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Stephanie Gail Hall
Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

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COMING HOME: HOMEcomings AND RETURN MIGRATION IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN FOLKLORE AND LITERATURE SINCE 1970

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

Stephanie Gail Hall
B.A., Howard University, 1988
M.A., Texas Woman's University, 1991
December 2000
This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Bessie Smith, and my great-grandparents, Henry Smith, Sr. and Katie B. Smith, of Dorseyville, Louisiana. They were members of the St. John Baptist Church of Dorseyville, Louisiana, where I attended my very first Homecoming celebration as a young girl. Their faith, prayers, and commitment to our family helped to sustain me. Their stories made me realize that I would one day live to tell theirs. Their dreams live on in me.

And to a man who left this world too soon: Abe Thomas Hall, Jr. (1940-1968). I only hope that I have become the woman he would have wanted for me to be.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I also want to acknowledge my relatives and extended family who have stood by me unconditionally as I pursued this dream, including Connie and Hal Bell, Samantha Jossell, the Williams family, the Westridge Park First Baptist Church family and Rev. E. L. Hewitt, Jr. A special thanks to my friends, classmates, and mentors who kept my spirits up and never let me quit.

But mostly I would like to thank two people: my mother, Lucy M. Hall, who always believed in me, supported me and prayed that I would fulfill my goal; and Anthony Manley-Rook, who was strong enough to stand behind my dream while I pursued it, and kind enough to stand beside me when I needed him. I thank them both for their love.
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores homecoming narratives and the representation of return migration in African-American folklore and in African-American literature written since 1970. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach, sociological, historical, religious and literary criticism are incorporated to examine African-American church and communal homecomings, personal memoir, and novels as extensions of the Great Migration narrative, leading to a reconfiguration of the South as “home.” This study includes an analysis of the structural features of the homecoming narrative, including the “moment of return,” the migrant’s connection to the Southern landscape, the significance of feast, and rituals of homecoming ceremonies. Subsequent chapters explore the decision to return home and the positioning of homecoming as claiming act or as salvation; the negotiation of home by returning migrants; the location of “home” by blacks in the New South; and family reunions and communal homecomings for African-Americans within the contested and non-contested Southern plantation site. Close readings of works by Toni Morrison, Ernest Gaines, Gloria Naylor, Walter Mosley, Bebe Moore Campbell, and Deborah McDowell also reveal ways in which the authors position homecoming and/or reinscribe the figure of the Prodigal Son (and daughter) in the narrative of return.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

You can definitely go home again [. . .]. You can go back. But you don’t start from where you left. To fit in, you have to create another place in that place you left behind.

—Eula Grant as told to Carol Stack, Call to Home1

One of the most expansive movements of the twentieth century was the Great Migration, a movement which involved the departure of over six million blacks from the South and their subsequent arrival in the North and West. From its beginnings near the eve of World War I until the dawn of the Civil Rights era, the Great Migration reshaped African-American life and culture. From artistic depictions by Jacob Lawrence to literary works such as Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, this enormous movement has been the focus of reflection and analysis by African-Americans, and the object of critical studies by historians, ethnographers, sociologists and within the last decade, revisioned literary criticism. This movement, however, is followed by a countermigration of blacks back to the South, often to familial places of origin, which began in the 1970’s, according to U. S. census records.2 It is the topic of return migration and its celebratory manifestation, the event of homecoming, that is the focus of this study.

This dissertation will explore homecoming narratives and the representation of return migration in fiction and personal memoir written by African-Americans after 1970 and will analyze cultural celebrations such as church and communal homecomings to see how they inform and renew the cycle of migration. My definition of a homecoming narrative is one that features the return of a son or daughter to a place geographically or symbolically constructed as “home.” For this study, “home” is situated in a Southern setting or a “symbolic South.”3 Return

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migration of African-Americans to the South is briefly mentioned in two recent literary studies: in the epilogue of *Canaan Bound* by Lawrence Rodgers and as a “final vision” in *Who Set You Flowin’* by Farah Jasmine Griffin. However, these studies focus primarily on the dynamics of the impetus for the Great Migration and the artistic impact that ensued. Rodgers sees narratives featuring return migration as efforts of “southern recolonization” but does not view them as “part of the Great Migration novel form,” whereas Griffin anticipates their development as “within the migration narrative.” My study contrasts with the aforementioned in that I view the possibilities for return migration narratives, looking for ways in which these texts expand and extend the Great Migration narrative.

This study is unique in that I contend that return migration and homecomings in African-American literature since 1970 not only warrant further critical study, but function as an extension of the migration cycle and lead to more inclusive interpretations of the “new South.” Limiting my focus to works published after 1970 will allow me to utilize Robert Stepto’s theory of ascent and immersion in African-American narrative to examine a revisioning of the South as “home.”

This study will incorporate sociological, historical, and ethnographic criticism regarding the phenomenon of return migration of blacks to the South. In analyzing the homecoming celebration in African-American folk culture, I include an examination of studies which have focused on African-American religion as well as my own fieldwork focusing on the rituals of African-American church homecomings. Also, I will examine and discuss cultural and critical theory involving place, movement, and migration to connect my study of African-
American migration folklore and literature to current revisionist Southern literary theory.

In my study of homecoming, I propose to delineate its structure as presented in African-American fiction and folklore. First, my study will focus on the ritual(s) of homecoming in African-American folklore and how those rituals are reflected in African-American literature. I will examine in chapter 3 the “moment of return,” the point at which an absent son or daughter makes the first return appearance before the family or community. I will discuss how the “moment of return” is represented in African-American memoir such as Bebe Moore Campbell’s *Sweet Summer* and Deborah McDowell’s *Leaving Pipe Shop*, the film *Mama Flora’s Family* (a novel begun by Alex Haley), and fictional works such as Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*. I will then look at how African-American return migration narratives illustrate the individual’s connection to the landscape of “home” in works such as *Mama Day*, *Sweet Summer* and Walter Mosley’s *Gone Fishin’*. This chapter will also feature an analysis of feast and its significance as one of the important rituals of homecoming. My fieldwork covering homecoming celebrations in small rural black churches in Louisiana reveals them as opportunities for the community to welcome those who have moved away. By examining these occasions and the sermons presented at homecomings which feature variations of the Prodigal Son narrative, I will explore the use of Biblical typology and how it informs these folk rituals.

Chapter 4 will focus on an examination of the decision to return home posed in two ways: as claiming act and as a means to salvation. Both of these
movements can be precipitated by internal motivation and/or external event. In the case of homecoming as claiming act, I look to African-American memoir for readings of how a journey back to the South can result in one's claiming of ancestral ties, family-owned land, or financial debts still owed. These journeys may be made by a son or daughter to fulfill familial obligations but may also expose feelings of melancholy about "home." A close reading of Walter Mosley's Gone Fishin' illustrates the author's reconfiguration of the Prodigal Son thematic, with an emphasis on the father-son conflict. This chapter will also address the act of homecoming as salvation, identifying African-American memoir and fiction which reveal blacks' disillusionment with the urban landscape of the North. The decision to go back "home" to the South is presented as a journey of atonement resulting in salvation.

Chapter 5 discusses how "home" is negotiated in three works—Bebe Moore Campbell's Your Blues Ain't Like Mine, and Toni Morrison's Tar Baby and Sula. Each of these texts treat problematic issues of return and transgressive moments with an emphasis on the differences between those who have left the community and those who have stayed. These works also address beliefs held by returnees and permanent residents regarding demeanor, appearance, sexual attitudes, and gender roles. Often, the clashes which result challenge the romanticized ideal of homecoming/return migration.

Focusing on what I call the "thwarted migrant," chapter 6 gives a detailed reading of Ernest Gaines's A Lesson Before Dying. The novel offers a vision of how the black Southerner can reinscribe his environment, coming to terms with an
oppressive Southern landscape that appears to be moving toward progressive social change. These possibilities of change suggest that migration to the North is no longer the only option for the frustrated, previously stifled black Southerner. Also, I address how this novel positions Gaines as an “heir apparent” to continue the tradition, albeit revised and reconfigured, of Southern literature.

In my final chapter, I will focus on a recent African-American homecoming phenomenon: the location of “home” by black families in the Southern plantation site and the implications for this identification. These emotional and physical journeys by African-Americans to Monticello in Virginia and Somerset Place in North Carolina illuminate their connection(s) to a black Southern cultural identity and notion of “home.” This chapter also contrasts the act of homecoming within a contested versus a non-contested site, revealing how, in a 21st century context, rupture(s) can be negotiated between the descendants of slaves and slaveowners.

1.1 Endnotes


This term is mentioned by David Wyatt in his study of the prodigal figure in literature, *Prodigal Sons* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) xiii.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Sociological, Anthropological, and Historical Perspectives

Three waves of scholarship predominate the field of African-American migration studies and are important to considering an analysis of African-American migration literature. These three theoretical movements—termed the race relations model, the ghetto model, and the proletariat model—address black migration from a historical context while incorporating other approaches (sociological and anthropological) to examine factors that have led to blacks' departure from and return to the South. The race relations model is exemplified by Carter G. Woodson's *A History of Negro Migration* (1918) which traces the history of black migration within the United States prior to the Great Migration, including the imposed movement of enslaved blacks and their later efforts of self-directed migration following the Civil War to locations in the North and West. Woodson's seminal study, published at the onset of the Great Migration, seeks to contextualize migration as an act of self-determination by blacks responding to economic, social, and political forces which threatened their progress. His statement, "The migration of the blacks from the Southern States to those offering them better opportunities is nothing new" (1), ironically resonates almost a century later as blacks migrate back to the South in search of "better opportunities."

Other early works covering black migration such as W. E. B. DuBois' *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), Emmett Scott's *Negro Migration during the War* (1920), and Louise V. Kennedy's *The Negro Peasant Turns Cityward* (1930) also typify the race relations model by emphasizing the "push" and "pull" factors in the
migration of blacks primarily in terms of political, economic, and social factors (i.e., the transition of the South from a farm economy dependent on black labor to one relying on machinery, severe poverty, disenfranchisement, racially motivated violence and lynchings). Included in the race relations model but shifting to newer issues involving urbanization is E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Family in Chicago* (1932). His study includes an analysis the destabilizing effects of the Great Migration, including the dismantling and detachment of black migrants from Southern rural kinship ties and culture.

The next major development in African-American migration scholarship evolving from Frazier’s focus and lasting from the Great Depression until the 1950s is termed the ghetto model. This model focuses on ghetto formation, the effects of migration within an urban context, and reflects an increasingly interdisciplinary approach. Other preeminent studies utilizing this model include Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944) and *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* by St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton (1945). The proletariat model, beginning in the 1970s and continuing up through the present, incorporates aspects of black migration previously ignored such as issues of class, gender, connections to rural folk culture and kinship ties. Studies by Peter Gottlieb (1987), James Groomsman (1989), Carole Marks (1989), and Joe W. Trotter exemplify this attempt to reconceptualize black migration by utilizing a variety of approaches including ethnographic research. This approach, particularly the use of oral interviews, forms the basis of two prominent studies within this decade, Nicholas Lemann’s *The Promised Land*: 
The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America (1991), which documents the personal narratives of blacks from the Mississippi Delta and their movement to the North and back "home" again, and Carol Stack's Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South (1996). In describing the "triumphant" returns of black migrants back to the Delta during the Great Migration, Lemann frames their homecomings by situating the precarious nature of the migrants' "success" up North. The magnitude of these homecomings, for those who returned and for those who remained, entered the folklore of the region as part of black Southern cultural memory. These temporary returns informed later permanent returns, a subject discussed in Stack's study, one of the first comprehensive anthropological studies of the return migration movement of blacks which began in the 1970s. Although an understanding of previous migration studies is necessary to undertake my project, Stack's study is crucial to my analysis of post-1970 African-American migration literature because her work is groundbreaking in its treatment of return migration, a relatively new field of black migration studies. Although the "seeking of a promised land" is challenged by Stack, the concept of the quest by blacks for a "promised land" or "Canaan" falls within the tradition of Biblical typology as applied by African-Americans to interpret migration and can arguably be used to address efforts by blacks to return "home." The expression of the Great Migration as an "Exodus" by those involved (the migrants) is highlighted in works such as The Black Church in the African American Experience by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya (1990) and Milton C. Sernett's Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration (1997). In addition to the typology of
the book of Exodus, these works also analyze the identification of blacks and their experiences with the book of Revelations and its narrative of redemption after crisis. Sernett's study examines the folk beliefs of blacks during the Great Migration and their self-fashioning of themselves as a people in bondage in the South leaving for the "Promised Land." Sernett writes, "Participants framed it (the Great Migration) as a religious event—another chapter in the ongoing salvation history of African Americans, rich in symbolic and metaphorical content" (58). My dissertation benefits from the studies of Lincoln, Mamiya, and Sernett in that I seek to link the Biblical typology of the Prodigal Son parable in order to discuss the thematic of return migration/homecomings. In this project, I plan to examine African-American religious and folk beliefs as a means of "reading" the phenomenon of return migration and homecomings as cultural patterns reflected in African-American migration literature after 1970.

2.2 Critical Perspectives: African-American Literature and Southern Literature

My study will include texts by African-American writers, who are Southern natives or "Southern" through familial connection. I will examine their works using both African-American and Southern literary theoretical models to discuss issues regarding construction of regional identity, attachment to place, and the negotiation of "Southern" notions of legacy and tradition. Scholars in both fields have begun within the last two decades to approach the topic of inclusion of African-American narratives within the "Southern" canon and the revising of critical models to reflect such an effort. While critical works like Richard Gray's Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region (1986), Jefferson Humphries' Southern Literature and Literary
Theory (1990), Fred Hobson's *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (1991), and Carol Manning's *The Female Tradition in Southern Literature* (1994) map out ways in which to analyze the discourse of Southern identity and its gendered variations, limited attention is given to African-American writers and thematic subjects. Other studies such as Louis Rubin's *The History of Southern Literature* (1985), and Jefferson Humphries and John Lowe's *The Future of Southern Letters* provide an inclusive framework for the analysis of black Southern literature and its attendant concerns with questions of regional identity and definitions of "home."

Because my topic is so invested in the critique of regional identity through the gaze of racial perspectives, I look to how literary critics address return migration. Thadious Davis, addressing the return migration of blacks, in an essay on the attempts to link race and region in late 20th century Southern literature, writes,

I would suggest that it (return migration) is a laying of claim to a culture and to a region that, though fraught with pain and difficulty, provides a major grounding for identity. At times, I like to think too that this return to the South is a new form of subversion—a preconscious political activity or a subconscious counteraction to the racially and culturally homogenous "Sunbelt." ¹

Davis' argument speaks to the intentions of African-Americans to construct a "place" within their sense of the South as "home."

Two recent major critical studies analyze the Great Migration in African-American literature and are helpful in positioning my study: Farah Jasmine Griffin's *Who Set You Flowin': The African American Migration Narrative* (1995), and Lawrence Rodgers' *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel*...
Griffin's study, interdisciplinary in nature, covers artistic, musical, film and literary narratives exploring the thematic of the Great Migration. Her work addresses the topic of return migration, but is limited to a brief discussion of the return migration narrative in film and popular music. She writes,

Surely, the South's new popularity among certain African-Americans will lead to more developments within the migration narrative; however, because of the dominance of black film and rap music as forms of African-American cultural production in the late twentieth century, it is to these areas that we must keep our eyes and ears attuned for the next developments in the African-American migration narrative.2

It is my intention to provide a critical study of return migration narratives emphasizing forms of African-American popular culture and folklore (church and communal homecomings) and a review of African-American literary production (novel and personal memoir).

Rodgers' study of African-American Great Migration novels also addresses the thematic of return migration in African-American novels, what he refers to as "southern recolonization." Rodgers writes,

The second category (of novels related to migrant culture since Invisible Man), closely related but not a part of the Great Migration novel form, employs a more optimistic means of dismantling the North as the land of promise. [...] these recolonization novels recuperate a sweep of southern geographies where loyalty to the ideal of community is the critical underpinning of black life.3

What Rodgers terms "recolonization" can also be linked to another important study of African-American narrative—Robert Stepto's theory of ascent and immersion in From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative (1979). Stepto argues that the ascent narrative depicts a hero/heroine willing to separate from familial or
communal bonds in an oppressive social structure in order to seek a new, less oppressive environment while the immersion narrative (or component) portrays a hero/heroine undertaking a "ritualized journey into a symbolic South"(167) in an effort to connect with kinship ties. Stepto's theory affords my proposed study the opportunity to reconfigure the ascent/immersion theory and revise ideas of "oppression" as tied to pre-1970s considerations of urban Northern landscape and explore literary figurations of a "new" New South.

With an intention to incorporate critical scholarship of the last two decades on Southern identity and African-American inscriptions of that identity, I have selected a topic which I believe necessitates a full-length critical study and anticipates the continued reexamination of the connections between race and region in African-American and Southern literary scholarship. The idea of "home" as a construct—physical, psychological, or cultural—and returns to that "home" and whether such representations in literature are romanticized or realistically depicted in post-1970s black literature allows for an analysis which can not only test existing critical theories but add to the ongoing conversation regarding the negotiation of "Southern" within an African-American cultural narrative.

2.3 Endnotes


CHAPTER 3: THE RITUALS OF HOMECOMING

Home. You can move away from it, but you never leave it. Not as long as it holds something to be missed.

Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*

But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found. And they began to be merry.

Luke 15. 22-24

In the above quote from Gloria Naylor’s novel *Mama Day*, the phrase that home "holds something to be missed" suggests a realm of possibilities—"something" could be a physical longing for contact with the land or the place of one’s birth and rearing. The word can refer to friends and relatives one has left behind, or memories and feelings of connection, both real and romanticized, one has of home. "Something" assumes a slippery quality, suggesting multiple meanings that are attached to home yet not overtly telling anything. The construct of “home” can be visualized in "something" and what is missed seems to be imbued with a fluidity, encompassing place, people, and memory. And although “something” may appear indefinable, Naylor’s words “never leave” imply a fixity of presence, suggesting that while one may physically move away from home, one can never escape its presence. In the effort to regain the “missing,” I believe Naylor hints that an individual manages to position and maintain the idea of “home,” even while absent from it. Furthermore, to reclaim or recover the "missing," a "son" or "daughter" returns home.

The second quote above, from the parable of the Prodigal Son, illustrates much of what constitutes homecoming lore. The end of the Prodigal Son’s journey
home signifies a beginning, one that commences with ritual. In the prodigal narrative, ritual is employed as a means by which the returning individual and the community of origin work to mediate the act of homecoming. The returning son is unconditionally accepted by his father (and, we can infer, by the community), and the feast served on the son's return is situated as a welcoming act. What the Prodigal narrative reinforces is how a son’s return represents and mandates a (re)birth; his journey away from home is posited as a death, both physical and spiritual, and his absence away from the community is treated as a vital loss. His journey back home terminates in his finding what could be described as the “missing” essence of Naylor’s “something.” As a response to an absent "son"—and I would add "daughter"—a community develops ritual responses to individual acts of homecoming.

Late 20th century African-American texts and folklore celebrations reveal homecoming/return migration rituals that suggest physical, emotional, and spiritual acts of (re)connection akin to those reflected in the Prodigal narrative. Although literature and folklore from numerous cultures can and do feature variations upon the thematic subject of the prodigal figure, the homecoming narrative in late 20th African-American literature and folklore reflects a historical legacy in African-American culture linking Biblical typology with migration. The conflation of familial and community traditions with Biblical meaning serves as a means of narrating an African-American history of place and ancestry, and also reflects current inscriptions of identity, connection, and return.
The implications of death and loss in the Prodigal narrative underscore late 20th century re-examinations of the African-American cultural movement known as the Great Migration. Homecomings serve to recover those of the community who have left, who are “lost,” or even “dead” (spiritually or emotionally). The event also offers a critique of a particular African-American cultural narrative, once invested heavily in the notion that the North was a “promised land.” For return migrants to return home after taking refuge in what was supposed to be a haven or place of boundless economic opportunity, and to do so in a cyclical fashion, suggests that, like the Prodigal narrative, (re)birth occurs from being immersed in the ritual of homecoming and from being accepted by one’s family and/or community.

By examining African-American return migration texts and practices, a pattern emerges involving homecoming rituals. Although they may vary in structure, African-American homecoming narratives feature at least one or more of the following: the "moment of return," or the return migrant's initial appearance before family and friends; a (re)connection with the landscape; a feast or offering of food; and a communal gathering given to welcome the return migrant. My research also reveals that African-American homecoming celebrations, particularly those held by churches, sustain a relatively literal, possibly romanticized interpretation of the Prodigal narrative. However, African-American literary narrative texts not only appropriate Biblical typology; they also signify upon them. As a result, homecoming rituals illuminate the range and complexity of African-American cultural responses to migration.
3.1 Going Back Home: The "Moment of Return"

The road from home leads out to the world and back.

--Carol Stack, *Call to Home*

The act of homecoming begins with the return of absent sons and daughters to a particular site or to a "homeplace," where one may have spent one's childhood or have longstanding familial relationships. The return occurs after an absence, either brief or lengthy; as well, the trip home can take place during a certain time of the year, perhaps during the summer or on a particular holiday. For those black migrants who left the South for jobs up North, the traditional holidays to return home for family reunions and church homecomings usually took place during the Fourth of July or Christmas, times when migrants were usually allowed vacations. For those whose homecomings followed a set pattern each year, these events became a part of the community's life cycle. As a result, homecoming served as a time for renewal, an opportunity to (re)connect. And by doing so, returns allowed both the community and the returnee to openly (re)inscribe and attach meaning to "homeplaces," where both place and identity became negotiated through the enactment of ritualistic practices. In African-American literature and folklore, the initial welcome of the returnee back "home" often reflects the desires of both those who stayed and those who left. Those who have remained "home" anticipate that the returning person will somehow (re)connect with both place and people, so as not forget where one has "come from." The homesite, a place from which the migrant may have left willingly or not, is situated as the stage onto which the prodigal projects, to his or her expectant audience, the appearance of success. The arrival,
then, of the returnee becomes an event in which the physical return of the migrant involves preset notions of status coupled with humility.

An important consideration in analyzing the ritual of homecoming involves the significance of the physical return to "home." This physical journey allows returnees to project their created self-images on those who have not left "home," as well as to negotiate an identity which includes both the desire to leave a place with the yearning to stay and/or return. The relationship which exists between the migrant desiring to come back and the community which, by some accounts, one never leaves emotionally, reflects the anxieties of both parties. Possibly the returnee wants to return to his or her “proving ground,” or as storyteller Earl Henry Hydrick relates, “When you return to your homeplace, [... ] you go back to your proving ground, the place where you had your first cry, gave that first punch you had to throw in order to survive.” Using this idea of the “proving ground,” a place to which one returns in order to gauge one’s progress (or lack thereof), helps us to trace the ritual of the physical journey “home” in African-American folklore, fiction and personal memoir.

The return narrative, that is to say the narrative of homecoming, suggests that either a sense of belonging or loss (or both) can be achieved when one returns “home.” As the entire community responds by attempting to imbue these former residents with a sense of connection to a site and people, the effort to combat the sense of loss affects those on both sides of the relationship.

The narrative of return focuses first on a journey, some might say a quest, back to a place which can, for the returnee, concurrently reflect attitudes, prejudices,
or often idealizations about identity. The physical return holds significance not only for the individual migrant but also for the community of origin and the children of those migrants as the journey home becomes an individual, collective, or generational expression of the desire to connect.

For those blacks who left their Southern towns and farming communities during the period known as the Great Migration, the need to return “home” was overwhelming. If one views homecoming as a quest, then the son or daughter participates in a search, indirectly or directly, to “find” something, a connection or meaning attached to one’s upbringing. The desire to complete a “cycle of migration” often involved a ritual which showed everyone who had remained home that the native son or daughter had “made it.” In studying the influence of the Prodigal Son parable on American and British male writers, David Wyatt denotes the “moment of return” as a climactic event, stating that, “Everything in the parable looks forward to this moment, yet the moment acquires value only by virtue of the story it completes.” 5 Wyatt’s vision of this “moment” is similar to how the African-American migration narrative positions the initial appearance of the return migrant before the community or family members.

An excerpt from Nicholas Lemann’s text The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America exemplifies the contrasting figure of the prodigal with the people and land to which he/she returned:

During the traditional family-reunion periods, July Fourth and Christmas time, people who had made the move would come home wearing dressy clothes and driving new cars. The mere sight of a black person, dressed as a businessman, pulling up to his family’s sharecropper shack in an automobile—sometimes a Cadillac!—was stunning, a paradigm shift, instant dignity. (40)
The lore of migration, for blacks in the South, held that wealth in the North was abundant; therefore, outward shows of success by migrants were not only commonplace but were expected as evidence that the price of leaving was not too high a cost. For these returnees, the impossible was seemingly made possible. Through the act of these homecomings, the newfound wealth and prosperity of those who returned became part of the lore which inspired others to leave. For large groups of individuals who had settled in the North, trips back home to Southern communities were often opportunities to return en masse. Nicholas Lemann writes about how in Chicago, hundreds of clubs for black migrants from Southern towns were organized during the 1970s, as those who had left “... became middle-aged and nostalgic.” One club in particular, the Clarksdalians (those originally from Clarksdale, Mississippi) “rents a fleet of buses once a year to take its members” back home for a reunion (276). This type of pilgrimage can achieve the image of success for an entire community. The significance of the Clarksdalians’ act is twofold: it allows migrants the opportunity to express a collective desire of tracing their way back to the site of origin, and also fulfills the black community's expectation or need to see visible proof that these former residents have succeeded in the material sense and wish to continue relationships with their communal “brothers and sisters.” Such a stunning display of the community's sons and daughters affirmed the communal notion that their decision to leave home for Chicago was not in vain.

To observers of African-American migrant homecomings, returns can serve as dreams realized, as author Bebe Moore Campbell suggests. As a child, Campbell awaited the returns of her uncles to her grandmother's home in Pasquotank County,
North Carolina, each summer for their family reunion. She relates in her memoir *Sweet Summer: Growing Up With and Without My Dad* that the sight of her uncles returning to the family homeplace illustrated the success they had achieved up North. Seeing her uncles' gleaming automobiles and the prosperity they symbolized was, for Campbell, a wondrous sight:

> I loved my aunts, but I watched for my father’s seven brothers. When I saw two dim headlights from the end of the lane grow brighter and brighter and closer, the truth is, I was waiting for my uncles [...]

> My uncles’ cars rolled slowly up to Grandma’s door in shiny splendor. They drove huge Fords, Oldsmobiles, and Pontiacs with pearly whitewalls and big, shiny chrome fenders they’d polished the day before they left Camden or Philly or New York. John, Elijah, Eddie, Cleat, Joe, Sammy, Norman. [...]

> I sneaked peeks of them as they got out of their cars and entered Grandma’s house. They were tall, powerfully built men who moved with energy and grace. Grandma’s boys had done well, pretty wives, healthy children, good factory jobs that would eventually lead to other possibilities. That was their magic: they all believed in their possibilities.

In this portrait of the uncles' annual ritual, what resonates is an emphasis on the depiction of the American dream as realized in their automobiles. The litany of American car brand names—Ford, Oldsmobile, Pontiac—bought for by her uncles' "good factory jobs" suggests that for these men, success was uniquely linked to a national ideal of what constituted the outward manifestation of success, or the "good life." Their participation in the American notion of "hard work equals success" only becomes realized with their departure from the South, an ironic reality for these sons. The hard work of sharecropping or farming their land in the South does not result in success; leaving that land and participating as workers in the manufacturing economy of the North does.
Therefore, the possession and the parading of newly-acquired affluence was expected by the family and community, as a ritual which reflected prosperity that was not only individual but also communal ("Grandma's boys had done well"). In Campbell's recollection, we also discern an emphasis on more than material possessions; we see the manifestation of success in her uncles' "pretty wives, [and] healthy children," so that prosperity extends from these men into future generations. Just lurking, however, beneath the surface of their outward success is a promise of the American dream yet to be fulfilled. In the phrase "good factory jobs that would eventually [emphasis mine] lead to other possibilities," Campbell hints that her uncles have not fully reached the pinnacle of the "possibilities" available to them. For these "tall, powerfully built men who moved with energy and grace," whether the culmination of their dreams is actually achieved, the "magic" they possess resides in their belief in those aspirations. Campbell's admiration of her uncles' "magic" can be viewed as emblematic of the black community's view of their "offspring's" success, their magical transformations one might say, as enacted through the ritual of the physical return. Even many years later, when as a grown woman she attends the funeral of her father, her memories of those anxious moments looking for her uncles' return remain a comforting thought:

I thought of the homecomings of long ago and how I used to stay up all night long with Grandma waiting for them to come up the lane. Looking at them in their dark suits and paisley ties I remembered them bare-chested, gathered around their cars under Grandma's fig tree. I remembered the energy and the dreams that emanated from that place and the strong hands that reached out to me.
Campbell's emphasis on the "energy and dreams" which were part of the myth and lore of the "American dream" for black migrants exists as a powerful image for her and the children of her generation. Her description of homecomings is reflective of many who awaited the returns of their relatives who fled the South. In the act of "coming back" rests the aspirations for those who have left and those who stayed.

In her memoir *Leaving Pipe Shop: Memories of Kin*, Deborah McDowell points out how significant the appearance of success becomes in the return home. While contemplating her upcoming flight home to Alabama, she begins to reminisce about the significance that "traveling home" held in her community:

> I still can't quite decide whether that early fascination with flying was for the thing itself or for what it represented. Throughout the community of Pipe Shop, flying signified prosperity. It was a sign that you had "made it," that you were doing well. It communicated one thing when you took the Greyhound bus and something else again, and better, if you flew . . . Flying was the next rung up from "motoring" on the social mobility ladder. In the days before flying became a novelty, the sign of status was returning home in a long shiny automobile with a horn like Satchmo's muted trumpet. [. . .].

> After a while, though, the fact that flying was the transportation mode of choice of the up-and-coming was signaled by the *World*, which ran front-page photographs, in almost every issue, of someone standing on the steps of an airplane, waving at those below. I would clip them for my scrapbook and picture myself in the spot where the travelers stood.9

In this passage, "looking" successful, upon one's return home, is an essential part of communal homecoming lore. Just as the automobile served as a symbol of achievement in Bebe Moore Campbell's memoirs, Deborah McDowell suggests its significance in her memory: "the sign of status was returning home in a long shiny
automobile with a horn like Satchmo's muted trumpet” (318). Tangible, outward displays such as these gleaming vehicles serve as pronounced symbols to demonstrate to the community that the "good life" can be accomplished. She also points out how, during her upbringing, black-owned newspapers played a key role in publicizing homecomings and that the black community elevated the status of those whose returns achieved an image of success. She expresses a specific hope of many future migrants—that of the overwhelming desire to attain the very same image as projected by those who returned home in "style." Not only does flying seem to signify wealth and status; the trope of flight or flying also seems to embody her own desire to flee, to travel, to discover what lies beyond Pipe Shop. She engages in her own self-projection by cutting the pictures from the "Society" pages and visualizing herself in the role of celebrated, prosperous returnee. By allowing a glimpse of homecoming lore which influenced her as a young girl, McDowell offers a view not unlike other black Southerners whose desires were reflected in the returns of their past neighbors.

However, because this desire to succeed up North was such a powerful impetus for those black migrants who left, going back home often necessitated an appearance of prosperity before their loved ones and friends. Sometimes the unspoken truth was that former residents presented an illusory picture for their families and neighbors. Nicholas Lemann notes, "The migrants were engaging in a good deal of gilding the lily, of course. The new Cadillac was liable to be rented, or to have been bought on credit, and destined to repossessed soon after the return to Chicago”10 The compulsion to engage in the ritual of the physical return, no matter
what the material cost, was for migrants the chance to establish a new identity. For this "new man" or "new woman," the aura of accomplishment, albeit one that might be self-fashioned and imagined, became the fulfillment of the dream which the "promised land" held. The desire for the returnee to measure his self-worth through the gaze of others often dictated this willingness to participate in a staged "moment of return."

The transformation of the prodigal son and his "triumphant" return are the subject of the television movie *Mama Flora's Family* and the novel of the same name by Alex Haley, published posthumously. The "moment of return" is detailed in the novel as family matriarch Flora Palmer welcomes her son Willie back home to Stockton, Tennessee, from Chicago. His return is revealed as an ironic scene, taking place in the train station in contrast to what was his rushed departure to Chicago, one in which he jumped onto the first coming train headed North. Those gathered to greet him see a different man return home to Stockton:

The Willie that stood before them was not the Willie who went away. The departing Willie was a simple, pleasant, country youth who melded into a crowd. The arriving Willie was a slick, sophisticated city man, who stood a long way out from the masses and looked, Albie [Flora's neighbor] thought, slightly ridiculous.

He wore a tangerine-tan zoot suit. The coat pinched at his waist, but then flared wide over his knees. His shirt was bright canary yellow, with a limp, long collar. He wore a pluming, brilliant orange tie. The trousers were fully thirty inches around at the knees, tapering radically to ankle-hugging cuffs. A long, imitation-gold linked chain looped under the coat. His shoes were yellowish-orange Florsheims, with paper-thin soles and sharply pointed, up-bent banana toes.

