruined look and her nose spreads like a bathtub stopper. . . . Peggy sighs. 'Some girls would want to look pretty for boys.' Anneka snorts with disgust" (441). Anneka does not feel compelled to transform herself into a female product marketable to her peers, but neither is she asexual. One day while at work in the diner she surprises all, Carroll Plummer and the reader included, by signing to Carroll a marriage proposal across the crowded room. When he in shock agrees, they meet at the Town Hall, *she* arriving on a white horse. Anneka's moments of gender role reversal are interspersed between her desire to perform the standardized part of adult female. Delighted at discovering Carroll's well-stocked pantry, she cooks a veritable party feast when they arrive home from the wedding ceremony: "After he eats all the meal and all the purple tapioca, that she is not having any of, after he scrapes the bowl clean, lays his spoon

down, she charges. She mashes her soft, too-large mouth onto his mouth" (493).

Anneka proposes marriage, then initiates its consummation, both acts conventionally belonging to the male's domain. She does see to it, though, that her newlywed husband is fed, a standard expectation of females.

Marriage is often a promise of escape from the hardships of reality in *Merry Men*, Anneka and Carroll's being the perfect example. Anneka diagnoses Carroll's depression, insists that he try medication, and in doing so saves him from his bouts of alcoholism that, before they were married, had repeatedly landed him in prison. Carroll in turn builds a fortress against sound in their home in the woods, an attempt to protect Anneka from the noise that brings her to despair. He brings home ear plugs, giant fans, a hard hat with ear protectors, a fish tank bubbler; he blasts the television and the radio, anything to help drown out the reverberations of the coon hunters and their dogs echoing over the hills. In selecting Carroll for her mate, Anneka has chosen a man she can safeguard, one who correspondingly reciprocates the favor. Anneka, however, dreams bigger--of owning work horses, planting gardens, and running a farm--all of which Carroll recognizes as anachronisms. Anneka's dreams of domesticity conflict with what she knows to be reality: an economic vise slowly puts her father's farm out of business, while clear-cutting the hills the is only work Carroll can find. Strangely enough, though, she persists in these fantasies which were inspired "when she found that old ring among the photos and war ribbons when she was not but eight years old" (516). Her shower reflects the potential and prosperity typically endowed in marriage: "Gifts are wrapped in silver and pink and white paper, boxes the size of blenders,

spatula sets, coffeepots" (503). The actuality, though, is that the two are playing house --living in Carroll's brother's home while he is away, deafening themselves to the violence that surrounds them, medicating their hearts and minds--Anneka for a heart condition, Carroll against melancholy.

Carroll's brother eventually returns home after being away for military duty, so Anneka and Carroll lose their residence. Shortly thereafter Carroll's job comes to an end, since the area is now completely clear-cut. As may be expected, Anneka is pregnant. Homeless and insolvent, the two fall victim to medical bureaucrats who doubt Anneka's awareness of her own body. They dissuade her from seeking treatment when her labor pains do not coincide with the typical delivery process. The heart-warming moment when Anneka signed a marriage proposal to Carroll across the diner is then heart-wrenchingly reenacted in the novel after their child arrives stillborn. Through the havoc of aggravated medical personnel feigning indifference to their suffering in order to deny any responsibility for it, Anneka and Carroll's eyes meet: "She finger spells to him, '*Do you think we can name him anyway?*'" (673, italics hers). Naming their dead child "Richard after Carroll's grandfather" (690), conferring upon it an identity, Anneka voices its existence as an act of defiance. Her dreams of domestic happiness work to make her vulnerable to hegemony; marriage and maternity effectively force her acquiescence. The vulnerability in Anneka's armor is that she is enamored of the nuclear family. So too is Carroll destroyed:

The nurse settles the loose-limbed child in his arms. Carroll opens the blanket. His eyes fix first on the wasted thin shred of umbilical cord that has remained at the baby's center. Then the Pamper that is tightly

tabbed. Baby's waist. Wouldn't it seem a little perverted for him to undo the Pamper right now, to look at the genitals and all that part of the child that is, though no one says it, off-limits. And this Pamper is *them* again, standing between him and his son, this likeness of himself who was a different soul . . . could have made him, Carroll, a much larger man. (675)