His hat was enormous, dark orange, Big Apple felt, with a swooping brim and an enormous feather in the hatband. The several rings on his fingers, and his huge, glass-stoned cuff links, glittered, competing with the starry night. [...]
The exterior Willie was all big city, but as he hugged his mama, the simple Willie broke through, and Ernestine [Willie’s girlfriend] saw that he was relieved to be home.

Willie’s outward appearance of confidence and garish garb contrasts sharply with the collective memory of who he was and how he acted when he left home. His desire to establish his identity as cosmopolite, however, is met with resistance by one onlooker, Albie, who deems Willie’s mode of dress “ridiculous.” Haley’s skill in portraying the tensions between blacks who left the South and those who stayed is embodied in the explicitness of the description of Willie’s clothing. Using descriptive language such as “bright canary yellow,” “pluming, brilliant orange,” “sharply pointed, up-bent banana toes,” “swooping,” and “enormous feather” to delineate Willie, Haley depicts him as majestically bird-like, in the guise of a returning peacock, covered in excessive finery for the benefit of himself and the gaze of others. Nevertheless, the telling sign of whether Willie has rejected his past is delivered in the phrase “as he hugged his mama, the simple Willie broke through,” reinforcing the idea of the physical return being a catalyst for the migrant to not only connect to others, but also to himself. The simple man—not in a pejorative sense—that is, the plain, unfettered Willie beneath the gaudiness, convinces his audience of his sincerity by the embrace he gives his mother.

The film *Mama Flora’s Family* extends the image of Willie delivered in the novel, addressing the practice of “gilding” to which migrants subjected themselves in order to create the impression that things “up North” were better than the reality. The character of Willie, portrayed by actor Blair Underwood, arrives in Stockton and emerges triumphantly from the train; true to the novel’s description, he is
dressed in a vibrant tangerine suit. Flora (portrayed by Cicely Tyson) and other
neighbors greet him at the train station, in awe of his seemingly triumphant
demeanor. But days later, he confesses his charade to his girlfriend Ernestine:

| Ernestine. | Everybody’s been talking. You coming back from Chicago, doing so good.... |
| Willie.    | It’s lies. |
| E.         | What you mean, lies? |
| W.         | It’s all lies. I ain’t got no money. Ain’t nothing I got on paid for. Dollar come in one hand, go right out the next. What I been doing up there is been gambling, and drinking, and running around. |

Willie’s “moment of triumph” is uncovered as a sham, an act put on for his
mother, his girlfriend, the community of Stockton, Tennessee, and ultimately, for
Willie himself. Unlike the Biblical Prodigal Son, Willie does not return home as a
humiliated figure but rather feigns sophistication and cockiness. Although he basks
temporarily in the attention given him by the audience at the train station and later
in town, his masquerade progressively disintegrates, causing him to reveal his
discontent. That he confides only in Ernestine is a rather ironic gesture, for in doing
so, he chooses to still remain an object of admiration for the community and, most
notably, for his mother, as opposed to exposing the harshness of his urban milieu.
His conflict, between the reality of his hand-to-mouth existence and the illusion of
prosperity he seems forced to portray, depicts the dilemma of returning migrants
desperately wanting to demonstrate to their communities of origin that their
journeys away from “home” were not failed ventures.

Toni Morrison’s *Sula* also illustrates the “moment of return” and how, as an
African-American homecoming ritual, it signifies wealth and success to the
observing community. Although the novel is set in Medallion, Ohio, a small
Northern village, the majority of black residents are migrants from the South, including Sula's grandmother, Eva. Sula's arrival by train to her hometown and subsequent promenade into the "Bottom," as the black neighborhood is known, after her ten-year absence occur on a day "accompanied by a plague of robins" (89). The suggestion of Biblical typology, specifically of the Exodus, is introduced in "the plague of robins" which attends Sula's appearance. This allusion to the Exodus, which was an integral figuration of the Great Migration for African-Americans, is posited ironically in the text, for Sula is returning from her migration. Milton Sernett in his study on African-American religion and the Great Migration relates that blacks inscribed their movement out of the South with religious meaning:

Black southerners were told by exodus enthusiasts in the North that this was no time to wait. Freedom's train was on the roll. The temptation to join others who were participating in the divine drama was strong. Since the movement was God's doing, so the argument went, all should climb aboard freedom's train.13

Morrison continues to signify upon the Exodus typology of the Great Migration with the image of the train. That Sula returns on the "Cincinnati Flyer" is significant, for it evokes the mode of transportation most blacks rode away on in their flight from home during the Great Migration. Trains like the Illinois Central took blacks from places like the Mississippi Delta on into Chicago, so that the train signified more than movement; in African-American lore, it was emblematic of freedom and progress. Sula returns to Medallion regally bearing the accoutrements of a cosmopolite, managing to display the appearance of "success":

Sula stepped off the Cincinnati Flyer into the robin shit and began the long climb up into the Bottom. She was dressed in a manner that
was as close to a movie star as anyone would ever see. A black crepe
dress splashed with pink and yellow zinnias, foxtails, a black felt hat
with the veil of net lowered over one eye. In her right hand was a
black purse with a beaded clasp and in her left a red leather traveling
case, so small, so charming—no one had seen anything like it ever
before, including the mayor’s wife and the music teacher, both of
whom had been to Rome (90).

In this passage, Morrison subverts the traditional image of the triumphant prodigal
figure. The contrast between Sula’s arrival into town by “Flyer” and her immediate
descent from the train into animal excrement is a stark reversal of the romanticized
return featuring the glorified returnee. In this description, Sula’s "difference" is
reflected initially through her possessions. That Sula is outfitted in trappings unlike
any seen by the local folk signifies her supposed success to the community. The
stylishness and cost of her clothing, including her “foxtails,” conveys to the
community the image of wealth. But the “veil over one eye” hints at the distance
between Sula and “home.” Under the full gaze of the community, Sula approaches
them with one eye uncovered and the other hidden, casting her eye on them while
unwilling to let her former neighbors truly “see” her. The uncovered eye is a
testament to the fact that she has seen the world and come back home as eyewitness.
Yet she is an enigma for no one knows from where she has come, and no advance
notice has been sent of her coming.

Since the clothing and accessories have not been previously "seen" (and
therefore validated) by the fashionable white ladies of Medallion, Sula is marked as
"other." Her “red leather traveling bag” and black purse with its “beaded clasp” are
unrecognizable by the women in the town who have been abroad, even to Rome, a
traditional destination for pilgrimages. Sula carries the proud demeanor and
trendsetting dress of one who has traveled to places no one else has visited. She is thus set apart from both blacks and whites in Medallion. In the delineation of Sula's material goods, Morrison illustrates how the "moment of return" serves as a tableau, in which the returning migrant engages in the act of self-fashioning. Sula does not disappoint: rather she understands what is expected of her and willingly performs.

The community's first reactions to Sula also suggest the initial "otherness" of the migrant. Morrison describes their reactions using the metaphor of the gaze. It is a collective gaze of Medallion which greets her, but depending upon the onlooker, that gaze is subjective, resulting in a myriad of "readings." In the following passage, the gaze can reflect possible sexual desire; smoldering, uneasy jealousy from housewives; or the naïve awe of high schoolers:

Walking up the hill toward Carpenter's Road, the heels and sides of her pumps edged with drying bird shit, she attracted the glances of old men sitting on stone benches in front of the courthouse, housewives throwing buckets of water on their sidewalks, and high school students on their way home for lunch. By the time she reached the Bottom, the news of her return had brought the black people out on their porches or to their windows. There were scattered hellos and nods but mostly stares. (91)

As news travels quickly along the informal network of communication in the black community, or the "grapevine," Sula's presence is broadcast rapidly throughout the black community and word reaches the Bottom—her "proving ground," so to speak. Though instead of an outpouring of well wishes like those greeting the Biblical Prodigal Son, she is greeted hesitantly ("scattered hellos and nods"), even rudely by her former neighbors in the form of stares. Morrison reinscribes homecoming in this scene with a sense of foreboding, a not-so-subtle hint that this returning
migrant's arrival brings discord. An even more inauspicious sign of impending turmoil greets her appearance at her grandmother's house—four dead robins.

This homecoming challenges the romanticized ritual of the physical return as depicted in the Biblical prodigal narrative; Sula is not welcomed by her community nor by her grandmother, Eva. The initial meeting between them is rather hostile:

> When Sula opened the door she (Eva) raised her eyes and said, "I might have knowed them birds meant something. Where's your coat?"
> Sula threw herself on Eva's bed. "The rest of my stuff will be on later."
> "I should hope so. Them little old furry tails ain't going to do you no more good than they did that fox that was wearing them." (91)

The Biblical image of the father welcoming the Prodigal Son, with compassion and affection, resonates within this passage. Yet Eva's immediate belittling of Sula's most conspicuous display of affluence ("them little old furry tails") negates the typology. Instead of a traditional greeting, full of complimentary remarks, given by a (grand)parent to a daughter upon her return home, neither woman utters "Hello" or inquires of the other's well-being. Through this antagonistic exchange, the narrative manages to deconstruct an accepted homecoming ritual and "home" fails to be configured.

Even though African-American homecoming lore tends to provide a more romanticized depiction of the "moment of return," there can be no denying that the returnee's attendant desire to impress juxtaposed with the expectations of the community of origin holds provides much potential for conflict. By focusing on the tension that can exist when return migrants appear before their respective
communities, *Mama Flora's Family* and *Sula* revise the "moment of return" ritual by critiquing the prodigal narrative and the romanticized welcome.

In contrast, a more optimistic depiction of the "moment of return" emerges early on in Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day*. Cocoa, granddaughter of Abigail Day and grandniece of Mama (Miranda) Day, returns to Willow Springs each August. Although she has moved to New York City, going back home is a ritual Cocoa places above all other responsibilities and duties. In an interview for a job that she desperately needs, Cocoa tells her interviewer and future husband George that she is unable to begin working right away, adding, "I have to go home every August." She impresses upon him the importance of her trip home ("have to"), indicating that her journey back comes before all else, including an opportunity to be gainfully employed.

Cocoa's homecoming is positioned as one that is anxiously expected by the community. Her grandmother Abigail prepares for the arrival with great attention to detail, sweeping her front porch diligently. Abigail's home is described as a comforting space:

> Inside, Abigail's living room gleams with lemon oil and a light breeze moves her freshly starched curtains. A bunch of wildflowers—daisies, periwinkles, marsh fern—sits in their mama's cut-glass vase on the mantelpiece. Off to the right, the spare bedroom has a new rag rug on its polished floor which matches the ruffled bedcover and throw pillows. More wildflowers are arranged on the night table and dresser.

A sense of "home" is provided by the bounty of nature used to decorate throughout the house. The wildflowers are depicted as Abigail's offspring; they are displayed in "their mama's vase," establishing Abigail as "Mother" of nature. The "freshly
starched curtains" signify the time and effort taken by Abigail to show Cocoa that she is important, loved, and eagerly awaited. A new "rag rug" which matches the bedroom ensemble is indicative of Abigail’s handiwork and practice of a folk craft. Nothing pretentious or artificial marks this "moment of return," and Cocoa's arrival home is described thus:

Miranda watches Cocoa approach with her grandmother's arms tightly around her waist. She thinks for a moment that the sun musta come from beneath the clouds again and actually glances up. When did it happen—this kind of blooming from pale to gold? . . . she strides so proud, a sunflower against the brown arms over hers, the sweat flowing from the reddish gold hair and absorbing every bit of light to fling it back against those high cheekbones, down the collarbone, on the line of the pelvis, pressing against the thin summer cotton. The lean thighs, tight hips, strides flashing light between the blur of strong legs -- pure black.16

Cocoa's appearance before the two matriarchs of the Day family allows those who welcome her a moment for introspection and admiration of their progeny. While other works focus on the outer garb of the returning migrant, Mama Day centers on the allure of Cocoa's own physical beauty. Cocoa's attractiveness is reflected in the use of metaphors which underscore her connections to the landscape; her "moment of return" is akin to the dawning of sunlight: "the sun musta come from beneath the clouds again." In the eyes of Mama Day, her grandniece's countenance is so luminous that she is both life and life-giving. In turn, the progression of Cocoa's development is described in natural terms, for she is a "sunflower" that "blooms" into maturity. She not only projects and absorbs light, she is light. And, now that she has returned to her place of origin, her bearing exudes confidence: "she strides so proud." In witnessing this return, Mama Day recognizes the sensuality of Cocoa's physical presence; the older woman takes note of the "lean thighs, tight
hips, the long strides flashing light between the blur of strong legs." Yet unlike the
disparaging public gaze in *Sula*, *Mama Day* presents an adoring great-aunt who sees
her grandniece as a bearer of the family legacy: "But the "great, grand Mother"
(48). Here, Cocoa is portrayed, in language reinforcing her sexuality and possible
latent fertility, as the Day who will carry on the Days. Instead of a figure that
returns home as an affected image of success or serves as the object of heightened
animosity, Cocoa is characterized as not only the Days' link to a matriarchal past but
also embodies their anticipations for the future.

Whether suggesting hopefulness or skepticism, the "moment of return" in
African-American return migration narratives reveals itself as an evaluative act.
Those who come back home are subject to the communal gaze, one that can admire,
revile, or intensely scrutinize. A returnee's projection of success to the community
exists as more than just an individually self-directed desire; it is an expectation, a
test of sorts that allows both migrant and family to estimate what has been gained,
what has been lost, and most importantly, what of one's origins has been retained.

### 3.2 No Place Like Home: Landscape in the Homecoming Narrative

> When I think of home, I think of a resting place
A place where there's peace, quiet, and serenity...
--Stephanie Mills, "Home"\(^{17}\)

In these lines from the popular Broadway musical "The Wiz," which
featured an all-black cast, the suggestion is of home existing as a place that provides
comfort and connection. The link between regeneration and landscape is an idea
that is not only established in this example from African-American popular lore, but
is also represented in African-American homecoming narratives, as landscape exerts
tremendous influence on the prodigal figure. Often for the migrant who ventures North, memory of home sustains hope and acts as catalyst for return. In Marita Golden's novel *Long Distance Life*, Naomi Reeves, migrates to Washington, DC, from Spring Hope, North Carolina, but during one of her visits back home reflects:

No place else smells like the South in springtime—the azaleas, the flowering dogwood just bust out and you can't hardly smell nothing else. [...] I realized that it was the beauty and the feel of the South that I missed, living in the North. 18

As Naomi explores what constitutes her longing for the South, the expression of that longing is denoted in detailed sensory images, highlighting the importance that geography impresses upon the returning figure. On the influence of geography and its inscription upon one's perception of place, Kent Ryden writes in his work *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*:

A knowledge of place is grounded in those aspects of the environment which we appreciate through the senses and through movement: color, texture, slope, quality of light, the feel of wind, the sounds and sights carried by that wind. 19

This tactile method of experiencing place is one that can be used to map the ritual involving the (re)connection to landscape in African-American homecoming narratives. However, making the journey back home uncovers not just those memories which are pleasurable; the journey also reveals the animosity felt by returnees toward their "homeplaces." Of this conflicting emotion for the landscape that return migrants have, Carol Stack writes:

Over the years, as time compounded the mileage that removed migrants from their homeplaces, the image of the South they carried in their hearts could acquire a life of its own, swelling into an obsession, simplifying into a logic, embittering one moment and sweetening the next. Embittered men and women remembered fields and pecan groves, funerals, red bugs and thunderstorms, dark creek
water, foul-mouthed white bullies, broken bottles in the ditch, and the sound of car tires spitting gravel on a summer night. People who pulled away from those memories still recalled the sound of the tires, perhaps, as a faint soundtrack for a long-ago family snapshot: children, dogs, grown-ups, all settled down on the front porch of a summer's evening, back when the future was only a wondering [...].

Stack identifies the return migrant's yoking of sensuous images with nostalgic longing, suggesting the disillusionment that frequently accompanies these memories. The meshing of sadness and resentment ("funerals," "foul-mouthed white bullies") with pleasant scenes of home ("fields and pecan groves," "front porch of a summer's evening") constitutes a ritual which is not always pleasurable for those who have left:

On some days, for some people, memory of the South could run something like this: home of my ancestors, site of my blood and shame, focus of my birthright, still to be redeemed.

At other times the memory is milder: garden of my childhood, home of love's embrace, clear skies, lost sanctuary.

Both remembrances collide in people's voices, and either or both can stir the romantic and the idealist. But as people make the journey home, remembrance also collides with, and eventually falls witness to experience.

Here, the effort to anticipate and eventually confront the reality of place shapes the migrant's ultimate (re)conciliation or (re)negotiation with the "place" called home. In examining this aspect of homecoming, it is helpful to consider Robert Stepto's *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* and his idea of symbolic geography. This notion focuses on the idea that a landscape becomes symbolic in literature when it is a region in time and space offering spatial expressions of social structures and ritual grounds on the one hand, and of *communitas* and *genius loci* on the other.
With this emphasis, Stepto extends the theoretical framework of Victor Turner, whose work on "ritual topography" explores the ending stance of the hero-narrator, through his identification of and with rituals and ritual ground (67). It is Stepto's definition which can be helpful in addressing the relationships or connections between ritual and what is considered by returnees to be "home." The significance of place frames the physical return such that in African-American homecoming narratives, those who return home often reaffirm, but also sometimes resist, the connection they have to the landscape.

When the relationship between a returning figure and the landscape is one that emphasizes the restorative qualities of place, first sightings of "home" are often richly described. Walter Mosley's *Gone Fishin'* charts the journey of Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins and his best friend Mouse Alexander to the latter's hometown of Pariah, Texas. A novel set in 1939 before their later migration to Los Angeles, *Gone Fishin'* depicts Easy as an "adopted" son of Pariah by virtue of being a brother-like best friend to Mouse. Although forced to make the trip from Houston against his better judgement, Easy accompanies his friend to the flatlands of south Texas. Easy paints a picture of a place that is enchanting but not always seen favorably by outsiders:

> When we drove off it was still way before dawn. […] People don't understand southern Texas. They think that the land there is ugly and flat. […] If they could see Texas in the early dawn like I saw it that day they would know a Texas that is full of potential from the smallest rock to the oldest woman on the farm.

> The road wasn't paved or landscaped. On either side there were dense shrubs and bushes with knotty pines and cherry and pear
trees scattered here and there. I was especially aware of the magnolias, their flowers looking like white faces staring down from shadow.

They say it's like a desert down there, and they're right—at least sometimes. There are stretches of land that have hardly anything growing, but even then it's no simple story. Texas is made up of every kind of soil; there's red clay and gray sod and fertile brown, shipped in or strained over by poor farmers trying to make the land work. The earth gives you the feeling of confidence because it's so much and so different and mainly, because it's got the patience to be there not ever having to look for a better place. (21-22)

During these quiet moments while traveling back to Pariah, Easy contemplates his relationship to the landscape while defending its beauty and utility. In doing so, Easy claims the south Texas terrain for his own. Though the name of the town evokes the suggestion that perhaps the two returnees are "outcasts," Easy proves, through his reflections, that he is no stranger in this land. The language he uses to read the land's hidden nuances displays his reverence for a place not admired by many. By positioning himself as insider ("they're wrong," "If they could see [... ] like I saw it that that day they would know"), Easy articulates a connection to the symbolic notion of Pariah as "home." Mosley emphasizes man's handiwork and toil in the creation of this land ("shipped in or strained over"), working to mold its multicolored configurations. Yet what is most striking in this passage is Mosley's description of land—unlike man—having the "patience to be there not ever having to look for a better place." This statement critiques the constant movement of man, represented in Easy and Mouse's migration from the area, in a search for opportunity.

Similarly, in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, an "adopted" son travels to the South and finds both meaning and attachment in his introduction to the landscape.
Returning with his wife Cocoa to her home, George, a native New Yorker, makes his first trip to Willow Springs, an isolated island hamlet off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. Although he shows an initial wariness, George registers a sense of being anchored to this "home":

My suspicions were confirmed when we drove over that shaky wooden bridge: you had not prepared me for paradise. [ . . . ] Sure, I can describe what I saw: a sleepy little section of wooden storefronts, then sporadic houses of stucco, brick, and clapboard all framed by palmettos, live oaks, and flowering bushes; every now and then a span of marshland, a patch of woods. But how do I describe air that thickens so that it seems as solid as the water, causing colors and sounds and textures to actually float in it? So as that old blue truck crept along, there was no choice but to breathe in lungfuls of oaks dripping with silvery gray moss, the high leaning pines. My nose and mouth were coated with the various shades of greens, browns, and golds in the muddy flatlands.

And if someone had asked me about the fragrance from the whisperings of the palmettos, or the distant rush of the surf, I would have said that it all smelled like forever. (175)

George's first impression of Willow Springs reflects the awe he experiences in the power that nature holds over him. The visual cornucopia of sight and sound which envelops him is expansive, so that any prior misgivings he held about going give way to an overwhelming sense of contentment. This "place," this "home," is beyond paradise—it is "other"worldly. There is no place like home, and indeed there is no place like this home. For George, the result of his accompanying Cocoa on her annual trip home is encapsulated in the phrase "it all smelled like forever." These words are ironic, for this arrival, his homecoming, foreshadows his imminent death in the novel. He is linked "forever" to this landscape; his connection to this place is irrevocable. Naylor offers a picture of an "adopted" prodigal figure in George, a
character whose love for the physical beauty of Willow Springs and respect for its spiritual qualities mark him as "son."

African-American homecoming narratives that depict an admiration of the Southern landscape are not limited to only those who left their communities. The fondness for the land also extended to the children of these migrants. Each summer, the offspring of those who left returned to visit with grandparents, aunts and uncles. For Bebe Moore Campbell, who waited for each June to visit her dad and grandmother in North Carolina, the recognition was that she was not alone in making these summer sojourns to the South or finding connections to the land. She relates,

It wasn’t my ritual alone, of course. I was like a lot of northern Black children making the annual trek down south to the Carolinas, to Georgia, Alabama, or Mississippi. Across Philly in the summer of 1957, hundreds, maybe thousands of black kids were packed and waiting to be driven to wide open spaces, barefoot living, outhouses, watermelon patches, swimming holes, Grandma. Daddy.23

The concerted effort of migrants to continue these generational attachments becomes a realized dream with the ritualized returns of their children. For these opportunities to connect with relatives are coupled with, as Campbell points out, to identify with the region, the land. Her returns help her to develop a “sense” of place, a connection with the “wide open spaces” and “watermelon patches,” and with a place that is able to evoke both tactile memories (“barefoot living”) and emotional ones (“Grandma,” “Daddy”). As Campbell’s memoir suggests, homecoming rituals for the children of returnees serve to connect them physically to the notion of place inherent in the cycle of return.

40

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Stepto also posits the concept of “ritual grounds,” which provides another means by which to interpret how site functions in the homecoming act. He writes,

Ritual grounds are those specifically Afro-American spatial configurations within the structural topography that are, in varying ways, elaborate responses to social structure in this world [...]

Afro-American ritual grounds are quite frequently[...] spatial expressions within a structured topography of the “double life” [... ]giving rise to “double words and double ideals.”

It is from within Stepto’s theory identifying ritual grounds as African-American responses to reality that homecomings and return migration can be read as responses to the reality of African-American displacement and disconnection as a result of migration. Further, the notion of the “double ideal” to which Stepto refers can be applied to the construct of home as a “ritual ground” for the Southern return migrant who also happens to be black. For him or her, home and the memories it evokes can represent a myriad of dualities, such as pain/joy, life/death, and social acceptance/rejection. Inherent in the construct of home and act of homecoming in contemporary African-American representation is a state of tension, an unfolding that meshes memory, reality, romance, and myth. As anthropologist Carol Stack notes:

The South, scene of grief and suffering for black Americans, never ceased to represent home to many city dwellers. The people returning there are not fools; they are not seeking a promised land. They know that home is a vexed place, [emphasis added] and they often consider it a virtually unchanged place.

If "home" can be viewed as a "vexed place," representing both comfort and anxiety, then the ritual of homecoming can reveal similar sentiments.

For those returnees who experience conflicting feelings about the landscape, the same sense of dissatisfaction may be held regarding "home." Of the association
of the "place" of "home" with one's emotional ties, Kent Ryden writes, "Part of the sentiment which people feel for places derives from the feelings of identification that they form with those places" (39). For Deborah McDowell, coming to terms with her departure from home is reflected in her observations and memories of Pipe Shop, a black community located in Bessemer, Alabama. On one trip back to Pipe Shop, McDowell recognizes that her old neighborhood is slowly showing the signs of a declining steel industry as the place she grew up in seems dramatically different than the one she sees right before her:

You have to drive through Pipe Shop to get to Auntee's house, just three miles west of U. S. Pipe and Foundry. We flashed past boarded-up houses where junked cars without tires stood out front on cement blocks. Each time I return, more houses are torn down. Mama Lucy's house is gone, along with Miss Georgia's shot house. Those remaining are in need of paint, repairs, reseeded grass, and flowers. [ . . . . ]

As we pulled into Auntee's driveway, I could see the effects of the Alabama drought. The grass was brown, dry, patchy, and Auntee's blue hydrangeas were barely hanging on to life. There was no sign of rain. Inside the dejected-looking house, all the curtains were drawn, enveloping each room in darkness. The air conditioner blasted stale refrigerated air.²⁶

Each image of Pipe Shop mentioned is used to indicate the dearth of life in the community and by doing so, also raises the question of McDowell's own conflicting feelings about her old neighborhood. Although her aunt constantly admonishes her to "come home" to visit or live, McDowell resists these entreaties, finally discovering the reason for her resistance:

Why would I want to return to Alabama? I had always silently asked myself whenever Auntee laid the pressure on. While summer's palette, its sounds and smells, had framed my childhood memories in Pipe Shop, at least from adolescence onward, the place looks sere and desolate in my mind's eye and conjures up the sadness I often
feel when roses shed their petals and magnolia blossoms turn from cream to rust.\textsuperscript{27}

The use of natural tropes, shedding rose petals and decaying magnolia blossoms, to describe her own sense of sorrow at the loss of her community's vitality reinforces the relationship she once held with the land. Landscape, for McDowell, is not only a tableau that she observes but becomes a means through which she defines her own self-concept. The decline in the physical appearance of her community results in the fading of a notion of (re)connection and, in McDowell's case, establishes the disjunctive relationship between landscape and returnee.

The language used to indicate the role of place in African-American homecoming narratives is significant because of how terrain frames emotional connection or detachment. For the returning migrant, place remains a dominant construct in marking and reinscribing identity. Encountering the palpability of "home" can serve as an act of reclaiming but may also reveal heightened anxieties, as black return migrants engaged in the ritual of homecoming often contend with conflicting emotions regarding "home."

3.3 Sitting at the "Welcome Table": Food, Feast and Home

Naomi said nothing the evening she saw Esther get out of a taxi in front of the house, for she had seen her daughter's return in a dream a week earlier [ ... ] "Come on up here, gal. I knew you was coming home tonight and I got a sweet potato pie in the house with your name on it."

--Marita Golden, \textit{Long Distance Life}\textsuperscript{28}

In the excerpt above, Naomi welcomes her daughter Esther back from a sojourn down to the deep South, a trip taken to volunteer in the civil rights movement. Esther's homecoming, foreseen by her mother in a vision, prompts Naomi's offering
of sweet potato pie, a signal indicating that the distance which has thus separated them has now been traversed. The offering of food, then, becomes a mediating act which engages those who have remained home with those who have left but return.29

Food—its symbolic representations, its preparation, its ritualistic presentations—often embodies "home" for the displaced or returning migrant. The African-American homecoming narrative and its focus on feast is significant in that the offering of food not only signifies hospitality, but also the end of a journey back to family and community. The offering and sharing of food becomes part of the ritualistic connection to "home," much like the Prodigal Son narrative, in which the welcoming father announces, "And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry" (Luke 15: 23). A son's return, his acceptance by the parent and community, and the feast which commemorates his homecoming merge in one expressive act. While the Prodigal Son narrative focuses on a father's welcome of his son, African-American homecoming narratives in my study both encapsulate and revise the subject of a parent's welcome of a child as extended family figures (grandparents, aunts, great-aunts) emerge as keepers of the familial feast tradition.

Bebe Moore Campbell, in her autobiographical narrative Sweet Summer: Growing Up With and Without My Dad, relates how the women in her family traditionally prepare their family reunion feast every Fourth of July, the time of the year when all of her aunts and uncles returned "home" to North Carolina from up North. The scene she describes is one of great anticipation:
By Saturday evening everyone had arrived. Grandma moved around her blackened wood stove with more gusto than usual. Bustling in her pantry, she pulled down mason jars full of fruit: peach and pear preserves, pickled watermelon rind, stewed tomatoes, corn. The kitchen smelled sweet. My aunts helped with the cooking. The women swished around the stove, pulled together like rounded bits of darkened steel under the kitchen's magnetic spell. Their voices were soft music, their words like gentle tinkling. (68-69)

This description designates her grandmother as the primary cook and keeper of the feast ritual, for her "aunts helped with the cooking." As suggested by the variety of foods brought by her grandmother out of storage, the occasion also merits a show of bountifulness. The sights, smells, and sounds of the kitchen offer a picture of the familial cooperation in making the feast ready. Not only does the preparation of food serve as a mediating act to being together those who have returned with those who have remained, it also brings together three generations of women. By examining the passage closely, Campbell's language reveals that while her grandmother and aunts are busy in the kitchen, she observes them closely, her descriptions suggesting that she watches from a vantage point in the kitchen. The kitchen becomes a comforting space, where the mediating cooking rituals before the homecoming feast are enacted to continue the traditions that bind maternal (and thus all) family ties.

A similar display of matriarch-centered feast preparation is found in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. The return of Ophelia, whose pet name is Cocoa, to Willow Springs each August is anticipated by her grandmother Abigail and her great-aunt Miranda, known by all in the small community as "Mama Day." Before the arrival of "Baby Girl," the very first pet name given Cocoa by Abigail and Miranda, both
older women begin to plan what will be cooked and served for her dinner. Although Abigail goads Mama Day to participate in the cooking, Mama Day's initial resistance demonstrates how meal preparation for the returnee can serve as a mediating act. Miranda's dissatisfaction with Cocoa's independent streak results in Abigail's cajoling, seen in this exchange between the two older women:

(Abigail to Miranda) "Listen, bring me over a batch of that dried rosemary you got out at the other place to season this pork shoulder—Baby Girl loves herself some roast pork. And a good half-dozen eggs—I'll do up one jelly and one coconut cake. We only got two weeks to fatten her up—know she gonna come dragging in here puny as the law allows—'less you wanna make the jelly and I'll do the coconut. Your jelly cakes always turn out better than mine."

"I ain't making her nothing, 'cause she's too fresh. You go spend all day over a hot stove in this heat—and all my eggs is for setting now."

"A good half-dozen now, Miranda. And did you know it's almost nine o'clock?"

"Dear Lord, let me get off this phone. See you in the by-and-by."

"The by-and-by." 30

Even though there is a hint that because of her stubbornness, Mama Day might refuse to cook for Cocoa, her appearance of resistance is exposed as a sham. The urgency in her last remarks ("Dear Lord, let me get off this phone") belie her posturing as cantankerous and unwelcoming. Soon Mama Day is immersed in the ritual of gathering foodstuffs in order to prepare the welcoming meal, and she gets ready to bake a cake for the occasion:

The bowls come out, the flour, the butter—she'd sleep tonight, sure enough. She sets the square of butter into the bowl to soften, takes an old shoe box and candle from beneath the cabinets, and goes out her back door. She was gonna need at least six fresh eggs for her two cakes, and then six for Abigail's—a good dozen, and Baby Girl ain't worth a one. (40)
Despite her feigned gruffness, Mama Day takes part in this ritual as it constitutes an integral part of Cocoa's homecoming. In that food acts a metaphor for the ties which link Cocoa to her maternal kinfolk, the meal served upon her return as well as all preliminary preparations are identified as gestures which signify reconciliation.

In *Mama Day*, the offering of food to loved ones who have returned home is again represented in the depiction of the feast given to welcome Cocoa and her husband George to Willow Springs, on the occasion of his first trip "home." Theirs is an eagerly awaited arrival, and the bounteous spread offered by Abigail is a matter of pride, described thus:

Miranda brings over her berry cobbler a little bit before suppertime and it seems to her that Abigail done tried to give Cocoa and George a wedding feast single-handed. There's hardly no place on that table for the eating plates with all them platters of God-knows-everything. Abigail looks real cross-eyed at the pan in Miranda's hand, saying that she had baked up and frozen some decent cakes, figuring she'd do something poor-mouth like that [... ] Miranda says there ain't no point in stuffin' them to death on the first night, it was gonna take the two weeks they'd be here just to finish the food on that table. And why put on airs? [...]But once they all sit down to supper, the butter Abigail's got somewhere on that table would melt in their mouths.31

Not only is the abundance of food that is proffered to the newly arrived couple of importance but also, to Abigail, the type of food. She deems Miranda's cobbler too common for the formality and magnitude of such an event as the homecoming of their "children." The tension between the two sisters— one striving to put all her best wares and dishes before the couple, the other intent on presenting simpler fare and manners—suggests a hint of discord. However, this feast which brings the family together physically also manages to establish harmony, albeit temporarily.
During dinner, the couple learns that another event is soon to be given in their honor. The community is as ready to welcome Cocoa and George to Willow Springs as Mama Day and Abigail are to present them. In this exchange, Mama Day, anticipating Cocoa's disapproval, informs the couple of the impending plans while her sister Abigail understates the significance of the celebration and the amount of food that will be served:

"Now, tell us, what y'all got planned--for every day except this Friday."
"Why Friday?" Cocoa asks.
"Cause me and Abigail thought we'd throw a little party."
"Oh, you mean like the wedding parties Ophelia's told me about?"
"Oh no, nothing fancy like a wedding feast," Abigail says to him, straightening up and using her best English. "You've been married too long for that. But some of the neighbors are anxious to meet you and a few family friends--the minister, the school principal, [...] and all. We'd just bake a little something, fix up a bowl of punch. . . ."
"Since when have Reverend Hooper and the principal been close friends of ours? And Dr. Smithfield and Mama Day are rarely on speaking terms--he says she steals his patients. The only real close friends we have are Dr. Buzzard and . . ."
Miranda cuts her off. "Ignorance is a mighty ugly thing to watch in action. It's worse than spite and envy. You bring yourself home once a year in the last eleven years and you're gonna sit there and tell your grandma who we got for friends and who we don't? And besides, nobody was talking to your little yellow tail. If you got better plans for Friday, you can go off and we'll have the party without you." (179)

In the effort to introduce George to their neighbors, Mama Day invokes the ire of Cocoa, who protests against what she perceives to be an excessive amount of attention paid to her coming home with her new husband. Although aware of the wedding feast tradition as celebrated in Willow Springs, George is oblivious to the machinations of the elderly women, who are determined to commemorate the return
of their "baby girl" and newfound spouse with an impressive spread. It is evident that hosting the occasion—a converging of feast with welcoming ritual—provides the two women an opportunity to allow their community to observe and participate in a public showing of (re)connection and acceptance. In fact, it is a sense of community from which the wedding feast is derived, identified by the novel's narrator as a custom joining kin with food and festivity:

The wedding dinner is a big thing, [...] About six months after they [the couple] start keeping house, their folks and neighbors will cook up one something of a feast. We wait half a year to make sure it's worth going through the trouble—human nature being what it is and all. No point barbecuing a whole side of meat, frying tons of fish from The Sound, and using up a barrel of flour making cakes and pies if she's gonna be back home with her mama before the food gets digested good. So if this thing of Cocoa's is going to last that distance, the pots and pans will be out when she brings him down mid-August (133).

The irony of the statement "something of a feast" is projected in the litany of enormous amounts of food that are expected at such a dinner. The "side of meat," "tons of fish," and "barrel of flour" embody the overflowing generosity from family and community that is extended toward the couple. In his examination of feast days, Mikhail Bakhtin indicates that they denote "the doors of the home are open to guests, as they were originally open to 'all the world'"32 Extending Bakhtin's reading to the treatment of feast in Mama Day positions a ceremony that, through the presence of a bounteous feast, diminishes distance between host and guest.

Cocoa voices her displeasure at a gathering of this type and, by extension, resists the communal and familial desire for such a ritual. Although reassured by her grandmother that the event will not be a "wedding feast," Cocoa knows that essentially it will be exactly that. Reminded by Mama Day that by moving away
she has disconnected herself from the practice and appreciation of such events, Cocoa is literally robbed of the "last word" on the subject by Mama Day. The matriarch's will remains sovereign, and Cocoa is compelled to show her proper respect to her "homefolk." Because the initial tension of their exchange, during the practice of one ritual feast, centers on the maintenance of yet another feast tradition, Naylor reinforces how offering and accepting of food can be positioned as mediating acts in the African-American homecoming narrative. Naylor posits a homecoming ritual whereby feast articulates a communal desire to welcome Cocoa, a returning migrant, and George, now an "adopted" son by marriage, back "home."

As a sign of their respect for the Days, everyone in Willow Springs attends the affair:

Cars are parked all along the roadbed and jammed into Abigail's front yard. This being a word-of-mouth invitation, anybody with a mouth to wrap around some peach pie shows up [...] Most folks are in what you'd call their middling clothes: a little fancier than everyday since it ain't every day you get invited to meet a visitor from New York City, and a little less than Sunday wear, him hardly being the angel Gabriel. (235)

In the contrast between the openness and informality ("word-of-mouth invitation") of this gathering with the earlier, private, more formal homecoming dinner, Naylor shows how the traditional homecoming feast can accommodate communal desire for (re)connection.

If the migrant's return home is preceded by a conflict between family members, references in African-American texts to the interpretive nature of feast can reflect dissension within the family or even rejection. In Randall Kenan's novel *A Visitation of Spirits*, James Malachai Greene, a preacher and the local high school
principal, relates how his unmarried mother Rose returns to the small, rural community of Tims Creek, North Carolina, from up North with him and his other two born-out-of-wedlock siblings in tow. Her treatment by her three, college-educated sisters is described in retrospect by thirty-five-year-old James:

Rose was twenty-four. [ . . ]There were three children about her feet now, calling her Mamma. She decided to bend to convention and her mother's will and remain at home [ . . . ]But she had not reckoned on her sisters.

All three had been "good"; all three had married; all three were childless. [ . . ]Yet in their eyes Rose had turned her back on the family, flaunted her sins, and smeared their name in midnight gutters and liquor-scented backseats. Did she really believe they would welcome her with honey and sunshine and a roasted calf?

Rose became a pariah in her own home. They treated her as they would a servant girl, humiliating her, excluding her, backbiting, accusing. [ . . . ]She left finally, in stormy fury, rising from the Sunday dinner table surrounded by the entire family, disgusted, hurt, and angered beyond words. (119)

Kenan signifies upon the Prodigal narrative by ironically posing the "roasted calf" as a trope of the acceptance and fellowship which is not offered to Rose. Instead of providing a means of reunion, feast works as a resisting force. Because Rose has failed to live her life by a code dictated by her sisters, they continue to ostracize her, ultimately ending in a total collapse of familial ties dramatically played out at the Sunday dinner table. Kenan's manipulation of such an image as the dinner table challenges its figuration as a symbol of welcome and fellowship, recasting its use in African-American lore.

In other texts, the preparation of food can have a conciliating effect, as in Deborah McDowell's Leaving Pipe Shop: Memories of Kin. For McDowell's family, like many black families in the South, the Fourth of July serves as a time when those who have migrated North make it "back home" to visit their kin. In the
chapter "Fourth of July," McDowell writes of her aunt who is exerting pressure on her to file a claim, as a surviving child, against the government for the possible asbestos poisoning her now-deceased father may have suffered while working at U.S. Pipe. On this Fourth of July in 1994, "Auntee," sister of McDowell’s father, is her closest living relative as both of McDowell’s parents are deceased. Instead of promising to follow through on the claim, McDowell balks, resulting in her aunt’s hostility. Their reunion, during the writer’s trip home to Alabama, is underscored by her aunt’s feelings of disappointment regarding the matter:

The next day was the Fourth of July. Back home in Pipe Shop, Fourth of July was—after Christmas and Easter—the most important holiday of the year, a time for new shorts and sandals and cool-offs in bathing suits [. . .]

The scent of barbecue sauce simmering on the stove led me to the kitchen, where Auntee stood scraping potato skins still hot from boiling water. I dipped my finger in the pot and tasted the barbecue sauce.

"I see you’re still using Daddy’s recipe."

"It’s not your daddy’s recipe," she snapped. "And anyway, how you know he didn’t get his from me?"

"No, Auntee, you never used to put Worcestershire in your sauce."

"Yes, I did. Why you think your daddy had to come up with everything?"

"Auntee, I didn’t say he did, and I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just teasing." I left Auntee rattling pots and stomped down the hill to Buddy’s Place to get a copy of the *Birmingham World*. Of course I knew her tantrum was not at all about a barbecue recipe. She was still on a slow boil from yesterday. As I passed the rock quarry, stirring up clouds of red dust and gravel, I muttered to myself, "I don’t care what she says. It is Daddy’s recipe." (49-50)

Although McDowell focuses on articulating her aunt’s "tantrum" in the kitchen, it is evident that McDowell experiences a "fit" as well, indicated by the description of her own stomping "down the hill," "stirring up clouds of red dust and gravel," and "muttering." Auntee’s kitchen might initially be seen as a female-centered space
where the two women could engage in the nurturing tradition of cooperative
cookery. However, instead of reconciling the two women, the ritual of food
preparation escalates into a verbal confrontation, positioning the kitchen as an
antagonistic space, for Auntee views her niece's teasing as an outright challenge of
her cooking skills.

Farah Jasmine Griffin, in her analysis of African-American migration
narratives in *Who Set You Flowin': The African-American Migration Narrative*,
discusses the notion of "safe space" as it relates to works by black women writers.
She writes,

"Safe space" takes shape in song, oral culture, memory, dreams, and
spirituality... They [these spaces] exist as places where ritual
evokes a Southern or African ancestor. In many ways they are
spaces of "safe time" as well, for they evoke history and memory,
[... ] At their most progressive, safe spaces are nurturing, healing,
and resisting [... ] Often, black women writers represent home-safe
spaces as necessary to the characters' survival.  

When McDowell returns after a brief departure, she re-enters the space
encompassing her aunt's house and yard, venturing into what Griffin refers to as a
"safe space," where family, feast, song, and memory merge, creating a sense of
community and connection. In contrast to the earlier contentious scene, a truce is
negotiated between the two:

As I reached the crest of the hill, on my way back to Auntee's,
I could hear the funky growling of the blues. "Been searching. Been
searching. Been searching every wh-i-i-ich a way-ay-ay-ay." I
trooped around the house to the backyard, where friends and
neighbors had already sprawled around the barbecue pit, six-packs
and fifths of gin around their feet. [...] 
Auntee's next-door neighbor, Pee Wee, and Pee Wee's back-
door man trickled in with other cousins all afternoon, who bantered
over whether I had grown to resemble Daddy more than Mother.
"It's the same," Red insisted. "Cause your daddy looked just like
Aunt Curly, and you look just like both of 'em, except you done got stout." [. . . ]

Auntee wiped the sweat collecting on her brow and mopped the slab of ribs with sauce, then cut off a tip for me to taste. I read it as a peace offering. (51-52)

With the echo of the "wandering" blues in the background, McDowell "searches" for respite and finds it in the comforting space of Auntee's home. Within this environment, the oral tradition of "tracing" one's ancestry is practiced by her cousins as they detail those relatives she resembles or, to use their familiar, informal language, "favors." Further, McDowell shows us how Auntee's offering of food becomes a gesture of reconciliation, demonstrating her aunt's desire to welcome her back home. The gesture serves to, in effect, heal the strife between the two and demonstrates how McDowell is embraced by all of her kin and community.

The ritual of sharing food as a means of reconnecting to community and family appears as important in African-American folklore as it does in literature. Homecoming feasts reverberate with suggestions of the Prodigal narrative, as the thematics of return and reclamation are reinforced through celebration. In their essay "There's Nothing Like Church Food," Jualynne Dodson and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes maintain that the folklore tradition of sharing food in the black church is an often overlooked mechanism, "through which community is gathered and actualized."34 Through feast, they note,

an ethic of love and an emphasis on hospitality emerge, especially in the sharing of food, which spill over into the larger culture. Ritual moments of most African Americans occur at home and in their churches, and they are connected to food, meals, and their remembrance. In moments of eating, community is reconnected or "re-membered," and, at the same time, African antecedents and New World parallels are unconsciously nurtured, kept alive, and included.35
It is from within their perspective of how "community is reconnected" through feast that I begin to examine my visit to an annual homecoming celebration of one black Baptist church located in the rural community of Clay, Louisiana. At the Pleasant Grove Missionary Baptist Church in Clay, pastored by Rev. Kenneth Sapp, the homecoming celebration has taken place every August since the 1920's. The phrase "pleasant grove" aptly describes the area, for the church is located in a picturesque and serene place reached by an unpaved lane. The red clay of the grounds contrasts with the pristine white church edifice and tall pines surrounding the clearing.

The commemoration of Homecoming was organized initially by the church as a response to the increasing number of members who moved away to bigger Louisiana cities like Monroe and Shreveport, or north like so many other migrants to Chicago and Detroit. One 86-year-old gentleman attending the event who had early memories of traveling by wagon to Homecoming told me, "Everyone knows that you come back to Pleasant Grove on the first Sunday in August—you grow up knowing that you have to make it to the grounds." (The "Grounds" is the term used affectionately by members to describe their church property.) His memories of the event served to encourage him, someone who had never left the community, to rededicate himself and serve as an example to those attending the event each year.

On these "grounds," large white, picnic tents are set up for the communal feast that takes place after the 11:10 a.m. Homecoming church service. On the subject of special African-American church feasts, Dodson and Gilkes state that they are important for
churches whose emphasis on the embodied Spirit also involves an accentuation of a community that shares meals together. The occasions for celebrating the Spirit, particularly across congregational boundaries or on special occasions in the life of the church, involve the serving and consuming of meals. [...]

Those specialized occasions other than communion, where the consumption of real meals takes place in a ritual space, further reinforce the importance of food and shared meals as part of the remembering of community and the embodying of the Spirit.37

Using this view of African-American church feasting is helpful in interpreting the Pleasant Grove "Dinner on the Grounds." By claiming a space ritualistically, the church community link together both the cultural and historical significance of the site. During my visit, I was informed that families traditionally set their tents up in the same places each year. I observed that church members (of whom many are often related) made a point to travel from tent to tent visiting one another and sampling each other’s dishes.

I spoke about the tradition of the feast with two female church members—a mother and daughter. Both of them expressed enormous pride in preparing bountiful tables with home-cooked Southern fare such as collard greens, ham, cobblers and hot water cornbread. In particular, the daughter, a 36-year old resident of Monroe, Louisiana, mentioned that she felt compelled through her participation in the annual homecoming feast to involve the younger generation in the ongoing tradition where families eat together on the grounds. In asking her about the importance of the feast, she replied that "dinner on the grounds" was meaningful not only for the remaining church family as a whole but for returning individuals to see how they were a part of the generations which held the church together. For this female church member, the strong influence of community necessitates a desire to
reinforce ties of kinship through the ritual of homecoming feast. Further, by joining the significance of eating and food preparation with the continuity of community, such displays posit Mount Pleasant as a site for those who have left to connect with those who have stayed.

The Pleasant Grove homecoming feast is a custom which merges family and community with feast. In his study of American foodways, Charles Camp observes that an attachment to place often occurs through feast and fellowship. He notes: "Foodways in America is a helix of events, a coiling or intertwining of the strands of our very identity." For the generations that are represented at each year’s homecoming, feast is certainly not the only reason that so many who have moved away return to visit each year, nor is it what the members who have remained in the area define as the central focal point of the celebration. Yet the annual tradition of "Dinner on the Grounds" has entered the communal psyche as a construct of identity: one is part of the Mount Pleasant community by participating in the event. There, food represents a myriad of connections: young to old, past to present, individuals to one another and to a larger body that welcomes all who come.

3.4 'I Once Was Lost But Now I'm Found': Ceremony and Return

“There are people here who knew you before you left.”
--Reverend E. L. Hewitt, Jr., pastor of Westridge Park First Baptist Church (San Antonio, Texas), speaking at the Mt. Era Baptist (Morganza, Louisiana) Church Homecoming service

Just as the Great Migration for black Americans was infused with the typology of the Exodus narrative, so does the late 20th century African-American narrative of return resonate with the figure of the Prodigal. In examining African-American church homecoming ceremonies, I propose that certain features of these
events—namely feasts, social fellowship, sermons, and testimonials—reflect the Biblical typology of the Prodigal Son narrative. In addition, the depiction of returnees being formally greeted by church "families" in late 20th century African-American literature positions the ceremony as one that reconfigures the Prodigal Son trope.

For the Mt. Era Baptist Church in Morganza, Louisiana, a rural, African-American church pastored by Rev. Russell Jackson and celebrating its 94th church anniversary on the Sunday I visited, the program promoted a sense of belonging for those in attendance. The emphasis on migrants reconnecting to not only the church but also to their communal "roots," suggests how maintaining tradition and (re)connection foregrounds the homecoming event.

The attention given to the historical importance was visible during the Mt. Era homecoming program in the inclusion of a reading of the church's 94-year history. The presentation, over twenty minutes long, listed the founders' names, the officers and auxiliaries (both male and female), and the subsequent accomplishments of members, such as the painstaking financing of and completion of their edifice as well as the church's missionary efforts. This reading invoked a solemn reverence from the audience, some of whom murmured "Amen" softly to emphasize well-remembered acts of generosity by members. In speaking with the Mt. Era church historian, I asked about the significance of this "naming" ritual; her reply to me was that those who came back needed to be reminded that they came from a "worthy" place, a place rich in history. Her remarks reflect what I would argue is a desire to situate the occasion and the place as a site of remembrance. My
analysis stems from work done by Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Malley on the intertwining of history and memory in African-American commemorative events, who state that ceremony is “spurred on by the will to remember—by a conscious effort to limit forgetfulness.” This “will” as defined by Fabre and O’Malley, is at the center of the efforts by African-American churches to continue folklore traditions such as homecoming celebrations. By doing so, these ceremonial occasions exist as cultural repositories of memory which preserve the history of a community, a specific people and place. For the Mt. Era congregation, Homecoming defines a shared, communal "will to remember" in its annual recitation of church history, an oral tribute to those whose sacrifice and commitment are honored.

One important feature of the African-American homecoming celebration is the sermon, which can serve as a tool to (re)inscribe identity. In his text *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American History*, Albert Raboteau notes,

Through the sermon, as well as spirituals and gospel songs, the Jewish and Christian Scriptures enter and shape the imaginative world of African-Americans. Black preachers fashioned out of the biblical characters, events, and symbols a religious ethos that fit the peculiar experience of black people in America.

As Raboteau offers, the Scriptures, offered in the mode of sermon, influence and reflect the collective worldview of blacks in America. Just as the Exodus narrative served as a symbolic text of deliverance and redemption for blacks during the Great Migration, other narratives such as the parable of the Prodigal Son provide meaning through the presentation of audience-anticipated textual subjects such as the Prodigal narrative and its focus on return, testimony, and renewal. Ministers,
therefore, seek to reflect the collective desire(s) of the church congregation. This
desire consists of both an extension of social fellowship and the expectation that
returnees will seek to (re)affirm ties to their former communities of origin. At the
Mt. Era service by the guest minister, Rev. E. L. Hewitt, Jr. of the Westridge Park
First Baptist Church of San Antonio, Texas, expressed in his opening remarks that
the concept of "homecoming offers an ideal plan for our lives." He stated,

> Coming home grounds us, makes us focus on our humility, for there
are people here who knew you before you left. Before you got your
education or fancy job. Here are the people who named you, who
gave you a name—many times a nickname that nobody anywhere
else calls you.44

Rev. Hewitt's emphasis on the interpersonal relationships found at "home" and how
"naming" impacts one's identity worked to support his background text for the
morning's sermon. His selection of the parable of the Prodigal Son, I argue, served
a dual purpose for the audience; I suggest that his sermon reflected both a particular
theme for the Mt. Era homecoming and a collective theme centering on the narrative
of return for African-Americans. His selection of the Prodigal Son narrative was
not an ironic one, for seemingly its message of reclamation was not only
wholeheartedly approved of by the audience (with forceful "Amens"), it was
expected by those present. At this point, Rev. Hewitt read the entire narrative of the
Prodigal Son, Luke 15, verses 11 through 32:

> And he said, A certain man had two sons.
> And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me
the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his
living.
> And not many days after the younger son gathered all
together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted
his substance with riotous living.
> And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in
that land; and he began to be in want.

And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee.

And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off his father saw him, and had compassion and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry:

For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard, he heard music and dancing.

And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.

And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.

And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.

And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends.

But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.
Rev. Hewitt’s central theme focused on the effects of displacement on the Prodigal Son and the decision to return home as described in verses 17 and 18: "And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger? I will arise and go to my father." Hewitt emphasized the phrase "he came to himself" as reflective of the self-awareness and psychological introspection which can impact the decision to return home. In this passage from the sermon, he suggests how critical the state of "conversion" figures in the mind of the prodigal figure:

He was on a path to nowhere, but then he came to himself. He had used all he had in the pursuit of riotous living but then he came to himself.

As he sat there in the filth of the swine and thought about the comforts of home, he came to himself. As he found himself all alone out there in the world and thought about those at home who loved him and knew who he was, he came to himself.45

Similar to Hewitt’s interpretation, another view of this moment of self-introspection centers on its revelation of self-knowledge. In an analysis of the prodigal figure, Nancy Corson Carter relates that

the turning point for the prodigal in the parable is when ‘he came to himself.’ A world of meaning hinges on that single phrase [. . .] How much discernment, how much courage is involved in claiming a self. How much discernment, how much courage is involved in claiming a self.46

Carter’s analysis not only identifies this crucial point in the narrative but also positions the prodigal figure as heroic in the act of “coming to.” In the reader’s (or audience’s) “revisioning” of this image, an understanding of the renewal process builds not upon pity but rather upon empathy. For the community engaging in welcoming those who have been “lost” back to the fold, the message is clear:

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accept and revere those who have strayed who wish to come back. By repeating the phrase "he came to himself" in his sermon, Hewitt directs the audience to "re-view" the redeemed prodigal figure as one whose actions are worthy of contemplation and respect.

Hewitt's rhetorical climax led the congregation through a spirited version of call and response. A form of African-based expression found in both verbal and musical performance, "call and response" features a "leading-in" phrase or word which is immediately responded to by an audience, thereby involving both in a participatory verbal "play." Following each of Hewitt's lead-in phrases, "he came to himself," members shouted their agreement with "Yeah," thereby validating the minister's premise: that a psychologically transformative experience for the prodigal son (or daughter) often precedes and precipitates the act of "coming home."

Albert Raboteau refers to the style of preaching as illustrated by Hewitt as a traditional "text-content-application" pattern, describing the process thus:

After reading his text, the (black) preacher elaborates its context. Drawing upon his knowledge of the Bible, he may range over both Testaments; explaining the meaning of this specific text by reference to other passages. Having set the context, the preacher ideally devotes the rest of his sermon to applying the lessons of the text to the day-to-day concerns of his congregation. Text-context-application is the conventional pattern for the development of the logic of the sermon. There is, however, another pattern as important as the structure of logical meaning, that of performance style, which gives rise to the sermon's emotive meaning.

Hewitt's sermon, with its emphasis on connection to community through psychological (trans)formation, exemplifies this duality of logical meaning tied with emotive meaning. His message demanded of his audience—particularly of those who might be marked by the community as "fallen" or prodigal figures—an
immediate, vocal response. The importance of emphatic responsive acts to sermons through modes such as “call and response” as well as “text-context-application” underscores how homecoming reveals and engages collective expectations.

Depictions of African-American returning and/or visiting sons and daughters in late 20th century literature detail their appearance as an event which can necessitate a verbal statement before the church community, known as a "testimony," or as "testifying." This practice mirrors the portrayal of the admission of wayward living by the son as shown in these verses from the Prodigal narrative:

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee.
And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.
And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.
And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.
(Luke 15. 18-21)

This public, expressive performance of remorse, occurring before the father’s show of forgiveness and the communal feast, is situated as another moment of renewal, and extension of the "coming to" act as described in Rev. Hewitt’s sermon.

Alex Haley depicts the significance of testimony for African-American migrants returning home in Mama Flora’s Family. Testimony serves as a mode of public self-confession for Willie Palmer during his visit home to Stockton, Tennessee. Having migrated North to Chicago, Willie returns home briefly to attend his mother Flora’s installation by her church as an "Old Sister." As he sits next to his girlfriend Ernestine and cousin Ruthana, he is asked to address the church:
Everyone was having a great time, except for Willie. Reverend Jackson took command, his voice hoarse with love.

"We have in our midst this evenin' a young brother of this church—[ . . . ]—young Willie Palmer, who is with us, to help us honor his mama, all the way from Chicago!"

The congregation was close to ecstasy, but Willie was on the edge of despair.

"We ask him for his testimony!" Reverend Jackson shouted, and it would have been impossible for Willie to decline.

Reluctantly, he stood up, still looking at the floor [ . . . ]

"I ain't never knowed no daddy," Willie began, and stopped. And started again. "But my mama always tol' me the right things to do."

He stopped again. Words did not come easily to him.

"An' I ain't always done them!" Willie announced. The crowd cheered in agreement. Confession of sin, especially in public, was good for the soul.

"Far back as I remember," Willie went on, "Mama was bringin' me to this church."

"Praise the Lord."

"She tried hard to keep me in school. She didn't want me to quit!"

"Ain't that the truth!" [ . . . ]

"But I wanted to help her out! Mama needed help!"

"He heard the Lord!"

"An' I lef' home, lef' Mama by herself! But she been wit' me, whatever I done!"

"Hallelujah!"

Willie's steam ran out. He couldn't think of anything else to say. He looked around at the congregation, at the people he had known all of his life, and found inspiration there.

"I got a good mama! I know it! An' y'all know it!"

They knew it, and loved to hear it from a son, and their enthusiasm gave Willie the push he needed. He looked at his mama, who was still dabbing her eyes.

"God knows, I love you, Mama," he shouted at her, and abruptly sat down. (177-178)

This scene shows how Willie is not seen as only Flora's son: he is "a son" of the entire congregation. The community expects him to reveal his shortcomings and weaknesses ("Confession of sin, especially in public, was good for the soul") en route to connecting back to his extended family. In *Mama Flora's Family*, Willie's
engaging in the ritual of testimony replicates the confessional act of the Biblical prodigal figure. Alex Haley positions Willie Palmer as a character searching for the support of those who have "known him all of his life." In a lively example of call and response, Willie "calls" out to his family and hears in their responses ("He heard the Lord!" "Hallelujah!") an affirmation of forgiveness. Through a public admission of his "sins," Willie is situated as "forgiven son," no matter his former transgressions. As well, his revelation supports a notion that his body may be "home" but until he "comes to himself," his spirit remains "home"less, weary, wandering. Only until his (trans)formation begins can he truly "come home."

The practice of testifying or testimony emerges from a tradition in black religion, one that Albert Raboteau refers to as the experience of conversion. This experience, he relates, has a foundation in the Evangelical Protestantism practices which make up African-American religious expression, and centers on a "change of heart, a transformation in consciousness," a practice first espoused by early Christians such as St. Paul. Raboteau also notes that at revivals and "experience meetings," those who had been converted were expected to talk about the working of the Spirit upon their hearts. Individual and unique as these conversion experiences were, they shared the common narrative construction and group norms associated with the tradition. Thus conversion was both a profoundly personal experience and an experience defined and validated within a community of church folk.

As part of the African-American church homecoming celebration, the practice of conversion as testimony is demonstrated both as oral form and communal tradition. However, an individual's unwillingness to participate in such a custom can problematize the emotional/physical journey "home."
Although the appearance of the returning son (or daughter) may serve as the catalyst for testimony, African-American homecoming narratives can depict a returnee's resistance to the call for testimony. In her memoir *Leaving Pipe Shop*, Deborah McDowell recounts her visit to her "home church" during one trip to Alabama. In the chapter entitled "Revisitations," McDowell relates how she is asked to address the congregation; however, she is not entirely forthright in her effort:

We went to church on Sunday. I had not been inside the walls of Macedonia since May 1981, for Papa's funeral. Just inside the double doors, ushers in bleached white uniforms stood like sentries, handing fans and printed programs to all who entered [...]. Reverend Miree, long one of two assistant ministers at the church, beamed in recognition from the pulpit, and when we came to the "Visitors' Welcome," she called for me to stand.

"We have one of our own with us today," she said in her slow, deliberate way. "She's not a visitor. She was brought up right here from the floor of this very pulpit. And the way she played the piano. We're so proud of her and glad to have her back home. She's made good, teaching at..." She paused. "Where is it you teach, honey?" I told her. "Oh, your people would be so proud of you, especially Miss Viola. Do say. University of Virginia. What is your church home there?" I finessed a vague answer, naturally unable to admit to this, my childhood congregation, that I had long since given up on church, although in memory of Grandma Edie I sometimes read the Ninetieth Psalm, hoping for the faith, the consolation, and uncomplicated certainty she found in its verses. (335-336)

McDowell relays in this passage her resistance to "testimony"; unwilling to confess publicly that she no longer attends church, which would mark her as wayward or sinful before her "home church," she delicately manipulates language in order to project an image of the daughter who has "made good." Unlike the archetypal prodigal figure that is expected to engage in an outward display of self-disclosure, McDowell's choice to subvert the expectations of her relatives and friends seems to
indicate not only an understanding of this ritual of (re)connection but also a
negation of its control, its hold over returning migrants. I see her effort as an act of
self-formation, for McDowell exerts her independence through her refusal to admit
that she is not meeting the religious standards of her former church family, and in
her construction of a self-defined spirituality. Participating in the ritual of testifying
before the community becomes her means of reconciling with them but is also
situated as an equivocal act. Although an argument might be posed that she dupes
her audience, her "vague answer" before her "childhood congregation" reveals the
problematic nature of testimony. For McDowell, testifying reveals itself to be a
complex act—does she meet the community's expectations of success or reinforce
their expectations of failure ("riotous living")? She chooses the former, and in
doing so, challenges the traditional image of the prodigal figure and the rituals
which (re)connect returnees to "home."

Examining African-American folklore celebrations as well as homecoming
rituals helps to frame the African-American narrative of return within the Biblical
context of the prodigal figure. Late 20th century fictional and non-fictional texts
exemplify how the practice of homecoming emerges as much more than an annual
event or outward display of reunion. These texts also reflect the conflicts which
arise between returning migrants and those residents who have never left as both
groups seek to reinforce the ties of kinship and friendship.

These narratives portray the journey of (re)connecting to a community, a
continuing legacy or history, and/or a specific site. As the texts relate, sometimes
this journey is just as difficult to make as the one which led away from "home." But
it is in the practice of these rituals that "home" takes shape, imparts meaning, and is validated. Home, then, becomes what one makes of it.

3.5 Endnotes


3Stack xiii.

4 Stack xvi.


6 Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1991) 276. Lemann profiles one black gentleman, George Hicks, a founder of the Clarksdaliens Club, and describes the socioeconomic makeup of the group and their club activities. Lemann writes that members are “mostly middle-class government employees” who “no longer live in the ghetto,” who meet regularly; sponsor dances, community service awards and scholarships and also assist “homefolk” who might be in need. The Clarksdaliens Club is an example of one of the many organizations created which has helped blacks from the South maintain communal ties and an extended family network.


8 Campbell 267.


10 Lemann 41.


14 Naylor 30.

15 Naylor 45.

16 Naylor 47-48.


19 Ryden 38.

20 Stack 17-18.

21 Stack 18.

22 Robert Stepto, From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979) 67. Stepto extends Victor Turner’s definition of communitas, which can be explained as the condition of anti-structure as characteristic of “relationships between those undergoing ritual transition” (69). Genius loci is defined as “spirit of place” (70).

23 Campbell, Sweet Summer 31.

24 Stepto 68-69. Turner’s concept of “ritual topography” rests, according to Stepto, on the idea of a “distribution of permanent sacred sites” whereas Stepto suggests that African-American narratives feature “structural topography,” or “seemingly permanent structures” manifesting “themselves as sites for locus-specific variations upon a nearly universal race ritual” (68).

25 Stack xv.

26 McDowell 41-42.

27 McDowell 26.

28 Golden 185-186.

29 I must mention my idea of offering and preparing food as "acts of mediation" stems from work done by and discussions with Lajuan Simpson, whose dissertation is entitled "Women on/of the Porch: Mediating Structures in African-American Women's Fiction" (Louisiana State University, 1999). A more detailed analysis of her theoretical framework regarding mediating structures is found in pages 4-10 of her dissertation.
30 Naylor 37.

31 Naylor 178.


35 Dodson and Gilkes 520-521.

36 I had the pleasure of visiting the Mount Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church in August 1997.

37 Dodson and Gilkes 529.


39 This phrase was taken from part of Rev. Hewitt's sermon at the Mt. Era homecoming service on October 12, 1996.

40 My comments on homecoming feasts are, however, limited to the previous section of this chapter.

41 I visited the Mt. Era Baptist Church on October 12, 1996, when my "home church," Westridge Park Baptist Church of San Antonio, TX, was invited to participate in the annual Mt. Era Homecoming Service.


44 Rev. E. L. Hewitt, Jr., Sermon address at Mt. Era Baptist Church; Morganza, Louisiana, October 12, 1996.

45 Hewitt, October 12, 1996.

47 Raboteau 143.

48 Raboteau 153.

49 Raboteau 155.
CHAPTER 4: THE DECISION TO RETURN HOME

Suddenly she heard a voice in her head, saying, Stop! Go down South!
   — Juanita Haynes, as recorded by Nicholas Lemann

"You got to come home."
   — Estella "Auntee" McDowell, speaking to her niece Deborah McDowell

For the Southbound migrant in the homecoming narrative, the call to return "back home" can come from within or can be issued by another. No matter the mode of the call, there seems a sense of urgency felt by the returnee to respond to "the voice."