Throughout the novel Chute has repeatedly depicted scenes of family members in bed together, a scenario that arouses suspicion in a culture that has become obsessed with defining and exposing the potential for sexual deviation. Diapering the dead child, a wholly unnecessary act for the child will never produce excretions, is absurd and by doing it the hospital staff effectively express this same misgiving. They place a sanctioned barrier between the parents and the dead child, and Carroll accurately recognizes that his motive for removing the concealment would be questioned. The hospital bureaucracy's assumption that they know what is best for Carroll's son, that the child is theirs to protect from him, effectively forces Carroll's breakdown. He refuses to give up his dead son and in resistance to the staff's effort to take the child from him, Carroll kills one of his subduers.

The tempo of *Merry Men* accelerates during the last section of the novel. An escalating foreboding is suggested by short chapters alternating between Lloyd and Gwen's disjointed phone conversations, Anneka's labor pains and the repeated telephone calls she and Carroll make to the hospital, and depictions of anonymous people getting married: "Another Saturday. Another bride. Cars and pickups line both sides of the road by the Mason Hall" (683). At the novel's conclusion Carroll Plummer is once again in prison, and presumably Lloyd Barrington is on his way there. Anneka



sits in front of the television at a sister's house watching a Godzilla movie, the one where the mother monster rescues its child: "Just another cheap Saturday afternoon filler. Probably bowling is next" (695). Marriage is unveiled as a means of escape akin to television, both activities to fill a Saturday afternoon, both ways in which the population is controlled; prison is the alternative.

I have attempted throughout this essay to draw analogies between the repression of sexual possibility and of class reality. It is my assertion that in *Merry Men*, Carolyn Chute exploits the culture's schizophrenic relationship to sexuality, the fears, anxieties, fascinations, repulsions, and repressions all centered around the limitlessness of sexual expression. Chute purposely employs homosexuality and homosexual possibility to spur the reader into casting a wider net for participants in the paradigm of the nuclear family, the system whereby permissible sexual relations are defined and enforced. The imagery of homosexual potential is suggested everywhere in the novel, as when a trio of communist activists seeks out those who have been agitating Egypt's population. They find David and Macky Turnbull, the Reverend David Moody, Albion Cole, Morelli, Lloyd Barrington and his son Joel and a slew of others in and out of the water near the covered bridge: "If there was ever a question of whether or not David Turnbull's tattoos exist below the beltline, this is one of those nights which will answer that question. Meanwhile, the other men's nakednesses are less colorific. Just moon blue and the dark of hair" (612). Lloyd Barrington, the acknowledged "fearless leader" (617), and his friends swim naked in the cover of the night. When the strangers arrive, "Joel Barrington tosses his father his pants" (619).

This scenario is the one and only time when Lloyd and his coconspirators, his assistants really, are gathered together in the novel. Their comfort with one another suggests that the commitment to collective resistance is shared by all; they do not fear one another's awareness for all are participants. The scene, which could be right out of medieval England or contemporary homoerotics, emphasizes the homosexual potential inherent in the allusion to Robin Hood and the merry men Chute employs.

Homosexuality here represents one mode of "community interdependence" and "the last vestiges of freedom." Chute also examines how the threat of homosexual potential is employed to enforce the status quo, though. By the novel's conclusion Carroll Plummer is back in prison and we can suppose Lloyd Barrington is on his way. Lloyd appears to have anticipated this all along: "It is fated. Lloyd *will* wind up 'doing time.' How can it be any other way? Every intention, every promise, every act of love leads him closer" (242). Carroll, who has been in and out of prison, is familiar with the experience: "In prison he was touched. Felt. Probed. Inspected. Searched. The untouchable private dark found out by the public's hand and eyes" (483). Incarceration is a constant threat in the novel; it is depicted as a means of controlling the defiant, of suppressing nonconformity.<sup>12</sup> Here Carroll and Lloyd's vulnerability to this branch of the state utilized to punish those who cannot be effectively suppressed is vividly expressed in terms suggestive of rape. The story commemorates the spontaneous

---

<sup>12</sup>Chomsky insists incarceration is a tool for controlling the population's potential for resistance: "That's a way of keeping people from bothering us: keep them in jail. If they're not useful for wealth production they have to be controlled somehow" (22).

gathering of a community of the like-hearted, like-minded; it condemns the institutionalization of involuntary participants in such a community. The former tendency celebrates homosexual potential as a choice, the latter condemns homosexual possibility employed as a threat. Chute exploits the homosexual/heterosexual binary. She also discredits it by expressing the multitude of ways the object of gender choice can be and is utilized by our culture, as threat, as alternative, as power, as knowledge. Chute explores how definitions of gender, sanctioned sexuality, monogamy, adultery, rape, promiscuity, paternity all depend upon an understanding of sexual choice, and she examines how these definitions are related to class, defined by, limited by, and expressed by class boundaries.

We must remember that Chute begins *Merry Men* with a prologue depicting unfettered liberty, the taking of a life without repercussion. Indeed, Freud reminds us that "Civilized man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security. We must not forget, however, that in the primal family only the head of it enjoyed this instinctual freedom; the rest lived in slavish suppression" (115). Throughout the novel Chute disturbs and disrupts the reader's expectations, refusing to endorse a system of morality or a strategy for organizing society. She does, however, emphatically express concerns regarding the direction advanced capitalism is taking us.

## **Conclusion**

### **Infanticide: Visions of the Apocalypse**

I began this analysis of contemporary women novelists and the nuclear family with an examination of how the family is fetishized, in particular, by the advertising industry; so it is to the annals of the media that I would like to return. The fetishization of the nuclear family is a hegemonic campaign whereby the versatile and multifaceted social structure deemed "the family" is fixed to affirm only the most narrow and circumspect of its manifestations. The nuclear family at its most basic consists of a legally married heterosexual couple and their biological offspring. This aggrandized paradigm has become a deep-seated component of America's self-identity, an element so naturalized in this country that variations demand detailed explanation or justification. All evidence, however, suggests that the American family is in flux. In 1960, 16 percent of marriages in the United States ended in divorce; reports suggest that today somewhere between 40 to 50 percent of U.S. marriages now do so. In 1986 the United States ranked fourth worldwide in divorce rate; today it ranks second. The Catholic Church in the U.S. now grants approximately 60,000 annulments a year, three-quarters of all those granted worldwide. According to the 1970 census report, married couples with children made up 40.3 percent of U.S. households. By 1995, that number had dropped to only 25.5 percent.<sup>1</sup> Even the Institute for American Values admits that we have "stopped being a marriage culture," but there is a general social

---

<sup>1</sup>See Barton, Pasternak, Pollitt, Raspberry, Wallechinsky, and "You Aren't Alone Anymore" for these statistics, those that follow, and various discussions regarding their implications.

reluctance to recognize and to accept the variety of familial affiliations that a growing percentage of the population now chooses in lieu of the paradigm of the nuclear family.

This reluctance is manifested in a resistance to legalize or simply acknowledge the legitimacy of alternative patterns. For instance, in 1997 the Institute for American Values proposed a nation-wide ban on no-fault divorce, and in 1999 this same organization suggested that social service agencies should promote marriage as a means whereby young single mothers might escape poverty. In contrast, in 1996 when a Hawaiian court ruled that prohibitions against same-sex marriages were unconstitutional, many other states responded by enacting laws that upend the standard whereby marriages performed in one state are recognized in another; and 58 percent of Americans polled by *Newsweek* supported such restrictions. What we have here is the dwindling practice of the tradition of the nuclear family and an extensive campaign to combat this cultural trend by encouraging marriage when possible and enforcing it where necessary. Yet, it is a highly restricted club all the same. Laws prohibiting interracial marriage were not deemed unconstitutional until 1967, and that same *Newsweek* poll suggested that 20 percent of Americans still disapproved of such unions 30 years later. Betty Berzon, a psychotherapist, author, and lesbian, argues that "our anxiety about sexuality has led us to enact marriage laws that don't make sense." She points out that "Richard Ramirez got married even though he murdered 13 women and is in prison," while she herself has been "in a stable relationship with a woman for 23 years" but is prohibited from doing the same (qtd. in Barton, G1).