The first quote above describes "a voice" heard by Juanita Haynes, a Chicago resident and daughter of a native Mississipian who moves North during the Great Migration. At the time when Juanita "hears" the voice, her life is in a downward spiral and her addiction to drugs impedes her from any progress. The call to "go down South," back to Mississippi, is suggestive of a God-like presence, commanding her to save herself at the very moment she is fighting the urge to get "high." The South, then, is posited in her conscience as her only salvation.

In the second excerpt, a relative's "call" functions as an impetus for Deborah McDowell's return to Pipe Shop, Alabama, to claim her "legacy." After listening to her aunt's pleas over the phone, McDowell finds "the voice"—in this case, her aunt's—will not be ignored, and in fact, demands that McDowell return home to investigate claims that she might be entitled to a financial settlement from her late father's employer, U.S. Pipe Shop and Foundry. The settlement is offered as restitution for wage and job discrimination suffered by her father. Because of this summons, her aunt's "voice," McDowell is forced to confront her own feelings of melancholy about the place she grew up in but later left to pursue an education and career. "Home," in this case, is
presented as a place one must return to in order to (re)claim what is owed as well as what is owned. Comparing the two, we see that although the summons is different, the result is the same: both women return "home."

In the attention given to influences on the decision to return home, African-American homecoming narratives manipulate, advance and reshape established theoretical concepts of African-American narrative, such as those identified by Robert Stepto. In his work *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, Stepto defines two basic narrative structures in African-American letters: the ascent narrative and the immersion narrative. The ascent narrative focuses on a figure's journey to a symbolic North, a figure termed as an "articulate survivor," a hero or heroine willing to abandon close familial ties within a socially oppressive environment in order to seek freedom or advancement in a less oppressive one. In contrast, Stepto writes that the immersion narrative is fundamentally an expression of a ritualized journey into a symbolic South [...]. The conventional immersion narrative ends almost paradoxically, with the questing figure located in or near the narrative's most oppressive social structure but free in the sense that he has gained or regained sufficient tribal literacy to assume the mantle of articulate kinsman. [...] the hero or heroine of an immersion narrative must be willing to forsake highly individualized mobility in the narrative's least oppressive social structure for a posture of relative stasis in the most oppressive environment, a loss that is only occasionally assuaged by the newfound balms of group identity.3

A reconfiguration of Stepto's theory aids in mapping the narrative of return. African-American homecoming narratives such as Juanita Haynes' reposition the trope of the "articulate kins(wo)man," as well as the concept of the immersion narrative. Instead of a ritualized journey to a symbolic South, her story centers on a ritualized journey to an *actual* geographical South. In addition, Chicago, while situated in African-American
lore as a "Promised Land," exists not as a "less oppressive" site, but as a place where
drugs, crime, and urban blight combine to threaten Haynes' very existence. Thus,
Chicago's fixity as a place promising "highly individualized mobility" is inverted, as it
no longer offers refuge. Now seen as a safe haven, the South's image as the "most
oppressive environment" in 19th and 20th century African-American narrative is
dismantled. This shifting of the South's position in the immersion narrative is an
important one, as an application of Stepto's theory to late 20th century African-American
homecoming narrative finds much more fluidity of interpretation regarding the
decisions to return.

4.1 "I Will Arise and Go to My Father"'s: Homecoming As Claiming Act

For so many Black sons and daughters of the South, leaving their homes for the
North meant a looking ahead, a forging of new hopes and dreams. For those returning
back "home," leaving the North to return to the South is a similar exercise. That
decision may be grounded in the desire to start anew or to (re)claim a legacy, familial
and/or material. In late 20th century African-American memoir and literature, the
choice to return home is often situated as an act of appropriation.

Many who left often did so with the intention to one day return for good, never
losing a connection to their sense of belonging "to" and "with" the land. It is this sense
of ownership which propels migrants to come back "home." Carol Stack writes in her
work Call to Home of Nora Johnson, whose return to rural northeastern North Carolina
is prompted by her connection to the land:

Most people who want to come back home have to buy
their own soil, [...] but she had it handed right to her,
a house seat, exactly on the spot where as a child she had left herself
a landmark to designate her future home. A landmark. There were
three little sprouts of sweetgum trees growing almost on top of
one another at the edge of a field where she and her brothers had
picked tobacco when they were young. She'd twisted those
three sprouts together, plaited them into a single sapling, and
kept an eye out over the years as bark stretched around the twisty
knobs of the plaited trunk and the three trees became one. One
night she had dreamed of building her house right there by the
triplet sweetgum tree. And her father had gone away to
Washington, D.C., [...] until he died and she got the land, ten
acres in all, her house seat, with just one string attached.
The one stipulation was that Nora couldn't sell her land.
She had to put in her will that the place could never be sold [...]
Nora believed that this limitation was a great comfort
for her and all the family. The land tied them all together [...] the land itself was a family relationship[...].
Even when she couldn't actually live on the land—and
for twenty years she'd had to support her mother and
grandmother back home by working in Washington, [...] even in those hard years Nora had felt that her land was a
bulwark, that owning the land kept her family somehow safe
and close: Thank God my parents made me a landmark. Without
land, a person is at the mercy of the white community [emphasis
is original].

Johnson’s return to the South seems almost preordained by the stipulation that family
members cannot sell their collective land. Land does not just represent a physical
connection to place but veritably is a connection (“the land itself was a family
relationship”). This relationship to the land is rooted in Johnson’s act of marking her
birthplace. Her braiding of the sprouts into one sapling, which she regards as her
landmark, emerges as an outward sign, a birthmark, one that she nurtures in order to one
day ensure her return. The metaphor of the tree trunk is one that establishes Johnson’s
origins in the earth of her ancestors, and also maps an organic relationship to the land of
her birth. As she tends the tree’s growth, she invests in her own destiny, cultivating and
creating a bond, equally physical and emotional. Johnson’s dream of building her
house by the sweetgum tree foretells her journey back home, but any romanticized
notions of return encapsulated in her vision are supplanted by the hard labor of a twenty-year sojourn in Washington, DC.

Just like thousands of black migrants, Johnson views her separation from the land as a temporary state to be endured while she waits to go back home, to (re)claim her birthright. She also positions her decision to return as an empowering act, one that enables her to subvert the status quo of the South, one which places most of the wealth, authority, and property in the hands of whites. Land, and more specifically—ownership of land—serves as more than just a sign of wealth; it becomes a signifier of individual and familial identity for Johnson, and going back home becomes an assertion of these mutual identities.

Although returning home as an act of appropriation might initially be configured as a claiming of material wealth, African-American homecoming narratives can resist or reshape such readings. It is significant that the title of writer Deborah McDowell's memoirs, Leaving Pipe Shop, suggests the work will focus on flight and migration from Pipe Shop. Born in 1951 in Bessemer, Alabama, McDowell grows up in a neighborhood known as the “Pipe Shop,” a community located twelve miles from Birmingham. In the 1950's and 1960's, blacks in Birmingham like many all over the South began challenging the status quo—seeking an end to discriminatory practices in all areas of life: the workplace, in housing markets, public transportation and accommodations, and education. Known during the Civil Rights movement as “Bombingham,” the city of Birmingham during McDowell's early years was a place where bombings by white supremacists throughout black communities were commonplace. One act of brutality became a symbol of the hatred which permeated

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the city: the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on September 15, 1963, which claimed the lives of four young black girls attending Sunday School. It is from this place, with its history of hostile race relations and segregated conditions, that McDowell’s narrative unfolds.

Her first chapter, entitled "Summons," refers to a late-night call from her aunt, insisting that she return home. That the text begins with the "call" to come home is not lost on the reader, for this posits the narrative as grounded not so much in the flight from home but rather the return to it. As McDowell relates, the "summons" comes on Memorial Day weekend in 1994:

[her aunt speaks]"You got to come home." Whenever Auntee calls, I always cringe, then lock my knees and brace myself for the bad news, and the news is almost always bad [...] when I heard those dreaded and familiar words in May 1994, "You got to come home," and the heavy pause that followed [...] I tried to steady myself for the worst.6

Finding that her aunt has gotten news from a neighbor about claim settlements from the steel factory, McDowell learns of her aunt’s real motive for her phone call: a desire to see her niece claim damages from the company. As McDowell begins to express her disapproval, her aunt counters:

"You don’t know until you look into it. [...] you the right one to see about it. You the oldest and you know how to stand up to these plant folks. You got enough gumption to deal with these peckerwoods."

"Auntee, this is bound to end up just like the pay discrimination suit did. I’ll go through a lot of toil and trouble—making phone calls, gathering documents, writing letters—for a measly twelve hundred dollars." [...] I repeat, I don’t have the time for this. Not for chump change."

"You don’t know how much you’ll get until and unless you try. Plus twelve hundred dollars was more than you had."[...]

"Well, I’ll call the plant tomorrow."

"You know, this might not be the kind of thing you can
take care of on the telephone. You might need to be here, you understand. If I was you, I would come home and do my business that way, face to face. When you do your business face to face, folks ain't as quick to try to mess over you."

"Auntee, I just can't drop everything and come running home every time you hear rumblings about money at the Pipe Shop. [...] Auntee, look, Daddy's been dead and gone, soon will be twenty years. I just don't want to stir all that stuff up again." I could tell from the tone of her voice that her face had taken on that familiar pinched and sullen cast. Silence always follows.

"Well, then, good night."

The tone of McDowell's narrative, at this point, reflects animosity and conflict.

Although Auntee expects her niece to wholeheartedly embrace the effort to make a claim, McDowell remains recalcitrant. Her aunt's entreaties are no match for her resistance as McDowell, I would argue, seems to misread her aunt's code in the call to come home. McDowell sees the pursuit of such a claim to be fruitless, dismissing it as a ludicrous, trivial financial prospect. She denigrates Auntee's request, describing the proceeds from a previous effort to collect from a discrimination lawsuit as "a measly twelve hundred dollars" (21). Further, by rejecting her aunt's insistence that she is the "oldest" and has the "gumption" to confront the whites who own the plant, McDowell shirks her duty, both as oldest child and as the family's most educated member to act as mediator. She fails to successfully interpret this call to come home for she sees it only in terms of monetary gain, whereas her aunt posits the venture as one in which McDowell would claim at least part of her father's legacy: his backbreaking toil in the U. S. Pipe and Foundry steel mill, in spite of unfair wage and work standards.

Referring to the possibilities of the claim, McDowell's retort, "I just don't want to stir up all that stuff up again" denotes to her aunt an air of insolent disregard of her father's sacrifices. Auntee's silence then becomes not just one of dissatisfaction as McDowell
reads it but also one of deep dismay. Her niece's disdain to confront "all that stuff" signifies to Auntee a willed forgetfulness of the past, of the prejudice her father endured to make a living, to make possible McDowell's later migration from Pipe Shop, and to pass on a legacy to his children. Instead, Auntee sees what is owed by U.S Pipe and Steel as what is owned by McDowell and her brothers.

Ironically, it is another call to come home, offered in a different mode and in a distant place, to which McDowell responds. Visiting a place that is not her "home," she unexpectedly confronts her past and realizes she must return to claim her legacy. Almost a year after her aunt's request that she come back home permanently, McDowell continues to resist the call to come home. She can no longer resist being reminded of her father and is made aware of his contributions to the foundry while viewing an art exhibit at the National Building Museum in Washington, D. C., twenty years after his death. She relates,

I had almost made my way around the room when I finally came upon two color photographs shot at U.S. Pipe and Foundry. [...] I couldn't have predicted how the next picture would affect me.

I read the caption first:
EXTRACTING A 24-INCH PIPE, U.S. PIPE AND FOUNDRY, BESSEMER

A lone black man in a white helmet was bent over a row of pressurized valves as the pipe emerged from a giant mold. At first glance, the pipe looked just like a cannon pointing at my chest, and the mold like a long, deep birth canal, both pipe and mold dwarfing the image of the man. I could swear he looked a bit like Daddy, although this must have been my imagination running away. I had no warning, did not feel it coming on, but I stood there staring at the man until I began to sob, wracking sobs that brought another patron to my side.

"Are you all right?" she asked. I nodded yes, but when I did not collect myself; a guard came over and ushered me gently outside and to a bench between two of the marble columns. I sank down there, heaving, and when the patron left the gallery, she approached
me once again. "Are you sure you’re all right? Would you like for me to call a doctor?"  

I don't remember how long I sat there leaning against the pillar. It could have been ten minutes, or an hour. When I came to myself, I was clenching my skirt in my hand. I rose, and for a moment, felt an acute sensation of vertigo. Fearing that my legs would buckle right against the column for support.  

My whole body felt naked, stripped clean like the bark of a tree that has been struck by lightning.8

McDowell's use of images that evoke the rigors of childbirth ("the mold like a long, deep birth canal," "my whole body felt naked, stripped clean") as well as those that suggest a cleansing by fire ("like the bark of a tree that has been struck by lightning") posits this experience as one in which she undergoes a purification, an emotional (re)birth. McDowell is "born again," that is, made anew after realizing that she has ignored and denied her past. Her exhausting fatigue suggests that this experience is not only emotionally consuming but one that is also physically taxing. One line from her narrative—"when I came to myself"—signifies upon a verse from the Prodigal Son narrative in Luke 15 indicating the son's psychological transformation ("And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger").9 From this point forward in her text, it is the trope of the transformed prodigal figure that McDowell assumes.

A newfound awareness of the obstacles her father faced in the steel factory humbles her. She gains, via this purging, a new sight, a way of seeing her father's life through the lens of knowing and understanding his pain, and therefore, her aunt's entreaties no longer sound unreasonable. After leaving the museum, McDowell writes:

For more than twenty years I had tried to banish him [her father] from my memory, but here was the repressed returned. [. . .] Many a time, especially during my college years, I would listen as family members—one by one—laid
Daddy's woes and squandered hope at the feet of U.S. Pipe. I mustered not a mite of sympathy for the view they took of him. I was always with a sharply rational rejoinder, quick to interject that work was not the measure of the man and thus it could not explain everything. There was more to a man than his work. But now it slowly dawned on me that, while all this might be true, there was also more to Daddy's work than I had ever known or cared to know. I was now compelled to seek that knowledge, which I could only glean by going back to Pipe Shop again.  

Even though McDowell's epiphany sets her on a course to claim her legacy, she is ultimately unsuccessful in her efforts to locate documentation substantiating her late father's settlement. Yet her journey back home to Pipe Shop is not one made in vain, for her trip serves as a catalyst for (re)acquainting her with the struggles her father endured. She writes,

I had finally traveled to Pipe Shop, but was no closer to solving the riddle for myself. [..] I resolved right then and there that I would pursue the asbestos question, try to determine what, if any, role it had played in my father's early death. I would pursue it, not for money, nor simply to honor Daddy's memory, but to continue fighting, for the cause of justice.  

Her decision to keep fighting for "justice" reconfigures this homecoming as a claiming act. Instead of pursuing a financial inheritance or seeking to revere her father's legacy, McDowell's return home begins an effort to recast the South of her past as a place which can now, in the late 20th century, address the injustices experienced by all blacks. On this visit back to Pipe Shop, McDowell manages to shift the construct of "home" from a place that held little promise for success to one that may yet provide some semblance of emotional restitution. Her account of her departure, though, hints at the undercurrent of sorrow she still carries within:
Crouched in the backseat of Auntee’s Rambler, I cried silent tears. Out of sadness, fear, rage, guilt, relief. Relief at having left it, just as Mother bade me do. Guilt for learning only now what Pipe Shop was all about. Sadness for what I’d left behind and yet still carried strong within me.1

Her words suggest a recognition, indeed a (re)categorization of “home,” (“learning only now what Pipe Shop was all about”) within her psyche. For McDowell, homecoming constitutes more than a claiming act of monetary inheritance; going back home to Pipe Shop becomes a means of claiming her familial legacy. The plethora of emotions she experiences (“sadness, fear, rage, guilt, relief”) in this “leaving” of Pipe Shop is quite unlike her previous departures. Unlike before, she is now a knowing daughter. In other words, she has been (re)bom, baptized, and purified as a result of the journey away from and back to “home.”

In contrast to narratives such as those featuring the reclamation of familial ties, one late 20th century African American homecoming narrative features the decision to return home as an opportunistic act. In Walter Mosley’s novel Gone Fishin’, one character’s return is presented as a quest for financial gain. Set in 1939, Gone Fishin’ is a coming-of-age novel featuring Mosley’s serial character Easy Rawlins and his friend “Mouse” before they migrate from Houston to Los Angeles. For Raymond “Mouse” Alexander, going “home” presents the chance to confront and demand that an inheritance from his late mother be returned by his stepfather Reese. Before leaving, Mouse explains his plan and his history with Reese to Easy:

“Yeah, my stepdaddy got a big pile of money out on that farm somewhere. Big pile.”

“He wanna give you some’a that?”

“Well, we ain’t on the best terms—me an’ daddyReese (sic). You know he’s a farm boy down t’his nuts an’ he see everything like a farmer see his world. So when I come along he figgers I was

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the runt’ a the litter and I should be put in a burlap sack and dumped in the river.”

Mouse was smiling but he wasn’t happy.
“Shoo, man! Even a farmer love his chirren.”
“I ain’t none’a his. My momma had me when she was still footloose an’ feelin’ good. daddyReese come nosin’ around later.”

A legacy of past rejection marks Mouse whose smile masks a vexed spirit. Mouse’s disdain for Reese stems from being treated like an outcast (“runt’ a the litter”) as a young boy. Mouse stresses the lack of blood ties between the two as further cause for the rift that exists.

With Mouse’s homecoming centering around the conflict between the two men, Mosley’s work posits this decision to return home as a pivotal step in Mouse’s maturity. By focusing on father/son confrontation as male initiation, Gone Fishin’ typifies one of the characteristics found in the African American male Bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel. In a study of African American and Caribbean male Bildungsromane, Geta LeSeur traces the significance of ritual and initiation (“rites and rituals”14 ) in the development of such narratives. She notes that major elements of these texts focus on estrangement, journeying, racial/cultural violence and frustration, and an examination of the relationship between fathers and sons as part of the male’s emergence into manhood.15 Mosley’s novel incorporates the elements of “rites and rituals” resulting in the depiction of a hostile homecoming, reconfiguring the traditional representation of “home” as a welcoming place.

The beginning of Gone Fishin’ finds Mouse about to marry, wishing to provide his future bride EttaMae (sic) with some of the niceties he believes she deserves. Once he thinks of a plan, Mouse engages the help of best friend Easy Rawlins, offering him
fifteen dollars to travel with him to Mouse’s home, the aptly-titled Pariah, Texas. In this place, Mouse is treated like a “pariah,” an outsider, by his stepfather Reese, to the extent that none of the comforts of home are offered him upon his arrival. Unlike traditional homecoming narratives, no welcoming ceremony greets Mouse and Easy when they reach Reese; instead, the entire homestead appears lifeless to Easy:

The yard, if you could call it that, was a mess. [...] The house was even worse. It looked as if the main beams had been broken. The roof was caved in; all four walls leaned inward. The old two-story farmhouse had been folded into a squat hut. There was a pipe sticking out near the top of one of the slanted walls, a weak rag of smoke coming from it. If it wasn’t for that, I’d’ve thought we had come on a deserted wreck. [...] A strong-looking black man stood in the wreck of that doorway. He wore overalls with no shirt and you could see the strength in his arms and chest like flats of dark steel [...] Mouse stared Reese straight in the face. He wasn’t letting anything show, except a slight squint from the sun.

“Ain’t no room in the house fo’ no guests, Ray. What you want?”

Mouse hunkered down against a rotted bale of hay and said, “Just wanted to shout at ya, Reese, you know it’s been some years an’ I thought I’d see ya while we down here.”

“Ain’t got no food and no drinks fo’ guests neither. So if you got sumpin’ t’say then let’s have it.”

By denying Mouse any of the rituals of hospitality—food, drink, and respite—Reese escalates the conflict between them. Mosley’s narrative highlights the tension of the encounter positioning the sheer physical brawn of Reese against Mouse’s daring cockiness. The image of Reese’s collapsing house, one without structural support (“main beams had been broken”) serves as a trope representing the disintegrated relationship between (step)father and (step)son. A close reading also reveals Mosley’s skill in providing a picture of a place that is the antithesis of “home.” A rotting bale of hay signifies a decay that permeates the air, revealing the absence of life and love in this
place, attributes normally found at "home." Their clash continues as Mouse informs Reese of his upcoming nuptials; however, Reese is dismissive and turns his back to re-enter the house. Their mutual hostility escalates to the point of violence:

"Reese!" Mouse shouted as he jumped to his feet.

The older man stopped. Without turning, he said, "I don't take to folks raisin' they voice t'me out on my farm, [...]. So I guess you better go back to wherever you come from or I'ma go get my gun an'..."

"I come fo'my part'a Momma's dowry, Reese." Mouse said. "I know she had some jewelry an' some money from her folks when you two got married an' you leased land wit' it. I know you got money out here now, an' I want some for my own weddin'. It's mines, Reese, an' I want it."

The last three words turned Reese around. [...]

"You ain't got the right t'say her name, boy. She up ev'ry night worried 'bout you an' who knows what you doin', or where? She worried herself sick an' then she died an' who you think brought it on?" There were tears in Reese's eyes. "She died askin' fo'you. It broke my heart, an' where was you? "What good it gonna do, huh?" Mouse shouted. "I's barely a teenager an' you come after me wit' sticks. [...]"

"You was a rotten boy, Raymond, an' you's a rotten man. You kilt her an' now you want my money, but I see you dead fo' I give up a dime [emphasis added]."17

In this excerpt, Mouse approaches his stepfather in an antagonistic manner, shouting at the older man. Initially, readers are unaware of the original source of tension between the men. The reader soon finds out the nature of the conflict between the two men: Reese's physical abuse of the younger man which has kept Mouse from previously coming back home. LeSeur notes that African American male *bildungssromane* often feature protagonists who become self-sufficient "if they survive their often difficult childhood, while others carry a lifelong hostility to the point of being dangerous to the larger society."18 Throughout all of Mosley's Easy Rawlins' novels, one of Mouse's trademarks is his temper; the other is his willingness to kill at a
moment's notice, making him an extremely dangerous presence in Easy's life. In Gone Fishin', the vestiges of a painful childhood are evident in the character of Mouse as his seething rage shows no sign of ceasing. He accuses Reese of physical violence ("I's barely a teenager an' you come after me wit' sticks an' fists") and appears to carry within him an inclination toward violence.

In this text, the figure of the (step)father is not a completely unsympathetic character; the source of Reese's pain seems to be a tormenting jealousy borne out of his late wife's favoring of her son. His declaration that Mouse was the cause of her untimely death ("She worried herself sick an' then she died") coupled with his grief over her preferential concern for Mouse ("She died askin' fo' you. It broke my heart...") depict a heartsick man with little means other than violence and intimidation to release his anger. Unaware that he is his stepson's own personal demon, Reese belligerently taunts his stepson and Easy and orders them to vacate his property ("So I guess you better go back to wherever you come from or I'ma go get my gun an'..."). By introducing the possible use of deadly force to end this conflict, Mouse sees only two choices to resolve this dispute: he can withdraw from the challenge which would signify defeat, or he can go up against Reese in a battle which would affirm the younger man's initiation into adulthood. What Mouse "reads" is that he can become a "real" man by marrying and providing a means of financial support to EttaMae lies in this life-altering moment.

Another important ritual that characterizes this homecoming narrative is the emphasis of the request for inheritance. Mouse's demand for his mother's dowry, his financial legacy, echoes the request made by the prodigal son of his father in Luke 15,
verse 12: “And the younger said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.” Serving as the archetypal homecoming narrative, the parable depicts a spirit of openness and trust as the son’s father willingly gives the young man his inheritance. Unlike the peaceful, dignified resolution between father and son displayed in Luke 15, the exchange of words between Reese and Mouse reflects a past of former physical and emotional abuse which prohibits the two from reconciliating. In a skillful divergence from the Prodigal narrative, Mosley manipulates this model text, subverting it with an outright rejection by Reese. The gravity of Reese’s words in the passage “I see you dead fo’ I give up a dime” defines and forecasts the resolution of this battle of wills: it will not end without someone’s death. By signifying upon the harmonious relationship between son and father in the as presented in the Prodigal Son parable, Gone Fishin’ resists a sentimental, romanticized notion of “home.” No love or comfort is found here for Mouse; instead, he must stand up to the threat to his life.

Once Reese makes his antagonistic pronouncement, Mouse reacts quickly, ready to embark on this initiatory act. Only by responding in kind—that is, with violence—does Mouse begin to dismantle Reese’s control and authority. Aiming his long-barreled .41, Mouse shoots Reese’s four dogs in rapid succession, resulting in Reese dropping to the ground. After this chilling display of brutality, Easy relates the two men having more words, followed by one last taunting gesture by Mouse:

“I’m a have what’s mine,” Mouse said as he brought the bead down on Reese.
“You can kill me an’ you can take my soul but I ain’t gonna give you a drop’a what’s mine!”
“Raymond!” I shouted “Let it go, man! You cain’t get nuthin’ like this. Let it go.”
Mouse lifted the barrel a hair and shot over Reese’s head, then he turned to me and said, “We better get outta here.”

[... ] Half a mile down, Mouse stopped and pulled the baby doll from his jacket. He took out a string and tied it roughly around the doll’s neck and then he hung the doll from a branch so that it dangled down over the center of the road.

“He gonna come down here with that shotgun but you know he gonna be stopped by this,” Mouse said loudly to himself.19

This excerpt, ending with Mouse’s strategic placement of a voodoo doll meant to represent Reese, demonstrates the lengths to which a (step)son will go to prove his manhood to his (step)father. Mouse’s yoking of lethal force to “otherworldly” powers establishes a tableau for continued conflict. Mosley masterfully connects the sacred (the biblical narrative) to the profane (the African/Caribbean-based folk rituals of voodoo), reinscribing the former with initiation rites that reflect tension and dread. As a pariah deciding to return to Pariah, Mouse emerges as the outcast who dares not forget. In contrast to Easy’s repeated pleas to “let it go,” Mouse most certainly cannot let “it” go. “It,” the hatred Mouse holds inside for Reese, made him decide to go back home and “it” will not let him leave until he has settled his score with his stepfather; “it” will not leave him alone and “it” will haunt him until one of them is dead.

As the days of their brief visit to Pariah pass by, Easy and Mouse find that Reese begins to deteriorate physically, believing that he is the target of a voodoo curse. Mouse’s guile plays strange tricks on Reese, and, in contrast to the “powerful man” that Easy first sees confronting Mouse, Reese appears before the church congregation on Sunday morning with “his arms and chest sagged down like fat [... ] hair sprinkled with white, [... ] stooped [...] (walking with) a slight limp” (157). The suspected power of the supernatural threatens to dismantle Reese’s control and over his stepson.
and a last confrontation between the two looms. In trying to explain the reversal of
Reese’s state since Mouse’s return home, Easy offers,

> Some men believe in evil. They’ve seen so much of it in
> the world and in themselves that it becomes a part of what they
> know as truth. And when you believe in it the way daddyReese
> must have, you open yourself up to people preying on that fear.
> The strength of hatred turns to weakness.²⁰

Perhaps the “evil” that finally debilitates Reese is not just his fear of witchcraft; what
Mosley also seems to suggest through this struggle between father and (step)son is that
a father’s rejection of his child, a denial of a son’s rights of inheritance, can require the
ultimate price—death. Hatred, greed, and eventually fear consume and overcome
Reese, whose reality or “truth” lies in a belief that his son is out to destroy him.

Through the figure of Reese, Mosley posits that failing to observe homecoming rituals
trangresses a natural order, one in which hospitality and parental acceptance should be
offered upon a son’s (or daughter’s) decision to return home.

In an effort to reconcile the prodigal figure with a resisting parent, Mosley
enables the community to weigh in on the debate. Although Mouse has returned to
claim what he believes is owed him, both his and Reese’s “sins” are displayed before
the church when the local preacher speaks to his congregation, stating in his Sunday
message,

> I see a day coming when the Lord is gonna test us. He’s
gonna pull the land away from us and he’s gonna strike down
with his open hand and smash away this village. He’s gonna
take it all and the only thing you’ll have left is your wits and
the love of Jesus in your hearts. [. . .] The land don’t belong to
you. No it don’t. Your house and your clothes and
your chirren too. None’ a them belong to you.²¹

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With Reese in attendance and Mouse noticeably absent, the minister reminds those gathered for service that material things will pass away and issues forth a kind of community mandate to the two men: work your differences out. Yet the public chastisement makes little impact. Upon leaving church, Reese tells Easy to convey to Mouse, “You tell him I don’t care what happens. I see my soul in hell fo’ I let up on a dime, you hear that?” (168). In an unyielding posture, Reese pronounces his fate: he is unwilling to contemplate any kind of mediation and sets on a final self-destructive course.

In the final confrontation between Mouse and Reese, the violence that has marked their previous encounters is consistent until the end. In a furious battle on Reese’s property, Mouse, holding a gun on his stepfather, tries to confine him in a large basket. Helped by a fugitive named Clifton, Mouse demands that Reese show them where his money is hidden. When Reese breaks out of the basket, chaos ensues and in the gunplay that follows, both Clifton and Reese are dead, the latter shot by his stepson. It is significant that Mosley does not initially paint Mouse as cruelly calculating by this act and leaves it up to the reader to believe whether it is done in self-defense; nevertheless, the violation of homecoming mores by Reese and his subsequent challenges of moral and communal codes are seen as reinforcing his demise. For Mouse, Reese and his money are foregrounded as obstacles to be met and overcome in a quest for manhood. On their way back to Houston, absolved of any wrongdoing in the deaths, Mouse shows Easy a “fat envelope” (213) filled with money. As he admits his scheme to Easy, Mouse reveals a plot that subtly implicates his act as one of murder, not self-defense. In the end, his motive for killing Reese is solely for getting the
money, at any price. Mouse tells Easy, "...you know he owed me sumpin' so I just
look at it like this here money I got is mines" (214). Whereas the prodigal figure is
often cast as a model of humility, the character of Mouse reshapes this trope, presenting
a demeanor that is jubilant in his stepfather's downfall. With Reese gone, now Mouse's
"happily ever after" can commence, as he relates to Easy:

"I been scared'a Reese day and night for my whole life
and now he's dead." A smile of pure joy spread across his
face; tears sprouted from his eyes. "An' I'ma be married and I'ma
be happy fo' the rest'a my years."22

For Mouse, the painful memory of "home," is juxtaposed with recollections of an
abusive, loveless relationship with Reese. However, no longer haunted, Mouse seems
poised for a new life. His "pure joy" comes at great expense, the death of two men, but
his act of rage is situated as one that can possibly be forgiven, even deemed necessary
to forge ahead.

Portraying Mouse in such an ambivalent fashion, Mosley deconstructs the myth
of the prodigal, depicting a homecoming that fails to reinforce nostalgic or romanticized
notions of "home." Reformulating the African-American return migration narrative and
its attendant romanticized notions of "home" allows Mosley to manipulate homecoming
rituals found in Biblical lore. Gone Fishin' reinscribes the model for the homecoming
narrative while reinforcing the portrayal of the quest as a major trope in the tradition of
the male Bildungsroman.

Both the fictional narrative Gone Fishin' and the non-fiction Leaving Pipe Shop
affirm that decisions to return home by sons and daughters in search of their
"inheritances" are not without resistance, both internal and external. For prodigal sons
and daughters, confronting the past leads to a bittersweet realization of relationships
with and regard for parental figures. The seeking of "inheritance," though it may be initially depicted as economic, develops into far more. Both Mosley and McDowell present works in which the claiming of financial birthright or estate becomes a discovery of familial legacy. Their works offer a restructuring of the prodigal narrative, with a focus on the symbolic (re)birth that occurs as a result of the journey home. As these writers show, deciding to travel back home is often not easy for those who return, but rewarding in the sense that going "home" can be a pathway to finding a sense of self.

4.2 "'We've Come this Far by Faith': Homecoming as Salvation

Although one impetus for returning "home" can involve the claiming of an inheritance by a son or daughter, African-American return migration narratives also examine the belief that returning to the South can offer a measure of freedom or salvation from urban, societal ills that may be rampant in the North. As a trope, "escaping" gets reconfigured in the African-American homecoming narrative. While slave narratives and early 20th century African-American literature portrayed the North as a "Promised Land," late 20th century return migration narratives revise this portrayal. Instead of being depicted as a sanctuary, the North is represented as an enclosed, limiting domain from which one must "escape," while the South is posited as a place teeming with freedom and possibilities. In what could be viewed as a reversal, return migration narratives reshape traditional African-American rhetorical modes, articulating the late 20th century movement of black folk from North to South as a redemptive act, a kind of "salvation."
Often for the returning migrant from “up North,” the South is cast as a place offering respite. The geography of expansive Southern spaces provides a powerful lure, even for the returning migrant who owns no land but still sees in the South the possibility for advancement and a better life. In an effort to uncover this phenomenon, Black journalist Chet Fuller examines the "New South," traveling throughout North Carolina on an undercover assignment for the *Atlanta Journal*. During his journey, he meets Vivian Rouse, a woman who has moved her family from a New Jersey housing project back to the South. He writes:

First I saw the sprawling front yard, a muddy wasteland of puddles and rotting. [...] Far back from the road, in the midst of a muddy expanse of land, sat the house—big, awkward, something out of an earlier time, with faded white paint peeling like diseased skin. [...] But forty-one-year-old Vivian Nadine Rouse and five of her six children lived there as tenant farmers.