America has developed a schizophrenic conception of the importance of the nuclear family. Trends and statistics fail to substantiate claims of the nuclear family's prominence and worth, so instead we are warned that we are jeopardizing our children's happiness and stability if we fail to raise them in the setting of a conventional nuclear family. Interracial unions are frowned upon in light of the fear that offspring will be stigmatized. Anti-divorce advocates proclaim that the psychological damage divorce inflicts on children warrants restricting their parents from separating no matter what the condition of the marriage. Unwed young mothers are cautioned that children of single-parent families suffer countless failings. Same-sex marriages are denounced on the basis of the partners' inability to procreate. The venerated image of the child, of course, is an indispensable ingredient to the fetishization of the nuclear family. It is a vacuum of sentimentality that is appropriated to exonerate a multitude of civil liberty infringements and to exalt the necessity of countless commodities. We insist upon mandating a television rating system so as to protect our children's seeming innocence, yet we ignore the fact that there are 28 nations with a lower infant death rate than ours. New Yorkers pride themselves on their decision to phone child protective services when in 1997 a Danish woman leaves a child in a stroller within her view outside a restaurant and refuses to bring the baby in at their request. Then they dismiss the fact that such a practice is common in Denmark because unlike in the U.S., the threat of harm to a child there is almost nonexistent. Across the nation courts are endorsing the prerogative of government officials to assume custody of a fetus in instances when the pregnant woman is suspected of drug

or alcohol abuse, yet we seem unconcerned that 15 other nations have a lower maternal death rate than ours. It is far easier to fetishize the value of life than to question the validity of our naturalized institutions; the deterioration of the nuclear family is a simpler target than the economic and social praxes that perpetuate a gap between the wealthiest ten percent and the poorest ten percent greater than almost any other country.

I have attempted within these pages to examine the ways in which these four novelists--Leslie Marmon Silko, Carolyn Chute, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Cade Bambara--have explored such fetishization. Within their novels, these writers seek to identify the cause of this national compulsion to limit and standardize familial relationships. Furthermore, these writers deliberate upon the possible affects the drive to normalize and institutionalize the nuclear family has had and will have upon its subjects. These women conclude that the idealized nuclear family is an oppressive and ultimately unattainable archetype staunchly preserved primarily for its serviceability to capitalism. Silko, Chute, Naylor and Bambara all four suggest that just as capitalism reifies human beings, so too the hegemonic operation of herding them into nuclear families alienates and estranges them. Thus it is that each of their novels concludes with the self-destruction of the community depicted within its pages.

*Almanac of the Dead* ends on the verge of a North American revolution to be waged between the wealthy and the indigent, one that the reader surmises will reach beyond this continental border and eventually eradicate much of the world's population. *Merry Men* concludes with an unearthed corpse, an affluent female

protagonist who is traumatized, and an impoverished hero soon to be imprisoned. The last image of *Linden Hills* is that of the two young hero-laborers gazing upon the birth of the prosperous community's inferno. And while *The Salt Eaters* does offer in the end the prospect of an allied community, it does so only after first taking the reader through an array of violent and disastrous alternative possibilities that include a nuclear catastrophe which is the result of magnates depleting communities of their natural resources. All four novelists predict that our current practice of endorsing without reservation advanced capitalism will lead to cataclysmic consequences. All four moreover view the fetishization of the nuclear family as part and parcel of the unchecked adulation of the capitalist system. Within the novels, the consequences of such absolute reverence are depicted not merely in visions of apocalypse, then, but in images of sterility and infanticide as well.

*Almanac of the Dead* is largely structured around Seese's desperate search for her son who has been kidnaped, violated, and mutilated at the hands of blue blood sycophants. All hope for successful future resistance is quelled in *Merry Men* when Anneka DiBias loses her unborn child to the condescending, inept, and faceless bureaucracy of what passes for socialized medicine in this country. Luther Nedeed starves his son in *Linden Hills*. The rest of the community appears to be childless, and the only other mention of a child in the novel is one in Putney Wayne that dies of tuberculosis caused by intolerable living conditions. Velma Henry miscarries in *The Salt Eaters*, as did her husband's previous lovers. Frequently, the image of the child in literature signifies the promise of a better future. The absence of children often is used



to indicate self-absorption, and child abuse is employed as a sign of inhumanity. In these novels the children are simply deceased—the dead posterity of dying communities. In an essay that includes an analysis of how the ideological image of the child is used to enforce hegemony, Lee Edelman explains that “the child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and [has] been enshrined as the figure for whom that order must be held in perpetual trust” (21). He goes on to suggest that the figure of the child “seems to shimmer with the iridescent [sic.] promise of Noah’s rainbow, serving, like the rainbow, as the pledge of a covenant to shield us against the threat of apocalypse now—or apocalypse later” (24). In the four novels I have examined here the child is always dead. In one way this invokes the vision of the sacred child in the fetishized nuclear family for both are cavernous repositories of symbolism, lifeless yet conjured up as life-affirming. More to the point, however, these novelists emphasize the anaesthetizing capabilities of capitalism whereby the image of the child comes to be more consequential than the child itself and the fetishized nuclear family serves to authenticate and dictate the only meaningful social experience.