Mrs. Rouse greeted me with a smile. [...] It was cold on the March morning I found the Rouses, so the whole family was crowded into what I guess should be called the living room. This was the room where the Rouse family did most of its living, since it was the only heated room in the house. [...] The house had no bathroom, not even an outhouse. [...] Yet Mrs. Rouse and her children insisted they were happier here in the backwoods of North Carolina than they had been in New Jersey. [...] (Mrs. Rouse relates) “After we got here, the children just got out running in the woods. It was the first time they’d ever seen such wide open spaces. They were just running and screaming, ‘We free! We free!’ I didn’t have the heart to take them back to Jersey after that.”

The elation Rouse’s children feel at being able to run freely through the countryside in North Carolina seems to echo another kind of emancipation experienced by Southern blacks—that of being “set free” from slavery by Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. However, instead of slavery being the institution keeping blacks in bondage, the North is positioned as a place of stifling enclosure. For Rouse, the freedom of the South is
much too great to subject her children anymore to an enforced confinement. The decision for her to come back "home" is settled in a moment marked by the envisioning of her children being "free," a moment that resonates with great cultural importance.

However, a closer glance at Mrs. Rouse's circumstances reveal an "ownership" in the land that is problematic. Evicted from living in a house and on land that belongs to a lieutenant governor of North Carolina, her options are few as a tenant farmer, for she must take her family to live in substandard housing. For her as well as for other sharecroppers and laborers, the feeling of possession seems tied to a "love/hate" relationship with the terrain, as the vicious cycle of tenant farming serves to leave many who work closest to the land impoverished. Their toil only seems to leave them further in debt to those who own the property. "Ownership" in the South for the African-American return migrant emerges, then, as a condition that must be viewed not just in legal, possessive terms but also in more personal, emotional ways. Though living an impoverished lifestyle in the South could be seen by others as a step down on the socioeconomic scale for Rouse, she rejects such a view, stating, "Though we have fewer material things and less money here than we had in Jersey, . . . I feel freer here. I have more peace of mind. I can leave my house and not have to worry about anybody breaking in." In this statement, Rouse articulates a notion of freedom equated with "peace of mind" and feelings of safety. Assigning values which stress freedom, peace, and refuge to a Southern "home" diverges greatly from traditional African-American positioning of the North as the "Promised Land."

For some migrants, no matter how long their physical absence from home has been, a sense of belonging defines their Southern "home" and provides a kind of
psychological redemption. Memories of the place and those who have been an integral part of the life of the migrant can inspire this connection, as suggested by Jacqueline Joan Johnson. Johnson, whose mother died when Jacqueline was four, reflects on how she has searched for emotional connections through her numerous migrations, including to the South:

By the time I was thirteen, I had moved from Philadelphia to New York and migrated from New York to South Carolina and back to New York again. Over the years, I have looked for my mother, my geography of self in many migrations, among many people, sometimes aware and at other times not so aware of this search, this need. When I think of my migration, I also think of my migration from childhood to young adulthood and from woman to mother of self and others.25

Migration serves as a mode through which Johnson engages on a journey toward self-realization. During those times when she leaves the South, her memories of her there continue to provide her with emotional solace. While attending school in New York, she relates,

I truly began to miss the South. I had become accustomed to living life in a certain way. I was used to having a community and having presence in that community. I was watched by my elders and peers and expected to be somebody. There was a dignity of daily life and refinement that became a part of my way of being in the world.

My daily life in New York highlighted my emotional and spiritual loss. [...] secretly I mourned the loss of a way of life as I knew it. [...] The South was a doorway, a home, [...] I spent most of my time looking back like Lot’s wife, almost losing my life to the salt of the past. [...] It would be another ten years before I returned to Charleston and realized some essential part of me never left [...] the largest part of my spirit always lived in Charleston, near my grandmother and her God.26

Johnson’s return to Charleston revives her spirit and redeems her selfhood. Using the Biblical image of Lot’s wife to express her feelings of longing for the South, Johnson
situates her ten-year physical absence as a traumatic experience. She loses a great part of her identity, her place in a community, and undergoes a psychological “disconnect” that threatens her validation of self. For Johnson, Charleston functions as a foundation for her self-worth, and it is upon her return that she regains her “essential part.” Her realization is that returning to a Southern “home” results in wholeness, which approaches the revised, late 20th century African-American lore emphasizing the “healing” properties of returning to the South.

African-American writers such as Bebe Moore Campbell demonstrate an ability to further explore and expand upon this theme of the South as salvation. In her novel Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, Campbell approaches and seems to reinforce the notion of a South full of possibilities for the “lost” prodigal figure. Through the characters of Wydell Todd and his son, W.T., Campbell presents a narrative in which both men struggle with their own personal demons. Covering a time period of over thirty-five years, the novel depicts Wydell’s descent into alcoholism as well as his son’s entry into the world of crack use and Chicago street gangs. Campbell’s work focuses on the disintegration of one African-American family, centering on how initially the South and eventually the North dismantle its stability. However, at novel’s end, a journey to the South is posited as a refuge as both father and son escape from the harms of the city.

The narrative traces the migration of a young black couple from the Mississippi Delta to the cold harshness of Chicago. A migrant from the Delta, Wydell settles in Chicago where his abuse of alcohol accelerates his decline and leads to his abandonment of his wife Delotha and son Armstrong. In an effort to cope with her teenage son’s “hardheaded, mannish” ways, Delotha, a beautician and factory worker,
sends him to stay with her mother in Hopewell, Mississippi. Mirroring the real-life events surrounding the murder of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old boy killed in 1955 in Mississippi by whites who felt he was disrespectful to a white woman, the novel depicts a similar fate for Armstrong. He is killed a few days after uttering French phrases in a pool hall while a white woman happens to enter the room. Three white men, including the woman's husband, abduct and Armstrong, seeking revenge for his supposed transgression.

Wydell's later attempt to "save" his son W. T. at the end of the novel is situated as a penance to make up for his earlier absence from son Armstrong's life. However, Campbell explores both parents' feelings of guilt surrounding their first son Armstrong's death, their remorse over his being sent to the South and the impact of those emotions on their desire to protect their second son W. T. from danger. Initially, Delotha's decision to let Armstrong live with his grandmother is presented as a drastic action taken to alter her son's behavior as well as benefit from her extended family's offer to share in his care:

She [Delotha] didn't have to explain to explain to anyone that she'd tried to keep her son with her. The boy was a handful. She didn't dare leave him at home alone while she was working or going to school. If she turned her back on him for a minute, he'd break something or tear it up in some way. And lie! Half of what he told her she made up [. . .] If Mama said it was all right to send Armstrong, then who was she or anybody else to find fault? [. . .] Delotha had tried to talk up the place, but he was being stubborn that day she put him on the train, muleheaded and vindictive, trying to make her feel guilty. "You just don't want to take care of me," he screamed. "That's why you're sending me away."27

Thus, Armstrong's despair over being sent to Mississippi reflects a fear that he is being abandoned by his mother. Her decision to send him "home" to Mississippi might be
seen as an attempt to "save" him at an early age, but at the time of the novel's initial setting around 1955, the South is characterized as a hellish place. Others in the community offer not-so-subtle opinions about the harsh, racist conditions likely to met in Mississippi; one customer of Delotha's reprimands her, saying: "I tell you, girl, you got more nerve than I do. When I left Greenville, that was it for me and Mississippi. I don't want to see that place no more. And I wouldn't dare send no child of mine down there" (41). This forewarning is significant, for it communicates that seeing the South as salvation in the mid-1950s is to misread its ability to provide sanctuary for black boys. In a local bar shortly after his son's death, Wydell tries explaining to the bartender why Armstrong was in Mississippi:

The words came as though they were traveling through a tunnel. "We wasn't together," Wydell said slowly. "The mama went back to Mississippi?"
"No. She ain't never going back there. The boy, he was staying with his grandma. Her mother."

The bartender opened his mouth and then closed it without speaking. Then he said, slowly, "Well, I guess she had her reasons. Sending him down there. Anyway, it sure was a damn shame, what happened." [. . .] Wydell could hear the questions the bartender didn't ask. What was his boy doing in Mississippi? Why was he living there? 28

Although intended as a courtesy, the bartender's dramatic pause does not effectively conceal the man's belief that Wydell has failed his son by letting his wife send him to Mississippi. The unspoken but clearly understood message of the black community is that the South of the mid-1950's cannot function as a place of protection. Further, by disobeying this credo through indirect means, Wydell is implicated in the crime of his boy's murder, thereby setting the course for his later redemption.
However, this redemption comes at a cost, with great suffering endured by both parents. After Armstrong’s death, Wydell and Delotha engage in the pursuit of placing blame on the other instead of accepting that his murder takes place because of the ruthless actions of hatemongers. In one private moment, facing a decline in her mental stability, Delotha seethes inside, leveling accusations at an absent Wydell: “You and your promises, she wanted to scream. If you’d done what you was supposed to do, I wouldn’t have sent Armstrong away” (147). Even though his abandonment of his wife and child leads to Delotha’s decision to send Armstrong to the South, Wydell, trying to lose his sorrows in drink, directs his anger at her after their son has been killed:

> [questions nagged him, wouldn’t disappear, and suddenly he grabbed hold of them as if they were a lifeline. Why couldn’t ‘Lotha raise the child herself, instead of shipping him off to Odessa? Women were supposed to raise their kids, to protect them. She was always telling him that he wasn’t nothing; well, what about her? He kicked the bar in front of him. “A mule got a better chance at living than a nigger in Mississippi. And that’s the truth.”

> Several of the people at the bar were staring at him, and for a moment he was scared in a way he didn’t understand until he realized that he’d spoken aloud . . . faces in the bar offered him sympathy. And why shouldn’t they feel sorry for him? He deserved all the pity the room had to offer. His son was dead. [. . .] Even if he was all kinds of wrong, and jive, a mother was supposed to protect her child.29

Although Wydell tries to assuage his own fears that he is somehow to blame for Armstrong’s fate, his efforts are in vain. Denial and pain debilitate him until he soon has to become institutionalized in a mental hospital, haunted by hallucinations of Armstrong screaming “Daddy,” crying for help. After his collapse, Wydell is visited by Delotha. The encounter results in accusatory charges leveled by them both:

> “Why you send him down there? Why didn’t you keep him here with you?” The sudden meanness in Wydell’s voice
overwhelmed his tears. “What kind of mother would send her
own kid to that hellhole?”
“What kind of mother?” Delotha lunged toward Wydell,
her fingers curved to grip his throat. He grabbed her by the
wrists and held her away from him. [. . . ] His thin white
hospital gown suddenly turned wet from her tears. “Delotha,”
Wydell was saying, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I said that. I ain’t
got no right. . . . I know you hate me. I deserve it.” [. . . ]
“I can do better, Delotha.” He spoke softly, but the
words slammed into her like a wild storm.30

What ensues from this encounter represents the dilemma for Wydell: the course of his
life must be to try and repent for his transgression. Although he and his wife reconcile
and eventually have two daughters and one son, the aftermath of their first son’s death
lingers on. Delotha becomes overprotective of their second son W. T., resulting in his
complete lack of respect of authority; subsequently, her behavior over the years begins
to strain her relationship with her husband. Relapsing into alcohol abuse, Wydell is no
longer a part of his son’s life by the time of W. T.’s fall into drugs and gang violence
during his teenage years. The lure of the Chicago streets takes its toll on the boy while
his mother discovers one night while waiting for him that she cannot “save” her son
from harm:

She didn’t know where he was, except that he was somewhere
gravitating toward peril, dancing with it, embracing danger like a
woman he paid for. Delotha sighed. All her life she’d been
defending him against the wrong enemy; she would have to fight
the streets to save him, and she didn’t have the strength.31

In this passage, the “enemy” of the urban black male is redefined. Instead of the
traditionally inscribed “enemy”—the South and white people—Delotha comprehends
the direct threat to W. T. and others of his generation. Although her nurturing role as
mother is vital, Delotha is positioned as not strong enough to fight the battle that must
be won, with her son’s life as the spoils of victory. In framing W. T.’s salvation, the

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novel seems to suggest, though, that only a father or male figure has the “strength” to bring about W. T.’s salvation. The earlier absence of Wydell’s presence in Armstrong’s life, “read” by Delotha as a contributing factor to her son’s death, becomes an integral part of her plea for their second son’s life. She feels compelled to do whatever she can to ensure Wydell’s presence in W.T.‘s life, so that this son can live. In asking for help from her brother-in-law, Delotha achieves an illuminative moment:

“[...] I want you to help me find Wydell. Wydell needs to talk to him.”
“Girl, isn’t it a little late for that?” Lionel said quietly. [...] Lionel shook his head. “He’s been drinking like a fish. He can’t save his ownself, let alone somebody else.”
Tears streaked Delotha’s face. “All I ever wanted was for W.T. to be safe, for white people not to kill him like they done Armstrong.”
Lionel said sadly, “The streets is killing more black boys than the white folks ever could. We always had more than one enemy.”
“Oh God,” Delotha said, sobbing, raising her hands in supplication, “please save my baby!”

In attempting to rescue her son from harm, Delotha is informed that her husband may not have what is necessary to “save” W. T. Realizing the truth about the newfound enemy forces her to make her appeal to God, shedding light on the last hope for W.T. The narrative not only defines the struggle that black migrant families have had to endure against debilitating influences up North but is also prescriptive in nature, suggesting that familial and divine intervention are necessary to combat the destructiveness of the “streets.” Delotha’s cry to God, that He will intercede and “save” her child from a place that offers no safety, is suggestive of how African-Americans in the 20th century interpreted their movement during the Great Migration. For many, the desire to be rescued and led to a haven which held promise was interpreted as God-driven. Investing the dynamics of that movement with religious meaning, blacks often
viewed their leavetaking of the South as their being delivered out of bondage. As Milton Sernett notes, "the hand of God" was seen by many as operative in the mass exodus of blacks departing the South for what was felt to be "the Promised Land."33

In a reversal of the "North as the Promised Land" trope, salvation as depicted in Your Blues Ain't Like Mine is achieved for African-Americans through the process of "escape" from the North. Unable to fully realize happiness in Chicago because of his addiction to alcohol, Wydell has failed in his efforts to be a good father and husband; his son W. T., at the same time, succumbs to the street violence around him. However, the novel's closing features redemptive moments for both father and son. While talking to his brother Lionel, Wydell must confront his past and contemplate on his future:

(Lionel speaks) "W. T. is in trouble, Wydell. He's running with a gang. Delotha found a gun in his room. She wants you to talk to him."

"She do, huh? Well, I ain't got nothing to say to W. T., nothing he'd want to hear."[ . . . ]

"Wydell, I got me six sons. You only got one son left. You want to lose him too?"

"I can't save that boy. I ain't never been a father to him. It's too late to start now."

"You don't have to start at the beginning. Start in the middle."

"It's too late."

Lionel grabbed Wydell's hand. "Start at the end," he said.34

The line "I can't save that boy" uttered by Wydell reveals more than the character's self-doubt; with this quote, Campbell raises the question of whether salvation might require more than just one individual's effort. For Wydell to exist as savior, he must rely as well on the power of a higher (F)ather. This time, Wydell is forced to recognize that he can make a significant difference in the outcome of his boy's life, unlike before with Armstrong.
Saving W. T., then, becomes an exercise in “saving grace.” As father, Wydell serves as an instrument of providential intervention. Campbell manipulates the trope of the (F)ather’s hand so that W. T. is rescued from danger by Wydell’s hands. Late at night, running away from a rival gang member’s attempt to shoot him and the police’s efforts to apprehend him, W. T. finds himself in a life-threatening predicament:

His legs were screaming with each step he took, but he kept running, trying to stay in the shadows. [ . . . ] Then he heard a lone car on the street, slowing as it approached him. [ . . . ] The car stopped and a door opened. He heard footsteps running toward him, only he was too frightened and exhausted to move. Suddenly, strong hands were grabbing his arms. He tried to reach for his gun, but the hands, big and hard, yanked it out of his waistband and he heard it clatter against the sidewalk. A fist glanced off W. T.’s cheek. Then he was being dragged and pushed into the car, and it took off into the black night.35

Campbell’s depiction of this salvation scene merges highly dramatic action with religious implications of the providential “hand.” Certain details in this passage—lone car, opening door, footsteps running—emerge as somewhat melodramatic. However, the implications of the rescue are such that W. T., only through a benevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient power, can begin his life again, with the help of his (F)ather. “Strong hands” that are “big and hard” embody the (F)ather’s hand in guiding him away from imminent danger. In this literal run for his life, W. T. is subdued by strength more powerful than his. Brought back from the “shadows” of death, W. T. is unaware that his father has abducted him. The boy briefly continues anticipating his own death but soon realizes that it is his father who is taking him away from this mayhem:

When W.T. felt the strong hard hand on the back of his neck, the fingers spreading around to his throat, and then the other hand pushing him into a car as dark and frightening as
the belly of a whale, he thought he was about to die. He waited for death [...] and the fear gripping him was deep and cold and real. Suddenly both hands released him [...] before he could see him, he heard his voice. “You must want to die real bad.”

W. T. smelled the liquor before he had a chance to even make out his father’s features. He hadn’t seen the man in three months, [...] “Where are we going?” he asked finally.

“You and me is taking a trip.”

“Where?”

“Down home.” [...] the longer W. T. looked at him, the angrier he got [...] “Let me out,” W. T. said, his voice as flat and hard as asphalt.

“You keep your ass right in this car, boy. I told you, we taking a trip.” Wydell reached over W. T. and pushed down the lock on the door. [...] “... we going to the home of the original blues. Mississippi. That’s my home.”

“Mississippi! What the hell are we gonna do there?” W. T. asked. [...]“You gon’ see me and your mama’s home, that’s what. We still got relatives down there. Friends too. We never took you because, well, you know what happened to your brother. Me and your mother had such bad memories of the place. But you need to see it.”

“Why do I need to see it?” W. T. asked irritably.

“You just do. It’s just something you need to see.”

W.T.’s resistance at being taken away to Mississippi underscores the exchange between father and son. The lack of respect shown by W. T. challenges the romanticized notion that African-Americans wish to go to the South in an effort to reconnect to their “roots.” An exchange of hostile words between the two uncovers the resentment and distrust that W. T. feels for his father. In the case of W. T., he feels nothing for the home of his parents. As a result of his estrangement from his son, Wydell’s motives are unclear to W. T., whose initial negative impressions come from noting the smell of alcohol on his father. Nevertheless, Wydell seeks to bond in some way with W. T., explaining that the boy “needs” to see Mississippi. By equating his...
own desire to be “saved” with the opportunity to “save” W. T., Wydell merges his own “need” with a projected sense of what his son “needs.”

The novel’s closing and final movement to the South articulates Wydell’s mission: to “save” his son by equipping with a sense of family legacy and connection to the land. Campbell posits this dual homecoming for one homegrown son and his boy as a quest full of hope and possibility. Heeding his brother’s advice, Wydell’s “starting at the end” to gain a relationship with his son necessitates that numerous lessons be taught—about the life led in the South, about the kind of man that left in search of a new beginning, about the man who now returns seeking renewal. The suggestion is that in addition to both father and son being “saved” individually from the destructive forces of the North, their relationship will now be “saved” as well. After the two finally reach the cotton fields and manmade fish ponds of Mississippi, Wydell stops his car in front of the community where he used to live, “a settlement of run-down shacks, most of which appeared to be empty” (331). W. T.’s salvation thus begins with his father’s telling him about this “home”:

“This is where me and your mother is from. This is where your brother got killed. I thought you ought to see it one time in your life, just so you’d know. My mama and daddy and your other grandparents, they come from here too. You see all that water? Well, it used to be nothing but cotton, and before the machines come, black folks picked that cotton. Me and your mama and your grandparents, your aunties and uncles, we all picked that cotton. We picked that cotton until our fingers bled. And sometimes when it would get bad—and boy, it could get real bad—we’d be in them fields just a-singing, you know. ‘Cause them songs, them songs could get you right.”

For Wydell, the way to reach his son is to tell him of how connected his people for generations have been to the land. The image of being one with the land, of family
members being organically tied to the land ("until our fingers bled"), is an enduring legacy that Wydell can pass on to this son, unlike his failure to do so with his first. Now that he has brought this son "home" to begin anew, Wydell can begin to overcome his own guilt about Armstrong still carried within. But in sharing the pain of the past ("when it would get bad"), Wydell also shares with his son a lesson on how blacks coped with the harshness of the past—through song. The power of African-American song, the blues and spirituals of the Mississippi Delta, is depicted as restorative ("them songs could get you right").

At first glance, the conclusion of Campbell’s novel seems to impart an "and they lived happily ever after" ending. The idea that a prodigal son bringing a wayward child "home" will result in a reconciliation might be viewed as somewhat romanticized. However, the hint that things may not be so perfect here at home is revealed by Wydell’s confession to his son as the two look over the deteriorating shacks, "W. T., I’m trying to give up drinking, but I believe I need me a drink now." The suggestion that this escape to the South may yet hold difficulties to overcome keeps the narrative from becoming oversentimentalized.

Perhaps what is most noteworthy is Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine is the novel’s ability to revise late 20th century African-American narrative theoretical concepts. In particular, the character Wydell functions as a hybrid of the "articulate survivor" and "articulate kinsman" as outlined by Robert Stepto. In his From Behind the Veil, Stepto defines the "articulate survivor" in the ascent narrative as one who leaves an oppressive social structure for a new posture in a less oppressive environment. On the other hand, the "articulate kinsman" in the immersion narrative forsakes individualized mobility in
the least oppressive social structure for a posture in the most oppressive environment, the latter of which may offer a newly found group identity. In projecting new directions for African-American narrative forms, Stepto writes that the primary features of the ascent and immersion narratives appear to call for an epiloging text that revoices the tradition's abiding tropes in such a way that answers [...]: Can a questing figure in a narrative . . . be both an articulate survivor and an articulate kinsman?

In answer to Stepto's "call" for an epiloging text, Campbell's novel appears to remap the North and South, synthesizing elements of the ascent and immersion narratives to produce a figure capable of being both survivor and kinsman. Wydell has left the oppressive North, a place that has wreaked havoc on his family, for the less oppressive South. Although at the beginning of the novel the North is initially positioned as offering more individualized mobility, the conclusion depicts the prospect of familial connection and legacy in the South as life-sustaining.

This concept of return to the South as salvation can also be situated as an idealization in late 20th century African-American non-fictional homecoming narratives. Nicholas Lemann examines the Great Migration and its impact on black migrants entitled The Great Migration: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America (1991). This important text includes numerous interviews conducted by Lemann of black Southern migrants and their descendants. His work presents the personal stories of those who left the South in search of a better life for themselves; in many areas, the narrative style of the text approaches that of African-American memoir. Writing about Juanita and her mother Ruby Haynes, Lemann explores the dynamics of Juanita's decision to go to the South as a last attempt to regain control over her life.
For Juanita Haynes, whose mother migrated to Chicago during the Great Migration and returned back to Mississippi after twenty-five years, the South is figured as a place that will rescue her from a life of drug addiction. One night after smoking cocaine with a friend, Juanita is rushed to a local hospital. Expecting a baby, she recovers from the episode but is "badly shaken." Of her ordeal, Lemann writes

> [e]ven through the haze of her addiction—the urge for one more perfect high was so strong it led the mind to rationalize away nearly any sensible thought—she could see that she was endangering the life of her unborn child, and probably her own life as well. On April 14, 1986, Juanita was lying in her bed at night, thinking that in the morning the welfare checks would arrive at the currency exchange, which meant that a big group would probably be coming over to smoke. Suddenly she heard a voice in her head, saying, Stop! Go down South!42

Juanita appears to experience a moment of "redemption," one that literally "calls" her "home" to the South. It might be argued that her mother Ruby's relocation to Mississippi acts primarily as a catalyst for Juanita's actions; however, the command is not simply "Stop! Go to your mother!" The significance of the internal call is that it links the directly stated "South" with implied messages about her safety and wellbeing, locating a sense of salvation within a sense of place—in this case, Clarksdale, Mississippi.

Though initially posited as life-altering, Juanita's strong belief in the South as a place of redemption progresses problematically. The next day after cashing her check and paying off her debt, $150 owed to her drug supplier, Juanita uses the rest of her $192 to buy Greyhound bus tickets for herself and her two children to go to Clarksdale. Her actions mirror those scenes a generation before her when multitudes of blacks left their Southern homes; in a reversal of those moments, Juanita views her "Promised
Leaving that same evening, she and her children show up at her mother’s unannounced where she confesses her addiction and begins to rehabilitate herself. As a result, her third child is born healthy; however, a year later she moves back to Chicago. After “telling herself that if she stayed away from the Robert Taylor Homes, she would be all right,” soon afterward she begins to use cocaine again. After a friend agrees to help her get back on the right path, Juanita tries to stay employed and off drugs. During this time, she decides to help her former boyfriend who also happens to be the father of her youngest two children. Now homeless and a cocaine addict, Thomas Chairs is still seen by Juanita as worthy of a chance, one that she feels can be found in another place:

She still felt, after all these many years, that Thomas was the love of her life, and even though he was hardly the world’s greatest prospective mate, she wanted to be with him. Knowing that he was never going to amount to anything as long as he was in Chicago, she asked him to move back South with her. He agreed.

In this attempt to “escape” the North, Juanita’s romanticizes the South as a place for redemption, a “reality” that exists in her mind through projected dreams of salvation from drug abuse. Extending her own projections to Thomas, she sets them both on a course to be redeemed. Further, her belief that Thomas will “never [ ... ] amount to anything” if he stays in Chicago uncannily echoes the fears that blacks had of the South only a generation ago. This (re)formation of the South as safe haven reshapes African-American folk belief. No longer a place to run from, the South now serves as a place one runs to in order to “amount to” something.

Determining whether Juanita’s dream is viable, however, must be addressed. As Lemann relates, Juanita with Thomas and her kids in tow moves back to Clarksdale,
Mississippi. After getting a place next door to her mother in a housing project, she and Thomas begin working. A few months later, Thomas gets back into trouble while working at the local grocery store, stealing a VCR. His crime lands him in jail for one year and while there, gets involved in a scuffle, which adds to his time and delays his marriage to Juanita. She, on the other hand, stays off drugs and manages living on government assistance with her four children, finding a minimum-wage job as a gas station convenience clerk. One wonders whether her regard for the South lessens as a result of her family’s setbacks, but Lemann writes that getting a job makes Juanita feel like she is “doing something with her life... pleased, on the whole, with the way her move to Clarksdale is working out.”

The desire to be “saved” and to “amount to something”—similar to the “push and pull” factors which motivated blacks to go to the North during the Great Migration—is at the center of Juanita’s expression of hopeful thinking. However, the same social problems (drugs, gangs, teenage pregnancy, gun violence) of urban living which have forced these sons and daughters to flee the North have begun to affect life in Clarksdale. Even still, blacks there remain positive, where “nearly everybody has the feeling of being on a communal trajectory.” The lure of hope and promise of possibility act as anchors for African-Americans (re)settling in a place called “home.” However, as Lemann explains, Biblical texts preferred by Juanita’s mother Ruby, a return migrant, may provide more insight into the (re)visioning of the South:

She is especially drawn to the several books of the Old Testament during which the prophets are leading their people toward the land of Canaan that God has promised them, but haven’t arrived yet. It is a resonant image for a poor black American who has lived through nearly all of the twentieth century and seen the end of sharecropping and segregation.
and the rise and fall of Chicago as a glorious symbol of hope: the other side of the Jordan River is now clearly visible, but unattained.  

What seems most striking about Lemann’s analysis of Ruby Haynes’ favorite Biblical passage is its emphasis on the shifting configuration of the “land of Canaan” as a metaphorical image for blacks in America. The image migrates just as the people in search of it do. Interpreting the decision of African-Americans to go back “home” to the South, whether to annually visit or permanently return, involves close attention to the motivating factors which propel them to leave. In examining homecoming as a commemorative event or ritual, the case seems that by doing so, the “son” or “daughter” engages in an act seeking to connect. In this sense, Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Malley contend that these kinds of acts serve as a kind of self-preservation:

The desire to retrieve the past still endures. Threatened by a sense of discontinuity and forgetfulness, we seek new moorings and props, new means of reactivating the processes of remembrance as we reach toward a better sense of who we are and whence we have come.

Using such a view, we can cast homecoming as a means of “retrieving” the past. The South then figures as a place to which one returns to regain one’s memory as well as a place to (re)establish new beginnings. And homecoming serves as a mode through which memory can map out the future.

Regarding how the prodigal figure is positioned in decisions to return permanently, possibilities of interpretation extend beyond traditional cultural views of (re)connection and escape from the harshness of the North. According to Thadious Davis, return migration by blacks back to “home” (“home” being the South) can be read as more than just an emotional or physical journey:
While anthropologists and sociologists may see the increasingly frequent pattern of black return migration as flight from the hardships of urban life, I would suggest that it is also a laying of claim to a culture and to a region that, though fraught with pain and difficulty, provides a major grounding for identity.

Davis' assertion that the act of return migration becomes "a laying of claim" positions homecomings as acts of will. That is, the choice by blacks to annually visit or permanently return to the South reconfigures its construction as "home." The vision of the "South" becomes infused with a people searching for, and locating, an identity as well as salvation. Davis' identification of the "laying of claim" act can be used to chart the decision to make the homecoming journey and connect to the community as willful acts of identity-making. Examining the choice to return "home" allows us a glimpse at how these occasions serve as markers of individual and group identity.

In the African-American homecoming narrative, "going home" is revealed as a ritual that can be read in at least two ways: as a claiming act and as an act of salvation. As a claiming act, homecoming may initially involve a prodigal's desire for material or monetary gain, but that effort can lead to the recognition of family ties or individual strengths. The existence of family ties, land ownership, and communal fellowship connects prodigal sons and daughters to the South, enabling them to mediate a sense of identity. The journey back home can also demonstrate a prodigal's willingness to confront past conflicts in the hopes of affirming notions of manhood or womanhood.

When homecoming emerges as an act of salvation, the promise of fulfillment that lies in the reinscribing of the South as "homeland" parallels the "Promised Land" trope which motivated blacks to move North during the Great Migration. Although the revised image of the South focuses on its ability to "save," late 20th century African-American
narratives address concerns about the romanticization of the South’s recuperative powers. Nevertheless, black writers show that a Southern “home” can provide rest for the weary, calling out for those who have been away too long or who have only known it through the recollections of their parents. For those returning, “home” is an end and a beginning, and like faith, “the substance of things hoped for.”

4.3 Endnotes


6 McDowell 19-20.

7 McDowell 19-25.

8 McDowell 311-314.


10 McDowell 314.

11 McDowell 353.

12 McDowell 359.


15 LeSeur, 72.
16 Mosley, 92-95.
17 Mosley 97-98.
18 LeSeur 6.
19 Mosley 99.
20 Mosley 157.
21 Mosley 166.
22 Mosley 219.
24 Fuller 66.
26 Johnson 107-108.
27 Campbell 42.
28 Campbell 153.
29 Campbell 153-154.
30 Campbell 161-162.
31 Campbell 308.
32 Campbell 312-313.
34 Campbell 318.
35 Campbell 322-323.

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36 Campbell 329-331.
37 Campbell 331-332.
38 Campbell 332.
40 Stepto 168.
42 Lemann 294–295.
43 Lemann 301.
44 Lemann 301.
45 Lemann 335.
46 Lemann 337.
47 Lemann 339.
50 *King James Bible,* Hebrews 11:1.
CHAPTER 5: NEGOTIATING HOME AND TRANSGRESSIVE MOMENTS, OR "YOU DON'T LIVE HERE NO MORE"

"You be gone. I have to live here."
--Old Man speaking to Son in *Tar Baby*

One of the challenges for the returning migrant going back home permanently or for a visit involves having to negotiate with those who still remain in the community. Those who return as well as those who have never left may have conflicting values, codes of conducts, and belief systems, as the traditions of home can seem restrictive for one who has become accustomed to another set of customs. Being absent from home exposes migrants to new ways of thinking, and for African-Americans who left the South in large numbers during the Great Migration, the changes were instantaneous and often overwhelming. Issues of physical and social space altered dramatically as blacks were able to experience a relatively closer social distance to whites. Although blacks in roles as caretakers and servants historically shared their physical space with whites in the South, social space was considerably restricted.

For blacks who migrated North, coming back home to the South often meant having to accept a second-class status and harsh or patronizing treatment by whites. Although blacks may have proud of their successes up North, this optimism could create an air of tension in the communities from which they had left. Sharing their stories with friends and relatives, returning blacks told of how they were treated up North, providing much detail to those wanting and waiting to leave. These stories were not welcome news, however, to all:
In Chicago, migrants said, a black person could go anywhere, and could vote, and was not required to step off the sidewalk so that whites could pass, and was not called “boy,” and did not have to sit in the back of the bus. People who had spent time in Chicago seemed to have a whole new way of carrying themselves—the police, who noticed it and didn’t like it, called it “The Attitude.”

“The Attitude,” was read by whites as behavior that transgressed Southern social mores for blacks that had been passed down for generations, beginning with slavery-imposed submissiveness. Failure of blacks to live by this code could be deadly; even being the subject of an unfounded rumor could lead to fatal results, as in the case of Emmett Till. Sent from Chicago to stay with his grandmother, Emmett’s brutal death in 1955 in rural Mississippi at the hands of whites who suspected him of whistling at a white woman proved how determined those in power were to maintain the status quo. When blacks returned to the South before the Civil Rights era, newfound liberties they enjoyed up North were practically nonexistent back home. Coming home sometimes resulted in the subtle dismantling of past traditions and even outright confrontation.

The relationship between those who return and their communities of origin is illustrated in African-American homecoming narratives to show that a return can sometimes emerge as a contentious affair. Black writers present a range of responses reflecting how coming home is negotiated between those who return or visit home and those who stayed behind. The image of the black “city slicker” who does not maintain the behavioral status quo is akin to an image known as the “been to,” portrayed in African and Afro-Caribbean literature Geta LeSeur describes, the “been tos” are black people who
having ‘gone to’ a new and better place [...] are viewed differently, with awe and respect, by their friends and relatives. Subsequently, they are expected to behave differently by taking on more urbane and European modes of conduct and performance.3

Using LeSeur’s definition of the “been to” helps to analyze returning migrants and their children in homecoming narratives. However, although LeSeur points out the “awe and respect” displayed by friends and family, the “been to” is also subject to skepticism and derision by those who are outside the family circle.

For black migrants who sent their children back to the South to visit relatives, these offspring are in effect, “been tos,” but without knowledge of Southern mores, the perception of them by the community as “different” can be problematic. By depicting life for blacks in the South before the Civil Rights era, Bebe Moore Campbell uncovers the tensions within a rural Mississippi community in *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* struggling to respond to a brutal race crime.

Armstrong Todd, a young black boy of fifteen, is murdered by whites seeking to avenge his alleged “disrespect” of a white woman. Sent from Chicago to Mississippi by his mother to stay with his grandmother, Armstrong is cast as a young man whose likes to show off his verbal prowess in the local black-patronized, white-owned pool hall:

“Now, in Chicago, they got some pool players,” he announced to the room. He deliberately made his voice loud and condescending, so that everyone understood that he was a Chicago boy, born and bred, city slick and so cool that nobody better not mess with him. [...] Armstrong liked the feel of their eyes upon him. They recognized that he was way above them, he told himself. What he didn’t realize, as the men reared their heads in laughter, was that among themselves they declared Chicago couldn’t have been all that great, seeing as the boy’s mama sent him down to Hopewell.
When he saw the men were silently watching him, Armstrong launched into yet another description of the wonders of the Windy City, embellishing his limited sightseeing—he'd been no farther than his mother's South Side neighborhood—with the imagination and alacrity of a born liar. [...] The sharecroppers and the field hands had drawn in closer around him and were laughing loudly as he described his exploits. The boy's blunt crowing about the fabled city so many miles north of them was part of their entertainment. The more they laughed, the more Armstrong lied.4

Armstrong desires to appear suave in front of the hangers-on in the pool joint, bolstering his ego while thinking to himself about the status of blacks in the South:

"That's what wrong with the colored people down here; they're so scared of these crackers. Well, I ain't. I ain't scared of no crackers." 5 His disdain for Southern whites and blacks is, however, in direct opposition to the traditional expectation of blacks' submissiveness to whites in the South and is not well-received by all. In fact, Jake, the black manager of the hall, perceives Armstrong as a threat and seeks to chastise him publicly. The boy, undaunted, continues talking:

"Voulez-vous danser avec mois ce soir? Vous êtes belle, mademoiselle." The words pranced out of Armstrong's mouth like so many high-stepping show horses. [...] "I'll be going back to Chicago to live soon. I'll be glad to leave this place. What I wanna stick around here to go to school with some redneck crackers next year?"

"You better watch your mouth, boy. Don't tell me Delotha and Wydell done raised a jackass." Jake said. [...] "It was in the newspaper," he [Armstrong] said loudly. "The Supreme Court said last year that the schools hafta integrate. But me, I'd rather sit next to northern crackers. Not these poor-white-trash people down here." The men lined up along the walls gaped, while Armstrong laughed.

"You better watch your mouth, boy," Jake repeated.6

Jake's insistence that Armstrong "watch" his mouth is borne both out of jealousy and the uneasiness that comes from seeing a young black male transgress the rules
that govern the conduct of black men in the South. Armstrong’s vocal insults of whites stun the pool hall patrons, who live by the constraints of the day regarding their ability to speak their minds. After Jake warns him a second time, Armstrong repeats the French phrases, only to have the white owner’s wife walk in the bar and overhear them. Her reaction, a giggle, is countered by Armstrong’s own laughter, a dangerous response in the Mississippi of the 1950s. Once her husband walks and discovers from Jake that she has heard Armstrong and walked back outside, his anger is insurmountable. Campbell characterizes Jake as a willing participant in Armstrong’s later demise, for Jake’s “confession” to his boss ultimately becomes the boy’s death sentence. In a final attempt to silence the boastfulness of Armstrong the “city slicker,” Jake levels a charge at him accusing the boy of verbal disrespect knowing that the consequences will be deadly. In what is interpreted by blacks as a traitorous act, Jake is condemned by the black community, whose moral code emphasizes protection of its members from harm, no matter the disagreement.

Although Armstrong’s lies and jesting are very patronizing of local residents and his disparaging remarks about whites are taboo at the time of the novel’s setting, the narrative appears to suggest that his behavior still should not result in death.

The unwritten rules regulating how blacks must interact with whites are not restricted to black males; *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* also illustrates the difficulty black women have had historically in negotiating their dignity with whites in a pre-Civil Rights South. The young man’s death results in the return of Armstrong’s mother Delotha from Chicago. Coming back to a place she fled initially in search of

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prosperity up North, her attempt to ship her son's body to Chicago encapsulates the lack of compassion and respect experienced by blacks in the segregated South.

A visit to the train depot by Delotha becomes an exercise in forced humility and patience. As custom dictates, she must stand and wait for all whites who wish to buy train tickets before she can approach the window. Yet she prepares herself mentally for the ordeal, willing "herself to be patient and calm, no matter how long things took" (79). In this way, Delotha recognizes the futility of an emotional outburst, knowing that to negotiate "home," she must assume the pretense of submissiveness. Delotha wills herself to remain calm, finding the resolve to make preemptive steps not to transgress the traditions of her homeplace. She understands that she has neither the freedom nor the rights to upset the ways of Hopewell, Mississippi. Certainly the fact that Odessa still resides there is a motivating factor for Delotha to restrain herself; for she realizes that the ramifications of her actions could lead to severe consequences for her mother. But just below the surface, she seethes as she informs her mother on their way to town: "Lord, don't let none of these crackers say nothing to me this morning" (79).

Delotha is forced to assume a mask for the purpose of getting her son's body shipped back to Chicago. That is, she must perform the role of a submissive black person within a Southern environment unwilling to grant her the freedom to display her outrage. On the subject of masking within American culture, Ralph Ellison writes

> We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense; when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals.7

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In articulating what the mask covers and reveals, Ellison touches upon the dilemma which is presented in *Blues*. For Delotha, posturing allows her to position herself as nonresistant, ensuring the safety of her mother (projecting the future) while seemingly following the code of behavior for blacks in Hopewell (preserving the past). She is suspended in a social space that neither lets her forget her “place” nor allows her to openly express a mother’s grief.

Approaching the clerk, Delotha makes what seems a simple request: that her son’s body be shipped on the same train leaving for Chicago that she will be taking. The clerk’s response is swift and unquestionably antagonizing:

He slammed down a form in front of Delotha and asked, “Can you read?” She nodded. “You f-f-fill this out for m-m-me?” [...] The attendant, looking away from her when he spoke, said quietly, “I ain’t never shipped a d-d-dead nigra before. I ain’t sure where I can p-p-put a colored body on my train.”

Delotha dug her nails into the palm of her hand so hard she could see the imprints when she pulled away her fingers. No one spoke for several minutes, and then the clerk raised his head to signal that he had figured everything out. “There’s a little b-b-bit of space in the livestock car, and I can put the c-c-casket in there. Nobody ought to mind that,” he said. [...] “Livestock car?” Delotha said. Her voice was whispery and thin. She could hear her own heart beating as she waited for the man to explain, to tell her he was joking, that her son’s body wouldn’t be left with animals.

“I believe we’re hauling some p-p-pigs on the train tomorrow.”

“Isn’t there some other place you could put him?” Delotha’s voice was stronger this time, a loud, clear, angry voice full of unuttered curses.

“Now listen here, g-g-gal, you don’t like the accommodations, you can arrange some others. That’s gonna be thirteen forty-six. You need to p-p-pay it now.”

He stared at the fifty-dollar bill that Delotha handed him and said, “Where you get aholt of that?”
Delotha could feel her mother’s hands on the small of her back, pressing against her in tiny circular motions. “Mister,” she said. She swallowed, conscious of the word that was hanging in the air before her. She gulped again, shutting her eyes, concentrating on her mother’s fingers, the tiny circles on her spine. “I don’t have nothing smaller,” she said finally.

The clerk took the money [. . .]. When he stood up, he slapped the change on the counter. A quarter rolled to the floor; Odessa bent down and picked it up. [. . .] “You know,” the man said, fingering the fifty-dollar bill, “it’s a sh-sh-shame....”

“Come on, Mama,” she said, trying to walk quickly, to escape the tiny eyes, the thick, dirty fingers, the killing words aimed at her heart.

“Sh-sh-shame you didn’t teach that boy of yourn to watch his mouth. He might be riding with you and the rest of the colored people instead of going back to Chicago in a b-b-box.”

Even as she and Odessa walked out the door, she heard him, “Y’all go on up to that Chicago and you forget your p-p-place.”

This final, searing remark by the train employee captures the degree to which the returning migrant or “been to” must suffer while home. In portraying the numerous social obstacles and indignities that blacks had to encounter when coming home to the South, this passage from Campbell’s novel is one of the most powerful scenes in late 20th century African-American homecoming narratives. By capturing the pain of two generations of black women, one who has remained at home and one who must return under the most trying of circumstances, Campbell positions the encounter at the train station as a defining moment of negotiation for the returnee Delotha. A closer examination of the exchange between her and the train clerk depicts the internal and external motivations which govern Delotha’s responses to overt acts of racial prejudice.

Odessa is situated as a mediating influence, silent but strong, ready to support Delotha emotionally as well as physically. It is Odessa’s hands that literally “hold” Delotha together, applying the supportive pressure to her back when she
faces each insult. It is Odessa who bends to pick up the change that is deliberately flung at the women. Odessa is Delotha’s underlying strength, a rock upon which she can stand up to face and overcome the clerk’s displays of disrespect. Odessa represents the archetypal, longsuffering black matriarch, a figure that strives to retain dignity, no matter how harsh the conditions may be.

In the effort to get beyond this grievous moment, Delotha demonstrates many of the characteristics of the black matriarchal figure as she endures mistreatment. The train clerk engages in a litany of slights aimed at Delotha; she is treated with great disdain as she is thought to be illiterate and challenged about having a large bill to pay for the shipment of her son’s body. It is the clerk’s intent to make Delotha “remember her place,” since she represents to him the inability of whites to make blacks stay in the South and accept the treatment and “place” reserved for them. Delotha and others like her are a threat to the status quo of Hopewell, for they have escaped the attempts to make them accept second-class citizenship.

The act of publicly shaming the return migrant is shown in Blues as a prescriptive measure taken by the white community, represented by the clerk, to regain control. Ironically, the clerk is described as having apparent African features, “widely flaring nostrils and [a] pendulous bottom lip,” yet he seeks to impose his feelings of superiority over blacks. The closing comments made by the clerk are intentionally meant to sanction Delotha for her inability to “teach” her boy the ways of this South, a South still immersed in racial intolerance and brutality. The clerk seems to implicate Delotha in her son’s death, suggesting that she is to
blame for his alleged transgression, not the killers. The underlying message in the worker’s retort sends Delotha over the edge. After returning to her mother’s house, she blames herself for Armstrong’s death and tells Odessa, “God is punishing me, Mama [. . .] He’s punishing me for being a bad mother” (82). Delotha, then, slowly accepts the charge laid before her—that she, as a Southern black daughter, must acknowledge and maintain the region’s long legacy of unequal justice for and treatment of blacks. The message is clear: Ignore the code and suffer the worst.

In spite of these warnings that seek to contain blacks who live in Hopewell, the novel illustrates efforts by Delotha to subvert the white community’s power over them. After the train incident, two white journalists from a New York newspaper approach Odessa to ask questions about her grandson’s death. Immediately, she sizes them up and questions their motives, thinking about the consequences of any truthful responses from her:

[Odessa, thinking to herself] Why would some New York newspaper care about Armstrong? Suppose Mr. Pinochet [her landlord] found out that she talked to them about how Armstrong got killed? He’d put her off his place in two minutes, and then where would she go? [. . .]

[the newspaper man tells Odessa] “We know things are unstable down here between whites and colored, and, well, ma’am, if we can write about what happened, it might be a chance to see justice done. [. . .] If the right people learn about what happened, maybe they can put some pressure on the system so that the men who killed your grandson can be put in prison.”

The brown eyes that looked into hers were warm and kind, but the sincerity she saw in them was as frightening to Odessa as looking down the barrel of a loaded gun. [. . .] Now here was a white man telling her she had a right to justice, that maybe the people who’d killed Armstrong would be punished. But the men who were standing on her front porch didn’t live in Hopewell. “I don’t know nothing,” she said softly. She didn’t look at them. “Please go.”

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“Listen,” the short one said. “Don’t be afraid.”
“You just don’t know, mister.”

Odessa’s resistance to the men’s entreaties reflects the very real fear of repercussions for transgressing the code of silence that is enforced upon blacks in Hopewell. Violating that custom by talking to outsiders, albeit those who wish to assist, is tantamount to a wishful death, as Odessa views the sincerity in one writer’s eyes as “frightening . . . as looking down the barrel of a loaded gun.” The two journalists, from Odessa’s perspective, simply do not understand her world. She is reminded not to “be afraid,” but living in a constant state of fear is what, unfortunately, helps to keep black folk alive in her world. So her decision not to respond is borne out of the instinct to survive, even at the cost of justice. Odessa, as one who has stayed “home,” rejects any notions that those who wield power in Hopewell will take kindly to being exposed to the outside world. Her dependence on Mr. Pinochet, the richest white landowner in the area, for a place to live and her livelihood demands her compliance with the way things are.

Her daughter, on the other hand, upon hearing the word “justice” spoken by one of the reporters, experiences a revelatory moment:

She was waking up, reclaiming her vitality, her will, and all the power that Armstrong’s death had drained from her. She looked the men straight in their eyes. “He was my son,” she said, turning to Odessa. “She’ll talk to you. We’ll both talk to you.”

Once she crosses this point of no return, Delotha voids the contract that exists between whites and blacks in Hopewell. She chooses to rebel against the model of passivity that has been established for blacks. Delotha now realizes the power that she and Odessa have in telling their story to the two objective newspapermen in
Hopewell. She understands that speaking to outsiders who have no vested interest in maintaining the status quo of the town is one of the few avenues she has to usurp the authority that has suppressed her voice and that of all blacks in the town. But in her choice to talk to the journalists, Delotha takes an even greater risk by saying her mother will speak as well. By including her mother in the interview, Delotha compels Odessa to overstep the boundaries of “home.” Delotha’s act can be interpreted in at least two ways. Her decision might be viewed as insensitive for putting her mother in danger; Odessa, who knows what the fallout will be from this transgression, has to live in Hopewell when Delotha leaves. However, this choice to reveal what happened to Armstrong can also be seen as a step taken by Delotha to help empower her mother. In this way, Delotha becomes much like the individuals who went to the South during the Civil Rights Movement to help local blacks resist and overcome the pervasiveness of segregation. However, Delotha is situated as a figure between two places: as a daughter of Hopewell, she is best suited to tell of its shameful legacy. Yet as an exile about to go back to Chicago, she is not crippled by the need to be silent and in deciding to broadcast Hopewell’s sins, her mobility allows her to escape the aftermath of her actions.

Attempting to subvert the limitations imposed on blacks, Delotha emerges as a resilient, revolutionary figure. Approached by the elder Pinochet’s son who is depicted as somewhat sympathetic to her pain, she is offered one hundred dollars as assistance. Told by Pinochet that “certain people, very important people” want her to bury Armstrong in Hopewell to avoid any “bad publicity,” Delotha rejects his offer and replies that she will not bury her son in Mississippi. After Pinochet’s
departure, Delotha feels “more strength in her body than she had since she’d come back home” (103). Her homecoming, albeit for the purpose of claiming her son’s body, results in an awakening of her own physical and emotional fortitude.

Planning her next course of action, Delotha gets Odessa to ask a neighbor for help:

“Run over there and ask him will he carry me to the funeral parlor right now and if he’ll take me to Memphis. I’m going to finish packing.”

“Oh ‘Lotha,” Odessa said, beginning to cry.

“Mama, we ain’t got time for your crying. These crackers ain’t telling me where to bury my child.”

Delotha’s plan—to take her son’s body from the undertaker and transport it to Memphis—constitutes an act of direct defiance against Hopewell’s white establishment. The retort to her mother insisting that “these crackers” will not dictate where she will bury her child is similar to her son Armstrong’s denigrating remarks about whites when he is in the pool hall. While his words are used against him to end his life, Delotha’s usage of the disparaging term “cracker” is posited as a liberating act.

Emboldened to carry the plan out, she has to engage William to assist her with moving the body. William, an older widower, is looked at by Delotha as perhaps one of the few blacks in Hopewell who will help her in her efforts. But her zeal is countered by William’s anxiety:

[when she asked if he would [...] drive her to Memphis [...] she could see he was frightened. “What difference do it make where you bury him? Ain’t gon’ bring him back,” he said.

“You gonna help me or not?” [...] He answered slowly. “Delotha, you see how these crackers is. And that’s just the trash, what ain’t got nothing to lose. Now you telling me that Mr. Pinochet and all the rest of them plantation owners don’t want you taking Armstrong outta here. What you think

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they gon’ do to me, they find out I helped you? You tell her, ‘Dessa.”

“Honey,” Odessa said, “you know how things is down here.”

“Are you gonna help me, William? Delotha repeated.

“Lotha, you don’t live here no more, but I got me a house full of kids with no mama,” William said.

Odessa’s neck jerked, and her words came out harsher than they would have if she’d taken time to think. “They coulda had a mama.” She looked into his eyes. “We all scared, William. You tell me a time when we ain’t been scared.”

Unlike Odessa’s fearful silence, William’s challenge of Delotha openly raises the issue of retribution for aiding her in taking Armstrong’s body. Although William, a carpenter, has built his own home and would seem relatively independent, he expresses his nervousness at the prospect of harm being done to him and family. He affirms the scope of influence held by Pinochet and other plantation owners, contrasting their ability to wield power to the harm that poorer whites in Hopewell are able to cause. After revealing the source of his fear, William admonishes Delotha, reminding her that she no longer lives “here,” at home. In doing so, William marks Delotha as outsider, as a “been to,” someone whose newly adopted ways threaten him and the safety of the black community.

By situating himself apart from Delotha, William creates a breach, indicative of the distance between one who stays home and one who returns to it. He implies that Delotha, because of her alien status, no longer maintains the fear that has kept most blacks observing an outwardly subservient manner. What finally spurs William into action is Odessa’s insistence that he cannot continue to dodge the opportunity to assert their rights. By voicing everyone’s fears (“We all scared”), Odessa is telling William that no one is asking him to sacrifice more than she and Delotha are willing to do. Included in her challenge to him is the message that the
time has come to stop being paralyzed by what might happen ("tell me a time we ain't been scared"). As a result, he decides to help Delotha by picking up the body and driving her five hours to Memphis to ship it along with the freight. Delotha's journey home then positions itself as a defining moment for Odessa and William to disrupt the accepted social order.

Even though Campbell depicts, through the characters of Odessa and William, a black community that eventually acquiesces to the influence of the "outsider" Delotha, the act of subverting the authority of whites appears to be attained without much retaliation. While William emerges unscathed as a result of his participation, Odessa later leaves Hopewell for Detroit after testifying in the trial against her grandson's killers, so her newborn resistance can be read as an aftereffect of her daughter's influence instead of as an escape from danger. Although this outcome seems romanticized, Campbell chooses to manipulate the narrative such that Delotha accomplishes the seemingly impossible while in Hopewell yet continues to suffer emotionally afterward. After beginning to show signs of a nervous breakdown, Delotha maintains a desire for vengeance that leads her South one more time. Almost two years after her son's death, she travels as far as Memphis on the Illinois Central, seeking to "take her own justice" (146). Sitting in the train depot armed with a .38 pistol, she intends to travel home to kill her son's murderer and his wife. Only the glimpse of another woman with her son exchanging laughs in the station moves her to abandon her plan. The sense that this homecoming is disrupted for Delotha because she only wishes harm is evident. Her desire to inflict pain on others situates her as losing grasp on the legal justice she
once sought. Her failure to complete this journey to Hopewell is therefore posited as a step toward self-healing.

In Campbell's *Blues*, all homecomings are not presented as jubilant moments. Instead, an emphasis on the problematic nature of homecoming is portrayed, with a focus on how "home" is contested as well as how those who have remained at home are challenged and (re)inscribed by those who have "been to" the big city. The black migrant figure is portrayed as radical, unafraid to publicly voice prejudiced beliefs about whites. In doing so, these characters can violate the social mores so egregiously that the white community seeks to silence them. Yet the black return migrant is also shown as refusing to revere the white power structure's dictate. As an alien presence, returnees are no longer bound by a code of conduct designed to restrict Southern blacks from defending their rights. The quest for home becomes a quest for dignity, a search for self-respect in an environment which circumscribes movement and speech but not individual determination.

African-American homecoming narratives also reflect the notion that blacks are not just subject to the gaze of whites. Within the African-American community, returning sons and daughters are expected to conform to standards of courtesy. Neglecting to observe traditions, including having respect for elders and sustaining kinship ties, is depicted as creating dissonance in African-American communal life. Narratives that explore these tensions highlight issues of class and gender and the strains on relationships between those who come home and their extended families.

Examining Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and its treatment of homecoming reveals an emphasis on (dis)connections and the many ways in which "home" is
negotiated by blacks who seek solace within its borders. In discussing her writing, Morrison relates that "matters of race and matters of home are priorities" in her texts. In stating that discourses about race are also discourses about home, Morrison identifies several important matters with which she is concerned: "a spiritual home; family and community as home; [...] dislocation of and alienation within the ancestral home; [...] migrations; hybridity; [...] interventions; assimilations; exclusions." Using her focus to look at Tar Baby and issues of "alienation within the ancestral home," the narrative does provide moments in which those who return to an ancestral home struggle to accept and negotiate its traditions.

In Tar Baby, Jadine and Son are represented as wayfaring figures, searching for home or a sense of connection in their travels—he as an itinerant sailor, she as a model—spanning the world. Their paths first cross in the Caribbean but eventually she convinces him to move to New York. Several critics focus on the text as a Diasporean novel and on the development of Jadine as a "cultural orphan." In fact, one critic maintains that "the portrayal of the folk community of Eloe is not clearly enough focused." Getting emotionally closer to Jadine in New York, Son asks her to travel home with him. Yet a closer analysis of the time Son and Jadine spend in Eloe, Florida, his boyhood home, uncovers how both characters negotiate social customs in an insular but resilient Southern black community. Son, who yearns for the simplicity of Eloe and its people, serves as cultural navigator for Jadine, urging her to visit with him. He is one of Eloe's sons, a prodigal figure who wants to renew his ties to his extended family. However, he does not adequately prepare
Jadine for their excursion; she is unfamiliar with the social courtesies of the community and, therefore, never achieves a sense of belonging.

Throughout the trip to Son’s “home,” several incidents embody the social distance that separates Jadine from the community of Eloe. Upon their arrival, Son introduces himself and Jadine as Southerners “out of Brewton [Alabama] on their way to Gainesville [Florida].” Yet their driver thinks otherwise; he looks over Jadine’s cosmopolitan dress—a cashmere sweater, designer boots, and tight-fitting jeans—and surmises, “Nobody dressed like that in Brewton, Alabama, and he suspected they didn’t in Montgomery either.” In addition to the outer garb that marks her as outsider, her inability to relate to the those who live in Eloe separates her from them. Jadine has not been orientated by Son in the ways of the South, for she is incapable of engaging in “small talk” with one of the women in his extended family, as “she [Jadine] had run out of conversation with Ellen ten minutes after it started.” Unable to comprehend the language spoken by and social customs of the Eloe residents, Jadine also has no understanding of the ritual of introducing her to his father that Son must adhere to:

He asked her if she would mind staying at Soldier’s house with his wife, Ellen, while he went to see his father. [...] Son urged her, saying he had not seen Old Man in eight years and that he didn’t want to bring someone his father didn’t know into his house the first time they met in all that time. Could she understand that? She said yes, [...] but she didn’t understand at all, no more than she understood the language he was using when he talked to Soldier and Drake and Ellen and the others who stopped by; no more than she could understand (or accept) her being shunted off with Ellen and the children while the men grouped on the porch and, after a greeting, ignored her [...]”
Jadine’s fundamental difficulty in connecting with the people of Eloë is dual in nature; she lacks the ability as well as the will to communicate. She does not understand their language nor does she want to accept their customs. Further, she does not recognize that interacting with the women and children is one way for the community to accept her on their terms. Jadine misreads the separation of men from women as her “being shunted off,” when she should interpret these signs as opportunities for her to become familiar with Son’s extended family. The barriers that prevent her from connecting to Eloë, however, do not extend to Son. After abandoning the kind of stilted speech that might mark him as pretentious, Son begins using the informal, familiar language of “home.” Jadine chooses not to bridge this gap, thereby reinforcing her status as stranger. But Son’s remembrance of the kind of language used in Eloë is one way in which he is able to reconnect to the community.

Son also knows that following tradition in Eloë signifies respect. He also understands the conservative social parameters that exist at home and realizes that violating them will cause friction. Although Son tries to accommodate Jadine, ultimately they must both accept the way things are done. The community will not adjust or compromise for those who return; instead, outsiders and prodigals must adapt. During his first visit with his father, the two men discuss the sleeping arrangements for Jadine in what appears to be a playful, verbal tête-a-tête:

Son said, “I didn’t come by myself.”
“You with a woman?”
“Yeah.”
“Where is she?”
“Over to Soldier’s. Can she stay here?”
“You all married?”

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“No, Old Man.”
“Better take her to your Aunt Rosa’s then.”
“She won’t like that.”
“I can’t help it. You be gone. I have to live here.”
“Come on, Old Man.”
“Uh-uh. Go see your Aunt Rosa. She be mad anyway you don’t stop by.”
“Scripture don’t say anything about two single people sleeping under the same roof.” Son was laughing.
“What you know bout Scripture?”
“I could have lied and said we were married.” [...] 
“She’s welcome in my house all day in the day. Bring her back so I can meet her.”  

Old Man adheres to a communal tradition of hospitality that emphasizes very strict rules governing interaction between men and women. Old Man stipulates the rules that Son, in deference to his father, must observe. These norms reflect the conservative, staunchly religious beliefs that unmarried men and women are not allowed to sleep together in a consecrated Christian household, nor does an unmarried woman visit an unmarried man’s home after dark. Although Son jokingly “tests” his father regarding the propriety of these practices, Old Man does not waver one bit in his convictions. The message encapsulated in Old Man’s reply “I live here” is meant to remind Son that his passing through cannot compromise the values of “home.” Long after Son leaves, Old Man will have to face his neighbors whose collective memory will sanction him if he transgresses against their code of conduct.

Left behind with Son’s friends and thinking she will “go nuts, trying to keep a conversation with Ellen and the neighbor women who came in to see Son’s Northern girl,” Jadine tries to talk “down home.” Unsuccessful in that effort, she decides to photograph some of the Eloe residents. The young women and children
pose willingly, but the “old folks refused to smile and glared into her camera as though looking at hell with the lid off.”

She is unaware that the older folk see her interest in them as intrusive and patronizing. Upon returning, Son snatches the camera from her hands. His reaction stems from a belief that she is violating the dignity of these people, that they are not exotic, primitive objects for display. He insists upon their sanctity, but Jadine, a fashion model used to being a commercialized object, does not comprehend the nature or depth of her insult. Instead, she projects onto the residents an image or exoticized status with which she is comfortable, not fully aware of her own state in the outside world as exoticized image. After he takes away the camera, Jadine responds in disbelief to Son’s actions, asking him, “What’s the matter with you?” (251). The irony of this question is not lost on the reader, for the same question might be directed at Jadine. What is the matter with Jadine is that she is wholly indifferent to the people of Eloe and their ways.

Jadine is further dismayed at the news of their sleeping arrangements as she is required to sleep at the home of Son’s aunt, without his company. While there, she experiences another uncomfortable moment which reflects the conservative moral observances of the Eloe community. Jadine, who sleeps without a nightgown, wakes up during the night to look out upon the backyard. The reaction of Aunt Rosa to Jadine’s nakedness underscores the distance between the two women and their cultural differences:

The lamplight from the other door was weak but it was healthy enough to spotlight her nakedness. Rosa gazed down Jadine’s body with a small bowing of her head, and then up again. Her eyes traveled slowly, moving like one of those
growing plants Jadine could not see, but whose presence was cracking loud.

"Why didn’t you tell me you didn’t have no nightclothes. I got somethin I can let you have," Rosa said.

"I . . . I forgot," said Jadine. "I forgot to bring anything."

"I’ll get you something.

When Rosa came back, Jadine was in the bed. Rosa handed her a kind of slip, wrinkled but clean-smelling.

[Rosa asks] "You all right, daughter?"

"Oh, I’m fine. I just got too warm and wanted some air,” Jadine answered.24

In this encounter, Jadine realizes her nakedness affirms her difference. She is an “other,” a woman whose standards of morality are quite different from those of Eloe. This scene also resonates with Biblical overtones; Rosa’s gaze is akin to the gaze of the Father from which Adam and Eve try to cover their nakedness in light of their sins. This gaze is not a shared one, for Jadine is unable to see Rosa but can feel her presence. This moment demonstrates Jadine’s blindness to her own plight of cultural disconnection.

Rosa is also positioned as omniscient, seeking to clothe Jadine and return her to the fold. Even though Rosa suggests that Jadine cover up her “nakedness” for the sake of propriety, the older woman does not condemn her guest as it would be discourteous to do so. That Rosa calls Jadine “daughter” is of great significance; Rosa sees Jadine as a lost daughter, but all Jadine can focus on is that no one before Rosa has “made her feel that naked, that unclothed . . . More than exposed, obscene” (253). She does not recognize this overture made to her as an effort to make her feel at “home,” to feel like a daughter of Eloe.

Unable to communicate and connect with Son’s people during this visit, Jadine begins to disdain their culture. Also prohibited from sleeping together under
the same roof with Son, she becomes even more disgusted when Son tries to explain
the "way" things are:

Paleolithic, she thought. I am stuck here with a pack of
Neanderthals who think sex is dirty or strange or something and he
is standing here almost thirty years old doing it too. Stupid.
"Stupid," she said aloud.
"I know, but that's just the way they are. What do you want
me to do? You think anything we do is going to change them?"
"I want us to be honest."
"Can't we be gentle first, and honest later?"25

In denigrating the customs of Son's kinfolk, Jadine differentiates herself from them.
He recognizes that temporarily accepting their traditions illustrates an effort to be
"gentle," with an emphasis on accommodation rather than confrontation. Although
Jadine insists that being "honest" is the way to approach his people, he knows that
those who return cannot reshape home but must adapt. Further, Son maintains a
sensitivity to home, one that Jadine cannot share.

Describing her hosts as a "pack of Neanderthals," Jadine engages in a
pejorative discourse that reflects her disassociation from Elo. Her remarks also
approximate the kind of rhetoric found in Afro-American travel literature when
describing Africa. In analyzing this type of Africanist discourse, John Gruesser
relates

There is the tendency [by African-American writers]... to describe
Africans and Africa as lagging behind Westerners and the West in
development: Africans are children; the continent is prehistoric; the
people and the land recall an era the West experienced centuries ago;
etc.26

Like outsiders who deem Africans primitive, Jadine sees the people of Elo as
uncivilized; her views border on those espousing a racially charged bias. Her lack
of esteem for their culture demonstrates how Son's homecoming results in the

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failure to provide Jadine with a notion of "home." Instead of honoring the belief systems of his family, she wishes to change them to suit her more modern tastes.