## Works Cited

- Ahmad, Aijaz. "Literary Theory and 'Third World Literature': Some Contexts" in *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*. Davis, Robert Con and Ronald Schleifer, eds. 4th ed. New York: Longman, 1998.
- Allen, Paula Gunn. *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1986.
- Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1969.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Althusser, Louis. "On Ideology." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: New Left Books, 1971. Rpt. In *Critical Theory Since 1965*. Eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1986.
- Belsey, Catherine. "Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text." in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class, and Race in Literature and Culture*. Newton, Judith and Deborah Rosenfelt, eds. New York: Methuen, 1985.
- Bambara, Toni Cade. *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*. Ed. Toni Morrison. New York: Pantheon Books, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Salt Eaters*. 1980. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- Baker, Houston. A., Jr. "Our Lady: Sonia Sanchez and the Writing of a Black Renaissance" in *Reading Black Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Meridian, 1990.
- Barton, David. "Wedding Reception." *The Sacramento Bee*. 14 Dec. 1990, G1+.
- Burns, Wayne. "Triumph of the Monster: A Study of Carolyn Chute's *Merry Men* in Relation to Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*." *Recovering Literature* 23 (1996): 5-32.
- Butler, Evelyn. "Carolyn Chute's *Merry Men*: Outside the Magic Circle." *Recovering Literature* 23 (1996): 51-60.
- Campbell, Jennifer. "Teaching Class: A Pedagogy and Politics for Working-Class Writing" *College Literature* 23 (1996): 116-130.

- Chomsky, Noam. *Keeping the Rabble in Line: Interviews with David Barsamian*. Maine: Common Courage Press, 1994.
- Christian, Barbara. "Naylor's Geography: Community, Class and Patriarchy in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*" in *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993. 106-125.
- Christopher, Renny. "Cultural Borders: Working-Class Literature's Challenge to the Canon" in *The Canon in the Classroom: The Pedagogical Implications of Canon Revision in American Literature*. Ed. John Alberti. New York: Garland Publishers, 1995. 45-55.
- Christopher, Renny. "Lower-Class Voices and the Establishment: The Reception of Carolyn Chute." *American Letters & Commentary* 5 (1993): 106-121.
- Chute, Carolyn. *Merry Men*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.
- Collins, G. Michelle. "There Where We Are Not: The Magical Real in *Beloved* and *Mama Day*." *The Southern Review* 24 (1988): 680 - 685.
- Collins, Janelle. "Generation Power: Fission, Fusion, and Post-modern Politics in Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*." *MELUS* 21 (Summer 1996): 1-47.
- Curry, Renee R. "'I Ain't No FRIGGIN' LITTLE WIMP': The Girl 'T Narrator in Contemporary Fiction." in *The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women*. Ed. Ruth O. Saxton. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.
- Dash, Michael J. "Marvelous Realism--A Way Out of Né Negritude," *Caribbean Studies*, 13, No. 4 (1973), 57-70.
- Delbaere, Jeanne. "Magic Realism: The Energy of the Margins." *Postmodern Fiction in Canada*. D'haen, Theo and Hans Bertens, eds. Postmodern Studies 6, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992.
- Derrick, Scott S. *Monumental Anxieties: Homoerotic Desire and Feminine Influence in 19th-Century U.S. Literature*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Ideology: An Introduction*. New York: Verso, 1991.
- Edelman, Lee. "The Future is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive." *Narrative*. 6, No. 1 (1998), 18-30.
- Engels, Friedrich. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1942.

- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press, 1968).
- Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Bantam, 1971.
- Farris, Sara. "American Pastoral in the Twentieth-Century: *O Pioneers!*, *A Thousand Acres*, and *Merry Men*." *ISLE* 5 (1997): 27-48.
- Foreman, Gabrielle P. "Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende On Call." in *Feminist Studies*. V. 18, N. 2, Summer 1992.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. and Trans. James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Hogarth Press, 1953.
- Frus, Phyllis. "Regionalism, Class, and Anti-Realism in Carolyn Chute's Maine Novels: Who Gets Read." *Recovering Literature* 23 (1996): 33-50.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr. "Significant Others." *Contemporary Literature* 29 (1988): 606-623.
- Goddu, Teresa. "Reconstructing History in *Linden Hills*" in *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993. 215-230.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Ed. and Trans. Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.
- Hart, Patricia. "Magic Feminism in Isabel Allende's *The Stories of Eva Luna*" in *Multicultural Literatures through Feminist/Postructuralist Lenses*. Waxman, Barbara Frey, ed. Knoxville: U. of Tennessee Press, 1993.
- Hartsock, Nancy, C. M. *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985.
- Homans, Margaret. "The Woman in the Cave: Recent Feminist Fictions and the Classical Underworld." *Contemporary Literature* 29 (1988): 369-402.
- hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.
- Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Continuum, 1994.

- Hull, Gloria T. "What It Is I Think She's Doing Anyhow': A Reading of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*," in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*. Eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985. 216 - 232.
- Irmer, Thomas. "An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko." *Alt-X*. Online. CSU, Sacramento Lib. Internet. 23 July 1997. Available <http://www.altx.com/interviews/silko.html>.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious*. New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981.
- Jehlen, Myra. "Gender" in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990.
- Kellener, Kathleen. "Predicting a Revolt to Reclaim the Americas" *Los Angeles Times*, 13 Jan. 1992, View:1.
- Kolmar, Wendy K. "'Dialectics of Connectedness' Supernatural Elements in Novels by Bambara, Cisneros, Grahn, and Erdrich" in *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women*. Eds. Lynette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar. Knoxville: U. of Tennessee Press, 1991.
- Knickerbocker, Brad. "Dark Beauty, Bright Terror." Rev. of *Almanac of the Dead* by Leslie Marmon Silko. *Christian Science Monitor* 3 Feb. 1982: 13.
- Korenman, Joan S. "African-American Women Writers, Black Nationalism, and the Matrileneal Heritage." *CLA Journal* 38 (1994): 143-161.
- Landry, Donna and Gerald MacLean. *Materialist Feminisms*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993.
- Lentricchia, Frank. *Criticism and Social Change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Lesser, Ellen. "Interview with Carolyn Chute" *New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly*. 8 (Winter 1985): 158-177.
- Lukacs, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1971.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Ed. Samuel H. Beer. Arlington Heights: AMH Publishing, 1955.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital*. Vol.1. New York: International Publishers, 1967.

- Masse, Michelle A. *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic*. Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- Memmi, Albert. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. (New York: Orion, 1965).
- Mitchell, Juliet. *Woman's Estate*. New York: Random House, 1971.
- Morrison, Toni. "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Ed. Mari Evans. New York: Anchor, 1984.
- Naylor, Gloria and Toni Morrison. "A Conversation." *The Southern Review* 21 (1985): 567-593.
- Naylor, Gloria. *Linden Hills*. 1985. New York: Penguin, 1986.
- Pasternak, Judy. "Do Courts Have Right to Confine Pregnant Women?" *San Francisco Examiner*. 2 Feb. 1997, A2.
- Perry, Donna. "Leslie Marmon Silko." *Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out, Interviews*. (New Jersey: Rutgers, 1993).
- Pollitt, Katha. "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" *The Nation*. 17 Feb. 1997, 9.
- Porter, Nancy. "Women's Interracial Friendships and Visions of Community in *Meridian*, *The Salt Eaters*, *Civil Wars*, and *Dessa Rose*" in *Tradition and the Talents of Women*. Ed. Florence Howe. Urbana: U. Illinois Press, 1991.
- Pietz, William. "Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx" in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* Eds. Emily Apter and William Pietz. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993.
- Raspberry, William. "Teen Pregnancy Debate Should Focus on Marriage's Importance." *Washington Post*. 30 Sept. 1999.
- Restuccia, Frances L. "Literary Representations of Battered Women: Spectacular Domestic Punishment" in *Bodies of Writing, Bodies in Performance*. Eds. Ellen E. Berry, Thomas Foster, and Carol Siegel. New York: New York U. P., 1996.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 1976. New York: Bantam, 1977.
- Sandiford, Keith. "Gothic and Intertextual Constructions in *Linden Hills*" in *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993. 106-125.

- Saunders, James Robert. "The Ornamentation of Old Ideas: Gloria Naylor's First Three Novels." *The Hollins Critic* 27 (April 1990): 1-11.
- Sayler, Gregory. "Almanac of the Dead: The Politics of Time." in *Leslie Marmon Silko*. Twayne's United States Authors Series. 692. Ed. Frank Day. New York: Twayne, 1997.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Almanac of the Dead*. New York: Penguin, 1991.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Slemon, Stephen. "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse." *Canadian Literature*, 116, 1988.
- Smart, Carol. *The Ties That Bind: Law, Marriage and the Reproduction of Patriarchal Relations*. London: Routledge, 1984.
- Spillers, Hortense J. "'The Permanent Obliquity of an In[pha]llibly Straight'" in the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers" in *Daughters and Fathers*. Eds. Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- Stack, Carol B. *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.
- Stanford, Ann Folwell. "He Speaks for Whom?: Inscription and Reinscription of Women in *Invisible Man* and *The Salt Eaters*." *MELUS* 18 (Summer 1993): 17-31.
- St. Clair, Janet. "Uneasy Ethnocentrism: Recent Works of Allen, Silko, and Hogan." *Studies in American Indian Literatures: The Journal of the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures* 6 (1994): 82-98.
- Stein, Rachel. "Contested Ground: Nature, Narrative, and Native American Identity in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead*," in *Shifting the Ground: American Women Writers' Revisions of Nature, Gender and Race*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997.
- Walker, Alice. "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression Within the Work(s)" in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. New York: Harcourt, 1967.
- Wallace, Michele. *Invisibility Blues*. New York: Verso, 1990.

- Wallechinsky, David. "Are We Still Number One?" *Parade Magazine*. 13 April 1997, 4-7.
- Wallinger, W. "Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*: The Novel by an African American Woman Writer and the Critical Discourse." *MSp* 37 (1993), 172-186.
- Ward, Catherine C. "Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*: A Modern *Inferno*," in *Contemporary Literature* 28 (Spring 1987), 67-81.
- Waring, Marilyn. *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*. 1988. San Francisco: Harpers, 1990.
- West, Cornel. "Postmodern Culture" in *The Columbia History of the American Novel*. Ed. Emory Elliott. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- West, Paul. "When a Myth Is as Good as a Mile." Rev. of *Almanac of the Dead* by Leslie Marmon Silko. *Los Angeles Times* 2 Feb. 1982: BR8.
- Williams, Sherley Anne. "Roots of Privilege: New Black Fiction." Rev. of *Linden Hills*. *Ms.* 13 (June 1985). Rpt. in *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993. 9-12.
- Wright, Anne, ed. *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace: Letters between Leslie Marmon Silko and James Wright*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1986.
- "You Aren't Alone Anymore--Family Definition, Demographics Shift." *Childfree Lifestyle Quarterly*. Ed. Leslie Lafayette. December 1996, 1.



## **Vita**

Tamra Lynn Horton was born and raised in California. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of California, Davis in 1988. She received her Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Wyoming in 1990; her thesis was titled "The Father as Narrative Impetus in John Irving's Novels." Her areas of academic interest include technical writing, modern and contemporary American literature, women's literature, African American literature, Marxist and feminist theory, and postcolonial and cultural studies. She has ten years of college teaching experience, and she spent three years working for the State of Arizona welfare program first as an eligibility interviewer, later as a case manager, and finally as a trainer for the bureau. In December of 1999 she will receive her doctorate in English from Louisiana State University. At this time, Tamra is 35 years old and, no surprise, she has never been married and she has no children. Tamra Horton is a NASCAR fan.

DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

**Candidate:** Tamra Lynn Horton

**Major Field:** English

**Title of Dissertation:** Family Portraits: Contemporary Women Novelists and  
The Nuclear Family

**Approved:**

Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

**EXAMINING COMMITTEE:**

**Date of Examination:**

10/19/99