Through this unsympathetic depiction of Jadine in Eloe, Morrison manages to critique the African-American who does not view a "home" as being situated within a black Southern environment. Some critics have focused on Jadine’s dream of the black “night women” while she is in Eloe as a primary foreshadowing device of her subsequent rejection of a cultural identification.27 Yet Jadine’s interaction with the people of Eloe prior to her vision manifests her repudiation of a Southern folk past. She is unable to establish any kind of connection for she is never able to negotiate “home.”

Another Morrison text, *Sula*, repositions the homecoming narrative to reflect the ongoing tensions between a returning migrant and her family/community of origin. As in *Tar Baby*, the subject of homecoming and the responses of family and community to the prodigal are central to the narrative. Although the novel focuses mainly on the friendship of Sula Peace and Nel Wright, two young black females growing up in the early 20th century, it also details two separate homecoming depictions: one of Nel’s mother Helene traveling to New Orleans, the other of Sula going back home to Medallion, Ohio. Appearing earlier in the novel, the story of Helene’s journey foregrounds Sula’s later return. But the brevity of the scene belies its importance as a prefigurative moment in the text—one which highlights a daughter’s return in contrast to a mother’s disregard for homecoming rituals.

Upon receiving the news that her grandmother Cecile is gravely ill, Helene Wright decides to make the trip to New Orleans in November of 1920, taking her
daughter Nel with her. Born in a whorehouse and taken from her mother at birth, Helene is raised by Cecile who succeeds at cutting off the ties between mother (a prostitute) and child. As she contemplates her trip back to the South, she is filled "with heavy misgiving," (17) not an unreasonable fear as she must travel by Jim Crow car. Her wariness, though, may also be seen as extending to the kind of reception from family she believes may be awaiting her in New Orleans. Traveling by train, Helene is forced to endure the humiliation of rude service and inadequate facilities along the journey due to her skin color. Once she arrives home at her grandmother’s home in Elysian Fields, a Creole enclave of New Orleans, Helene finds that she is too late—her grandmother has already passed away. The "sweet odor of gardenias" (25) permeates the house but no one from the family is there to greet Helene and her child, only the undertaker. This is the first sign that no welcome will be extended to the two. Already the homecoming fails to provide any sense of connection for Helene, and when her mother Rochelle walks in the door, there is an exchange of looks, but "no recognition in the eyes of either" (25). The shared gaze of the two women is devoid of any emotion. No warm embrace nor offering of food or drink from Rochelle posits her as a transgressor of homecoming rituals. It would seem that upon Cecile’s death, Rochelle would assume the duty of culture bearer, carrying on the folk traditions which serve to (re)connect her daughter to "home." Rochelle’s neglect in fulfilling that role marks a breakdown in the reconciliation of family ties.

With her mother’s failure to greet them, Helene begins the task of introducing Nel to her grandmother. Nel is confused by the relatively young
appearance of Rochelle, triggering the first response from the older woman—a laugh along with the reply that she is an “old forty-eight” (25). Instead of any meaningful conversation, Rochelle continues to glance in the mirror, a sign of her indifference and narcissistic attitude. Watching her mother perform her toilette, Helene is livid as she remembers the slights—poor to nonexistent restroom facilities, substandard train accommodations—she has had to suffer en route home:

All the while Helene and Nel watched her [Rochelle]. The one in a rage at the folded leaves she had endured, the wooden benches she had slept on, all to miss seeing her grandmother and seeing instead that painted canary who never said a word of of greeting or affection[ . . . ].

The lack of any kind of verbal acknowledgement from Rochelle—“the word of greeting or affection” expected by her daughter—further signifies that there is no “home” here for Helene or Nel. Rochelle’s self-absorption takes precedence over any show of familial affection.

Like Jadine and Son in Tar Baby, Helene must confront the different language used at “home.” Morrison’s conceptualization of how language can connect an individual to the community is situated in both novels as similar to that of Amrijit Singh’s who posits that “we ‘remember’ events, language, actions, attitudes, and values that are aspects of our membership in groups” and who also examine the traces of memory in narrative, looking for ways in which writers also depict the “dark shadow” of memory: forgetting. In Helene’s case, speaking in “Creole” would indicate a willingness to join the community and could be viewed by Rochelle as an effort to reestablish family ties. But Helene stubbornly chooses not to speak French with her mother whose conversation is liberally sprinkled with
Creole diction and phrases. When Rochelle addresses her granddaughter in French, Helene replies: "She doesn't talk Creole" (26). The unspoken message exchanged between the two women is clear: Helene does not want her daughter to be a part of this "home." Helene maintains a guarded distance from her mother, coldly answering her only once in French to questions about what will happen to the house. As Rochelle rushes off saying "Voir, voir" (shortened for "au revoir") the young Nel asks what "vwah" means, to which her mother replies, "I don't know . . . I don't talk Creole . . . And neither do you" (27). It is highly unlikely, having been raised by a Creole grandmother, for Helene not to know French. Her "forgetting" of the language means a rejection of one of the discourses of identity. "Au revoir," French for "goodbye," also signifies the final departure of Rochelle from the lives of her daughter and granddaughter. The response to her daughter therefore is positioned as a disjunctive moment, one which results in the complete detachment of Helene as well as Nel from their ancestral ties.

By foregrounding this unsuccessful reunion, Morrison executes a kind of layering of homecoming narratives within the novel, with Helene’s journey to New Orleans resonating in the return of Sula Peace to her birthplace. After a self-imposed exile of ten years, Sula arrives in Medallion, Ohio, where she begins a series of social missteps that inevitably lead to her status as community pariah. Sula reveals the social and emotional distance that seems unable to be bridged even though, as returnee, Sula is well-versed in the lore and practices of her community. She persists, though, at transgressing the parameters regarding acceptable behavior for a female in the role of daughter and as a prodigal figure, even when the
consequences generate discord between her, her family members and other
townsfolk.

Reading Sula as a returning migrant who states “there’s no place else for me
to go. [. . . ] I guess I should have stayed gone,” posits her as a figure whose
homecoming, though fraught with tension, is revealed as her only alternative to life
as wayfarer. Morrison reconfigures the homecoming narrative by featuring a
contentious reunion with a portrayal of Sula rejecting the role of dutiful
(grand)daughter. Instead of the congenial exchange that would normally be
expected, Eva provides no welcoming gesture or greeting. Morrison situates Eva as
violating the traditional ritual of homecoming in which the prodigal is welcomed
back into the family.

[Sula asks] "Don't you say hello to nobody when you ain't seen them
for ten years?"
"If folks let somebody know where they is and when they
coming, then other folks can get ready for them. If they don't—if
they just pop in all sudden like—then they got to take whatever mood
they find." (92-93)

In this exchange between Sula and Eva, Morrison manipulates and rejects the
idealized homecoming as offered in the Prodigal narrative. No open-armed greeting
awaits the returning migrant; instead Eva is contentious and disdainful of her
granddaughter's attire. Despite Sula's insistence that her grandmother conform to
the niceties of the welcoming ritual ("Don't you say hello to nobody when you ain't
seen them for ten years?"), her attempt to reprimand Eva fails and the expected itual
collapses. It is clear that “home” offers no respite for Sula, and her arrival quickly
disintegrates into a heated argument between the two women. Their disagreement is
marked by Eva’s efforts to demand courteous treatment from Sula. Unlike the
Biblical Prodigal narrative, there is no forgiveness in *Sula*, no forgetting the past.

Instead the past comes to haunt Eva in the form of Sula’s accusations. Using Biblical verses and references to reprimand Sula, Eva is unsuccessful at silencing her:

[Eva speaks] “You need [ . . . ] I’m a tell you what you need.”
Sula sat up. “I need you to shut your mouth.”
“Don’t nobody talk to me like that. Don’t’ nobody . . . ”
“This body does. Just ‘cause you was bad enough to cut off your own leg you think you got a right to kick everybody with the stump” [. . . ]
“Bible say honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land thy God giveth thee.” [. . . ]
[Eva speaks again] “Pride goeth before a fall.”
“What the hell do I care about falling?”
“Amazing Grace.”
“You sold your life for twenty-three dollars a month.”
“You throwed yours away.”
“It’s mine to throw.”
“One day you gone need it.”
“But not you. I ain’t never going to need you. [. . . ].”

In this call-and-response exchange, Sula completely shatters the myth of the prodigal figure coming home to reconcile differences and atone for previous wrongs. She is not shaken by her grandmother’s verbal onslaught of proverbial sayings that are meant to chastise. Eva’s charge that Sula has thrown her life away resonates with the Biblical lore of the Prodigal’s wasteful “riotous living.” Yet Sula counters the charge by claiming her own individuality and ability to choose her own lifestyle, even if her choice is viewed by others as irresponsible.

What emerges from their encounter is the utter lack of deference shown by Sula to her grandmother. Her speech defies the boundaries of what is considered proper (“shut your mouth”) and respectful (“I ain’t never going to need you”) discourse between grandchild and grandparent. Her rejection of propriety, in such a

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strident manner, and her refusal to honor the close ties of kinship seal her fate. It could be argued that Sula is not bound to respect Eva in light of the fact that the older woman denies Sula a proper homecoming. However, Morrison seems to suggest that Sula’s disrespect is a greater sin than Eva’s. Sula’s transgression violates not only custom but also moral law. Morrison posits the respect of one’s elders in opposition to Sula’s behavior and the consequence is thus: because she does not honor her (grand)mother, her days are not destined to be long.

In what is viewed by the community as an unforgivable sin, Sula casts her grandmother out of her own home. After their contentious encounter, it is not long before Sula has Eva taken away to live in a nursing home. Not long afterward, Sula’s homecoming begins to take on more traditional attributes as she eventually makes her way to visit her long-time friend Nel. This reunion seems a reversal of that between Eva and Sula; Sula is welcomed and allowed to be more expressive about her opinions, signifying that she has found a restful “home” in Nel’s company. Sula feels comfortable confiding to Nel that coming home to Medallion has been a disappointment:

[Nel states] “Somebody need killin’?”
“Half this town need it.”
“And the other half?”
“A drawn-out disease.”
“Oh, come on. Is Medallion that bad?”
“Didn’t nobody tell you?”
“You been gone too long, Sula.”
“Not too long, but maybe too far.”

In this exchange, Sula articulates the great distance between herself and the rest of her homefolk. Her words reveal a restless discontent and an inability to reconcile her neighbors’ lack of sophistication and her grandmother’s intractability.
Her statement that it is not time that has brought about this awareness but her
mobility establishes Sula as a prodigal figure representing those blacks who left
their homes during the Great Migration and the impact that displacement had on
their emotional attachments to home. Going “too far” for Sula has led her to
Nashville, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon, and San Diego, a
litany of waystations and destinations for blacks seeking better economic
opportunities during the 20th century. Yet in all of those places she has found
“boredom,” and has yearned to return home to her friend Nel. 33 A spirit of openness
exists between the two women as they recall past mischief. In recounting these
tales, Nel offers insight into Sula’s character, mentioning, “O Lord, Sula. You
haven’t changed none.” 34 Her comment is significant for it critiques Sula’s own
belief that being away has changed her fundamentally. Only Nel is able to penetrate
the jaded, worldweary exterior of Sula’s persona and find that her inherent qualities
have remained.

After offering Sula some “cool tea,” a show of hospitality signifying that she
is indeed home, Nel engages in the familiar small talk between friends, asking Sula
to tell her about the “big city,” to which Sula replies, “Big is all it is. A big
Medallion.” 35 This revelation contradicts the accepted notion that the outside world
is much more cosmopolitan than a place like Medallion. Sula underscores the
similarities, giving further credence that home is just as good a place to be as
anywhere else. The intimacy of friendship she shares with Nel allows her to feel
more comfortable revealing what has happened to Eva:

“Well, since you haven’t heard it, let me tell. Eva’s real sick.
I had her put where she could be watched and taken care of.”
“Where would that be?”
“Out by Beechnut.”
“You mean that home the white church run? Sula! That ain’t no place for Eva. All them women is dirt poor with no people at all. [. . .] Eva’s odd, but she got sense. I don’t think that’s right, Sula.”

In serving as sounding board for Sula’s confession, Nel becomes the voice of the black folk community of Medallion. The belief that a nursing home is a place for the “dirt poor” who have “no people” is at the heart of Nel’s admonishing of Sula. Eva is neither “dirt poor” nor without “people,” and therefore will be seen by black townsfolk as having been abandoned by her own flesh and blood, Sula. Nel shares her The defense Sula gives—that Eva is sick and needs constant care—does not suffice for Nel. In telling her friend that this decision is not “right,” Nel places a value judgement on the way Sula has handled the disagreement. Yet Nel does not reject Sula; instead she tries to help her negotiate her role as (grand)daughter and her acceptance by the community by suggesting “(L)et’s work out a plan for taking care of her. So she won’t be messed over.”

With Nel as mediator taking the time to (re)educate Sula about her responsibilities as (grand)daughter, the subsequent failure of Sula to respect her friend’s marriage represents her inability to comply with acceptable norms of behavior. Several critics have pointed to Sula’s failure to follow an alternative or independent lifestyle within the social boundaries of Medallion. In one analysis, Valerie Smith notes that Sula “defies social restraints with a vengeance. She disavows gratuitous social flattery, refusing to compliment either the food placed before her or her friends gone to seed [. . .].”
Yet in the "gratuitious social flattery" which Sula rejects, a close reading of the text demonstrates how she intentionally remaps this notion or characteristic of "home" and distances herself from its constraints. We might think Medallion is a place that she can successfully traverse, being privy to its communal idiosyncracies. Yet Sula possesses one particularly unique characteristic—the unwillingness to lie to those she cares nothing about, even if they are her homefolk:

She had lied only once in her life—to Nel about the reason for putting Eva out, and she could lie to her only because she cared about her. When she had come back home, social conversation was impossible for her because she could not lie.40

"Lying" would bridge the social distance which exists between her and most of the town. It is a shared, participatory act which overlooks flaws for the sake of the appearance of congeniality and fellowship. Having "no place else" to go but home, Sula dismisses this important step needed to reconnect to a sense of community. Instead, connecting to them on her own terms instead of theirs underscores the deterioration of communal ties. Ultimately, her detachment from Medallion is not due to her time spent away or her supposedly more sophisticated ways but rather because of the emotional connection she does not share with them. "Home," to Sula, means Nel, someone she cares for and whose concern and sisterly love is reciprocal.

Sula fully embodies the figure of a problematic prodigal, in that her love for Nel does not prohibit her from committing a blatant taboo—an adulterous affair with Nel’s husband. This act and the charge that she sleeps with white men mark her as outcast: “She was pariah, then, and knew it.”41 Yet for all of her injurious acts, she is still not cast out from "home." Some critics have noted how Sula’s status as marked woman or communal scapegoat does not result in her complete

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disconnection from home. Carolyn Jones notes that the figure of fallen human, as represented by Sula, “must be reconciled to the self and to the community for the sake of both. [. . . ] Cain cannot be banished forever but, somehow, must come home, lest both Cain and community be forever marked.” Extending Jones’ observation to chart Sula’s fall from grace also allows for an examination of the attempts by Nel and the community to reach out to her and (re)claim her as one of their own.

Three years after the affair, Nel visits Sula who is gravely ill and homebound. In a gesture of guarded compassion, Nel utters two simple statements, profound in their intent to close the void of silence between her and Sula: “I heard you was sick. Anything I can do for you?” In this way, Nel represents a “home” resistant to the idea of a “daughter” being forever separated from its care. Although Nel appears sympathetic but not completely forgiving; her concern is described as “for the illness, though not for the patient.” But in adapting her own value system, one which was critical of Sula’s treatment of her sick grandmother, Nel must come to negotiate her own idea of what it means to represent “home” as a caretaking presence. As Sula’s manifestation of “home,” Nel cannot wholly abandon her bosom friend.

Nel’s visit can also be read as a demonstration of the lie Sula refuses to tell: that at home, one engages in a “safe” duplicity. Nel maintains the appearance of propriety for her own self-image and for the community. The question of Nel’s sincerity about tending to Sula must be approached; in Nel’s own eyes, she is a “good woman come to see about a sick person who, incidentally, had such visits

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from nobody else” (138). However, the term “good woman” seems ironic in this case; later, when Nel wonders aloud about Sula’s betrayal (“I was good to you, Sula, why don’t that matter?”), an answer by Sula points to a critique of the folk customs which govern the way of life in Medallion: “Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don’t get nothing for it” (145). Sula sees being “good” as no guarantee of happiness while Nel clings to the notion that being “good” (or, at least, the affectation of it) binds the individual and a community together. The two women are thus diametrically opposed in their constructs of “home,”: one focusing on negotiation at any cost, the other refusing compromise, no matter what the cost.

In spite of all Sula does to undermine her family and communal connections after her return, the ties are not severed irrevocably. After her death, the curious and the superstitious congregate at her burial. The few who attend begin to participate in what evolves into a homegoing ceremony, singing “Shall We Gather at the River” for politeness’ sake” (150). Several who come, do so to make sure that nothing went awry, that the shallow-minded and small-hearted kept their meanness at bay, and that the entire event be characterized by that abiding gentleness of spirit to which they themselves had arrived by the simple determination not to let anything—[ . . . ], let alone a strange woman—keep them from their God.46

In this ritual of farewell, the folk of the Bottom rise up to their self-appointed task of seeing off one of their own, one who had “no place else . . . to go” but home. Her sins against their code of morality and social customs are, for the moment, forgiven in the effort to (re)connect her to the community. In essence, Sula’s homegoing
represents her second homecoming, albeit one in which she is inscribed as “strange woman,” yet also embraced as a wayward daughter who has found her way back.

Morrison’s approach to the examination of, to use her own phrase, “dislocation and alienation within the ancestral home” resonates in both *Tar Baby* and *Sula* as complex prodigal figures strive to (re)connect to or disentangle themselves from worlds that have changed very little. The struggle to find a common ground often becomes the center of these narratives but is not always located. The relationship between the community and the individual is situated as in flux when traditions are not maintained. Home is a place where the ways of the past continue, often challenged yet more or less intact.

The question of whether late-20th century African-American homecoming narratives romanticize reunions is certainly answered by the thematic concerns of writers like Bebe Moore Campbell and Toni Morrison, who focus on contested notions of “home.” Their works reveal ruptures and ambivalence, albeit within a paradigmatic migration novel structure. By also investing their works with historical import, religious tropes, and folk traditions, we see returning migrants who must confront and navigate racialized and gendered social norms. Variations of the Prodigal Son figure in their texts demonstrate the evolution of an African-American return migration narrative which encompasses constructions of the self and the community that diverge yet which are inextricably linked. “Home” becomes situated not only as a place to which one physically travels back to but also as a crossroads for present beliefs and past traditions.
5.1 Endnotes


5 Campbell 18.

6 Campbell 18.


8 Campbell 79-81.

9 Campbell 83.

10 Campbell 84.

11 Campbell 103.

12 Campbell 103-4.


14 Lubiano 5.

18 Coleman 67.


21 Morrison, *Tar Baby* 249.

22 Morrison, *Tar Baby* 250.


27 See Mobley, 761-70; and Coleman, 63-73, for a discussion of Jadine’s vision of the “night women.”


32 Morrison, *Sula* 96.

33 Morrison, *Sula* 120.

34 Morrison, *Sula* 98.


36 Morrison, *Sula* 100.


Smith 130.

Morrison 121.

Morrison 122.


Jones 624-625.


Morrison, *Sula* 150.
CHAPTER 6: HEIR APPARENT: LOCATING "HOME" IN THE NEW SOUTH

The straight line of flight curves into the arc of homecoming.

David Wyatt, *Prodigal Sons*

The late twentieth century saw what might be termed a "Great Remigration" to the South, with over 1.8 million blacks between 1975 and 1997 migrating back in a reversal of the dynamics which motivated previous generations to seek better lives up North and in the West. One "push and pull" factor which was at the heart of the Great Migration movement in the early 20th century is mentioned by many migrants who have chosen to move back—the economic conditions that have improved within the American Sunbelt. Jack Kasarda, director of the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, notes

A fundamental shift occurred in the late 60s [...] The cities that once had pulled Southerners north began to push them away. And the South, which for so many decades had repelled its most productive workers, became a magnet—even for African-Americans.

The "pull" of growth and prosperity is cited in the personal accounts of blacks like Delores Watson, 45, who moved after twenty years in Los Angeles back home to Saluda, South Carolina. A place where her family ran the town's only black-owned funeral home, Watson cites that choosing to return was part of a calculated business move. Opening her own home health services company, she indicates one of her primary reasons for returning home was her family's legacy, "My family has an entrepreneurial tradition here... In a way, I came back to an incubator for small businesses that I didn’t have in California." Like Foster, many blacks have begun having a stake in the making of the "New South," a place reconfigured by the Civil
Rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's. No longer perceived as a region to flee, the South has (re)entered the Black American consciousness as both possibility and "home."

This shift in the American landscape has challenged the strongholds of political power and social influence. A host of African-American mayors in the last thirty years have assumed leadership in cities like Atlanta, Birmingham, New Orleans, Houston and Dallas, as native sons and daughters remain home looking to claim a legacy in the "New South." And in this post-Civil Rights movement era, one of the bastions of traditional white Southern womanhood, the Junior League, boasts an African-American chapter president in its ranks. Alice Sharpe, 50, president of the Junior League of Durham and Orange counties, returned back home to Durham, North Carolina, after spending eighteen years away from the South immersed in corporate America. Her story, like that of many black return migrants, reveals that Sharpe yearned for something more:

Eventually it hit her, though, that there were more important things than career titles. She wanted more of a life, deeper connections to people. She came across an article by Isaac Robinson, an N. C. professor whom she knew from Durham, about black Americans migrating back to the South. Something clicked in her head. She moved back to Durham.6

The "click" in Sharpe's head signifies a recognition that the South holds a promise of connection and community. Moreover, in the search for meaning and identity, going back home is posited as more important than the trappings of "career titles." Ironically though, as the state's first black president of a chapter, her title brings along with it an enormous amount of social cachet. Entry into once-closed realms.
of power represent a "home" that appears to be undergoing fundamental changes in
the turn of the 21st century.

During the contentious era of segregation in this country, blacks felt uneasy
and threatened by the systematic racism which pervaded every aspect of life.
Confronted by the lack of jobs and equality in the South, three high school friends—
Clara Middleton, Thomas Lawrence and Robert Griffin from Fuquay-Varina, North
Carolina, decided to take their chances up North, returning home when they reached
their late fifties. While living in New York and New Jersey, they would discuss
home and found that: "They missed family. They missed the weather. They missed
the trees and the open expanses of country." But perhaps what became most
evident to them was what home meant to them all: a sense of connection or
"rootedness" As Robert Griffin relates,

I took advantage of my years in New York because I knew I
wasn't going to stay there. All of us knew it. (emphasis added)
You move to a place like New York or New Jersey, and you're
dazzled by the glitter. But then one day you come home for a
real funeral, you get that sense of community, of your
family roots. And the glitter has lost its shine.

The statement that he and his friends "knew" they would eventually return home
reveals an embedded desire—a desire to complete the circle of migration ending in
the act of homecoming. In acknowledging the influence of previous journeys back
home, Griffin articulates how funerals, also known as "homegoing" ceremonies,
provided opportunities to notice the simplicity as well as emotional sustenance of
the South. "Home" unfolds as a place to which one must return, a place of origin
and end.
This new casting of the South as home for black Americans enters via the cultural narratives of return migrants as well as through the efforts of late 20th-century African-American writers. Critics such as Lawrence Rodgers and Farah Jasmine Griffin have identified the threshold of this literary movement. In Rodgers' view, the "recolonization" novel looks to the tradition of the Great Migration novel, yet focuses on the South as a "mythic land of promise," while Griffin stresses that the "narrative of return has helped to shape the discourse around this countermigration," I would suggest that using this theoretical mapping to examine a work that does not focus on a physical journey either to or from the South but rather on a critique of migration for the African-American is essential to charting a, to quote Lewis Simpson, "fulfillment of the literary promise of the New South." Looking toward future literary representation(s) of the South, Simpson notes that

This will occur when the African-American quest for identity turns from the self-conscious rejection of the South toward participation in the southern self-interpretation.

What Simpson appears to "call" for, Ernest Gaines seems to answer. For within the articulation of an African-American return migration narrative, Gaines's novel *A Lesson Before Dying* addresses the subject of the "thwarted migrant"—one for whom the South is no longer situated as a place to flee. Framed around a critique of flight for the black Southerner, the novel's final moment appears to favor a kind of emotional homecoming, or reconciliation with the South.

In Grant Wiggins, the novel's central character, Gaines presents the decision that so many black Southerners have had to confront—that of leaving home. The narrative depicts Grant as unhappy with the circumstances of his life in circa-1940s
Louisiana—a job as teacher to the children of the Quarter, a relationship with a married woman who is unable to leave because of her children, and the stifling social confines of a segregated South. Throughout the novel, Grant questions why he remains in the rural community outside the small town of Bayonne. Leaving home becomes a constant obsession for Grant; Gaines weaves the import of the term "flight" throughout the story as Grant’s struggle against leaving becomes a significant thematic set against the lesson of manhood that he imparts to Jefferson. Mapping the notion of flight in *A Lesson Before Dying* requires an analysis of how it is situated as response to internal and external motivations. Flight emerges as a mechanism for survival, better economic opportunities, and social equality. In addition, flight is suggested as a means by which one’s responsibility to the larger community can be subverted. Yet with each construction of flight as “solution,” Gaines provides a rebuttal, leading to a reshaping of the importance of migration for the black Southerner.

The subject of Grant’s dissatisfaction with all things South begins with his very first appearance in the novel. Although the narrative opens focusing on the murder of white bar owner Grope and subsequent trial of Jefferson, a young black man wrongly convicted of the murder, Grant is soon brought into the aftermath of the death sentence given Jefferson. Asked by his aunt to speak to their wealthy white landowner and request the privilege of visiting Jefferson, Grant can barely contain his rage:

I was screaming inside. I had told her many, many times how much I hated this place and all I wanted to do was get away. I had told her I was no teacher, I hated teaching, and I was just running in place here.14

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The Grant we see at the beginning of the narrative is an embittered man who expresses no connection with the land or its people, preferring to acknowledge it only as "this place." Throughout the story, Grant makes repeated references to the language of flight, and in this passage, "running in place" in "this place" signifies a position of stasis, from which there is no escape. His contempt for "home" is matched only by his loathing for his profession. That he announces these two emotions in such an interconnected fashion can be viewed as Gaines' positioning of preeminent issues of conflict for the black Southerner living in a segregation-era society. Through the depiction of this struggle, Grant's search to locate "home" functions as a "sub-text" to the narrative of his helping Jefferson achieve a sense of manhood.

Grant lives in a community that is in transition, much like many in the South that felt the consequences of the Great Migration and the continuous flight of blacks from its borders; that is, many of those who are young and striving leave permanently. He is an example of the children who are left behind by their parents for others to raise. In his case, he belongs to a family that has seen migration break apart his family. Continuing to stay home, his aunt has been the one to raise the children of her sister and niece. Grant expresses a sense of abandonment as a result of the separation, commenting on how "my mother and father left me with her, for greener pastures" (167). The suggestion is that he seems somewhat detached from his parents. Although they tell him he should come to California if is "not happy in Louisiana" (102), he goes to visit after his junior year in college but only stays for the summer after which he goes back to Bayonne—to Tante Lou, who is the
that raised him, and to his "home." Gaines appears to imply that migration has severed the black family unit, resulting in the loss of kinship ties but also reveals the strength of the black extended family, which Tante Lou represents. Grant’s desire to run is problematic in that if a notion of family is situated as a "pull" factor, running away to California would not fulfill his need for connection. For Grant, “flight” becomes a constant obsession, aided by the influence of his professional mentor and former teacher, Matthew Antoine, “the big mulatto from Poulaya” (62) who constantly issues a charge to his pupils to leave home. He is a teacher who fails to expose students to a range of options: ‘[Antoine] Told us that there was no other choice but to run and run’ (62). Instead, the one lesson that Antoine teaches his students reverberates through the text: ‘He could only teach us one thing, and that one thing was flight’ (63). When making a toast, Antoine offers, ‘To flight’ (64). Both Antoine’s fixation on flight and ambivalence about leaving are inherited by Grant. Antoine confesses that he remains in Louisiana because he is a light-complexioned Creole and can experience a sense of racial superiority nowhere else. This revelation is shocking to Grant, who finally learns the source of his teacher’s contempt for his students. Yet the former mentor emerges as a kind of ironic role model for Grant: he adopts Antoine’s philosophy on flight, but at the same time resists the racist ideology espoused by the older man.

Juxtaposed against the lesson that Grant hopes to teach Jefferson, Antoine imparts a lesson that reinforces survival of the individual over that of the community. During a visit from Grant, Antoine asserts his belief: “You have to go away to know about life. There’s no life here” (65). His best pupil internalizes this
lesson, for Grant defines leaving as “living,” telling Vivian, “I need to go someplace where I can feel I’m living. [. . . ] I don’t feel alive here. I’m not living here” (29). This positioning of leaving as “living” is subverted, however, through a litany of examples of those who have not survived in the world outside Bayonne. As Grant observes his students chopping wood for the classroom, he contemplates the demise of so many who followed Antoine’s advice:

And I remembered the others, too—Bill, Jerry, Claudee, Smitty, Snowball—all the others. They had chopped wood here too; then they were gone. Gone to the fields, to the small towns, to the cities—where they died. There was always news coming back to the quarter about someone who had been killed or sent to prison for killing someone else: Snowball, stabbed to death at a nightclub in Port Allen; Claudee, killed by a woman in New Orleans; Smitty, sent to the state penitentiary at Angola for manslaughter.¹⁵

This passage—a listing of the dead and dying—reads in a matter-of-factly tone which belies the significance of the implications of flight: that it is the surest means to a violent, troubling end for black men. No matter the destination—small town or city—flight provides no escape.

In an analysis of the representation of manhood in Gaines’s works, critic Suzanne Jones notes how the writer defines how violence shapes and often ends the lives of black men: “Gaines underlines consequences for men who fight rather than talk or walk away from potential violence.”¹⁶ Jones points to a bar room brawl scene between Grant and two mulatto bricklayers as indicative of how violence permeates everyday life. He clashes with the two over their disparaging remarks made about Jefferson. Although Grant instigates the physical fight, this scene also resonates because of its outcome: the three men never engage beyond fisticuffs and

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are separated by friends and acquaintances. Although Gaines does not project a completely safe haven for black men who remain close to home, he does suggest that the potential for the resolution of conflicts is greater within a community that can intervene, if necessary.

Not only is survival an issue in Grant’s decision, but the promise of better economic conditions elsewhere is presented as another motivating factor to leave Louisiana. Trying to convince Vivian to leave with him, Grant pleads with her to “just pack up and leave.” (29). While she resists his pleas, he is unwilling to let the subject drop, adding, “I know we can do better someplace else” (29). This acknowledgement of the limited choices available to college-educated blacks in the South during the 1940s establishes the validity of Grant’s argument. Along with the large numbers of working-class African-Americans who were part of the Great Migration, many who left the South had obtained higher education but were faced with few options to work in professions other than teaching and the ministry.

Grant’s displeasure with his plight in life is depicted in his interaction with his students. Clearly unhappy, he looks at his six-year effort in the classroom as futile, approaching his students with a sense of ennui. Each day during their lessons, he listens to them “for a moment,” (34) after which he stops paying attention for the rest of the day. This feeling revisits him after the school’s annual Christmas play when he becomes dismayed by the lack of progress the community appears to reflect. In contrast to his own hopelessness, his lady friend Vivian perceives a better day for the South: “Vivian said things were changing. But where were they changing?” (151). Grant’s pessimism prohibits him from believing that a
change may come someday, particularly when his life seems so unfulfilling and stifling from the lack of opportunity.

One scene that captures the bleakness of Grant’s economic predicament down South occurs in the Rainbow Club, a local black-owned bar and café. It is here that we see a portrait of a community that recognizes Grant’s financial plight and seeks to help him. He waits in the bar for Vivian to arrive, hoping to borrow some money from her to buy a radio for Jefferson. While there, Grant speaks to Claiborne, owner of the bar, about the radio and not only does he donate some money for the radio and gets others to do the same, he also lets Grant have a beer on the house. Accepting this gracious show of support, Grant offers his thanks and promises to pay him back soon. While listening to him speak about the donation, Thelma’s face changes from “patience to sadness to anger” (173). When she looks at Grant, the anger leaves her face, and she asks if he is hungry. He tells her that he has already eaten, but she can tell he is lying to save face. Grant emerges as a black male striving to help make a change, yet crippled by economic realities which limit his ability to do so. She brings him a plate of food and also donates money for the radio. As Jeffrey Folks notes, these gestures of compassion by Thelma can be seen as “ritual actions that suggest a faith in life.”17 She, like the other women in Grant’s life, wants him to survive and succeed despite the obstacles. Laying a sum of money beside his plate, she utters “Here” (174). The solitary word embodies the disappointment that black women, represented by Thelma, suffer from having to see their men endure the disconcerting mark of poverty:

It was the kind of “here” your mother or your big sister or your great-aunt or your grandmother would have

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said. It was the kind of “here” that let you know this was hard-earned money but [. . . ] since you did not have it, and she did, then “here” it was, with a kind of love. It was the kind of “here” that asked the question, When will this all end? When will a man not have to struggle to have money to get what he needs “here”?18

Thelma’s gesture, “a kind of love,” is a representation of how Gaines posits the African-American extended community as one of the social institutions which will be able to sustain black men who choose to remain in the South. For Grant, these small acts of charity display the level of compassion needed to help men like himself feel a sense of connection and withstand the harsh effects of racism. Thelma’s “Here” has a doubled meaning, for it signifies both hopefulness and despondency; just as black men like Grant are weary of having to leave home to survive, so are black women. The promise of a new South is still elusive (“When will this all end?”), but a spirit of interdependence in the black community appears to nurture both black men and women until that dream is fulfilled.

Initially through the story of Jefferson’s unjust conviction, A Lesson Before Dying develops a thematic centering on the state of social equality in the South in the mid-20th century. For blacks at this time, Bayonne and the plantations surrounding it continue to be places where individual civil rights are practically nonexistent and life is governed by rigid codes of racial segregation. The narrative provides moments in which the character of Grant emerges as one whose educational accomplishments do not shield him from the reality of life for black men—a day-to-day posturing of the subservience expected by whites. In most of his interactions with white men, Grant has to rein in his anger because of the treatment he receives. During a visit to Henri Pichot, owner of the plantation and
land on which Grant lives, he is made to wait over two hours in the kitchen before he can request a meeting with Jefferson. A visit by the white parish superintendent to Grant’s plantation school becomes an exercise in humility as Grant must temper his requests to his employer for more supplies. At the parish jail, each of his visits to Jefferson begins with the deputies’ search of his possessions. All of these slights echo the forecasted beliefs of Grant’s former teacher, Mr. Antoine, who tells the younger man, “Just stay here long enough [...] He’ll (the white man) make you the nigger you were born to be” (65). Antoine suggests that if Grant chooses to stay in the South, he will have to endure being treated like a second-class citizen. However, as Grant becomes resentful of the sacrifices he must make, he lashes out at Tante Lou for forcing him to visit Jefferson. Running down the list of humiliations he has encountered, he implicates her in contributing to his plight:

“Everything you sent me to school for, you’re stripping me of it [...] Professor Antoine told me that if I stayed here, they were going to break me down to the nigger I was born to be. But he didn’t tell me that my aunt would help them do it.”

Yet Tante Lou withstands Grant’s accusations by reminding him of his responsibility to the black community as de facto representative. She counters his charge with an ironic apology, stating

“I’m sorry, Mr. Grant, I’m helping those white people to humiliate you. I’m so sorry. And I wished they had somebody else we could turn to. But they ain’t nobody else.”

Tante Lou’s comments serve to reinforce the notion that until the South undergoes a fundamental shift, Grant inherits its promise and pain. Her challenge to him is that
he recognize remaining home requires the diligence of long-suffering en route to a more equal society.

There is the suggestion in the novel of how the South can bridge the gap between whites and blacks. Gaines depicts the interaction between Grant and Paul, the young, white sheriff's deputy, as one rooted in mutual respect. Paul is described by Grant as coming from "good stock" (140) and is portrayed as a sympathetic figure. The two men also talk briefly about Jefferson's well-being during visits by Grant to the jail. After Jefferson is put to death, Paul drives to the quarter to give Jefferson's journal to Grant, according to the executed man's wishes. Gaines skillfully crafts the scene to articulate a vision of the new South. As Paul approaches the schoolhouse, Grant behaves in a manner unlike what is expected:

I moved into the ditch as Paul came up even with me and stopped. We looked at each other, and I knew he had come to bring me the news. I didn't go up to his car, as I was supposed to do; I waited for him to make his move. [. . .] I waited for him to come to me.²⁰

In this moment, a new social order is implied, one in which men treat one another as equals. The traditional signifiers of the subjugated black male figure—a lowered gaze, the appearance of servility—are reinscribed by Grant who is "even" with Paul, "looks at (emphasis mine)" him, and waits for the deputy to "make his move." Paul has entered Grant's sphere, the "quarter," so the possibility for Grant's radically different posture reveals a shift in race relations between blacks and whites. Gaines remaps the dynamic of social distance, linking it to a reversal of the balance of power within the relationship.
Most promising at the novel’s end is the suggestion that the two men will begin a friendship. After telling Grant of the events which occurred during Jefferson’s execution, Paul compliments the teacher’s efforts, calling him “a great teacher” (254). In addition, he apologizes to Grant for what has happened to Jefferson, and the exchange which follows establishes new parameters for their future:

[Paul states to Grant] “If I could ever be of any help, I would like you to call on me. I mean that with all my heart. [...] Allow me to be your friend, Grant Wiggins. I don’t ever want to forget this day. I don’t ever want to forget him.”
I took his hand. He held mine with both of his.
“I don’t know what you’re going to say when you go back in there. But tell them he was the bravest man in that room today. I’m a witness, Grant Wiggins. Tell them so.”
“Maybe one day you will come back and tell them so.”
“It would be an honor.”

The novel closes with the image of Grant facing his class crying right after Paul states that “it would be an honor” to come and speak to the schoolchildren about Jefferson’s dignity. It comes as a revelation that Grant’s “lesson”—that black men are men, not beasts—has not only been learned by Jefferson but also by Paul. Gaines’s vision is an optimistic one: he sees a South that is no longer divergent but instead one that black men no longer need to flee in search of respect and opportunity. The image of both men shaking hands is perhaps one of the novel’s most enduring tropes; this handshake evokes that of the “gentleman’s agreement” yet dismantles its representation of racial privilege.

For Grant, the burden of being a role model for the entire black community works as a “push” factor in the debate over whether to leave the South. Gaines
examines the problematic nature of the sense of personal responsibility and the role within society that the black teacher had to assume. An account of the high expectations for black teachers in mid-20th century Birmingham gives an indication of what they endured:

While in their home environment, teachers were expected to maintain a middle-class posture that reflected their status and their commitment to helping uplift the race. Marvine Bradford (a retired teacher) explained what she perceived to be the overbearing responsibilities attached to teachers as role models: "Teachers had to live by different standards. Horrible as it was...[y]ou had to have a different attitude toward life in general in order to survive if you were a teacher." [...] The status conferred upon teachers may have been a high price to pay for some who resented having their lives controlled by outside forces.22

The status that teachers held within the black community during the era of segregation is posited as a double-edged legacy, one that required putting the individual's needs or desire behind that of society's dictates. However, many experienced feelings of alienation and frustration for having the mantle of responsibility placed upon them.

The notion of commitment to "uplift the race" is reflected throughout Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*. When Grant asks Vivian to leave the South with him, they disagree over their obligation to the community:

[Grant speaks] "People do it all the time. Just pack up and leave."

"Some people can, but we can't," she said. "We're teachers, and we have a commitment."

"You hit the nail on the head there, lady—commitment. Commitment to what—to live and die in this hellhole, when we can leave and live like other people?"

"How much have you had to drink, Grant?"

"A whole fucking barrel of commitment," I said and raised my glass.23
Although Grant presents this outward show of animosity regarding the burden of commitment, his actions of the past reveal an ambivalence about leaving the South for good. During the same conversation, he tells Vivian that he is only remaining in Louisiana because of her, until she receives her divorce, but she rejects his claim. In reminding him of his earlier departure to California to stay with his parents, Vivian remarks, ‘[y]ou wouldn’t stay. You couldn’t stay. You had to come back. Why did you come back, Grant? Why?’ (30). To her questions, Grant offers no answer and simply replies, ‘I want to go now, and I want you to go with me’ (30). Grant’s silence on the matter of his commitment to the schoolchildren, to his aunt, and the black community is significant, for it constitutes a truth behind his decision to return and remain, despite his complaints. Grant has, in essence, accepted the onus of being an example, but in doing so, he has become deeply resentful. He has begun to emulate his former teacher, Mr. Antoine, who Grant remembers warned about the consequences of such a choice:

No, he did not say it with words, only with his eyes. You will be the loser, my friend. [...] You want to learn, I will help you learn. Maybe in that way I will be free, knowing that someone else has taken the burden. Good, good, you want to learn? Good, good, here is the burden.24

In this passage, the burden of commitment is established by Antoine as an inherited duty, passed in the African-American community from one generation to the next. Having academic promise is shown as being a scourge, as the individual who demonstrates the desire to learn is cast as one who will eventually suffer great hardship.
Though the burden is constructed as too much for Grant to bear, he is nevertheless instructed by Antoire to “Just do the best you can. But it won’t Matter” (66). This kind of doubled message conjoining an equal amount of hope and despair extends into Vivian’s perception of his inner turmoil. She notes the source of his immobility, stating, ‘You love them more than you hate this place’ (94), and adding, ‘This is all we have, Grant’ (94). Thus, his decision to stay is positioned as an emotional connection to a community (“them”) and a notion of place (“this”). Recognizing his confinement as self-imposed, Grant’s own subjective gaze focuses on the middle ground he has inhabited since his return from California: ‘I had been running in place ever since, unable to accept what used to be my life, unable to leave it’ (102). The image of Grant being stationary embodies his attempt to come to terms with his decision to remain in the South. He emerges as a “thwarted migrant,” one who contends with persuasive reasons to flee but ultimately chooses one’s relationship with “home” over that of flight.

Through the figure of Grant, Gaines provides a harsh commentary on the end result of migration on the African-American communal psyche. Making the choice to stay home involves a leap of faith for Grant. In an introspective moment, he relates to Vivian how the cycle of migration destroys the fabric of the black community:

[Grant states] “We (black men) stay here in the South and are broken, or we run away and leave them alone to look after the children and themselves. [...] I can give them something that neither a husband, a father, nor a grandfather ever did, so they want to hold on as long as they can. Not realizing that their holding on will break me too. That in order for me to be what they think I am, what they want me to be, I must run as
others have done in the past.” [...]
“Will that circle ever be broken?” [...]
“It’s up to Jefferson, my love.”

Here Grant outlines his possible fate in relation to those before him. He has taken on what amounts to an almost unbearable task. His conflict is one that has been faced by black men countless times: is individual self-fulfillment more important than a community’s survival? In this moment, Gaines manages to critique the Great Migration and subsequent movement of blacks from the South while also underscoring the black male’s right to choose self over the group.

A shift in the location of the “burden” occurs as Grant squarely places responsibility for the hopes and dreams of others on Jefferson. Looking to the younger man for a sense of optimism, Grant is hopeful that Jefferson will achieve through his act of self-sacrifice the kind of heroic stance that sustains both self and community. During one of his last visits to the jail, Grant articulates the nature of his dilemma, telling Jefferson

“I need to know what to do with my life. I want to run away, but go where and do what? I’m needed here and I know it, but I feel that all I’m doing here is choking myself. I need someone to tell me what to do. I need you to tell me, to show me.”

As Grant concludes his speech to Jefferson, he shares an anecdote comparing each person who is part of their community to a “piece of drifting wood” (193) but asks Jefferson to “be better” (193). Realizing the scope of the challenge he has issued, Grant is overcome by emotion: “I cry, not from reaching any conclusion by reasoning, but because, lowly as I am, I am still part of the whole” (194). The “lesson” Grant learns is that his role is vital to the entire community and if he
chooses to leave the South, he will experience a psychological and spiritual death, if not a physical one, like so many others who have moved away.

Becoming “part of the whole” demands that Grant now remain in Bayonne, in his vision of a new South. Gaines creates in Grant a figure that negotiates his ambivalence and reconciles with his community. In other words, he has found his way back home. In an interview with Wolfgang Lepschy, Ernest Gaines discusses how Grant’s transformation ultimately affects the whole community:

He’s gonna put everything now into being a better teacher and try to save these kids. And they will probably grow up and become rooted there. Otherwise some of them might have run away and done the things this dying professor had told Grant he should do. But now the kids will stay and do all the work that is necessary. And those are the ones that have made all the difference in the South, staying, working there, living there, fighting, and dying. They are the ones.27

Those who have stayed and “made all the difference” reinscribe a sense of identity and belonging in their “roots.” And inherent in his comment that those who stay may even fight or die reveals Gaines’s concern with a romanticized notion of a Southern “home.” Grant’s Bayonne is no Utopia; it will take great personal sacrifice on his part to adapt to the institutionalized racism that permeates his world. Although the novel is set in the 1940’s, Gaines configures the narrative such that it looks ahead to the next generation of black Southerners who challenged the status quo “fighting, and dying” to remake their home.

This reshaping of the return migration narrative situates the act of coming home beyond simply a physical journey. *A Lesson Before Dying* belongs to a new
movement in African-American homecoming narratives—one which focuses on the restitution of a Southern point of origin as a final destination. However, not only does this text demonstrate a remapping within African-American literature, it also allows for reconsiderations of Southern literature. Critics such as Michael Kreyling and Fred Hobson identify Gaines as a kind of heir apparent to the legacy of Southern letters. According to Fred Hobson, Gaines's claim to this inheritance resides in his treatment of those weighty issues which encompass the black Southern experience:

The black Southerner might be seen as the quintessential Southern writer (emphasis writer's)—with his emphasis family and community, [...] his feeling for place, [...] failure, poverty, defeat [...]. Any writer with those qualities and that legacy would seem to be [...] the truest contemporary heir to the southern literary tradition—although such would be, [...] a final irony of southern history.

This anointing of Gaines carries with it a sense of optimism; by “breaking” the circle/cycle of migration, Gaines reinforces the ties that bind blacks to the South and Southerners to one another. The hopeful vision of a new South, captured in the image of Grant and Paul shaking hands, seems not so much ironic as it does anticipatory. Within this moment there is the extension of one hand and the acceptance by the other, an alliance forged of promise and pain, and a renewed commitment to place and community.

6.1 Endnotes

1 David Wyatt, Prodigal Sons (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) xiii.

2 These figures are taken from U. S. Census Bureau statistics on African-American migration and population increases. See U. S. Census Bureau Home Page, United

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7 Sheehan, A16.

8 Toni Morrison uses this term “rootedness” in her essay entitled “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” in which she outlines her theory regarding the use of ancestor figures in African-American writing. I posit using the term here as many of the personal testimonies of African-Americans who go back to the South mention their “roots” as being located within the region, a motivating factor for their return migration.

9 Sheehan, A17.


13 Simpson, xvii.


15 Gaines 62.


18 Gaines 174.
19 Gaines 79.
20 Gaines 253.
21 Gaines 255-56.


23 Gaines 29.
24 Gaines 63.
25 Gaines 167.
26 Gaines 193.


29 Hobson 101.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION: HOME AND THE TIE(S) THAT BIND(S)

To go home means there is something waiting for you.
--line from an Iyanla Vanzant Hallmark© card

"...most Southerners go home sooner or later for good, even if it’s in a coffin."
--from The Last of the Southern Girls by Willie Morris

The end of the 20th century heralds a new movement in its wake—that of African-Americans (re)discovering their ancestral ties to a region which holds for them a bittersweet legacy. To use Ernest Gaines’s “broken circle” as a metaphorical image, the era of blacks leaving the South in large numbers has ended; the cycle has been broken and many who left or whose parents and grandparents left the South today wish to return. Thus, the notion of “home” located in a Southern landscape (re)shapes African-American discourse in the 21st century. The search for “home” and a sense of belonging constitutes the journey of choice for many blacks who seek to find meaning in their cultural past while affirming their optimism for the future.

The need for a connection can create a new space or crossroads where one’s identity in relation to a “home” can be forged. In moving beyond traditional boundaries of identity (class, gender, race), Homi Bhabha suggests that we imagine a new kind of space:

What is [...] crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.
Using Bhabha's tropological "in-between spaces" to frame the current movement by blacks to the South allows for an interpretation of homecoming that addresses issues of shared and contested spaces. For those blacks whose familial ties originate in the South, a realm of cultural signifiers reinscribing identity are emerging as the "tie(s) that bind(s)." No longer forced to keep quiet about slavery's brutal past, African-Americans are asserting through the act(s) of homecoming that, to use a line from Arthur Miller's Linda Loman in *Death of A Salesman*, "attention must be paid." However, this (re)location is not without its challenges, for claiming a Southern "home" can sometimes be problematic in an American landscape still wrestling with residual emotions stemming from slavery and its aftereffects. To examine possibilities for the 21st century African-American homecoming narrative, it is helpful to look at two efforts to locate "home" within the Southern plantation and the responses to these (re)definitions of family, power, and place.

During his lifetime, America's third president, Thomas Jefferson, had to answer rumors that he had maintained not only an illicit relationship with his slave, Sally Hemings, but also that he had fathered a number of children by her. Although Jefferson publicly denied the claim, the descendants of Hemings laid claim to the Jefferson legacy over the span of nearly two hundred years through the oral tradition—remembering, telling, and passing their story on to subsequent generations. The staff of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, a private, non-profit organization which owns and operates Monticello, Jefferson's famous plantation, maintain that they have for several years included, on the grounds tours, references to the possibility of the Jefferson-Hemings relationship. Along with
these efforts, the foundation began the “Getting Word” research project in 1993, established to collect oral histories from descendants of Monticello slaves, including twenty-six Hemings descendants. Yet their public recognition as heirs to the Jefferson legacy remained in flux until 1998, when DNA testing confirmed that Hemings’s son Eston shared the same genetic makeup as Jefferson.

At issue now is the inclusion of this branch of the family, “legitimized” by the scientific data to support their claim. At the heart of the debate has been the acceptance of Hemings’s descendants into the Monticello Association, an organization of nearly 800 descendants of Thomas Jefferson, whose members own a graveyard at Monticello and offer burial privileges at the site to those who are of “direct” lineage. Before the results of the testing were made known, the Association had long denied membership to Sally Hemings’s descendants on the basis that there was not sufficient evidence that she and Jefferson had had children together. Yet one member of the Association, Lucian Truscott 4th, let his sentiments be known in an editorial of the New York Times:

The slaves did not have a choice about their presence at Monticello, but Jefferson’s descendants have a choice about who is buried there. I think we should open our arms and admit the descendants of Sally Hemings and those of all the other slaves who lived at Monticello, whom Jefferson counted among “the number of souls in [his] family” in 1776. On the grassy hillside just below the main house, there is plenty of room for the graveyard to grow.

The image of “open arms” which Truscott utilizes in his appeal approaches the kind of homecoming ritual—the welcoming gesture—that indicates connection and (re)conciliation. But what Truscott fails to acknowledge is an important dynamic
which underscores the entire debate: the implications of power behind those very same "open arms." The family members with the most power are able to choose whether they will accept their relatives who have little recourse but to wait. The public airing of his family's squabble illuminates the discontent that threatens to reconfigure not only the revered status of Thomas Jefferson but also notions of authenticity and legitimacy as means of situating identity. In establishing a claim to the legacy of Jefferson, the Hemings descendants confronted a stark reality: that locating "home" may be met with great resistance by those who already reside there.

In light of the DNA findings, Association members claimed they would leave the organization and refuse to be buried at Monticello if Hemings descendants were admitted. Truscott again appealed in the New York Times to his fellow Association members:

I have always been proud that I'm a sixth-generation grandson of Thomas Jefferson, but pride in one's heritage has come cheaply over all these years. Now it's time to pay up. Even if Thomas Jefferson didn't do the right thing two centuries ago, we can do the right thing now. [...] we can start by opening our hearts and our arms [...] . Hopefully, they'll accept an invitation that was way, way too long in coming.11

In addition to the "open arms" image, Truscott also appropriates the image of legacy as currency ("heritage has come cheaply," "time to pay up"). In these remarks, he demonstrates that a DNA-legitimized Jefferson lineage, validated by the Association, carries with it a significant marketability. However, that market value is seen as tenuous by others in the group, who view blackness along with illegitimacy as factors that depreciate the worth of the Jefferson legacy.

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Intending to right past wrongs, Truscott invited 35 of his Hemings cousins to the 1999 annual meeting of the Monticello Association. To one member of the press covering the reunion, “it was like an episode of ‘Family Feud.’” The meeting began with a motion to dismiss the Hemings descendants from the proceedings. Although the motion was defeated, the “tone of the gathering became more contentious,” causing one descendant of Eston Hemings to note, “People sitting at my table got up and said they wanted me and my cousins to leave [...]. It was painful to hear that.” Instead of admitting their guests to join, the Association declined membership to the Hemings descendants at that meeting, deciding to appoint a committee to oversee further actions. An effort to extend honorary membership was also disallowed by the Association’s president, who maintained that honorary membership is traditionally extended only to University of Virginia and Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation officials. One Hemings descendant, Deborah Edwards, upset by the contentiousness, remarked, “In days gone by, they wore Wamsutta sheets and pillowcases [...]. Today they wear suits. Same scene. Different days.” Another of her Hemings cousins, John Q. Taylor King, stressed that he has no need for the “group’s stamp of approval” to believe that he is a Jefferson descendant, adding, “We place implicit faith in the traditions of our family, and we will not let anyone discredit it.” Both Edwards’s and King’s comments illuminate the painful realization by the Hemings branch that the connections denied their ancestors in the 18th century remain as elusive at the turn of the 20th century. Through the “writing/righting” of their own homecoming narrative in the public arena, the Hemings’s quest becomes an experiment on race and its
implications for the acceptance of African-American oral history within the larger
American narrative.

Yet not all their Jefferson kin have sought to turn them away; in addition to
the campaign by Lucian Truscott 4th to force the Association to admit his Hemings
cousins, others are coming forward to back his efforts. One Association member,
Naomi Nobles, stated she was “excited” to meet the Hemings family members,
noting that when families begin to accept their cultural diversity, “it’s a beautiful
thing [. . . ] it could heal racism in our country.”17 These vocal shows of support
indicate a shifting tide within an insular world that has long remained unchanged.

But ripples of discontent continue to loom outside the borders of a
previously untouched realm—over one year later in May of 2000, the reunion
between the two branches fared not much better, with one writer referring to the
event as “an uncomfortable, tension-filled ride punctuated by hostile words and
defensive postures.”18 At this homecoming, an afternoon business meeting offered
“heated exchanges,” causing one Hemings family member, Dorothy Westerinen, to
observe, “I sense a lot of anger still [. . . ]. It’s the ‘R’ word. They can’t see
anything else but race. They’re trying to project themselves as rational people, but I
don’t think they are.”19 In a similar fashion to the previous year, an effort to oust
the Hemings from the meeting was defeated while new criteria for joining the
Association are still developed. Any romanticized notions that acceptance would
be quickly forthcoming have been tempered, and the location of “home” continues
to be a negotiated construct between the two groups.
For the Hemings descendants, the act of coming “home” to Monticello is as problematic as is the contested space of “home” itself. Through these homecomings, the negotiation of legacy as currency converges with a remapping of power as located within the construct of home. The Monticello plantation site loses its allure for some whites who locate their sense of heritage there but deny a common ancestry shared with blacks. In this sense, the Hemings’s effort to claim their “inheritance,” a legacy passed down through the oral tradition, approaches a narrative formation that critic J. Lee Greene identifies in several African American novels: one informed by a focus on ancestral descent which positions the “desire for a healthy relationship with (one’s) biological father.”

Using Greene’s theoretical mapping to examine the Hemings’s narrative of return positions the collective desire of the Hemings descendants for a “healthy relationship” with their relatives via the Association as a (mis)reading (or “missed reading”) of the discourse of privilege as inscribed in both the Jefferson name and the Monticello site.

While the Hemings’s effort to claim “home” emerges as a dichotomy of rupture versus healing, another Southern African-American homecoming offers a marked study in contrast. For Dorothy Spruill Redford, site manager of Somerset Place, a plantation site in Creswell, North Carolina, the journey back “home” began, after seeing Alex Haley’s Roots in 1977, with questions about her African ancestry. This quest blossomed over seven years as the former social worker and North Carolina native pored over census records and numerous documents including bills of sale of her ancestors which led the paper trail back to her great-great-grandfather as well as his owner. Although a self-taught genealogist, Redford possessed the
patience and dedication to find out not only her own “roots,” but also traced the histories of the other families whose ancestors were slaves owned by the master of Somerset Place, Josiah Collins. What she found was a link to Africa but also an endpoint: slaves brought to Edenton, North Carolina, on one of Collins’ ships were originally from “Affrica,” but no other details about their origins were included in the ship logs. Her research then shifted to uncovering as much as she could about her black Southern legacy. This led her to discover that the Collins plantation, Somerset Place, had been maintained as a historic site by the state of North Carolina since 1967. After the Civil War, the Collins family was unable to retain ownership of the property due to financial troubles, and after many different owners, the site was bought by the federal, and later, the state government. Yet unlike the Jeffersons and their relationship with Monticello, the direct descendants of original owner Josiah Collins had no investment, financial or emotional, in the restoration of Somerset Place.

Redford’s journey eventually brought her “home,” but as she looked around the grounds of Somerset Place, she had an ambivalence about her first visit: “I don’t know what I was hoping for. [. . .] The slave lists and bills of sale I had in my hand were the stuff and power [. . .] But the man was long gone. And what was left was hollow.” Redford noticed the dry ditches clogged with trees, a cracked walkway, and determined that the place she was viewing was “an echoing shell,” “the emptiest, loneliest spot in the state of North Carolina,” and “a dead end.” She also saw the only tangible legacy of her ancestors’ past—a single rotting sign stating
“Site of Slave Quarters.”24 The experience strengthened her resolve to present the story of her ancestors:

The family I had gone after had blossomed into something larger that I’d ever imagined. So many slaves at Somerset were my kin. By traveling backward I had found an entire community of relatives I never knew existed [ . . . ]

For almost a century, Somerset was a self-contained pod of people [ . . . ] When those pods burst in 1865, seeds like the one that spawned me were scattered in the wind. I had to find the seeds that had mixed with mine—the Somerset sisters and brothers I knew were out there. It was time to work forward now, to close the circle.25

From this moment on, Redford’s individual journey then became the starting point for a collective homecoming of descendants of the Somerset enslaved community: the personal became the communal. The organic metaphors she uses (“pod,” “seeds,” “wind”) tie her identity as well as all of her relatives to the geographic site of Somerset. To have the homecoming anywhere else would not necessarily be meaningless but would (re)join her people to the land.

Redford began by contacting North Carolina’s head of historic sites and letting him know that she wanted to have the homecoming at the plantation. By this time, she had received a grant to do archival work for fixture researchers at Somerset. Although the state official agreed, he indicated a desire to “tie in” the homecoming to a state anniversary of the Lost Colony. Redford writes of her slightly subversive response: “I took him at his word. But we weren’t tying this into anything. This was no state celebration, no public relations showpiece. This was our homecoming.”26 In 1985, she recognized that the late-20th century social and political climate of racial tolerance and a shift in African-American sensibility
worked to her advantage in planning the affair. Her language illustrates a
divergence from the discourse of servility that blacks had to utilize only two
decades earlier, as she defines what the celebration will not be ("no state
celebration," "no public relations showpiece"), refusing to allow her family to be
situated as tokens. She also claims this homecoming as a self-empowering act
("This was our homecoming"). The dynamics of the publicly owned site are such
that Redford does not have to approach anyone or any organization hoping for
acceptance. Understanding that the ramifications of any untoward behavior by the
state would be "politically incorrect," she is able to negotiate from a position of
relative authority as well as from a position of legitimacy as a scholar.

To make the homecoming a success, Redford put out "the word," visiting
churches to publicize the event, conducting interviews with outside media persons,
and reaching out to her older relatives who were a bit hesitant about discussing a
period which they tended not to discuss. However, she began educating the younger
descendants whose enthusiasm soon filtered throughout the community. Through a
mix of the oral, informal network of communication and the formal print media, the
news of the first homecoming spread throughout the region and nation. At one
point, a national TV newsmagazine set up an interview between Redford and the
great-great-granddaughter of Josiah Collins, former owner of Somerset Place.
Redford relates that the two women were able to respectfully discuss their
philosophies about the event:

She said she recognized slavery was a fact of life.
[... ] she also felt that however good or bad her ancestors
might have been, she is responsible for her own life, not
theirs. She was not Josiah Collins, she said. And she

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didn't live in his time. She could neither condemn, she said, nor defend him.

And I agreed. You inherit your ancestor's genes and their blood, but not their sins or their glories. [... ] That was yesterday, and this today. Those were their lives, and these are ours.

That [...] was a focus of the homecoming. That we can live with the past without being dragged down by it. That we cannot deny what happened here—that we must not deny it—and that we must restore this place to reflect all our histories. We were all here before, and so we must all come together again.27

The conciliatory tone of Redford's address reveals an even greater dimension of the empowering ritual of homecoming for the African-American Southerner. For her, the ability to heal is linked to the ability to remember the past but not assign blame in the present. In this manner, Redford posits a goal of an accessible homecoming ritual for all who come without anger, bitterness or guilt. Somerset Place becomes a site of (re)collection and remembrance for all who desire to inscribe their identities there.

On Labor Day of 1986, some 2,000 people attended the first Somerset Homecoming, including descendants from nearby who had never been on the grounds; those from New York, California, and West Germany; as well as a U. S. senator and the governor of North Carolina. Two guests at the reunion provided perhaps the most significant closure for Redford: Josiah Collins VI, great-grandson of Josiah Collins III, who came from Seattle; and Alex Haley, the author of Roots who inspired her to begin and continue her quest. Of that day, Redford writes,

As I watched the sun set over those cypresses, I thought of what people really mean when they talk about destiny. This was my destiny. I began as a woman alone, drifting in both time and space. But now I had a past peopled with links as strong and as solid as any
family in this nation. I was anchored. [...] there is no place I can go that I can't find somebody I'm connected to, someone I belong to.

The need to belong. That's what this was all about. Not just my need, but the need of our entire people, whose destiny was out of our hands for so long, and who are still struggling to shape our identity, our sense of place in a society that was not of our making.²⁸

From the initial “amateur” genealogist to her present-day status as site manager of Somerset Place, Dorothy Spruill Redford revises the African-American homecoming narrative with a tale of singular faith and determination to locate “home” in a Southern landscape. With the sun setting, she stands on the ground that was cultivated by her ancestors and is now “owned” by her and her relatives. The “need to belong” of which she speaks is not to an association or any other organization that wishes to exclude her; her “need” to locate within the plantation site is to validate the existence of her ancestors’ contribution.

For those who come willingly and share in honoring the memory of those who were enslaved, the Somerset Homecoming continues to serve as a public testimony of African-American resiliency and self-fulfillment. Subsequent homecoming celebrations have been equally well-attended, in 1988 (1,800 attendees); in 1991 (2,500 attendees); and in 1996 (2,000 attendees); while another is planned for Labor Day weekend of 2001. Since the first homecoming, Redford has led efforts to reconstruct buildings and offer educational programs which reflect the slave experience at Somerset.²⁹ What the Somerset Homecoming represents in a 21ˢᵗ century context is what blacks returning to the South permanently or periodically hope to achieve: a connection that is welcomed.
The promise and possibility that Somerset Place embodies bodes well for the forthcoming African-American homecoming narrative. Yet other journeys, such as the one being traveled by many other black families including the Hemings descendants, are more problematic when resistance has been entrenched for generations. But when African-Americans situate "home" within an uncontested Southern space, the act of homecoming appears to be one that focuses on reconciliation. Coming home to a South that returns the embrace of kinship completes the circle.

7.1 Endnotes

1 A new line of Hallmark© cards designed by African-American author and spiritual advisor Iyanla Vanzant features greetings targeted for an African-American buying public with a focus on family, religious, and communal themes.


3 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture, (New York: Routledge, 1984) 1-2.

4 Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman (New York: Viking, 1949) 56.


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11 Truscott 4th, "Open the Gate," F10.


19 Smith, "Race," B7.


22 Redford 96.

23 Redford 99.

24 Redford 97.

25 Redford 171.

26 Redford 192.

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APPENDIX: LETTER OF PERMISSION

June 8, 2000

Stephanie Hall
P.O. Box 253
Greenville, NC 27835

Dear Stephanie:

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VITA

Stephanie Gail Hall (1966- ) received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from Louisiana State University in 2000. She received a master of arts degree in English from Texas Woman's University in 1991, where she wrote a thesis entitled "Conflict and Cohesiveness: Black Folk and Black Bourgeoisie Cultures in Harlem Renaissance Novels." She received a bachelor of arts degree in English from Howard University in 1988. She won the 1998 Margaret Walker Alexander Award from the College Language Association for her original one-act play entitled The Policy, which was published in 1999 in Estuary. A native Texan and adopted by Louisiana, she now resides in Greenville, North Carolina.
DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate:  Stephanie Gail Hall

Major Field:  English

Title of Dissertation:  Coming Home: Homecomings and Return Migration in African-American Folklore and Literature since 1970

Approved:

[Signatures]

Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

Date of Examination:

October 18, 2000